Chronicles of Valicadia: Order of the New Dawn

by cosmic_cube_keeper

Summary

Harry and Mazhe have both fulfilled their destinies, but they are about to find out, fate is far from done with them. A terrible ancient prophecy looms in the background, and dark forces threaten to bring about the end of the world... with both young mages caught in middle. Picks up where 'Orb of Magnus' left off. AU, multi-xover. Contains SLASH. This story is not for Dumbledore fans. independent!powerful!dark!Harry! Harry x M!dragonborn.

Notes

“Orb Of Magnus” is a prerequisite for reading, or you'll find yourself hopelessly lost trying to understand what's going on in this one. Just being clear on that. If you've already read that, then I welcome you back.

Again, in case you skimmed or skipped the notes above, there is SLASH in this story, as in, boy on boy, wand on wand. If you post some sort of rant/bash/flame, then there is no hope for you. Flames will be shredded and removed. Period.

The time line has been moved forward ten years to account for technology and a few events that I wish to cover.

This installment/chapter/part of the series is significantly darker than its predecessor, and I have to warn: there will be plenty of death and destruction ahead. Count on a number of major character deaths!

Finally, expect lots of spoilers for all seven books in the Harry Potter series, and spoilers from The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim. However, I should note, since the story is told from Harry and
his friends' point of view for the most part, in-depth knowledge of the crossover universes are unnecessary.

An additional note, the “West Wing” timeline has been adjusted to match that of the Bush administration (2001-2009).

Still with me? I present, then, Part Two of the Chronicles of Valicadia: Order of the New Dawn...
1: THE LESSER OF TWO EVILS

September, 2007 / Hearthfire, 4E202

“So, what can't you take? Decide which of the two options is harder, and do the other. That way, no matter how hard your choice turns out to be, at least you can find comfort in knowing you're avoiding something even worse.”

- Josephine Angelini, Starcrossed

September 2 2007 / 2 Hearthfire 4E202
Mariana Islands, South Pacific Ocean (+10 UTC)

The operator of the small boat cut the engines, announcing, somewhat dazed, “We're... we're here.”

“This took longer than anticipated.”

“F-forgive me.”

He glanced at the three 'guests' with glassy eyes, his head still somewhat in a fog. They were all dressed in dark cloaks, strange outfits for the area. Hoods covered their heads, effectively masking their faces. He knew one of them was female, and guessed the others were somewhat older.

“It makes no matter,” spoke the woman, “You have done as asked. Face the front of the boat, and remain that way until we tell you otherwise. The lives of your family depend on your cooperation.”

The operator faced forward obediently, while one of the others remarked, “It's not necessary to further threaten him. He remains under our absolute control.”

“He's a useless Muggle,” the woman sneered, reaching into her robes and producing a cylindrical object.

She set it on the deck, and a wave of the hand had it restored to proper size—about the size of a fifty-gallon drum. The waves of magic radiating from it was almost intoxicating—even the operator of the boat could feel something in the air—something that was quite literally making the hair on his forearms want to stand on end.

“It will take some time for this to reach the bottom, m-my lady,” said the third, “Even assisted with the reverse buoyancy charm.”
“It matters not, within hours, our enemy will feel the first of many stakes be driven through their hearts,” the woman hissed low, “With perhaps great collateral damage spilling over to destroy great numbers of Muggles; numbers Lord Voldemort could only dream of!”

“Our brothers and sisters in the western US have already been advised to take steps,” said the first man, “Though unfortunate we will lose some magical blood with what we’re about to do.”

“That also matters not, fool,” the witch growled, “They chose their path by aligning themselves with Muggle loving fools and their ilk! They deserve no better fate, than for for the sea itself to rise up and carry them to the afterlife.”

She thrust out a hand, levitating the barrel up and over the side of the boat, then let it drop in the water. It rested on the waves a moment, before slowly beginning to sink. She waited for it to slip beneath the waves before declaring, “Return us to shore.”

Spiraminis, meaning “Crevice”, was a relatively new city in the Commonwealth, having been constructed less than two centuries before. It was part of an experiment to determine whether the Commonwealth could actually construct cities beneath the sea bed, rather than just underground. Up to now, it had been a resounding success, with no problems, even considering the geology of the area. The Mariana Trench was geologically active, in a number of ways, certainly testing the skill of wizards and engineers.

The city covered 750 square kilometers, with a ceiling of 500 meters, and boasted a population of 500 thousand, it was all in all a typical Commonwealth city. People lived, worked, went to school, shopped, dined—everything you would expect in a typical large population centre.

That late winter evening, however, proved to be nothing ordinary, as alarms rang out in several offices across the city, as a subtle, but rapid vibration seemed to permeate every surface. At first, it was thought they were experiencing an earthquake, but—no, that didn't make sense. The vibration was rapid, and consistent.

At the city's Office of Resource Management, or ORM for short, staff came to a horrifying conclusion.

“Gods. The key wards are being disturbed by whatever this vibration is!” the master warder on duty shouted, “This doesn't stop in three minutes, they'll collapse.”

“Make that two, the vibration's increasing in frequency,” spoke a colleague beside him.

“Gringotts is evacuating,” said another, putting down a phone.

Hans Krupp, the on-duty manager, had most certainly been through a simulation of such an event, but... to have to play for real? He had two choices. One; let the wards collapse, and create an instant five-hundred metre sinkhole in the ocean floor over four times the size of Manhattan... or two; breach the northern end of the ward, flooding the city not quite as rapidly, killing everyone inside, but preventing a tsunami that would make the 2004 event look like it took place in a kiddie pool. He picked up the phone.

“Ah, Harry. Good of you to make it,” said Voldemort, with fake pleasantry. The book had fallen to the floor a number of feet away, and as Harry tried to shake out the cobwebs, Voldemort continued, “You are a fool, Harry Potter. To allow yourself to be brought into the very seat of my power, where I am surrounded by my supporters. You trust too easily. A fatal mistake.”
“I guess I should have expected that,” Harry muttered, still trying to regain his bearings. He tried to crawl over to the book, but Voldemort simply summoned it with a wave of his hand.

“So, you do bring a gift.”

“I do as promised,” Harry managed, making sure his mental shields were still in place. Everything was sound, thanks to the years of training. Healer Ferris had conducted harsh drills while Brandon and Eric pounded him with spells... now it was all paying off.

“Harry, Harry, Harry. Do you not see? No matter what you may have done, our paths are still very different. Your actions are driven by anger and fury, while mine, only work to restore balance to the Wizarding world. Regrettfully, none of those plans can ever involve you.”

“But...”

“But, what, Harry? I do thank you for the gift. I plan on studying its contents... only after I do away with you. Good bye, Harry Potter.”

Harry knew what was coming, but was still somewhat scattered, and was slow to react to the Dark Lord's hissed, “Avada Kedavra.”

Brilliant emerald green ballooned into his vision, then—

“Harry?”

He felt a hand reach up and touch his shoulder.

“B-bad dream.”

“I know, I get them sometimes, too,” said Mazhe, as they turned to face one another. Harry flicked a finger out, and '3:02 a' wafted from the tip.

“Gah, too early to get up.”

Unfortunately, noise out in the corridor put an end to his idea of going back to sleep. They'd only just returned from their vacation, wishing to spend a couple more days of down time before resuming any kind of schedule.

“Sounds like something's going on,” Mazhe said, swinging his legs over the side of the bed, and summoning a tee shirt. Harry was already doing the same. Less than a minute later, the pair were dressed, and stepped out into the corridor. Was that...

“Your grace? What... what's going on?” Harry questioned, worried, seeing Queen Susan and her protection detail now standing in his common room. A few others were with her, faces he didn't recognize, but didn't question it. If they were with the Queen, they were more than safe.

“We're going off-script, Harry,” the Queen answered, “Our standard protocols in an emergency were determined to be flawed.”

“What happened?”

“The city of Spiraminis was destroyed a few minutes ago with catastrophic losses,” the Queen answered, as she was led into the dining room.

“They reported some sort of vibration that had—“
“Harmonic resonance, a technique practised by warders and curse-breakers on occasion,” said Harry.

“Yes, indeed, but back to the point, the wards were crippled by the vibrations, and the city was forced to make a terrible choice.”

Mazhe looked confused. “They couldn't evacuate?”

“This happened about ten minutes ago, Mr. Stormcrown,” said the new speaker.

“Harry, Mazhe, I introduce Linda Hampton, my Royal Press Secretary, and her assistant, Lee Pearson.”

“Oh. Uh, pleasure,” said Mazhe, as they shook hands.

Harry was still confused. “But... reason behind so much death still escapes grasp. Why was evacuation not attempted?”

“The wards were already beginning to collapse when they got in touch with Trevelyan.” “What would've happened had the wards collapsed—I mean, would that have bought people time?” Mazhe questioned.

“Perhaps, at a far more terrifying price, Mazhe,” answered the Queen, “It would have created an instant, massive hole in the sea floor that would have covered about—“

“Seven hundred-fifty square kilometers, five hundred metres deep.”

“Jupiter's cock...” Harry barely whispered, as the realization set in. “Gods... that would end San Francisco, L.A., Vancouver, Tokyo, Hong Kong... such a wave is unfathomable. No coastal location in the Pacific would escape untouched.”

“A terrible sacrifice was made, to prevent one many times worse.”

“Her majesty, along with a number of other government officials have been moved to safe locations, until the wards which protect Trevelyan can be adjusted.”

“I do hope my temporary presence will not cause discomfort,” said the Queen.

“You do not impose, your grace,” Harry answered, “With Remus returning to his cottage, there is ample room available for you, and should you require it, we can most certainly relocate, so that you might borrow the entire flat.”

“I will not impose more than necessary, Harry. I do realize this is your home.”

“Harry, what—“ Brandon stopped short in the entrance to the dining room. “Y-your grace.” He bowed his head in respect.

“As you were, Lieutenant Commander.”

“Something tells me this isn't a social call.”

“No, it is not,” the Queen answered, gravely.

By the time breakfast was put out, the rest of the flat was aware of what was going on. Nearly a half-million people had been crushed or drowned within minutes. To date, the worst disaster in the Commonwealth's history, and it had happened while everyone slept.
With the meal over, the dining room was quickly taken over by more members of the Queen's Communications department, as they worked on a public address her majesty would be making in a few hours. A disaster of such magnitude, it was expected that the Queen would address the Commonwealth.

With that much chaos going on, both Harry and Mazhe left the flat, deciding to check in with the Guild. Unfortunately, the Ragged Flagon was empty, save for the pair of SOU soldiers keeping watch just outside the flat—Dierge shamelessly took advantage of the extra security, giving himself more time to rest.

“Perhaps we could visit with Paarthurnax,” Mazhe suggested, “Even this early, he'll like the company.”

“Sounds like a good plan.”

Harry gripped Mazhe about the shoulder, and they vanished with a soft pop.

Returning to the flat for dinner, they found the dining room still occupied. Now, the compliment had expanded to include senior staff from the Department of Information, and the Ministry of Defence.

“We have reason to believe the incident may have been a terrorist attack,” said Brandon, at Harry's unanswered question.

“The harmonic resonance.”

“Exactly. Several of our subs are doing a sweep of the trench and the surrounding area. They've already picked up strong magical traces.”

“Whoever did this... gods... murder on an unimaginable scale,” said Mazhe, “Not even the Thalmor are guilty of such a crime.”

“But capable of it,” Harry muttered, “However, the more pressing matter, is that this sort of thing was orchestrated and executed in the first place.”

“Which the government agrees with, Harry. It's likely her majesty will be a guest here for the next week at a minimum, until we can ensure such a failure won't happen again. Gringotts is also being warned, as is the ICW, since we most certainly have allies within its membership.”

“I still find it astounding, that someone was able to create something with strength enough to disrupt such powerful defences.”

“Three guesses, first two don't count, who might be responsible,” said Tommy, wading into the conversation.

Harry let out a snort. “Concurred. Mum and dad did pass on warning. Perhaps it bears poisonous fruit.”

He thought for a moment.

“We'll have to set up something different for classes then—“

“Already arranged,” answered Brandon, “Mrs. Longbottom has invited you and your classmates to borrow her dining room for the time being. The government, meanwhile, will be setting up a more proper school building in the next few days.”
“Gods, rate we're going, the Commonwealth will quite literally have a colony set up here in Skyrim,” said Mazhe. “There is debate about doing exactly that,” said Justin, now joining the conversation, “Given the number of people here already, some displaced from England, but still, people from our world... it makes sense. And with the dragon threat somewhat contained...”

“Not entirely,” Mazhe cut in, “Though Alduin is gone, there are still a large number of dragons out there who do pose a threat.”

“The government will make sure the settlement is secured. As it stands, we're planning to move the buildings to a location just west of Snow-shod Farm.”

“I know of them,” said Mazhe.

“My nieces...”

“Remus will continue to tutor them until we're sure things are safe back in Trevelyan,” answered Brandon. “I know you'd hoped for them to join public school, but...”

“I'd rather them be safe, yeah.”

Harry let out a sigh. “Gods. This event... still gives cause for concern. I now regret our returning from vacation yesterday. Perhaps we should have remained in Sydney.”

“Wouldn't have mattered. You would have still been warned,” said Brandon, “Remember, no matter what, you're still considered a VIP here in the Commonwealth—even if you wish you weren't. Stuff like this, you're one of the first to know about it.”

Harry scowled.

“We take leave to visit the guild.”

“Goes without saying, unless something urgent comes up, we want to be left alone,” Mazhe added. He glanced at Tommy. “Coming?”

Chapter End Notes

UP NEXT: Harry, Mazhe, and their circle of friends chase after the contents stolen from the Guild’s vault, and in turn, encounter a ghost with unfinished business... and Justin may have finally met someone special.

CHAPTER NOTES: Initially, I was going to have the city's wards actually fail, and have a tsunami-scenario play out... then I started running a few numbers and... just no. The consequences would have been apocalyptic, to say the least. So you get the event that took place instead—costly for the Commonwealth, but the rest of the world goes on in ignorant bliss, at least for now. (insert evil laugh here)
Out of interest, the volume of water that would have been displaced, had I went forward with the collapse, would have been around 375M cubic metres. 750 square km x 500 m = 375M. Imagine the wave heights that would result.
Lost to the Ages

Chapter Summary

Harry, Mazhe, and their circle of friends chase after the contents stolen from the Guild’s vault, and in turn, encounter a ghost with unfinished business... and Justin may have finally met someone special.

Note: Spoilers for the Dawnguard DLC quest “Lost to the Ages”.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

2: LOST TO THE AGES

September, 2007 / Hearthfire, 4E202

“There's always going to be the circumstances you can't plan for. There's always the unexpected relevance and the serendipity.”

-Jason Silva

7 September, 2007 / 7 Hearthfire, 4E202

With the Commonwealth effectively taking over the flat, Harry and his friends found themselves spending most of their time in the cistern. Mazhe used some of that time to have a look at the ledger, and see where things were at as far as guild affairs went. This was somewhat expected of him.

Meals were taken in the Ragged Flagon, with that afternoon being no exception.

“When can we expect you pair to start takin' jobs again?” Delvin wondered.

“Soon. It's about time we get back into some sort of schedule. The Commonwealth's intrusion or not,” said Mazhe, “We're not making profits just sitting around.”

Delvin smirked. “Now that's spoken like a true thief.”

“Good day all,” said Justin, cheerily, as he pulled up a seat.

“Right. What has your mood elevated so?” Harry asked.

“Oh, nothing.”

“Well, let's see. He was gone all day yesterday, well into the evening. I don't remember seeing him come in at all,” said Mazhe, smirking.

“Perhaps he has found a new bed to fall into,” Crixus suggested, from a nearby table where he, Dardanos, and Tommy were sitting.
Justin grinned. “Fuck off.”

“Seriously.”

“I dropped in on an interesting lecture yesterday at Georgetown University in Washington. On the way out, I quite literally ran into someone, and, well... one thing led to another, and we had coffee and well... she wants to see me again.”

“Oh. Well, congratulations,” Harry grinned, “Such an event has been long due in coming.”

“Harry. You know I don't blame you for having very little of a social life. I wouldn't change any of it.”

“No matter. I am happy for you. I hope things bear fruit for the long term.”

“So what's this girl's name?”

“Zoey. She's a Georgetown graduate... couple of years now, but. Anyway, she was attending the same lecture for exactly the same reason.”

“You attended a lecture at a university in Washington. Justin... you're a nerd,” said Tommy.

“I know I am, but what are you?”

“I sense a lack of maturity at present,” said Dardanos, though he was also smirking. Tommy, meanwhile, digested the conversation. There was only one Zoey that he knew of that had attended Georgetown University recently.

“What's her last name?” he asked.

“I... I didn't ask.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “You plan on seeing this woman again, and yet failed to collect such vital information? How is it you plan on retaining contact?”

“Our mobiles work perfectly well with the non-magical system,” Justin answered, “We've exchanged phone numbers.”

“And there is a plan to see each other sooner rather than later.”

“Sunday, yeah. We're going to see a movie.”

“We can make do without you,” Mazhe smirked. “Anyway. With things somewhat returning to normal, there's a matter we should take care of.”

“That is?” Harry asked.

“The stolen vault contents,” Mazhe answered, “Arkngthamz... I contacted Calcelmo about it a few days ago.”

“It would bring about closure on a dark event in the guild's history,” Harry agreed.

“When you heading out?” Brynjolf questioned, from his usual table.

“This afternoon... unless, Harry, you had something else in mind.”
“No. This sounds a good plan of action.”

“If you don't mind, I might come along.”

“Sure thing, 'Bryn. An extra set of eyes and an extra blade never hurts.”

“Uh, Harry. Dardanos, Crixus and I are going to be working with Brandon this afternoon,” said Tommy, “But... goes without saying, call if you need help, I'll be there.”

Dwemer ruin of Arkngthamz
Reach Hold, Skyrim Province

It had taken a couple of hours for them to actually locate the site, having first used Mazhe's mobile to teleport to a small settlement in the Reach named Old Hroldan. The settlement had perhaps ten, maybe twelve houses, a blacksmith, an inn, and a mine. A blip on the map, not all that remarkable.

From there, with everyone else waiting inside of Harry's chest, Harry produced his Firebolt, and he and Mazhe flew the rest of the way to the ruin. Harry put them both under a disillusionment charm, and in retrospect, that had been wise thinking. They passed over at least five different hostile parties on the ground, never mind the 'friendly' wildlife. Harry only needed to look at Mazhe's face to know what a sabre cat was capable of.

Getting to the ruin, however, may have been the easiest part, for, as Harry made to restore his chest to proper size, the ground began to shake, the vibrations coming from deep within.

“Shor's bones,” Mazhe muttered, crouching low as not to be toppled over by the vibrations. Harry quickly did the same.

“Most... unusual.”

“Something that shakes the entire ground? My immediate thought is a dragon... but... no, this is different.”

The shaking at last stopped.

“Perhaps Justin might know,” Mazhe suggested, while Harry restored his chest to proper size. He pulled open the lid, calling, “Guys! We're here.”

Having been in more than a few Dwemer ruins before, they expected a typical dungeon-crawl. Most of the places weren't in all that great shape... questionable stability and so on, but somewhat predictable. Arkngthamz, however, instantly proved to be very different, the moment they stepped inside.

The immediate thing they noticed, was the fact that the entire corridor was tilted on an angle. Sections of the wall had been cracked, with pieces strewn on the floor, forming piles of debris.

Then came the second surprise, as the floor heaved, with the place coming alive from massive shaking and vibrations from deep in the ground.

“By the eight...” Brynjolf muttered, as everyone braced from the shaking.

“What is this?!?” Mazhe exclaimed, alarmed.

“Earthquake,” Justin answered, having already produced a shield. The shaking was knocking pieces of the ceiling loose, and the air was becoming choked with dust.
“Earthquake?”

“Yeah. Strong shaking of the ground. We get them sometimes back on earth,” Justin explained, as the shaking at last stopped. “Guys. We need to be able to Apparate or port key out of here at a moment's notice. Not sure of the structural integrity here.”

“Concurred. Never have I beheld a ruin so...” Harry began.

“Ruined?” Mazhe finished.

“Come on lads, let's keep moving,” Brynjolf prompted.

Navigating the ruin proved somewhat challenging, considering the off-angle of the floor, not to mention the amount of debris. Some places, the columns had partially collapsed. It was as if a bomb had gone off.

They made it a little further into the ruin, before getting yet another surprise.

“Please, turn back... before it's too late...” The voice seemed to come from everywhere.

Both Harry and Mazhe wheeled about, being reminded of their last encounter with disembodied voices. No, this one was female, and rather than threatening, she was pleading.

“At least she's not trying to steal our magic,” Mazhe muttered.

“Such things still bring little comfort.”

“Maybe she might know about the missing vault contents,” Justin suggested, with a shrug, as they once again got moving.

Harry let out a snort. “Mercer likely sent her to the afterlife in the first place.”

They made it only a few steps, before yet another strong tremor shook the ruin. This time, Harry was forced to banish a section of the ceiling and the subsequent pile of earth that threatened to drop on top of them.

“ Gods. Mercer penetrated such inhospitable conditions?”

“He was an agent of Nocturnal, lad. With the Skeleton Key in his possession, perhaps he caused the destruction we're seeing here. Karliah did speak of him having access to unfathomable power.”

When the tremor finished, they once again got moving. They passed through several smaller chambers, and more corridors, before at last arriving at a much larger chamber—or the remains of it. By rights, the room appeared to be carved in half, with an underground river racing through the chasm that had formed.

They had barely stepped inside, when a ghostly figure appeared. Harry guessed she was dressed in a set of standard steel armour. She had to be a younger Nord, with long hair.

She let out a sigh. “What are you still doing here?” She gave them all a disgusted look. “Let me guess. You're here for the treasure, aren't you?”

“Did Mercer put you up to this?” asked Brynjolf.

“I have no idea who this 'Mercer' might be, but... wait. You come for—“
“Treasure, yes,” Mazhe answered, “Just not the treasure you might be thinking of. We're only here to recover property that was stolen from us. I'm Mazhe, this is Harry, Brynjolf, and Justin.”

“The name's Katria,” the ghost introduced herself, “I am—was—an adventurer. Raided ruins like this for nigh on twenty years. I was on the trail of something big. It led me here, and... I didn't make it.”

“How long have you been here?” asked Justin.

“I'm not sure. A few years, maybe,” Katria answered.

“You've seen someone dressed like me come in here.”

At Katria's nod, Brynjolf said, “He's been recently dealt with.”

Harry thought for a moment.

“Perhaps, if you help us, we might help you. It seems you might have unfinished business.”

“Unfinished business?!” Katria parroted, angrily, “It was my work, my theory, you know! All of it stolen, by my damned apprentice! That's how I ended up here. I can't rest. Not until I find the Forge, until I can prove that it was my discovery. Mine, not his!”


“Another name is added to a growling list of fools who now have a date with the demon of knowledge,” Harry muttered. “Katria, we would be willing to help you set the record straight. Let it be said there are thieves with honour.”

“What exactly is Aetherium, lass?” Brynjolf questioned.

“It's a rare mineral used by the dwarves,” Katria answered, “Supposedly, they had to build a special forge, the Aetherium Forge, even to work with it. The items it made were so powerful they went to war over it, and the Forge was lost. Or so the story goes.”

“What would it look like?” Mazhe asked.

“It's a crystal-like matter with a powerful magical aura.”

“Wait. Harry, remember that odd ingot we found about nine years ago? Even Balimund was confused. Nothing we did would put a dent in it... and well...”

Harry reached into his satchel, and pulled out an ingot that was a brilliant turquoise in colour. Katrina nearly fell over in shock.

“Where... where did you find that?” she finally managed.

“It was some time ago,” Mazhe answered, “But the ruin was in the northwest part of the province.”

“Remarkable. It was believed there would only be fragments left—it's truly a miracle you were able to find that. But... there's more to the story. You finding an intact Aetherium ingot proves at least part of my theory.”

She beckoned for them to follow, and led them to the ledge, where a set of columns had collapsed, forming a bridge. She pointed to a decayed body laying on a ledge below.
“One of you retrieve my journal, we're gonna need it.”

Justin quickly scrambled down, and collected the journal from her tattered satchel.

“We will ensure your remains are attended to,” Harry promised.

They crossed the makeshift bridge, which led into a narrow corridor with a grille that made up the floor. No surprise, a pair of dwarven spiders popped out of an opening part way through. Mazhe quickly dealt with the pair—this was old hat to them.

The corridor opened up into a partially flooded room, with a pair of steam pipes rising up at an odd angle.

“Looks like we have to climb,” said Justin.

“Hold on.”

Harry unleashed a blasting curse at the metal gates that were partially submerged, causing them to collapse, and form a bridge rather than an obstruction.

“Most curious magic, Harry,” Katria commented.

“He's not from around here,” Mazhe smirked.

They all scrambled across, and through a shorter corridor, only to arrive at a door that was barred, with no obvious way through. At least, until some strange device on the other end whirred to life. It was a tall spindle, with a ring that contained four 'paddles', for lack of a better word. The ring spun rapidly, while racing up the spindle, and when it reached the top, the doors sprung open.

“What sort of contraption is that, lass?” Brynjolf questioned, as they all scrambled through.

“Dwarves called them 'Kinetic Resonators','” Katria explained, as the spindle came to life again, this time causing the door to slam shut. “Don’t see them very often, least not among the clans in Skyrim. Just hit them, and they’ll... do whatever it is they’re supposed to do.”

They crossed the room, to where rested another Kinetic Resonator, and a door which they assumed was linked to it.

“So a shock spell will work?”

“Just hit it, Mazhe.”

Mazhe charged up a shock spell, and let fly, hitting one of the paddles. The contraption sprung to life, with the paddles spinning wildly up the spindle, with the door springing open immediately after.

“Most curious,” said Harry, as they hurried through the opening. “Dwemer technology is most certainly a fascination, but spending any amount of time within the remains of their cities is still not a favoured endeavour.”

“Nor mine,” Mazhe agreed, as they began to ascend a flight of stairs.

“Hold on,” Katria warned, “Falmer up ahead. Damned things are like flies... no matter how many you kill...”

“Concurred. Another reason to dislike Dwemer ruins.”
It took them only a few minutes to clear the chamber they stepped into, before beginning a hike up a chasm that had been carved into the earth. In that particular area, only a few traces remained that it had at one time been a Dwemer city. Both Harry and Mazhe had their mobiles out, taking both pictures and video of the room.

“Calcelmo will love to see this stuff,” said Mazhe.

At last, they came to a stop at a large set of gates. Inside, they could see crates, boxes, chests—which was obviously the stash of things stolen from the guild's vault.

“Your friend stored the items you're looking for in here. It's locked up tight—“

“We have the key to it,” Harry answered.

“Why don't you guys go on ahead, I can help Brynjolf get the stuff back to the Guild,” Justin suggested.

“We can collect this later,” Brynjolf decided, “Let's help the lass with her errand first.”

“Sounds good.”

Mazhe quickly made a bookmark of the location on his mobile so they could get back to it later.

“Let's keep going, then.”

The remainder of the ascent took another hour of them hiking up the chasm, to sometimes have to pass through a somewhat intact dwarven chamber. In typical fashion, those rooms were occupied by either Falmer, or Chaurus—a monstrosity with a slight resemblance to a lobster. Or, a lobster crossed with an ant, maybe? No matter. They were easily the size of a person, black in colour, and dangerous. Their mandibles were large enough to cut a man in two, never mind the deadly poison they could spit.

As if that wasn't bad enough, after a cocoon stage, they transformed into something even more dangerous: something called a Chaurus Hunter. It can be best described as a mosquito on steroids. It retained all of the deadly properties of its previous life with the additive of being able to fly.

Between the five people present, however, none of these presented a real challenge. With that, they at last reached the summit, and a most imposing structure.

“This somewhat resembles an arena,” Harry noted.

“What is this, lass?” Brynjolf asked.

“It's a lock. A 'Tonal Lock'. Simple, and very, very deadly. See the Resonators up there? Strike them in the right order, and the doors should open. Get it wrong, and... well. You've seen what happened when I tried it.”

“You mean... the earthquake,” Justin guessed.

Katria looked angry. “Yeah. I thought I was prepared for anything. How can you prepare for a damned earthquake?”

She let out a huff.

“And that was just one trap! Look around! Who knows what else this thing is capable of?”
“Justin, let's see the journal,” Mazhe suggested, “Harry, why don't you try... well... you have different ability.”

“Oh.”

Harry approached one of the doors, and attempted an unlocking charm.

CLINK!

Both Mazhe and Justin were sent ducking for cover, as two enormous spears embedded themselves in the ground where they had been standing moments earlier. The doors still remained sealed.

“Mazhe?!”

“It's fine, we're fine. Uh... best not mess with the doors.”

“Advice well-heeded.”

Now gathered off to the side, Justin was pouring over the notes Katria had written.

“Try my last entry,” the ghost suggested, “there should be a drawing.”

“Ah, here we are.”

Justin had opened the journal to the back, where indeed, there was a crude drawing of the enormous facade they were standing in front of.

“You've got lock one, and lock two. You're sure of those.”

“Positive.”

“And the earthquake was triggered by your fifth failure.”

“Yes.”

“Though. Hey Harry. Go check the remains over there. Perhaps they left notes or something,” Mazhe suggested.

“I'll give you a hand,” said Brynjolf.

Immediately, Harry spotted a tattered piece of parchment partially covered by the decayed remains. He unfolded it, and was not disappointed.

“Jackpot. Lock three is top left.”

“Which leaves a fifty-fifty chance of getting this right.”

“Your odds are far better than mine ever were,” said Katria.

The debate went back and forth for a few minutes, before they settled on trying the bottom centre as the fourth lock. Just like with the other resonators they triggered, the paddles spun rapidly up the spindle when struck. The first three caused the eyes in the bust high on the facade to glow green. Then, when Mazhe activated the bottom centre—they turned red.

“Oh Gods...” Katria muttered, as the other locks reset.

“Spheres,” Harry groaned, as no less than ten sphere-like objects rolled out of pipes along the
ground. They were about two and a half feet in diameter. They seemed to come apart, with a body springing up from within, a menacing head and arms appearing.

“*Fus... RO DAAAH!*” The shout came out as a clap of thunder, rendering over half the mechanical monsters a pile of scrap. Harry and Justin, meanwhile, lay waste to the remainder.

“*Dragonborn,*” Katria whispered.

“Dragonslayer,” Harry corrected her, “We have battled and destroyed Alduin, just a little over a year prior."

“You prevented the end times."

“I like this world, I'd rather it continue to exist,” said Mazhe.

That got a smile out of the ghost.

“Come on then. You know the combination."

“Yeah, let's get it right. I'd rather not face the monster behind door number one,” said Justin, pointing to the sealed set of gates at the centre of the facade.

Just behind it, they could barely see the mechanical monster that lay dormant. It was a giant robot, by best description. Made of a golden-coloured metal, it easily stood three times the height of an average human. If awakened, it could do terrible damage, including a deadly steam attack.

“Dwemer centurion. Wonderful."

“Hands and minds to purpose."

The resonators were struck in the right order, and this time, the gate to the far left sprung open. Everyone tensed a moment, ready for an unexpected surprise, but none came; the trap was defeated.

Passing through the now open gate, they entered a short corridor, before veering to the right, and to the left, into a small chamber. There were shelves stocked with numerous dwemer supplies, but more importantly, a pedestal at the back of the room, on which rested a bright turquoise shard that was very similar to the Aetherium ingot Harry now carried in his satchel. Mazhe quickly picked it up, and held it so the others could see it.

“Damn. The edges... this was precision-cut,” Justin noted, “Laser-like precision. Whoever made this... they were extraordinary smiths."

“The dwarves were exceptionally talented when it came to smithing,” said Mazhe.

“Wait,” Katria thought aloud, “This looks like... If you had another piece, about the same size, it would... it would snap right in. I saw a drawing of this once. This shard... it's... it's part of a key. A key made of pure Aetherium! The key to the Forge!"

“How many pieces are we talking about, lass?"

“I would guess, likely three others to go along with this one--one for each of the four cities that worked on the Forge. I had a map, in my journal. That's where we should start."

Justin was already opening Katria's journal, having seen the map earlier.

“Look. We're here now,” said Katria, pointing to the location of Arkngthamz.
Harry, meanwhile, was opening his mobile. He quickly resized the screen so others could see it, and manipulated the map, adding the various locations from the journal.

“Site four... we know it,” Mazhe remembered, “Mzulft. We don't remember—”

“No. My research indicated there was a storage room of some sort, close to but not inside,” Katria explained.

“Wasn't there a small building a little to the southwest?” Harry remembered, “We didn't have time to have a look, given the pressing matter at the time.”

“Perhaps we should start there. Care to join us?”

Dwemer ruins of Mzulft
Eastmarch Hold

The group arrived just outside the main entrance to the large ruin. Blades and spells were brought to bear, but it proved unnecessary. The Area was quiet. Katria, meanwhile, was held speechless at the way by which they had travelled.

“Such a device would have saved an incredible amount of time,” she declared.

“It does. I helped to create it,” said Justin, as they set out for the dwemer-made building a little ways down the path from the main structure.

Just as Harry remembered, it was a smaller structure, with a single entrance. A store room, as Katria's notes had described. The door was not locked, but getting inside, they found the inner doors sealed. And sure enough, on a pedestal inside the locked area, they could see a half-circle shaped piece of Aetherium, exactly like the piece they collected at Arkngthamz. Harry simply gave a wave of the hand, and the gate unlocked with a soft 'click'.

Justin, meanwhile, drew his wand, and gave it a swish.

“Guys. We need to check the other room. Something in there giving off a really strong magical signature.”

While Mazhe collected the Aetherium shard, Harry pushed open the door inside.

“Gods...”

“What—by the eight...” Brynjolf muttered.

The room was stuffed with coins, jewels, and more bright turquoise-coloured ingots of Aetherium.

“Profit. We further deepen the guild's coffers with such a discovery,” Harry grinned.

“We can bring a few guys from the guild later,” said Mazhe, “Meantime, let's collect the ingots. Knowing they're priceless...”

“We'll need them when we actually find the forge,” said Katria, confidence in her voice.

“And I think I know where it might be,” said Mazhe, “The fifth location. It's Bthalft. When I was a boy, my pa took me along with him sometimes when he went hunting, see. Bthalft... there's this really strange sort of mechanism on the top of a pedestal there... it sort of stands out.”
“That then leaves locations two and three. Perhaps Calcelmo might know.”

“Let me send him a message.”

“Here. I'll share the map locations,” said Mazhe.

Given their past meetings, Calcelmo was more than cooperative, particularly considering he now had one of the mobile devices. They received back a rather lengthy note, describing the two locations in question.

“One of them is called Deep Folk Crossing, more of a landmark than a ruin. It's northwest of Markarth, close to the border with High Rock. The other, is a larger ruin named Raldbthar. It’s west of Windhelm.”

“Wait. We've been there before. It's on the rocky slope, east of Irkngthand,” Harry remembered.

“Why don't we split up?” Justin suggested, “Brynjolf and I can check out Deep Folk Crossing, while you guys travel to Raldbthar. And Calcelmo gave us a tip. There may be another way into the ruin. Look for an elevator outside, above the main entrance. It should save you some time.”

“Perhaps we might send Calcelmo an Aetherium ingot for his trouble. He can display it in his museum.”

Dwemer ruins of Raldbthar
Pale Hold

They arrived not far from the ruin, considering Harry and Mazhe had been in the area before. Perhaps it was a good thing they hadn't chosen to make a port key directly to the ruin's entrance, since the immediate area was the site of a bandit camp.

Between the three of them, Harry, Mazhe, and Katria made quick work of the threats. Bandits tended not to be all that intelligent, generally held in a drunken stupor (or under the influence of stronger substances), and so were rather clumsy. Archers could be a little more tricky to deal with, but like any other foe, an ice spike through the eye socket tended to bring an abrupt end to the fight.

With the threat dealt with, they could then get a look around.

“There,” said Harry, pointing to the highest part of the ruin, “It appears identical to the lift at the Tower of Mzark—where we recovered the *Kel*.”

“The gate will likely be sealed,” said Katria, doubtful.

“We have ways of gaining entry,” said Harry, with a grin, as they began to climb the numerous steps that led up to the ruin.

They soon discovered, the steps didn't lead all the way up to the lift. That, however, was easily solved by Harry shuttling his partner and his new friend up on the back of his broom.

“He's not from around here,” Mazhe explained, as Harry once again stowed his broom away.

“I can see that,” said Katria, as they approached the gate to the lift. “Damn it. As expected, it can only be opened from the—“

She was again held momentarily speechless, as the gates simply vanished.
“You were saying?” Harry smirked. The three of them hurried onto the lift, with Mazhe pulling the lever to start their descent.

The ride took less than a minute, with them arriving at a closed metal gate that matched the one on the surface. Once again Harry simply vanished it, not wasting the time to determine if it was locked or not.

“Dwemer spiders,” Katria whispered.

Sure enough, they could hear something skittering about in the dim light. Harry knew better than to try any sort of detection spell; Dwemer automatons were immune. As far as Harry and his friends knew, there was no way at all to detect them, either magic or otherwise.

To their luck, there was only one spider, which was easily dealt with. The room they'd stepped into wasn't all that large, with a rectangular pedestal of some sort in the middle. There was a spherical receptacle, but no one was interested in exploring what it might be for. No, the purpose for them being there was at the far end, resting on a raised pedestal. The Aetherium shard practically glowed in the dim light.

“Harry, d'you mind checking for magical signatures? There might be more Aetherium here,” Mazhe suggested.

“Raldbthar was said to be a main source of Aetherium,” said Katria, as Mazhe collected the shard.

Harry gave a nod, before giving a wide sweep of his hand.

“Interesting. Nothing immediately close, but... a few hits nearby. Moving though.”

“Falmer,” said both Katria and Mazhe.

Harry only grinned. “Right. We might—” His mobile rang. He unclipped it, and pressed the button to answer it.

“Yeah.”

“Harry. We located the shard. This place looks more like a monument than a ruin,” came Justin's voice.

“Excellent. We have also located the shard at Raldbthar. Return to the flat. We'll ring you up when we arrive at Bthalft.”

“Right. Sounds like a plan. Be safe, we'll see you soon.”

Harry closed the connection, and re-clipped the mobile back on his belt.

“We're heading to Bthalft before summoning Justin.”

“Let me pull up a bookmark. I've got a location close to where we need to be,” said Mazhe, as he scrolled through the lengthy list of bookmarks he now had in his phone. It had become a habit to mark important locations for easy access later on.

“And it just... carries you to where the 'bookmark' references?”

“Justin is a master when it comes to charms. Teleport by mobile is his brainchild, his creation,” said Harry, “The Commonwealth has compensated him very well for such vital contribution.”
“Right. Got it. Everyone gather around.”

Dwemer ruins of Bthalft
Rift Hold

Once again, the three of them discovered the site was occupied by bandits. They'd not been seen approaching, and so it was decided they take the night, get some rest, and return at first light. Harry quickly made a bookmark of the location, before they all retreated back to the flat for the night.

“Your number has swelled,” Dardanos greeted, as they gained their bearings.

“Temporarily, yes,” answered Harry, “This is Katria. We are lending hands to correct an injustice, and perhaps benefit the Commonwealth. Katria. A few dear friends, Dardanos, Crixus, and Tommy. Let us break words, as I believe extra hands might be a necessity come first light.”

“How far did you guys get tracking down the... the forge?” asked Tommy.

“We're taking the night, gonna check out a ruin in the morning... Bthalft, is it?”

“Yeah,” said Mazhe.

“Bandits have chosen to make the location a campsite. Extra hands will put them to grass with quicker haste,” said Harry.

“The other sites being Aetherium sources, I'm almost positive Bthalft is the Aetherium Forge,” said Katria.

“Once we're sure of it, I think we should invite Balimund. His knowledge of blacksmithing is far above any of us,” said Mazhe, “And he is a trusted friend and teacher.”

“Sure,” Katria agreed, “It's all about proof. That's all I want.”

“And Balimund will help us to get it.”

“I'll return to the cistern,” said Brynjolf, “Come find me before you head out.” He left the room, and a door opening and closing moments later confirmed his departure.

“Katria. Is there anything you need, or...” Justin began.

Katria waved him off. “Being a ghost is both a blessing and a curse. I don't sleep or eat. Both things I do miss.”

“I'm sorry...”

“It's not your fault. Had I been a little more careful...”

“And second-guessing won't ever solve anything,” said Mazhe, “Everything happens for a reason, right? Our happening on you... somehow, our paths were meant to cross, even if... in your case, it was from the grave.”

Harry, meanwhile, reached into his rucksack, and retrieved the Aetherium ingot.

“What sort of properties is this material supposed to possess? Or, perhaps I might frame the question differently: what effect might this have on a ward anchor stone?” Harry questioned.
Katria seemed to think a moment.

“Theoretically, the ward would be immensely powerful... impossible to penetrate by exterior means. According to my research, Aetherium was used to create some truly powerful artefacts, already imbued with immense magical enchantments.”

“No more collapsing the ward using harmonic resonance,” said Justin.

“We are of like mind,” said Harry, nodding.

“But, just forming such a stone, it will require accessing the Aetherium Forge,” Katria pointed out.

“Which we will reach tomorrow. Harry, could I borrow that a moment? There's a few people I want to show it to.”

“Of course.”

Justin collected the turquoise-coloured ingot, and headed for the dining room.

At Katria's unasked question, Harry said, “One of our great cities suffered massive collapse after an attack against its wards. We seek a means to prevent such an attack from being repeated. Perhaps Aetherium might be what we seek.”

“And we really do need to investigate further, see if there are unexplored Aetherium deposits.”

“As I said earlier...” Katria began.

“We have access to tools, resources, and technology that even the dwarves didn't,” Harry cut in.

“Oh. I see.”

Katria thought for a moment.

“My research indicated Raldbthar was the primary Aetherium deposit.”

“The Commonwealth will revisit the site, then. If this resource proves to be of value in matters of defence, coin will mean very little.”

It was then Justin returned.

“Guys. Looks like I'm meeting with the Arcane Sciences department in a half hour. Why doesn't everyone go get some rest?”

“Concurred. We'll rise at first light. Morning exercises can be deferred for one morning.”

The following morning, they returned to a spot not far from the ruins of Bthalft. The much larger group comprising of Harry, Mazhe, Justin, Tommy, Brynjolf, Brandon, Dardanos, Crixus, Miraak, and Katria, then launched a swift attack on the bandit encampment. Suffice to say, the fight was over in under a minute.

“This... this has to be the place,” said Katria, hurrying up to the unusual mechanism at the top of the ruin.

“Look at the structure,” said Justin, “This... looks exactly like the top of the tower at Raldbthar...”
“And Mzark,” Harry added, “This has to be a lift. Hidden below, likely revealed by this mechanism.”

“The key,” said Katria, “Place the shards in the receptacle.”

She gestured to a gear-like receptacle.

“I would suggest that we give a wide berth,” Harry suggested.

“Good thinking,” said Mazhe, as he began placing the individual pieces into the slot. It took a bit of fiddling, before he determined the correct arrangement. However, when they were all placed in the receptacle, they were disappointed, as nothing seemed to happen.

“Try... taking the shards out?” Katria suggested.

Mazhe did as suggested—or tried to—and in the end, pulled out not only the shards, but an outer ring in the shape of a gear. It was made of dwarven metal. And, as he did, there came a low rumble from the ground.

“Gods! Get back!” Katria shouted, as she scrambled back to where the others stood. Mazhe quickly followed suit, and just in time, as the ground heaved, with dust and debris being thrown outward, as a stone structure quite literally erupted from it. It seemed to spin around on its vertical axis as it soared skyward, before finally revealing a gate.

“Wicked,” Harry grinned, as the dust began to settle.

“Come on then, let's see what's below,” said Mazhe.

The group quickly piled into the lift.

Both Harry and Mazhe, as well as Justin and Brandon, were more than accustomed to long lift rides. This, however, took them by surprise. It seemed to take perhaps fifteen minutes, before the lift at last came to a stop before a set of metal gates.

“That was exceptionally long,” said Mazhe, as he pushed the gate open.

“We have to be at least six, if not seven kilometres down,” Justin guessed. “To date, the longest elevator ride for me.”

“It will be the last,” said Harry, “Perhaps we should set a bookmark once we find the forge itself.”

“Feels much warmer down here,” said Tommy.

Justin gave a gesture with the hand, and '32C' wafted from the tips of his fingers.

“No shit, it's hot.”

“Stay your tongue,” said Harry, “I would rather near unbearable heat, than insufferable cold with no respite.”

There was only one path, made of yellow, almost bronze-coloured stones. And, as they set out to follow it, several braziers which anchored either side of it flared to life.

“This place has been sealed for a long time,” Mazhe guessed, looking around.
“Four thousand years, maybe,” said Katria.

The path led down several flights of stairs, before opening up into a vast chamber. As had been the case so far, a number of braziers roared to life as the large group got close to them, lighting the way.

“Shor's bones... this place is massive,” said Mazhe.

“There is rumour of a chamber that dwarfs even this one,” said Katria, “Blackreach. It is said to spread from the eastern edge of the Pale, to its western edge, perhaps more.”

Harry arched an eyebrow. “All of it underground?”

“Yes.”

“And sealed for nearly four thousand years. Perhaps, there is where we would find further sources of Aetherium,” said Harry.

“There has to be an entrance to it—“ Justin began.

“Blackreach. Gods... Septimus mentioned it, when he sent me to fetch the Elder Scroll,” Mazhe remembered.

They were then crossing a massive natural bridge that crossed the chamber. It had to be at least eight storeys above the chamber floor, which consisted of a massive underground lake. An island on the opposite side had yet more braziers, and as they approached, they flared to life.

“But we had already visited Tower Mzark on a previous occasion,” said Harry, “Septimus' instruction was stricken from thought.”

“And in hindsight, we may have missed out on something truly astounding. I think we need to check it out.”

“If it's as big as you say it is... I think the Commonwealth will be interested as well... research, right? We've lived underground almost since the Commonwealth was born... and to see that we're not alone—that another race, another culture, embraced the concept,” said Justin.

They had now crossed a second natural bridge, leading up to a wide set of steps, leading up to a facade similar to what they'd seen in Arkngthamz. Two kinetic resonators sat high up on the wall, one on each side of a set of metal doors. Between Mazhe and Harry, they triggered the devices, and the doors swung open.

That lead to more stairs going down, and it was easy to notice, it was getting warmer still. The stairs led to another short corridor, around a corner, and another set of stairs, before they arrived at another massive set of doors. Pushing them open, it was as if they'd opened the doors to a massive oven, the heat being unbearable.

The chamber itself was enormous, with a massive Dwemer machine at the far end of it. At the centre of the room was a series of grates, through which came a hellish glow: lava. Everyone was forced to step back from both the heat.

“Strong cooling charms,” Brandon suggested, producing his wand. Justin did the same, and within a few seconds, everyone was protected from the near searing heat.

“Gotta get the steam cleared out,” said Katria.
Harry, Justin, and Brandon quickly vanished the clouds of steam, only for it all to be replaced within moments.

“There. Looks like a valve,” said Mazhe, pointing to a large red wheel on a raised area to the left.

“One on the other side as well,” said Tommy, “But... wait. I don't like this. This setup screams ambush.”

“Yeah, agreed,” said Brandon, “Be ready for anything.”

There was no further prompting, as everyone in the group armed themselves, while Mazhe and Tommy hurried over to what they assumed were steam valves. When closed, the steam quickly dissipated, but Tommy's prediction was dead on. Far worse, the stairs leading back out of the chamber simply dropped into the floor, leaving no 'normal' way out.

“What the—Spiders!” Katria cried, as a series of tubes that lined the platforms opened up. The floor was quickly crawling with the mechanical arachnids.

*KAWHACK!* Mazhe's ice spike impaled one of them, blasting it across the platform, and into the lava behind the enormous machine that took up most of the back side of the chamber.

*BOOM.* Tommy's forty-millimetre grenades were more than a match for the arachnids, and a pair of them were rendered a pile of debris.

Harry, meanwhile, relied on reductor curses, having about the same effect. On the grand scale of things, spiders were more of a nuisance than a real threat—whether they be natural or mechanical.

“*Ven... GAR NOSSSS!*” came Miraak's shout.

Brandon grabbed both Crixus and Dardanos, and Disapparated, before the three of them were caught in the cyclone that was produced. The spiders, meanwhile, weren't so lucky, as four of them were caught up in it, and hurled into the lava at the opposite end of the room.

“That will be enough dragon shit,” he muttered, before un-freezing his companions.

“You wield truly extraordinary magic, young mage,” said Katria, while the others began to systematically destroy the now frozen automatons.

“It's magic from where I come from. It's a different world than here,” Justin explained. “Harry's versed in both the magic in our world, and the magic here.”

“Which has saved our asses on more than a few occasions,” said Tommy.

With their enemies dispatched, they were then able to get a look at the enormous machine that took up most of the back side of the chamber. Several enormous pipes rose from floor to ceiling, and perhaps most spectacular, a column of near white-hot molten rock was spewing from a spout near the ceiling, to fall into an opening at the back of the machine.

“The Dwemer tamed this? Gods...” Harry muttered, as they all gathered around.

“That column will have a temperature between seven hundred and twelve-hundred degrees Celsius,” said Justin. He was just as impressed as the others.

“We use a great temperature while smithing, but this... I'm astounded,” Mazhe finally managed.

“Yet, this works almost identically to equipment we have already seen and used,” said Harry, “This
looks to be a smelter. The ingots would have been created here.”

The equipment he was pointing out had the familiar dome shape to it, but there was no pile of fuel. A pipe pierced the back of the unit, and it was glowing a cherry red. There was no mistake what was being used as the heating source.

Tommy, meanwhile, looked confused. “Thing I don't get... this is all metal, right? How does it stay intact against that much heat?”

“Magic,” Mazhe answered, “Remember, the Dwemer were an elven race. There's no way to know for certain just how strong they were magically, but I think what we're seeing here is a pretty good measure. To tame heat of the earth itself... astounding.”

Katria looked just as astounded as the others. “It... It's all true! I... I can't—“

“We have to make something,” Mazhe decided, “Guys, let's see if there's supplies here. Ingots, likely Dwarven... and Harry... I think I might like to bring Balimund here. If he thinks his forge is special, this will send him over the moon!”

“Perhaps for now we should start with something small,” Katria suggested, “If only to prove this actually works.”

“Still, I'd like to let Balimund see this. He's a brilliant blacksmith in Riften who knows a bit more about the craft then me,” Mazhe answered. “But no matter what, we'll make sure it is known this is your research, your discovery. We just helped you to get here.”

It was the middle of the morning before they could bring Balimund to the forge. The Jarl's oldest son required repair work on his blade, and such things took priority. “Perhaps if young Harrold would stop slaying walls, his blade would not dull so quickly,” Balimund had remarked, before sending his apprentice up to the keep. That had earned a laugh out of Mazhe.

Once before the great forge, the old smith was equally astounded.

“And I believed I had seen a truly magnificent forge in Whiterun,” he remarked.

“I think this outstrips the Skyforge by a mile,” said Mazhe, “Using the very fire of the earth. This is all Katria's research and discovery. We just need to see if it actually works.”

Harry, meanwhile, pulled one of the Aetherium ingots out of his rucksack.

“We need to make something small. I was thinking an amulet,” Mazhe continued.

“Well... you've made something like that before, Mazhe.”

“Not of this kind of material, sir.”

“Well then. Let's get to work.”

“If... if everything's cool here, maybe some of us should get back to the flat,” said Tommy.

“Harry, why don't you take Brynjolf back to Arkngthamz, and help him collect the stolen vault contents? We're probably gonna be a while, right? Here, I'll pass you the bookmark.”

“Sounds like a good course of action.”

“We will also lend hands,” Crixus offered.
“I will remain here with Mazhe,” Miraak decided.

“Likewise,” Justin decided. “Though I’ve seen smithing before, this is different, right? I’ll want to share this with a few people.”

Within seconds, the group had split up, with three smaller groups going in separate directions.

Somewhere in the southeastern Indian Ocean, same day

Up until a few days prior, the Great Southern Star had been the pride and joy of an excessively wealthy Australian businessman. The luxury yacht was built with business and pleasure in mind, with room for nearly twenty people. Her twin engines could power her through the waves at nearly twenty knots, and she was built to withstand all except the most brutal of what the ocean could throw at her.

At present, the vessel’s owner, along with the guests he was hosting, now found themselves locked in the hold. The invasion had taken a matter of seconds, as individuals wearing dark, hooded cloaks stormed aboard. The past few days had become the stuff of nightmares, as the captors treated the owner and his guests to unspeakable torture. One of them had been driven to insanity, and in response, the tormentors had simply killed the man.

Now, said captors were gathered in the main saloon.

“Perhaps we should have sought something like this out last month. That pathetic little tub was most uncomfortable.”

“Enough, fool. We have little time for frivolity and other such distractions.”

“Of course, mistress. Though you have to agree, this is a practical base of operations,” said the first speaker.

“It being ’nice’ or not, is irrelevant.”

“And we’re getting off track, Deirdre,” spoke a man, leaning forward, and adjusting his half-moon spectacles.

“Of course, Dumbledore,” said the witch, “It is indeed time to begin the agenda in earnest.” She indicated a witch at the far end of the table. “The operation against Spiraminis was well-executed. Jezebel, share with us plans for your next target.”

The short witch rose. She had a frightfully pale complexion, so much so, one might conclude she was a vampire. And when she spoke, she sounded like a twelve-year-old girl, rather than an adult.

“Of course, your grace. My contacts within the Commonwealth have shared a rather interesting bit of information regarding Delir, their city just south east of Dubai.”

She flicked a wand at the wall to her right, causing a page of parchment to appear. Another flick of the wand had it enlarged so everyone could see it.

“As my contact was careful to explain, most cities in the Commonwealth have been excavated between four and six miles below the surface. In the case of Delir, earth conditions in the location prevented them from doing so. There have been six different incidences in the city’s history wherein the Commonwealth was forced to intervene to prevent exposure.”
“Intervene?” questioned a wizard two seats down.

“Drilling, I would imagine,” said Dumbledore.

Jezebel gave a nod. “Precisely. At a depth of only six thousand feet, the risk of exposure is exponentially greater than any other city they have.”

“Exposure? In what way?”

“The sand,” said Deidre, “Though by such depth, it would take years...”

The witch gave a vicious smirk, and let out a girly giggle. “By natural means, perhaps. However, I have the means to help nature along just a little, perhaps speed up the process.”

That had a number of people at the table smirking. One quipped, “And if Dubai should be inundated by the sand, all the better.”

Jezebel smiled. “It would be a side effect, yes.”

“I fail to see the reason behind doing such a thing,” said Dumbledore, “The Commonwealth is capable of great feats of magic too, I need not remind all of you. What prevents them from shifting the sand also?”

“Exposure, Dumbledore,” answered Deidre, “The International Confederation will condemn the Commonwealth for destroying a major city and murdering millions of Muggles.”

She seemed to mull the idea over. “Have you a time frame?”

“We will see results pretty quickly,” answered Jezebel, thoughtfully, “But the long-term goal... likely in the spring. The spell work will require a fortnight and some willing—or not-so-willing participants.”

She flicked her eyes to the forward wall, and that had everyone smirking.

“I will also require a team of able spell-casters... six to ten, though only for the final spell work.”

“Dumbledore and I shall assist directly,” Deidre decided, “You will have the additional resources required.”

“Thank you, your grace.” Jezebel flicked her wand at the wall, vanishing the parchment, then retook her seat.

“Let us move things along.” Deidre pointed to a wizard opposite. "Share your discovery with the group."

"All of you know by now who Justin Fraser is." Getting nods, sneers, and looks of disdain from the others around the table, he continued, "I have credible information from a White House source, wherein the President's youngest daughter has began a friendly relationship with the mudblood.”

“Such a relationship, it could be exploited,” said another wizard further down the table.

“My thoughts concurred,” said the first wizard, “Knowing and seeing how Potter and his circle function, we could use this as an opportunity.”

“What might you have in mind?” Dumbledore pressed.
“With just the right amount of coaxing, perhaps Miss Bartlet might like to take her new interest on a date. *Muggles*, so easy to *persuade*, are they not?”

His suggestion was met with sniggers—until one of them was instantly felled by a bolt of green magic.

“Do not forget, my pretties,” Deirdre smiled serenely, “Minions are but knuts a dozen. You are all replaceable.”

The speaker cleared his throat, and gathered his thoughts. “While at the event, a series of unfortunate events can then unfold, bringing about the deaths of many poor, defenceless *Muggles*. A *shame* should Miss Bartlett and Potter’s circle be counted among them.”

“Potter and his band of misfits did attend a baseball game in San Francisco back during the spring,” Dumbledore remembered, “My Order was keeping an eye on their movements. Perhaps it could be arranged for something similar.”

“It shouldn’t be that much of a challenge for such a thing to be arranged,” said a witch from part-way down the table, “Washington D.C. does have a baseball team.”

Deirdre thought for a moment. “How many Muggles would attend this ‘baseball game’?”

Now it was Dumbledore’s turn to think on the matter, for about a minute.

“If memory serves me correctly, between fifteen and fifty thousand, depending on a number of factors,” he answered. “It would mostly depend on the opponent popularity, what kind of ‘star power’ the opponent has, and the like. Count on at least fifteen thousand spectators.”

The dark witch gave a nasty smirk. “See a plan assembled that would unfold before months’ end. That the venue be at capacity would be a preferable bonus. See that it is so, and be rewarded additionally. Additional reward shall be seen, should any or all of Potter’s circle be disposed of during the event.”

She once again collected her thoughts before continuing, “The Commonwealth has felt our sting, I think we need to be making a statement, both to the magical world, and to the worthless Muggles.”

“Ma’am... if... are we ready for that sort of scenario? I mean, our recruitment has been going extraordinary well—far ahead of where Lord Voldemort ever was. But are we truly ready to take on the Muggles? D-don't think me questioning your motive or your resolve, but... we do need to tread carefully, until we're sure of our strength.”

“This event, this plan... it is very do-able. It will eclipse the scale of the event in Atlantic City three years ago,” said Dumbledore, “The statute of secrecy will be breached, if temporarily, and it will have the magical world scrambling. I do know Americans love their baseball, so the repercussions will be far-reaching.”

“How do you figure the ICW will react?” questioned another wizard.

“It will depend on the incident we create. Ideal circumstance, is for Harry and his friends to receive the blame for aggravating the incident, if not causing it in the first place,” said Dumbledore. “As it stands, MACUSA(2) is still not entirely convinced of his innocence, with regard to last spring’s series of events which brought about the downfall of Voldemort.”

Deirdre leaned back in her seat, once again mulling over the information and the suggested plan of action. After a minute or two, she gave another creepy smile.
“Begin preparations at once.”

Chapter End Notes

UP NEXT: Harry and Mazhe complete the Aetherium piece they’ve been crafting; the Commonwealth begins an investigation to determine if Bthalft might be suitable for a settlement; and Justin’s second date with his new girlfriend in Washington results in chaos...

CHAPTER NOTES: The chapter's title pays homage to the quest of the same name, added to the game with the Dawnguard expansion.

Additionally, I should point out that there is more than a few pieces of verbatim dialogue used, all of which (C) Bethesda. As to the lore surrounding Aetherium, I give a nod to UESP (Unofficial Elder Scrolls Pages) for providing a helpful summary.

(1) Who wants to take a guess as to where I got this from? But God oh God, does it fit with where I’m going, as far as the scale of destruction is concerned. I did warn at the beginning of this story, it’s dark. Very, very dark, some of the darkest writing I’ve done.

(2) MACUSA – Magical Congress of the United States of America. Now the Canon magical government of the United States, clarified both through Pottermore, and through Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them, which was released in December. On a personal note, I thought it was an outstanding movie, though I didn't get a chance to see it in the theatre, and had to wait until it was released on Blu-Ray. My favourite movie at the present.
Bait

Chapter Summary

Harry and Mazhe complete the Aetherium piece they’ve been crafting; the Commonwealth begins an investigation to determine if Bthalft might be suitable for a settlement; and Justin’s second date with his new girlfriend in Washington results in chaos...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

3. BAIT

September, 2007 / Hearthfire, 4E202

“Welcome death, quoth the rat, when the trap fell.”

- Thomas Fuller

September 10, 2007 / 10 Hearthfire, 4E202
Aetherium Forge, Bthalft

“Remember, this material has a very short working time,” said Balimund, as he worked the small ring of Aetherium. It was wrapped around a tapered stone spindle which had a series of notches in it. The material was glowing almost painfully white, having been heated by the forge. A growing pile of similar rings lay in a small clay container off to the side.

A momentary flash near the stairs leading out heralded the arrival of Justin.

“Morning everyone. Sorry for not being around earlier, but—“

“Yeah, we know. You were tied up,” Mazhe smirked, as he worked alongside the smith.

“It was favourable?” Harry asked.

“What did... oh. Well. Um...”

Harry smirked. “Doctore has found love.”

“Fuck off.”

“Oh, testy are we?” Mazhe smirked.

“Put that one back on the heat, it's cooled too much,” said Balimund.

Mazhe glanced at it, and gave a nod. The link he was working on wasn't as white. He tapped the end
of the spindle to the work surface so the link fell off, then used a pair of tongs to put it back in the forge.

“Right. So. Uh, the date went very well, first off. It's only as we're parting that I asked her last name. You won't believe who it is. Zoey Bartlett.”

He got blank stares.

“Oh. I forget that sometimes. She... she's the youngest daughter to the U.S. President.”

Mazhe pulled the link back out of the heat, and put it back on the spindle. “So, someone really important.”

“I'd wondered why she had so many bodyguards. It explains a lot. She was kidnapped... let's see... a year or so ago?”

“You will be seeing her again?”

“Another coffee date has been set up, but more importantly, she's suggested we go see a ball game. The Washington Nationals, right, their stadium's not far from the Capitol Building. And of course, I suggested all of us go.”

“A baseball game. Like the game we went to in San Francisco during the spring,” Mazhe remembered. “It was entertaining the last time. Harry?”

“If you wish to attend, then so shall I.”

“Harry. Your destiny is finished. You've earned the right to have a good time now and then,” said Justin.

He thought for a moment.

“Anyway. I've sent a bunch of pictures to the ministry of Infrastructure. They'll likely be sending some engineers to survey the ruin here.”

“There is thought of creating a colony here,” Harry guessed.

“Definitely. This seems deeper than many cities back on earth. And though we have no major enemies here, I think the government will still wish to build underground. Old habits, or something along that line.”

“Jarl Laila will want to know she's getting some new neighbours,” said Balimund.

“Oh yes, we will be meeting with her,” said Justin, “The government has been for the most part up front with her as it is. Though, we're the good kind of neighbour—rarely seen or heard.”

They spent the morning working with the forge, before Balimund had to return to Riften. The afternoon was then spent back at the guild, as the stolen vault contents were recovered and sorted. With a number of people to divide the task, it was completed rather quickly. At the end of the day, the vault looked much more respectable.

Mazhe and Harry took dinner in the Ragged Flagon, choosing to spend it there, rather than in the noisy dining room in the flat.

“It is a curious note, that my home has become some sort of 'come and go room',” said Harry, as Vekel sat a plate of vegetables and seared slaughterfish in front of him.
Mazhe chuckled. “Somehow I don't think that's what you had in mind, no?”

“No. Now I have persons of import arriving and departing at all hours. Praise the gods for silencing and locking charms,” Harry muttered. “The thought has crossed my mind that we retreat back to the College of Winterhold. Though I believe that somehow chaos and unrest would simply follow us there. I would not intrude on the students and their studies with our distractions.”

On September 18, the morning's work session at the Aetherium Forge was unproductive, thanks to the presence of a number of officials from the Commonwealth. Members from the Arcane Sciences division, the Ministry of Infrastructure, as well as two Guardians of the Magnus were present, wanting to examine the ruin for themselves. So, most of the morning was spent doing very little, while the various government officials poked and prodded the equipment.

Finally, as it neared lunch time, Balimund at last threw in the towel, requesting that he be taken back to his shop. Harry and Mazhe both readily agreed, and after dropping him off in Riften, the pair retreated to the Throat of the World to visit with Parthurnax. Some relaxation and more lessons in Dovahzul might be just what the doctor ordered.

September 20, 2007 / 20 Hearthfire 4E202

Given the properties of the material they were working with, it had taken well over a week to complete the amulet and its matching chain. The amulet itself was inlaid with a ring of tiny rubies, and was made of Aetherium. A gold 'cage' surrounded it, and formed a loop through which to put the chain. The chain itself, meanwhile, was made up of alternating gold and Aetherium links. A truly unique masterpiece.

“It's... it's beautiful,” said Katria, admiring the final product.

“I have handled more than a few pieces, and this... it passes them all by miles,” said Mazhe.

“Truly Beautiful. And with that... it's done. No one could possibly deny what we've found now.”

She began to fade. “For me? I've done what I set out to do. But you... take that out into the world. And if anyone asks, tell them what we discovered. Together. And now... I think I can rest. Farewell, my friends, wherever your travels take you.”

“Farewell, Katria. May you find the rest you have so earned,” said Harry.

Katria bowed to them both, before disappearing completely. Both Harry and Mazhe couldn't help but feel a little sadness for the spirit.

“Dedication to her dream, reaching from the grave,” said Harry, quietly. “Though there is still unfinished business concerning her apprentice.”

“Delvin’s already sent word through the contacts we have. If he's spotted, we'll know about it.”

“Well. Try it on, Mazhe,” said Balimund, “Let's see how you did.”

Mazhe slipped the amulet on, and quite literally staggered a moment.

“Shor's bones...” he muttered, before unleashing a fireball at one of the platforms. It exploded quite violently, leaving a significant scorch mark. He gave a smirk.
“Wish we would've had this when we were fighting Alduin. I almost can't wait for the next time we face a dragon. Poor thing...”

“Not,” Harry smirked.

September 21, 2007 / 21 Hearthfire, 4E202
Washington, District of Columbia

Harry and Mazhe had certainly been treated to VIP treatment on numerous occasions already, but this was the first time either of them had experienced a ride in a limousine, which now sped its way toward Robert F. Kennedy Stadium, the home of the Washington Nationals baseball club(1). Both Tommy and Brandon joined them—Tommy had long since gotten used to his prosthetic limb, and was able to get around just as well as before he'd lost his leg back in the spring.

Zoey, too, had a pair of extra people with her—one rode with them in the back, while the other rode up front with the driver. She'd introduced them as Amanda and Tim, and a quick glance at the Asian man's mind told Harry both were Secret Service agents. Both had been personally interviewed by the President before being placed in charge of his daughter's well being.

“What?” Tommy questioned, seeing Harry's grin.

“Considering how my... family... views me as a VIP... why is it only now that I find myself enjoying benefits of being so?”

“Your first limo ride, I take it,” Amanda asked, to which Harry nodded.

“But Harry... we have our own ways of getting around, do we not?” asked Mazhe, smirking.

“Behave.”

“So... uh... Mr., uh, Mazhe, and Harry... what do you guys do anyway?” Zoey asked.

“They work for Valicor,” Brandon answered for them, “Uh, consulting work mostly.”

“Though I could get away without. I'm the heir of two rather wealthy families. That's, uh, why Brandon is here,” Harry said, using part of the standard rehearsed and agreed to answer. “He's my tail, but also one of my closest friends.”

“We're not really supposed to, uh...”

“Get close to the assignment,” Brandon finished. “I found it impossible after a while. And well... these guys...”

“Both Justin and Mazhe have been known to me most of my young life,” said Harry, “Brandon less so, but no less significant. Friend and protector, though I would equally defend him should I be placed in such position.”

“We watch each others' backs equally,” said Tommy, “Hell, we spend so much of our time together. Harry's become the brother I lost.”

“Yes, the incident in Atlantic City. I'm sorry for your loss,” said Amanda.

“Thanks, means a lot.”

“We failed you, Tommy. We should have taken better care after--”
“I’ve come to terms with that part of my life already,” said Tommy, “The corps was my family then... but Harry's become my family now, and I'm in a better place than I've ever been.”

“Well... I'm glad to hear that. You should know though... you should still be able to collect a pension. 'least as far as we looked, your record's been cleaned.”

“How... oh,” Tommy said, realizing the answer already. Of course the Secret Service would have vetted everyone in the car, including himself. Then again, it's also very likely the Commonwealth had 'smoothed things over'... not like they hadn't done it before. He only had to look in the mirror.

Zoey thought a moment, before looking at Harry. “You look a bit young to be doing consulting work.”

“It's very... specialized,” Harry answered, “And really not that often now. But I'd rather be busy doing something... And I mean, my last year of school just started at the beginning of the month, I'll graduate in June.”

“But your v—I mean, your bank account would let us travel just about anywhere, do just about anything,” said Mazhe.

“Oh and it will,” Harry smirked. “Sirius' dear old mother's probably cursing up a blue streak from the other side, with the crazy expenses we racked up recently.”

“Mrs. Black's likely died many times over, that according to Sirius,” Brandon grinned.

“Sirius Black. That was some bad business,” said Amanda, “All law enforcement agencies here were notified of him. I understand there was some sort of mistake.”

Harry gave the young agent a dark look, but softened. “He was framed for the crimes of another. The one truly responsible has gone to grass, my godfather's record corrected long before.”

“Harry. We're stepping into dangerous waters with that conversation,” Brandon warned.

“Right. I now give voice to both families, as he now walks the afterlife. He named me heir to the estate. Gods... why am I pouring out such unpleasant business...”

“Sounds like you've had a difficult life,” said Zoey, looking apologetic.

Harry gave a shrug, then smiled. “Perhaps, a series of misfortune, with the occasional spot of joy. To know the ones I call dear friends are well, to have my mate at my side, to see another dear friend finding happiness. I take joy in seeing my friends happy.”

The car at last arrived at RFK Stadium, and quickly, they were driving down a ramp and into an underground access.

“We're somewhat incognito,” Amanda explained, as the car was parked.

“People will notice the additional security though,” said Brandon, to which Amanda nodded.

“They won't know who though.”

The doors were being opened, and Zoey was helped out of the car by Secret Service agents already on the scene. Brandon found himself easily falling into step with the Americans, considering they did have similar operating protocols. Harry, Mazhe, and Tommy, meanwhile, fell behind Zoey and Justin, as they were led through a series of tunnels and corridors.
“Where are we going?” Tommy finally asked.

“You'll see,” one of the additional agents answered, as they turned another corner. Now, they met up with a few people who were clearly part of the event staff.

“C’mon, we're a little behind schedule,” Harry heard one of them say. They were then heading uphill —

“The field?” Justin sounded surprised, as they stepped out into the early evening light, through an opening in the outfield wall. The field was already occupied, with the home team going through their pre-game warm-up.

“Zoey's father made a few calls,” said Tim, with a sly grin.

That had Brandon smirking, knowing all too well how that likely went down. After all, Queen Susan had done similar things in the past, some of them with concern to his young friend and assignment.

Harry, though, rolled his eyes. “Some people might consider that overstepping.”

“I doubt there was any harm, Harry,” said Mazhe, as the group at last came to a stop in front of the Nationals' dugout.

Already, a few of the players had stopped what they were doing, noticing the entourage which had invaded the field. In short order, both Harry and Mazhe were talking to a pair of players. Stephen Strauss, that night's starting pitcher, was easily as tall as Mazhe, though a little thinner. His arms, though, were nearly as big as Mazhe's. No surprise, all considered. He had a thin face, blue eyes, and a tuft of facial hair adorned his chin. Bryce Hunter was nearly as tall as his teammate, perhaps almost a carbon copy. He had a slightly wider, rectangular face, grey eyes, and a neatly trimmed, thin beard.

Harry had to grin, noticing his cap. Bryce caught his look, questioning, “What?”

Harry grinned, and answered, “I believe your headdress is perhaps a size larger than necessary.”

Bryce simply tugged his cap off, and it quickly became quite obvious as to why. The mop of hair that flopped over the guy's eyes had both Mazhe and Harry grinning madly.

“He's giving you competition, Mazhe,” Harry smirked, while Bryce took the time to replace his cap. Mazhe, meanwhile, flipped his hair back and grinned again.

“If the pair of you are quite done with your vanity...”

That had both Bryce and Stephen laughing.

“I like you, kid,” said Stephen.

Harry stuck his tongue out, then smirked. “Who you calling kid? I'm nearly eighteen, I'll have you know.”

He happened to look toward home plate, and it was then he noticed someone standing about ten rows back up in the stands. Wait... was that? The man gave Harry a sinister grin, and it clicked: Marcus Flint. One of the bad Slytherins.

“Brandon,” Harry said, turning to his friend, “I think I just saw...” he looked back at the spot up in the stands, only to find Flint had vanished. No surprise, he was a wizard, capable of Apparating.

“What was it?”
"I... never mind," Harry mumbled, turning back to the pair of players he'd been talking to. Mazhe was asking all sorts of questions, and both of them were eating it up, only happy to talk shop with a potential new fan.

Harry, though, was distracted by who he'd just spotted. What was Flint doing there? The man had been nothing but cruel as a student toward anyone who was not a Slytherin, and perhaps far worse to anyone known to be half-blood or Muggle-born.

He was finally drawn back to the conversation as Bryce had noticed the amulet Mazhe was wearing.

"Harry and I made it, just finished it yesterday," Mazhe was explaining, "Care to try it on?"

"Mazhe..." said Harry, but Mazhe was already pulling it off. Bryce accepted it, and put it on.

"How about... if you guys don't mind a photo that is..." Brandon suggested.

"Yeah sure," said Stephen.

Brandon pulled out his mobile, and quickly snapped a couple of pictures of the four of them.

"Miss Bartlett, why don't you and your date come join us?" Stephen coaxed.

That resulted in a few more pictures, with Brandon promising to send a few digital copies to the team for their Facebook page. A few button presses, and Harry felt his mobile vibrate—the indication a message had arrived. That finished, Bryce began to remove the amulet, but Harry stopped him.

"Perhaps you should borrow it, if for the game, as a gesture reciprocated. That we were provided access I believe others would pay heavy price to obtain."

"Fair enough," said Bryce.

"Harry," said Brandon, "How do you plan on—"

"Come back down to the clubhouse after the game," said Bryce.

"Well. That makes it easy," said Brandon. "Harry. What did you see earlier? You don't usually—"

"I think... No. My memory is clear. I saw Marcus Flint, right there." He pointed to the spot in the stands behind home plate. "We made eye contact, he gave me this evil grin, crooked teeth 'an all."

"Enemy I'm guessin'," said Stephen.

"Former classmate. He's dangerous."

"Tim, Amanda, a word," Brandon called.

That had both Secret Service agents hurry over. Both of them had been off to the side, giving the group a bit of space, though they still kept close eye on the surroundings.

"What's up?" Tim asked.

"I'm about to contact the g—I mean, my employer and have security doubled. You guys need to do the same. Harry's spotted someone who may be a credible threat to both Mr. Stormcrown and Miss Bartlet," said Brandon.

"What about us?" Bryce wanted to know.
“They... if they're here, they're here for me,” said Harry.

It was only a half truth. If those people were here, then most definitely, Bryce, Stephen, and their teammates would be in equal danger.

“If there is a known threat, then we need to get Zoey out of here,” said Amanda, firmly.

Brandon shook his head. “If they’re here, and they see you guys leave, they’ll follow. Just quietly increase your security perimeter.”

Harry pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed.

“All I ever wanted to be was normal.”

“You and me alike, Harry,” said Zoey. “Forget about doing anything normal out in public if dad shows up.”

The next few minutes were spent with both Brandon and Tim on their respective mobiles, speaking to their respective agencies. In fact, Tim hadn't even finished his conversation, when several individuals in suits took up a stance at both ends of the dugout, with another standing in the entrance.

Bryce scratched his chin. “What... what would they do?”

“Trust us, you don’t wanna know.”

Both players furrowed their brows, and Harry mentally screamed in frustration. Now, both men would be distracted by the potential threat, rather than have their mind on the game ahead. So much for normal.

“Look, uh, we need to...” Stephen began, pulling Harry out of his thoughts.

“Right. Er... good luck tonight. We... we will meet up after the game so Mazhe may collect his necklace.”

A round of handshakes ensued, after which both Stephen and Bryce headed back toward the infield. Harry couldn't help but watch, as Bryce resumed his warm-up exercises.

“You could just take a picture,” Mazhe hissed into his ear. That earned the ginger-haired Breton a swat.

Harry smirked though. “If only I could see you in his clothes. I'm certain the trousers only serve to highlight the wearers' personal attributes.”

He let out a yelp, feeling Mazhe squeeze his arse. “Mazhe! Bloody hell...”

“If you're done, we need to get to our private box,” said Brandon.

The private box was high up in the stands, to the left of home plate. Much like had been the case for the game in San Francisco, the private box was fully catered, likely staffed by SOU agents. This time around, both Harry and Mazhe had come prepared, bringing the omnioculars they'd used during the Quidditch world cup a couple of years prior. It wasn't Quidditch, but the magnifying tool was still useful.

The game got under way just after 7 o'clock, with the Phillies quickly taking a 2-0 lead. 'Yep,' Harry thought, 'events earlier have driven Mr. Strauss to distraction.'
He glanced over at Mazhe, who was peering through his pair of omnioculars. Ah. Of course, Mr. Strauss. Mazhe was clearly smitten with him. Well... he did have some very nice attributes... and tall, like Mazhe. Of course, Bryce was tall too. Hmmm...

“Perhaps we should arrange for a hotel. I shall claim number thirty-four, while you claim thirty-seven,” Harry smirked. That earned him another swat, though Mazhe continued to watch through his omnioculars.

Brandon smirked before saying, “It's unlikely either of them play your end of the field.”

“Nothing strong drink and a lust potion won't correct presently,” Harry whispered. That earned yet another swat from his mate. “Ow!”

“I don't need to remind you that such things are considered illegal,” said one of the servers, keeping her voice down so the others wouldn't hear.

Harry smirked, deciding to throw more gas on the fire. “Oh but I believe the Commonwealth would make an exception.”

That earned yet another swat from Mazhe, and the undercover agent opened her mouth to protest, but Harry burst out laughing, and ended up in a coughing fit for the effort.

He finally caught his breath. “Shor's bones, I only jest!” he wheezed.

The mid-point of the fourth inning brought an amusing spectacle onto the field, known as the President's Race. Mazhe was very much confused by it, and if Harry had to admit, so was he, but it was funny as hell, seeing ten-foot-tall caricatures running some sort of race along the first base line. He made a note to maybe ask Bryce or Stephen about it when they visited the team's locker room after the game.

By the top of the seventh inning, the home team had pulled ahead, as Strauss had settled down in the second, while his teammates finally provided much needed offense in the previous at-bat. The home team was then taking the field—what was that?

“Harry. Did you—”

“Yeah, I felt—”

Darkness. With no warning, the lights went out, leaving near pitch-black void of darkness behind.

Out in right field, Bryce had just arrived at his default position for the start of the inning, when he swore he felt the borrowed necklace warm if only for a moment. The next instant, the building was plunged into darkness.

Now, he'd been in a few power-out situations... but not like this. Normally, at least a few of the lights stayed on, powered by batteries and emergency generators. Not here. It wasn't pitch-black... but damned close. The crowd was already whistling and jeering, but... again. No phone lights, flashlights...

He happened to look down the first base line, to see a bolt of green energy sailing straight at him. He had no time to react, as it struck him square in the chest.

Chapter End Notes
UP NEXT: Catastrophic events unfold at RFK Stadium, drawing the Commonwealth into conflict with a new, terrifying threat; and a member of Harry's close circle of friends asks him to do the unthinkable.

CHAPTER NOTES: Yeah, big warning about some really nasty stuff coming up next chapter. This story is rated M/R for a reason.

(1) Robert F. Kennedy Stadium, or RFK Stadium, was the home of the Washington Nationals from 2005 through the end of the 2007 season. They moved into their present home at Nationals Park in the spring of 2008.

(2) Zoey actually says something like this in an early episode during the first season of The West Wing.
Chaos unfolds at RFK Stadium, drawing the Commonwealth into conflict with a new, terrifying threat; and a member of Harry's close circle of friends asks him to do the unthinkable.


Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

4. FIRST BLOOD

September, 2007 / Hearthfire, 4E202

“If truth is the first victim of war, then read on - I've got some great lies for you this month.”

- Alan Gorrie

Harry could only watch in horror, as the stadium seemed to light up with dozens of green bolts of light. In the near darkness, he could see the players fleeing to the dugout, Strauss being one of the first down the steps. He was one of the few to make it, while the others were all felled by green bolts of magic.

Brandon had already pulled out his mobile, and punched in a code. “Code three, code three... death eaters... positive... current location, RFK Stadium in Washington... uh—for now... no... killing curses... all right, copy that.”

Both Tim and Amanda had drawn their side-arms, while the undercover SOU soldiers had produced their weapons as well, along with head-mounted lights. Harry pulled himself together, flinging a hand at the ceiling and bathing the room in a soft light.

“Justin... get Zoey out of here. Take... take Tim and Amanda—the President would be more at ease knowing her protection's along for the ride,” Harry decided. He closed his eyes, then opened them.

“They should have no trouble with the wards.”

“Who... who are you people?” Tim dared ask.

“People none of you should know about—”

There was a blinding flash, as a red bolt of magic impacted with the wall, sending up a shower of dust, and forcing everyone to duck.

“Trust us, where we're going it's perfectly safe, you can contact the President once there,” Justin promised, “God, shit's gonna hit the fan over this.” The last bit was said mostly to himself while he
fidgeted with his mobile, pulling up the destination.

A pair of SOU soldiers had moved into the private seating, and were training weapons on a few assailants in the stands below. There was no sound from the weapons, but the tell-tale muzzle flash told the agents all they needed to know: the people in the private box were the good guys, no matter what chaos was going on at present.

“How are we leaving?” Amanda wanted to know.

“Get a grip on my shoulder, both you and Tim. Zoey, get close. Hold on to me until I tell you otherwise... and be warned, this is a little disorienting.”

Zoey quickly did as asked, but both Secret Service agents hesitated. At Zoey's pleading look, however, they followed suit, and only then did Justin activate the phone. They vanished in a blur of limbs.

“How our turn,” said Harry.

“Wait. That... Mr. Hunter... he's still alive,” said Mazhe, pointing to the outfield.

Sure enough, now lit by several fires that had started in the stands, Bryce was trying to sit up, though having great difficulty.

“Mazhe. I need a magical boost. Someone get a cushioning charm in place.”

Mazhe cupped his hands together, prepared to cast, while Harry thrust out a hand. “Accio BRYCE!”

Bryce suddenly felt himself snagged up off the ground by some invisible hook, and quite literally rocketed up and across the field, straight for one of the private boxes, the only one with any sort of light in it. Faster and faster—god, what the hell—

And just like that, he felt himself land on an invisible cushion.

“Mr. Hunter. All right mate?” he heard someone ask. His head was still in a fog, whatever that blast of light had been a minute ago, it knocked him silly.

“I...” he tugged his cap off and rubbed his face. “What the hell...”

“Can you stand up? We need to get out of here,” said Brandon, who’d already produced his mobile, “lotta departments gonna be busy tonight.”

Harry snorted. “Charlie Foxtrot. Can only happen to me.”

He offered a hand, and Bryce took it, allowing himself to be pulled to his feet.

“Who are you people?”

“People you're not—fuck. They put up anti-apparition and anti-port key wards,” Brandon cursed.

“We got agents looking for the source,” said one of the soldiers near the door. Everyone was once again forced to duck, as another storm of magic blasted into the room. Both Harry and a pair of SOU hastily erected shields, reflecting most of it back out harmlessly into the sky.

“Shit! Man down,” came a shout, and Harry wheeled to see one of the soldiers had collapsed to the floor, a large chunk of his left side having been blasted away. The man drew a breath... another... and fell still.
“You and you. Conjure up shit to keep them from shooting in here while we think a minute!” Brandon ordered, pointing to a pair of soldiers.

“Sir.”

Seconds later, the opening out to the field had been sealed off by conjured blocks of concrete.

“Mr. Hunter. How well you know the building?”

“Well enough.”

“We need to get—”

“Sir. The anchor for the trap wards were set up close to the team's clubhouse.”

Brandon let out a snort. “Probably done earlier in the day.”

“How... what...” Bryce looked confused.

“You shouldn't know about us,” said Tommy, “The magic world is supposed to stay hidden.”

“Though we ain't been doing all that great recently,” said Brandon, as his mobile buzzed. He glanced at the message. “Good, the ward's only against exit. Harry, your circle's on its way.”

That coincided with a blur of limbs, heralding the arrival of Miraak, Dardanos, and Crixus.

“What calamity has befallen us now, Doctore?” asked Dardanos.

“Dark wizards attacking the stadium. the number sent to the afterlife will be staggering. Hands and minds set to purpose.”

“Mr. Hunter. Can you shoot?” Tommy asked.

Bryce gave Tommy a look that said, 'That's a dumb question, bro.'

“Right.” Tommy reached into his pouch, and pulled out a nine-millimetre Beretta. “You good with that?”

“Long's it shoots. Uh. What about—”

“You won't need ammo. Trust us,” said Brandon.

Bryce looked doubtful, while both Crixus and Dardanos had produced handguns of their own.

“We ready?” Tommy asked.

“Ready. Rules of engagement. Make your shots count. They're terrorists, plain and simple. They don't deserve mercy, or pity,” said Brandon.

“No need to tell me that shit,” said Bryce, scowling. He shoved his cap back on his head, not bothering to tuck in the stray locks of hair that now stuck out from under it.

“Right. Against the wall,” said one of the SOU They waited until everyone was out of the way, before pulling the door open. Instantly, a storm of red and green curses lit up the room—

“Fus... RO DAAAAAH!”
Bryce almost dropped his pistol from the volume of the shout. What the HELL was that? Whatever the ginger-haired man had done, had cracked the wall on all sides around the door frame. SOU stormed out into the corridor, and from inside, Bryce could see the corridor light up three times with red, once with green.

“CLEAR!”

Bryce was stunned silent by what he'd just seen. This magic shit... it was downright terrifying, he was certain of that one truth.

“Come. Let us begin our escape,” said Harry, tugging on Bryce's shirt sleeve.

Stepping out into the corridor, they found a heap of bodies, all of them bloody. God, the... the spell... whatever it was, had passed right through the wall.

“Unrelenting force,” said Miraak, seeing Bryce's gaze. “It is unlikely the victims were aware in their final moments.”

“Miraak. He's already being traumatized by this shit,” Mazhe scolded him, “Now we really have to get moving.”

They'd made only a few steps when there came a low rumble form below, making the floor shake. SOU were all looking around with their headlamps, but the source could not be seen nearby. They were then nearly knocked over by a small crowd of people racing to escape. From what—

The group was again forced to duck, as a storm of red and purple magic sailed down the corridor. The source of the curses appeared a moment later (the curvature of the building did somewhat limit line-of-sight).

“Fo... KRAH DIIIIN!!” Miraak roared, and the assailants found themselves quite literally frozen, their last thoughts wishing for warmth.

“Got another light I can use?” Bryce asked.

One of the SOU dug into his pouch, and produced an extra light, and it only took a moment or two for Bryce to put it on.

“Thanks.”

They then arrived at a ramp which led down to the lower level, but Brandon cursed, seeing it had been damaged. Brandon pulled out his wand intent on fixing the damage, when the entire section of ramp simply gave way, causing the floor to shudder. That triggered another low rumble from somewhere down the corridor.

“Fucking cowards, likely compromised the building's structure,” Brandon muttered.

“Damn... never thought this shit would come down,” said Bryce, quietly, “Reinforced concrete 'an all.”

“As you've seen, magic can do some pretty crazy shit,” said Tommy, “Just... just be ready for anything.”

It was then Brandon's mobile buzzed. He glanced at the message, before clipping his mobile back on his belt. “Okay. Mr. Hunter, we need to get to your clubhouse.”
“What for?”

“The bad guys have something set up there that's preventing us from leaving. We need to destroy the... well, the device... before we can get out of here, or get help.”

“The police—”

“Don't and won't know,” Brandon answered, “The bad guys... I'm sure they launched the magical equivalent to an EMP. Phones, computers, everything electronic, now just expensive paperweights.”

“We keep going this way,” said Bryce, “Should be another ramp.”

A few seconds later, they did arrive at another ramp, this one being protected by both security and police. Brandon debated about leaving a pair of SOU to help out, but no. Primary directive was to protect his assignment. Given the severity, he needed all members, and they'd already lost a man back in the private box. Mr. Hunter was a complete unknown at this point, as far as his shooting proficiency went. In all sense, he was just another body with a gun. Potentially dangerous, perhaps, but better than being an unarmed liability.

As they descended the ramp to the next level, Brandon's mobile buzzed again. He looked at it, then put it away.

“Need a closet or something—”

“How about behind there?” Bryce pointed to one of the concession stands, whose counter had been partially dislodged.

“Perfect.”

They all ducked in behind the counter.

“For what purpose do we seek shelter here?” Harry wanted to know.

“Justin just sent me something. Everyone with a mobile, pull it out.”

Harry, Mazhe, Crixus, Dardanos, and Miraak produced their mobile, as did a pair of SOU Brandon then pulled a small device out of one of the pockets of his utility vest, and plugged it into a small port on the side of his mobile. With a few button presses, he then un-clipped the device, and passed it to Harry.

“Upload the program to your phone from the memory card. It's a quick hack Justin came up with. It'll let us port key short distances, as long as it's inside the ward. He thinks it should get us down to the field at least.”

“Sounds good to me.” Harry quickly copied what Brandon had done.

“One problem,” said Tommy, “We've got no recording of the field—”

“Yes we do,” said Mazhe, “The pictures we took earlier.”

“Brilliant,” said Harry, as he passed the chip over to his mate. He then located the pictures Brandon had sent him. Bryce couldn't help but look over the young mage's shoulder as he went to work, taking one of the pictures, and dragging it over to a second app, or program he'd opened.

“I am fashioning a teleport target from the pictures we obtained previously.”
Bryce narrowed his eyes. “Teleport... seriously?”

“Trust the words which spill from his tongue,” said Dardanos, “We still walk this side of the afterlife thanks only to Harry and his skill.”

“Gather around—”

Something above them seemed to explode, sending a deluge of water crashing over the group, and a pair of SOU quickly returned fire, ending the threat. Everyone kept hold of their mobiles, save for Crixus. His ended up flushed under one of the cabinets further inside of the alcove. One of the SOU simply held out a hand, summoning it back, and Crixus was quick to jam it back into his pouch.

“Gratitude.”

Bryce, meanwhile, snatched his cap up off the floor, shook it, and jammed it back on his head, the light flickering a moment.

“Everyone all right?” Brandon asked.

Seeing quick nods from everyone, he glanced at Harry. “We ready?”

“I am ready. Gather close. Tommy, Mazhe, you will see to Mr. Hunter. The remainder of you make contact with me in some way.”

Bryce was still unsure of exactly what they were about to do, but he found both Tommy and the ginger-haired mage named Mazhe had gripped his arms, and Mazhe had linked his free arm with Harry's. Others were then linking arms, and when Harry was sure everyone was linked in some way, he pressed a button on his mobile.

Now up to this point, Bryce had already felt the most peculiar sensation, being hauled across the field by some invisible hook of some sort. This new mode of transportation was something similar, though this time, it was a whirlwind of flashing lights, and a strange hook about the naval.

The trip was mercifully short, and seconds later, he found himself being held steady, as they landed right in front of the Nationals' dugout—exactly the spot where the pictures had been taken before the game.

“Jesus Christ.”

“C'mon, let's... let's get under cover. We're exposed like this,” said one of the SOU

It took no further urging, as the group descended the steps and entered the clubhouse.

They were met by two players, both brandishing baseball bats.

“Bryce!” Stephen shouted, “God, a friendly face finally.”

“Where... where's everyone else?”

“We... we got trapped. They were shooting green shit 'an people were dyin'. I dunno where... they... people are bein' killed here!”

“Mr. Strauss. Take it easy, we're here to help,” said Brandon. He pointed to one of the SOU.

“Lieutenant Carpenter. Search out the rooms. Find the ward anchor.”
“We don’t have a curse-breaker.”

“A Shout should be more than enough to do away with it,” Miraak offered.

“God, not that again,” Bryce muttered.

“What did they do?” Stephen wanted to know.

“They have... this... fuck, I dunno really. Just, it's really loud, and it kills.”

“Unrelenting force,” said Mazhe, “Mr. Hunter—”

“It’s Bryce.”

“Oh. Uh, right. But he's got it exactly right. It's a type of magic that comes from my voice. There's only a few people ever that have been able to do it. Uh... there's more to it than that, but... it delivers a massive amount of physical force at the target. Both Miraak and I are capable of it, though... it is also very draining.”

“Magic. That... that's what all this shit is,” said the second player, eyes wide.

“You are all seeing a very dark aspect of a world none of you should have knowledge of,” said Harry, sadly.

“No shit,” said Bryce, as he again pulled his cap off, and ran a hand through his hair, squeezing a bit of water out of it. He then tugged his jersey off, and shook out some of the water, before throwing it back on. Harry was momentarily distracted by this, but quickly refocused on what was going on.

“SHIT!!” came a shout from the corridor, and Lieutenant Carpenter burst into the room. “Fucking thing's booby trapped! Everyone back out on the field!”

There came an awful THUD, causing the floor to shake, and a small cloud of dust rolled out from where the Lieutenant had just come from. More cracks and groans were coming from the ceiling, and now Brandon understood the danger. The building had been structurally compromised. The group stampeded up through the tunnel, back out onto the field, just as the ceiling gave way, sending a cloud of dust and debris out behind them.

“Peter? Shit! Where's Peter?!” Stephen demanded. He turned, intending to go back down the steps, but Bryce grabbed him by the shoulder.

“We can't... there's nothing...”

“We gotta do something!”

“And end up walking the afterlife,” said Harry, “We must—”

Harry found himself suddenly dragged to the ground, as a killing curse just missed him. Everyone else had hit the deck, as a storm of curses followed.

“Wuld... NAH KEST!”

Both Bryce and Stephen were stunned, seeing Miraak quite literally blast across the field, and into the stands, where a group of terrorists were gathered—the source of the ambush.

“Mul... QAH DIIIV!!” Mazhe was suddenly engulfed in... it looked like a dragon, Bryce realized. The mage was encased in the aspect of a dragon. Orange, fire-like, it looked exactly like a dragon,
casting an eerie glow on the ground around him.

“Mazhe! Here!”

Harry had reached into his pouch, and produced his broom. It was rapidly re-sized, and Mazhe mounted it.

“Christ... that just fits,” said Bryce, shaking his head.

Tommy couldn't help himself. “Well... witches and wizards... what did you expect? Vacuum cleaners?”

Bryce rolled his eyes, while they collected themselves and retreated to the dugout.

“Peter...” Stephen moaned, looking toward the rubble-filled entrance that had led into the clubhouse.

“We can't,” said Tommy, “This shit's not over. Fuck, they'll kill us. Just... stay close.”

On Harry's broom, Mazhe was making quick work of targets in the stands. They appeared to be having too much fun tormenting the trapped spectators, than to be worried about him. He made liberal use of shock spells and fireballs, roasting a good number of the terrorists before they finally started taking notice.

Miraak, meanwhile, at last mopped up the remainder of the cluster that had attacked the group, now setting his sights on another group, who were preventing terrified spectators from fleeing the stands.

“Avada Kedavra!” he heard a voice behind him screech.

“WULD!” He was carried to the left of the bolt of magic, then answered with a pair of ice spikes. The first shattered the witch's hastily-erected shield, while the second pierced her forehead, to protrude out the back of her skull. She collapsed in a heap, never to rise again.

“GUYS! LOOK OUT!” Harry heard Mazhe shout. He looked in time to see a cluster of terrorists trying to sneak around the side of the dugout. He cupped his hands together, sending a blast of fire, which ignited the end of the dugout and roasted the assailants alive.

“Yeah, real bright,” said Stephen.

Harry moved to put the fire out, but found himself once again dragged to the ground, as another explosion of spells flew overhead. He craned his neck around to find Bryce had quite literally tackled him to the ground.

“Thanks mate. I should warn you, my mate might draw conclusions.”

“Fuck off,” Bryce muttered, as the pair sat up.

“Where the hell are they coming from anyway? Anti-apparition should stop them,” Tommy wondered.

“They likely tailored it.”

“And why does it remain active? The ward should have dispelled with the destruction of its anchor.”

“No. Another one took its place,” Brandon answered. He was again digging in his pouch, and pulled out a small vest.
“Steve!!!” Bryce cried out, and everyone turned to find the young pitcher had collapsed to the ground, mouth open as though to speak.

Mazhe had already answered the attack, and the one responsible was reduced to a pile of ash. Now though, he was forced to land, as that had again drawn attention to him, making it very difficult to avoid the dangerous spells.

“I'm sorry. I didn't see him until...”

“Mazhe. Do not fault yourself,” Harry scolded, as he accepted his broom back, quickly shrunk it down, and stowed it away.

“Wuld... NAH KEST!!” came Miraak's shout, and in a blur, the mage reappeared a short distance away from the dugout.

“My spells now will only put innocent people at risk. Harry, I make suggestion that some of us be moved into your chest for safety.”

“No. We stay and fight,” said Tommy, “We've been over that shit before... just because we ain't magical don't mean we can't fight.”

“The truth falls from his tongue. Though my chest is substantially warded, those that attack this place, we cannot be certain of numbers, nor strength.”

Brandon had stowed the miniaturized vest away, and was about to pull out his mobile, when he found himself pushed to the ground, as his vision bloomed with red light. He heard Tommy let out a grunt, and more spell fire lit up the area.

“Shit!”

“Fuck!”

“Fo... KRAH DIIIN!”

“Yol... TOOR SHUUUL!”

More bangs and explosions filled the air... and then. Silence. Silence that was occasionally pierced by a cry or a shout from somewhere in the stands. Brandon finally dared open his eyes, discovering it was Tommy still on top of him.

“Tommy?”

The man let out a moan, then a hiss of pain.

“I... it... oh god...”

“Tommy? Let me... No. No, no, no,” Harry whimpered, as Bryce lent his headlamp so they could see what was wrong.

Tommy's midsection was all but gone, his hips being held to his upper body by the barest of threads. The bones in his lower spine were quite simply crushed, and the dark mess on the floor around them was likely all that remained of the man's lower organs.

Lieutenant Carpenter produced his wand, and with a swift motion, Tommy was moved off of Brandon, and onto his back, Harry having provided a cushioning charm in an attempt to make his friend more comfortable.
“We... he requires...”

“Mercy, H-h-harry,” Tommy finished, his voice barely above a whisper.

“He has sustained mortal injury, you know this, Harry,” said Dardanos, sadly.

“You... t-t-take care of Emily and Rosie. T-tell them both I love them... very much.”

“We... healing potions...” Harry whimpered, making to reach into his pouch. Another storm of spells flew overhead, with SOU Hastily erecting shields deflecting the curses.

“No, Harry,” said Tommy, reaching a shaking hand to forestall him. “I'm... I'm a liability like this.”

Brandon meanwhile, had thrust his wand skyward. “Mazhe, amplify this for me!”

Mazhe cupped his hands together, and cast the amplification spell, while Brandon commanded, “Fianto Duri. Repello Magia. Protego Maxima. Protego Horribilus.”

Even with the terrible event unfolding right before his eyes, Bryce couldn't help but be momentarily amazed, seeing the dome which shimmered to life about twenty feet above, beginning at the top, and descending to the field in all directions.

“It'll hold them off for a bit,” Brandon promised, “But... Harry. Tommy's right. Even with—”

“Harry... this...” Tommy sucked in a breath, and laboriously blew it out. “This hurts. I'm dying.”

“I can't—”

“You gotta,” Mazhe whispered, feeling his eyes stinging with tears. Tommy was as much a brother to him as he was to Harry.

“Don't ask me to...”

“You s-saved me, Harry. Do... this... end my s-suffering. P-protect... yourselves.”

“He's right,” said Brandon, nodding toward the field. A group of mages were approaching from the outfield, three of them walking just ahead of the main group. No doubt, Brandon guessed, the 'leader' of the operation.

“I won't kill one of my best friends!” Harry protested.

“Better that he die by your hand, than at the hands of the enemy,” said Crixus, “Send him to the afterlife, Doctore. It is not murder, but mercy.”

Harry bit back a sob, but reached into his pouch for a vial. It was something he'd procured a long time ago, never dreaming he'd have need of it. Now, however...

“Harry...”

“B-basilisk venom. It... you'll just... go to sleep, never wake up. It will speed you to the afterlife with little pain.”

He unscrewed the cap, and tipped the vial up, allowing only a few drops to fall into the destroyed abdominal cavity. The clear substance started to bubble and hiss, but if Tommy felt it, he said nothing. He quickly covered the vial, and stowed it away.
“I love y-you Harry... always have,” Tommy whispered, reaching up, and touching Harry on the shoulder.

“You... I love you too, Tommy. M-more than you realized. If... if not for Mazhe...”

“But y-you two... you guys... meant for eachother... yknow.” His speech was becoming slurred, as the powerful poison took hold. The veins close to the surface of his skin were turning dark, and Tommy blinked.

“I... die good, guess... g-g-good... bye... friend.”

Tommy blinked, then closed his eyes for good this time. His chest rose, then fell, rose again, then fell, not to rise again. Bryce reached down and gripped Tommy's wrist, feeling for a pulse, but found none.

“He... he's gone.”

At that, Harry let out the most horrible, gut-wrenching cry, that perhaps summed up that evening's events best.

Mazhe was already kneeling beside Harry, and gently put a hand on his shoulder.

“He'll wait for you with your mum and dad, such as mine wait for me,” he said softly, “Kynareth watch over him as he passes through her realm. And may Arkay guide him to the doors into the afterlife.”

Mazhe found himself almost tackled to the ground, as Harry seized him in a massive bear hug, as horrible sobs wracked his body. They remained that way for a half minute, before Harry sucked in a breath, trying to recompose himself.

“May the all-maker forgive this terrible deed carried out by my hand,” he whispered. When he looked up, his cheeks were stained with tears, as new ones fell.

“He... he saved my life,” Brandon whispered, “I... it should have been me. Harry, I... I'm sorry.”

“Actions befitting the unit, sir,” spoke one of the soldiers, “Mission above all.”

“He... I... I can't...” Bryce was visibly shaking, the midsection of his uniform now plastered with blood. He finally sank down to his knees, equally overwhelmed at what he'd just witnessed.

Mazhe reached over with his free hand, and gently squeezed the guy's shoulder. “Great evil has shown its face here.”

“Oh, my dear boy, this was no evil,” came a female voice, “This was only the beginning of a cleansing that has been a long time in coming.”

The group of terrorists had arrived at the dome, but made no attempt to bring it down. The three clear leaders of the group wore dark cloaks, and hoods which for the most part hid their faces.

“The text proclaims it so, light wizard,” spoke one of them—the female speaker. “Hello Harry.”

“Piss off,” Harry muttered.

“A handsome thing he was. Such a shame he was a Muggle. Perhaps more surprising, that you followed his request and murdered him.”
The witch clucked her tongue.

"Av dilon," Harry spat. ("Join [the] dead")

“You do recall our last visit, do you not? The promise we would meet again? And think of this. All of this was made possible... because of you.

“The time of worthless Muggles is at an end. The things that have unfolded here are a prelude to greater events which will follow. We will see this world cleaned of the abominations and their machines, their culture which continues to cast a blight on the natural order of things. Their time is at an end, the texts proclaim it so.”

“Go fuck yourself!” Bryce was still shaking, but mustered up the courage to speak out, rage overtaking fear. They’d murdered his teammates, people he’d considered family. They’d murdered innocent people, all for what? That they were better than others? If this was what the magical world had to offer...

The witch once again clucked her tongue.

“Such a pretty shade of red you wear, boy. One day in the future, it will be your own blood that is spilled.”

“Your life is forfeit, Bryce Hunter, along with that of your family, your friends, your associates. Yes, you were meant to die here,” said the mage to the left, male, older by the sound of him. “A slight inconvenience that the... boy-who-lived caused interruption of our plans. Know that your life as you know it is over. You will die, but not before witnessing the destruction of everything you hold dear.”

“You can try.” said Harry, at last standing, defiant, “Just remember, I destroyed Voldemort. I sent him to a place from which he can never return. And you. Your words carry little meaning. You bring terror and strife, just as you did to Batiatus’ villa. We defeated you on the sands, and we will defeat you here.”

The witch let out a cackle.

“Oh, dear old Tom Riddle. He had visions of grandeur, but only acted on a small part of them. I intend to take his work a step further. While you laid lax, tending to personal affairs, we have been collecting followers, laying out an agenda.

“A plan that we now bring to action. And, like your filthy Muggle companion here, we will take everything from you, before we claim your worthless life.”

Their departure was marked by trails of smoke, lit by the raging flames from numerous parts of the stands.

Chapter End Notes

UP NEXT: Harry and his friends old and new return to Skyrim, where they find things are far from finished; Harry is angered and heartbroken as he sees Bryce walking nearly an identical path to Tommy; and a trek is made to the Throat of the World to seek counsel from Paarthurnax...

CHAPTER NOTES: So. How did Bryce survive the killing curse? Cookies to those
with the correct guess.
Now, with regard to Tommy. It was inevitable that someone was going to die here. There were just too many dark wizards present for everyone to escape unscathed. I'd written this a little differently at first, having Harry actually use the killing curse. Then I got thinking, it's likely he would have other means that would be just as effective, and just as painless. Well, maybe basilisk venom isn't exactly painless, but it wouldn't hurt that much. But no way on earth is he gonna cast an unforgivable curse on someone he loved more than a brother. I mean, I strongly doubt he'd be able to get it to work, even fuelled by redirected hate.

(1) In the previous story, it was suggested that perhaps I run the translations in-line, rather than shunting them all to the bottom. So we'll try it this way. Tell me what you think.
Chapter Summary

Harry and his friends old and new return to Skyrim, where they find things are far from finished; Harry is angered and heartbroken as he sees Bryce walking nearly an identical path to Tommy; and a trek is made to the Throat of the World to seek counsel from Paarthurnax...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

5. THE BUTCHER'S BILL

September, 2007 / Hearthfire, 4E202

“If you battle monsters, you don't always become a monster. But you aren't entirely human anymore, either.”

- Jonathan Maberry

For what seemed like several minutes, no one moved. It was almost surreal, the area being lit by the hellish glow of numerous fires that now blazed out of control throughout the stadium. The departure of the three mages appeared to be a signal, as the rest of the enemies began doing the same, taking off leaving black smoke trails behind.

“How will I tell his nieces?” Harry finally asked, his voice barely a whisper, grasping at the first clear thought that crossed his mind.

“The truth,” Mazhe answered, softly, “You know Remus will look after them; he always has.”

Just then, a point of light appeared in their midst, speaking, “Lieutenant Commander McAllister, return Harry and his friends to his flat at once. Invoking lockdown.”

“Fuck. Gather around,” said Brandon, sharply, reaching into one of the utility pockets of his vest. He pulled out a tennis ball, and tapped it once with his wand, making it somewhat larger.

“The anti-port key ward—” Mazhe began, but Aaron answered, “Gone. Their retreat removed it.”

“W-what shall we do with—” Harry began.

“Get a hand on him. C’mon, c’mon, let’s go,” Brandon urged.

“Drop us outside the Ragged Flagon,” said Mazhe, “If Tommy's nieces see—”

“Good thinking,” said Brandon, tapping the tennis ball a second time. “Portus.” The object shimmered blue a moment, then fell still.
Bryce was confused, but Mazhe gripped him about the shoulder and put a hand on the object. Harry gripped Tommy's body by the shirt, while he too put a hand on the object. When everyone else was tied to it in some way, Brandon activated it. They vanished in a blur of bodies.

They arrived on the opposite side of the cistern, steps from the doorway leading into the flat. Brandon and Aaron were the only pair to remain on their feet, with the others landing rather awkwardly. Mazhe managed to land in one of the vacant alcoves, his head narrowly missing a stack of kegs. Both Crixus and Dardanos landed against the wall rather heavily; Dardanos was then rubbing the back of his head from the impact. Harry, Bryce, and Tommy's body, meanwhile, landed with a splash in the middle of the cistern's pool. Perhaps the softest landing of any of them.

Brandon quickly conjured another Patronus, and said to it, “Mrs. T. Carry out lockdown. We're back in Skyrim. Got an ETA when the mobile network will be up again?”

The panther again vanished through the doors to the flat.

Mazhe, meanwhile, climbed to his feet, but jumped into the pool to be with his mate, who was then sitting up to his neck in the water.

“Harry? You all right?”

“I... Gods...” Harry managed. “Such... such disrespect.”

Tommy's body was floating nearby, face down, the water around him being turned pink with blood.

“He'll be buried with honour,” said Brandon, “I'll make sure of it.”

“Rather strange place to be taking a bath, lads,” said Brynjolf. He stood at the railing, on the raised platform that covered a third of the pool.

“Bad business, 'bryn,” said Mazhe, flicking his eyes to Tommy's body.

“What can we do?”

“No... nothing,” Harry mumbled, “Death has claimed part of me on this day. I...” He rubbed his face with his hands.

Bryce, meanwhile, was sitting in the same position. “Where... where are we?”

“Just outside of Harry's flat,” Brandon answered.

“You live in a sewer,” Bryce deadpanned.

Harry grinned, though it quickly faltered.

“Appearances can be deceiving, do you not agree?”

“Fair enough, I guess.”

Bryce once again pulled off his cap, and dunked his head under the water a moment. If it was a sewer, the water didn't smell like it—it was clear right to the bottom. He resurfaced, and replaced his cap, not really caring the water was dripping down his face—it was better than being plastered with blood. He could have sworn he'd seen pieces of bone sticking to his pants earlier. Just the thought made him ill.
Harry did the exact same thing, also washing the blood and dirt off his face. Only then did he climb to his feet with Mazhe, and help their new friend, and climb out of the shallow pool.

“There will be facilities in which to properly see to your needs within the flat,” Harry promised.

“How about a strong drink or three?”

“Uh, yeah, we have that too,” said Mazhe.

“Mr. Hunter, I strongly doubt you're old enough for a drink,” said Brandon.

Bryce made a rude gesture at the man. “Still don't know who the fuck you people are, where the fuck I am, how the fuck I managed to survive whatever hell your people—your world dumped all over mine... but by fuck I'm having me the stiffest, strongest drink you got. End of story.”

“With Bryce on that,” Harry picked up, and only then did Bryce see the simmering rage behind eyes that blazed emerald. “I just murdered someone I called a brother. HE—“ Harry thrust a finger at Bryce, “—watched that abomination unfold! Watched people he likely considered FAMILY... sent to the afterlife in front of his eyes. Never mind the utter nightmare all of us have been forced to endure!” He softened, though his eyes stung with tears that threatened to fall. “Our... our world has changed for the worse on this night. Now come. Let us see what further calamity waits for us inside. My gut warns of further incidence.”

“Let us worry about Tommy's remains,” Brynjolf offered, “It seems you have much bigger business to attend to.”


“Where... where are we going?” Bryce asked.

“This way. My... my flat.”

“We're safe, right?”

“Yeah. It... my place is... it is one of the most secure locations we may access.”

“I'm serious about a drink.”

“Mazhe and I will join you. To forget this madness, it is at the top of my agenda.”

“Harry, if you like... we can look after issues, given we're in a secure location,” Brandon offered.

“No. This... this calamity. There will be more. Better to learn of things now, than be disturbed later.”

They passed through a short corridor, to arrive at a set of heavy steel doors. A single soldier dressed identically to Brandon stood outside, and he snapped to attention seeing his superior officer.

“Mr. Stormcrown, welcome back,” he greeted, as he pulled one of the doors open.

“Thank you.”

Stepping inside, Bryce was somewhere between surprised and confused. Whatever the place was, it DEFINITELY did not match the architecture they'd just left. It better matched a high-end manor.

“This way,” said Harry, leading Bryce into the common room. The place seemed busy, with a number of people hurrying about.
“Mr. Stormcrown, the Queen's on her way.”

“World gone fucking mad. So be it,” Harry muttered.

“Queen of where?” Bryce wondered.

“Valicadia. The Commonwealth of Valicadia, specifically. They... I owe them dearly.”

“Harry, we've been through that before. It's us who owes you far more than you'll ever know,” said Brandon.

“Yet, the gods once again part cheeks and ram cock in ass,” Harry snorted.

Bryce couldn't help but burst out laughing at the expression. “You kiss your mother with that mouth?”

Brandon gave a pained look, while Harry looked at Bryce, a dark look crossing his face. “My parents were both sent to the afterlife while I was still a babe.”

“I'm sorry,” Bryce apologized, “I... I didn't know.”

Harry let out a sigh. “I know you meant no ill with your tongue. Such terrible things tonight. Our minds lay clouded with grief and anger.”

It was then the flames in the fireplace flared up a brilliant green, expelling two people dressed identically to Brandon. Bryce was once again floored by what he was seeing, and he found himself shuffling behind Harry and Mazhe, part of him wanting to bolt back out the door back out to the... sewer, or whatever it was.

“It's normal here,” Mazhe tried to reassure him, but wasn't having any luck.

Both of the men who'd just arrived quickly stepped aside, and the fireplace again roared green, this time expelling a woman of average height.

“Ten-hut!” one of the soldiers who'd just arrived barked. At that, both Harry and Mazhe bowed their heads, as did a number of others in the room. The soldiers all snapped to attention, and saluted. Realizing this was someone important, Bryce pulled his cap off, and also bowed his head out of respect.

“As you were, everyone,” said the Queen, softly. Her eyes immediately found Harry and Mazhe. A smile threatened to form, but she held it back, seeing the young wizard was nearly in tears. She crossed the distance, and pulled Harry into an embrace.

“I... I don't know what to do anymore,” he whimpered. “Such calamity...”

“Shhh... just breathe, Harry,” the Queen soothed, “Relax.”

It was several moments before Harry at last broke the embrace, and wiped his eyes with the sleeve of his shirt.

“Your majesty,” he said, regaining his composure.

“Forgive us for once again imposing on your residence.”

“If... my residence affords you the required protection, then it shall so be afforded, your majesty.”
“And... you must be Harry's new friend.”

“Uh... somethin' like that, yeah,” said Bryce. If he'd felt like a fish out of water already, this only compounded the matter.

“You find yourself among friends here, Mr. Hunter,” said the Queen. “Our Department of Information has compiled a brief file on who you are and so on. I have already instructed members of my Special Operations Unit to secure your family's safety; you should be reunited with them sometime tomorrow if all goes well.”

“Thank you.”

“Your majesty... the terrorists... they've made it clear they will kill him if they catch him,” said Mazhe, “The Commonwealth kept Tommy safe from Voldemort...”

“I'm already ahead of you, Mr. Stormcrown,” said the Queen, reaching into her robes and producing a sealed envelope.

Harry already knew exactly what was in it, and stormed out of the flat.

“Excuse me,” said Mazhe, quickly following.

“Harry, wait.”

He'd nearly made it to the bridge that crossed into the pub.

“I can't... I can't travel such a path for a second time.”

“It's not his fault, Harry.”

“Does thought not cross you what torture befalls me only moments ago? To know her majesty is delivering a verbatim message also delivered to Tommy less than three years prior?”

“Harry. Listen to me. It can't be helped, Mr. Hunter's involved with us now. Being pissed at him isn't gonna solve anything, right? And it's not exactly identical, love. Think about that. The government's collecting his immediate family and they'll be reunited sometime tomorrow. He's in a ten-fold better state than Tommy was—or I am... or you are.”

Harry blew out a breath, as the pair of them walked into the pub proper. Dierge wasn't there, but an SOU member was, and gave them a nod as they passed.

The pair pulled up seats at their typical table, with Vekel already crossing the floor bringing two bottles of mead.

“Gratitude,” said Harry, accepting one of them.

“I would offer something to eat, but considering how you lot arrived, I'm guessing that's the last thing either of you would want about now.”

“Yeah, that's about right,” Mazhe agreed. “Uh. You have some of your specials in stock?”

“Of course. Would you like—”

“We have a new friend who might need one.”
“What happened?” questioned Delvin, from his usual table.

“Dark witches and wizards attacked the... well, the event we were attending,” Mazhe answered, “As it stands we still don’t know how many people may have been killed... but it's a lot. Tommy was killed, likely so were a bunch of Commonwealth soldiers tonight. Gods, so much death and destruction... nothing of that scale's been seen here.”

“It seems you pair continue to be a magnet for trouble.”

“Understatement,” Harry muttered, before taking a swig of his mead.

“Far worse,” Mazhe continued, “Our new friend's been singled out. They capture him, it'll be a very painful final hours—”

“Days,” Harry cut in, “They would make his suffering last for days, considering he somehow survived the un-survivable.”

“As did you, love,” Mazhe pointed out.

“Another dubious distinction I'm sure he doesn't want. A conversation will need to be had with certain people to ensure he is not made a specimen in some research facility. Should anyone put voice to such thoughts, I will send them to a very painful afterlife.”

“Harry. Figured you'd end up here.”

Both Harry and Mazhe turned to find Justin had arrived, along with Zoey. Both Tim and Amanda were following at a respectable distance.

“I... shouldn't you be... aren't you...”

“The lockdown, remember? And with the mobile system partly out—our mobiles aren't working at all... we don't have a way to get back to Washington.”

“I've spoken to dad already,” said Zoey, “He'd rather I was home, but given the circumstance... And with Tim and Amanda here, he's further at ease with me being here.”

“Considering our monarch presently occupies my flat, we enjoy security far and above anything that might be provided for you and your father,” said Harry, quietly, before once again taking a swig from his bottle of mead. He swallowed, then continued, “I do say the word 'enjoy', rather bitterly, as it does once again portray me as someone of import. I make no laws. I make no decisions regarding the place or welfare of the Commonwealth. Yet, from such interactions I have with her Majesty, it will appear I carry favour with her.”

“Harry. I know what it's like living in the spotlight. Remember what I said hours ago,” said Zoey.

“Words do not change the reality, miss Bartlet.”

“Right. Anyway, we're setting up some extra rooms in the flat. I hadn't expected to... well... be hosting... well... uh, I'll shut up now.”

Both Mazhe and Harry grinned, seeing Justin's face turn rather red.

Harry then smiled. “As I am honoured to host her majesty, I am also honoured to host the daughter of the American President.”

“Harry, you're wiser than your years,” said Zoey, pulling up a seat, sitting beside Mazhe. Justin
quickly took the seat immediately beside hers.

“There has been no time for me to be a child,” Harry answered, “And living in this place, has only served to reinforce such a circumstance.”

He looked up to see Brandon step into the pub proper, with Bryce following. The man still looked quite pale. Harry indicated a vacant seat, then waved to Vekel.

“Government's in complete lockdown,” said Brandon, taking up the final seat at the table, “Floo network's for emergency access only, mobiles off, all ministries are closed... point blank, we're scrambling here. Listen... our mobiles... someone had access from inside.”

“Such pleasant news,” Harry muttered, as Vekel brought over a platter with more bottles of mead, as well as a distinctive vial, which was placed in front of Bryce. The emptied bottles were then collected.

Bryce looked at the vial in front of him.

“Be aware, the contents are potent—likely more potent than anything you might have had before,” Mazhe warned him.

“Somethin' strong's right about now,” Bryce muttered, as he pried the cork off the vial.

“Bottoms up,” he said, then downed the contents, while Mazhe simply sat back, waiting for the reaction.

“Holy sweet FUCK!”

Burn. Oh God, did it burn. Bryce believed he was ready for just about anything when it came to alcohol content. The thing is, those seated at the table with him failed to warn him that Vekel's concoctions weren't exactly alcohol-based. So now, he could feel the potent mixture burning all the way down his throat, and into his stomach.

Mazhe, meanwhile, could only grin. “In a few minutes, you won't know which end is up.”

“Mazhe,” Brandon scolded him.

“'s all good,” Bryce grinned, though he could still feel the stuff. “Damn, what's in this anyway?”

“Top secret,” Mazhe answered, “Vekel keeps the recipe close to his breast. And no, we can't let you have more... unless you want to end up brain dead.”

Harry smirked. “I still remember what it did to Dumbledore. Such a beautiful picture that made in the Prophet.”

“An enemy,” Zoey guessed.

“Oh yeah. Nemesis-level for Harry, I think.”

“I plan on strangling the man with his own beard, before sending him to a place that will have him begging for the sweet release of death,” said Harry, nastily, “That man has been nothing but a master manipulator and a dangerous adversary. And now, it is more than likely he acts with the very same group of people who unleashed chaos in Washington an hour or so ago.”

“The American Magical Congress, along with a number of other magical governments are being warned of the threat he poses,” said Brandon, “And as it stands, the Queen's organizing a party to
address the ICW sooner rather than later. The attack tonight... it was an organized, concerted attack, with obvious, clear objectives. They took out the electricity, destroyed telephone and communications devices within a one-Kilometre radius, then attacked both players and spectators alike. We're still reviewing memories of the event... and Harry, we'll need to get your memory as well, to get your point of view.”

“You have a vial? Best I give it to you now, before I become too inebriated.”

“Uh... yes.” Brandon produced a vial from one of the utility pockets of his vest, uncorked it, and passed it over, while Harry pressed his right index finger to his temple, and began to pull what looked like a white-gassy substance from it. When it finally broke free, he then deposited it into the vial, and put the cork back in it.

“Excellent,” said Brandon, “I'll make sure the DOI gets this when I return. And I hope you understand, the Queen's likely going to be a guest again for several days. We have at least one spy or sympathizer in either the ministry of Transportation, or the ministry of Communications. One of the two.”

“It is to be somehow expected. In the worst case, we can retreat into the cistern and take temporary residence there.”

“Where 'm I stayin?” asked Bryce.

“With us of course,” said Mazhe, “No fault of yours, you've been dropped into our group. And don't mind Harry... he's suffered much loss in the past few months, Tommy being only the latest in a number of friends and allies.”

“Oh. Uh, yeah, I get it.”

“Apologies,” Harry said softly, “The truth falls from my mate's lips. I will likely not be pleasant company for some time... gods above...”

He let out a sigh, then raised his bottle aloft. “To Tommy Conlon. Dear friend, Doctore, brother. We shed tears by your passing, but smile with knowledge you walk the afterlife with your brother and your parents.”

“To Tommy,” Mazhe whispered, also raising his bottle.

“To Tommy,” said Brandon, also raising his bottle, “And a debt I can never repay.”

“To Tommy,” said Justin, as he raised his bottle. “A new star shines in the heavens, that we never forget.”

The next couple of hours passed in relative silence, with Vekel keeping the party well-supplied. At one point, Justin excused himself, and took Zoey back to the flat, and Dobby appeared with some snacks sometime later, but all in all, those remaining at the table were more than content to have their minds clouded by the unending supply of ale, wine, and mead.

Harry awoke to someone knocking at the door, and someone prodding him in his side.

“Harry. Someone's at the door. We good to let them in?”

“Uh... yeah. Yeah, sure,” Harry answered. “Gods. Kill me now...”
“Come in!” Mazhe called.

The door opened, and Brandon entered the room, closing the door behind him.

“Not so loud...” came a voice across the room.

A couch had been transfigured into a bed, and Bryce was then trying to sit up. He flopped back down, but rolled on his side so he could see the others. He’d slept still dressed in his uniform... and Harry realized he'd also slept in his clothes... so did Mazhe, for that matter. Both of them smelled like a brewery, and...

“Uh... how'd we end up here?” Bryce wanted to know.

He instantly regretted speaking, as his head felt about six times too big. He gave up trying to sit up, but reached up, and ran a hand through his hair. He'd not felt this bad since... well... since he'd been picked first overall in the draft. He grinned, letting the memory fill his head a minute.

“Dobby was kind enough to get us all back to our rooms this morning,” said Brandon. “I think all of you will need these.”

He produced three vials from one of the pockets of his utility vest.

“Though... Mr. Hunter, I do need to warn you, these don't work all that well against Vekel's specials.”

“As Dumbledore found out,” Harry smirked, though once again regretting speaking. Every sound was being amplified at least tenfold.

“Not the first hangover I've had,” Bryce mumbled, once again attempting to sit up. He un-corked the small vial that had been presented him, and dumped the contents in his mouth, only to nearly spit it out. What the hell was THAT? He swallowed, and scowled. “Fuck, almost think you're trying to poison me or something.”

“Tommy said they tasted like rotten socks,” said Harry, sadly, before consuming his own vial of the nasty potion. “Thing is it'll make you feel a little better.”

Bryce folded his arms and scowled. “What would make me feel better? Put things back the way they were.”

“If only it were possible,” said Harry, softly, “I would give just about anything that it would be so. But you must know, such a thing is not possible. Such an event, catastrophic as it was, has had... and will have terrible effects now and in the future.”

“You talk like time travel is possible.”

Harry reached into his shirt, then chose not to. “It is possible, but consequences will far outstretch the reward.”

“We can't,” said Brandon, “It's considered a major event affecting thousands of people. The universe just won't allow it.”

“The guys... they... they were my family, might as well been,” said Bryce, softly. He reached down and picked his cap up off the floor. He made to put it on, but decided not to, instead leaving it on the pillow beside him.
“What reason did you have for waking us?” Harry then asked.

“The Queen's asked for your presence as soon as possible,” Brandon answered.

“Me too?” asked Bryce.

“Yeah. And if we can swing it, you'll have an appointment with a healer after breakfast,” said Brandon.

“Healer. Don't you mean a doctor?”

“We call them healers here,” said Brandon, “Healer Ferris has a long-standing relationship with Harry and his friends. She not only specializes in healing physical injuries, but also psychological trauma—”

Bryce scowled again. “I don't need a shrink.”

“No, but you... Tommy was sent to the afterlife only inches from your side. It was written on your face last night. You've never witnessed someone die. Not that close,” said Harry, “You bathed in his blood.”

“Point being, for the next while, we want you to speak with her. She's a great lady, helped all of us at one point or another... and given the things we've done and seen... you'll understand,” said Brandon.

The dining room had been enlarged yet again, to make room for the number of people present. Harry again sighed, but led his new friend to a space at the table, then he and Mazhe took seats alongside.

“I bid everyone a good morning,” said Harry, “Though gut once again warns that it likely won't remain that way with news forthcoming.”

“Unfortunately you're correct,” said the Queen, seated at the far end, “There were three additional events which unfolded last night and early this morning. One involving a club in Sydney—we're still collecting the information regarding that one, an incident in a large club in London, and a club in Trevelyan—the reason for the lockdown which is still ongoing.”

“The Ministry of Sound was attacked last night right around the same time as the events unfolded in Washington,” spoke another official seated not far from her, “Thus far we're still unsure of a total from Washington, but the death toll from London's about fifteen-hundred people, including everyone inside the club itself.”

“What sort of response has the English ministry of magic provided?” Harry asked.

“Mostly a clean-up. According to sources, by the time an alarm was raised, the damage was done.”

Harry let out a snort. “Typical incompetence. And they wonder why I have zero interest in ever returning there. What happened in Trevelyan?”

“Club Destiny... one of the largest nightclubs in the Commonwealth. Magical explosion took out the building and did major damage to the buildings around it. We're looking at about eight hundred dead,” said yet another official.

Harry sucked in a breath, and blew it out. “Are the terrorists still within the Commonwealth's borders? While the DOI has a look at things, we think it's best if the Queen once again remain here. Given the security present—”
“And considering people would have to know about this place in the first place,” said Mazhe, “Guardian Elaine's been quite clear about that, right?”

“Absolutely,” the Queen agreed.

“Your majesty. As was expressed when we broke words last evening, my place of residence is open to you. The Commonwealth stood by, provided for, gave me reason to see an end to the duty assigned to me. I can do no less but offer aid and hospitality in return.”

“Harry, you know you talk funny sometimes,” said Bryce.

“A year being quite literally immersed in such a dialect, such manner of speaking and expressing one's self inevitably rubs off... leaves impression.” He smirked, then said, “Then again... Aalkos zu'u fend mah wah daar tinvok sinon.” (“perhaps i should fall to this language instead”)

Bryce looked at him like he'd grown a second head.

“Harry... play nice,” Mazhe grinned.

“What language is that?”

“You'll be meeting... well... someone who is a native speaker, perhaps sooner rather than later,” said Harry, “As it stands, I do seek his council on events which have transpired last night. You will require warmer clothes than you currently have.”

“He can borrow some of my stuff... we're about the same size.”

“Good morning all.”

All heads turned to see Justin enter the room, Zoey on his arm. Both Tim and Amanda had also entered, but stood at the back of the room.

“And a good morning to you, Dr. Fraser, and Dr. Bartlet,” the Queen greeted.

“After breakfast, I'm gonna need everyone's mobile for a moment. I'm switching everyone over to the local network, since the main network's compromised. And Mr. Hunter... this is for you.”

Justin pulled out a mobile identical to the others', and with a flick of his wand, sent it in the newcomer's direction.

“Uh, thanks.”

“Hopefully we can help you set it up later today, barring other crap coming about.”

“Dr. Fraser, it might be a thought that we keep the two networks separate in the future as it is,” said one of the officials.

“Yeah, my thoughts exactly. These things aren't a whole lot of use without network access.”

“So the guys in the guild still have working mobiles,” Mazhe guessed.

“Yeah. Everyone we've given mobiles to here wouldn't even notice the outage back in the Commonwealth.”

“Moving forward,” said the Queen, rising, “Lieutenant Commander McAllister, Lieutenant Carpenter, Harry and Mazhe Stormcrown—” she glanced around the table.
“Where are Miraak, Crixus and Dardanos?”

“They have not yet stirred from slumber,” said Harry.

“I will speak with them later, then. If I could then get you four, along with Mr. Hunter to please rise.”

Bryce looked confused, but everyone stood up, while one of the officials passed her a leather-bound folder, which she then opened.

“Last night saw unprecedented terror unleashed on the non-magical world in four separate places. All of you stood in the face of that terror, putting life and limb at great risk, giving many others the chance to escape the nightmare unfolding around them.

“Your numerous actions last night in Washington D.C., are a testament to your strength of character, an example others should take note of and follow. To that end.

“Brandon McAllister. We do hereby promote you to the rank of Commander, and assign you to the Operations Centre on board the Ragnar.”

“Thank you, your grace,” said Brandon, bowing his head.

“But...”

The Queen held up a hand.

“Aaron Carpenter. We do hereby promote you to the rank of Lieutenant Commander, and assign you to provide protection for Mr. Stormcrown and the circle of friends he keeps company with.”

“Thank you, ma'am,” said Aaron, with a bow of the head.

“Bryce Hunter. You found yourself amongst a group of strangers, as unfathomable chaos unfolded, of which you could not grasp or understand. Yet, you stood up to those monsters with Our ward and his circle, showing great courage. We recognize that courage, by awarding you Order of Merlin, first class.”

“Uh, thank you,” said Bryce, once again bowing his head. 'But... I didn't really DO anything!' he shouted in his head. Harry looked at him a moment and frowned, but turned his attention back to the queen.

“Harry and Mazhe. Our ward, and his bonded, once again setting a shining example of courage and strength in the face of adversity. To take action, standing up against those who wish to bring chaos and strife into the world. We do also recognize your courage and strength, awarding both of you Order of Merlin, first class.

“We award the Order of Merlin, first class, to Thomas Conlon, who made the ultimate sacrifice, protecting one of Our own. He acted without thought and concern of his own well-being, to shield Commander McAllister from a deadly curse.

“Though he was not officially a member of Our Special Operations Unit, We decree that he shall be treated as such, in so affording him all privileges and monies that would normally apply. His name shall be added to the National War Memorial in Trevelyan, that it shall live on in future memory.

“Lastly, Order of Merlin, second class, are awarded to Crixus, Dardanos, and Miraak, for supporting Our ward and his friends during the crisis which unfolded last evening in Washington. Their actions also showed courage and strong hearts, also an example for others to follow.”
“Your majesty... why do they only earn second class?” Harry questioned, “Their actions were no less significant than my own. I would see all of us be on equal footing.”

“Seconded,” said Mazhe, “With due respect, your grace, awarding them a lesser class suggests their contributions were less. Trust me, everyone was equally involved in preventing a complete disaster last night.”

The Queen hummed a moment. “I have to agree. Let the record be amended to reflect that indeed, Crixus, Dardanos, and Miraak shall also receive Order of Merlin, first class, for their actions yesterday evening.”

“Gratitude, your grace,” said Harry.

“Mr. Hunter. We are still attempting to locate your family, but they will be brought to your side as soon as possible. Additionally, you will be compensated for the terrible losses you sustained last night,” said another aide down the table.

“Uh... yeah, sure.” Bryce still looked to be in a total fog, being once again overwhelmed with the situation.

“Maybe now might not be the best time for such things,” said Brandon, “I'm sure there'll be plenty of time to get that all figured out.”

“Perhaps we might begin by awarding him the contents of the Flint vaults at Gringotts,” said Harry, nastily, “I witnessed his presence yesterday just before the game.”

Brandon gave a nod. “We're already conducting an investigation as it is, determining if any old faces were present. And most definitely, if... say, Marcus Flint was present during the attack, we'll press Gringotts to freeze his account and begin legal proceedings against his estate.”

“Magical Britain wouldn't lift a finger,” Harry muttered.

“I... uh... there's people that'll want to know I'm okay,” said Bryce, softly.

“You'll be able to do that sometime today, once someone from the Ministry of Communications—”

“I can look after that sort of thing,” Justin volunteered. “God, he's already overwhelmed with a bunch of strangers as it is.”

“There is still protocol—”

“To hell with protocol,” Harry snapped, “This has been nothing but a cluster fuck.”

Bryce gave a weak grin, while more than a few people further down the table carried shocked expressions.

“Hold your tongue,” an aide sitting close to the Queen snapped.

Harry stood up, shoving the chair back from the table, looking furious.

“I've had it up to—” he flung a hand over his head, “—here... with dragon shit that has no bearing on bringing forth solutions to the present set of circumstances! You stand in my place of residence and the only person I bow to in this room is the Queen. If any of you are offended by my tongue, feel free to find the door or the fireplace, and get the fuck out.”

“Harry, that's not constructive,” said Brandon.
“No, I'm agreeing with Harry here,” said Mazhe, “If this is just gonna dissolve into shouting and squabbling, there's other things we can be doing. Harry... Bryce...”

“There are still items we have to discuss,” said another aide.

“We can continue without them,” said the Queen, “Though we'll have a more private meeting later.”

“Thank you, your majesty.”

Harry bowed to the monarch, before leading his partner and his new friend from the room. As they passed into the corridor, Bryce could hear the voices carrying from the room they'd just left.

“Mr. Scott, you are dismissed from my service effective immediately.”

“Your majesty...”

“Let us be clear. Mr. Stormcrown and his circle have a lot of latitude with regard to protocol. Add to it the fact that this is indeed his personal residence, and the fact that Mr. Stormcrown is promagistrate...”

“Mey joor—foolish people,” Harry muttered, as they re-entered his room.

“So... uh, what now?” Bryce asked.

“The decision of what you wish to do now is entirely yours,” Harry answered, “Though in your place, I would remain close to us. Credible threat has been made against your life. Though this place does provide formidable defences—”

“Guess I'm stickin' close then.”

“Harry... we're not staying around long, right?”

“Yeah... just...” Harry gave a pained expression. “Gods... walking an identical path as three years ago.”

“With the guy who died.”

“You walk his path,” said Harry, sadly, “An identical circumstance. Forgive my being intemperate, my mind is clouded by grief.”

“Harry had a crush on him when... well...”

“Mazhe. Not helping.”

Harry blew out a breath. “His tongue does spill the truth, however. We yet loved each other... as brothers. I realized a year prior, who truly owned my heart. Our union was in Last Seed—August.”

“Uh, guess I should say congratulations, then. But... well...”

Harry grinned.

“The message is well received.”

“We'll try and have a room set up for you probably later today,” said Mazhe, “Considering you'll want your privacy.”
“And we'll want ours,” said Harry. “Next order of business—”

“A shower,” said Bryce, “I feel nasty, look nasty. I ain't going nowhere 'till I get cleaned up.”

“And a change of clothes. My stuff will likely fit you,” Mazhe offered.

“And once all all this chaos is ended, we will help you retrieve some of your belongings.”

“Guess goin' home won't happen any time soon.”

“No. That loathsome witch last night... every word which spilled from her tongue, was the truth. Should they ever capture you... you would suffer for days, not only because you were seen with us, but because you survived something that only one other has,” Harry explained.

“You know by now, that the green blasts of energy kill instantly,” said Mazhe. At Bryce's nod and scowl, he continued, “Harry is up to now the only person to have ever survived the killing curse: the green blast of magic.”

“I will be giving warning that you are not to be treated like a specimen. Any one giving voice to such thought will walk a very painful afterlife.”

“Now. The bathroom is this way,” said Mazhe. “It's pretty comfortable... we've got showers, and a large tub if you'd like to have a soak.”

“Leave your uniform and... we can have it cleaned for you.”

“It's likely fucked anyway,” said Bryce, looking down at his midsection. The area had been stained pink from Tommy's blood.

“Right. Uh, follow us.”

While Bryce took to the shower, Harry summoned Dobby.

“Can you clean this up? A new friend's had a tough go the last few hours.”

“Dobby is seeing your new friend. He is being unwell.”

“We'll introduce you in a bit, but yeah... his world has been turned on its head.”

Dobby took Bryce's clothes, and popped away.

“Find something for him to put on. We're going to see Paarthurnax.”

“What are we gonna do about Tommy?”

“I... I think the government will look after him,” said Harry, softly, “Gods above, I can't believe he's gone.”

“He saved Brandon from that curse, Harry.”

Harry gave Mazhe an angry look. “I am aware of that! No, this entire escapade should never have happened.”

“Thing is, we got through it. I could have lost you.”

“And I, you,” said Harry.
Mazhe was then looking in the wardrobe, pulling out appropriate clothing for travelling to the Throat of the World. Being late Frostfall, the weather tended to be even more brutal.

“We're both in agreement though. Mr. Hunter stays with us for the next while. No matter how much you hate it, he's taking Tommy's place.”

“I know that,” said Harry, “His life has been destroyed. All he knows has been ripped from his fingers. The thoughts crossing his mind...”

“He is suicidal?”

“Nearly. Defeated is a better description.” Harry seemed to think a minute. “When Tommy joined us, we didn't have separate rooms.”

“And we weren't married, Harry.”

“I would sacrifice privacy for our new friend's safety.”

“All right. If that's what you want to do. We did promise...”

“Excuses will be made.”

“And he needs to see healer Ferris, sooner rather than later. I mean, Paarthurnax will be a great help, but Mr. Hunter needs human help in this matter.”

“I know that. Shor's balls, we ALL need her services.”

When Bryce returned, he discovered the room had been changed slightly. His bed now had a privacy divider, and a small wardrobe. A set of clothes had been laid out on his bed—jeans, a long-sleeve shirt, and a heavy coat with a hood.

“We may have to transfigure your footwear into something more appropriate,” said Harry.

“Transfigure—”

“Change them into something else. The magic is not permanent, before you ask.”

“Oh. Well... uh, thanks.”

Bryce disappeared behind the barrier, and began to dress.

“Where'd my uniform go?”

“A... a friend is cleaning it. It will likely be waiting when we return,” Harry answered, “There are spells that could have cleaned it instantly, but—”

“No it's okay. Uh... my cleats...” He pushed his footwear under the divider, and Harry summoned them.

“How cold it gonna be?”

“We travel to a place known as the Throat of the World. It's the highest place in the... well, the region. It's locked in eternal winter,” Mazhe explained.

“If it's so cold, why we going there?”
“It is a place in which to seek reconciliation. You will understand when we arrive,” Harry promised.

It was then there was a knock at the door. Seeing Bryce was out of sight, he called, “Come in.”

The door opened, and Justin entered, followed by Zoey.

“The lockdown's still in effect,” said Justin by way of greeting.

Harry let out a sigh. “Guess that should be expected. I would say come along, but...”

“Not the best idea,” said Justin, “Limiting exposure and all that. Though... if Miraak wouldn't mind relinquishing the Virtual Projection Room...”

“I'm sure he won't mind,” said Mazhe, “The room's meant for everyone's use.”

“Thinking I'd like to re-shoot that first date,” said Justin, making a sour face.

“A date?” Bryce asked, reappearing from behind the barrier. “Thought you were seeing Charlie Young. 'least according to the tabloids.”

“Oh.” Zoey felt her face get hot. “It's... complicated.”

“You're not still seeing him?” Justin asked, to which Zoey shook her head. “We called it off a while ago.”

“Oh. Well good. I mean... not good, but...”

Zoey touched a finger to Justin's lips, silencing him. “No need to make a further fool of yourself, Dr. Fraser.”

That had both Mazhe and Harry smirking.

“Where is your... I mean...” Mazhe began.

“Tim's with... Brandon, is it? Talking shop I think. Amanda's just outside the door.”

“It does not surprise me that two security agencies are comparing notes,” said Harry. He glanced at Bryce.

“You ready?”

“Oh. Apologies. There was distraction.”

Harry flicked a hand at Bryce's footwear, and in an instant, they were replaced by a pair of heavy leather boots with a thick felt lining.

“You should find those more than suitable for where we're going.”

Bryce was again floored at what he'd just seen, and so hesitantly picked them up. “Shit. Unbelievable.”

“The transfiguration will wear off in time, but... if you like those, we can get you a real pair.”

“I'll pay you...”
“Unnecessary,” said Harry, as Bryce slipped the boots on. “It is you who is owed debt here. Be it known that a Stormcrown pays his debts.”

“How long you guys gonna be gone?” Justin wanted to know.

“A few hours,” said Mazhe. “It’s about gaining perspective. We’re gonna introduce Mr. Hunter to Paarthurnax.”

“Who’s Paarthurnax?”

“You’ll see,” said Harry, fishing into his pouch, and producing his mobile.

“We’ll see you when you get back then,” said Justin, as he began to lead Zoey from the room.

“Oh, I’m sure we’ll be seeing plenty of each other in the next while,” Harry smirked, and was forced to duck, as Justin let fly a stinging hex. Bryce nearly fled back behind the barrier, until he realized there was no threat meant.

“Shit. Apologies,” said Harry, seeing his new friend was once again afraid for his well-being.

“What... what the hell was that?!” Bryce demanded.

Mazhe explained, “We train together. He didn't mean anything by it.”

“You throw curses at each other.” It wasn't a question.

“Until recently, all of us participated in morning exercises. I would see that continue,” said Harry, “It is not needed to be said that you are welcome to join us. Now. You have already experienced the use of a port key. The rules are thus. Keep in contact with the item until told to let go of it. Keep your feet out in front of you when you let go of it, you will stand a better chance of landing on them rather than your arse. And if you wish to keep your headdress, I would suggest stowing it somewhere until we arrive.”

“Oh... here. That... well... whatever it is.”

Harry grinned, and stuffed Bryce's cap in his pouch. “Rather useful. It has a strong expansion charm on it, so it's much larger on the inside.”

“Sounds awesome.”

“Yeah, it is,” Mazhe agreed. “Now. One more thing to keep in mind. We're about to meet one, possibly two of our friends and allies. You'll likely be alarmed by their appearance... just remember we trust both of them. They have far more wisdom than we can ever hope to gain in a lifetime—”

“Many lifetimes over, Mazhe,” Harry corrected him. “Right then. Get a hand on it so we may go.”

Mazhe had already put a hand on the item, and so Bryce did the same.

“Activate!” Harry commanded, and the three of them vanished in a blur of limbs.

The trio arrived in another blur of limbs, only a few feet away from the broken word wall atop the Throat of the World. Bryce stumbled a moment, but quickly found his feet, while both Mazhe and Harry landed near perfectly. Almost immediately, Bryce yanked the hood of his coat up, covering his ears against the biting cold and blowing snow. There was near zero visibility, and the three of them found themselves almost knee-deep in snow.
“Shit, you weren't kiddin' around about fucking cold,” he muttered.

“Cover your ears,” Mazhe warned him.

“What... right.” Bryce covered his ears.

“Lok... VAH KOOOOR!”

The shout came as a clap of thunder, rolling high into the heavens, blasting a hole through the swirling storm.

“What'll that do?”

“Just watch,” said Harry, “My mate carries astounding ability.”

Sure enough, the swirling snow was already beginning to wane, and the wind was beginning to die off. And then, there came the beating of wings, and the ground literally shook, as something heavy set down behind them. Bryce wheeled around to find—

“Jesus Christ...”

He was already reaching for his pistol, but Mazhe put a hand on his arm.

“A friend, remember?”

“I... but...”

“Drem yol lok—Greetings,” said the great beast, much to Bryce's shock.

“Drem yol lok, Paarthurnax. We seek your council after enduring troubling events,” said Harry. “First, I introduce Bryce Hunter, a new friend encountered yesterday. He will be in our company here on out. Bryce, I introduce Paarthurnax, a great friend and ally with far more wisdom than any of us can ever hope to amass.”

“I... uh... God, this...” Bryce looked very confused. A talking, friendly dragon? That didn't happen.

“Fos lost koros, tol lost yah dii mu'ulaav—what has happened, that has you seeking my council?” asked Paarthurnax.

“Lot ahrk zomaar truk (great and terrible things),” Harry answered, “Just when I thought I had seen the worst the magical world was capable of, I am once again proven wrong.”

Harry, Mazhe, and Bryce then proceeded to explain the previous evening's events in painful detail. In retrospect, the entire event had unfolded in an hour, perhaps less, from the time the power went out and the first curses were fired on the field. Brandon was absolutely right... the operation had been well-executed from the start. Almost military precision. They knew how to cause the most damage, how to prevent non-magical authorities from providing rescue. Voldemort and his misfits were never that organized. So what had changed?

When they finished, Paarthurnax remained silent for a minute or so, digesting all that he had been told. Then he said, “Pah do hi lost staad kolos hi vust dreh zok pruzah—all of you were placed where you could do the most good. Perhaps you may not see it that way, but tiid ahrk dez—time and fate... only work to maintain balance. Pah do hi lost praagek skilaan tol ro—all of you were vital in maintaining that balance.”
“But... a lot of people died,” Bryce objected, “People... my teammates... they were family!”

“Daar los vahzah—this is true. Yet, I ask you this,” said Paarthurnax, “Vir pogaan zuk fund lost dir, lost hi ni dren—how many more would have died, had you not acted?”

The beating of wings heralded the arrival of another dragon. He landed a short distance away from Paarthurnax.

“Hail, Sahrotaar,” Mazhe greeted.

“Hail, thuri,” Sahrotaar returned, “What brings you to visit?”

“Terrible things have taken place in Harry's world. First, a new friend,” said Mazhe, “This is Bryce. He was almost killed last night.”

“He takes the place of Tommy Conlon, who was mortally wounded during the battle,” Harry explained.

“There was no way to save him, Harry. You know that,” said Mazhe, “Your heart aches, but—”

“He was my friend, Mazhe! I had to look him in the eye while I killed him! I will never be okay with having to do such a terrible thing.”

“To nii lost dren do aaz—though it was an act of mercy?” Paarthurnax challenged, “To have let him die in pain would have been worse.”

Harry blew out a breath. “Reason does not escape thought. Yet, reason does not justify result. My friend is dead.”

“We all suffered loss, Harry. He was my friend too,” said Mazhe.

“And I... this is so fucked up,” Bryce muttered. “I seen stuff last night an' none of it's okay.”

“Apologies that you face the worst of our world,” Harry found himself apologizing again.

“Hi lost pah aus zeim zomaar korosend—you have all suffered through a terrible event,” said Paarthurnax, “Time should be spent collecting and calming your thoughts... recognize the loss you have suffered, and perhaps begin to come to terms with it.”

“I... uh...” A pained expression crossed Harry's face, but he blew out a breath. “Wise thoughts that I would see turned to action.”

He gestured with a hand at the snow around them, clearing most of it away. Another gesture of the hand provided three comfortable cushions.

“Come. Sit comfortably.”

Bryce huffed, but did so.

“Like this.”

Mazhe had sat down, cross-legged, as had Harry. Bryce followed example, somewhat understanding what they were going to do.

“Tommy used to lead us with this,” said Mazhe, “Immediately following our morning exercises. It's good for settling our thoughts.”
“Meditation,” Bryce guessed.

“Exactly.”

“If I might lead the exercise,” Paarthurnax offered.

“Gratitude.”

Chapter End Notes

UP NEXT: The full extent of the incident is learned; Bryce receives distressing news...

CHAPTER NOTES: So they return from the disaster, but it's still not over. More grief is to be had, and the real devastation comes to light.
Aftermath

Chapter Summary

The full extent of the incident is learned; Bryce receives distressing news...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

6. AFTERMATH

September, 2007 / Hearthfire, 4E202

“Older men declare war. But it is youth that must fight and die. And it is youth who must inherit the tribulation, the sorrow and the triumphs that are the aftermath of war.”

- Franklin D. Roosevelt

It was late in the afternoon before they were disturbed, when a point of light seemed to materialize near the word wall, to quickly morph into the shape of a large panther.

“Harry, Mazhe, and all,” Brandon's voice spoke through it, “Return to the flat at once, we've got an update.”

“Guess the lesson's over then,” said Mazhe, standing. He stretched, and looked around. “Shor's bones, its' near sunset.”

“We spent the day at it,” Harry agreed, “But our minds surely rest in a better place after...”

“Thanks... for bringing me here,” said Bryce, also getting to his feet.

“Feel a bit better then?”

“Yeah.”

“That was the purpose of the exercise. A calmer head,” said Mazhe, “We've been doing it for years.”

“I meditate sometimes,” said Bryce, “Not like this though.”

“Normally we come up here a couple of times a week,” said Mazhe, “Harry's getting lessons in Dovahzul. Of course I also suspect there were other reasons a few months ago.”

Harry couldn't help but grin. “This is true.” He turned to face both dragons. “Paarthurnax and Sahrotaar. Gratitude for your help.”

“You are all welcome anytime,” answered the old dragon, “And of course, hi fen fahbo hin mindaat het—you will continue your lessons here.”
“Nü los mein, geh(1),” Harry answered. (“it is the plan, yes”)

Their arrival back at the Ragged Flagon was barely noticed. From there, they re-entered the flat, only to find it was still a beehive of activity. Brandon met them.

“Let's take this back out to the Flagon. It's near dinner time as it stands,” he said.

It was then Harry felt his stomach rumble. “Uh, yeah. Food and wine—perhaps more wine and ale... though I sense my appetite will not fare well with news you bring.”

“I'll be honest. It's not good.”

Bryce scowled. “Nine-eleven all over again.”

“Yeah, a good analogy. C'mon, let's get something to eat. Crixus, Dardanos, and Miraak are already there.”

They stepped into the pub proper, where indeed, the three other members of Harry's circle had already claimed a table. Harry, Mazhe, Bryce, and Brandon claimed the one next to them; Vekel was already on his way over with bottles of mead.

“How bad is it?” Harry asked.

“Mr. Hunter put it best. Security at a level unseen since 2001. The US border was closed over night, only reopened about an hour ago. The FAA almost closed the airspace, in the end decided not to. All ports closed—just... about every security procedure you can think of, it's in place.

“Canadian government's mirroring the US, similar security protocols are in effect.”

“What about the stadium? All those people...” Bryce asked.

“A lot of damage to it. Unusable as it stands. Death toll's reached seven thousand, but that's expected to get much worse. Emergency responders had to bring in heavy equipment to dig for survivors.”

“Did... were... were any of my teammates found?”

“I haven't heard. But I'll be sure to find out. I'll put DOI on it.”

“DOI?”

“Department of Information. They're like your CIA,” Brandon explained.

“Oh. Guess that makes sense. Find out. It would mean a lot to me.”

“Just be prepared. The news is likely not gonna be pleasant.”

Bryce could only nod. “Got no clue what the team's gonna do... front office, I mean. Still got a few games 'fore the end of the season—”

“Baseball season's been put on hold indefinitely. Given Philadelphia lost a bunch of players last night too. Given it was a direct attack against a game... Major League Baseball shut down every game still in progress when it was learned exactly what was going on. So games out west were all cancelled... uh... I think... yeah. There was a game still going in New York... they called the game and evacuated.”
“The baseball gods are crying today,” said Brandon.

“Fucking abomination, what it is,” said Bryce.

“What has been the reaction of the magical world?” Harry wanted to know.

“The Commonwealth is still in a complete lockdown. The government is completely shuttered, with all buildings being evacuated—it's a weekend, but normally a number of government services are still open for business,” Brandon clarified, getting the questioning look.

“Floo network is on emergency only, port keys are now by authorized use only—”

“Like the English ministry,” Harry remembered.

“Exactly. Except that we also have ways of tracking port key use. So use of an unauthorized port key right now will land someone in a cell, being questioned under Veritaserum.”

“So they catch anyone yet?” Bryce wondered.

“Eighteen up to this point. Though it's likely a harmless thing, but questioning will sort it out.”

Harry thought for a moment. “What has been the reaction from other communities?”

“So far twenty-six magical nations have issued statements of condemnation against the attack. The British Ministry is once again pointing the finger at us, of course, claiming once again that we are harbouring the one responsible and all that crap. Crown Council’s office is looking into it...”

“The British Ministry lacks credibility,” Harry snorted, “Unwise for the Crown to worry itself with such rubbish.”

“Thoughts mirrored by Queen Susan,” Brandon agreed.

“Guys.” Everyone looked up to find Justin had arrived, along with Zoey. Both Tim and Amanda had once again chosen to keep a ways back to give them privacy.

“Brandon’s been getting you guys up to date I guess,” Justin guessed.

“Yeah.”

“You don’t seem too out of sorts about it.”

“Nothing I really didn't expect,” said Harry, with a shrug, “Authorities are reacting in a way expected considering the severity. As to casualties, I did expect losses to be worse.”

“You know there will be more,” said Brandon, “Excluding unusual circumstances, a person can only survive for three days or so without water.”

“So it'll end up a recovery operation rather than a rescue,” said Justin, as he and Zoey pulled up chairs at another table.

“You have spoken to your father today?” Harry wanted to know, gesturing to Zoey.

“A couple of hours ago.”

“Your sisters, they okay?” Bryce asked.
“They're in the residence with dad. Liz and her family arrived early this morning and Ellie arrived just after lunch.”

“I was unaware you had siblings,” said Harry.

“I'm the youngest. Liz is oldest.”

Harry smirked. “I somehow feel sympathy for your father. A house with three girls. Particularly considering the career choice your father has chosen.”

“Harry. Play nice,” said Justin.

Zoey could only grin. “Living in the spotlight you mean? It's hard, sometimes. But sometimes we do get some pretty nice perks and privileges.”

Harry found himself nodding along with Bryce. “Fame does have its place.”

“You don't like being famous,” Bryce guessed.

“Never have. Made famous because of something my parents did. They died for me, so that I survived. Yet I became revered for it.”

“Thing is, Harry, now you're famous on your own merits. Don't ever doubt the contribution you've made. Voldemort would still be around—”

“But he still lingers! Even after all efforts, another monster fills the vacuum left behind! I find myself now repeating a path already followed! Why! Why is that? Was my best effort not good enough?! What more does this world want from me?!”

“I can't answer that for you. But yesterday, all of us were in the place where we could do the most good. Think about it, Harry. What if we'd not been there? What kind of destruction would've come of it?” Brandon challenged him.

Harry blew out a breath. Brandon, of course, was absolutely right. The chaos unleashed was bad as it was. Had there been no challenge at all, it would have been far worse.

“I'd be dead without your help,” said Bryce, quietly. He then thought of something, and pulled out the amulet. “I... uh—”

“Keep it,” said Mazhe, “Maybe it kept you safe somehow.”

“But—”

“We will craft another,” said Harry, “I know Balimund would not hesitate at the chance to work with the forge a second time.”

Bryce still pulled the amulet off. “What's it made of anyway?”

“Gold and Aetherium,” said Mazhe, “Aetherium is a magical element with some pretty powerful properties. I know that amulet's got some pretty strong protective enchantments on it. Debatable how much you may benefit from it, but, consider it a gift.”

“Thank you.”

It was then an aide approached. Harry had watched him come out of the flat, and circle around the cistern. He silently passed a note to Brandon, then went back the way he came. Brandon quickly
read the note, folded it up, then stood up.

“Mr. Hunter. Come with me a minute.”

“My parents...”

Brandon gave a quick nod, but Harry already knew it was bad news. Good news, he would have just told him. Privacy always meant bad news. Bryce too, seemed to know this, as he followed Brandon to the alcove which separated the Ragged Flagon from the guild proper.

“He stays with us. No matter what,” said Harry, firmly.

“And healer Ferris needs to be brought in. Justin, how difficult would it be to bend security and get her here?”

“Queen Susan occupies our residence presently,” said Harry, “Surely her word can make exception.”

Justin gave a nod, as Brandon was leading Bryce back to the table. He nearly missed the chair and Mazhe ended up having to guide him into it, and from there he lost all composure, overcome with grief. Harry slammed his chair back from the table and stormed off, knowing exactly where the guy was emotionally. He was in exactly the same spot as Tommy had been three years prior.

His feet carried him back into the flat, and he barely heard as people voiced acknowledgement of his presence. No, he had eyes for only one person.

“Queen Susan. I require a word,” he said, as he stepped into the dining room. He tried to keep his voice even, but it was not lost on others, just how pissed he was.

“Harry. What happened?” the Queen asked.

“A new friend, only further traumatized by incidence back in our own world. He must be seen by healer Ferris, this protocol be damned.”

“I see.”

“Your majesty, protocol is in place—”

“Place an emergency fire call to healer Ferris,” the Queen ordered, “I am giving clearance for her to be present. Mr. Stormcrown and his circle of friends all need a bit of sound advice after events last night.”

Harry gave a bow of the head. “Thank you, your majesty. Please have her find us at the Ragged Flagon.”

Another aide stood up. “I’ll bring her along after she clears a security screen.”

“Thank you.”

With that, Harry left the dining room, and retreated to his room a moment, taking the time to retrieve a few calming draughts. Perhaps one for himself might be a thought, too at this point.

Returning to the Ragged Flagon, he found Mazhe had brought his chair around so he was beside Bryce, and had pulled the guy into a hug, trying to comfort him. The others seemed lost on what to do... and Zoey was borrowing Justin's mobile, likely talking to her father. Harry pulled his chair around to the other side, and sat down, putting a hand on Bryce's back.
“I know it may not offer much comfort, but I do make many apologies. I have suffered great loss a number of times over in this year alone. Those I considered family, perhaps not by blood... but they might as well have been... all gone to grass. So yes, I know EXACTLY what you're going through, for I have walked in your shoes.”

“Why d'you care?” Bryce managed, “You don't even KNOW me!”

“Grief makes strange bedfellows,” Harry answered, “Even Mazhe has felt the terrible pain of loss.”

“My parents and my sister were murdered by... by the government... when I was nine. Just because they stood up against their... some of their policies.”

“I... I didn't know,” Bryce apologized.

“Understand, you are not alone. We won't let you be,” said Mazhe, “Both Harry and I will do our damnedest to keep you safe, and keep you sane.”

That earned a hollow laugh from Bryce, who sat up, and rubbed his face with his hands. “Sane, yeah. Nightmare, more like it.”

“A statement I can only concur with. World gone fucking mad, with me in the middle of it. Calamity and I continuously meet.”

Harry gave a vicious smirk. “Another name is added to the growing list of individuals who will suffer a very painful afterlife. I'll see her magic bound, crucified, and soul-trapped.”

“Harry.”

“What?”

“That is not productive, to carry hatred in your heart,” said Dardanos.

“You know of the path I now walk, Dardanos. To sew chaos amidst innocent people, to violate the statute of secrecy with severity not seen since the statute was signed in 1692... This loathsome witch... I'll see her burn.

“And let's not forget the nightmare suffered just over a week prior. I think logical conclusion points to the perpetrators of this evenings chaos, as having caused the destruction of Spiraminis.”

“They've done shit like this before,” Bryce guessed.

“Five hundred thousand dead. They destroyed one of our cities,” said Brandon.

“They... it was... how...” Bryce was at a loss for words, as the magnitude sank in.

“The more frightening thing is, it could have been worse,” said Justin, “the city is—or was—located close to the Mariana Trench... buried under the sea bed. So had the city actually collapsed... it would've instantly opened up a five-hundred meter hole four times the size of Manhattan. The waves would have been hundreds of feet high. Say good bye to Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Diego, Honolulu, Tokyo... and just about every other coastal city in the Pacific.”

Zoey could easily hear what they were saying, and her face paled at the implication.

“Jesus Christ,” Bryce muttered, equally horrified.

“It's interesting that they waited until we finished our honeymoon, before launching their schemes,”
Mazhe noted.

“Theatrics,” said Harry, “It equates to theatrics, to announce themselves to the world. ‘Look what chaos we can sow, despair in knowing you can do nothing to stop us’.”

“Except that we did stop them, Harry. Thousands of people are still alive tonight because we were there.”

“So what now? What'll happen—thank you,” said Bryce, as Vekel placed a refill of ale in front of him, as well as Harry and Mazhe.

“To you? Nothing. Queen's prerogative and all that, you're to be treated like one of us,” said Justin.

It was then they noticed an aide had stepped out of the flat, with healer Ferris following.

“Excellent,” said Harry, “Someone who can perhaps help us settle after distressing events.”

Bryce followed Harry's gaze. “Who's she?”

“I did promise for healer Ferris to break words with you. With further unsettling discovery, your seeing her is a matter of import.”

Bryce rubbed his face with the sleeve of his shirt. “If you think it'll help. God, this is so fucked up.”

“It helped all of us loads.” Harry stood up, as healer Ferris approached. The aide, seeing she'd made contact with the party, beat a hasty retreat back to the flat.

“Harry and all... and you must be Mr. Hunter,” said healer Ferris, with a nod to Bryce.

“Uh, yeah... uh... doctor?”

“Healer Ferris is fine. Why don't we find some place private?”

“One of the alcoves should be good,” said Justin, pointing to the three unoccupied alcoves on the opposite side of the cistern's pool.

Healer Ferris gave a nod, and led Bryce out of the pub proper, having picked one of the vacant alcoves as suggested.

“I mean it,” said Mazhe, “He can't be out of our sight.”

“And I know that, Mazhe,” said Harry, “Gods, and I thought Tommy was shattered.”

“They murdered his immediate family, current girlfriend, previous girlfriend, a former male... friend, three classmates he was still in contact with. Destroyed his residence with Feindfyre... and in all incidences, the Dark Mark was set off in the sky,” said Brandon.

“Wait. A... male friend?”

“Likely not something he'd want paraded in public,” said Mazhe.

“Yeah. No, I concur. I am aware sport tends to be rather... rigid in terms of...”

“Lots of homophobia,” Brandon finished. “Even here in the commonwealth, there are problems.”

“The missive did mention a girlfriend,” said Crixus.
“Someone who is bisexual then,” said Brandon, “I'm sure you likely knew people who liked both male and female companions, is this not true?”

That earned a nod from both Crixus and Dardanos.

“We're getting off track here,” said Mazhe. “No matter what, he stays with us. I'm thinking stun him if we have to, that kind of thing.”

Now Harry had to nod along. Perhaps tough love might be the expression. But no matter what, their new friend needed all the support they could give him, on top of whatever healer Ferris could provide.

The remainder of the night was spent in the Flagon, with healer Ferris pulling each of the group aside for a chat. Bryce still seemed literally lost, however, saying very little, more than content to make up to a bottle of mead. Vekel was more than happy to keep him in supply, with Harry dropping a sizeable bag of coins on the bar mid-way through the evening.

Finally, as it neared 4 am, Vekel wanted to get some sleep. Both Justin and Zoey had returned to the flat just before 2 o'clock, with Crixus, Dardanos, and Miraak departing a half hour later.

“C'mon, Harry, let's get to bed. Gonna be a bitch getting up in a few hours.”

“No... bed...” Bryce muttered, though he was half asleep.

“We gotta. C'mon, up you get,” Harry prodded, as he rose himself. He tugged on the guy's shirt sleeve, trying to get him up out of his seat, but it was Mazhe who had more success.

“We could just levitate him,” Brandon suggested.

“No. Tryin' to keep the magic to a minimum around him for now,” said Harry, “I think Mazhe and I can manage.”

So it was, that with Bryce supported in between them, Mazhe and Harry retreated back to the flat, with Brandon trailing behind them. Inside, they found only a few people up, along with the SOU watch. On sight of Brandon, they each saluted; he was the senior officer in the flat.

Once in Harry and Mazhe's room, Harry hesitated a moment. Coming to a decision, he discreetly cast a spell at Bryce's back.

“What are we doin'?"

“You're staying with us,” said Harry, “It's late, you're pissed, emotionally crushed, and I'll be damned if you sleep alone. Lean on us, mate. We've got your back.”

“Well... okay.” Bryce shook his head a minute, though trying to shake the cobwebs out of his head, but offered no resistance as they set him down on the somewhat larger bed. Wait. That can't be right. Wasn't it smaller? Way too much to drink, Bryce muttered in his head, as he leaned down to take his boots off. The charm thing was kind of neat, if he had to admit.

“Let me help,” said Harry, and just like that, his boots were neatly arranged in front of the wardrobe they'd given him. Part of him wanted to protest, but now... he was just too spent, mentally and physically.

“Can you... Idunno, take...”
“Trousers, socks, shirt... anything else?”

“Uh... nope.”

Harry flicked a hand, and Bryce found himself stripped of both the jeans he'd been given, as well as the long-sleeve shirt, leaving him in a pair of undershorts, and the undershirt that went with his uniform.

Harry then flicked a hand at himself, changing into appropriate bedclothes. Given they had a 'guest', it wouldn't be appropriate to sleep wearing very little (or nothing, as it was on most occasions).

Mazhe, meanwhile, was also changing for bed.

“I think I've come to a decision about which I prefer more,” he said.

“And that is?” Harry prompted.

“The clothing from your world is much more comfortable, and much more versatile.”

“But your world hasn't had need to change their clothes. Never mind the fact civilization here hasn't changed all that much when compared with Earth. Your world operates at a much slower pace than ours does. And that's not meant in a bad way.”

Bryce listened to the pair talking, as he stretched out on the bed. Mazhe's world? What did he mean? This was still Earth, wasn't it? _Wasn't_ it?!

With the bed being pushed up against the wall, Harry had to climb in from the bottom, while Mazhe took the opposite side.

“I'll sleep on the outside,” Bryce offered, but Harry shook his head. “Nope. This way if you wake up, you can't get out of bed without waking one of us up.”

“I... I don't wanna get in the way of—”

“Shhhh,” said Mazhe, putting a finger to his lips, “It's okay. And really, if you need anything, wake one of us up. It's the whole point of this.”

“Now really, it's gonna be a bitch getting up, so let's try and get some sleep.” A flick of the hand dimmed the room's lights so the shadows fell heavy, leaving just enough light to see by.

As much as Bryce wanted to fight it, it being a little too weird... he found he couldn't. Mentally exhausted, emotionally spent, it was just easier to roll with it. He closed his eyes, and succumbed to a fitful sleep.

Harry was awakened by someone knocking on the door. That, and someone had spooned up against him. He didn't have to open his eyes to know it wasn't Mazhe—Mazhe smelt like the outdoors.

“Harry?”

“Yeah. Someone's banging on the door—WHAT?!”

“It's nearly lunch time,” came Brandon's voice.

“Bloody hell.”
“Wha?” Bryce muttered, trying to roll onto his back, then realizing he was bumping up against Harry. “Uh...”

“It's all right,” Harry answered, his memory clearing, “Your tears awakened me short hours ago. I saw to your comfort.”

“Oh. Sorry, didn't...”

“It's why we put you between us,” said Mazhe. “Alcohol will only numb the pain for so long, only leaving you with a pounding head.”

“Anti-hangover draughts if necessary, but the truth spills from my mate's tongue.”

Bryce had to laugh. “Y'know, your... uh... you don't talk like that when you're drinking.”

“Really? I had not taken notice. Now. Much time has been wasted in bed. I would see time put to better use with proper routine which has been neglected far too long. Mr. Hunter—”

“It's Bryce. Think we're on first names after... well... whatever this is.”

“This... is nothing,” said Mazhe, firmly, “Your emotional state and comfort were our number one priority since yesterday.”

“And it will stay such. Perhaps... Mazhe, perhaps we should break words with Maramal.”

“No. He is a priest of Mara. We would need to speak to Alessandra, since she's a priestess of Arkay, and deals with the dead... thing is, she makes me uncomfortable. I'm thinking of something else that we might do... something I've not done in some time,” said Mazhe, as he planted his feet on the floor and stood up. “It's a small ritual I used to do, but stuff these last few years... it's kind of been neglected.”

“Guys?!” came Brandon's voice again.

“We'll be out shortly,” Harry called back.

A short time later, the three of them joined the others in the dining room. And it was then that Bryce got his first look at a house elf. Harry and Mazhe too, were momentarily confused, seeing the elf's outfit, as he went about organizing a stack of papers beside the Queen at the far end of the table.

“This is Chorley,” said the Queen, by way of introduction, “He's my personal aide. You will notice the number of staff at the table has thinned slightly. I felt you might be more comfortable with someone more agreeable.”

“Thank you, your grace. Welcome, Chorley. I trust both Dobby and Kreacher have met you and aren't giving you issue?”

“None, Mr. Stormcrown. I do believe they were more than enthusiastic to be working with me.”

Harry grinned. “I see. That sounds about correct for the pair of them.”

Bryce finally found his voice. “What... what are you?”

“I am a house elf, Mr. Hunter,” Chorley answered. “I've been in the service of Queen Susan longer than she has been on the throne.”

“Long before I was born, Chorley, you did serve my parents,” the Queen laughed, “House elves
belong to a witch or wizard. Some families mistreat them, treat them like slaves, while most... at least most in the Commonwealth, are treated like members of the family.”

“But you're still a slave,” said Bryce.

“I don't see it that way,” Chorley answered, dismissively, “To serve a family, and to be treated kindly, that's all one of us can ever ask for. To be idle, it's something we dread.”

“All right, I get it. Just, slavery though…”

“It's a dark side of the wizarding world. It still happens in some places,” said one of the aides.

“It's been illegal since the 1500’s here,” said another.

Bryce only shook his head as he took a seat. “So I got a question. Where are we?”

“We take sanctuary in a place none of your enemies can hope to reach presently,” Harry hedged.

“So I'm startin' to figure out. I mean, if this magic shit's real... going somewhere other than…”

Just be ready for anything,” said Mazhe, “You'll learn the full extent of just where we are shortly.”

“This place... has been where I have called home since the age of six,” said Harry, as lunch at last appeared on the table.

Bryce was momentarily startled by the dishes just suddenly appearing, but seeing others already reaching for the items provided, he began to fix himself a plate.

“I think I've been blessed many times over when Harry showed up,” said Mazhe, “We've been nearly inseparable since.”

“Yeah, bonded, I remember that.”

“Near the end of Last Seed—I mean, August,” said Mazhe.

It was then that one of the SOU stepped into the room. “Uh. Mr. Stormcrown…”

Both Harry and Mazhe looked up. “Which one?”

“Uh, Mazhe. One of your... well—”

“Let him in.”

“But…”

“Allow him in,” said the Queen.

“Of course, ma'am.” The soldier left, but returned a moment later with Delvin in tow.

“Afternoon, all. Your majesty,” he said, with a nod of the head. “Mazhe. Got this missive from Solitude. Bit different than our normal commissions, thought you'd like a crack at it.”

“Sure. Returning to some sort of routine sounds about right,” said Mazhe, accepting the letter. “Uh. Harry. You’ll be all right for a few hours while I take care of this?”

“Go. I think we can manage an afternoon without you.”
“I'll be in touch no matter what,” said Mazhe, standing. He went around, and planted a kiss on Harry's head. “Anything happens, call me. I can be back in an instant.”

Harry watched him and Delvin leave. “To return to some sort of schedule. It sounds about right.”

“We hope to have the lockdown lifted sometime today,” said one of the aides, “The government's nearly completed their investigation into the attack in Trevelyan.”

“The attacks back in Rain's Hand—April... I did warn at their end, that those responsible were not finished.”

“We can only act on the evidence, Mr. Stormcrown,” said another aide, “A number of people with DOI agreed with that, and an investigation has been ongoing.”

Harry could only mutter in his head, as he finished his lunch. These monsters were more competent than Voldemort ever was. Working with near military precision, leaving little evidence of their identity. And they had their sights set squarely on the non-magical world.

He finally pushed back from the table, and stood up.

“You finished?” he asked, with a glance at Bryce.

“Yeah.”

“Follow me. We will be joining the others for some exercises.”

“Oh. Uh, okay. You guys have weights 'an shit?”

“Anything you would like, the facility will provide,” Harry promised.

“Awesome.”

It was once again nearing dinner time before Harry heard from Mazhe.

“I'll be a while yet, Harry. Solitude's steward has me dealing with a small problem.”

“Do you require my help?”

“I'll let you know. It's just bandits, so I should be okay.”

“Just... just be careful.”

“I always am. See you in a bit.” The call disconnected, and Harry stowed his mobile away.

“Not long ago, you would have hurried after him,” said Dardanos.

“This is true,” Harry agreed, “But I have learned to trust my partner to have sound judgement. Should he encounter more than he can handle, we are but a mobile call away.”

“Yeah, your... way of travelling. Be anywhere in a second or two,” said Bryce.

“With limitations, yes. In Mazhe's case, we most certainly could travel to his location. However, in most circumstances, in order to travel to a location, one must have it... bookmarked. Have travelled there, and saved the location.”

“So it's like... making a call.”
“Exactly like,” Harry agreed. “Justin’s work. It was his doctorate.”

“Oh. Wondering why people called him doctor.”

“I was most proud of him, seeing him graduate. He is one of my best friends.”

It was well after dinner before Mazhe returned, and found everyone once again gathered at the Ragged Flagon. Harry immediately noticed a very nasty series of half-healed cuts on his partner’s left arm. Blood was still oozing out in a few places.

“What happened?”

“Harry. I’m fine. Perhaps it was a little challenging, but... things were dealt with. There was one point I nearly called, but... it was a group of necromancers. They were attempting to summon Potema.”

Harry swore under his breath. “The Wolf Queen. Tell me you ended such a summoning.”

“Yeah. Those responsible were dispatched, the materials for the ritual destroyed. Falk Firebeard had an identical reaction to yours, I think, when I told him what happened.”

“The Wolf Queen?” Bryce questioned.

“A very dangerous former queen who delved into necromancy and other very dark magic. Had she been summoned... Shor's balls. The havoc she would have unleashed. The very thought gives me shivers. Mey joor—foolish men.” Harry indicated the vacant seat to his left. “Sit, so I may heal your injuries properly.”

“Yes sir,” Mazhe teased, but sat down so Harry could get a look at the damage.

“And the guild matter?” Delvin enquired, from his usual table.

“Concluded successfully. I spoke with Gulum-Ei at length; our influence in Solitude continues to expand—he says a person close to the Jarl may have a job in the future.”

“Now that is a wonderful piece of news,” said Delvin, happily. “Should it bear fruit, I’ll have you see to it.”

“Of course—ow.”

“Well, if you’d sit still,” Harry muttered.

“Sorry.”

“I gather the pair of you will be taking up jobs again?” Delvin questioned.

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Hard as it might be, we must move on,” said Harry, “It's what Tommy would want.”

“The workout this afternoon. Yeah, it was good doing something... well... routine, after...”

“Exactly. We want you to join us in the mornings. Tommy came up with it, realizing I required proper conditioning, given... given what I was tasked to do.”
Harry let out a sigh. “Gods. I find myself once again repeating words already spoken. Crixus and Dardanos also find themselves displaced and permanently separated from friend and kin. Such as Tommy was.”

“A circumstance we consider a blessing, Harry,” said Crixus, “Being pulled here, prevented both our deaths.”

Bryce thought for a moment. Crixus. That name sounded... familiar. Really old. Harry could already guess where the guy was going.

“Dardanos, meanwhile, went by a rather different name in history.”

“A name given me by the Romans,” Dardanos spat, “Spartacus, they chanted.”

Bryce once again found himself shocked. A legend from two-thousand years in the past, sitting at the next table. “How... how's that possible?”

“Remember our brief discussion about time travel?”

Bryce gave a nod.

“The time-turner I possess allows one to turn back time by a few hours at most. However, as you will find out, rules and I on most occasions tend not to get along all that well. Mazhe... you still have the Kel—Elder Scroll?”

“Yeah.”

Mazhe waited for Harry to stop casting healing charms on his arm for a moment, then reached into his pouch, pulling out the fabled artefact.

“This in itself has allowed me to view an event which took place thousands of years ago. It's one of the most sacred relics of this world—part history, part prophecy—don't open it, it'll hurt your eyes,” Mazhe warned, seeing Bryce was about to pull it open.

“That scroll rested in my pouch for some time. Combine it with the other device I possess, it was only a matter of” he coughed, “time”, he coughed again, “before some sort of mischief came of it.”

“He arrived by most startling method during training one afternoon,” said Dardanos, “An ordinary man would have died, I am certain.”

“Yeah, but we know Harry's not an ordinary man,” said Brandon.

“Over a year was spent in 73 BCE. Men seen as slaves, I happily joined in training, saw each of them grow in strength and skill. I lamented the loss of connection to them, brought about by the witch who spoke to us during the... events two nights ago.”

“You're sayin' the bitch responsible came from two-thousand years ago,” said Bryce.

“Exactly that,” said Harry, as he collected the scroll and stowed it away, “It was her group who forced me to reveal magic to the gladiators and their masters. Perhaps most terrifying, seeing her capable of casting the killing curse without word or wand. Such a thing is impossible today.”

“We'll solve her eventually,” said Mazhe, “Just as you did Voldemort.”

Pop. “Mr. Hunter.”
Bryce looked down to his left, to find Chorley standing beside his seat. He carried a small box. “This is a box of items the government was able to retrieve from the remains of your residence. You should also find a bank draft with compensation for pain and suffering you've endured.”

“I... thanks.”

“Some items will need to be restored to proper size, but I believe Mr. Stormcrown will be able to help you with that.”

“Yeah. Thank you. Uh... could... could you just put it in... put it where I'm sleepin’.”

“Of course.” Chorley popped away.

“Thought the house was completely burned. How'd they find anything, I mean—”

“Likely repair charms, Mr. Hunter,” Brandon explained.

“I appreciate it, but... don't your government have bigger things to worry about?”

“Trust us, it's not any trouble.”

Bryce looked at Harry, but Harry only shook his head. “I had no hand in the recovery. Though such action was never carried out with Tommy.”

“Because his home still existed. So did his brother's,” said Brandon. “Sure, we kept an eye on them, and honestly, had Tommy asked, we would have taken him.”

Harry closed his eyes, and opened them. He was trying to push the memory of his dear friend aside, but now, such discussion was pulling it all back to the forefront. His resistance at last crumbled, and he collapsed in grief, powerful sobs wracking his body.

Chapter End Notes

UP NEXT: Bryce finds out exactly where ‘Skyrim’ really is; The ICW holds an emergency meeting to address the disastrous events in Washington, and a plan is discussed about possibly destroying the ‘internet’; Harry and his circle of friends attend two extraordinary ceremonies in the Commonwealth, both of which having far-reaching consequences for the nation...

CHAPTER NOTES: So lots more licking of wounds going on here. Pretty much done with the bulk of it though, with a memorial service coming likely next chapter at most. Know though, that Bryce has been severely damaged by what's happened. Never mind the magic stuff that's gonna throw him for a loop, he's in a far worse position than Tommy ever was. There's likely gonna be lots of fireworks as he works through that sort of thing.

Now, those of you who've played Skyrim know that there is a secondary quest attached involving Potema. I'll be playing with that in the future.
From the Ashes

Chapter Summary

Bryce finds out exactly where ‘Skyrim’ really is; The ICW holds an emergency meeting to address the disastrous events in Washington, and a plan is discussed about possibly destroying the ‘internet’; Harry and his circle of friends attend two extraordinary ceremonies in the Commonwealth, both of which having far-reaching consequences for the nation...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

7. FROM THE ASHES

September, 2007 / Hearthfire, 4E202

“Hope rises like a phoenix from the ashes of shattered dreams.”

- S.A. Sachs

For the second night in a row, Bryce slept sandwiched in between Harry and Mazhe. This time it was Mazhe who woke him up, discovering they had again wasted the morning sleeping.

Arriving in the dining room, they found fewer people around, although the Queen was still present.

“afternoon, your majesty,” Harry greeted.

“And a good day to the three of you. You'll be happy to know the lockdown has been partially lifted, and so you should have your dining room back sooner rather than later.”

“There is no hurry.”

“Harry. There you are,” said Justin, “I guess you've heard.”

“Dr. Bartlet can at last return to her father. I am certain he will be more than relieved, to have his daughter returned to him in good health.”

“There is that, yeah. I'll be going along.” Justin scooped up a few pieces of paper from the table. “Markets really took a beating when they opened this morning. Massive losses in Europe, and trading was halted an hour after opening, both New York and Toronto.”


“And things will recover. It's one thing the terrorists can't really stop,” said Justin, “Sure, it causes nasty upheaval for a while, but things stabilize in the end.” He furrowed his brow, reading another headline.
Harry caught the look. “What?”

“Dubai’s getting hammered by a sand storm, the worst ever witnessed in recent memory.”

“Such events are not uncommon in the area,” said Dardanos.

“Not on this scale, Dardanos,” said the Queen, “The ministry of Infrastructure is monitoring it.”

“For what reason?” Harry wondered, “Our cities are placed far beneath the ground beyond the reach of surface threat.”

“Not Delir,” answered an aide, “It’s one of only a handful of cities less than six kilometres below the surface. There’s been discussion of decommissioning the city for safety reasons.”

“And where exactly is Delir?” Harry wanted to know.

“Roughly five kilometres southeast of Dubai. It used to be much further, but the rapid growth of both Dubai and Delir has reduced that.”

“If the location was considered unsafe, why was construction permitted?” Dardanos asked.

Justin let out a snort. “Politics.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “We travel to the Aetherium Forge after lunch. When you return from Washington, come find us.”

“Replacing the amulet you gave away, eh?”

“Balimund will love the chance to work with the forge again,” said Mazhe, “And I'm really thinking I might like to try and make something else as well.”

“Remember though, we only have a few ingots,” said Justin.

“I know that. Really need to make a trip to Raldbthar. If Katria's notes are right, we should find further deposits of Aetherium there, perhaps even a stockpile.”

“Another item of business to draw our attention away from the ongoing calamity of late,” said Harry. “Let us have food and be off.”

An hour later found Mazhe, Harry, Bryce, Lieutenant Commander Carpenter, and Brandon back at the Aetherium Forge. Mazhe had collected Balimund from his shop with very little difficulty; the old smith was more than willing to work with the legendary forge, and leave his apprentice in charge of the shop for the remainder of the day.

The group found they were not alone, as Mazhe helped Balimund to set out tools and equipment. Engineers from the Commonwealth were still at work, surveying the extensive excavation. How long would it take before the Commonwealth made it an official settlement?

Bryce, meanwhile, thought further on what he’d seen so far. Talking dragons. Strange architecture. Strange people. Strange creatures... outside of dragons.

“This ain't Earth,” he said, finally.

“No. It's not,” said Brandon. “About thirty-five years ago or so, the Commonwealth made a connection with this world. We don't know exactly where it exists... hell, we can't even be sure if it's even in the same dimension as us, considering what we've learned about dimensional constructs.”
“So where are we?”

“The people here call the planet Nirn, but more specifically, we're in Tamriel's northern province of Skyrim. Until about seven years ago, our contact was quite limited, mostly with a magical school here.”

“With my introduction to this world, things changed,” said Harry, “Friendships and alliances have been formed, but most important, I have joined with people I call family in all but blood. I have found the one I love and adore, and plan to walk to the afterlife with.”

“Shit. That's... nuts. I mean, whole different world? I ain't arguing, it's just...”

“Hard to wrap your head around it,” Brandon finished.

“Yeah.”

“Skyrim—and Tamriel as a whole... think medieval times. No modern conveniences, no firearms, central heat... just be prepared.”

“Though the Commonwealth's been introducing a few things... a number of people in the guild already have one of Justin's mobiles. As does Tolfdir, the acting Arch-mage of the College of Winterhold,” said Mazhe.

“As does Calcelmo in Markarth,” Harry remembered. “His assistance when dealing with Dwemer ruins has been essential, as recently as the beginning of this month.”

“So the magic stuff—”

“Is mostly from Earth,” said Brandon, “Though Harry's versed in magic from both realms.”

“The... uh... shouting—”

“From this world,” said Mazhe, “It's a very special type of magic, that only a few people are capable of. Miraak and I are natural users, while there are a handful of others who have learned by long years of practice.”

“And the... the dragons... teach it,” Bryce guessed.

“Until recently, no,” answered Mazhe, “There is an ancient order at High Hrothgar on the Throat of the World called the Greybeards. Their Grand Master is Paarthurnax. But they've been known to teach men the Thu'um—or voice. It takes years though... only person I know who can do it is Ulfric Stormcloak, the Jarl—Leader of Windhelm.”

Sometime later, Justin appeared nearby.

“Zoey has returned home safely?” Harry questioned, by way of greeting.

“Yes. President Bartlet is more than thankful to all of us. He wishes to meet the rest of you, but given what's going on, it'll probably be a couple of weeks or so.”

“Yeah, maybe then things will settle down,” said Brandon. “And something you guys need to be aware of. I'll be returning to the Ragnar in the next few days.”

“That would explain why Lieutenant Commander Carpenter joins us,” said Harry.

“Yeah. Exactly.”
“Have the pair of you worked together?” Mazhe wondered.

“Up to this point, no,” Carpenter answered.

Harry only grinned, as he dropped another finished link into the growing pile, and started work on the next. “Welcome to the circle, Lieutenant Commander.”

“It's Aaron. Since you seem to be on a first-name basis with the Commander.”

“As long as you can call me Harry. Within my circle of friends, formality is not required.”

Aaron chuckled. “Yeah. Protocols and formality don't seem to work all that well around you.”

After dinner, Harry and Mazhe took Bryce to meet Remus. This proved to be a rather difficult meeting, since it also meant Harry having to explain to Tommy’s nieces what had happened; why their uncle wouldn't be coming home. Of course, they had been told something already, but it was up to Harry to give a proper explanation—the truth, and not some watered-down version of it. Both girls were growing young ladies, now attending homeschooling with the rest of the kids. Sir Malcolm Davis Institute continued to supply appropriate materials for the various age groups, with the adults displaced from England each playing a part in teaching. If anything, Harry was happy for Remus, who seemed to be in his element.

Harry was more than thankful when they left the cottage, heading for Longbottom Manor. It had become somewhat the hub and gathering place for the displaced wizards and witches from England. This proved to be a slightly happier reunion. While Harry got caught up with his friends' activities of late, Fred and George attempted to explain the game of Quidditch to Bryce. Naturally, he was more than interested; the game sounded fantastic.

Returning to the flat, they found the common room had gone through a small change, as a number of pieces of equipment now took up part of the room. What looked like a video camera was also set up, and an ornate, high-backed chair was then staged beside the fireplace. A short flag staff bearing the Commonwealth flag had been placed beside the chair, and a dark curtain hid the wall.

“Her majesty's going to address the nation,” said an aide, at Harry's unasked question.

“We can plan to be elsewhere.”

“That's not necessary,” said Brandon, “Just as long as you guys keep quiet when she goes on the air.”

“She address the nation often?” Bryce asked.

“No. She does do a Christmas address, but other than that... only if something really significant happens... like this.”

It was then the Queen entered from the dining room, along with a few technicians. Harry and Mazhe had already seen her in full royal attire before, having attended her Christmas balls the past few years. Bryce, though, now knew for certain that this was the Commonwealth's leader. The underlying atmosphere of power was unmistakable—someone would have to be sensually dead to miss it.

One of them approached the camera, and plugged a memory card into a receptacle. A slide below the camera's lens immediately lit up, while the Queen took a seat in the chair.
“Ready, ma'am?”

“Just give me a moment.”

She made an adjustment to her posture, glanced at the leather-bound journal a moment, then snapped it shut, and passed it to Chorley, who was at her side.

“We're just past seven o'clock Trevelyan, ma'am.”

“I'm ready.”

“Uh... come into the room,” Harry decided, “I would prefer us not hear further detail of incidence Friday.”

September 26
Pentagram Office(1), Magical Congress of the United States of America,
New York, NY

Though the monthly session of the ICW had already taken place in Brazil two weeks prior, the international body had called another session to address the incident in Washington, and felt it prudent the meeting be held in the US. Valicadia was invited to send a representative, considering they did have a connection to the event. At this point, it was undecided whether it was a good thing or not.

“Let's come to order,” spoke an elderly witch, “This emergency session of the international body this twenty-sixth of September now in session.”

It did nothing to quiet the membership down, as all were trying to talk over each other, trying to be heard. The witch finally pointed her wand at the ceiling, and shot off a firework, finally bringing quiet to the room.

“We'll get nowhere all trying to talk at once. Speak one at a time.”

“I would like to know why we're here,” spoke the representative from Bulgaria, “I do agree this was a major incident, but the Statute still remains intact, and those affected by the event have had their memories altered and sent on their way.”

“The ones responsible remain at large,” said the American representative, “And we are certain they are still in the country. Given the fact that RFK Stadium was one of four targets last Friday, it's safe to bet the same group of terrorists are responsible—my government believes them terrorists, let's call them what they are.”

“I have to agree with my American counterpart,” said the representative from the Canadian ministry, “Considering the Dark Mark was seen at all four venues, and more recently, a number of locations in Nevada, it's safe to say these individuals are followers of Tom Riddle. It underscores a much deeper matter than just one man, a matter that must be addressed properly if we wish to put an end to these monsters for good.”

“I resent your implication,” said the representative from Britain, “We are taking steps—”

“Not far enough,” said the American representative, “Your government still has its head in the sand, resisting any suggestion of making changes. So, here we are, the magical world—and the non-magical world, all suffering due to the choices of one nation. My fellow members, Britain has sired not one, but two dark wizards in the past century, all due to their hubris. If they are not called to
account, we can only expect more of the same, along with dangerous consequences.”

“I protest! The policies and practices of our Ministry is not under the purview of this body!” the British representative shouted, angrily.

“But it DOES come under this body's purview when your actions compromise the integrity of the international magical community as a whole!” the American representative shot back, “It is exactly this sort of arrogance we're calling you out for!”

“Hear hear,” said the representative from Australia, and the membership all applauded, voicing their agreement. “Have the ones responsible made any claims or demands?”

“If I might have the floor.”

“The floor recognizes Grant Weyland, the representative from Valicadia.”

“Thank you. We did collect a statement from Harry Stormcrown and his group of friends, who happened to be attending the event in Washington—”

“AH! So we have the true man responsible for this atrocity!” the representative from Britain jeered, “We warned you the man was—”

“No, it's Britain that continues to be blind to the truth!” Weyland shouted back, “Your newspaper continues to spout unsubstantiated, outrageous claims against Harry, his friends, and the Commonwealth at large. Such rubbish wouldn't make it past the editor in one of our publications! Does Britain even have such a thing as slander laws? You wonder again why the international community at large frowns on you as a whole!”

“Mr. Weyland...”

“Apolo...”

“The point being, we did collect a statement from individuals we consider to be truthful, and reliable. A transcript of the interaction between Mr. Stormcrown and the supposed leader of the new terrorist faction should now be in front of you.”

He waited, while the membership looked at the page of parchment that had appeared on their desks. A gradual increase in muttering had him continue.

“It is clear this new faction has the non-magical world square in their sights, promising events as severe, if not worse than the event in Washington.”

“What kind of action is Valicadia taking with regard to this?”

“In addition to working closely with our few allies who sit in this membership, we also have our Department of Information exchanging data with non-magical law-enforcement agencies.

“Where many of you consider doing such a thing to be a weakness, a taboo, perhaps, we see it as an absolute necessity to keep our world safe.”

“Yes, this same nation who consorts with Muggles,” the British representative sneered.

“And see where we are. Ignore non-magical people at your own peril,” said Weyland, “We, on the other hand, embrace technology, embrace the achievements of the non-magical world. How many here are aware that non-magical people have walked on the moon?”

Pandemonium once again reigned, and the chief witch once again had to shoot a firework at the
ceiling to get things calmed down.

“Mr. Weyland! Enough with your inflammatory remarks!” she scolded.

“Actually, Mr. Weyland is correct,” said the American representative, “The United States has launched many manned spacecraft since the sixties. In July of 1969, one such craft successfully landed on the moon. So don't ever discount the ingenuity, intelligence, and creativity of no-maj people.”

Another murmur of voices went up in the chamber, many offering apologies to the American representative.

“So you suggest, then, that we consort with the mundane world,” said the French representative.

“We may have to, yes,” said Weyland, “They deserve to know the danger. By no means am I saying we reveal our existence. But some authorities must know of the danger.

“Otherwise, events like what happened a week ago in Washington... it'll become a common occurrence. And mark my words. Non-magical people aren't as stupid as you might think. Many people these days carry cameras in their pockets. The internet, computers... simple Obliviation won't really cut it any more. In some ways, I'm surprised the statute hasn't been shattered yet.”

“Cameras in their pockets?” questioned the representative from Brazil. “Really?”

“None of you know how far technology has come,” said the representative from Canada, “Cellular phones. They've become commonplace, as people demand easier ways to communicate. Those phones have cameras in them, enabling people to whip them out, and snap pictures of things and events at the drop of a hat.

“A video can be uploaded to the internet within minutes—a simple picture within seconds. So how long will it be, before pictures of actual magic start showing up on places like Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube?”

“And something else you must know. There's a phrase out there non-magical people use: 'The internet is forever'. Once something's been shared online, it can't be removed,” Weyland explained.

“So this... internet... could be a threat to us,” said the representative from Bulgaria.

“A potential threat.”

“Then this 'internet' should be destroyed—”

A number of representatives, including those from Canada, the US, and Valicadia all burst out laughing.

The chief witch once again sent off a firework, restoring order to the room.

“Tell us, why would that not be practical?”

“None of you have any understanding of how the internet works. Just... turning it off... can't be done. Redundancies, trunk networks, millions and millions of computers—very powerful computers, very small computers, the telephone system, it's all inter-linked and connected. Just attempting to remove a small part of it... would expose us,” Weyland explained, “So no, forget about destroying the internet. It'll never happen.”
“So it comes down to us working closely with our non-magical counterparts,” said the American representative, “Some of you may not like it, but our choices are becoming limited. Another large-scale incident like what happened last Friday could expose us for good.”

“And Britain really needs to get its head out of the sand, and accept reality,” said Weyland, “Two dark lords are enough—”

“Three, if we count Dumbledore,” said the Canadian representative, “Considering the confrontation between the former headmaster and Mr. Stormcrown last spring, we can conclude he is now working with this... witch seen in Washington.”

“Yes, such an implication, it is alarming,” the chief witch agreed.

The discussion dragged on for most of the day, without any sort of firm resolution in place. However, Weyland felt he'd accomplished what he'd needed to do: point out a glaring hole in the perception of the membership. Non-magical technology was increasing the risk of exposure, and present methods of plugging breaches in the statute would soon be insufficient.

Sunset, September 30, 2007
Magnus Chamber, Trevelyan

Both Harry and Mazhe were confused by the summons from Guardian Elaine, requiring their assistance in the sacred chamber. Of course, it had also been rather strange the day before, when an engineer had requested a handful of Aetherium shards. That had Harry puzzled: what was the Commonwealth up to, considering how difficult the element was to work with?

He got the answer, as he and his circle were escorted into the chamber. He'd insisted that Bryce be included, and the guardians reluctantly agreed, knowing Harry's important position within the realm. Promagistrate did order him many special privileges (not that he knew that). Having his new friend present was rather tame of a request, and so it was done.

Of course, that didn't mean the man wasn't first checked for curses and other such matters that could present a security risk. The scans took several minutes, before the group was then brought into the chamber proper.

“Damn,” Bryce whispered, catching sight of the great magical sphere which took up the centre of the room.

“The Orb of Magnus. Also known as the Eye of Magnus in Skyrim,” said Mazhe. “Good evening, Guardian Elaine.”

“And a good evening to you, young Mazhe. You did bring the Staff of Magnus?”

“Yes ma'am.”

“For what purpose are we here?” Harry questioned.

“We're charging a ward stone,” answered Elaine.

“Bloody hell. I suddenly feel... under-dressed,” Harry muttered.

He flicked a hand at himself, instantly changing out his jeans and tee shirt for his mages' robes.

“Dress isn't necessary,” Elaine said. “Now, Mr. Hunter, is it? I gather you're the newcomer.”
“Uh... yes ma'am,” Bryce answered.

“You find yourself amongst friends in Harry and his mate.”

“So the Queen has also said.”

She then looked to Harry. “I would have had Mr. Conlon take part in this, as he was to replace Mr., Varro, was it?”

“Yeah,” Harry answered, “He was killed by Alduin.”

“Yes, as I do now remember. Mr. Hunter. Are you willing to participate?”

“What will I be doing?”

“You will stand as a supporter, along with Crixus and Dardanos.”

“Uh. Okay. This sh—stuff... it's all new to me, so...”

“Don't fret the details. Your task will be rather simple, as the Eye and Staff will do most of the work,” said Elaine.

“Ma'am. The sun is setting.”

“Come this way.”

The group was led to a rectangular block about five feet long, by three feet wide, and three feet high. Harry could see a number of turquoise-coloured flakes glittering throughout it.

“NOW I know what you needed the Aetherium shards for,” Harry realized.

“Indeed, Harry. Now, if you'll stand there—” Elaine indicated a spot which put him directly opposite the Orb. “The rest of you, pick a corner. Stand about five feet away from the stone. And Mazhe, your partner will need the Staff of Magnus.”

“Oh. Right.”

Mazhe reached into his pouch, and withdrew the powerful staff. Once it had left the pouch, it instantly restored itself to proper size.

“Harry...”

“Right. Though I do have concerns. The last time this was aimed at the Orb...”

“Just follow our instructions. We don't see a risk in what we're about to do,” Elaine promised.

“It is time.”

“Let us bow our heads,” said Elaine. Everyone in the room did so, and she continued. “Ancestors, creators, keeper of magic. We present this stone, to be charged and sealed, to mark the cornerstone and anchor for our new province and city-state, yet to be named by your chosen sovereign. Channel through it your love, firm hand, and protection as life blooms around it, that it never be compromised.”

She paused a moment, and everyone in the room felt a momentary magical surge, which caused an intense blue glow to briefly surround the stone.
“Mr. Stormcrown. If you'll then aim the Staff of Magnus at the stone.”

Harry did so.

“Repeat then, Fianto Duri.”

“Fianto Duri,” Harry spoke, now realizing what he was doing: forming the powerful wards that would protect the future settlement. The stone shuddered a moment, an orange glow momentarily enveloping it.

“Protego Maximum,” he then whispered, having a similar action.

“Very good. You understand what is taking place, then.”

“Yes ma'am,” Harry answered.

“Now we do something a little different. Point the staff at the Orb—good. Now as the energy from the Orb connects to the Staff... drag the energy to the stone—exactly.”

Elaine paused, as the arc of energy now connected between the Orb and the stone. “Keepers of magic, ancestors, hear our plea. Protect the great city formed under this stone, now and forever, until the light is extinguished from the world, that we turn to dust.

“May the city this stone guards offer shelter from the oncoming storm, as dark days now cast a shadow on Valicadia's doorstep. May it long survive, even as others might someday fall.

“Blessed be, keepers of magic,” she finally said.

This sent a powerful surge of blue magic through the arc which connected the Orb to the Stone, and everything fell silent. The stone, however, still continued to pulse a blue shade. Bryce could feel the energy radiating from it... a warm effect from something that should be cold. He felt lightheaded from the ritual—that's exactly what it was, he realized. He'd just participated in a magical ritual. How was that possible?

“All right there, mate?” Harry asked, seeing the look of confusion.

“Uh... yeah. Just feel... a little lightheaded.”

“You felt the power of the Orb, Mr. Hunter,” said Elaine, while several guardians began inspecting the now charged stone.

“Yes, I got that. It was... intense.”

“You'll feel a bit of a high from it for the next few hours,” said Mazhe, “Perfectly normal.”

Just before dawn the following morning, the group was then assembled in the enormous chamber in Bthalft, not far from the bottom of the great lift. Also assembled, were all of the people displaced from Britain, as was Leila Law-Giver, the Jarl of Riften. The Queen was once again present, and once again, she wore her formal attire and her crown.

Soon enough, a large wagon was being directed down the path from the elevator by engineers, on it resting the large stone charged the previous night in the Magnus Chamber. It reached the designated position, and from there, it was then levitated to a platform that had been formed.

The Queen then addressed the assembly.
“This month has been most difficult for Our great Commonwealth,” she began, “For such unspeakable death and destruction to be levelled in so short a period, these two events have wrought far worse despair and discord, than all of our previous battles with Tom Riddle, less than a year ago.

“There are perhaps some, that may give concern that this is not the most opportune time for the actions We take in this place at this time, and perhaps they are right. However, even as We lay so many of Our sons and daughters to rest, the time for healing and moving forward must begin some place. Such as a phoenix rises from the ashes, a new community rises here, in a place far removed from the strife of Our home world.

“Whereas a number of persons find themselves indefinitely exiled from their nations of birth, facing an uncertain future; and whereas, one of Our favoured sons, with the help of friends and allies, uncovered this grand chamber; We therefore proclaim this place, Bthalft, to fall under Our sovereign rule and purview.

“Given here, in this place, by the grace of Our ancestors and Our creators, in the thirty-ninth year of our reign.”

“Long live Queen Susan!” shouted one of the engineers.

“Long live Valicadia!” shouted one of the SOU present.

And then, as the stone began to magically sink into the platform, a number present began to sing, “I Vow to Thee, my Country,” with most of the assembly quickly joining in. Mazhe and Harry also joined in, arm in arm, understanding the magnitude of the event: a new city had been born before their eyes, a moment of joy in the wake of sorrow. The Commonwealth had needed this.

Bryce removed his cap and bowed his head, realizing this was the Commonwealth's national anthem. This had been just one more magical event he'd taken part in; he could feel the powerful waves of energy as the stone disappeared into the ground, the wards settling into place. As much as he had lost... somehow... these guys had a way of lifting his spirits. ’A phoenix rising from the ashes? No shit,’ he thought to himself.

Chapter End Notes

UP NEXT: Harry and his circle catch up with a thief, and Bryce has a most uncomfortable experience thanks to one of Harry’s unusual allies; and Harry receives disturbing news about another group of friends...

CHAPTER NOTES:
(1) Remember, this is the same office/chamber where the ICW delegation met with MACUSA to discuss the attack on Sen. Henry Shaw Jr. in December of 1926.
Harry and his circle catch up with a thief, and Bryce has a most uncomfortable experience thanks to one of Harry’s unusual allies; and Harry receives disturbing news about another group of friends...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

8. THIEF'S DOWNFALL

October, 2007 / Frostfall, 4E202

“Looters become looted, while time and tide make us mercenaries all.”

- Patrick Rothfuss, “The Wise Man's Fear”

October 3, 2007

For the first time in some time, Harry and his friends awoke to find the flat all but deserted, save for the single SOU soldier still watching the doorway leading out to the outer cistern and the Ragged Flagon. The dining room had been restored to its original size, the table only providing seating for eight as opposed to the twenty or so officials in recent days.

Justin was already having breakfast when Harry, Mazhe, and Bryce entered.

“morning, guys,” he greeted, “Uh... the paper... you're probably not gonna like it.”

“More bad news,” said Harry, annoyed, “Are we to be surprised by this?”

He frowned, seeing the front page of the National Daily Chronicle.

MLB CANCELS SEASON
Concerns over security force severe action on part of league

Commissioner Phil Notley officially canceled the remainder of the 2007 Major League Baseball season, due to grave security concerns, in the wake of the magical terrorist attack against the Washington Nationals at RFK Stadium on September 21. The commissioner made the announcement yesterday evening, after 2 days of discussions involving the owners of all 30 teams.

“We are of a consensus that as of this immediate time, we are unable to guarantee the safety of our players and our fans,” said Notley, during a press conference held at the league's head office in New York City. “Both the Philadelphia Phillies and the Washington Nationals have suffered the loss of over half of their players, and the Nationals, meanwhile, currently have no suitable home field, considering the extensive damage done to RFK Stadium. Adding to it the grave security concerns, we agree that canceling the remainder of the season is the safe thing to do, even in the face of...
massive revenue losses that will result. At the end of the day, the comfort and safety of our players and our fans must come first, and I am certain our decision here will be understood.

“We will take the fall and winter to reevaluate our security procedures and policies, and work closely with law enforcement agencies, with the hope of coming up with a suitable plan that will allow us to start up again in March, and open the new season in April.”

Asked whether or not individual player awards would still be handed out, the commissioner said, “Awards will still be handed out, though at this point, we have no plan on hosting a ceremony, given the security concerns surrounding any public functions conducted by the league.”

The attack perpetrated by dark witches and wizards on September 21, now considered the worst attack on American soil, left nearly 9,000 people dead, with hundreds more injured. Various government agencies still remain at the ruins of RFK Stadium, as the investigation is ongoing.

Officials are (See “STILL”, page 4)

NHL, NFL, NBA all evaluating situation, page 6
Large-scale public events at risk, page 7

The new enemy: is the Commonwealth prepared? Editorial, page 12

“Saw that coming,” said Bryce, frustrated, “God, what a fuck up.”

“Think the other, uh, leagues or whatever will follow suit?” Mazhe questioned, as he took a seat beside Harry. Bryce took a seat across from them, and began to fix his breakfast.

“Dunno,” he hedged, “I'm guessin' probably. All three sports have pretty big, uh, buildings.”

“Include concerts and other live events in that,” said Justin, “This sort of shit's gonna hurt the entertainment industry as a whole. People will be scared to attend stuff like that.”

That got a nod from Bryce. “About sums it up, yeah.”

“A good day to all,” said Miraak, as he took a place at the table. “You have finally regained use of your home, it appears.”

“Question remains, for how long? When will disaster again visit? If this... was their opener, my stomach churns at what their next offering shall be. A half-million, dead in Spiraminis. Nine thousand dead in Washington, five thousand in three other venues the same night. Their attacks take thousands of lives. Far beyond anything Voldemort ever managed to do.”

“Far beyond anything non-magical terrorists have ever done, too, Harry. We know, it's bad,” said Justin. He looked up, to see Dardanos and Crixus enter, with Aaron arriving only moments later. “So, uh, now that we're all here. I know you guys have stuff planned for the morning, but just a reminder that we need to be back here for two o'clock.”

“Brandon will be meeting us here,” said Aaron, “And we'll travel by floo powder to the Queen's palace. The ceremony's scheduled for three o'clock.”

“We'll be done at noon hour as it is, Balimund doesn't like to be away from his shop the entire day,” said Mazhe.

“Just remember, back by one o'clock.”

“I'll keep an eye on the time,” said Aaron.
Queen's Royal Palace
Trevelyan

It was no surprise that the ceremony attracted nearly a thousand guests, as well as the media. With the number attending, it was held outside on the lawn, and Harry was forced to suck in a breath, as a memory of two (or was it three?) years prior, when he, Brandon, and Tommy stood in the same place.

Harry had gone with his carved Nordic armour again, while Mazhe had once again gone with his mages' robes. The pair of them had needled and coaxed Bryce into wearing his uniform, though the man would have preferred to wear a suit. Harry thought it would serve a visual reminder of where he came from. Crixus and Dardanos, meanwhile, went with expensive suits, considering it wasn't the first time they attended a major public event—Harry and Mazhe's wedding being a recent example.

The ceremony itself was relatively brief, with the Queen issuing a few remarks, before bestowing the medals (or new rank pins, in the case of Brandon and Aaron). Emily and Rosie accepted their uncle's Order of Merlin, the pair standing stoic amongst the adults gathered on the dais.

With the ceremony concluded and a number of people leaving immediately, the gathering then moved inside into the ball room for the reception. As much as Harry hated it, this was the Queen's function, and so it was only fair he and his companions at least show their faces... even if only for an hour. Oh well. There was food and refreshment... wait. Mazhe's got a goblet of Colovian Brandy. Maybe there's more...

It wasn't until late in the evening that they returned to the flat. The young wizard had once again consumed far more drink than he should, leaving him unstable on his feet. Both Mazhe and Bryce had to carry him through the floo, making for a very uncomfortable landing when they were expelled from the fireplace at the other end. This did no wonders for his stomach, and he vomited on the floor.


Harry sloppily gestured with a hand, attempting to banish the mess he'd just made, and ended up making several tries before succeeding. He then pointed a finger at his mouth, attempting to cast a cleaning charm. It ended up being overpowered and wrong, and he ended up choking on the mass of suds that filled his mouth.

“Don'tcha worry 'bout vanishing your tongue doing that?” Bryce wondered.

That sent Mazhe into a fit of giggles, while Harry spit out the soap and scowled. “Ain't funny,” he muttered.

Mazhe got to his feet, and helped Bryce up. Between them, they then picked Harry up, and carried him to their room.


“is fun though, c'mon an' admit it.”

“Oh and it'll be even more fun in the morning,” said Mazhe.

“cept you got hangover potions or whatever they are. I did tell ya that shit's nasty right?” said Bryce.

“Yeah 'an I think they're MEANT to be nasty, try 'an discourage someone from getting into that state in the first place,” said Mazhe. That got a smirk from Harry, as he flopped down on the bed. Mazhe quickly joined him, and Harry let out a gasp, as Mazhe did something that Bryce couldn't see.
“Uh... I'll, um—”

“Uhh,” said Harry, wagging a finger, “This's your bed too.”

“But...”

“Shhh... sleep time.”

“Yeah, 'an you guys got something else in mind I think...”

“Harry...”

“What?” Harry asked, innocently. He'd already slid up against the wall, and was shedding the outer shirt he was wearing.

Bryce, meanwhile, began to undo the buttons on his jersey. It had been quite the event, if he had to admit. That guy from the... what league? Fuck. He'd have to ask in the morning. Head's too messed up.

He was startled, as Mazhe wrapped an arm around his waist and pulled him down.

“What—”

“Shhh...”

Mazhe pointed to Harry, who'd already fallen asleep.

“He gets pissed easy.”

“He's had a shit life,” said Mazhe, “'s got lotsa reasons to drink. More reason recently. Hates seein' shit goin' on 'an not bein' able to do somethin' about it.”

“So I'm guessin',” Bryce agreed. He wiggled around so he was laying on his back. He then continued to unbutton his shirt, still having every intention of taking it off.

Mazhe had to grin. “I think Harry would about die if he saw me in your outfit.”

Bryce rolled his eyes. “Yeah 'an I think both of 'ya keep findin' excuses to get me into it.”

That got another grin out of Mazhe. “Maybe.” He reached over and gently tugged on the shirt sleeve. “This stuff's nice. Why you wear the shirt under it? This'd be nice on its own.”

“Some guys don' like it. 'an if it's cold. Lots of reasons. Tell 'ya what. I'll get'cha both some of our gear if 'ya like it that much. 'an I do have my other shirts, 'least I think.”

“an I think Harry'll love 'ya forever, you do that.”

“course, I get you guys gear, 'ya gotta learn how to play.”

“Yeah. But you gotta come play Quidditch.”

“Count on it,” Bryce promised.

Both were startled when Harry sat bolt-right up in the bed, looking white as a sheet.

“Harry?” Mazhe asked.
Harry gave both of them a deer-in-the-headlights look, and burst into tears.

When Harry awoke the next morning, he was surprised to find himself sandwiched in between Mazhe and Bryce. Mazhe was crushed up against him, an arm lay protectively across his chest. Bryce, meanwhile, was spooned up against Harry, though he faced away from him. He’d once again slept in his uniform, though the jersey was unbuttoned. He’d made an attempt to undress but...

Harry sighed. Both of them had provided much needed comfort. That dream... definitely not something he wanted to see happen for real. He was living a waking nightmare as it was, never mind the fact he’d lost someone he loved and adored.

It was then there was a knock at the door. “Harry? Mazhe? Delvin's looking for you guys,” came Justin's voice.

“Give us a minute!” Harry called back. He then touched Mazhe's shoulder. “Time to get up.”

Bryce rolled onto his stomach, and got to his knees. “You feel better?”

“Other than the head,” said Harry, as he sat up. “Apologies for being an ass. The dream was... unpleasant.”

“Guessed that much,” said Mazhe. “Let me go find out what Delvin wants, while you guys take a potion or two and clear your heads.”

“We love you too,” Harry smirked, while Mazhe wiggled his way out of the bed. Bryce had sat down on the edge.

Harry, meanwhile, summoned a pair of potions from his pouch. “Here. Gods, too much alcohol... again.”

He passed Bryce one of the vials, and consumed the contents of the other, making a face. “When next week begins, we will be returning to some sort of schedule. You are welcome to join Crixus and Dardanos, though I will be joining my former classmates for lessons.”

“You're still in school?”

“Grade eleven, and level seven magic,” Harry answered.

“Damn. Thought you were older.”

“Older than you might think. A year spent with Dardanos and the gladiators, and this...” Harry reached into his pouch, and produced the time-turner. “I promise to show you how it works. But I figure I have aged an additional year through its frequent use.”

“So you can really go back in time.”

“This only allows for hours, maybe a day at maximum. The Commonwealth gave it to me three years ago. Hermione suggested it, and when I mentioned it to a few people you haven't met yet, they readily agreed with suggestion.”

“But you can't change things.” It wasn't a question.

“No. At least, not big things. Though... an interesting event took place when I was in Dardanos' time, where... well... my past-self joined me in defense. I still question how that was possible.”
Bryce took the small amulet in his fingers. It was a beautiful piece, all of it made of gold—two hoops, in which was a small hourglass. He read the inscriptions on both hoops:

“I mark the hours, every one/Nor have I yet outrun the sun.
My use & value unto you/Are gauged by what you have to do.”

“This magic stuff's pretty nuts,” he said, passing the device back to Harry.

“The magical world can be a truly awe-inspiring, yes. But I have learned over the years, that the dark elements in it temper such wonder. I still cry for you and yours, Bryce. You have seen perhaps the worst element of our world.”

“Guys!”

Both turned to find Mazhe framing the doorway into the room. “Taron Dreth's been seen, on the road west of Morthal.”

“Shit.” Harry stowed the time-turner away, and flicked a hand at his chest, which lay open against the opposite wall. It was a few moments, but a thick, black tome zoomed out of it, flew across the room, and landed in his hand. He stuffed it into his pouch, and another flick of his hand had the chest shrunken down, and also flying across the room. He expertly caught it, and shoved it into his pouch as well.

“Uh. Right.”

He stood up, and flicked a hand at himself, once again dressing in his heavy carved Nordic armour.

“Now. Uh, Bryce... you'll need something.”

“Loan him your old armour.”

“Brilliant.”

“I'll need to—” Bryce began, standing, but a flick of Harry's hand had him dressed in the aforementioned armour. It was a bit heavy... heavier than full catcher's gear, if he thought of it... and old. Ancient-old.

“We don't know how old it is,” Harry said, seeing what he was thinking, “A few thousand years, easy. It used to be my favourite armour, until I obtained what I've got on.

“Thing being, we're about to face a potentially dangerous opponent. The armour should protect against some of the lighter rubbish the enemy likes to throw around here, but...”

“Keep your wits about you. Dreth's a dark elf, a race well-versed in magic,” said Mazhe.

“Still vulnerable to bullets,” said Harry, nastily, “Very few magical barriers are effective against non-magical ballistic weapons.”

Bryce felt for it... there. The pouch they'd given him. How did that work anyway? No matter, he pulled out the pistol he'd been given. “This'll still work then.”

“Yeah. We'll have to talk to Aaron; you should be kitted out with a variety of tools and weapons. Tommy was.”

Bryce stowed the weapon away, while Mazhe fumbled with his mobile. That coincided with Aaron sticking his head in the door. “Where we going?”
“West of Morthal. Dealing with a thief and a traitor,” said Mazhe, nastily, “You got a partner?”

“Yeah, if you think it necessary. I know this is your back yard, but...”

“The more the merrier. Delvin says the coward's got three mercenaries working as bodyguards.”

“And we know the rules. Only good bandit, mercenary or whatever's one with an ice spike through his eye socket,” Harry muttered, once again checking himself over.

Aaron disappeared from the doorway, only to return a few seconds later with another man.

“Are we ready?” Mazhe asked.

“Think so,” said Harry.

Bryce looked down at himself, and could only shake his head. He was still dressed in his uniform, but the armour for the most part covered it up. His pants were still partially visible through the gaps, but other than that, he now looked like an ancient warrior. ‘Never in a million years,’ he thought, but gave a nod. “Guess I'm ready.”

“Right. Gather close then.”

Mazhe had already cued up the destination, and with everyone linked in some way, he activated his mobile, and the five of them vanished in a blur of limbs.

_________________________________________

Western Edge of Morthal
Hjaalmarch Hold

Bryce momentarily shivered, as they touched down not far from the bridge leading into the town proper. The chill was only momentary, as the strong warming charms on the armour took hold, and he found himself comfortably warm.

“What?” Harry asked, seeing his look.

“The, uh... magic you got on this stuff, it'd be useful when we play in the cold.”

“I can imagine,” Harry grinned, as the five of them started to walk west. He glanced at Mazhe. “How far away were they?”

“According to Delvin, Dreth left about an hour ago, so said his source. If I could borrow your broom, I could fly ahead and message you.”

“Good thinking,” said Harry, reaching into his pouch, and retrieving his broom. “Send message when you locate them; we shall join you.”

They watched as Mazhe took off on the broom, headed west.

“Mazhe was smart. Looks like we got snow coming,” said Aaron, pointing to the northwest.

“Snowsquall,” said the soldier who'd joined them.

“Yep.”

Clouds were already starting to obscure the mid-morning sun, and the wind was already feeling harsh and raw against the exposed skin. Both Aaron and his partner reached into their pouches,
producing pairs of warmer gloves.

“There should be a pair of gloves in your pouch,” said Harry, gesturing to Bryce's midsection.

“Uh. Right.” Bryce reached into it and indeed found a pair of gloves. He was unsure whether they would fit or not, until he slipped them on; they fit perfectly. And, like the armour, they also had a warming charm. He noticed they matched the gloves the soldiers had. “Military issue I'm guessin'.”

“Yeah,” said Aaron, “We'll set you up with a few things when we get the chance. You notice the pouch has an expansion charm on the inside of it. So, stuff you want with you at all times... put it in your pouch.”

“Just... be careful when we're in non-magical places. These are a rather blatant violation of the laws of physics and the laws of nature,” said Harry, though he smirked as he said it.

“But... help me understand. Why are you guys hidden?”

“Because of stuff that happened many years ago,” Aaron answered, “Witches and wizards were persecuted because of their gifts. So it was decided that the magical world would hide itself, separate itself from the non-magical world. Hence, the Statute of Secrecy.

“The Commonwealth is one of a few magical nations who refused to adhere to the Statute, and withdrew from the I.C.W.—the international governing body of the magical world—because it came into conflict with our own constitution: that non-magical people and those who are magical are seen as equal under the law.”

It was then that Harry's mobile buzzed, indicating a message. Harry scanned it.

“Okay. He's found them. Gather around.”

They disappeared with another blur of limbs, to land only a moment later behind a copse of trees.

“They are a minute that way,” said Mazhe, pointing east.

“When it comes time, dispose of his security detail. Dreth is to remain alive so he may reap the reward he so justly deserves.”

“What'd he do?” Bryce asked, as they started walking.

“Stole his master's life work, and published a book. Stolen knowledge... and so he will face a most unpleasant penalty.”

“I will need to borrow the amulet a minute. It will draw Dreth's attention... exactly what we want.”

“Right.” Bryce reached through the opening at the top of his armour, and pulled out the amulet.

“Hold on. Just long as it's visible,” said Harry, “It'll still draw the thief's attention.”

Bryce let the amulet drop back against his armour, and they continued walking. Taron Dreth's party was already visible, and soon enough, the two parties met. Taron Dreth was a tall dark elf, dressed in expensive mage's robes. He had three mercenaries with him—two men and one woman, all of them nords—so no magic threat from them.

Taron Dreth was immediately drawn to Bryce's amulet.

“Your amulet... gods, it's made of Aetherium! Pure Aetherium! Where did you get it?!” he
demanded. (1)

“I made it,” Mazhe answered, stepping in between Bryce and the dark elf.

“He had lots of help,” Harry then threw in, “Our mentor was more than thrilled to work with the Aetherium Forge. And Katria, of course, told us all about you.”

Dreth looked unsettled. “Katria... no, no that’s impossible.”

“That your former mentor would desire to set things to rights with such fervor, that she would operate from beyond the grave? Oh yes, rek drey rinik daar, Taron Dreth,” Harry hissed. (“she did exactly that”)

“I am perhaps a thief,” Mazhe spoke, harshly, “But what you did to her... to steal her life's work? Unforgivable.”

Now, Dreth looked horrified. “Kill them!! Kill them!!” he shrieked.

Both Aaron and his partner were already moving to draw weapons before the dark elf had began speaking, easily reading his body language. Two of his guards were down in two heartbeats, with Bryce putting the other on the ground a second later. Aaron then finished the woman off, putting a bullet between her eyes.

Harry and Mazhe, meanwhile, kept Taron Dreth busy. Or was it, that Taron Dreth was keeping Mazhe and Harry busy? Gods, the elf knew a lot of magic. It was enough to keep both young mages on their toes.

With Bryce and the SOU joining in, however, the fight was quickly brought to an end, as Mazhe saw an opportunity.

“Fus... RO!”

Taron Dreth was bowled over by the shout, ending up on his arse, and while he attempted to sort out the cobwebs in his head, he suddenly found himself frozen from the neck down. He found himself surrounded, with both Harry and Mazhe looking down on him, nasty scowls on their faces.

“A part of me would have you killed and soul-trapped, your soul then sent to the Soul-Cairn,” said Harry, viciously, “However, it would still grant you a form of death, a penalty I would be unsatisfied with. Theft of your mentor's life work, theft from someone who entrusted you with her research and knowledge...”

He thought for a moment, before reaching into his pouch, and producing the Black Book he’d collected from his chest a short while earlier.

“If it is knowledge you so desire, it is only appropriate the penalty fall within the same vein...” Harry purred.

“Harry...”

Ignoring the uncomfortable look he was getting from Mazhe, Harry run a finger down the spine of the book, speaking, “May the owner of this book claim the next soul who opens it.”

Bryce had felt the odd magic from the book when Harry had summoned it earlier. Now, the book surged with... slick, syrupy, sticky, oily magic that was... making him feel unclean, it was the best description. Whoever owned that book... Bryce hoped to God he would never meet them.
“Harry, please. Don’t... don’t summon him.”

“Mazhe. I made promise to Katria. And every foolish wizard who stomps on my dick nerve only earns further room for negotiating in the future.”

Mazhe let out a sigh, as Harry flicked a hand at Dreth. He waited a moment, as the dark elf’s eyes flicked to the book Harry was holding. Another flick of his hand, and Dreth was freed, only for a hand to shoot out for the book. Harry only obliged, passing it over.

'Must read...' was the only thing running through Taron Dreth's mind, as he opened the heavy tome —

A mass of tentacles burst from the book, to lift Dreth off the ground, to be suspended in the air. At the same time, a blob of... was that... eyes... and more tentacles appeared a short distance away.

“Well met, Hermaeus Mora,” said Harry, with an incline of the head. “Another offering. This foolish mage has stolen knowledge and secrets from the one he apprenticed to, then proceeded to reap fraudulent reward. I would see him learn the proper price of knowledge.”

“Ah, friend of my champion... you please me yet again. This one's mind contains so many secrets, all of which shall be added to the endless stacks of my library. Oh yes, he shall learn the price of knowledge, Harry.”

The compulsion charm had fallen the moment the tentacles had lifted Dreth off the ground, and now he was terrified. Hermaeus Mora!? He now knew he was buggered in every way possible.

He let out a single whimper, as another tentacle blasted out of the book, to wrap itself around his neck. He and the tentacles vanished with a slight whoosh, the book dropping to the ground with a thunk.

Harry once again gave a bow of the head. “Thank you, my lord. Know that as long as there remain fools who insist on drawing my displeasure, you will continue to benefit.”

That earned a chuckle out of the Daedric Prince. “Until we meet again, Harry Stormcrown.” And with that, the cloud of eyes and tentacles again vanished.

“What the... what... what the HELL was THAT?!” Bryce shouted, and it was only then that Harry noticed he was as white as a sheet. No shit, the guy had just seen a Daedric Prince.

Harry reached into his pouch, and pulled out a calming draught. “Here.”

Bryce removed the top, consumed the contents, and handed the items back to Harry so they could be stowed away.

Harry waited a moment before asking, “Better?”

“Yeah. But... what the hell was it?”

“Let’s get back to the flat and we will explain,” Mazhe promised, while Harry summoned the book and once again stowed it away in his pouch. He made a mental note to stow it back in his chest when they returned.

“Can we... I... I need to walk a bit,” Bryce said, still still looking very pale. “Jesus Christ...”

“We can do that,” said Harry, as the group started walking. “We can stop in the inn once we get to
Morthal for a drink, maybe some lunch.”

“What... or who was that?” Bryce persisted.

“Hermaeus Mora. One of fifteen Daedric Princes here on Nirn. He's a little... unsettling to deal with... but I owe him much for assistance he provided back in the spring. Without his help, another Dark Lord would still be at work.

“Part of me thinks we may have been better off with Voldemort still around, considering a much more dangerous witch is now acting in his place. However—”

“Hindsight's twenty-twenty,” Bryce finished.

Harry gave a nod. “Yeah, exactly. Now... let me tell you about the Daedric Princes...”

They ended up spending a few hours in Morthal, stopping at the Moorside Inn for a bite to eat and something to drink. With the weather deteriorating, perhaps it was time to get back. Maybe a workout in the Virtual Projection Room might be in order...

His thoughts were interrupted as Aaron's mobile buzzed with a message. He watched the guy read it, and put it away.

“We gotta get back. Something's happened.”

“Yeah, figured that much,” Harry muttered, producing his coin purse to cover the meal.

In short order the group had returned to the flat, this time thanks to Harry's mobile. In the common room, they found Will and Alice, along with Healer Ferris. Now, Harry knew he wasn't going to like what he was about to hear. He sighed.

“What now?”

“There's been an attack at McKinley High School in Lima,” said Will, “Multiple attackers, the SOU assigned to keep an eye on things have been killed—they managed to get a warning out just before. The Commonwealth's responding, as is MACUSA, but... there's gonna be a lot of deaths.”

“Then we must help,” said Harry, making to pull out his mobile.

“Harry, you're to stay here. Queen's specific orders,” said Aaron, “I'll show you the message if you want, but... we're handling it, trust us.”

“They're my friends, Aaron!” Harry shouted, “How can I not help!?"

“It's not your call,” said Aaron, “And you know Brandon would say the same thing. Just... let us handle it.”

A look of rage crossed his face, and Harry once again stormed out of the flat.

Chapter End Notes

UP NEXT: Harry attends a pair of funerals; a break is arranged wherein the group take in a movie or two at the Fox Theatre; and while acting to protect another MLB player,
they discover a potentially devastating weapon the enemy has created...

CHAPTER NOTES:
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Uneasy Quiet

Chapter Summary

Harry attends a pair of funerals; a break is arranged wherein the group take in a movie or two at the Fox Theatre; and while acting to protect another MLB player, they discover a potentially devastating weapon the enemy has created...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

9. UNEASY QUIET

October, 2007 / Frostfall, 4E202

“The only order in the universe is just a cycle of calm and chaos.”

- Toba Beta, “Master of Stupidity”

October 7, 2007

Harry and his circle once again found themselves gathering with important dignitaries at the National War Memorial in Trevelyan, as Tommy and the four SOU soldiers were laid to rest. How many more would die before all was said and done?

He would be attending yet another funeral that coming Friday, for the twenty or so students and teachers murdered in Lima. Every member of the school's glee club had been struck down with killing curses, as were a number of bystanders.

Unlike the attack in Washington, the attack in Lima was personal: aimed at people Harry had become close friends with. He sighed inwardly. Up to this point, they controlled the chess match, working one or two moves ahead. How did one counter that? If they didn't come up with a solution... he inwardly shuddered at the consequences.

Even with all the chaos swirling around, Harry attempted to return to some sort of schedule, attending classes or working as a tutor at Longbottom manor. Considering he was working ahead in a number of classes, it was rather easy for him to assume the role of tutor, as it also worked as a review.

Bryce, meanwhile, joined Dardanos and Crixus in the Virtual Projection Room, as they trained with the SOU. Though the exercises were geared toward military training, he found himself easily falling into step. The baseball season had prematurely ended, and who only knew what would come in the new year. Still, he had to hold out some sort of hope that come the latter part of February, he'd be attending spring training in Florida. Staying in top shape was expected... and keeping busy kept his mind off the nightmare his life had turned into.
The second funeral that week left Harry utterly spent emotionally. Returning to the flat mid-afternoon, he barely acknowledged the people around, before vanishing with a noisy crack. He didn't return until well after sunset, and barely said a word before retreating to his room.

The following morning, as they wrapped up meditation exercises, Justin announced, “We're spending the afternoon in San Francisco.”

“But...”

“The theater's available, so we're gonna see a movie.”

Harry brightened. “That... yeah, that'll be nice.”

“Theater?” Bryce wondered.

“The Fox Theater. We own it.”

“I thought—”

“Valicor? Yeah, that's the Government of Valicadia,” said Justin. “We bought the place back in '63. Saved it from the wrecking ball, and it's provided us with a rather important research facility. Not that the non-magical world knows about it.”

“But—”

“Yeah, the theater's open to the public. Just, there are a few places the general public doesn't know about.”

Bryce could only shake his head. “God. This magic shit... still throws me for a loop, y'know.”

That got a grin out of Harry. “Just... just be ready for anything.”

“Right. Uh... we get cleaned up first.”

Justin gave a wicked grin. “Count on it. I'll be making a detour to Washington.”

That resulted in a few cat-calls from Aaron and his fellow soldiers.

“Piss off,” said Justin, with only a little heat.

A half hour later, both Harry and Mazhe were getting changed, after showering.

“Think we should dress up?” Mazhe wondered.

“I don't plan to,” said Harry, “I have conflicting feelings returning to the Fox.”

“Yeah, I'm sure. Just... Harry. Your friends would want you to remember them as they were. We had a lot of fun back in the spring with them, right?”

That got a nod out of Harry. “Yeah.”

“That's what you remember. That's what you take, and keep close to your heart. Otherwise you're just gonna be forever paralyzed with guilt. That's not healthy, tell me I'm wrong.”

It was then Bryce stepped around the partition, holding up a pair of jerseys. One was grey, while the
other was red. Naturally, both had Bryce's name and number on the back.

“Promised you guys could try these on.”

Harry and Mazhe both reached out for the red one, but Mazhe relented, and accepted the grey one.

“Mazhe. You must know, red clothing conflicts with your hair.”

“Fuck off.”

“And I love you too,” Harry grinned, as he slipped the jersey on. “Oh. Decision made. I will be wearing this, I think.”

That had Mazhe smirking, as he also dressed. Now it was his turn to admire the texture. It was very nice.

“What is this made of, anyway?”

“I dunno, some polyester mix, something like that,” Bryce answered, with a shrug.

“What's polyester?”

“A synthetic material. Guess you don't have stuff like that here.”

“No. I think the lining in Harry's armor's probably the softest material I've come across. Thinking of that. Really wish we could find more suits of armor like that.”

“Concurred,” said Harry, “I would have both my love and my new best mate dress identical, and be equally protected.”

That got a grin out of Bryce, as he disappeared back behind the partition a moment. “My teammates would get a kick out of me dressed in your armor, Harry.”

He stepped back out from behind the partition, putting on his white jersey, getting grins from both Harry and Mazhe. “Might as well go three for three, 'an all that. We gonna be goin' outside any point?”

“Keep a sweater or a jacket in your pouch. We might get something to eat down the street,” said Mazhe, remembering their last outing.

“Will... Aaron be coming?”

“Yes. Though the building has security present around the clock,” said Harry. “I would equally suspect we will not be alone in attendance.”

“Short notice,” said Mazhe.

“Magic,” Harry answered, flatly.

Both Mazhe and Bryce rolled their eyes.

Shortly after 1 o'clock, the group arrived in the theater's main lobby via floo powder. There were already people present, including a number of SOU. Harry grinned, having suspicion someone else might also be joining them.
“What?” Mazhe questioned.

“I believe we might be joined by more than one very important person this afternoon.”

“And you'd be right,” said Aaron, “Queen Susan got word of the event, and will be joining us.”

“So it's gonna be an official event or something,” Bryce guessed, as they climbed the stairs up to the mezzanine.

“No. Very informal. Other than the extra security, she'll hardly be noticed.”

Bryce shook his head. “God. The President could never do that.”

“No shit. But... this is the advantage we have, being a magical nation. The security she has... both seen and unseen.”

“Yeah, very true.”

“Thing is, her majesty doesn't like being stuffed in her palace. She likes to be out and about, keeping in touch with the public. It's one of the reasons she's one of the most popular kings or queens we've ever had.”

“It's made providing security, uh, interesting sometimes.”

Harry craned his neck, to find Brandon had joined the party.

“Brandon!”

“Keeping out of trouble, Harry?”

“Oh fuck off, we love you too.”

“Right. So yeah, you know Queen Susan's gonna be joining us. Nothing formal, just out to enjoy a show like normal people.”

“Except that none of us are really normal,” Mazhe smirked. That earned him a swat for the effort, as they stepped into the auditorium proper.

Bryce had been by the Fox Theater before, earlier in the season, but he'd never actually been inside.

“Damn,” he whispered, as he followed Harry and Mazhe to seats at the front of the upper balcony. “Feels like I stepped into a time machine.”

“I've made a few happy memories visiting here,” said Harry, as they took their seats, “Beginning when I was eleven years old. Seems ages ago now.”

“Harry. Guys.”

Harry turned to find Justin had sat behind them, along with Zoey. He grinned.

“Your detour to Washington was a success?”

Justin rolled his eyes. “Oh very funny.”

“Glad to see you again, Dr. Bartlet,” said Harry, by way of greeting.

Zoey smiled. “And likewise, Mr. Stormcrown.”
She then noticed Bryce was still with them. “You're still with these guys, Mr. Hunter?”

“They tell me it's indefinite.”

“We've warned him, it could be years,” said Brandon, “Considering the lethal efficiency these monsters are working at.”

“Honestly surprised there haven't been more attacks since,” said Mazhe, “Why go quiet all of the sudden?”

“Careful what you wish for,” Bryce muttered. That got nods of agreement from the others.

Shortly after, the lights dimmed, and the jeweled curtain rose, revealing the screen. *Ratatouille(1)* was the choice, having been released in June, and Harry had to admit, it was an excellent choice. A good laugh was exactly what he needed, perhaps. A rat who could cook? Who knew?

When the movie finished, the house lights came up, and the organ console rose from its hidden pit, filling the auditorium with music. That was the cue for people to look after personal business. It was then Brandon tapped Bryce on the shoulder.

“Can I have a word with you? Got a few questions you might be able to help me with.”

“Uh, sure.”

“Follow me.”

They both got up, and Harry watched them leave.

“Did... did something happen?” he wondered.

“No,” Aaron answered, “Brandon's got an idea about a possible security plan. Baseball if it resumes in the spring, but possibly other sports and events as well.”

“Oh. Well... why did he ask—I mean, why bother Bryce about it, when... they could have just talked to DOI, right?”

“DOI's already conducting their own research, this is true,” Aaron agreed, “But, he's accessible, and does know a few things about what goes on behind the scenes, right?”

Harry nodded along. Yeah, that would make sense. It was expected that the department would devote more than a few resources to the matter. It was part and parcel to the whole issue. Keeping the sport—or any part of the entertainment industry dark, did just as much harm as a direct assault.

It was only when the organ began to descend back into its well, that Brandon and Bryce returned.

“Harry. I'll need to speak with you after,” said Brandon.

“Of course. You have an idea how to protect people attending baseball games.”

“Yes. Not one-hundred percent foolproof, but it's an idea. Just... we'll talk after.”

The second movie turned out to be *Major League(2)*, and both Harry and Mazhe had to laugh at Bryce's comments, coming from someone who played professionally. Still, it was an awesome movie, and it left Harry more than entertained, able to spend an afternoon with his mind occupied with lighter subject matter than had been the case over the previous month and a half.
As the movie let out, they briefly met with the Queen, if only to say hello, and see her off through the fireplace. From there, they boarded a chartered motor coach to a restaurant, though it was a short ride away. No way the Secret Service would let Zoey walk down a busy San Francisco street—the security concerns far outweighed her personal preference.

During the ride, Brandon shared his plan with Harry. It sounded a bit dodgy, but... if the three magical governments could get on the same page... it might work. Getting around the magical EMP attack definitely solved one of the issues—the local magical authority had no clue anything was wrong until the Commonwealth notified them. And then, with anti-port key and anti-Apparition wards in place, it made the official response painfully slow. The terrorists had controlled the playbook from beginning to end.

The plan Brandon was hatching would see a back up response put in place during any major spectator event on any given day. It sounded colossal in terms of manpower and coordination... but if they could pull it off... they could lessen the severity of an attack, if outright prevent them.

The restaurant was a middle-of-the-road affair, a place one could dress really nice for, but it wasn't expected. They were shown to a private room, where security was already present: both SOU, and Secret Service—they had more than likely worked ahead of time securing the building.

As they ate, Harry was more than content to listen to the conversations flowing around him. Justin had made an excellent call; they'd needed a break from the flat, from what had become an unending circle of negative energy. He smiled to himself, seeing Justin and Zoey laughing. The pair just fit, there was no doubt. It was about time the man see to his own happiness for a change.

As to his new friend, Bryce seemed to brighten a bit too, being back in the normal world—or at least, what was normal for him. Even if he was still surrounded by witches and wizards. Seeing a movie and going out to dinner was a normal thing, right?

“Harry? All right there?”

“All is well, Mazhe,” Harry answered, with a grin. “I was lost in thought. We needed this. To attend function away from our flat or the Flagon—no ill will toward Vekel intended.”

“Yeah. Agreed. Both... uh, movies... I enjoyed both of them. That first one, the animated one. Did the... are there others like it?”

“By the same producer? Yes,” Justin answered, “Cars' was a really big hit last year—We can see it if you're interested. My favourite though, was 'A Bug's life'. You won't remember it, Harry—it was before you started Hogwarts.”

“Then we must see it,” Harry decided.

“Tonight?”

“Let me guess. Magic,” said Bryce.

“Something like that,” said Justin, with a shrug. “You guys up for another movie?”

“Dad will need to know if we're gonna be late,” said Zoey.

“You can borrow my mobile,” Justin grinned.

They ended up seeing both A Bug's Life(3) and Cars(4), making it well into the early morning hours.
Given the crazy late hour, they once again borrowed the executive suites in the theater's upper floor. Then, following a light breakfast, they returned to Riften by floo powder—though Justin made a detour to return Zoey to Washington.

When Justin returned, he joined the group in the Virtual Projection Room, as they went through the typical morning routine. Both Dardanos and Crixus had adopted some of the exercises Bryce did for arm strength, recognizing such training would benefit their swordsmanship.

Lunch, for a change, was taken at Longbottom Manor, and Harry took the opportunity to again connect with his school friends outside of class work. He noticed how close Ron and Hermione were sitting—who would've thought? And Luna and Neville were an item? He grinned to himself. Yeah, they just fit.

“What?” Mazhe asked, seeing his expression.

“I see dear friends finding happiness, even with the darkness that seems to swirl around us recently,” Harry answered. “I do have to wonder how long it shall be, before I attend another bonding ceremony, this time as witness and guest.”

“Harry!” Hermione gasped, but Ron grinned madly.

“It just fits, the pair of you. And Ron, you should know that, should you do anything to cause my honorary sister grief, I have many ways of making you regret it.”

Ron visibly shivered, but grinned, knowing Harry was joking.

“So now that most of you are in your final year... you been thinking of what you plan to do once you finish your exams?” Justin wanted to know.

“I dunno,” Ron answered, “Maybe play Quidditch... I mean, if—”

“The Commonwealth does have a pro league, if you're wondering, yes. I'll speak to Oren, see if he can get you a try-out with a couple of teams. 'course, it'll have to wait until the spring—we follow the same schedule as the northern hemisphere.”

“That would be brilliant. Thanks, mate.”

“What about you, Hermione?”

“I'm leaning toward teaching. A job that will keep me engaged mentally. Does that make sense?”

Justin gave a nod. “Yeah, I get that. You definitely have the grades for it—don't look shocked, I had a look at your school records. Now if you wish to take up teaching in the Commonwealth, it will likely be more than challenging, given you haven't kept up with your non-magical education. But given your work ethic, it's still do-able.”

“Well, I was thinking... hoping... that we'll get to return home one day. Maybe teach at Hogwarts.”

Justin again gave a nod. “Just be aware. There's no guarantee that will happen. All of you know what's been happening the past month or so. There isn't gonna be an easy fix for it, and honestly, it could be years.”

“Right. Enough dark thoughts,” said Harry, frowning. “Let us discuss lighter subject matter.”

“Harry. We've been thinking,” said Fred.
“We should hold a Halloween party,” George finished.

“Well...”

“Now that would be an awesome idea,” said Justin.

“The ball room would be enough space,” said Neville, “That's if gran will allow it.”

“If not... we can use the VPR,” said Mazhe. “C'mon, Harry. We need to make a happy memory or two. I know it's a dark day for you, but...”

Harry gave a grin. “Dobby and Kreacher will have a grand time helping with the decorations, I should think.”

“And everyone needs a costume. I'll see if we can get some... maybe we can get some music and stuff,” said Justin.

“And I'm gonna try and drag all the guys from the guild along. Make it a 'mandatory' thing,” Mazhe decided, “Been a while since we did something as a family.”

“Concurred.”

“And we really need to have... uh... the skating thing we did—”

“Last Christmas,” Justin remembered, “Yeah, that was an awesome event. Still remember Vex skating with Emily and Rosie. That was a real treat, seeing her let the little girl inside of her out, if only for a little while.”

Harry's face briefly darkened at the memory, but he smiled. “It is something we must do again. And with better preparation, the event can be better this year.”

“I take it you guys celebrate Christmas,” said Bryce, at last wading into the conversation.

“Yeah, somewhat,” said Justin, “Though it's always been a bit nuts, given all the stuff that's been going on.”

“Concurred,” said Harry, “Chaos seems amplified several times over, for one reason or other.”

Bryce shook his head. “Christmas ain't gonna be fun for me this year, I know that much.”

“But you won't be alone,” said Justin, “We won't let you be.”

“That... means a lot.”

It was then Aaron approached the table. “Bryce. How well do you know Jose Armando?”

Bryce furrowed his brow a moment. “Starting pitcher for the Giants. N.L. Rookie of the year the year before me. But I don't know him all that well. Why?”

“Okay. That would make sense,” said Aaron.

Harry narrowed his eyes. “What's going on?”

“We think there's a credible threat against Mr. Armando.”

“So you're watching players, I guess,” said Bryce.
“In a limited manner, yes,” said Aaron. “Thing is, there's only so much we can do. But in this case, we're certain the DE's are targeting him. There's been an increase in magical signatures around his Florida residence.”

“What's MACUSA got to say about it?”

“They're not interested in getting involved unless there's an incident,” said Aaron. “We all know that's a stupid answer. Spend a few more resources, and they might actually catch the bad guys.”

“What's the Commonwealth gonna do about it?” Bryce asked.

“We will collect him and his family,” said Harry, firmly, “If there is credible threat...”

“Harry...”

“See it done!”

The room fell silent a moment, and it was impossible for one not to feel the magical force behind his spoken words.

Aaron shuffled on his feet uncomfortably, then cleared his throat. “By your command.”

As he stepped away from the table, pulling out his mobile, Harry turned back to his friends.

“Apologies, but we must see to a new friend.”

“Go, Harry. We get it,” said Ron.

“Let's do this again next Sunday,” Mazhe decided, “Getting out of the flat was a smashing idea for a change.”

“Concurred,” Harry agreed.

They met Aaron at the door. He'd already been joined by five others.

“All right. Guys on the ground have sent me a teleport bookmark, so whenever you're ready. Uh, Bryce, since you'll be somewhat familiar, d'you mind running point?”

“Right.”

Bryce reached into his pouch, fetching his white jersey. He quickly slipped it on over top of the dark tee shirt he was wearing. He didn't bother to button it up or tuck it in—just having it on would suffice.

“How many people do we have in the area?” Mazhe wanted to know.

“There were two this morning. When additional magical activity was observed, the detail was tripled. Now we have about twelve agents and soldiers deployed in the immediate area. We ready?”

“Ready,” said Harry.

______________________________________________________

Residence of Jose Armando
West Palm Beach, FL

The teleport bookmark dropped them in an alleyway a few houses away. The group found three
agents waiting.

“Mr. Stormcrown. Lieutenant Commander Carpenter,” the first agent greeted.

“Status.”

“We detected at least six unidentified wizards in the area. MACUSA has no record of anyone magical living here, so...”

“At least six bad guys,” Bryce summed up.

“Very likely. DOI’s authorized a move.”

“Move?”

“We’re taking Mr. Armando’s house with us.”

Bryce looked at the agent like he’d grown a second head. “I’m sorry what?”

“Trust us. It’ll make sense when we do it.”

“Not sure if I’m amazed or terrified.”

“Well, Neville's house used to be in Britain. It was moved last year when his grandmother was in danger from Voldemort,” said Mazhe.

Bryce could only shake his head. “Damn.”

He got to thinking, as the group began heading for the house. “So, uh... say you wanted to move RFK Stadium... or our new park...”

“Yes. We could do it,” said Aaron, “It’s just the amount of manpower and resources it would require, given the size of the building.”

“We tap into the Orb of Magnus when we do a move,” a second agent explained, “Arcane sciences is already on site deploying devices which will do that for us.”

They at last arrived at the residence, an upper-scale bungalow of similar décor to the rest of the houses on the street. The properties were of decent size, by no means cramped together.

Bryce hesitated before ringing the bell. This guy's life was about to be turned upside down. But... better turned upside down, rather than snuffed out.

A moment later, the door opened to reveal a blonde-haired young woman.

“Can I help—oh. Mr. Hunter,” she greeted, instantly recognizing him. “Jose!!”

Seconds later, the man in question was at the door. “Mr. Hunter. Uh...”

He noticed the others with him. “Guessin' this ain't a social visit.”

“No, it isn't,” said Aaron, stepping forward so he was standing beside Bryce, “My name's Aaron Carpenter. Bryce is just a long for the ride, but... can we come in?”

“Y-yeah. Sure. What... what's going on?”

Aaron gave a nod to the other soldiers with him, who quickly took off in different directions, as did
two of the three agents. Bryce, Harry, Mazhe, Justin, and Aaron, along with the third agent, followed Jose into the house.

“Mr. Armando, I'm sure you remember what happened at the end of September—”

Jose let out a snort, and gave them a furious look.

“The bad guys have targeted you and have been watching your house. We haven't determined for how long, but point being—”

“They'll kill you,” Bryce finished.

“Exactly the point,” said the agent. “Who else is in the house?”

“Who are you people?” the woman—wife, Harry determined, looking at her thoughts—questioned.

“We're from a place none of you have heard of. We promise to explain everything once we get you all to safety.”

“There's just me, Lisa, and Miguel—our son,” said Jose. “Is there... do we need to pack anything?”

“We'll take care of it,” said Aaron. “We'll need a list of immediate family... close friends—”

“Teammates,” said Bryce.

“We're already looking into that,” said the agent, “DOI's already deploying. The whole department's been called in—that's ten thousand people just here in North America.”

“DOI?” Jose wondered.

“These guys'll explain,” Bryce promised. “Where's Miguel?”

“I just put him down for a—”

There came a red flash of light from outside, and a noisy thud had those magical present producing wands, while Bryce reached into his pouch and produced the nine-millimeter Beretta he'd been given. Aaron was already sending a text message through his mobile.

“Mrs. Armando, please collect your son so we can get you three off to safety,” said Harry.

“Oh for fuck's sake... they just snapped an anti-apparition and anti-portkey ward in place,” Aaron cursed.

The front door flew open, and three soldiers hurried in. “We got about fifteen hostiles that just Apparated in three doors down.”

“Figures—”

There came a deafening blast that shook the house, and everything brightened almost painfully bright for a moment. Harry had to shake his head several times, his ears were still ringing from the noise, and his vision still swam with the intense brightness. The stereo instantly went off, as did the single light which was on in the dining area.

“What in Oblivion was that?!” Mazhe demanded to know.

“Felt like a nuke,” said one of the soldiers, drawing his wand. He gave it a flick, then looked at it,
confused. “What the...”

Aaron too, flicked his wand, and became alarmed, when nothing happened.

“Mazhe. Can you—”

“NO! I... no, not possible!” the ginger-haired mage exclaimed, horrified. He couldn't feel his magic.

“What... what have they DONE?!”

Chapter End Notes

UP NEXT: The incident in Florida has larger implications than it first appears, forcing the Commonwealth’s government to take unprecedented steps in the interest of national security...

CHAPTER NOTES: Anyone care to guess what the terrorists have managed to do now? I'll tell you, it isn't anything healthy, that's for sure.
So, apologies if this chapter seemed to drag a little. However, this was meant to cool things off a little, after so much crap went down over the past few chapters. Of course, with so many general ideas floating around (most written down as brief notes), it comes down to arranging things. This chapter was like pulling teeth in that regard, and I have to admit, some of the scene transitions were -rough-. Again, apologies.
Lastly, Jose's character is based on the late Jose Fernandez, who was killed tragically on September 25, 2016. May he find peace in the afterlife.
(1) Ratatouille – Released in 2007.
(4) Cars – Released in 2006.
The incident in Florida has larger implications than it first appears, forcing the Commonwealth’s government to take unprecedented steps in the interest of national security...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

10. FOLLOWING PROCEDURE

October, 2007 / Frostfall, 4E202

“If you have a procedure with 10 parameters, you probably missed some.”

- Alan Perlis

October 7, 2007

“Everyone just calm down a moment,” said Aaron, fetching his mobile. He opened it, and Harry could easily see the look of relief on his face. “Right. Whatever it is, it didn't knock out our mobiles. Mrs. Armando, go fetch your son so we can get out of here.”

“Where we going with them?” Bryce wanted to know, while Lisa left the room.

“Back to Skyrim,” said Harry, “Protocol be damned. I do now have concern about others they may be watching.”

“Yeah, agreed,” said Aaron.

Lisa returned with her son cradled in her arms. A newborn, perhaps only weeks old, Harry realized.

“It looks like congratulations are in order,” he said.

“Thanks. Guess if there's a silver lining with the season gettin' canceled... I've been able to spend time with my boy,” said Jose.

“All right. Everyone get close.”

“We'll continue to secure the scene,” said the agent.

“What... I thought we were goin',” said Jose, confused.

“Just trust us. We have a method of travel that will take us to safety within moments.”

It was then yet another blast shook the neighbourhood. With that, came a series of gunshots.
“Yeah, really gotta go. Mrs. Armando, keep a tight grip on your son. Mr. Armando, you need to keep a strong grip on your wife, and grip my arm tightly. It'll be a little disorienting, but trust us. We're getting out of here,” said Aaron. “Harry, you all right to go separately?”

“Bryce, Justin, and Mazhe will join me,” said Harry, producing his mobile. He closed his eyes a moment, then opened them. “Take them directly to my flat. I've adjusted the wards to permit their entry.”

“We... your flat?” Jose looked confused.

“You'll be safe there,” Bryce promised, “He's kept me safe this past month.”

“If... all right,” Jose relented. If Bryce trusted them... so be it. Whatever was going on outside, it was obviously meant to harm him, and likely his family. If these people were offering protection, one had to be insane not to take it.

“Well... let's go.”

“We'll take care of your house,” the agent promised, “We'll be in touch in a few hours.”

More gunfire erupted outside, pressing Aaron to act. He gripped Jose about the arm, and activated his mobile. They vanished in a blur of limbs.

“Our turn,” said Harry, “Guys, get close.”

“Wait a sec. Jesus, look at the grass outside,” said Bryce, pointing out the front window.

Sure enough, it was as if the grass had died. So had the plants and shrubbery in the yard across the street.

“Bloody hell,” Harry cursed. “Come on. We make our exit, much as I loathe turn tail and run.”

“We've got this, Mr. Stormcrown,” said one of the remaining soldiers, “Get to safety.”

Harry waited for his companions to be in contact, then activated his mobile. They vanished in a blur of limbs, and within moments, touched down in the foyer of the flat.

He inwardly screamed in frustration, once again finding the flat aswarm with officials and security... and sure enough, he found the Queen once again occupying the dining room.

“What calamity have I walked into now?” Harry muttered, frustrated.

“A device exploded near the ministry of transportation, which has disrupted the floo network in most of our cities in the northern hemisphere,” an official near the Queen answered, “So far we have three additional devices which have—”

“Nullified magic in the immediate area. We know, they just used one at Mr. Armando's residence a few minutes ago,” Harry finished. “Where are they?”

“In the remaining spare room under security until—”

“Release them at once. I will not have victims treated as suspects—”

“It's protocol—”

Harry almost hissed at the man. He blinked once, and with a very noisy crack, the official vanished.
“Mr. Stormcrown! That's not—”

“As much as I may not agree with the banishment of my staff... Mr. Stormcrown has all the right in the world,” said the Queen, sourly. “Follow his instructions or follow Mr. Sweeney, perhaps through the floo this time.”

Harry sucked in a breath, then blew it out. “Apologies, your majesty, I acted without thought. Now I must see to a few new friends who find their world out of sorts due to the actions of ours.”

“Of course. Do accept our apology for once again intruding on your space.”

“As always, you're welcome here, your grace.”

Harry, Mazhe, Justin, and Bryce stepped into the spare room, to find several officials and soldiers, all of them asking questions from the Armandos.

“Everyone excluding the Armandos, please leave,” said Harry, calmly.

No one dared question the dark-haired wizard, and moments later, the group was alone. Mazhe moved to stand by the door to keep others from interrupting.

“Apologies, I had no expectation there would be further calamity—though in hindsight, perhaps I should.”

“You couldn't have known, love,” said Mazhe.

“Where... where are we?” Lisa questioned.

“This is our home. Though lately, a few rather important guests have visited. As to where we are exactly... it's complicated.”

“Just... be ready for anything,” said Bryce, “This shit... god. It's pretty unbelievable.”

“How much do either of you know about magic?” Justin asked.

“Magic? For real?” Jose looked doubtful.

“But... wait. The crazy reports in the paper. People at the game in Washington back in September... said they saw lots of green lights and people dying from them,” Lisa remembered.

“That was magic,” said Harry, “Terrible, the worst sort, but magic, nonetheless. I'm a wizard, as is my friend Justin. My mate, Mazhe, is also magical, but he wields it in a different manner.”

“But thing is... the people who came after you guys today... they're wizards too,” said Bryce.

“But... okay, so magic's real. But... why come after us? What do they got against baseball?” Jose wondered.

“It's not just about baseball,” Harry answered, “These witches and wizards... carry deep hatred towards non-magical people, like yourself and Bryce. Their attacks against you serve double purpose: killing non-magical people, and creating massive panic while doing so.”

“So going back to Florida would be dangerous,” Lisa guessed.

“Just... trust these guys. They'll keep you guys safe,” Bryce promised.
“I... I guess,” Jose answered. “But... magic's real. Damn.”

Harry produced his wand. “I tend not to need it these days, but...” he seemed to think a moment, and it was impossible to miss how his face lit up momentarily. “Expecto Patronum.”

The three non-magical people present were all amazed at the enormous ghostly-white stag which suddenly appeared in the room. It glanced around, alert, but finding no threats, it nuzzled its nose up against Harry's cheek, before vanishing.

“Damn,” said Bryce, impressed. It was the first time he'd seen it.

“A ghostly guardian, meant to protect against several very dark creatures which exist in the wizarding world. One of those, a non-magical person cannot see it, but can most certainly be harmed by it,” Aaron explained.

“A Dementor,” said Harry. “A creature which serves no useful purpose, in my opinion. Now. Let us get you settled while the government sorts out your residence. I again offer apologies for your lives being uprooted and forever altered due to the actions of a few.”

He flicked a hand at a chair, and right before their eyes, it transformed into a robust, but serviceable crib.

“Is that suitable for your son?”

“Thank you, Mr...”

“Stormcrown. But call me Harry. This is Justin Fraser, and Mazhe, my bonded,” Harry introduced.

“Our house... what will... how will—” Jose began.

“We have ways of moving it.”

“Right. I'll believe it when I see it.”

“Just trust us.”

“All right, fine,” Jose relented. If magic really existed... maybe moving a house wasn't that far out of the question. So... “What happens in the spring... I mean, if baseball starts up again?”

“We'll make sure you get to spring training with your team,” said Justin, “Count on there being plenty of security with you and your team. And naturally, we'll protect your family and close friends. That means we'll need a list of people close to you.”

“Jose... look. You're in a much better place than I am,” said Bryce. “Fuckers killed a lot of people I knew... family and friends both.”

“So again... we need some sort of quick list... sooner the better,” said Justin.

“Okay. Uh... got a pad of paper and a pen?”

It was then Aaron appeared in the doorway. “Uh, guys. Arcane Sciences wants pensieve memories of what happened this afternoon. They've got a team deployed analyzing the damage.”

“It was killin’ the plants across the street,” Bryce remembered.

“That matches what they're finding. Everything’s dead for about three blocks.”
“The explosions...” Jose remembered.

“Ground zero was five doors down. Took out one house, and the houses on either side are write-offs. Most magical equipment’s still a no-go... casting magic is still iffy, and everything electric or electronic has been rendered useless.”

“So, some sort of magical EMP,” Jose guessed.

“Did the same thing in Washington,” said Harry, “But creating a magical dead zone... this is something new. Aaron, got a vial handy?”

“Yeah.”

While Aaron produced a vial, Harry pressed a finger to his temple, and began to pull out the required memory. Finished, he let it dangle at the end of his finger a moment, before dropping it into the offered vial.

“Can... Is there a way I can share mine?” Bryce wondered.

“All right. Just... make sure the memory you want to share is at the front of your thoughts. Focus entirely on that one, and tell me when you're ready,” said Aaron.

“Yeah. Ready.”

Aaron pointed his wand at Bryce. “Legilimens.”

“What's he doing?” Jose wanted to know.

“It's a spell that can read the thoughts and memories of others,” Harry explained, “Some of us have means to protect our thoughts from such spells.”

“So he can... just invade our minds?” Lisa asked, clearly disturbed by the idea.

“If he wanted. And yes, there are some who would do exactly that. However, we only use the art where it is deemed necessary. In cases of security, for example. Or in this case, where one has witnessed an event. Though what Aaron's collecting will be somewhat limited, it is still useful.”

“Jesus. This magic thing... still not sure whether I'm amazed or terrified,” said Jose, shaking his head.

“No matter whether we be witch, wizard, or mage, we still share humanity, and all the flaws which come with it,” said Mazhe. “It's about what one does with their abilities, which makes them who they are. Nothing more, nothing less.”

Aaron at last lowered his wand, and produced yet another vial. He touched his wand to his temple, and pulled out the memory of what he'd just done, dropped it into the vial, and sealed it up.

“I'll get these off to Arcane Sciences. Mr. and Mrs. Armando, we should have your residence retrieved by tomorrow morning.”

“Thank you,” said Lisa, “This... all of this is confusing, but... we're still alive.”

“That's the important thing,” said Bryce. “Just trust these guys. They're awesome.”

Harry was more than thankful when he and Mazhe at last retreated to the room for the night. The damage to the department of transportation's headquarters in Trevelyan had been extensive, forcing the Commonwealth to reroute floo controls to the office in Erwin. The procedure had ended up
taking the remainder of the afternoon and into the evening. After all, it wasn't like pressing a button.

Luckily, perhaps, Jose and his family was the only target that day in the non-magical world. Even better, the attack had been nearly prevented, the target spirited away and placed out of harm's way. In his books, that was a good end to an incident: the bad guys failed in their objective.

Unfortunately, their sleep was short-lived, as, just after 3 am, there came more commotion outside, and someone was pounding on the door.

“MR. STORMCROWN!!”

“Wha?”

“Harry. Wake up,” he heard Mazhe say, and felt him prodding him in the ribs.

“What... what's wrong?” came Bryce's voice from across the room.

“HARRY!” came yet another cry from outside the door.

Now, Harry almost shot out of bed, as his brain finally rebooted. He flicked a hand at himself, instantly dressing. Bryce appeared from behind the partition, also partially dressed. Harry glanced at Mazhe, seeing he was also decent, moved to open the door. He found one of the Queen's aides at the door.

“What's going on?”

“We need you to grant access to the Prime Minister and her staff, as well as the Governor General. The Prime Minister's residence has just been attacked.”

“Shite! Okay, let them through. Are... are they all right?”

“The Prime Minister was only shaken up. Sorry for disturbing you, Mr. Stormcrown.”

“What about the rest of the government... the other members?” Mazhe wondered.

“All being taken to secure locations,” said the aide, “But we're now following COG procedures.”

Mazhe looked confused. “COG?”

“Continuity of Government,” the aide answered, “It's a set of protocols and procedures that are put in practice during an attack on the seat of government. A situation we're facing right now.”

“What'd they do?” Bryce wondered.

“A device was detonated near the front doors to the residence, at least from what we gather.”

“Harry... guess you've heard,” said Aaron. He stifled a yawn. “Gonna be a bitch of a day.”

“We shall rest when opportunity presents. Let us greet our new guest.” He glanced toward the Armandos' room. Good thing he'd erected silencing charms on their door; the young family didn't need further disruption all considering.

Bryce reached into his pouch, once again pulling out his jersey. He made mental note to store additional clothing so he wasn't relying on his uniform so much. Mazhe, meanwhile looked at himself.
“Harry... d'you mind?”

“Oh.” Harry flicked a hand at his mate, instantly dressing him in a pair of jeans and a tee shirt. “Will that suffice?”

“Perfect.”

Stepping into the common area, he found the Queen was already up and about, likely alerted to the unfolding situation before he was. He bowed as he entered. “Good morning, your majesty. Unfortunate business that rises us from bed yet again, it seems.”

“It would seem so, Harry.”

It was then a silvery point of light appeared. “PM inbound,” it said, simply, “GG being secured, arrival in one minute.”

Only a moment later, the fireplace flared a brilliant green, expelling a single figure. She was very tall, taller than the Queen, with sharp grey eyes and aristocratic features. She was still dressed in her bedclothes, her hair let down and messy from sleeping. Harry felt bad for her, knowing she'd just been through a frightening, very rude awakening.

“Harry Stormcrown and friends, I introduce Victoria Martin, the Prime Minister of Valicadia,” said the Queen, by way of introduction.

“Welcome to my flat, Prime Minister,” Harry greeted, offering a hand.

She readily accepted it. “Even under dark circumstances, it's a pleasure, Mr. Stormcrown. We did meet, if briefly a couple of years ago at her majesty's Christmas ball.”

“Forgive me, that memory escapes me presently. But... uh... Dobby!”

It took a moment, but the elf finally popped in. “Harry sir called for Dobby?”

“We need some snacks and refreshments put out. And wake Kreacher. This may be a long morning.”

“Right away, Harry sir!” he popped away.

“Harry, we might think of... well, since important government officials continue to use our flat... perhaps we need to make a permanent expansion,” Mazhe suggested. “And if we end up doing another rescue or whatever that was yesterday...”

“A point concurred,” Harry agreed, “As it stands, additional rooms will be required for our extra guests.”

“If we have your permission, Mr. Stormcrown, we will see to the changes. Do you have any sort of plan of the tunnel network outside the flat?” an aide questioned.

“I'll have to speak to Delvin, he might have one. Or at least, draw a map.” He glanced at the Prime Minister. “Is there anything you require presently?”

The Prime Minister pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed. “A place to sit down and some strong coffee.”

“Come into the dining room,” said an aide, “And I'm sure Mr. Stormcrown's elves will have something for us shortly.”
Harry muttered to himself, as the Prime Minister was led into the dining room. Yet another calamity unfolding. Just wonderful.

It was then the fireplace once again roared green, this time expelling a man of average height.

“Mr. Stormcrown. We at last meet,” the man greeted. “Grant Weyland.”

“Your Excellency. Welcome. You are unharmed?”

“Not at all. Though I’m sure Queen Susan has already offered her sincere gratitude, please accept mine. I fear we have trampled heavily on your hospitality in recent weeks, although through no fault of our own,” said Weyland.

“Apologies, though appreciated, are unnecessary, sir,” said Harry. “My house elves are preparing refreshments. You should find Prime Minister Martin already in the dining room.”

“It's this way, sir,” said yet another aide.

It was then Prime Minister Martin stepped back into the common room. “Mr. Stormcrown, I need to see the minister of defence, and the minister of the interior—”

“Prime Minister, we must convene a meeting of the Privy Council,” said Weyland. “It's time we conduct a deeper assessment of recent events.”

“I will require a list of names so they may be added to the wards,” said Harry.

Yet another aide flicked his wand toward the dining room, and moments later, a page of paper fluttered into his outstretched hand.

“Shall all on this list pass security?”

“That sort of thing has been done already,” said the aide.

“Let it be clear that should any person permitted into my residence prove to be a threat to my person, my bonded, my dear friends, or her majesty... it would be a tragic mistake, at least for them. My patience has been worn extremely thin by recent events; being dragged out of bed with further incidence erodes it only further.

“Being clear. First threat I see, I'll curse them to atoms, and throw whatever might be left into Balimund's forge.”

Aaron couldn't help but chuckle. “The effort's appreciated, but it's unlikely you'd get a spell off ahead of us. Trust us, we've got security well in hand, Harry.”

Harry huffed, but let out a sigh. “Still felt good to vent. World gone f—effing mad, with, as always, me at its dead centre.”


“The Ragged Flagon... is it open all the time?” Bryce asked.

Harry glanced up at the clock above the fireplace, but Mazhe shook his head. “Vekel's likely gone to bed. But we could slip into the cistern. Let these guys sort out their business without us buzzing around.”

Harry thought for a moment. “All right. Let's go.”
Given all the activity in recent weeks, they'd not spent a whole lot of time in the inner cistern. Therefore, it was the first time Bryce got a look at the guild's inner sanctum. Mazhe crossed the bridge over the large pool at the center, to approach a large statue erected on the opposite side. It made of dark stone, an effigy of a woman dressed in a revealing outfit. A pair of crows rested on her outstretched arms.

“The patron deity of thieves, Nocturnal,” said Harry, as Mazhe reached into his pouch, and produced a cutting of nightshade. He lay it at the foot of the statue.

“She's one of the Daedric princes,” Bryce remembered.

“Yes. The mistress of shadow,” said Mazhe. “I've spoken to her. It was at the conclusion of nasty business, treachery within the guild that nearly destroyed us. Thanks to Harry, we put an end to it.”

“Not all my doing,” said Harry. “I did take great exception to the level of treachery perpetrated by Mercer. Though I am certain he now regrets his choices, given his new master.”

“Let me guess. Hermaeus Mora.”

“I like this man. He learns quickly,” Harry quipped. Bryce gave him a swat for the effort.

Mazhe, meanwhile, visually shivered. “You keep helping him, and he'll own your soul, Harry.”

“Just as Nocturnal owns yours?”

“It was given freely a long time ago, Harry. You know that already. It's only something I reaffirmed when I spoke with her back in the spring.”

He then glanced around. “Let's go into the training room. We can spend a few hours in there.”

“Or we could retreat into the Virtual Projection Room,” Harry suggested.

“Sold,” said Mazhe. “Maybe we should have just done that in the first place.”

Harry gave a shrug. “No harm done.”

The day proved to be every bit as chaotic as expected. The Armandos now walked an identical path to Bryce, being singled out because of who they were. Three more lives turned upside down. How many more would follow?

The most recent attack now added an additional complication, a far more frightening form of chaos, being able to disrupt the earth's natural energy. At least, that was the best guess from the Arcane Sciences Division. They still had a team on site back in the Armandos' neighborhood, conducting further tests and gathering evidence.

The Prime Minister's residence was also a crime scene, and it now looked like she would be a guest in Harry's flat for at least the next three or four days, while the government reevaluated security procedures.

The Governor General also remained at the flat, for identical reasons, and the dining room was then off limits, as the Queen and the Privy Council met. Silencing charms had been erected on the door, and as Harry learned, meetings of the Privy Council were secret in nature.

Late afternoon, the Armandos' residence was moved to a spot near the rest of the displaced buildings from Earth. Harry again sighed, realizing he would have to once again explain the reality of the
situation to the young family. Bryce, however, took over that duty, though Harry and the rest of his circle assisted where necessary. Jose and his wife took it all in stride. Hell, if magic existed... not much of a stretch for there to be other worlds in the universe.

GOV'T BUILDINGS CLOSED TO PUBLIC

Governor General's Residence, Prime Minister's Residence, Parliament Buildings off limits for foreseeable future

TREVELYAN: The federal government has taken the unprecedented step in declaring nearly all government buildings off limits to the public indefinitely, after the incident on Monday morning which once again sent the Commonwealth into lockdown.

“In light of recent, alarming incidents which still leave our Arcane Sciences Department completely baffled, the government has decided that, until further notice, all government buildings shall be out of bounds to everyone except those authorized,” Prime Minister Victoria Martin said, in a statement issued to the press late yesterday afternoon. “Government services will for now be largely unaffected by this edict, but that may change given recent events. Both the ministry of transportation, and the ministry of education will have separate announcements with regard to this change in policy, likely either later today or early tomorrow.

“The Department of Information and the Ministry of Justice will also have separate statements, once again possibly late today, or early tomorrow, with regard to the events on the weekend. Know that they are working hard to prevent further attacks, and uncover those responsible.

“Ladies and gentlemen, fellow citizens, know that your government is working around the clock (see DOING, p.3)

Harry wasn’t surprised by it, as he folded the paper up and dropped it on the table, and turned back to his breakfast on Friday morning.

“Of course, people aren’t happy about it,” said Justin, as he poured himself a cup of coffee, “The opposition's calling the PM out, asking what's she got to hide and all that crap.”

“Yeah, an’ I’m sure the leader of the opposition was put into hiding like everyone else,” said Bryce, as he too fixed his breakfast.

“Yep. All MP's were taken to a safe location,” said Justin, “It's all part of COG procedure. They actually practice it several times a year, at least as far as I know. But Monday morning's incident's the first time I've seen it used for real.”

Bryce thought for a moment. “So your COG procedure... you guys have a designated survivor too?”

“Yes,” said Aaron, as he poured coffee into a take-along mug. “Her majesty has picked a successor, but most definitely, she’s also picked someone for that worst-case scenario.”

Harry muttered under his breath. “Yeah, likely me.”

“I can tell you it’s not, Harry. Queen Susan knows you would hate that sort of thing. Though, quite honestly, there were a few who pressed her to do so anyway.”

Justin let out a snort. “Yeah, pity the bastard who should ever end up with that mess. Suddenly have
the leadership of the Commonwealth dropped in your lap, likely no one to give you any sort of
directions on what to do next… I mean, the only way the Designated Survivor gets activated… is if
the other people more qualified are dead. It’s a worst-case scenario, as Aaron said.

“Thing is, it would have to be something really, really bad, before we got to that point. Lots of stages
to go through beforehand.”

“Mazhe…”

Everyone turned to find Miraak had stepped into the room.

“Something happened?”

“I may have uncovered the location of a word wall.”

“Then we need to check it out. Where is it located?”

“In the northwestern part of the Reach. 'Dragontooth Crater'.”

“Sounds promising,” said Mazhe. “Show me where.”

He pulled out his mobile, and enlarged it, then brought up the map. Miraak then began moving it
around, until he found what he was looking for.

“There.”

“Excellent,” said Mazhe, “There's a bookmark for a location not far from it.”

“I have class,” said Harry, “You all right without me?”

“I'll call you if we run into something out of my depth,” Mazhe promised.

“Uh... I'm goin' to Jose's place,” said Bryce.

“One of the guys will take you up,” said Aaron, looking up from his meal. “Best you not be roaming
the Ratway alone. We do purge the tunnels periodically, but it's got a reputation.”

“Right, got it.”

“Of course, eventually we'll have a proper floo connection,” said Justin. He set his mug down, and
the empty dishes promptly vanished. “Either way. I'm off to our new satellite office in Bthalft. You
guys know where to reach me.”

Within short order, Harry was left pretty much alone, save for the extra security still present.

Chapter End Notes

UP NEXT: Harry’s circle and some of his school friends blow off a little steam in the
Virtual Projection Room inside Harry’s chest; Bill surprises everyone with a rather
personal announcement; and a Halloween party hosted by the Longbottoms ends on a
sour note...
End of Frostfall

Chapter Summary

Harry’s circle and some of his school friends blow off a little steam in the Virtual Projection Room inside Harry’s chest; Bill surprises everyone with a rather personal announcement; and a Halloween party hosted by the Longbottoms ends on a sour note...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

11. END OF FROSTFALL

October, 2007 / Frostfall, 4E202

“If human beings had genuine courage, they’d wear their costumes every day of the year, not just on Halloween.”

- Douglas Coupland

21 October, 2007 / 21 Heart Fire, 4E202

Jose had already seen some pretty remarkable magic—the most extreme up to this point being his residence being moved. But today was the first time he experienced Harry’s Virtual Projection Room.

At first, the man was not all that impressed with the room, considering its bland default appearance. Then, right before his eyes, the room began to change, expanding in all directions, structures seeming to spring up out of nothing, coming together to form a near-perfect duplicate of RFK Stadium.

“Holy mother of...”

“I asked for a baseball field, Harry. God... didn't need to go that far,” said Bryce, shaking his head.

“One only has one opportunity for a first impression,” Harry smirked, seeing Jose's gobsmacked look.

“If I got it right, this was a gift Harry received from the Commonwealth a couple of years back,” said Aaron.

“It was,” said Justin, “The crew of the Ragnar got tired of him hogging their VPR all the time.”

“So... this room... it can copy anything? I mean, any place?” Jose asked, still looking around the enormous space that had formed.

“We're sure there are limitations, but up to now we've never reached them.”

“Though I do believe this is the largest place attempted,” said Harry.
“How detailed is it? I mean, inside?” Bryce wondered.

“Only the outer structure is detailed, given my limited memory of interiors.”

“But you could if you knew.”

“How... how does it work?” asked Jose.

“I simply project my wishes to the room. Such as...”

He blinked a moment, and instantly, a large duffel bag appeared near home plate. That coincided with several people stepping out of the home dugout: Crixus, Dardanos, and Miraak.

“We are not late?” asked Miraak.

“Just getting started,” said Bryce.

“This is your home... arena,” Miraak said, recognizing the field.

“Wasn't expected, but yeah.”

“If this is causing distress—”

Bryce shook his head. “It's fine. What's in the bag you summoned?”

“We require certain pieces of equipment in order to play, am I correct?”

Both Bryce and Jose gave a nod.

“I simply requested the room provide those things.”

“Awesome.”

Bryce thought for a moment. “So none of you guys played before, I'm guessin’.”

“All told, we have seen two games,” said Mazhe, “Back in the spring in San Francisco, then... well...”

“Yeah. Okay. So maybe...”

“Just toss the ball around a bit, get 'em used to handling it,” said Jose.

“The room should have provided ample supplies to do so,” said Justin. He grinned. “I won't lie. When I was a kid, I always dreamed of having a catch with a pro, right? Just didn't ever imagine it happening like... well—”

“It's all right, bro, we get it,” said Jose.

As Justin had assumed, there were plenty of balls, a few bats, and generic gloves provided in the bag. So, for the next hour, the group broke into pairs, so those who'd not handled a baseball before could get a feel for it.

No surprise, Harry and his circle of friends did quite well in the throwing department, considering the conditioning. Catching, meanwhile, proved to be another story. While Harry, Justin, and Mazhe did pretty well, the others, not so much. Crixus and Dardanos were the worst at it, though Miraak was passable.
Batting, meanwhile, produced different results. Miraak, Justin, and Harry had difficulty making contact, with Justin the only one able to do anything. Mazhe, Crixus, and Dardanos, meanwhile, proved more than adept at making contact, with Mazhe connecting for a four-hundred foot bomb down the first base line on his third attempt.

“Damn,” said Jose, “You sure you ain't done this before?”

“Nope,” Mazhe grinned, as he got back into position to take another swing.

Harry could only grin, as he summoned the ball from where it landed. “My mate can swing a greatsword with little effort. A baseball bat carries little weight in comparison.”

“How heavy's a greatsword?” Jose wondered.

Mazhe thought for a moment, before reaching into his pouch, and producing a dark-coloured blade. Not quite black, more of a deep violet shade, it gleamed in the light. An intricate pattern was etched in both the hilt and the backside (non-sharp) edge. “Here. Be careful, it's razor sharp.”

Jose carefully accepted the weapon, and quickly realized he'd need to grip it with both hands. “Damn. What's it made of?”

“Something called ebony,” answered Mazhe, “It's a hard, glass-like substance. Not exactly rare—uncommon would be a better way to put it. But... it makes some amazing weapons and armour.”

“Like the armour Harry's got,” Bryce assumed.

Harry shook his head. “No. Though elaborately carved, my armour is made from simple steel.”

“Bryce... you wanna give it a try?”

“Sure.”

Jose handed the blade over, and it was Bryce's turn to inspect the tool. He gripped it tightly, and swung it gently a couple of times. This, of course, gave Harry an idea.

“You both will join us for sword training.”

Both Jose and Bryce looked doubtful.

“It can't be a whole lot different from swinging a bat,” said Mazhe, “And really, you both should know how to use a blade. Let's say for some reason you aren't able to get into your pouches. That leaves you with what might be lying around.”

“Yeah, got it,” said Bryce, as he passed the weapon back to Mazhe.

It was then that both Dobby and Kreacher popped in, bringing a pair of enormous platters filled with food and drink.

“Lunch time all ready?”

“It is being noon hour, Master Harry,” said Kreacher, as the elves set the platters down on the field.

“Thank you both. Though I believe this meal will feed our number several times over.”

He barely finished, when Aaron appeared at the entrance to the home dugout. He was followed by a few others: Fred, George, and most of the students.
“Merlin... where are we?” Ron wanted to know, as they all looked around.

“This... this is, or was our home field,” Bryce answered, as everyone sat down and got comfortable.

“Was?” George was confused.

“We're moving to a new field... building... in the spring.”

“That's if we have a season at all,” Jose threw in, as he fixed himself a plate.

“The Commonwealth's working on something. We're actually trying it now with the NHL. If it works—”

“Meaning if there's an attack and we foil it,” Mazhe finished.

“Means nothing though. They'll just do something different,” said Bryce, doubtful.

“There is that possibility, yes,” Aaron agreed, “But we have to start someplace. Point being, we also stand to take them by surprise, maybe catch the monsters in the act, maybe capture one or a few of them.

“An ideal circumstance, would be to detain them for questioning, maybe figure out long-term plans, gather intelligence. Get that far, maybe we can prevent an attack before it gets off the ground.”

Harry gave Aaron a dirty look. “Right. Enough discussion of this subject. I've had fun out here this morning. I would see it repeated.”

“What have you guys been doing?” Ron wanted to know.

“Baseball,” said Seamus, “But c'mon, it's got nothing on football.”

Bryce let out a snort, and Jose shook his head. “No way. Baseball's better than football any day.”

Now it was Seamus' turn to laugh. “No no no, I mean real football, not that dodgy excuse for a sport you yanks have.”

“Oh, soccer, you mean,” said Jose.

“Football,” Seamus again corrected him.

Harry smirked. “Careful guys. Seamus is a football fanatic. I remember all the posters over his bed back in the Gryffindor dormitory.”

“So Harry,” said George, as everyone began fixing plates, “You won't believe this, but the Commonwealth's asked us if we'd like to set up a shop in Bthalft.”

“So of course we said yes,” said Fred, “Gonna be really exciting, we're working with a contractor on Monday.”

“That's brilliant, guys!”

“We've been strictly mail-order since we lost the shop in London.”

“And it has cut into our business,” said George.

“Not to mention us not having dedicated space for making product...”
“Or coming up with new ones...”

“Apologies, guys.”

“Harry, you don't need to apologize,” said Fred, “You got rid of Voldemort, saved us, our family...”

“A little inconvenience is completely worth it,” said George.

“What kind of shop?” Jose wondered.

Harry smirked. “A simple rule to keep in mind around these two mischief-makers. Do not for any reason accept anything edible if you desire to keep your dignity intact.”

That had the twins smirking.

“Yeah, there was that canary crème incident with Tommy when he first joined us,” Mazhe remembered.

A dark look momentarily crossed Harry's face, but he chuckled. “He took it pretty well, all in all. Laughed along with the rest of us.”

“We make joke and prank products,” said George.

“Our mother constantly harasses us about it, but—”

“Your mother is secretly very proud of the pair of you,” Harry cut in, “As is your father. Tell me if I'm wrong, but it's been a long time since a Weasley earned any substantial amount of wealth... though in my personal opinion, your family carries wealth beyond measure. That house of yours, gods above. To stand under its crooked roof, all one can feel is love. Never, ever discount that. Not for a second.”

The expanded group spent the rest of the afternoon either throwing the ball around, or in a few peoples' cases, taking to the air and tossing a quaffle around. Harry made a point of giving both Jose and Bryce a ride on his broom, though at this point neither of them were ready to fly on their own. They finally called it quits as it drew close to meal time.

Harry had planned on taking dinner in the Ragged Flagon, but Ginny put the brakes on that.

“Harry, Bill wants you guys to come over for dinner.”

“Is that so?”

“He's invited Cedric and Viktor too.”

“Ah, I see. And he's invited Fleur as well? Do not appear surprised, I have ways of learning things,” said Harry, smirking.

Ginny made a sour face. “Mum doesn't like it. She thinks they're moving too fast.”

“And your mother has no business telling them such. Ni los ok miiraad.—It's his choice.”

“Tell that to mum, mate,” said George, shaking his head.

“So is this gonna be a... well, do we need to dress up?” Jose wondered.

“Oh no, not anything like that,” Ginny answered. “But mum's cooking enough to feed an army.”
That earned yet another chuckle out of Harry. “That sounds about right. Though you know she relishes such chores.”

Up to this point, both Jose and Bryce had seen the Weasleys’ home, at least from afar. But this would be the first time either of them stepped inside, if only for a moment. Both of them knew at once what Harry was talking about. It was as if love (and maybe a bit—or a lot—of magic) was keeping it upright.

Given the number of people present, however, tables had been set up outside under a large canopy, and strong warming charms had been cast to keep the fall chill at bay. Even though it was still Frostfall/October, a foot deep blanket of snow was already covering the ground. Naturally, this was not out of the ordinary for Skyrim at that time of year, given how far north the province was.

Rather than long tables, there were a number of round tables, enough for eight people each. It further cemented Harry's suspicion of what might be going on, as he took a seat. His circle was quick to follow, Mazhe claiming the seat to his right, and Bryce to his left.

“Had I known sooner, I would have invited Zoey,” said Justin, as he too claimed a seat.

“You have made her aware of the Halloween party?” Harry asked.

“Yes. She's coming, one way or another—her words.”


“We follow North American traditions,” said Justin, “So yeah, dress up, treats, spooky decorations... some people have a scary movie marathon, that sort of thing.”

“Until Harry and his friends arrived here, I had no idea what Halloween was,” Mazhe confessed, as the center of the table filled with food and the plates appeared, “The closest we have to any sort of festival here is Emperor's Day, which takes place on the 30th.

“Thing is, it's been some time since it's been truly celebrated, because of something that happened roughly thirty years ago.”

“The Great War,” Harry remembered.

“Yes. The day the Empire began to collapse.”

“What about trick-or-treating?” Jose wondered.

“Not this year. But next... I would count on it,” said Justin, “Bthalft is still in its infancy, with not even fifty people. But once the city's properly established, basic infrastructure in place... we expand pretty quickly. It's just getting the framework in place.”

“Yeah, quite something seeing that,” said Bryce.

“You join a rather exclusive club,” said Justin, “Not many people witness the charging of a city's ward stone, or the setting of it.”

“I had placed little thought into that,” said Harry, “Though the logic does not escape me.”

“So your... Commonwealth... it's divided into city-states, or something like it,” Jose guessed.

“Exactly that,” said Justin, “Each city has a certain number of representatives it elects to the House of
Commons, but they also have their own government for local matters.”

“So no mayor then,” Bryce guessed.

“No. It's set up akin to a province, with a Premier. Much like the federal government, he or she is chosen by the party membership, and the party who wins the most seats forms the government. That party's leader then becomes the Premier.”

“So people don't elect their leader,” said Lisa.

“Nope. The party membership decides that.”

“What if the guy they pick sucks?” Bryce wanted to know.

“Then they'll have a much harder time getting elected, won't they?” said Mazhe, “If the leader's a moron, would you vote for them?”

He thought for a moment.

“I do like the idea of democracy. For everyone to have a chance to be heard, rather than the Elder Council we have here. I know all of the Jarls here are members, but how others gain membership, I don't know. They definitely aren't chosen by the public, that much I'm certain.”

The food was excellent, as was expected. Harry had a suspicion both Dobby and Kreacher had been roped in to help out, given the mountain of food provided, a literal feast. As the noise level once again began to rise, someone tapping their glass with a fork had everyone's attention. Bill had gotten to his feet, as had Fleur. Even from where Harry was sitting, he could see the both of them were positively aglow with excitement.

“Right. Err, thank you all for coming. I felt we needed this, given the nightmares we've had thrown at us over the past few months. Now I've had a few discussions with certain people, you know who you are.

“Last night, I asked a very important question to a very special person in my life. The answer I was given allows me to present to all of you the future Mrs. William Weasley!”

Both of his parents were instantly on their feet, surrounding the happy couple—though Mrs. Weasley's smile appeared a bit forced. Still, she enveloped her son in a strong hug and several kisses.

The rest of the room clapped and cheered for the happy couple, Harry and his friends among them. Bill was right; they did need a happy distraction for a change. There would be questions of where to hold it, the guest list... Mrs. Weasley would be in her element, that much was certain.

The announcement put the crowd in a party mood, and so more food and drink was to be had, making for a very late night—or very early morning, depending on whose perspective one took.

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31 October / 31 Frostfall

If Harry was honest with himself, he'd been truly looking forward to the party that evening. Unlike the events back during his early years at Hogwarts, this one was hosted by close friends, in friendly territory—namely the Longbottoms' manor. They hadn't been able to secure live music for the event, but there would be a DJ, and that would have to suffice. If Harry did nothing else that night, he vowed to have at least one dance with his mate.
They arrived promptly at 7 o'clock. It was a good thing they were able to use the mobiles; a blast of winter had swept down from the Sea of Ghosts earlier in the day, with biting wind and heavy snow.

“Mr. Stormcrown and his party,” the hired steward announced. A pair of house elves moved to collect cloaks and outerwear, but realized Harry and his party didn't have any.

“Apolologies, we arrived without needing to travel outside.”

“Harry! Glad you made it!” Neville greeted.

“You must know, I had every intention of attending,” Harry grinned.

“And Mr. Hunter, welcome.”

“Thanks.” Bryce momentarily shivered. “Yeah, questioning this, uh, costume, Harry.”

Harry only smirked, and flicked a hand in his friend's direction, casting a gentle warming charm. “Better?”

“Yeah.”

“Just don't wander close to the city gates,” said Mazhe, also smirking. “Good way to get shot, looking like that.”

“You both wanted to see me dressed like a bandit. Happy?”

Harry had dug deep in one of his old wardrobes, locating a set of studded armor he'd collected years prior, one of the earliest pieces of armor he'd worn. Though it thoroughly covered up the midsection and upper legs, it left the chest mostly exposed.

Mazhe had then helped with a bit of face paint, and had momentarily shivered when he stepped back, considering he'd encountered the real thing on several occasions. Harry, too, had to admit, Bryce looked rather scary.

As for Harry and Mazhe... Mazhe had wanted to dress up as a baseball player. That planted the seed in Harry's mind, though how to pull it off. Transfiguration would work... or maybe he could... but no, they needed two pairs of trousers.

It was Jose who solved the problem, by loaning his uniform to Mazhe. Harry did need to enlarge it to fit, but other than that, the outfit worked. Of course, Bryce then helped Harry by loaning him his, and the pair were complete. Perhaps it worked out even better, that the pair wore opposing uniforms.

Jose and his wife went with a pirate theme. The pair had been worried how to pull it off, until they mentioned the thought to Justin. They very quickly discovered, it was not much of an issue at all; he only needed to have a general idea of what they had in mind. A morning trip to a couple of shops in Trevelyan had it sorted rather quickly, and the end result was rather striking. The pair could easily fit in on the set of Pirates of the Caribbean.

Crixus and Dardanos had gone with their old gladiator gear, including the helmets. Harry had wanted to object, but both had reminded him that their time as gladiators wasn't all bad. 'It is something not to be forgotten, but to be remembered, for it has made us who we are,' Crixus had reminded him.

Rounding out the group, Aaron had decided to dress up as non-magical Navy pilot, given he had the night off. He'd spoken to Brandon, who in turn spoke with a few of the Ragnar's Air Wing fighter
pilots, and a costume had been cobbled together. If anything, it was rather simple, needing just a jumpsuit, bomber jacket, and the helmet. He wore his usual combat boots to complete the outfit.

Shortly after their arrival, Justin arrived with Zoey. The pair had gone full goth, and Harry had to smirk seeing her makeup.

“Shor's bones, I can only imagine your father's reaction seeing you dressed as such.”

Zoey laughed. “You have no idea. He threatened to have the Secret Service lock me in the bunker for the next twenty years.”

“I had to promise the President we'd keep her name out of the papers,” said Justin. “Mr. Ziegler's already got enough on his plate as it is.”

Bryce rolled his eyes. “Yeah, uh, burning a flag in the White House kind of does that.”

Harry arched an eyebrow.

“Allegedly,” said Justin.

“That was on my birthday,” said Zoey. “Penn & Teller performed a few tricks. I don't know if they really burned a flag, but... it was months ago.”

“The media have long memories,” said Harry.

“Err... this way, everyone,” said Neville.

Stepping into the ball room, Harry was reminded of his first Halloween at Hogwarts. Live bats fluttered and swooped from the ceiling, which was illuminated by dozens of hovering, ever-light candles.

“Damn,” Bryce said, taking in the scene, “Can I say again magic's awesome?”

“You just did,” Harry grinned. “Come, let us claim a table.”

Others were also arriving at this point, including Bill and Fleur. Fleur dressed as Cleopatra, while Bill dressed as a servant. It was a bit of irony, considering that at one point, Bill had done curse-breaking work for Gringotts in Egypt a few years prior.

One more arrival certainly caused a stir. Those from the Commonwealth or the non-magical world instantly recognized the character from the Shrek franchise: the not-so-nice fairy godmother, in her purple outfit, eyeglasses, working fairy-wings, the whole nine yards. It was only when Harry noticed the additional security present that it clicked.

“Oh Merlin,” said Justin, trying not to laugh, “But damn, she's absolutely nailed it.”

“Just long's she doesn't turn me or my wife into a frog, we'll be just fine,” said Jose, shaking his head.

“Who is she supposed to be?” questioned Mazhe.

“A character from a movie... uh... something like Cars, but from a different studio. Actually, I think you guys would probably like it,” said Justin.

“What, Shrek? Oh yeah,” said Jose, “Though you guys might not get some of the pop-culture references if... you know what I mean.”
“No offense was taken,” said Harry. He let out a laugh. “Still find it amazing that our monarch resists being entrapped in her residence, but insists on partaking in normal activity.”

“It only puts an exclamation point on the fact she's a human being just like the rest of us,” said Justin.

“God, no way dad could ever get way with doing this kind of thing,” said Zoey.

“No. Definitely not,” said Aaron, “In your world it's so much more difficult to place security. It's one area the Commonwealth does have an advantage.”

“Yeah, 'an how many guys do we NOT see right now?” Bryce wondered.

“Classified,” said Aaron.

“Right. We talk about that sort of thing enough as it is,” said Harry, rolling his eyes.

Soon after, the music started up, and that was the cue for various couples to take to the floor. Harry and Mazhe quickly followed suit, and though they weren't all that great at dancing, they were more than content to just follow the beat. For just a little while, they were lost in each other, with everything else fading into the background.

“Harry. Let's take a break. I'd like a drink and a bite to eat.”

“Oh. That... yeah, let's do that.”

Only then did Harry realize he was ravenous, having not had something to eat since lunch time. So, they made their way across the dance floor to where the buffet table had been set up. There were plenty of different food choices—chicken wings, pizza slices, perhaps a half-dozen different salads, french fries, cold shrimp, just to name a few choices—surely something for everyone.

After filling their plates, the pair made their way back over to the table they'd picked out earlier. Aaron was still there, but everyone else was still out on the floor, or elsewhere in the manor. The table had changed, now resembling a booth with a circular bench, rather than just a table and chairs.

“Gods, the pair of you are soaked,” said Aaron, looking them over.

Harry grinned, and flicked a hand at himself, casting a drying charm. He then did the same for his partner, before taking a seat.

“Why you not out there?” Mazhe wanted to know.

“Just content to make up to a mug of beer and watch,” answered Aaron, with a shrug, “side the point, I've got two left feet.”

“Two left...” Mazhe was confused.

“He means to say he cannot dance,” Harry finished.

'O', Mazhe mouthed.

“You move like a cat. How can you not know how to dance?”

“Yeah, I'd love to know the answer to that one,” said Aaron, ruefully. “Dardanos and Crixus don't seem to have any trouble out on the floor, and they're both pretty new at this stuff. Can I curse them now?”
“No you may not,” said Harry, but he grinned. “You were simply blessed with other talents, Mr. Carpenter.”

“Please.”

“Don't deny it,” said Harry, and he stuck out his tongue.

Aaron rolled his eyes, as Harry picked up the drink menu card, and selected an item. Almost immediately, a mug of Black-Briar mead appeared in front of him. Mazhe quickly followed suit, ordering a goblet of Colovian Brandy.

“Just be aware, I won't be carrying either of you back to the flat.”

Harry smirked. “That's okay. We'll get Bryce and Jose to help us.”

“Yeah, uh, I think the Armandos are gonna be busy tonight.”

Aaron flicked his eyes out toward the dance floor, and sure enough, the pair were simply holding each other close, much like Harry and Mazhe had been doing earlier.

“It's a good thing Remus and Miraak offered to look after the younger children.”

“Won't always be that way though. Emily and Rosie could have came, you know,” said Aaron.

“Next year,” said Harry. “Maybe next year all this rubbish around the new Death Eaters will be dealt with... and maybe Bthalft will be larger.”

“Yes, agreed. It's unfortunate the pair of you never experienced trick-or-treating. Going out in costume, door to door... one of my fondest memories of Halloween when I was a kid.”

“Blame Voldemort. And Dumbledore,” said Harry, bitterly.

After having a bite to eat and finishing their drinks, the pair once again made their way out onto the dance floor. Now happily buzzing, the pair relaxed much more than earlier, and though neither were all that great at dancing, they didn't hesitate to join the others.

They again retreated to their table, this time discovering that Bryce had returned, and was making up to his own mug of ale. Mazhe quickly requested a refill of his Brandy, with Harry following suit.

“Thou shalt not mix,” said Aaron.

“Bite me,” said Harry, though with little heat.

“You puke anywhere near me, you'll be licking it up,” said Aaron.

Bryce made a face. “That's gross, bro.”

“Uh, agreed,” said Mazhe.

“Mr. Stormcrow.”

Harry looked up to find Viktor had wandered over.

“Viktor. We are both former Triwizard champions and therefore on a first-name basis.”

“Harry, then. I vos vondering. You still train in the mornings, no?”
“Of course. You wish to join us again?”

“Yes.”

“I'll have to set up clearance, but—”

“Let me worry about that,” said Aaron, “I didn't know you joined these guys.”

“During the tournament, yes. Events conspired to interrupt the schedule. Something I would see corrected. I would likewise see Cedric and Fleur join us, as was the practice. One of the few bright spots from that tournament, that I gained a few friends.”

“One of the primary goals of the tournament,” Aaron remembered.

“I repeat, one of the few bright spots from the event.”

He took a gulp from his brandy. “Nothing says competitors in games must become enemies.”

“Yeah, well put,” Bryce agreed, “Ain't always the way it ends though. Guys get heated, 'next thing it's bitter rivals.”

“The problem there though, is the cash involved, tell me if I'm wrong. Let's see... you're makin' what, two mil this year? And Mr. Armando's makin' what, six this year? So winning's everything for you guys,” said Aaron. “When the play goes wrong, it's amplified a hundred-fold. Again, tell me if I'm wrong.

“Next you have the rabid sports media circus that swirls around you guys, gushing one minute that you're the best thing since sliced bread...”

“Then I'm bein' chewed up and spit out like yesterday's garbage, yeah, been there, done that,” said Bryce, making a face.

“My point exactly. Not sure who's at fault, but gods, professional sport is just a market, a money-maker. A business that is a shadow of what it used to be. Not saying you guys don't deserve to be paid, but...”

“Yeah, heard that before too.”

“Uh... excuse me,” said Viktor, making to leave.

“We will contact you sometime tomorrow with credentials,” said Aaron.

“Thank you.”

“God, y'know, the pair of you are soaked,” said Bryce.

Harry only shrugged, feeling a little light-headed. “My promise that you will receive it in the condition it was loaned.”

“Not like he can't afford to replace it as it is, Bryce,” said Aaron.

“least they didn't try 'an get me to wear it tonight.”

“The thought did cross my mind,” said Harry, innocently. He then let out a gasp, feeling Mazhe do something out of sight. Perhaps it was a good thing the table covered their hands. Harry smirked, put his hands on Mazhe's face, and pulled him close, locking their lips together. He then visually
shivered, feeling a hand slip into the front of his jersey, to rub his chest.

“Guys...” said Aaron, “Public behaviour, remember.”

They finally came up for air, and Harry smirked. “I have been dying to do that.”

Mazhe gave a smirk of his own. “Well... Harry, you did want to see me in... well...”

“His uniform, yes, I remember,” said Harry. “I do believe orange better suits you.”

Mazhe smirked again. “It's unfortunate I can't share a pensieve memory of that conversation. Something about a strong drink and a lust potion.”

Bryce rolled his eyes. “Great. I got two gay guys having fantasies about me.”

“Well, perhaps involving you, yes,” Mazhe admitted. “Thing is, it was a joke, nothing more.”

“Though we do not deny that you have a very nice frame—”

Mazhe silenced him by seizing him about the face, and locking lips together for a second time.

“Guys. You're scaring the children,” said Aaron, though he grinned as he said it.

Harry leaned back in his seat. “Giving someone a love potion is illegal, just so you know. Do not concern yourself with ideas that we would do so.”

“Yeah, just bein' clear. If I found out that happened... I've never hit someONE with a baseball bat before, but...”

“Trust us, you'd have to get in line,” said Aaron, “The government treats that sort of thing very seriously. A) administering a potion without consent, B) assault on a non-magical person, C) sexual assault, whether or not the victim ends up having sex with his or her attacker—those would be the minimum charges someone would be facing. Drop “B” if they're not magical themselves, but... you get the picture. Love potions are restricted here in the Commonwealth, for obvious reasons.”

Aaron thought for a moment. “Gods, Harry, just mentioning the idea, that can get you investigated. Any other person, and that's exactly what would happen.”

“He did say he was joking,” said Mazhe.

“Doesn't matter. It's a serious offense. Just keep that in mind in the future.”

Bryce took another gulp from his tankard, then smirked. “course, question is, would either of you know what to do with me?”

That had both Harry and Mazhe smirking. “That is for us to know, and for you to find out, Mr. Hunter.”

Now Mazhe let out a squawk, as Harry did something the others could not see.

“Yeah, thinkin' I'll need a separate room tonight,” Bryce muttered.

“Silencing CHARMS!” Harry squawked, as Mazhe then did something.

“Guys...”
“Yeah, quit jerkin' each other off or whatever you're doin' over there,” Bryce muttered.

Now both Mazhe and Harry almost fell off the bench, they were laughing so hard.

“Am I intruding?”

Harry almost choked, but scrambled to his feet, with Mazhe quickly following, as they realized the Queen had fluttered over.

“Your majesty. Uh... um... glad to see you here,” said Harry, trying to straighten himself out.

“Relax, the pair of you,” said the Queen, “This is by no means a formal event.”

“Respect must always be shown, your majesty,” said Mazhe, though he did slink an arm around his mate. “Your costume choice, though confusing, does look brilliant.”

“It was Chorley who suggested this,” said the Queen, “I know some people may not understand the reference, but most have been most amused.”

“I am curious. With perhaps thousands of different events celebrating Halloween, why choose this one?” Mazhe wondered.

“Though a public event, I have seen perhaps two—correction, three, members of the press attending. This was arranged on short notice, correct me if I am wrong.

“Such events tend to work in my favour, since no one attending is informed of my presence.”

“This is true,” said Harry, as he and Mazhe retook their seats, “Up until your arrival, there was no warning. Had I not took note of extra security present, we would not have known of your presence at all.”

“It's been an enjoyable evening so far, absent the usual protocol and other such rubbish that goes with attending a more formal event. Not that I don't enjoy such functions. I only tire of their number and frequency.”

“The double-edged sword of being our leader, ma'am,” said Aaron.

“This is very true,” the Queen agreed.

As the night wore on, both Harry and Mazhe were content to remain at the booth, snuggled close to one another. All of his school friends visited at one point or other, and naturally, other members of the group stopped to rest at various points. Bryce had returned to the dance floor for a time, but returned just after 10 o'clock, content to make up to another tankard of ale.

Aaron, too, remained at the booth, also more interested in watching rather than participating, even though he had the night off. Harry had wondered why he wasn't working, but given the Queen's presence, that would give perfect reason. It still seemed like the guy was working though, always keeping an eye on what was going on. Just like Brandon, Aaron took his assignment very seriously.

“Hey Harry...”

“Wha? Err... gods, did I—”

“Fell asleep, yeah. You're makin' your partner jealous,” said Bryce.

Now Harry realized, he'd slumped up against Bryce.
“What time is it?”

Aaron glanced down at his watch. “Going on 1 o'clock. Some people are starting to head out.”

“If that is desired—”

“No, Harry. Just didn't want you to miss too much. Feel like having another dance or three?” Mazhe wondered.

Harry only shook his head. “Apologies. And likely such a thing would be unwise for you.”

“Conceded.” Mazhe smirked. “Though I do look forward to us getting back to the flat, so I can help you out of that uniform.”

Bryce rolled his eyes. “Like I said earlier, I'll find someplace else to sleep. Maybe Jose won't mind me borrowing his couch.”

Harry shifted so he was once again crushed up against Mazhe. “Helping each other out of the uniforms will happen later,” he purred.

“Yes, okay. Didn't need to know that,” Bryce muttered.

It was then Harry noticed a pair of soldiers hurrying out of the room. That coincided with Aaron's mobile chirping, indicating a message had arrived. He pulled it out, and quickly read the message, as a pair of soldiers hurried up to the Queen. They too, then hurried out of the room.

“Aaron. What has happened?”

“Information's still not one hundred percent... but it looks like...” he sighed. “It looks like, the Death Eaters have stormed the British Ministry of Magic, with the intention of taking control of it. We... we have to go.”

“Harry! Guys!” Justin shouted, hurrying over, Zoey in tow. “We... we gotta—”

“I know,” said Harry. “Where's Jose?”

“He's no longer cleared for the flat during lockdown,” said Aaron.

Harry stood up, looking furious. He had to put a hand on the table to steady himself, as he felt the strong vertigo effect from standing so quickly.

“If he's not permitted into my place of residence, then neither is her majesty.”

“Harry...”

“Do not press me. Do remember, it is I who retains control of the wards.”

“Beside the point, isn't he something you people keep calling, Promagistrate or something?” asked Mazhe.

Aaron relented, and chose a number from his contact list.

“We must at one point determine what that truly means,” said Harry, as they prepared to leave. It was then that Crixus, Dardanos, Jose, and his wife joined them.

“What's going on?” Jose asked.
“Lockdown... again,” Harry muttered. “We are held up momentarily by a small matter that Lieutenant Commander Carpenter is correcting presently.”

The glare he sent Aaron was not lost on anyone.

Aaron finally disconnected the call. “All right. We're returning to the flat. Be warned, there will be a number of people around, given the severity.”

“No shit,” Bryce muttered. He drank down the remainder of his drink, and stood up. He wobbled a moment, before putting a hand on the table to brace himself, much like Harry had done a minute or so prior. He made a sour face. “Yeah, this is gonna be fun.”

They arrived back in the flat, and true to Aaron's word, the place was once again aswarm with officials and security. The Queen had already abandoned her costume, and was already huddled with a group of people in the dining room. The fire in the fireplace was out, the sign of a floo network lockout.

Harry blew out a breath, and shook his head to clear it.

“Total utter clusterfuck,” he muttered.

“Understatement,” Justin muttered, “Uh... Zoey, let's go into my room so you can use my mobile and speak to your father.”

“What happened?” Lisa pressed, as Justin led Zoey toward the rooms.

“The terrorists have seized control of the British Ministry of Magic,” said Aaron, “At least according to rough details I'm getting. The Commonwealth's once again activated a protection protocol, meaning our Queen's once again borrowing Harry's flat for safety.”

“Guess we're borrowing the guest room we had last time, then,” said Jose. “Wait. What about my son?”

“We can have him brought here if you require peace of mind. But know that he is in very good hands.”

“Get him for us,” said Lisa, “If... if stuff's happening...”

“Your concern is understood,” said Harry.

Aaron knew better than to question Harry's request, given the nasty text message he'd received a few minutes prior. He again pulled out his mobile.

“Right. We are retreating to our room for the night. Do not disturb unless there is direct threat against the flat and its occupants,” Harry muttered. “Anything less will draw my further displeasure.”

Mazhe slung an arm around Harry's shoulder, and they started off, with Harry reaching back and tugging on Bryce's arm, coaxing him to follow. “Utter... complete... clusterfuck.”

Chapter End Notes
UP NEXT: The identity of the group taking the place of Voldemort and his Death Eaters is at last revealed, as they put several strategies in motion that will likely have dire consequences for the Commonwealth; The ICW holds yet another emergency session to discuss the matter; and word arrives about a possible imminent attack on Hogsmeade and Hogwarts...

CHAPTER NOTES: As I was writing that scene discussing the lust potion, I came to realize that, yeah, the Commonwealth would treat such a thing harshly, given how non-magical people do have access to potions and so on.
Order of the New Dawn

Chapter Summary

The identity of the group taking the place of Voldemort and his Death Eaters is at last revealed, as they put several strategies in motion that will likely have dire consequences for the Commonwealth; The ICW holds yet another emergency session to discuss the matter; and word arrives about a possible imminent attack on Hogsmeade and Hogwarts...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

12. ORDER OF THE NEW DAWN

October, 2007 / Frostfall, 4E202

“Sanctions and negotiations can be very ineffective, and indeed foolish, unless the people you are talking with and negotiating with and trying to reach agreements with are people who can be trusted to keep their word.”

- Caspar Weinberger

Office of the Minister
British Ministry of Magic

The assault against the Ministry had taken an hour at most, with the Auror department putting up the strongest resistance. With all departments now secured, a meeting was then under way to discuss next steps. A table already present in the office had been re-sized to accommodate a larger number, and now eight individuals sat around it, including both Dumbledore and Deidre.

“With the government now fully under control, we must set our sights on Diagon Alley, Hogsmeade, and equally important, Hogwarts,” said a witch sitting opposite Dumbledore.

“Agreed on all three counts,” said a wizard to her right, “We need to secure the newspaper and the wireless, to make sure our message is properly heard.”

“And taking control of the school will insure students are being properly educated.”

“Indeed, the staff and students must be shown the error of their ways,” said Dumbledore.

“You will return as headmaster?” Deidre wondered.

“No. As much as I might desire to, the wards will no longer accept me. However, I'm confident we will be able to convince Minerva and the rest of the staff that following our direction is the only choice they have.”

Deidre gave a creepy smile. “There is always a choice, Dumbledore.”
Dumbledore gave a grim nod. “There is. Though I strongly doubt it should come to that. We'll want to replace the Muggle Studies professor. Perhaps arrange for Professor Burbage to experience an unfortunate accident.”

His suggestion was met with snickers and jeers from around the table.

“Defence Against the Dark Arts will also be replaced—completely,” said another wizard down the table, “Students need not learn how to defend against the dark arts, when they should be studying the arts themselves.”

“This is something we should not address for a few days as it is,” said Dumbledore, “But indeed, a number of items will need to be addressed, and a plan devised before we visit the school. It won't do for students' lives to be disrupted more than necessary.”

Deidre thought for a moment, and gave a nod. “A thought concurred.”

“Our focus then should be on securing the Prophet and the Wizarding Wireless. Have our people in place in Diagon Alley, ensure there are no thoughts of rebellion.”

“The address is prepared?” Deidre asked.

“It is ready, your grace,” said a witch down the table, “You will know immediately when we've secured the Wizarding Wireless.”

“Your grace. If I may,” said a wizard four seats down. “Proceed, Mr. Gilbert,” said Dumbledore.

“I've spent some time reviewing pensieve memories of the events in Florida last month.”

“Armando, the baseball player,” Deidre remembered. She frowned. “That event was a failure. Tread very carefully.”

“Your grace... the way the Commonwealth reacted, there's an opportunity here,” Gilbert said, standing. “I'm still unsure how they learned we were even watching the target. Thing is, how quickly they responded. I think we can take advantage of that.”

Deidre frowned again, but Dumbledore gestured that he continue.

“I still have a number of sources back in the US, still helping me out on a number of issues. I'll get right to the point: what if we could disable or destroy the Ragnar?”

It was an instant uproar, as those gathered around the table all started talking over one another. Dumbledore flicked his wand at the ceiling, setting off a firework, and the room instantly fell silent.

“Shouting over one another like school children won't get us anywhere,” he scolded them. “Proceed, Mr. Gilbert.”

“Know thine enemy. It's an old saying, and in this case, it's absolutely true. All of you know, Muggles outnumber us a thousand to one, easily. As much as we want to sneer and turn our noses up at their toys and abominations, if we truly want to defeat this enemy, we have to know how they work, how they think.

“Our operation in Washington was for the most part successful, because we took the time to study how a few things work.”
“As much as it pains me, I do have to agree,” said Dumbledore. “I assume you have some sort of plan in mind?”

“We know that the Commonwealth will react if they learn that we're targeting another player. Except that in this case, we plant a mole.”

“A mole?” questioned a witch opposite.

“A plant. Someone we've already targeted and set up.”

“We know they check for the Imperious Curse,” said another witch.

“They won't be altered magically. We instead use a Muggle device—hear me out,” said Gilbert, holding up a hand, seeing a number of people about to protest. “Once again, using my sources stateside, the target's mobile device can be infected with a virus. Specifically, one that will target the Ragnar's control systems.”

“Is that even possible?” questioned yet another wizard, “Given that thing's size, controlling it would be a very complex thing, would it not?”

“And you’d be right,” answered Gilbert, “I've already conducted a bit of research. Most of her controls are done through Muggle computers. Likely magically-enhanced somehow, but they would still run computer code, and still susceptible to viral infections.”

“A virus?” came the question, as others nodded in agreement, looking lost.

“Think, dragonpox,” said Gilbert, “Except that it affects computers.”

“Surely the Commonwealth would protect their devices against such a problem,” Dumbledore countered.

“Leave that to my contacts. We engineer the program so it gives us—or my friends access to the control systems on board. Then—imagine this, friends. The Ragnar falls out of the sky, a half-million tons of metal and machinery, crashing into Lower Manhattan—or in the middle of a similar, large population centre, killing possibly millions of filthy Muggles all at once.”

This had everyone at the table grinning madly, Deidre even more so.

“You believe this is possible?” she finally asked.

“With not a shade of doubt, your grace. Imagine the fallout from this incident. MACUSA would be at the Commonwealth's throat—as would the ICW. The risk of exposure is significant—”

“If the statute is irrevocably breached, then so be it,” said Deidre, “What sort of time frame are you working from?”

“It will largely depend on how complicated her computers are, your grace. I would say likely several months—late winter, early spring, perhaps.”

“You have leave to access any resources you deem fit, Mr. Gilbert. See this done,” said Deidre.

“Deidre… an update on Dubai,” said Jezebel. “The city’s been declared a no man’s land by the Emirati government.”

A wizard to her left looked confused. “No man’s land?”
“No man's land is land that is unoccupied or is under dispute between parties who leave it unoccupied due to fear or uncertainty,” Dumbledore clarified. “What other sort of response has come from the Muggle authorities?”

“My sources are verifying a report in which a US army battalion has been diverted to assist with the evacuation—this being shortly after the storms began.”

“And the damage to the city?” Gilbert questioned.

“Buried by sand,” said Jezebel. “My sources in the Commonwealth report their Infrastructure ministry’s become rather nervous. They know the storm’s magical in nature.”

“And they’ve made no attempts to put an end to it?”

“No magical authority has,” said Jezebel, “My sources again tell me, it’s akin to a hot potato in that no one wants to deal with it.”

Deidre gave a sinister grin. “Perhaps we might have similar luck with our victory here.”

“I wouldn’t count on it, your grace,” a wizard sitting beside Gilbert spoke up.

The room was momentarily bathed in a brilliant flash of green light.

It was mid-morning before Harry and his companions were up and about. They found the residence still flooded with people, the Queen and a few of her staff once again occupying the dining room.

“Weren’t they supposed to, idunno, make more room for these guys?” Bryce wondered.

“I will press the matter again,” Harry agreed, “Her majesty should be provided more appropriate comforts than at present.”

“The government did offer, Harry.”

“And I will press the matter again,” Harry repeated, as they stepped into the dining room.

The table had once again been enlarged, and though the Queen and her staff had commandeered one end, there was more than enough room for Harry and his companions to take up the other.

“Good day, all,” he greeted.

“And a good day to you, Harry,” said the Queen. “I insisted none of you be disturbed this morning.”

Harry inclined his head. “Thank you, your majesty. The gesture is appreciated. Though gut warns of distressing information.”

“They're calling themselves the 'Order of the New Dawn',” said an aide, “Their leader, a witch named Deidre, gave a public address over the British Wizarding Wireless a couple of hours ago.”

“So it’s absolutely certain they have complete control of the British Ministry of Magic,” Harry guessed.

“It is so,” said the Queen, “We have already issued a statement of condemnation, as has the Prime Minister. Premiers of twenty-one cities here in the Commonwealth have also issued similar statements.”
“And outside of the Commonwealth?” Bryce wondered.

“Twenty-six magical communities including France, the United States, and Canada, all issuing statements of condemnation, using the strongest language possible,” said an aide, “As uncooperative and otherwise problematic the British magical government was, they were the legitimate government of magical Britain.”

Bryce made a face. “Yeah, well no shit.”

“But surely, the rest of the sane world won't ever take them seriously,” said Mazhe.

“The ICW has scheduled an emergency session for the day after tomorrow in Toronto,” said an aide, “They'll likely strip Britain of most of their member privileges, among other things.”

Bryce looked at the aide strangely. “They're meeting on the weekend.”

“Yeah, keywords here, emergency session,” said the aide. “It comes down to scheduling. A hundred and fifty or so member nations, it's a lot of people, magical or not. So organizing a session this quickly, it's—”

“An impressive feat,” Harry finished. He looked up to see Jose walk into the room.

“Mr. Armando. Good day to you,” said the Queen.

“Ma'am,” said Jose, as he claimed a seat at the table. He made eye contact with Harry. “Lisa's wondering when we can... uh, get back to the house.”

“We'll take you once we...”

“Forgot the reason we came out here, did we?” Mazhe teased.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Dobby?”

Rather than just popping in, the elf hurried in from the kitchen. “Master Harry call for Dobby?”

“Yeah. It was a late night and we missed breakfast. If you could bring the lot of us something—not too much, knowing lunch isn't far off.”

“Dobby will be right back!”

“He still amazes me,” said Jose, as he watched the small creature patter back into the kitchen.

“A dear friend procured over four years ago. I took great pleasure in all but stealing him from his tyrant of a master not long before,” said Harry, nastily. “The fool now walks the afterlife, the price for following the Dark Lord.”

“And the foolish Dark Lord likely wishes for death,” said Mazhe, with equal venom.


Harry gave a curt nod. “He frightens you. It would be a lie if I denied he scares me also. Our relationship with him was formed through necessity. He presented opportunity to dispose of Voldemort once and for all, a proposition I had no choice but accept—it was truly for the greater good, no matter what sort of future that may mean for me.”

Mazhe narrowed his eyes. “Still. I think you take delight in sending victims to him, Harry.”
“Take delight in seeing justice met out? Why should I not? Not one individual I have sent to him is innocent. Can you say the same? Do remember Storn—”

“That's not fair!” Mazhe snapped back, “How could I have known what would happen?!”

“What happened?” Jose wondered.

As they ate, Harry and Mazhe recounted the events a year prior, and their battle with Miraak. The subject of the tale joined them half-way through, adding his own view of the event. At the mention of Mazhe and Harry's encounter with a dragon, Jose appeared alarmed, and Harry made a mental note to introduce him to either Sahrotaar or Paarthurnax in the near future. Up to this point, they'd been lucky not to encounter a hostile dragon. Perhaps the meeting should happen sooner rather than later, just because. Bryce had handled the introduction rather well... good luck there. Would that hold out with Jose?

November 5, 2007 / 5 Sun's Dusk, 4E202

It was rare for photographs to be taken during a session of the ICW However, given the severity of the matter at hand, such a photograph took up the top third of the front page from that morning's National Daily Chronicle.

**BRITAIN DECLARED ROGUE STATE**

**International Body Reacts to Terrorist Takeover**

*Toronto (AWP):* The International Confederation of Wizards declared Britain a Rogue State, following a lengthy debate at yesterday's emergency meeting of the international body in Toronto.

Effective retroactive to midnight, the declaration suspends Britain from all international agreements, protocols, and privileges typically enjoyed by member nations. The international body has also issued a travel advisory to its membership, and is advising all member nations to impose floo network restrictions in accordance. “It is up to member nations to take precautions against this new hostile entity,” it was stated in the notice.

“The international magical community is both outraged and alarmed by the actions of this new terrorist faction calling themselves 'Order of the New Dawn'. I emphasize the term 'terrorist faction' here, for that is exactly what we are dealing with. Their actions up to the incident Thursday were alarming in themselves, having murdered over a half-million people, both magical and mundane combined,” said one representative who wished to remain anonymous, “It is clear these individuals have nothing but contempt for people as a whole, whether they be witches and wizards or not.

“Never mind the fact that this faction is committing mass-murder on a regular basis, each of these ghastly attacks puts our world at great risk of exposure. Quite frankly, the time for talking about the matter has come and gone. It's time to act.”

Asked what he meant by that, the representative answered, “Nothing's off the table now. My government is holding emergency meetings of its own to determine what sort of response we might offer. I know other member nations are also conducting similar meetings, and the membership will meet again, likely in a weeks' time to see where we are.”

Will there be a joint effort between member nations to restore a legitimate government in magical Britain? That is a question we still don't have an answer to at this point, but (see IT IS CLEAR, p.2)
I.C.W. INVITES COMMONWEALTH TO THE TABLE

Opens up possible membership in international body

*Toronto:* The International Confederation of Wizards has begun the process in which to accept the Commonwealth into its membership, after a short debate during yesterday's session. “There are a few roadblocks we will have to clear,” said an aide to Grant Weyland late yesterday, “But we like the chances here. This is 2007, not 1692. And, we do have a few allies in the membership who see where we’re coming from. So yeah, we like our chances.”

The aide is of course referencing the invocation of the International Statute of Secrecy back in 1692, the primary reason for which the Commonwealth left the international body. The statute is very much still in effect today, and most certainly a large hurdle to clear if we are to reclaim member status. Indeed, as the aide also mentions, we have gained a few allies in the international body, and our own set of laws governing interactions with the non-magical world outside our borders, do make for a more compelling argument than we may have had three centuries ago. Whether that will be enough to (see GET BY, p8)

The International Statute: Is it doomed? Editorial, p14

Commonwealth interactions with the I.C.W. Time line, p12

Our own secrecy laws, a brief, p5(1)

DELIR THREATENED BY SANDSTORMS

Same storm destroys non-magical city of Dubai, declared no-man’s land

*Delir:* Officials from the Ministry of Infrastructure have become concerned by the unprecedented “mother of all sandstorms”, which has all but destroyed the city of Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates. The storm, with winds measuring in excess of 130 km/h at times, has all but buried the city in sand.

This massive shifting of sand has government officials gravely concerned, as Delir’s shallow depth puts it at risk of discovery as it is. “Yes, the government is taking the matter very seriously,” said a spokesperson with the ministry late yesterday, “Delir’s government is meeting with federal counterparts, as well as with our ministry, and the ministry of Technomancy to try and come up with options.” Asked if decommissioning the city was on the table, the aide answered, “No. At this time, we’re confident that sort of action won’t be required.”

Magical authorities in the region, meanwhile, have taken a ‘hands off’ approach, with the Egyptian Ministry stating, “We do know the storm was formed by a magical anomaly. However, we are confident the Statute is not at risk, and so therefore we’re in agreement that an intervention is not required.”

The Prime Minister released a statement condemning the authorities’ course of action, saying, “Someone created a magical storm so powerful it’s wiped out a major population center and magical authorities are choosing to do nothing? It’s an outrage, an abomination off the scale. It’s a form of magical terrorism, likely perpetrated by the same faction who have now overran magical Britain. I do have to wonder, would they be saying the same thing, if it were Cairo being inundated by a magical (See SANDSTORM, p3)
It had been a long time since Harry had taken an archery lesson from Niruin. So, that morning found him and most of his circle in the guild's training room. Miraak did not attend, having received a message from the Greybeards asking him to meet with them.

Aaron, not having taken such training, readily joined in as a student. After all, it never hurt to learn a new tactic; archery was an old skill not taught in the military in modern times.

Bryce, too, joined the group for the lesson, and Harry ended up casting an enlargement charm on the room to better accommodate everyone.

Niruin was more than impressed. “Perhaps we should leave the room this size,” he said, “It's much better suited to the purpose.”

Harry only shrugged. “It shall be left in its present state, then.”

Bryce grinned. “Would've been nice to do that back at RFK Stadium. Space was a bit tight there at times.”

“Yes, but you know why we can't,” said Aaron, as he picked up one of the bows from the bench.

“And statute. Can I say it's a stupid law?”

“And some of us agree with you. But so many more believe otherwise... and there have been incidents that back up their concerns.”

“Let's focus on the lesson,” said Niruin. “Now. Harry, show me how much you remember...”

As the morning's lesson progressed, Harry once again made a mental note to return to a proper routine. Regular lessons with Balimund had also suffered as of late—though again, through no fault of Harry's. The bad business surrounding the OND had everyone scrambling since the beginning of Hearthfire, if he really thought about it—back with the incident in Spiriminis.

He was pulled out of his thoughts as Aaron's mobile buzzed. He set down the crossbow he was handling, and retrieved his mobile. He glanced at the message, and frowned. “Lesson's over, guys. OND's moving on Hogwarts.”

Harry muttered under his breath. “How much time do we have?”

“Very little. A guy from Technomancy is on his way to the suite as I speak.”

It only took a minute for the group to travel from the guild's headquarters in the cistern, to Harry's suite. And, sure enough, two people waited for them in the common room, dressed in grey coveralls.

“Mr. and Mr. Stormcrown. Though we have obtained maps of the province here already, you pair would likely know the area better,” said the female worker.

“Uh, well... why?” Mazhe wanted to know, “Shouldn't we be preparing to protect the castle?”

“Yes, we expect you and your group to help in that aspect as well,” said the other, “But something equally critical, is choosing a site here.”

“Wait. You... you intend to move Hogwarts,” said Harry, as realization dawned on him.
“We need a site that would be suitable for the building. Of course, obtaining an exact duplicate geographical position will be impossible, but—”

“Okay. Let me see,” said Mazhe, as he produced his mobile. He pressed a button which caused it to enlarge into tablet form, then opened up the map. He then zoomed in on a location northeast of Ivarstead. “The castle would likely fit well here. It would be on the edge of the escarpment, so, somewhat like the position it's in now.”

Harry shook his head. “I have passed over that location. Though plausible, I believe it more suitable for the castle to be located close to Bthalft.”

He also produced his mobile, and seconds later, had the map zoomed in on a site to the southwest of the new Commonwealth settlement.

“Pass over a bookmark, the both of you,” said the female engineer, “I’ll pass that along to the Ministry of Infrastructure. They’ll need to send out engineers to make sure the locations would be suitable.”

Bryce still looked doubtful. “So you're just gonna... move the whole building.”

Justin gave a nod. “Exactly like we did with Jose and Lisa's house, yes. It'll be a lot more work, but do-able. Definitely up there with one of the largest structures we've moved.”

Harry frowned. “Wards surrounding the school will be a concern.”

That got a nod from Aaron. “A large contingent of SOU will be deployed, as will a similar number of her majesty’s marines. But yes, we will need for Professor McGonagall to disable most, if not all of the castle's protections just before we do the move.”

“When's this happening?” Bryce wanted to know.

“We're leaving now. Gear up, guys,” said Aaron, “The Ragnar's already in position over the Black Lake.”


Justin smirked. “You've not seen her yet. One of our warships. Gave Dumbledork a nice surprise three or so years ago, I'll say that.”

That earned a vicious smirk from both Harry and Mazhe.

Chapter End Notes

UP NEXT: Harry and his circle attend Hogwarts and help repel the OND assault, ending with astounding magic being used in its defence; and Bryce has a terrifying encounter with one of the Wizarding world’s darkest creatures...
CHAPTER NOTES: (1) Oh, the irony of the date, it being November 5 when this happens. Those who aren't British or members of the British Commonwealth won't get it, but those of you who do, help out and fill the rest in, eh? >:D I did consider having the actual invasion/take-over happen on November 5, but I wanted an incident on Halloween. So this has to be the next best thing.
Flight of Hogwarts

Chapter Summary

Harry and his circle attend Hogwarts and help repel the OND assault, ending with astounding magic being used in its defence; and Bryce has a terrifying encounter with one of the Wizarding world’s darkest creatures...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

13. FLIGHT OF HOGWARTS

November, 2007 / Sun's Dusk, 4E202

“Battle is an orgy of disorder.”

- George S. Patton

It had been well over a year since the last time he'd set foot on the Ragnar, but to Harry, almost nothing had changed. A small pang of sadness pulled at his heart, as he remembered the furious exit he and Tommy had made. He gave his head a shake to dislodge those thoughts, and forced himself to focus on the present situation. The terrorists would call at the school any time, leaving no time for reminiscing about the past.

“This is supposed to be a ship?” Bryce looked unimpressed.

“We will give you a tour when we have a chance,” Aaron promised, “She's nothing like you might imagine.”

“You will appreciate her size when we get down to the ground. Here. Have a look,” said Justin indicating the floor-to-ceiling windows which formed one wall of the common room.

Harry found himself once again forcing old memories to the back of his mind, as Bryce had a look out the enormous windows.

“Damn,” he said, “That... that's the... the school, I guess.”

The Ragnar had oriented herself so the side containing Harry's suite faced the castle.

“I've had a number of nasty events unfold around me while attending school here,” said Harry, “Yet, there have been moments of joy that do somewhat offset others. I count all of the teachers as friends and allies, as I also consider a number of students present.”

Bryce thought for a moment. “Why didn't we just travel by floo right into the school?”

“The Ragnar has the only secure fireplace into the school,” Justin answered, “It was set up three years ago. Harry told you about the Triwizard tournament, right?”
Bryce gave a nod.

“‘The connection’s still intact and it’s been most useful on more than a few occasions.’ Harry glanced at Aaron. ‘They are expecting us?’”

Aaron gave a nod. “Whenever you're ready. Commander Dawson's already meeting with the headmistress.”

“Then we waste time standing idle.”

Only a few moments later, Harry and his circle stood in the headmistress' office. He was again forced to shake off old memories, as he greeted Professor McGonagall.

“Good of you to come, Mr. Stormcrown,” she said, as they shook hands.

“To learn friends and allies are in harm's way? How could I not, professor? You are aware of the Commonwealth's plan to relocate the school?”

“We are, Mr. Stormcrown,” said Professor Flitwick, “Though quite honestly, all of us have doubts as to whether or not the Commonwealth will be able to move the castle.”

“Trust us, professor, it's more than do-able. A team from the ministry of Infrastructure is already at work. The biggest issue right now, is time. We need a half-hour, maybe a little more,” said an engineer who'd joined Commander Dawson.

“Then we'll do our best to see you have it,” said McGonagall.

“Just be aware, there'll be a point where we'll need you to deactivate any protective wards so the move can take place,” said the engineer. “We'll wait until the last possible moment, but...”

“Protective wards would interfere with whatever magic you'll be using to move the castle,” Flitwick guessed.

“Where is the castle being moved?”

“To Skyrim,” Harry answered, “My partner and I have submitted two potential sites for consideration.”

“And the government's made a decision, choosing the site near Bthalft. Harry's argument was compelling,” said the engineer.

“Merlin's beard!” one of the portraits protested, “Hogwarts being taken out of Britain altogether?! I must protest!”

“Hold your tongue!” shouted another, “I'd rather it be moved or destroyed, than see it fall into the hands of traitors and monsters!”

“Silence, all of you,” said the portrait of Armando Dippet, “Better to move the castle than it fall into the hands of the enemy. All of you must be aware of the Commonwealth's position on a great number of matters dear to us all. It's truly the lesser of two evils, one even the founders would have to agree to.”

“Thank you, professor,” said Harry, with an incline of the head. “Now. Students who are not of age...”

“Are being port-keyed to the Ragnar and escorted into the VPR,” said Commander Dawson, “We
have a number of diversions and entertainment set up to keep everyone comfortable for the next few hours, extending to a couple of days if necessary.”

It was then Commander Dawson's mobile buzzed. He pulled it out, opened it up, and read the message. “Shit. OND's coming up the pathway to the main gate. Professors, do what you must to secure the school.”

“Where should we be?” Mazhe asked.

“We go down to meet the enemy,” Harry answered, simply.

“I'll walk with you down to the entrance. There's one spell which must be cast from the entry way,” said McGonagall.

“Then let's go. Commander, when can we expect SOU and marines on site?”

“They should be arriving by port key any minute now,” said Dawson, “Now go. Professor, you're coming back here when finished?”

“Not straight away. Filius, I'll need your help with a few additional spells.”

“Yes, of course.”

The enlarged group hurried out of the office, down the spiral staircase and into the corridor at the bottom.

“Though this is not you-know-who... there is no certainly we'll keep them out forever,” said Flitwick, as they hurried through the corridors leading to the main staircase.

“Just a half-hour, all we need, if that,” said Aaron. “Ragnar's gonna deploy her air wing unit, Captain Rowland should be in the air now.”

As they arrived at the main staircase, Harry remembered something. “Uh, Bryce. Be aware of your footing. The stairs can change without notice.”

“What for?”

“A quirk of the building,” answered McGonagall, as the group began to descend.

“Shor's bones. Apologies not making proper introductions. Professor, this is Bryce Hunter, a new friend we've acquired back in Hearthfire. Bryce, this is Professor Minerva McGonagall, the headmistress of Hogwarts, and Professor Filius Flitwick—”

“Deputy headmaster,” Flitwick finished, “Head of Ravenclaw house, and Charms professor.”

“Nice meeting you. Think we better keep moving, us being on the clock and all that,” said Bryce.

“Yes, indeed,” Flitwick agreed, as they all hurried down the next flight of stairs. “You're a Muggle, I gather.”

“Non-magical, yes. Don't mean I can't fight.”

“Oh, don't mistake my question, Mr. Hunter,” said Flitwick, “Mr. Stormcrow's always surrounded himself with a wonderful group of people, whether Britain's wizard community wishes to accept that or not.”
They finally stepped off the last set of stairs, only to climb another set of stairs leading into the entrance hall. There, they found a pair of engineers at work, monitoring a set of instruments set up in the middle of the room. Every few seconds, a tall rod protruding from the top of the contraption would flicker a green colour before falling still.

Professor McGonagall ignored them, instead turning to face the stairway they'd just come up. She raised her wand, commanding, “Piertotum Locomotor!”

Bryce was startled, as a suit of armour resting on a plinth a little ways up on the wall came to life right before his eyes, leaping down to the floor with a noisy crash. Rumblings and similar crashes from the corridors and the floors above told him the same thing was happening throughout the castle.

“Damn,” he whispered.

“Hogwarts is threatened,” McGonagall shouted, “Man the boundaries, do your duty to our school!”(1)

Now the suits of armour all charged off out the main doors, intent on carrying out the headmistress' instructions. Noise from around and above told the group the same was happening throughout the building.

“Jesus. The school's got an army,” said Justin, looking impressed.

“One of numerous protections we can activate, Dr. Fraser,” said Flitwick, as the group headed out the enormous main doors. “Mr. Stormcrown, you are versed in amplification spells?”

“Yes sir,” Harry answered.

“Good, good. Help amplify the spells we're about to cast.”

“Right. Mazhe, help Professor McGonagall.”

“Got it.”

“Hurry it up, the enemy's a minute from the gates,” Aaron warned. That coincided with a group of black-clad soldiers arriving a short distance away. Then, moments after, a second group of soldiers arrived, these wearing camouflage patterned uniforms. Marines, Harry remembered, as he set to work, amplifying the charms professor's spell-casting.

Bryce quickly realized the spells being cast as the same used during the attack on RFK Stadium in Washington. It had created an impressive protective dome maybe twenty feet in diameter. But here at the school? Surely—

The channel of magical energy shooting up into the evening sky was enormous, being amplified by the two mages. Sure, Brandon was well-versed in magic, but this was two substantially powerful Hogwarts professors. It should be expected that they did know a thing or two about magic, right?(2)

The great columns of energy were then forming a massive protective dome, one that would encompass most of the grounds, right down to the main gate. Some of the soldiers also began casting, joining with the professors, and now the air seemed to hum with the powerful energy at work. Faster and faster the dome formed, until it last touched the ground, forming a translucent barrier.

“Come, Filius, let's return to my office,” said McGonagall.
It was then, as Harry watched the headmistress and Flitwick head back inside, that he noticed pairs of men dressed in coveralls working at the bottom of the wall nearby. A glowing sphere was placed on the ground against the wall, and one of the engineers then aimed his mobile at it, and pressed a button. The sphere shimmered a green colour for a moment, before vanishing.

“Perimeter markers,” Justin explained, catching Harry's gaze, “They mark out the footprint of the object we're trying to move. In this case, we'll use a thousand of them, maybe more.”

“Okay, so they get the building's size and shit. But what about the... well, the other end?” Bryce wondered, “Leaves a hole behind, but... how does it fit where you're plannin' on placing it?”

“Oh. Gotcha. There's a second object we deploy, called a footprint marker. That's the device we saw set up in the entrance hall. It captures the shape of the footprint,” Justin explained. “That marker, once it's done its work, is picked up, and taken to the destination. We can then place it, and it'll show an outline of the structure so it can be placed precisely.”

Bryce looked impressed. “Damn. So it's like... switching the two places out, or something like that.”

“A very good analogy. Naturally, no witch or wizard would be powerful enough to do such a move on their own. And even a group wouldn't be able to do it. We tap into the Orb during the operation for the power we need.”

Now Harry saw the connection. “The device... a rod or antenna turned green every few seconds. That would coincide with a marker being set.”

“Yeah, exactly,” said Justin, as they set out for the main gate. “The marker is spent when deployed, transmitting the information to the footprint marker.”

They arrived at the main gate, to discover Dumbledore had joined the throng of foes. This coincided with the arrival of another group of men, Brandon among them.

“Rowland's in the air with air wing, they'll be providing aerial fire support whenever possible,” said Brandon, by way of greeting.

“Good. We've got an additional problem,” said Harry, pointing out the tall wizard, who was pushing his way to the front of the attackers. “I would see him captured alive so he may join the dark wizard he fathered and now follows.”

“Care must be taken,” said Dardanos, who had remained silent up to this point. “His presence may only represent distraction.”

“Yeah, thoughts concurred. I would speak with him anyway.”

He stepped up to the invisible barrier to face the one-time headmaster, now turned enemy. Though the ward was physically impenetrable, it was still possible to speak through it, exactly as had been the case in Washington.

“Somehow, I knew that one day, we would face each other across a field of battle, Dumbledore,” said Harry. “Why? Why join those you not so long ago fought against?”

“It was an inevitable path, Harry,” Dumbledore answered, as though stating the obvious. “The damage Muggles have caused to our world, it must stop or it will be our end. It's simple as that.”

“Yeah, so you're gonna kill what, six billion of us?” Bryce retorted, “You're touched in the head, old man.”
That got a smirk out of Harry. “The better question might be, what does the old man and his merry band of misfits think to accomplish? Did he not consider that perhaps, we would keep close watch on a location which contains many friends and allies?”

Now, Dumbledore's eyes were twinkling. “Perhaps, young Harry, we thought exactly that.”

That coincided with both Aaron and Brandon's mobiles buzzing. A second later, Justin's mobile rang. He had to put a hand over his other ear so he could hear what was being said, since the dark wizards were frequently lobbing spells against the barrier.

Brandon, though looked alarmed by the message he'd just received. “Jesus. Five players being targeted as we speak; DOI’s mobilizing as is MACUSA and the Canadian ministry.”

“Have... did they get anyone?” Bryce asked, concerned.

“Not known just yet. We're working on it.”

“Hands and minds to purpose!” Harry shouted, “I trust the Commonwealth will have things in hand. Do remember, Dumbledore, that we've gotten pretty good at intercepting such actions. Now that we have some understanding of your targets, if not the root purpose, steps can be taken.”

“You cannot protect them all, Harry. It's a simple truth.”

“We can try, old man. We can most certainly try. Perhaps we may fail, but know this. We'll fight you to the last man if that's what it calls for.”

It was then there came a painfully loud blast to the left of them. The barrier still glowed an angry red from the explosion, but it was rapidly dissipating, and the barrier still remained intact.

Dumbledore also gazed at the mark left by the detonation. “You have to know, Harry, the ward will not keep us out forever.”

“We do not need to keep you out forever,” Harry answered, lightly, “In time, the headmistress will disable the wards on our direction.”

Now, Dumbledore looked baffled. Harry gave a vicious smirk. “Shall we enlighten the old man?”

“There's no harm in telling him,” said Brandon, though he was still reading the message he'd received.

“Long before the ministry fell, her majesty broke words with the headmistress, and discussed concerns regarding an event exactly like this becoming a reality. We have ways and means to remove the school and those within, to a location beyond the reach of yourself and your dark mistress.”

The majority of the dark witches and wizards gathered behind Dumbledore all laughed at the absurdity of doing such a thing.

“No amount of magic can move Hogwarts, boy!” one of them jeered.

“Stick around and find out,” said Aaron, “Our engineers should be finishing the on-site prep any time now.”

“Even if what you claim is possible, you have no right to do so,” said Dumbledore, “Hogwarts belongs to Britain's magical community—”
“Which has now fallen into the hands of a terrorist organization. I think if the school's founders were still alive today, they would accept the lesser of the two evils,” said Brandon. “They would resist your rule with every fiber of their being, and welcome whatever plot or scheme that would protect the school. Including moving the building. I think they would rather it be destroyed, than see monsters like you in charge of it.”

“Yeah, portraits in the headmistress' office said something along the same vein a little while ago,” Aaron remembered.

“No parent will ever accept such a move,” said Dumbledore.

“If it means keeping kids safe—”

Bryce wasn't able to finish, as a massive bright flash bloomed in the same spot where the smaller explosion had taken place only a short while prior. This was promptly joined by a terrible blast, which punched a gaping hole in the barrier. Everyone quickly realized what had happened: the first explosion served only to weaken, while the second, much larger blast punched the hole.

Instant chaos. A throng of Death Eaters streamed through the gaping hole, Dumbledore quickly joining them. That coincided with the Ragnar's Air Wing engaging outside the barrier. Much more agile than a non-magical fighter plane, they better-resembled birds. Incredibly fast, and deadly, they were rapidly laying waste to the attacking force still outside.

Bryce had quickly teamed up with Aaron and a second S.O.U. soldier, and between them, a half-dozen enemies met their end. While Aaron stuck to magic, the second guy used a rifle. Non-magical, then? Bryce didn't have much time to think on the matter, as they pressed another group of terrorists.

Harry and Justin, along with a pair of soldiers, had engaged Dumbledore. Even at four against one, the man was a frightening sight to behold, unleashing terrifying spells, if Harry had to admit. Most of them were considered very dark magic, and he had to wonder if the man had ever truly been on the side of the light, all considered. Perhaps the grandfatherly face he wore was truly just a mask, put in place to hide the wizard's true nature. After all, he had run with—

“Fus... RO DAAAAAH!” came the terrible shout off to Harry's left. An enemy soared through the air and into the path of a purple blast of magic Dumbledore had unleashed, and plopped to the ground with terrible gashes slicing across his body. He was dead. Four others had also been caught by the shout, sent flying across the field.

There came a flicker from outside the damaged ward, and a dark cloud formed. At least a dozen Dementors spewed from it, along with another throng of terrorists. The dark shapes swooped in through the opening, and the temperature seemed to plummet, as the abominations each locked onto a target. Three soldiers were dead within moments—non-magical, Harry quickly realized. A few magical defenders were quickly producing Patronus charms, but not enough to repel that many. He really needed to get away from Dumbledore—

Dumbledore's attention was briefly diverted, as a group of statues had joined the fight. Unfortunately, Dumbledore just batted them away with a flick of his wand. The suits of armour weren't able to cast magic in any way, being simple animations.

That did, however, give both Harry and Justin the opening they needed. Justin attempted to nail the old man with magical chains and restraints, while Harry unleashed a pair of ice spikes. The magical chains were batted away, but one of the ice spikes nailed the old man in the left arm, and he staggered backwards.
A purple arc of electricity sizzled by from Harry's left, and for a moment he thought they were being attacked from behind, until Mazhe put a hand on his shoulder. Dumbledore had been forced to Apparate a short distance away to avoid the additional attack.

Now, Mazhe saw an opening. “Fus... RO DAAAAAH!”

That coincided with Dumbledore unleashing a chained bone-breaking curse at the group. The man was sent flying, and while Harry managed to shield himself and his partner, Justin was caught by it, as were the pair of soldiers assisting. The three of them collapsed in a heap.

“Justin!?"

“Get Dumbledore!” Justin hissed, shakily trying to point his wand at his damaged legs. He knew both of them had been busted pretty bad. Both of the soldiers had been killed instantly, having received the brunt of the spell.

“I'll look after him,” Mazhe promised, while Harry hurried after Dumbledore. Did he have a Black Book? Yes, ‘Waking Dreams' was in his pouch. Gods, Mazhe really nailed him. He'd landed nearly a hundred feet—

“HARRY!!!!” came Dardanos' panicked shout. Harry followed his equally panicked gesture, and was horrified to see three Dementors circling Aaron and Bryce, who were both down on the ground. A fourth was poised to suck out Bryce's soul.

“Expecto Patronum!” Harry thundered, and to the ghostly stag which ballooned from his wand, he commanded, “Get it!”

The silvery animal all but flashed across the distance, sending the Dementor flying. The presence also sent the other three to seek a softer target, as Harry hurried over.

“Yol... TOOOOR!” came Mazhe's shout, and one of the fleeing Dementors was set alight, letting out ungodly noises as it soared back up into the heavens.

“Bloody hell...” Harry muttered, before summoning a Seeker. It wasted no time joining the fight, giving Harry a chance to get to his downed friends.

“Gods... a second more and that would've been it,” Aaron muttered, as he retrieved his mobile. It had been buzzing for the last minute or so, but up to this point he'd been unable to check it.

“Harry... you all right?” Mazhe asked, as he joined them, with Justin not far behind. Justin still looked pale, and likely whatever Mazhe had done would only serve as a stop-gap until they returned to Skyrim. Healer Ferris' services would be required, without question.

“I'm fine. Just...” he knelt down beside Bryce, who was still not moving.

“Here,” said Justin, reaching into his pouch, “Chocolate, it should help.”

“Yeah, I know. Bloody hell, he's white as a sheet.”

“Guys. They're about to do the move,” said Aaron.

No sooner than he'd gotten the words out of his mouth, the damaged ward at last collapsed.

“McGonagall must've disabled the wards,” Mazhe guessed.

Harry nodded absently, more concerned about Bryce. Only now was he showing any signs of life at
all. Death Eaters were still about, but with the Air Wing now able to help inside the school grounds, the threat was diminishing.

“Help prop his head up so I might give him a calming draught,” Harry decided.

Mazhe knelt down beside Harry, and lifted Bryce's head up, while Harry fished in his pouch for a calming draught.

“A pepper-up potion may also help,” said Justin. “And the chocolate.”

The lot of them were again forced to duck, as a storm of colourful curses soared overhead. That was answered by a flurry of bright flashes from the opposite direction.

“We really gotta get out of here,” Justin muttered.

“Bryce? Can you hear me?” Harry asked.

Bryce opened his eyes, and Harry could see it at once: the guy was emotionally shattered. No shit, the man had just experienced his worst memories all at once, never mind the fact he'd nearly been kissed.

“Here. Drink this, it'll help.”

Harry put the bottle up to his lips, but Bryce reached up and gripped it, silently insisting on doing it himself. However, he was shaking too much, and Harry ended up helping anyway.

Another storm of curses and spells zoomed overhead, with counter-spells and curses flying the opposite way.

“Right. We really need to move,” said Aaron.

“We'll help Bryce,” Mazhe decided, with Harry silently agreeing.

It was then that the castle itself began to take on a blue shimmer.

“Here we go,” said Justin, as the shimmer intensified. The building was beginning to turn translucent, showing the interior, better-resembling a three-dimensional computer drawing, rather than a solid structure. The entire area hummed with energy that intensified by the second, before there came a tremendous CRACK, much like the sound Ragnar made when she popped from place to place. Hogwarts was gone a fraction of a second later, being replaced by a mismatched chunk of terrain.

That was the cue for the remaining Death Eaters to pop away, the target of their operation having been removed from their grasp. Harry looked around to find the Seeker had also been destroyed, and...

“Where did the Dementors go?”

Mazhe gave a vicious smirk. “They didn't like being set on fire.”

“They can't be killed,” said Justin, firmly, as he climbed to his feet. He hissed under his breath.

“What?”

“Let's just get back to the flat so we can properly fix our injuries. I'll need Healer Ferris sooner rather than later.”
Moments later, the group found themselves in the common room of the flat. Brandon had his mobile out at once, already putting in a call to Healer Ferris, while Harry and Mazhe helped Bryce to sit on one of the couches. He was still white as a sheet, and his whole body was shaking.

Justin, meanwhile, sat down heavily on one of the chairs. He was also shaking, looking rather pale, and if Harry had to guess, he was going on mostly adrenaline at this point.

"Legs are still hurting, healing potions or not," he said, seeing Harry's look of worry. "Likely need to regrow the bones—"

Bryce looked at him like he'd grown a second head. "Regrow the bones. Seriously?"

"Yeah, something called Skele-gro," Aaron answered, "It's a nasty concoction, but it will regrow bones that have been damaged too far to be healed by other means."

"The healer vanishes the damaged bone, and the Skele-gro is administered over a few doses to grow new ones."

Now Bryce looked impressed, at least for a moment. "Your world's still fucked up," he declared. "What the hell was... well... whatever it was that attacked us?"

"Dementors," Aaron answered, "They're supposed to guard Azkaban, the Wizarding prison in Great Britain. Because you're not magical, you can't see them. Perhaps in some ways, that's probably a good thing. They're a real nasty piece of work, an abomination... and you saw—felt—first-hand, what they are capable of."

"I feel like... like..."

"You'll never be happy again," Justin finished. "Trust us. It gets better. What you're feeling... it's not permanent, even though you might think it."

It was then that Brandon finished his call. "All right. Healer Ferris is on the way."

"Their attempt at distraction—" Dardanos began.
“I'm looking into it,” said Brandon, “We expected them to try something like this soon as we got word they were moving on Hogwarts.”

“So the players—”

“We don't know yet, Bryce,” answered Aaron, “Just... trust us, we'll do everything we can.”

“We should be—”

Aaron shook his head. “Harry, no. Queen's orders, we're to stay in Skyrim.”

“Zu'u los nid kiür.” (“I am no child”)

“English,” Bryce muttered.

“I'm not a child, nor have I been ever, really. I tire of people handling me in that way!”

“We've got it in hand. If we run off into the middle of an operation, it could be disastrous. Beside the point, you've all got injuries to deal with,” said Brandon.

Harry crossed his arms and huffed. “So be it.”

It was then the fireplace roared to life, expelling Healer Ferris.

“Good grief,” she muttered, seeing the state of the group. “What happened?”

“Dumbledore happened,” Harry answered, “Bryce was attacked by a Dementor...”

“Dumbledore nailed me with a bone-breaking curse. Pretty sure I'll need Skele-gro to fix them,” said Justin.

“Then we'll start with your injuries. Lieutenant Commander Carpenter, if you could give me a hand getting him into his room so we can begin...”

Chapter End Notes

UP NEXT: Harry takes action to protect Zoey and her family, much to the Commonwealth’s annoyance; Harry and Mazhe dine with the Jarl of Solitude, resulting in a few uncomfortable questions; and we get another glimpse into further OND plots, as the group meets aboard their acquired yacht in the South Pacific...

CHAPTER NOTES: Yeah, never planned for Bryce to encounter one of those things, but... sometimes, things just write themselves. Once again, though, I so hate writing battle scenes. What I see in my head going down is so difficult to translate onto paper & it ends up crap... at least I think it ends up crap. But there you go, Dumbledore shows up and it's chaos.

Count on this happening a few more times, he's not going down easily. He's got over a century worth of knowledge on these guys. Granted, in this case, he came close to being captured thanks to Mazhe's dragon abilities. And that's gonna be the thing—something out of left field that's gonna catch him off guard... something from Skyrim, or... unusual, obscure magic. But most things in the magical world aren't gonna do a whole
lot to him. He's on the dark side now but that doesn't mean he's abandoned what he knows. He's a formidable opponent in any form.

(1) Taken from p. 484, Deathly Hallows, Canadian soft-cover edition.
(2) A slight alteration on something McGonagall actually says in the book.
Harry takes action to protect Zoey and her family, much to the Commonwealth’s annoyance; Harry and Mazhe dine with the Jarl of Solitude, resulting in a few uncomfortable questions; and we get another glimpse into further OND plots, as the group meets aboard their acquired yacht in the South Pacific...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

14. YEAR'S END

November/December, 2007

“An optimist stays up until midnight to see the new year in. A pessimist stays up to make sure the old year leaves.”

- Bill Vaughn

With just about everyone nursing injuries of one sort or other, it wasn’t until late the following morning before anyone was really up and about. Healer Ferris ended up remaining in the flat, having to administer potions at different times overnight—the bones in Justin’s legs had to be vanished and regrown entirely.

When Harry, Mazhe, and Bryce stepped into the dining room to get something to eat, Harry wasn’t surprised to find Zoey was present, sitting rather close to her boyfriend. ‘No shit,’ he thought, ‘he could have been sent to the afterlife.’

“Dr. Bartlet,” he greeted, as he took a seat. “Your family is safe?”

“Dad’s almost ready to send all of us here,” Zoey answered, “He’s really scared, and so is mom, but —”

“MACUSA won’t allow it,” said Brandon, “They’re asserting jurisdiction and effectively telling us to fuck off.”

“And they’re bein’ morons,” said Bryce, quietly. Even going on twelve hours after the event, he still looked pale.

“Though there are certainly fewer risks here in Skyrim, there are still dangers, Dr. Bartlet,” said Mazhe, “Never mind the fact they would then need to be told about our world.”

“One of MACUSA’s concerns,” Brandon agreed, “And as much as we hate it, the argument carries some weight.”

Harry continued to fill his plate as he listened to the discussion. In her shoes? He’d do everything
possible to protect family. Right? To hell with protocol. Wasn’t he Promagistrate or something? But this was also meddling with the American First Family… potential, very messy repercussions if something were to happen.

Yet, Zoey was Justin’s girlfriend. And Justin was a dear friend of more than a decade. And the promagistrate thing… no, there was an avenue open to him that shouldn’t cause too much chaos.

“See to it that those of import are aware, the ancient and noble house of Black considers Zoey Bartlet and her immediate family to be under its protection hence forth. That should they request sanctuary, it shall be granted without interference or delay.”

“Harry—”

“Brandon, it is my right as the Lord Black, a title I have not had use for until now.”

Brandon looked like he wanted to bang his head on the table. Zoey, meanwhile, gave Harry a warm smile. “Thanks, Harry.”

“I take care of my friends. And you mean something to my best friend. I won’t have his life shattered due to something happening to you or those close to you.”

Brandon let out a sigh. “You know the Americans won’t like that. It could be considered interfering with the non-magical government. Just so you’re aware.”

“My decision stands. Additionally, Jose Armando and his family, as well as Bryce Hunter also fall under the protection of House Black… the offer of sanctuary is equally extended.”

“What’s that mean?” Bryce wanted to know.

“It means Harry can mete out justice in any way he sees fit,” said Brandon. “The Commonwealth doesn’t like it, and quite honestly, expect to have a number of conversations about it.”

“Can they… Idunno, reverse it?”

“The better question, will they try? Answer, probably not. The thing being, there are a number of people who still see Harry as a dark wizard—still believing the garbage the English Wizarding media was spouting. This will be seen as further evidence, him using old laws and customs commonly used by dark circles.”

“Yeah, gotcha. Bad press.”

“Yes.”

“The press can all get bent,” Harry snorted.

Brandon cleared his throat several times, while Zoey was sent into a fit of giggles.

She at last recomposed herself. “Dad likely won’t come, but… he may send mom and my sisters.”

“And their immediate family,” said Harry, “I wonder if… maybe Hermione’s parents might help… your sisters know nothing about the Wizarding world presently, am I correct?”

“Yeah.”

“Theresa can probably help out as well, as can my mom and dad,” said Justin, “I’m first-gen, too, remember.”
“It won’t happen today,” said Brandon, “The government will still need to coordinate—”

“And I’ll need to talk to mom and dad,” said Zoey.

“But I will be clear. The next time there is a lock down, your family will be protected,” said Harry, firmly, “In the most extreme case, they will be brought here. If the security here is sufficient to protect her majesty, then it should be more than suitable to protect you and your family.”

Brandon again mentally sighed. Instant chaos. Just add Harry.

“What happened to the players yesterday?” Bryce asked.

“All were recovered with few difficulties,” said Brandon, “We’re tracking down immediate family and friends, what I’m hearing so far, it’s been successful so far.”

“It was a distraction,” said Harry, “Dumbledore alluded that much yesterday.”

“Mr. Armando’s volunteered to help with the orientation since they’re considered colleagues. And we’ve got healers helping out where necessary,” said Brandon. “The distraction was an outright failure.”

“Maybe,” said Bryce, “Just… maybe they’re testing how you guys react to this kind of shit, right?”

“Yeah, we’re considering that. Thing is, OND doesn’t know exactly how strong the SOU really is. Equally, I’m confident they don’t know just how easily we can get around thanks to Dr. Fraser’s devices.”

“Overconfidence kills.”

“That too,” Brandon agreed, “Just trust us, we’ve got a lot of resources working on this, and lots of boots on the ground.”

Mid-afternoon, once Zoey had been returned to Washington, the group took a port key which deposited them in the entry hall at Hogwarts. The school was then crawling with government officials, including a throng of engineers. No surprise, considering the magnitude of the move. Harry found himself truly impressed, as they headed for the headmistress’ office.

“Still has me floored you guys did this,” said Bryce.

“Yeah, definitely one of the largest moves we’ve done,” said Aaron. Much like Bryce, he was still rather pale, but both were doing much better by this point.

“How often is it done?”

“Common,” Justin answered. They had arrived at the gargoyle that secured the entrance to the office, and it simply pivoted out of the way, revealing the spiral staircase.

The door to the office was open, and when they stepped inside, they found the headmistress and some of the teachers speaking with several government officials.

“Mr. Stormcrown,” McGonagall greeted.

“Good day, professor. Everyone is getting settled, I’m guessing?”

“All in all, very little in the way of complications.”
“We were expecting to be dealing with damage,” Flitwick admitted, “But Merlin, we’re more than impressed by the precision.”

“We’ve had lots of practice, professor,” said one of the officials. She was of average height, with dark skin. “It’ll be a first for moving a school, if ministry records are correct.”

Justin gave a nod. “Minister, this is Harry and Mazhe Stormcrown, and their friend Bryce Hunter. Guys, I introduce Dawn Church, Minister for Education.”

“Ma’am,” said Harry, offering a hand.

“A pleasure. You’re still studying hard, I hope.”

“Of course. Even with all the chaos, I’m doing my best to keep up on things.”

“So what’s gonna happen now?” Bryce wondered.

“A question we were discussing as the lot of you arrived,” said McGonagall.

“The remainder of the school year, not a whole lot,” said Church, “Introducing a new curriculum or making any sort of significant change wouldn’t be in the best interest of the students.”

“Without interference from the English ministry, we should be able to enact a much better curriculum come September,” said Sprout, “But we welcome any suggestions the Commonwealth might have.”

Harry couldn’t help but grin. Yes, the school would do more than all right, under the eye of the Commonwealth.

“Hermione and the rest of my displaced friends—”

“Will be more than welcome, Harry,” said Flitwick.

“And I’ll be having a word with Remus about returning as Defence professor, sooner rather than later,” said McGonagall.

That got another grin from Harry. “Of the four professors I had lessons under while here, I learned the most from him.”

“Who will look after Emily and Rosie?” Mazhe questioned.

“Jose and Lisa,” said Bryce, “Miguel will like having honorary older sisters.”

“That works. And if they won’t, Mrs. Weasley will,” said Harry, “No matter what, they will be taken care of.”

“And the school situation will be settled come September as it is,” said Church, “We are at the point where a school must be established in Bthalft as it stands—”

“Your schools combine both magical and non-magical subjects, correct?” questioned Sprout.

“Yes, exactly.”

“Then there is no reason such an arrangement couldn’t be accommodated here. It’s about exposure, correct?”

“Again, exactly,” said Church. “Headmistress?”
“It will mean adjusting the wards somewhat, but more than do-able.”

“With your full cooperation, it’ll be more than do-able, headmistress,” said Church.

That earned a smirk out of Harry. “Can’t wait to see Dumbledore’s face when we tell him next time we have an encounter. It will drive him ’round the twist and then some.”

“Or any of the pure-blood extremists so prevalent in England,” said Justin, “Muggles attending Hogwarts?! The world’s coming to an end!”

That sent Harry into a fit of laughter.

“There’s another pressing issue we need to address,” said Mazhe, “I’m not sure if the Commonwealth’s warned you about some of the dangers here in Skyrim, the most serious being hostile dragons.”

“There was mention, Mr. Stormcrown. How serious a threat?” Flitwick questioned, “Or more precisely, how common are they?”

“It’s been some time since we dealt with one, but the point being, they are still around.”

“There is a potential solution,” said Harry, “What if we convince Sahrotaar to relocate here?”

“Both him and Parthurnax,” said Mazhe, “And their presence could be a learning opportunity.”

Harry again smirked. “Count on Hagrid covering them during one of his lessons.”

“More importantly, a pair of dragons in the area would provide a deterrent to hostile forces, whether they be bandits, mages, or other dragons.”

“You have us sold, Mr. Stormcrown,” said McGonagall, “We trust the pair of you know the lay of the land more than we do.”

“Thank you, professor,” said Harry, with an incline of the head.

By the middle of November, all of the displaced residences and their occupants had been moved to Bthalft, as the space now permitted doing so. In the little time since the ward stone was set, the settlement had grown into a respectable city, boasting nearly ten thousand residents.

Harry and his friends had been confused as to where the people were coming from, but Justin had explained, “It’s a milestone for us. Some people enjoy the novelty of being part of that. And realize, moving is less complicated in our world, right?”

Each residence had been moved onto a property which matched the size of the original property back in the UK, and maintenance performed on the structures to ensure they were safe. In the Weasleys’ case, the contractor had offered to replace the house altogether, but Molly and Arthur politely declined.

With there being a population to support it, Gringotts had opened a new branch in the city, which then established a commercial district. That, in turn, allowed Fred and George to open their shop, though Molly was far from impressed by the idea.

Snape, too, opened a shop of his own, an apothecary. He was also looking for an apprentice, and if sources were correct, more than a few had submitted applications. The Commonwealth would permit it, but would likely be keeping an eye on such an arrangement, this according to Will and Alice.
After all, his reputation as a teacher at Hogwarts had been antagonistic.

The last couple of weeks had also seen three different incidents where Harry and his circle were needed; two involving baseball players being targeted by OND, while the third involved a musician. All three incidents were handled quickly and the target successfully rescued. Naturally, questions again rose as to why the terrorists had not attacked another large-scale event. What were they waiting for?

23 November / 23 Frostfall

It wouldn’t be the first time Harry, Mazhe, and their circle dined with a Jarl, considering the pair had been frequent visitors in both Whiterun and Windhelm. However, this would be the first time they did so in Solitude. The dinner was at first somewhat awkward, as they discovered that General Tullius and his Legate, Rikke, were also attending. Of course, Harry realized, with Solitude being considered the seat of Imperial rule in Skyrim, it was likely common for the commander to attend. Would Mazhe end up in trouble, considering what happened the previous summer?

Their worry was for naught, as Tullius and Rikke both greeted Mazhe warmly, the transgressions of the previous summer forgiven. That then allowed for things to relax somewhat, as the meal was served.

The conversation flowed, covering various topics, most focused on the comings and goings of the city and the hold. However, as fate would have it, the ongoing standoff between the empire and the Stormcloaks cropped up.

“And you, Dragonborn, on which side of the battle do you fall?” Rikke questioned, as servers were clearing the empty dishes.

Mazhe let out a sigh. “Guess that topic would eventually come up. The Thalmor murdered my parents and my sister when I was still a boy. The empire simply stood by and watched, then shipped me off to a place that by all accounts was my own personal hell—excuse me, a place that could be considered a pocket plane of Oblivion. And now you have the stones to ask me for my support? I think not.”

Harry scowled. “Is that the purpose for inviting us here? To draw us into conflict here, when we are pressed by conflict elsewhere? Consider the request rejected.”

“If you go to Ulfric, we will know,” said Rikke.

“Ulfric has asked us too,” said Mazhe, “I turned him down too. Both of us have too many problems of our own to worry about, to be drawn into this fight here.”

He closed his eyes, then opened them. “My personal view? The empire died when it capitulated to the elves. Whatever is happening now... you only delay the inevitable.”

“What choice did we have?” Tullius shot back, “We were being exterminated.”

“Better to die than to live in servitude,” said Mazhe, simply, as he refilled his goblet, “The empire was enslaved by the elves and now it’s in its death throes.”

“I have to disagree with that,” said Tullius, “We have been forced to make a number of sacrifices, yes, and we have been weakened somewhat, but dying? No, I take exception to that.”

“And Ulfric’s little rebellion is further weakening us, as we’re forced to divert men and resources in
“And what do the people of Skyrim want?” asked Aaron, “Is an independent Skyrim wanted?”

“That sort of question is irrelevant,” answered Falk Firebeard, “We have all swore oaths to the empire. Ulfric and his revolt are unlawful, it’s that simple.”

“Yet, oppressing an entire people is considered unlawful also,” said Mazhe.

Aaron felt his mobile buzz at his hip, and excused himself.

“Does the Stormcloaks’ actions not surprise you?” questioned Dardanos, as he at last waded into the conversation.

“Ulfric murdered my husband,” said Elisif, bitterly, “How is that ever considered lawful?”

“By no means do we condone or agree with what Jarl Ulfric did, but it is clear he has grievance with the empire. Know this: the order of things as you know it will only persist for so long,” said Dardanos, “Oppressed people will not remain so forever.”

“Guys. We have to go,” said Aaron.

“Something happened,” Harry guessed, to which Aaron gave a nod.

Mazhe rose, with the others following suit. “Jarl Elisif and friends, thank you for having us, but we must return to Riften.”

“Thank you for attending, Dragonborn. Do be well,” the Jarl answered.

Only a minute or so after, the group was gathered back in the suite.

“What’s going on?” Mazhe wanted to know.

“OND have been spotted near a residence we’ve been watching in Lethbridge Alberta,” Aaron answered, “DOI’s ordered the target collected, and for us to attempt to capture one or more of the hostiles. Mrs. T. thinks you and your partner might be able to help in that department.”

“Right, our alternate skill set,” said Mazhe, rolling his eyes.

“Who’s the target?” Bryce questioned.

“A Rich Parker, pitcher for the Oakland A’s.”

“I sort of know him. His fastball’s clocked over a hundred miles an hour.”

“Bloody hell,” Harry muttered, “Catching his pitches must become painful. Right. Let us change our wardrobe and be off.”

“I will remain here,” said Dardanos, “Your number will alarm the subject sufficiently as is.”

“It’s your decision,” said Harry, “But know you’re welcome to come along.”

Residence of Rich Parker
Lethbridge, AB

The entire day had for some reason felt off for the young pitcher. It was as though… as though he
had somehow skipped a couple of hours—unable to recall where he’d been, what he’d done. He’d gone to bed sober—getting plastered really wasn’t his thing as it was… so why was he unable to recall anything from early that morning? Did someone break in, maybe club him over the head…

No. Nothing was missing. At least, nothing obvious. He’d checked himself over in the mirror at least five times, looking for evidence he’d been attacked in some way. Nothing. Not knowing… it was driving him—

The doorbell ringing interrupted his train of thought. Given his hyper-vigilant state, he cautiously pulled back the curtain in the living room. Was that… he looked again, and sure enough, Bryce Hunter was standing on his front doorstep, along with a few strangers. What the hell?

He opened the door, still not sure of what to make of the situation.

“Mr. Parker, can we come in?” Bryce asked.

“What… yeah, uh, sure,” he answered, and stepped back. “What… what’s going on?”

Aaron, meanwhile, caught the disturbed state the young pitcher was in. “You’re missing time… earlier in the day.”

“Yeah! But… how?”

“We’ve seen this before,” Aaron answered.

“Rich, there’s… a group of bad people in the neighborhood.”

“Like what happened to some players recently… they’re after me now,” said Rich, catching on immediately.

Aaron gave a nod, as he felt his mobile buzz at his hip. He pulled it out, and quickly read the message.

“Shit. OND fled the scene.”

Mazhe narrowed his eyes. “Without getting into a fight with us?”

“Yeah, something feels very off with this event,” said Aaron.

“Who are… I mean, I know who you are,” said Rich, pointing to Bryce, “But…”

“I’m Harry, this is Mazhe, and Aaron. Aaron’s with… uh…”

“Commonwealth of Valicadia…”

“That sounds familiar. Like I… I heard it somewhere.”

“Maybe OND said something this morning,” Bryce suggested.

“Very likely, yeah,” Aaron agreed. “I know you will have many questions, but right now, we need to get you to safety. Though it sounds like the bad guys are gone, but it could be a distraction and they may try again.”

“Just trust us,” said Bryce, “We’ll hook you up with the others we’ve already collected.”

“Are we relocating the residence?” Harry wondered.
“No,” Aaron answered, “But we’ll have a detail collect the contents.”

“Well… if… I guess I don’t have much of a choice,” said Rich, “Can… can I let people know I’m okay?”

“We’ll help you sort that out once we get to safety,” Mazhe promised.

“Where we taking him?”

“Bthalft, like last time,” said Aaron.

Harry gave a nod, before producing his mobile.

“We’re about to travel using a method you have never seen or used before. Just trust us, it’s cutting-edge technology not available outside our Commonwealth.”

“Best analogy is teleportation,” said Bryce, “A molecular transmission. Blew my mind first time I experienced it.”

Rich was doubtful. “Teleportation? For real?”

“Just trust us,” said Harry, “We’d best be off.”

“I… all right. Uh… what do I do?”

“Grip my arm and hold on tight. Everyone else get hold.”

Rich still looked very doubtful of exactly what they were about to do, but relented, and gripped Harry’s arm as he’d asked. As soon as others were in physical contact in one way or another, Harry activated the link, and the group vanished in a blur of bodies.

Armando Residence
City of Bthalft

Since Jose’s house had been moved to the Commonwealth, it became the de-facto meeting point for most of the displaced baseball players. The government had been quick to make a few adjustments, expanding the residence to provide more ample space for the Armandos to entertain, and additional security was being provided ‘round the clock (though them being well within Commonwealth borders somewhat negated the need).

So it was, that a moderate group of people at the residence witnessed the arrival of a clump of bodies on the front lawn. Rich was the only one not to remain on his feet, and Aaron quickly helped him up.

“Jesus Christ,” Rich swore, now taking in his surroundings. “That… holy shit, that was insane!”

“Yeah, what I thought the first time, too,” said Bryce, “C’mon, Jose should be around here someplace.”

“And we can get you settled in at least temporarily, until we can arrange longer-term accommodations,” said Aaron.

“So where is this?”

“We’re in Bthalft, the newest city in the Commonwealth. As for where exactly… that’s a more difficult question. We’ll explain it to you once you get settled, because it’s not a short story by any
means,” said Aaron, honestly. “Just know that we’re long-standing friends with both Canada and the US, and we’re doing everything we can to protect against this new terror threat.”

“Hiding all of us,” said Rich.

“If necessary, we’ll do exactly that. Now come on. Mrs. Armando’s expecting us.”

December 1, 2007 / 1 Evening Star, 4E202

As Harry and his friends stepped into the common room, he found a regal-looking owl waiting for him, a letter affixed to its leg.

“Bet I know what it is,” said Mazhe, smirking.

“And you’d win handily,” Harry grinned, as he relieved the bird of its message. It ruffled its feathers, then flew off, finding the invisible exit provided for the post. He broke the seal, and scanned it.

“What is it?” Bryce wanted to know.

“We’re invited to the Queen’s annual Christmas Banquet in Trevelyan. It’ll be the fourth time for us attending.”

“As Brandon’s explained,” said Aaron, appearing from his room.

“You coming, or you gonna take the day?”

“I’ll probably come along, though I won’t be working. You know what Queen’s security’s like.”

“It’s something I actually look forward to,” Harry admitted, “The Commonwealth’s been really kind to me all in all, but Queen Susan’s been… I guess I sort of see her as a grand-mum.”

Aaron grinned. “I’ll tell her you said that.”

“Not that she’d ever be offended by that, Harry,” said Justin. “I should let you know though. I won’t be attending. Zoey wants me to have Christmas dinner with her in Manchester.”

“Gods, go for it, Justin. I am not offended you wish to spend your time with someone you love,” said Harry.

“Speaking of love,” Mazhe grinned, “It was nice having the bed to ourselves again.”

“Fuck off,” Bryce muttered, “Y’know the silencing charms only do so much to, uh… cover up whatever the hell you two were doing last night.”

Harry didn’t need a mirror to know his face had turned rather red. “Apologies. We will add a private room so you don’t have to suffer through such discomfort.”

“And you do know that, if you wish, we can provide you with a private residence in Bthalft,” Aaron added.

Bryce seemed to think on it a moment. “Can I think on that?”

“No hurry,” said Justin, “But if that’s something you want, we can do it, and don’t worry about the cost. Consider it further compensation for what the magical world’s done to you. It’s only fair.”
“The gesture’s appreciated. Guess I’m in a better place than two months ago. Healer Ferris… she was—is—amazing.”

“We know that,” said Harry. “Tommy… he required her services when we first met, due to almost identical circumstances.”

“We’ve all needed her skills at one point or other,” Mazhe added, “Considering our separate destinies, it—”

“Comes with the territory,” Bryce finished.

“Thing is, if you get in a bad head space, any shit’s bothering you or whatever, she’s only a phone or floo call away,” said Justin.

“Yeah, she said that to me.”

“Right. Let’s get breakfast...”

S.S. Great Southern Star
South Pacific Ocean, same day

Members of the OND were once again gathered around the table in the saloon, a satellite image of the United Arab Emirates taking up the center of it.

“My contacts in the US were able to obtain this,” said Gilbert, “Sometimes their technology does have a use, as we can really get a picture of what’s happening. Look at these grooves. Some of them reaching nearly three thousand feet. Intel says a number of highrise buildings have come down because of the sand and wind. And our sources inside say the 33rd Battalion is facing heavy opposition, quite possibly CIA operatives.”

“The CIA? Who are they?” another wizard questioned.

“The American Central Intelligence Agency.”

“Think spies,” Dumbledore clarified, “This could prove interesting. American and middle-east relations have always been tumultuous at the best of times. If American forces are killing civilians...”

“We could incite a war,” said Jezebel.

“I’ll press our contacts and sources for further information,” Gilbert promised, “But my gut… the CIA agents will need to be eliminated.”

“All Muggles must be eliminated, Gilbert.”

“But those Muggles are high priority. If the Americans are trying to cover this up...”

“Unacceptable,” said Deidre, “Gilbert is correct. Should the middle east go to war with the Americans, it will result in the deaths of millions of filthy Muggles, a step in the right direction.”

“I will press the matter more urgently.”

“The results here are what I had hoped for,” said Jezebel, indicating the photograph, “A major population center filled with Muggles, all but destroyed.”

“And there are other spells you wish to try,” said Deidre. It wasn’t a question.
“This...” Jezebel again indicated the photograph on the table, “…was rather tame, compared with a number of other spells I would like to attempt. Requiring roughly the same amount of energy, if perhaps just a little more, we might achieve far more… devastating effects.”

“Then I leave you to it. Access whatever resources you require, but continue to provide results.”

“Of course, mistress,” Jezebel promised.

“Our second, pressing matter is that of Mr. Parker,” said Gilbert, “They didn’t take the bait.”

“They did take the target, did they not?” questioned a witch down the table.

“Yes, but the target didn't remain with the group.”

“Perhaps the target wasn't traumatized enough as occurred with Hunter,” suggested Jezebel, “Given Potter's 'saving people' thing, perhaps Parker didn't qualify, being of the same condition as when we last targeted players.”

“I have to agree with miss Jezebel's assessment,” said Dumbledore, “Present him with a victim in crisis, he'll want to protect him or her, keep them close.”

Jezebel gave a cruel smile. “Leave that to me.”

“I'll put you in contact with people who know a few things about US military protocol,” Gilbert offered.

Jezebel gave an incline of the head.

“Have you settled on a target?” questioned Dumbledore.

“New York, of course,” answered Gilbert, “Eight million Muggles inhabit New York City, never mind an equally-important fact that MACUSA has their headquarters there. If this is successful, the chaos unleashed will be—”

“ Astounding,” Deidre finished.

Chapter End Notes

UP NEXT: Harry and his circle are asked to help solve the problem in Dubai, resulting in a catastrophic series of events. Warning: violence and mature themes.
Chapter Summary

Harry and his circle are asked to help solve the problem in Dubai, resulting in a catastrophic series of events. Warning: violence and mature themes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

15. NIGHTMARES IN THE DESERT I

January, 2008

“I am. That has not changed. I am the villain. I am the one you should curse, not praise. I am no hero. Heroes look to fix what lies before them and head home after the leak is patched. A villain will remain poking and prodding his achievement long after they've won. Evil never sleeps. It's always looking for more ways to expand on its conquest.”


January 3, 2008

The Christmas holiday had been the best ever for Harry and his friends. Though the threat presented by OND still loomed, he for some reason felt far less pressure than in years past, finding it easier to relax and enjoy time with friends both new and old.

School wouldn’t start up again until the 7th, so everyone was still in holiday mode. Harry had decided to relax the schedule until school resumed, and so on this morning, both he and Mazhe were having a bit of a lie-in, not planning on being up until mid-morning.

An urgent knock at the door put the brakes on those plans.

“Come in.”

The door opened a crack, and Brandon poked his head in.

“Brandon? What… what are you doing here?”

“We’ve got a problem. Need you guys up ASAP.”

“Yeah, uh, give us a few minutes.”

Brandon left, closing the door behind him. Harry was already instantly dressed, but Mazhe was struggling to get into a pair of pants. Harry only smirked, and with the flick of a hand, Mazhe was instantly dressed as well.
"Thank you."

Harry bowed and then grinned. "For you, anything."

Entering the common room, they found a few additional SOU members present, as was Bill.

"Harry, Mazhe, sorry to wake you, but... we've discovered something that has potentially catastrophic consequences."

"Back in August, while the pair of you were on your honeymoon, there was a break-in at Gringotts," Bill began. "The thief managed to somehow circumvent several of the protections placed on a vault, and make off with a quarter of its contents. She murdered eight goblins and seriously injured twelve more as she made her escape. The bank’s placed a two-thousand galleon bounty on her head, with a five-hundred galleon bonus should she be presented to them alive."

Harry sneered. "Ah, Jezebel, as she calls herself."

"You know of her," said Bill.

"How could I not? I do have access to the news, Bill."

"Of course. I digress. The owner of the vault has been conducting an audit of the contents, to determine what’s been taken. When the news started coming in regarding what’s been happening in Dubai, they’ve determined that a particularly dark tome covering elemental magics was one of the items taken. All of it ritual-based magic, all of it banned by most members of the ICW, given what’s involved... never mind what the spells are capable of."

"The sand storm," said Mazhe.

"One of many powerful spells, according to the owner."

"And now the OND has it."

"Certain of it. Jezebel’s been seen traveling in dark circles, so it’s very likely she’s been recruited," said Brandon.

"The thing is, this spell they’ve set up is now threatening Delir to the point where we have to do something," said Aaron, "DOI wants it ended."

"When we leaving?"

Everyone turned to find Bryce had stepped into the room, dressed. Dardanos and Crixus had also arrived, as had Justin.

"Absolutely not," said Brandon.

"This is a military op, Mr. Hunter," said Aaron.

"Crixus and Dardanos are goin’."

"As we have trained with Harry and Mr. McAllister for over a year," said Dardanos, "You have only two months’ training with us, if that. Your presence would present only undue burden."

"You can help out on the Ragnar with the survivors," said Brandon.

Bryce crossed his arms. "All right, fine."
“All right, guys. We suit up.”

Harry reached into his pouch, and produced the wearable radio set he’d been given nearly four years prior. Gods, had it been that long?

“Brandon, you guys have extra sets for Crixus and Dardanos?”

“Yeah.”

HMS Ragnar
20 km southwest of Dubai, UAE

It was the first time Harry and his circle had been invited into the vessel’s Action Information Center. Naturally, considering the room was considered the ship’s ‘brain’, it was off limits to most people.

The first thing that struck him was the number of computer monitors, including a number of enormous displays which made up one wall. He guessed maybe twenty different consoles were grouped together, most of them occupied by a crew member.

A moderately-sized table took up the center of the room, and it was inlaid with a large display of its own. Commander Dawson stood at one side, discussing a matter with another officer. He glanced up as Harry and his group entered, and gave him a nod.

“Come this way,” said Brandon, “We’re meeting in the Op briefing room.”

The briefing room was easily half the size of the Action Information Center, with a large number of seats, arranged almost like a cinema. Many of those seats were already filled. Like Brandon and Aaron, many were wearing tan-shaded digital camouflage uniforms.

Aaron noticed Bryce’s gaze. “Yeah, much of our gear takes after NATO specs, including weapons, armor, and uniforms.”

Harry smirked, and with a flick of his hand, transfigured the outfit he was wearing to match that of Aaron’s. He then did the same to his partner.

“Ten-hut!”

Everyone seated scrambled to their feet, as Commodore O’Toole stepped into the room, along with a group of people wearing suits. DOI, Harry guessed.

“At ease, ladies and gentlemen,” said O’Toole. That had people retaking their seats.

“Good morning everyone,” said one of the suits. “Sorry for the short notice, but the information we discovered about three hours ago demands a rapid response.”

“Indeed, as we have discovered, the magic at work in Dubai is considered not just that of the dark arts, but rather, of the black arts, magic which is banned by the ICW.”

“The department’s already notified the international body, given the severity, and though they’re promising a response, we feel more immediate action is necessary,” said another.

A satellite picture of Dubai now took up the large screen at the front of the room, with a circle marking one of the many still-standing structures in the ruins.

“We have determined with certainty that this is where we will find the device, or ward put in place,
which is maintaining the near-cataclysmic conditions in the city. The primary objective, therefore, is the elimination of the device or wards present at this location.”

“Including destroying the building itself?” came a question from the back.

“Including the destruction of the building itself,” the suit answered.

The first suit then picked up, “Our secondary objective, will be to get as many people out of the city as we can. You will be divided up into a number of units, which will then escort a team each, combing through the ruins. When you locate survivors, either radio the ship and request a recovery team, or transmit teleport coordinates to the ship. Teams will be standing by, waiting for those requests.”

“All right, ladies and gentlemen, you have your assignments. Dismissed.”

“Ten-hut!”

Everyone again scrambled to their feet, as the commanding officer left the room.

“Radios on, guys,” said Aaron. “Our call sign is Gladius.”

“Guys… did you feel that?” Mazhe questioned, as he activated his radio set. The others were doing
“Yeah. Something… off, like. The spell’s messing with the natural energy. So careful casting magic,” Brandon warned. “Right. Mazhe, Miraak, would your Shout disrupt the storm—if temporarily?”

“Only way to find out.”

Mazhe glanced at his fellow Dragonborn, and the pair faced the massive swirling storm wall off in the distance. Then—

“Lok... VAH KOOOOR!!”

The shout once again traveled as a rolling clap of thunder, slamming into the storm wall, sending an explosion of dust and sand in all directions save for behind. For a moment, it seemed like the hole was just going to fill back up again, but... no. The powerful magic from Nirn began to overtake the black magic, and slowly, surely, the hole began to grow, the sand and dust beginning to settle.

“Still floors me to see you guys do that,” said Aaron, as they started off.

“Our abilities did stop Alduin,” said Mazhe.

“Ever worry that he might come back?”

“No. Even Paarthurnax is certain, he’s gone for good. We not only destroyed his body, but also his soul.”

“Soul?”

“I keep forgetting. You haven’t seen that yet. When a dragon dies, Miraak and I can claim its soul.”

“It will go to the one who killed it,” Miraak added.

“You literally eat its soul.”

Mazhe made a grotesque face. “Well… not literally. Absorb is a better way to put it. The way you put it, it sounds like… cannibalism.”

It took some time before they reached the edge of the city proper. And there, they discovered what would turn out to be the first of many disturbing scenes: at least a dozen Humvees—heavy-duty military trucks, and nearly twice as many dead American soldiers.

“Shotgun blasts,” said Aaron, “Jesus, this was personal.”

“Overkill. Everyone be extra-vigilant,” said Brandon.

Justin, meanwhile, was sending another text back up to the ship. Only a few moments later, four separate groups of people appeared, two of them bringing a heavy-duty cart which carried a large plastic tank. Water, Harry realized.

“I’ve sent another message to the ship; they’ll send down a recovery team for the bodies,” said one of the additional SOU members present. He reached into his pouch, pulled out what looked like a ping pong ball, and dropped it near one of the vehicles.

It was mid-morning before they came upon the first survivors. Ten American soldiers, all of them
suffering from life-threatening dehydration. They saw Harry and his group approach, but all of them were too weak to sit up.

Healers set to work at once, giving them water and performing medical scans to assess each man. All of them were near death, that much was quickly revealed. Another message was dispatched to the Ragnar for a retrieval team.

“Dying of thirst. Not a pleasant way to go,” said Aaron, as they prepared to set off again.

“No, it isn’t,” came a voice over the radio sets. “You can thank our illustrious Captain Walker for this little stunt.”

The voice was cold, filled with malice. If Brandon had to guess, the man was in his early to mid fifties. “No matter. How about we give our uninvited guests a nice welcome?”

“Aaron. Any idea where it’s coming from?” Brandon asked, as a strange tingling sensation washed over them.

“No idea. Workin’ on it,” Aaron promised. He’d once again produced his mobile, and now linked it to his radio set.

“SHIT! Inferi!” one of the additional SOU shouted, as the street ahead seemed to come alive with reanimated corpses.

Mazhe and Miraak again shared a look. “Fus… RO DAAAAH!”

The shout roared down the street with a clap of thunder, sending the vile re-animations flying. It also slammed into a massive plate-glass window, shattering it, and unleashing a wall of sand which promptly buried the monsters.

“Aaaaaand now we’re gonna have to find a way around,” Justin muttered.

“Better than being swamped with Inferi,” snapped one of the accompanying healers.

“Let’s keep moving.”

Sometime later, they were entering what was obviously a refugee encampment. A large number of bodies were scattered around, and Harry found himself praising the gods for the bubble-charm on his face. He knew the smell would be unbearable.

Among the dead, they found a single body, laid out differently than the others.

“God, they… he was lynched,” Aaron muttered, noting the rope marks around his neck.

“But someone laid him out. Crossed his arms across his chest, closed his eyes…”

“American soldier. We’ll have a recovery crew collect him so he might be returned to his family.”

A barely audible gasp could be heard over the radio sets.

“UID. You knew him? We’ll take good care of him,” Aaron promised.

“Aww, touchy,” came the mocking voice from earlier. Immediately after, there came the sound of a crash.
“We won’t be able to do that for all of them,” said Justin, “We only have so much manpower.”

“No. You’re right,” Brandon agreed, “But it’s the right thing. His family will want closure. I know... I know mine would.”

Rounding a corner, they came across a group of refugees, all cowering in fear. Almost identical to the soldiers they’d found earlier, this group were all near death from extreme dehydration.

One of the healers stepped forward, and pressed her wand to her throat. “We're here to help. We have fresh water and we'll evacuate all of you to safety.” She then spoke in a language Harry had never heard before, but finished before the translation charm took hold. He made a note to ask about it later, and perhaps have her speak more of it. Knowing the language used in the area could be useful.

He quickly joined with the others in passing bottles of water to the refugees, often getting a raspy, barely whispered ‘thank you’ for his effort. And there, was the reminder of why he did it. Why he was there: one person can make all the difference. Saving people? You better believe it.

Shortly after, another group of healers and medics arrived, along with another squad of marines, and that was the signal for Harry and his group to move on, this not being the primary objective. There hadn’t been any discussion on how long it might take, but Harry guessed it might be a couple of days.

“Hey guys. Why don’t we just fly there?” Justin suggested.

“Thought of that,” said Brandon, “No. Remember that odd feeling a while back? The area’s magically unstable. We could fly into a ‘dead zone’ and end up crashing.”

“Yeah, a thought concurred,” Harry agreed, “Best stick to the ground. Additionally, if we encounter survivors we can radio the ship and have them picked up.”

“Sound advice. Come on, let’s keep moving.”

As they crossed another dune that marked another intersection, they were again set upon by a horde of angry Inferi. This time, conventional weapons were used, rather than risk causing another avalanche of sand, or worse. Given the amount of damage done by the sand storm, building integrity was called into question.

They stopped to regroup a moment.

“We still headed in the correct direction?” Harry wanted to know.

“Yeah. There. You can see it to the east of us,” said Brandon, pointing to one of the tall buildings downtown.

“We probably won’t reach it until nightfall,” said Aaron.

“In which case—”

“We’ll retreat to my chest for the night and start fresh in the morning,” Harry finished.

“We’ll supply a watch during the night,” said one of the marines, “As long as you set up under appropriate cover.”

“Don’t worry about it, Sergeant, we’ll have it covered,” said Aaron.
“DOI’s absolutely certain the building’s the source of the ward or device—my bet is on a physical ward stone.”

“The magic in the atmosphere… it feels wrong,” Harry noted. “And it’s getting worse, the closer we get. Almost reminds me of—”

“Dealing with Hermaeus Mora,” Mazhe finished, “In fact, almost exactly like that. Thick, syrupy, oily, unclean. Like I need a shower.”

“Except that it doesn’t wash off,” said Brandon, “It’s the nature of the dark arts… or black arts, in this case.”

“Does it go away?” asked Mazhe.

“Eventually. Thing is, the pair of you have been tainted several times over by Hermaeus Mora. I know others have already warned you, but… do be careful. He is a very dark being.”

“A warning I keep in mind, Brandon. Thing is—” Harry stopped talking. Party line, the enemy was listening in.

“Oh, please. Do continue,” came the mocking voice.

“What, and give you lot further ideas on how to cause destruction and mayhem? I’ll take a pass,” Harry shot back.

“The book those spells came from should have been destroyed,” said Mazhe.

Crixus furrowed his brows. “Why then were they not?”

“Conflicts with old family laws,” Aaron answered, “Even in the Commonwealth, this shit happens sometimes. Stuff that shouldn't exist, being protected by old laws. It's crap that puts everyone at risk.”

“Perhaps Queen Susan should invoke privilege,” said Dardanos, “Safety of all must take precedence over the privilege of a few.”

“She has weighed that equation a number of times, Dardanos. Each time after something exactly like this.”

“Perhaps I might lean on her ear a little,” said Harry, “I do have her ear, do I not?”

“So tell us, oh wise ones, have you also come to play hero? Know the past two attempts have both ended in complete failure,” the mysterious voice mocked.

“This is a priority military channel, jackass. ID or leave the channel,” Aaron snapped.

“Colonel John Konrad, United States Army 33rd Battalion. Who are—”

“FUCKING LIES!!” another voice crackled across the radio, making everyone wince, “KONRAD’S FUCKING DEAD!! I SEEN HIS FUCKING CORPSE WITH MY OWN FUCKING EYES!”

Harry swore his ear was still ringing several seconds after everyone was shocked silent by the painfully loud voice who’d joined the party.

“So nice of you to join us, CAPTAIN,” came Konrad’s voice. The sneer was obvious even over the radio.
“Hey FUCK YOU!” came the angry retort.

“Great, we have a pissing match over the radio,” Aaron muttered, “Scabbard, Gladius, over.”

“Scabbard, go ahead.”

“Got a fix on the transmission?”

“We’ll set up a trace.”

Laughing could be heard for a few moments, before Konrad quipped, “I wish you luck with that.”

“Trust us not-Konrad, or whoever you are, we’re pretty good at this shit,” Aaron shot back.

“Gladius, Scabbard.”

“Gladius, go ahead,” said Aaron.

“DOI’s confirmed an impostor, whoever’s speaking ain’t Colonel Konrad, over.”

“Copy.”

Now, maniacal laughter filled the radio. “BUSTED, FUCKER!!”

“Scabbard, you have an ID on the second speaker?”

“Still working on it.”

“Let me save you the trouble, ‘Scabbard’, came the imposter’s mocking voice, “He’s—”

The second voice cut in, “Captain Martin Walker, Delta team... sent...”

“To be a hero, yeah, we get it. Tell me, do you still FEEL like a hero, CAPTAIN?”

“Scabbard. ID confirmed, United States Army Captain Martin Walker, been MIA since—”

“Three days,” said Walker, “Or… is it five. Fuck, really dunno anymore.”

“Shit!! More Inferi!” a marine shouted, and seconds later, the party found themselves in thick with yet another horde of Inferi. Some of them were truly horrifying, better resembling roasted skeletons. Then, far worse, as Harry made to charge up a spell, nothing happened.

“Bloody hell… no magic. Careful with the pouches.”

Everyone rapidly switched to non-magical weapons, and that made the fight somewhat more challenging, given the sheer number of them. Seemed like nearly a hundred of the things. Of course, no surprise given the number of deaths in the city. These nutcases had scores of bodies at their disposal.

Finally, the last body fell, and the group moved on.

“Shor’s bones, that was a lot of enemies. Too many more, we might be overwhelmed,” said Mazhe.

“And if we get stuck not having access to magic again… yeah. Hey Mazhe… does this not remind you of Labyrinthian?”

Mazhe thought for a moment, before giving a slow nod. “In many ways, yes. Waves of enemies,
something that leaves us without our magic for a time… yeah, very similar.”

“Long’s we don’t end up facing something like Morokei at the end,” said Harry, bitterly.

“And here I thought Walker was the insane one,” came the imposter’s mocking voice.

“We got a way to shut him up?” Harry muttered.

He heard a faint but very pronounced, sharp intake of air.

“Captain? You still with us.” Aaron questioned.

“Y-yeah,” came the answer.

“No, he’s too busy crying over his boyfriend,” the imposter jeered.

“FUCK YOU!”

“Oh, have I touched a sore spot?”

Aaron looked like he was about to bang his head on the nearest wall. He huffed. “Both of you just shut the fuck up.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “I detect some UST. Perhaps the pair of you should find a room.”

“Harry, not helping,” Brandon scolded, as unintelligible swearing was heard through the radio.

“What does UST represent?” Dardanos wondered aloud.

“*cough* unresolved sexual tension *cough*” said Justin, smirking.

More unintelligible swearing filled the radio a moment.

“Hands and minds to purpose,” said Dardanos, softly, “Shouting accomplishes nothing.”

“Aww, I like you already,” came the imposter’s voice, “Still haven't told us who you are.”

“For us to know and you to find out. Captain Walker, where are you? We're here to help,” Aaron promised.

“Here to help, they say. How quaint,” the imposter mocked.

“We're evacuating survivors as we speak. We know you're OND. We know exactly what you've done, and equally, we're here to put an end to it.”

“Just as we know who you are, Potter. Dumbledore sends his regards... or not.”

“Scabbard, Delta team.”

“Delta team, go ahead.”

“Just came across a dozen more soldiers. Evac'inig to the Ragnar, quarantine's been erected.”

“NO! NO, NO!” came Walker’s panicked voice, “They’re FUCKING killers!”

“If it is as you say, then we will make certain they answer for their crimes,” Harry promised.
“Trust us, Captain. Everyone’s going into quarantine until we understand what’s happened,” came the reply from the Ragnar.

“Potter, and his 'saving people' thing. For the record, we knew you would come. Dubai will be your grave by the time we’re through.”

“Bring it on, nutcase,” said Mazhe, frostily.

The radio filled with the sound of Walker laughing.

Harry couldn’t help but laugh also. He collected himself. “See, thing is, moron, there is absolutely NOTHING you could ever do that would really surprise me. Considering the nightmare unleashed in Washington back in Frostfall... no... not much else would surprise me.”

“Wait... these fuckers... whoever's fakin' Konrad... they're the same? Same as the fuckers who attacked the baseball game in Washington?” came Walker’s question.

“We're saying exactly that, Captain. This storm... all this chaos and destruction here... it was caused by the same group.”

“...no. No...”

Brandon was forced to stop, hearing the grown man on the other end of the radio break down. Harry found himself wrapped in a tight hug, thanks to his partner, and it was obvious the effect it was having on the other soldiers listening in.

“Captain…” Aaron began, but had to suck in a breath. He blew it out. “Listen to me. Whatever happened here... none of it is your fault. Your hand was manipulated by people with access to unnatural and dangerous tools and skills. There’s nothing you could have done that would have prevented this outcome.”

“Tell us where you are, so we can help you out. ‘side the point, I’d rather talk to you face to face, rather than through this radio,” said Harry.

“And I think we could use your help. Rather trust a mental army Captain than a terrorist any day,” Justin threw in.

“Captain… tell us where you are. We can use your help.”

“I... no. No, you... I’m...”

“Murdered nearly fifty innocent civilians, is what he did!” the impostor mocked.

“And you’ve done FAR WORSE, moron!” Justin shot back, “Two million innocent CIVILIAN lives because of the chaos you’ve unleashed here!”

“Gladius, Scabbard, over.”

“Scabbard, go ahead,” said Aaron.

“We're transmitting Walker's location to your mobiles, along with a sat photo. And heads up, the sand storm's beginning to reassert itself.”

“Copy,” said Aaron.

Mazhe glanced up at the sky, darkening in the west. “We may not be able to clear it a second time.”
“Come find me, I’m sheltered,” came Walker’s voice.

“Affirmative. Sit tight, we’re heading your way,” Aaron promised. “Scabbard, got a location on the impostor yet?”

“Still working on it, Gladius.”

“Copy.”

The group fell silent, as they continued to pick their way through the shattered remains of the city. The sand storm was indeed re-asserting itself, and the group was again forced to don face masks to protect against the blowing dust and sand. Harry found the non-magical masks uncomfortable, but… better than the alternative.

“Scabbard, echo team.”

“Echo team, go ahead.”

“We’ve got evidence of White Phosphorus being deployed. We’re gonna photograph and dispose.”

“Roger. Send everything to DOI so they can ensure the Americans see it.”

Aaron made a sour face. “Yeah, okay. As if things weren’t fucked up as it is. They used Willie P. on each other?”

“What’s it do?” Harry wanted to know.

“It burns very hot, and creates a lot of poisonous smoke, in a nutshell,” Brandon explained, “Using it on people… it’s cruel. Causes second and third-degree burns, the shit sticks to the skin, see. Causes gruesome injuries.”

Once again, the group could hear Walker crying. Was he responsible? No, it was not a good idea to ask that sort of question over the radio. Thing is, if he was responsible, then what? No, that was best sorted out after the current matter was dealt with. And really, if Walker WAS responsible… in a way, he wasn’t. It was looking more and more like the OND orchestrated the entire scenario. But, for what reason. That was the million-Galleon question. The storm alone had caused unspeakable destruction. So why go the step or steps further? What was the gain?

Aaron looked up from his mobile, feeling another odd sensation wash over him.

“I think we got magic back.”

Harry flicked a hand at a ruined book laying in the street, easily summoning it. “Thing is, for how long?”

“Better question, are they doing this… controlling whether we can use magic or not?” Mazhe wondered.

“No, at least not with any sort of precision,” said Brandon, “My guess, the whole area’s magically unstable. The earth’s natural energy’s been scrambled. So be ready for more interruptions.”


“Just trust us. It’s more real than you can imagine,” said Harry.

“And the filthy No-Maj has already seen just how terrible and powerful it is!” the impostor again
Aaron made to retort, but was prevented from doing so, as a plate-glass window suddenly shattered with a hail of automatic gunfire. Everyone dove to the ground, and Mazhe was then forced to scramble out of the way, as a bottle with a flaming wad of cloth came sailing out of the gaping hole where the glass used to be, to then impact with the street, and burst into flames.

“Contact! Return fire!”

“What in Oblivion was that?!” Mazhe demanded, as he produced an MP-5.

“Molotov cocktail!” Brandon shouted over the gunfire.

There came a series of small to medium-sized explosions, and someone was blasted out of the ruined store front to land in a heap on the street, completely enveloped in flames. Harry made to put the fire out, but it was no use. The man was already dead.

“*Homenum Revelio*,” Aaron commanded. “All teams, heads up, just been attacked by civilians.”

“*Bravo team, copy, over.*”

“*Charlie team, roger that, over.*”

“*Delta team, that’s affirmative, over.*”

“*Echo team, yeah, copy. Hostiles earlier, able to talk them down, over.*”

“*Foxtrot team, copy, over.*”

It was late in the afternoon when they came across a heavily-fortified barricade, consisting of a number of Humvees, bunkers, and other obstacles. And, amongst the debris and wreckage, were many bodies: American soldiers.

“Damn. This… this was a massacre,” said Brandon, softly.

“We… *we had no choice*,” came Walker’s answer.

“No, you didn’t,” said Aaron, “Captain, you can only act with the information in front of you. If these guys were acting like the enemy… you did what you had to do.”

“*Makes it no less right though, does it?*” the imposter’s voice cackled.

“Oh *shut the fuck up*. If not for you and your bitch mistress, we wouldn’t be here... Captain Walker wouldn’t be here... none of this would have happened. But no, oh no, you monsters just keep dragging the world further and further into the abyss... and one of these days, you'll doom all of us.”

“And the earth will then be allowed to heal from the damage—”

“Can we send this nutcase to Hermaeus Mora?” Mazhe wondered aloud, as they began to make their way through the mass of debris and bodies.

Harry gave a nasty smirk. “The better question. Would Mora have use for him? How much knowledge does he posses? The demon of forbidden knowledge must be able to use him, or the offering would be wasted.”
“What, no comment from the oh so wise OND operative?” Aaron jeered.

“Scared? You should be,” Justin taunted.

“Do not waste breath on taunts,” said Dardanos, “They only give our enemy ammunition.”

Arriving at the back end of the makeshift fortification, they found another body, positioned similar to the first: eyes closed, arms crossed across the chest, as though prepped for burial. The soldier’s uniform was in tatters, and every inch of exposed skin was covered in lacerations, some of them very deep. ‘ADAMS’ was stencilled on the name patch.

“Captain… was Adams one of your guys?” Aaron questioned.

“Yeah. He... told me to run. Stayed behind, I escaped.”

“Scabbard, Gladius.”

“Go ahead, Gladius.”

“Recovery unit to my location expedited.”

“Copy, a unit will arrive ASAP.”

“Thank you,” said Walker.

“We'll make sure the remains are looked after, Captain. You don't know us, but we've been friends with the United States nearly as long as it’s been a country,” came the voice from Ragnar’s communications.

“Yes, as you've always done, consorting with No-Maj filth!” came the imposter’s mocking voice.

“Which has only made Valicadia stronger, moron. Let's press on guys. he's not worth our breath. His ignorant rants are making me sick to my stomach.”

They were then crossing a wide, but short bridge which led to a tall highrise. The way was relatively clear, with only a bit of debris, and less than a minute after, they passed through a set of double doors, into the building’s lobby.

“Captain. We’re in the lobby,” said Aaron.

No answer.

“Captain. Are you there?”

“We really want to help,” said Harry, “But—”

Several seconds went by, before they got a sigh from the other end. “Take the elevator to the top.”

Brandon pressed the call button at the elevator bank, and it was a half-minute before a car arrived. He then pointed to a pair of marines. “Remain here. Keep on the radio. Anyone’s seen nearby, I want to know about it.”

“Sir.”

The remainder of the group all piled in, and Aaron pressed the button for the penthouse. The doors slid closed.
“These devices still unsettle me,” said Dardanos, as the car began its ascent.

“Which, the closed space, or the feeling?”

“A little of both. Not fear of them, only a dislike.”

“Fair enough. Some people are truly afraid of elevators—claustrophobia, the fear of small enclosed spaces,” Justin explained. “Similarly, agoraphobia is the fear of being trapped in a situation that’s hard to escape—”

“Such as an elevator,” Dardanos finished.

“Exactly.”

They fell silent, as the car continued its ascent. Forty-six floors, by the number of buttons on the panel, and they were headed for the top. By no means a quick ride.

“Get ready,” Aaron warned, as the elevator at last began to slow. With a soft ‘ding’, the doors parted. Brandon and Aaron exited first, Brandon carrying an assault rifle, while Aaron held his wand out in front of him.

The suite was two storeys high, with the upper floor divided into two separate areas, accessed by two separate flights of stairs. The view would have been beautiful before the storms hit, Harry was certain.

“Captain?” Harry called out. No answer.

“You pair, remain on this level,” Brandon decided, gesturing to the pair of SOU who’d come along. “Watch the elevator. If it leaves the floor, I wanna know about it.”

“Sir.”

“Dardanos and Crixus, stay here,” Aaron decided.

“I’ll stay with,” said Justin, “We’ll scout out the rooms on this floor.”

With that sorted out, the rest of the group took the staircase to the left. It led to what was obviously the sleeping area. An enormous bed was set up against the railing, with the foot facing the massive floor-to-ceiling windows. Again, the set-up would have been amazing before the city was wrecked by the sand storms. Judging by the dirt, dust, and the occasional speck of blood covering part of the bed, Harry guessed Walker had likely slept there.

Then, Harry spotted movement on the opposite side of the suite.

“He’s over there.”

“Naturally,” said Justin, rolling his eyes.

They returned to the lower level of the suite, to then climb the other set of stairs. This area was substantially larger than where the bed was, though sparsely furnished. Given the late afternoon light, made darker by the pressing, blowing sand, they could only see the silhouette of a man, appearing to be sitting on the floor, his back against the wall. An automatic rifle rested across his lap.

“Accio rifle,” Harry whispered, and the weapon zoomed through the air into his outstretched hand.

“You… this ain’t real…” Walker spoke, voice barely above a whisper.
“Trust us, we're as solid as the floor you're sitting on,” Brandon promised, “I'm Commander Brandon McAllister, Commonwealth of Valicadia, Her Majesty's Special Operations Unit.”

“And I'm Lieutenant Commander Aaron Carpenter, Commonwealth of Valicadia, Her Majesty's Special Operations Unit.”

“Spec Ops,” said Walker, sounding hopeful.

The group had closed the gap now, coming to stand within a few feet of him.

“Brandon. Say it,” said Aaron.

“Captain, you’re relieved.”

For the third time, they hear—and now see—the man break down, crushed by utter defeat. Harry tapped Mazhe on the shoulder, and the pair sat down on either side of him. And, as they tried to give him comfort, both were horrified by the condition Walker was in. A terrible burn covered the right side of his face, and the rest of it was a swollen bruise—or might as well be. Every inch of exposed skin was scratched, lacerated, or bruised, and his uniform was in utter tatters.

“Shor’s balls, how are you still alive?”


Harry reached into his pouch, and produced a calming draught.

“Here. This tastes really nasty, but it’ll make you feel better.”

“Water,” said Brandon, reaching into his pouch, and producing a bottle. “You’re not in much better shape than the people we’ve been rescuing.”

Walker accepted both items, and attempted to open the potion, but with shaking hands, found it impossible.

“Here.” Mazhe helped him open the vial. “Be aware, it really tastes nasty.”

Walker touched the vial to his lips and consumed the contents, and simply passed the empty vial back.

Harry arched an eyebrow.

“What? Ain’t the worst thing I’ve ate or drank.”

That got a chuckle out of both Aaron and Brandon, as Walker then drank greedily from the offered bottle of water.

“How many people you find so far?”

“Nearly three-hundred, Captain,” came an answer over the radio.

“This shit… Lugo was right. Should’ve radioed for an extraction… this shit… none of it would’ve happened.”

“Thing is, it was out of your hands the second you arrived.”

“Not feeling any odd magic on him,” said Harry.
“Not that they would need to. And really, we’re still not sure what the game is. The storm sacked the city, killed two million people, they got what they wanted. So why sink an entire battalion and a recon team?”

“Riggs… CIA… he wanted the city to die,” Walker answered. “If what happened here ever got out...”

“You guys would be at war with the entire middle east,” Brandon finished. “Scabbard, you got that?”

“Affirmative. The plan is to absorb everyone into the Commonwealth as it stands. We’ll pull in people from MIRT and modify memories if necessary.”

“We’ll also want to recover the bodies of dead soldiers,” said Brandon, “Dispose of the evidence.”

“Riggs was right,” said Walker, “But...”

“It meant killing civilians,” Aaron finished. “We have an alternative method to keep some level of sanity, that won’t result in the death of innocent people.”

“How touching,” came the mocking voice of the impostor. “Check.”

“What...” Harry didn’t finish, as he instantly knew what the speaker meant. “Bollocks. They’re watching us.”

“Hey guys!” Justin called from below, “Think I just saw someone on a broom.”

“So did I,” said Brandon, “Scabbard, Gladius.”

“Scabbard, we copy. Captain Rowland's suiting up as I speak, eta fifteen minutes.”

Harry couldn’t help but smirk. “You wankers do remember the last time his unit was deployed. Not that long ago either. More than thirty OND put to grass thanks to them.”

“Your total's a little soft, Mr. Stormcrown. Try nearly fifty.”

“I stand corrected.”

“Right. So your first and only warning, OND nutcases. Approach our location and you’ll get a taste of exactly what we’re capable of. Don’t fuck with us,” Aaron hissed, “You’ll suffer a fate worse than death.”

“Ain’t nothin’ worse than death,” said Walker, quietly.

“Trust me, there is,” said Harry. “Look. Your enemies are mine. And those monsters... they’re enemies of everyone. I have something very special planned for the loathsome witch who leads the faction.”

“You did threaten to have her crucified,” Mazhe remembered.

“Crucified? Jesus, kid.” Walker at last dared look up and make eye contact with Harry. Even in the dim light, Harry could see the man was virtually dead inside.

“Shor’s balls. Kissed by a Dementor. Or might as well have been.”

“What… what’s a Dementor?”
“Just… you don’t want to know,” said Harry, quietly. He found himself having to force down the recent memory of Bryce nearly having his soul sucked out by the loathsome creatures.

“Gladius, Scabbard.”

“Gladius, go ahead,” said Aaron.

“The soldier recovered a few hours ago was a golem.”

“Seriously?”

Walker looked confused. “What… what’s that mean? What’s a golem?”


Walker took a shaky breath, and whispered, “Lugo.”

“Staff Sergeant John Lugo?” came the query from the Ragnar.

“Affirmative. But... why... I saw him! I gave him CPR, he DIED in my hands!” Walker protested.

Harry gripped the man about the shoulder and gave it a squeeze. “It’s what they wanted you to see.”

“Aww and now they begin to connect the dots. So, CAPTAIN. Where might your friend be? I promise you, he's been rather... useful to us,” the impostor mocked.

“Hey fuck you,” Walker muttered, clearly rattled by this contradictory piece of information. Was he still alive?

Harry, meanwhile, looked furious. “Congratulations, wanker. You've just been added to a rather exclusive list. I'll see you soul-trapped and sent to a very painful afterlife.”

“You don’t know how much that warms my heart, Potter. I wish you luck with that. In the meantime, enjoy another present.”

“FUCK!! JESUS FUCK!! EVERYONE OUT RIGHT NOW!!” one of the SOU all but screamed, alarmed.

“Check mate,” came the impostor’s voice.

“What?”

“Eyes LEFT!” Justin shouted.

Now, it became immediately apparent as to the source of the alarm: the mangled front half fuselage of a seven-forty-seven jumbo was hurtling toward the building. They had very little time before impact.

Harry only reacted. Given he still had a hand on Walker’s shoulder, he reached over with the other, gripped Mazhe by the bulletproof vest, and the trio vanished with a particularly noisy CRACK.

They landed a fraction of a second later at the edge of the refugee camp where they’d found the golem. There were still soldiers at the site, but none took much notice. Harry winced at the babble of excited voices in his ear.
“HARRY!” came Aaron’s voice.

“Refugee camp where we found Lugo. I’ll send a marker.”

“Expedite it!!” came Brandon’s voice.

Harry worked quickly, and fired off the requested link, and moments later, the remainder of the group arrived in a clump not far away. That coincided with the distant noisy rumble, as the aircraft wreckage made one with the highrise.

Only then did Harry wince, as the pain registered. He vanished the left sleeve of his jacket, to discover he’d splinched himself, and badly. Several chunks of flesh were missing from his arm, leaving grisly wounds.

“Harry… here… let me,” Justin offered.

“Thank you.”

“Essence of Dittany,” said Brandon, offering a vial.

“What happened to him?” Aaron gestured to Walker, who lay sprawled out, unconscious.

“Likely didn’t handle the unexpected Apparition. He’s likely suffering mental shock as it is,” said Justin, as he continued to cast healing charms on Harry’s injured arm.

It was then Aaron received a text on his mobile. “Radios off.”

Everyone quickly switched off their sets, with Mazhe reaching down and switching Walker’s set off.

“Why?” Harry wanted to know.

“Time to end the party line,” said Aaron, “We’re switching to a new frequency, though the Ragnar’s gonna continue to monitor the one old one.”

“Smart… thinking...” said Walker, quietly. He blinked several times, but chose to keep his eyes closed. “What… what in the flying FUCK was that?”

“Apologies, Captain,” said Harry, “There was no time to warn of what I was about to do.”

“Sometimes it’s better to act and seek forgiveness, than to ask permission. Forget who said it, but… most fitting,” said Aaron.

“What was comin’ at us?”

“The wreckage of a big aircraft, a seven-forty-seven, I think,” said Brandon, “Jesus Christ, they threw a plane at us.”

“How?” Walker wanted to know.

“Some sort of magic, that’s all I know,” said Brandon, “But yeah, scary shit.”

Aaron again felt his mobile buzz. He read the message. “All right. We’ve got the new frequency. Captain, here. One of our sets, it’s better-suited.”

“Thanks.”
Walker sat up, and began to undo the hardware. “Kind of surprised this thing still works… y’know, after all the shit that’s happened.”

“These are set up to work through a slightly different system,” said Justin.

“Thanks to your work, Dr. Fraser,” Harry grinned.

“All right, that should do it,” said Justin. Harry inspected his arm, and found all the injuries had been healed. A gesture from his hand restored the sleeve to his jacket.

“So all this magic. Why ain’t I heard of you guys until now?” Walker wanted to know.

“It’s not allowed,” Mazhe answered. “You’re not magical.”

“Right. Witch and wizards are supposed to be evil, all that bullshit.”

“And as you’ve now seen and experienced, there are some truly evil witches and wizards,” said Aaron. “All right. Code is nine three two eight zero one four.”

Walker still had the actual unit in his hand, and so quickly plugged the numbers into the keypad. Others had to retrieve theirs, but in short order, the new frequency was programmed.

“Ragnar comm. Team alpha.”

The silence was deafening.

Chapter End Notes

UP NEXT: Alpha team and their additional member continue to press toward the primary objective; Captain Walker’s forced to relive more horrible memories of his trek across the broken city; and a freak accident has fatal consequences...

CHAPTER NOTES: Wow. This was a TON of fun to write. And thing is, as I wrote the notes for this chapter… the rough write-up to establish the plot flow… god oh god, the ideas that came out. I found myself backing up, realizing that wait… if that happens, then THIS can happen, or… if this happens, then, I CAN’T have that happen. Playing “Spec Ops: The Line”smashed my writer’s block from here to buggery and back, I think. Now, as far as Captain Walker goes… oh god, that poor man. If there’s anyone who needed someone to wrap him in a bear hug and give him comfort… it’s him. Just wow.

Of course, what I’ve got planned for Walker… ouch. His emotional roller coaster is far from over.
Nightmares in the Desert II

Chapter Summary

SUMMARY: Gladius and their additional member continue to press toward the primary objective; Captain Walker’s forced to relive more horrible memories of his trek across the broken city; and a freak accident has fatal consequences…

WARNING: mature subject content, violence, disturbing scenes, character death; massive spoilers for "Spec Ops: The Line"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

16. NIGHTMARES IN THE DESERT II

January, 2008

“I can control my destiny, but not my fate. Destiny means there are opportunities to turn right or left, but fate is a one-way street. I believe we all have the choice as to whether we fulfill our destiny, but our fate is sealed.”

- Paulo Coelho

Aaron spent the next few minutes attempting a number of other channels commonly used by both the Commonwealth and the non-magical world. In one case, he thought he heard an answer on the other end, but it was fleeting, returning to only static.

“Perhaps the storm again causes interference,” Crixus suggested.

“Message the Ragnar,” said Justin, “The storm shouldn’t interfere—nor should the magical disruptions.”

Aaron un-clipped his mobile from his belt, and quickly dispatched a message back to the ship. A reply came back almost immediately.

“Confirmed, weather’s messing with the radios.”

“Well, look on the bright side,” said Justin, “If our radios aren’t working, then neither are OND’s. They’re just as deaf as we are.”

“This weather’s getting particularly brutal,” said Aaron.

“Think they’re actually controlling it?”

“Before seeing this, I would’ve said no way, absolutely not. But now. God, Justin, I don’t know. They’ve kept this thing active for four months.”
“What about… let’s go back to my rooms aboard the Ragnar, get something to eat, maybe get a bit of rest?” Harry suggested.

“Protocol—” Justin began, but Harry gave him a frigid glare. “We'll be in my set of rooms and no further.”

“We could return to the apartment,” Mazhe suggested, wanting to head off an argument.

“Now that I can agree with,” said Brandon, “No offence, Captain, but you're still considered a foreign operative without clearance and credentials.”

“Though… it's probably a good idea that sort of thing be arranged, if only temporarily—”

“We can sort that out after,” said Harry. He’d already produced his mobile. “Everyone get close.”

They landed in the apartment’s common room, with Justin quickly helping Walker back to his feet. He quickly took in his surroundings. “Damn. Where are we?”

“My private residence,” Harry answered, “Come this way. My nose tells me we’re just in time for dinner.”

“Thanks, but, uh, I don’t have much of an appetite.”

“Come sit anyway. Have something to drink.”

“Anything that’s got alcohol.”

“We have that too,” said Justin, “But we’re going back out there, so—”

“Haven’t had a cold beer—or any cold beverage in over a week.”

“Right.”

“We should let Bryce know, have him join us,” said Mazhe.

“D’you mind?” Harry asked.

They took seats around the table, which had been reduced in size to account for the fewer number. Mazhe finished sending off a message to Bryce, while Harry seemed lost in thought a moment.

“What?” Justin questioned.

“I believe this is the smallest I’ve seen this table in quite some time. Having people of import calling here all hours of the day recently… bloody hell.”

“Your table changes its size,” said Walker.

“You notice the room’s much larger, no? The table’s been nearly as long as the room on a number of occasions. Up until recently, we’ve had many visitors.”

“So it, what, re-sizes itself?”

“Sort of,” Justin supplied, “It’s likely the last people in here put it back to normal. Promising, considering the chaos that woke us this morning.”

It was then the centre of the table instantly filled with food, in this case, a lasagna, with a platter of
garlic bread. A Caesar salad rounded out the offering, and a chest of refreshments appeared to Harry’s right.

“Damn,” said Walker, impressed.

“C’mon, at least have a bit,” Aaron pressed.

“Here, hold your hands out in front of you,” said Justin.

Walker looked at him funny, but did as asked. Justin produced his wand, and with a flick, the dirt, grime, and blood vanished.

“Oh. Uh, thanks.”

“Once all this nonsense is over and done, you can borrow our shower—or bath, if that’s what you’d like,” said Harry, “Shor’s balls, you look like a walking corpse.”

“Gee, thanks,” Walker muttered, as he plucked a piece of garlic bread off the plate. If he had to admit, he was actually hungry. Food being scarce for the past few days, he’d gotten used to the idea of eating very little. If anything, locating water had become the much more pressing issue—that, and avoiding the bad guys, whether they be remnants of the 33rd, or who he now knew were terrorists. Magical terrorists.

“So let me get this straight. Magical terrorists. They made the sand storm that’s destroyed Dubai.”

“Exactly that, Captain,” said Aaron, “It’s behaviour unlike anything we’ve ever seen. I mean, you have Osama Bin Laden and his nightmares, but this…it’s the extreme. Order of the New Dawn, or OND for short, kill thousands. Their opening salvo against the Commonwealth resulted in the death of a half million people. Then came their attack in Washington, nine-thousand dead, the near-exposure of the magical world. Attempted abductions of major-league baseball players, attacks against other entertainment venues, and this, the destruction of Dubai. Two million dead or missing, an entire battalion of American soldiers now lost, one of your own men killed, the other still being held captive—this is their thing.”

“What do they want?”

“For you to die. As in, every non-magical person in the world to die,” Brandon picked up. “Of course that’s a load of bullshit, the ratio of magicals to non-magicals being one to one-thousand, something like that.”

It was then Mazhe’s mobile buzzed. He looked at the message. “Bryce already had something to eat. He’s still busy helping with refugees.”

“Good that he’s tied up. This shit today, gods. It’s not a training ground,” said Harry, as he finished fixing his plate.

“How many are you?”

“Me, Mazhe here, Dardanos, Crixus, Justin, and Aaron. Brandon’s only along today because—”

“Queen’s orders, Harry.”

“Right. But these guys are my protection detail. I accepted it grudgingly four years ago. Now, Brandon’s one of my closest friends, orders aside. Aaron, meanwhile, he’s a newer member of my circle, having took over Brandon’s assignment back in Frostfall - September. But, I would trust him
with my life, just as I trust Brandon.

“There’s one other person who also joined us rather recently, but has less experience than the rest of us, and so it was decided he would be better off helping aboard the Ragnar.”

Walker gave a nod. It made sense. Someone green on a critical op, a recipe for disaster. Sure, a soldier needed to get experience somewhere, but not a situation requiring experienced team members. He thought for a moment. “How long you been training together?”

“Four years,” Harry answered. “There’s one other who’s no longer with us. Killed in Washington. The name Conlon mean anything?”

“Staff Sargent Thomas Conlon, USMC. Went AWOL, way I heard it.”

“He was my trainer, and someone I loved and adored. A part of me died inside when he was mortally wounded in Washington. I think… only thing that would hurt more than that… was if I were to lose Mazhe.”

It only took a moment for Walker to get it. The pair of rings, and how closely the pair sat, sharing the end of the table.

“How long?”

“We were joined in Las—August,” said Mazhe.

“Oh. Uh, congratulations.”

“Thank you.”

“So, uh, what happens to me when this is over?”

“The immediate term, we insist you speak with one of our healers, Healer Ferris. She’ll not only properly heal your physical injuries, she’ll help you reconcile your thoughts, come to terms with the events you’ve been through.

“Captain, you’re as much a victim in this event as the refugees, perhaps more so. To keep all of that bottled up, it’s not healthy,” said Justin.

“Long term? We don’t have an answer to that,” said Brandon, “Though our official directive is for all survivors from the city be absorbed into the Commonwealth, it’s likely the US Army might like to have you and your surviving team member back.”

“They might try him for war crimes,” said Aaron.

Walker gave a slow nod. Yeah, he could almost count on that happening. Accident or not, his orders had resulted in the death of nearly fifty innocent civilians, never mind what happened when rescuers arrived. What would these guys think of him, if they were to learn of that? What was their justice system like?

“And what might he like to happen?” questioned Dardanos.

“A fair question,” said Harry, “And, uh, being with us, does permit that option.”

“Harry...” said Brandon, warningly.

“I won’t play that card. Yet.”
“My life… everything… after this, after what I seen, what I’ve had to do… no going back. I don’t get to go home this time. Even if there’s some magic you can do… it’ll never be right.”

“Then he stays with us,” Harry decided.

Justin groaned, while Brandon also made a pained face. Yeah, they’d all been down that road before. How quickly would Harry see it? Last thing they needed right now, was for him to have a mental outburst, being forced to walk a road he’d already travelled, such was the case in the aftermath of Washington.

The group fell silent as they ate. Harry was somewhat pleased to see Walker take more than the slice of garlic bread, and go for a helping of lasagna. If anything, the meal was having a calming effect on the man, perhaps from it being a normal thing after so many days of very abnormal events.

With the meal over, Justin had Walker lay down on one of the couches in the common room. A flick of his wand banished most of the dirt and grime.

“As Harry suggests, once we get back for the night, we’ll show you where the bath and shower is. Magic’s good for doing a robust job, but nothing beats a steamy hot shower.”

“Yeah, makes sense.”

“All right. Take your ear piece out so I can heal some of your injuries.”

Walker reached up and did so. “This hurt like a bitch.”

“Looks grisly,” said Mazhe.

“So do your wounds. What did that?” Walker pointed to the faint, but still noticeable scars on Mazhe’s face.

“A big cat did it. She did this to me AFTER I’d stabbed her in the heart. I ran out of healing potions, so the scars are permanent.”

“I was… eleven—yeah, it was Christmas back in first year,” Harry remembered, while Justin continued to cast healing charms.

“The injuries were pretty frightening,” Justin also remembered, “Even with the additional healing charms, they took a few months to heal up properly. Some kind of infection.”

“What healer Ferris said,” said Mazhe. “Doesn’t matter. I’m still alive, and the animal’s pelt fetched a nice bag of coin. I’d considered having the head stuffed as a consolation prize.”

That earned a chuckle out of Walker. Both he and Harry were barely adults, but most definitely, they were warriors. Hell, here they were, working with Spec Ops.

“So you aren’t actual military.”

“We’re still not really sure how to class them,” said Brandon, “Harry’s a ward of the Queen, officially. Though that’s sort of expired, and will expire by official records this coming July when he turns seventeen.”

“Unofficially, I’m nearly nineteen. I won’t get into the hows or the whys, just trust us, it involves some dodgy magic.”

“I’m thinking likely, once you officially become an adult, the Queen will invite the both of you into
“I’d like to have a few words with you, Brandon. You’ve already had a baptism of fire several times over, you’ve had the equivalent of basic training...”

“Led the training of nearly thirty men who had no prior military experience,” Justin threw in.

“It is no surprise the government wishes to officially recruit him,” said Dardanos.

“All right. That should do for now,” said Justin, stowing his wand.

“Thanks. Feels better,” said Walker, as he replaced his ear piece and sat up.

“And as I said earlier, you have a date with healer Ferris; she’ll do a much better job than I’ve done —this is just basic first aid magic. And we insist you have a lengthy chat with her about your experiences.”

Walker only gave a nod. “It’s, uh, appreciated.”

“The nightmare you’ve been through, you’re clinging to the thinnest thread of your sanity,” said Harry.

“Lugo... the thought that maybe he’s still alive... it’s a huge emotional boost.”

“I expect it would be.”

“Not to dampen your optimism, but the chances of him still being alive—” Brandon began.

“No. They're using him as bait. They want us to find him,” said Harry.

“Until we reach them,” said Dardanos.

“We'll have to be extra vigilant.”

“No matter what, the ward or device maintaining the spells must be destroyed. It's the primary objective,” said Brandon.

They at last returned to the ruined highrise where Walker was staying. Pieces of the plane had rained down on the ground and the bridge, and now the site was crawling with Commonwealth soldiers and non-military personnel as they recovered the dead. They wore hazmat suits and heavy masks which not only kept out the sand and dust, but the biological hazards as well—never mind the smell. The bodies had been there for a number of days.

“Thanks,” said Walker.

“For?”

“For looking after them.”

“The families of the dead will want closure,” said Brandon.

“Having to kill them tore me up inside. Fuck, they were our guys, y’know.”

“Yeah, no shit,” Aaron agreed, “I know it would mess with my head, too. Thing is—I mean, you know this already, but... you had to do it. And I’m sure OND got off on it, seeing ‘filthy No-Majs’ killing their friends.”
“Let’s move away from these guys,” said Mazhe, “I’d rather not leave them deaf.”

“Why—oh,” Brandon realized, knowing what Mazhe intended on doing.

They walked for a few minutes, heading with the wind on their backs, as to lessen the discomfort.

“All right. This should be all right.”

“Miraak.”

“Of course.”

The pair shared a look. Then—

“Lok... VAH KOOOR!!”

Walker remembered hearing the near-deafening clap of thunder earlier in the day, and had wondered what it was. Now, he had his answer, and he wasn’t sure whether to be astounded, or terrified, as the powerful magic took hold. Right before his eyes, the powerful sand storm was being beaten back by some sort of magical... shout?

“It’s ancient magic from my world,” Mazhe explained, seeing Walker’s expression. “Dark magic is at work here, but it has nothing on a Dragon Shout.”

“It did ground Alduin,” said Harry, “And he was a dragon... a demigod of sorts. So black magic? A cake walk.”

Walker furrowed his brows. “A... dragon? Seriously?”

“Trust us. We know two of them rather personally. If you’re staying with us, you’ll meet both of them eventually.”

“So... they’re friendly.”

“Yes, though they’re somewhat of an exception,” Mazhe explained, as they began walking.

“Wait. So you... you’re not from earth, then.”

“No. He’s not,” Harry answered, “He comes from a... well, a planet called Nirn.”

“It’s about two-thirds the size of earth, but with similar gravity and atmosphere.”

“Damn.” Walker shook his head, then smirked. “Welcome to earth.”

Mazhe rolled his eyes. “We have a comedian in our midst.”

The storm had all but vanished, with only a light breeze stirring the sand slightly with the evening sun. Everyone was able to remove their masks and goggles.

“Bloody hell, these things are uncomfortable,” Harry muttered, as he tucked the gear away in his pouch.

Aaron let out a snort. “Better than having your face ripped off by sandpaper.”

It was then a group of what resembled fighter jets flew overhead. However, if Walker had to admit, the wings looked way too small to support the air frame. Of course, he realized: magic.
It was confirmed, when a new voice came over the radio. “Gladius, phoenix lead, over.”

“Phoenix lead, Gladius, we read you loud and clear. Welcome to the show,” said Aaron.

“Got a strong signal from the target, were gonna scout ahead.”

“Roger phoenix lead.”

“Phoenix two, just passed over a heat sig. Coords on their way.”

That coincided with Aaron’s mobile buzzing, indicating a new message.

“Received, we’ll check it out.”

“Scabbard. that’s a negative, Gladius. Press to primary objective, we'll dispatch a team.”

“Roger, Scabbard, WILCO.”

Dardanos looked confused. “WILCO?”

“Will comply,” Walker answered.

“How come we stopped using these anyway?” Mazhe gestured to the radio he was wearing.

“Think about it,” Harry answered, “With the nightmare went through the end of fourth year... last thing I wanted to think about. And with the mess at the end of fifth year... these things, even as useful as they might be... had many negative emotions attached.”

“This is true. They would have been useful in Washington.”

“How come you guys were there?” Walker questioned.

That got a frustrated look from Harry. “I don’t look for trouble. Trouble usually finds me instead. It was meant to be a date for Justin, a normal activity for the lot of us. Instead, it's a complete calamity and a loss which still deeply affects me personally.”

“And Tommy wouldn't want you to cry over him, Harry,” said Justin, “He died a hero.”

That earned a scowl from both Brandon and Harry. “Still doesn't lessen the pain. He was a dear friend I loved and adored.”

“Here’s a question,” said Justin, wanting to steer the conversation in a slightly safer direction, “How come we've not seen the enemy? I would've thought OND would come at us now that we're sucked into this mess.”

“You know we'll run into them eventually,” Brandon answered, “Once we get closer to the tower they've occupied. It’s likely their stronghold.”

“How come we never saw them?” Walker wondered.

“Magical people have many ways of hiding in plain sight,” said Mazhe, “Example.” He simply vanished right before Walker’s eyes.

“Holy fuck.”

Mazhe reappeared with barely a sound. “So they're likely watching us.”
“Even worse, we suspect this group is tapping into non-magical resources, the radios as an example,” Brandon added, “It's behaviour we've never seen from a magical terror cell.”

“Are you really surprised?” Walker muttered.

“No. Not really.”

“No matter, it still comes down to a simple hard line fact: they have to be stopped, end of story,” said Mazhe. “Let’s keep moving.”

“All teams, Scabbard. CO’s ordering everyone in for the night, we pick up again at oh-seven-hundred.”

“Roger that,” said Aaron.

The sun had set, and it was becoming difficult to see ahead of them as dusk fell. Adding to it, the storm was starting to re-assert itself, the wind picking up with each passing minute.

“All right, guys. We pick up fresh in the morning,” said Brandon.

“We’re going back to the apartment, then. Coming with?”

“Yeah, sure, Harry.”

“We can return to the Ragnar,” said one of the marines.

“You guys are welcome to join us,” said Mazhe, “There’s loads of room, and worse comes to worse, we can configure something in the VPR.”

Less than a minute later, they had once again returned to the flat. This time, they found a few people about, including Bryce. He looked tired. No surprise, handling the number of refugees and survivors would have been chaotic at best.

“Right. Let’s get some rest. Uh, Captain Walker, come with us, we’ll set up a bed in our room.”

“Give him a dreamless sleep potion, Harry.”

“Plan on it. I’m guessin’ you’ve not had a good night’s sleep in a week or so.”

“You have no idea,” Walker answered. “So your potion or whatever, I won’t have any dreams?”

“Or nightmares,” Harry answered.

“Uh, I’ll look after these guys,” said Aaron, gesturing to the contingent of marines, “Go get some rest.”

Harry tugged on Walker’s shirt sleeve. “C’mon, this way. We’ll conjure you a bed.”

January 4, 2008
Ruins of Dubai, UAE

Seven hours of sleep and a hot breakfast did favours for everyone, and as it neared 7 am, the large group had returned to the spot they’d left the night before. Mazhe and Miraak once again used the Clear Skies Shout to drive back the magically-powered sand storm, and the group pushed forward.
Sometime after, they were approaching a pair of tall buildings which mirrored each other. Harry wasn’t the only one to notice Walker had become very quiet. And, all too soon, everyone realized why. Everyone was forced to either put on face masks, or produce bubble-charms. The smell was toxic. Then, the bodies. The burned corpses, huddled together in clumps.

“Oh God,” said Aaron, horrified, “This… this was white phosphorus. Who… who would do this?”

Walker let out a strangled cry and collapsed to his knees, as the memory of the event hit him like an out-of-control truck. Both Mazhe and Harry knelt down beside him. Both Aaron and Brandon looked furious, though. He’d killed nearly fifty people!

Harry, meanwhile, was seeing the rest of the battle field. “Brandon… look.” he gestured to wreckage in the distance.

“American soldiers,” said Aaron. “So this…”

“We didn’t… we didn’t know,” Walker sobbed.

“And had you known, you wouldn’t have done this, tell me if I’m wrong,” said Mazhe.

Now, both Aaron and Brandon relented. “Faulty intel. A catastrophic mistake, but…”

“W-w-we didn’t have a choice! Three… of us… against… Idunno… dozens of them!”

“Here.” Harry had reached into his pouch, and retrieved a calming draught. “It'll help.”

Walker Shakily accepted the potion and consumed its contents, handing the empty vial back.

“I know you likely don’t want to feel better, but… we need you half-sane.”

“Yeah, right,” Walker snorted, as they helped him back to his feet. He rubbed his face with his hands, and sucked in a breath. “This fucked me up… you don’t know ‘till you’ve been there. It’s still fucking with my head.”

“Shit!” Aaron exclaimed, “Watch out, the bastards just unleashed some sort of surprise—”

He got no further, as a number of corpses seemed to come alive right before their eyes. Walker looked horrified, while the rest of the party was forced to open fire on the unexpected but very dangerous threat. Harry cupped his hands together, allowing an acid-green energy to form in them, and let fly. There came an angry, hissing, crackling sound, as an acid-green sphere formed, then dissipated, to reveal a Seeker.

“Get them!” Harry hissed, flicking a hand at a clump of threats.

Walker was only further horrified, seeing the strange demonic creature the young wizard had summoned. What the HELL was THAT?!

“A seeker,” Harry answered, at the unasked question. “It won’t hurt us. Our enemies, meanwhile…”

The seeker had now drawn the attention of the Inferi, making it easier for the rest of the party to take them out with impunity. Some of the marines were quickly vanishing the remains, so they could not be raised a second time.

With the enemies thinning, Brandon was scanning the area with his wand. Someone had to be nearby in order to activate the Inferi. Unfortunately, his scan came up empty.
“They likely left soon after the corpses woke up,” said Aaron, as Justin dispatched the last enemy.

“Given the number of dead, OND has a deep resource pool,” said one of the marines, “Sir, we could be swamped.”

“Yes, agreed,” said Brandon.

Walker, meanwhile, once again sagged to the ground. He’d been forced to kill something—defile something he’d already killed days earlier. The adrenaline rush was receding, leaving only despair; all of his past deeds were rapidly catching up with the man. He at last collapsed into the abyss of unconsciousness.

“Shit.”

“Send him to the Ragnar,” said one of the marines, “What should’ve been done in the first place.”

“It’s my call, corporal,” Brandon snapped.

“I’ll carry him,” said Harry, “Let’s get moving, we’re lagging behind as it is.”

“Harry,” said Mazhe.

“I got this.”

Harry picked the man up, momentarily surprised at how light he was. “Shor’s bones, my chest weighs more.”

“Not eating for a while does that, Harry. You sure you’ll be all right?”

“Yeah, we’ll be fine. Now let’s go.”

“Scabbard, Gladius.”

“Scabbard, go ahead.”

“We need more boots on the ground. It’s the third time we’ve been suckered by things that are supposed to be dead.”

“Roger that, Gladius. Cadogan comm., we’re deploying our marines as we speak.”

“This is phoenix lead, we’re getting airborne now.”

“Recovery teams are also suited up, should be in the field, ETA five minutes,” came the voice from the Ragnar.

“Thank you both Scabbard and Cadogan,” said Aaron.

“Cadogan?” Harry wondered, thinking back to the obnoxious portrait he’d run into at Hogwarts once.

“HMS Cadogan. She’s one of our smaller naval vessels,” said Aaron, “Think—”

“Roughly the size of an American destroyer,” came the answer from the ship in question.

“Given the size of the Ragnar and her sisters, they tend to have a much larger travel path. Cadogan and her sisters, meanwhile, stick to a much smaller patrol area,” Aaron explained.
“So the Ragnar sticking to one place is unusual,” Mazhe guessed.

“Very, yeah,” said Brandon, “But don’t feel bad. Had she been needed due to something urgent, it wouldn’t have been an issue.”

“Her ability to teleport,” Mazhe remembered. “Harry, here, let me carry him a bit.”

They didn’t bother to stop, as Mazhe quite easily lifted Walker onto his back. The seeker had not been dispatched, and so followed a short distance behind. The other soldiers kept their distance, still unsettled by the summoned creature.

“Right. We just got attacked back there. Is there a way we can listen in on the old channel, without them hearing us?” Harry wondered.

Aaron simply gave a nod, and un-clipped the receiver from his belt. He fiddled with the buttons and controls a moment, before clipping it back on.

“All right. I’m the only one who can broadcast, but we should all be able to hear what they’re saying.”

It had to happen eventually. As they crossed yet another sand-buried intersection, a hail of green magic blasted from the upper floors of a ruined building on one corner, instantly felling two marines, and sending everyone scattering for cover.

Harry and Mazhe quickly ducked into pocket created by wreckage, and Mazhe put Walker down. He was still very much out of it, and perhaps it was a good thing.

“How many you think?” Mazhe asked.

“Eight, I think,” Harry answered.

“I counted nine,” came Justin’s answer.

“Fourth floor,” came Aaron’s warning.

“Flash bangs?” came Brandon’s question.

“Roger,” Aaron answered, “Look away.”

Seconds later, both Harry and Mazhe heard a noisy bang from nearby, followed very shortly after by gunfire.

“Homenum Revelio,” came Brandon’s command. “We’re clear.”

“Search the ruin, see if they’ve left anything behind,” came Aaron’s order.

“Sir,” came another voice. Harry guessed they were directing marines.

“Harry, where are you?” came Justin’s question, slightly concerned.

“We took cover given—”

“Roger that. Good thinking,” said Brandon, while Harry once again picked up Walker. Then with Mazhe’s help, they crawled out of the makeshift hideout. The others were already gathered, while a group of marines were entering the building where the attack had originated.
“Feel foolish, cowering behind cover while the lot of you faced the enemy.”

“Better to take cover than to be out in the open,” said Aaron. “He’s still out of it?”

“Yeah. Thinkin’ it’s better to just let him be,” said Harry, “In his shoes, I probably would’ve passed out BEFORE they suddenly came alive. Gods, that’s so fucked up.”

“He didn’t know, Harry,” Mazhe pressed.

“I know. But we both know, killing someone who is innocent, it always weighs on the soul.”

Mazhe gave a nod. “And you know that’s one of my hard and fast rules. I won’t ever kill someone without just cause.”

“We’re clear,” came a voice over the radio, belonging to one of the marines, “Looks like they only set up here shortly before we came through.”

“They ambushed us,” said Brandon.

“Scabbard, Gladius” said Aaron.

“Go ahead Gladius.”

“Recovery unit to my location, two casualties.”

“Roger. Location marked, ETA three minutes.”

They fell quiet for the next few minutes, until the recovery unit arrived. As was the Commonwealth’s policy, no soldier was left behind, unless there was no alternative. In this case, the hostile situation had been neutralized, and waiting a few minutes for the recovery team didn’t cause an issue.

As they started moving again, Harry felt Walker start to move about, and so they stopped, and Harry set him down, then knelt down beside him.

“Where… where are we?” he asked, then swallowed hard. His mouth was dry.

“Here,” said Mazhe, reaching into his pouch, and producing another bottle of water. Walker accepted it, opened it, and drank greedily.

“We’re getting closer to the target,” Brandon answered.

“’m sorry...”

“Nothing to be sorry about,” said Harry, “You all right to get up?”

“Y-yeah. Just...”

Both Harry and Mazhe got up, then helped Walker to his feet. The man teetered unsteadily for a moment, but got his bearings.

“Being a pansy here, fuck. Just—”

“Apologies aren’t necessary,” said Mazhe, “But we do need to keep moving if we’re to rescue your friend and put an end to this disaster.”

“No shit.”
Late morning, they came upon a convoy of wrecked tanker trucks. There, they found a larger group of refugees, all of them in slightly better condition than others they’d located. Most of them looked furious, seeing Walker among the group who’d just wandered in.

Aaron produced his wand, and pressed the tip to his throat. “Sonorous. We’re here to help. Just bear with us a minute.”

“You’re not Americans?” asked one, in broken English.

“It’s not important,” Justin answered, “Everyone just hold on a bit.”

Aaron cancelled the amplification charm. “Scabbard, Gladius.”

“Go ahead, Gladius.”

“Recovery team to our location expedited. Found a large group of survivors.”

“Roger that. Location noted, a recovery team’s been dispatched, ETA two minutes.”

Walker, meanwhile, was kneeling down beside a badly burned body that had been partially pinned under the wrecked truck. He reached down, and pulled something off of it.

“Dog tags,” said Aaron, seeing Harry’s questioning look.

“Agent Riggs,” Walker answered, as he stuffed the tags in a pocket for safe keeping. “He… he did this. Wanted the city to die. I didn’t really get it until… until this. The trucks blew up, I got burnt. But by the time we got to this… I was already pretty much dead inside. After the gate… I was more dead than alive.”

“You gave up,” said Mazhe.

“No. Not… not quite.”

A blur of limbs nearby brought a contingent of marines and healers from the Ragnar. That was alpha team’s cue to move on.

“What finally did it… discovering Konrad was already dead,” Walker continued, as they left the scene behind them. “Realizing… or at least thinking… it was all in my head, some hallucination.”

“Except that it wasn’t,” Harry guessed, “Or… most of it wasn’t.”

“I… I don’t know.”

“OND likely knew he was unhinged,” said Aaron, “Likely exploited it, made it worse.”


“They were playing with you. See, thing is, they get their rocks off torturing non-magical people. It’s only slightly less satisfying than killing them,” Brandon explained, “They see non-magical people as inferior.”

“Trust me, I catch whoever’s doin’ this, they’re gonna be breathin’ through a new hole in their skull,” Walker vowed.

“Not if I catch him first,” said Harry, “Trust me, the one or ones responsible… have a very unpleasant afterlife in store.”
“The Soul Cairn,” Aaron remembered, “What… what is it exactly?”

“Hell,” Mazhe answered, “There is no reunion with loved ones, only an eternity serving beings known as the ‘ideal masters’. I don’t know who or what they are exactly, but… I do know when someone is soul-trapped… that’s where the soul goes when the soul gem’s used.”

Harry gave a vicious smirk. “Nothing we do to them will match the torment that waits when their life is extinguished.”

Walker gave a satisfied nod. “Sounds good to me.”

“I’m sure you’d like their last minutes to be particularly painful, but honestly, we can’t ever do that… stoop to their level,” said Brandon, “And honestly, the government frowns on some of Harry’s tactics, but…”

Harry gave yet another smirk. “Yeah, except that rules and I tend not to get along very well.”

“What’s a soul gem?” Walker wanted to know.

Mazhe reached into his pouch, and produced a Black soul gem. It was a deep violet shade, almost black in colour, almost double the length of his hand.

“This is a black soul gem, capable of capturing the soul of a dying person.”

“Looks like a crystal. What’s it used for?”

“They’re used to create or recharge Magically-enchanted weapons,” Mazhe answered, as he slid the soul gem back into his pouch, “One of these can make a particularly strong enchantment, or in all but a few cases, fully recharge an item’s enchantment.”

It was then they spotted a group of brooms pass over head. That almost sent the team heading for cover, until Brandon recognized the uniforms.

“They’re our guys.”

“Risky,” said Harry, “They hit dodgy magic and they’ll be ploughing a ditch.”

“Makes it faster, though,” said Justin, “And really. The storm’s been kept at bay for most of the morning.”

“Fair enough,” said Harry, “And I’m not feeling the strange sensation… haven’t since the twin buildings—”


“All right. All in favour of taking to the air?”

Five minutes later, everyone was in the air. Harry had Walker climb on behind him, while Mazhe took Miraak. Dardanos and Crixus flew together, while Aaron, Brandon, and Justin flew on their own. The rest of the SOU and the marines paired up, with one odd member.

In the air, they picked up the pace, although Walker did point out a few things, locations he and his team had fought against the 33rd during their trek across the broken city. They were also able to spot several more pockets of survivors, though that was becoming less and less. Time was running out, the seventy-two hour mark had already come and gone. It was a known fact that a human being
typically cannot survive more than three days without water.

As they approached a shattered building with a lot of burned wreckage on top, Walker said, “There was a guy broadcastin’ on the radio. We caught up to him there. Blew up the equipment fleein’ by chopper—”

Everyone was forced to take evasive action, as a hail of bullets and spell fire pierced the air.

“Bloody hell,” Harry swore.

“The 33rd,” said Walker, as they pulled back a bit. “Building was heavily fortified.”

“Except that it's not the 33rd,” said Aaron, "Looks like the terrorists took it over."

“If it was a stronghold, it was likely well-supplied,” said Brandon. He reached into his pouch, producing what looked like an over-sized pen. “Aaron. Air strike.”

“Scabbard, Gladius.”

“Go ahead,” came the reply.

“Need a firing solution on a mark at our two o'clock, range one hundred ten meters, yield to compromise structure.”

“Roger, Gladius, waiting for mark.”

Harry had heard of such an operation being performed, but this was the first time he’d seen it actually done. Brandon had turned on the device in his hand, and now pointed it at the charred wreckage on the rooftop.

Walker clearly had his doubts. “No way an airstrike’s gonna knock down the building.”

“Just watch us,” said Brandon, smirking.

“Target sighted. Programming firing solution. Recommend retreat to Mike Sierra Delta two two five,” came the warning.

“WILCO,” said Aaron.

“Mike sierra delta?” Harry asked, confused.

“Minimum safe distance,” Walker answered, “Number’s the distance.”

“Yeah, gotta go, guys,” said Brandon.

“Here, I got your broom, keep it painted,” said Aaron, as the group began to pull back from the target.

More gunfire erupted from the building and the ground, but given their rapidly opening gap, it was ineffective. Finally, they all stopped, having put nearly a quarter of a kilometre between them and the target.

“Scabbard, we're Mike Sierra Delta. Fire when ready.”

“Roger.”
It was twenty seconds before anything really happened. Then, there came a noisy whoosh, as a projectile blasted overhead, at a downward angle. It impacted with the spot Brandon had painted in the wreckage on the roof, erupting in a powerful blast of smoke and debris. (1)

At first, nothing seemed to happen. Plenty of smoke, with the blast having ignited more flammable materials on a few floors below, but not a lot happening. Walker was about to point out the failure, when there came a series of ominous cracks, pops, and groans. And then, with a another cloud of dust and debris, the building pancaked, one floor crashing down on another.

“Scabbard, target is destroyed, repeat, target is destroyed.”

“Roger that,” came the answer.

“What was that?” came the imposter’s voice.

“Air to surface missile, they just blew up a building, sir,” came the answer.

“Any idea what for?”

“Ambushed. Potter and his friends are on brooms. One of them pointed a... a laser is it? at the building and you just saw the result.”

They heard the impostor suck in a breath. “They called in an air strike. Shit, okay. This may alter our plans. Is Walker still with them?”

“He’s still with Potter.”

“Well now. That was interesting,” said Brandon, as they resumed flight. “They sounded—”

“Concerned,” Harry finished, giving another vicious smirk, “Bet they did not see that coming.”

“What's stopping us from calling an air strike on the ward anchor once we find Lugo?” Mazhe wondered.

“We don't know what we're gonna find there,” Aaron answered, “But if it's an option we'll definitely take it.”

“Guys... hang on. I saw—”

Justin was forced to roll the broom to avoid a blast of green magic. The others answered back with a storm of spells and gunfire, sending up a cloud of dust and debris.

Aaron circled around, casting detection spells, but found nothing. And, as the dust settled, they spotted a single body splayed out on the rooftop.

“Most foolish choice of actions,” said Dardanos, “One against many, the intelligent choice is to exercise restraint.”

“He knew he was compromised,” said Walker.

“A last stand, then,” said Dardanos.

“Should have just Disapparated. But I'll take a stupid enemy over a smart one any day,” said Aaron, as he rejoined Brandon.

Crixus only chuckled, reaching into his pouch for something, just as everyone felt an odd sensation
wash over them. And then...

BOOOOOM.

Like a switch being shut off, the brooms and their riders all fell from the sky, to impact with the sand dune below. The last thing Harry saw and felt, was Walker slamming into him heavily.

Harry found himself being shaken awake. He opened his eyes to find Mazhe hovering over him, a worried look on his face.

“Harry? You... you all right?”

Harry carefully sat up, his head still full of cobwebs. It was if...

“Think I nailed you in the head,” said Walker. He was sitting nearby.

“Don’t worry—”

Then, he spotted Dardanos, slumped up against a pile of wrecked crates and boxes, terribly injured and bloody. He scrambled over, even though his world was still spinning. “Dardanos...”

“I knew... fate would catch up to me one day, Harry.”

“No...”

“Harry... listen to me. You... gave me something I... can never repay. Hope. Joy. That I have lived as long as I have, with all of you...”

“It’s... it’s not fair.”

“Do not... do not think that. If this is my time, then so be it. Sura waits for me, just... as your parents wait for you.”

His breathing was becoming laboured, and Harry knew he was running out of time. Justin hurried over, and was about to reach into his pouch, but Harry angrily swatted his hand away. “NO!! You’ll blow us all up!”

“Crixus... he...”

“He died instantly,” said one of the marines. He was covered in cuts and scratches, and splotches of blood plastered his uniform. He was busily applying bandages to a fellow marine, who was still prone on the ground.

“Harry... do not place blame on yourself. One... cannot escape his fate... ever.”

He took one more ragged breath. Then, he fell still, his head rolling to the side.

Now, Harry lost it. Both Crixus and Dardanos were gone, his last link back to the gladiators, and two of his dear friends. And, as though a switch had been shut off, he blacked out, the grief being too much to bear.

Mazhe had hurried over, and as he held his unconscious mate, now also felt both sadness and anger: Dardanos and Crixus had both been close friends of him, too. He mentally cursed, finding himself once again reciting a short prayer for the dead: “Kynareth watch over him as he passes through her realm. And may Arkay guide him to the doors into the afterlife.”
UP NEXT: Still reeling from the loss of two dear friends, Harry and his circle at last reach the location of the device keeping the violent sand storm alive. But as they are about to discover, OND has far worse events in store, for both Harry, and the Commonwealth.

CHAPTER NOTES: I’d not intended to kill Spartacus/Dardanos and Crixus, but... it seemed only an inevitable event that the chaotic magic would have catastrophic consequences. A dimensional pocket being exposed to a magical disruption created by a dark spell? Recipe for disaster. The technical explanation: the pocket dimension collapsed in on itself rather violently, killing Crixus instantly, and mortally wounding Spartacus.

(1) This ain’t a Michael Bay movie, so no huge fireball here. Lots of dust being sent up, but no fire, at least not initially.
Nightmares in the Desert III

Chapter Summary

SUMMARY: Still reeling from the loss of two dear friends, Harry and his circle at last reach the location of the device keeping the violent sand storm alive. But as they are about to discover, OND has far worse events in store, for both Harry, and the Commonwealth.

WARNING: Violence, mature subject matter.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

16. NIGHTMARES IN THE DESERT III

January, 2008

“After Hiroshima was bombed, I saw a photograph of the side of a house with the shadows of the people who had lived there burned into the wall from the intensity of the bomb. The people were gone, but their shadows remained.”

- Ray Bradbury

Smoke. Fire. Heat. It was almost too hot to touch, if Harry had to admit. And his movements… felt sluggish, for some odd reason. He opened his eyes, but found it difficult to see far ahead of him, with the near-poisonous environment. Had he died? Was this—

“Don't you see, Harry? You only delay what is inevitable. You will lose... everything and everyone.”

Now, a figure emerged from the smoke, to stand not far from him. A figure Harry was sure he’d never see again.

“You... I defeated you! You've been sent to a place from which you can never return!”

Voldemort let out a laugh. “Oh, Harry. You still don't understand. I live on through those who follow me.”

Then, as fast as he’d appeared, he vanished, being consumed by flames. And, the scene around him was changing… an ominous shape was passing over, the ground becoming clouds, which themselves thinned, to reveal gleaming skyscrapers.

He was forced to look up, as a blue beam of light was projected from the bottom of the shadow. Then—white, painfully bright light. And, as he began to burn, he heard Voldemort speak again:

“We will take everything, Harry. Everything.”
Without the aid of magic, the group was forced to continue, with Mazhe carrying Harry over his shoulder. Others took turns carrying their fallen brethren, Dardanos, and the remains of Crixis as they continued forward, slowly making for the tall structure in the distance.

Finally, an hour later, Justin felt another strange sensation wash over him.

“We have magic again.”

“Let’s get into cover and radio the Ragnar,” Brandon decided.

No urging required, the group took to cover by breaking into what Justin guessed was the third floor of an office building—the sand had effectively buried the lower part of it. With marines taking up lookout positions, Aaron at last made his call.

“Scabbard, Gladius.”

“Go ahead, Gladius.”

“Recovery team to our location expedited. Four casualties,” Aaron reported.

“Roger. Hold position until they arrive.”

“Roger. Gladius out.”

Mazhe had put Harry down, and sat down beside him. “Maybe we should send him back to the ship.”

“Yeah, and I think you know how well that would go over, Mazhe,” said Justin.

“He’s dead weight,” said Walker, “He’s slowin’ us down.”

“You’re new here, be quiet,” Justin snapped. He let out a huff, then relented. “I… didn’t mean that. Gods, this is so messed up.”

“He’ll freak out if we just send him back to the Ragnar,” said Brandon, “Likely come back after us. Give him a break, he’s lost a lot of people he’s been very close to over the past few months.”

“Yeah, I get it. Guess I know how that feels.”

A blur of limbs nearby brought a group of people from the ship. They were initially empty-handed, but one produced a wand, placed several boxes on the ground, and tapped them, restoring them to original size. Coffins, Walker realized. One of the wizards then noticed Harry.

“He goin’ back to the ship?”

“No,” Justin answered.

“All right, people, let’s keep moving,” said Aaron.

“Wait. Pouches are off limits. Pull out bare essentials, mobiles clipped to belts, ammo packs, have healing potions and other aid within reach,” Brandon ordered.

Justin let out a snort, as he began to pull out essentials. “If there's a silver lining, OND is worse off than we are. Their attacks are strictly magical.”
Finally, as it neared lunch time, Harry finally began to stir. The large group again took to cover, and Mazhe set him down.

“How… how long?”

“A few hours,” Mazhe answered, “D-don’t use your pouch.”

“Right. Need some water.”

“Here,” said Aaron, setting down his pack. He pulled out a bottle of water and handed it over. Harry drank greedily from it.

“Mouth tasted like shit. How close… are we?”

“Nearly there,” said Brandon, “We should break for lunch.”

“Food… yeah…”

Mazhe sat down beside him. “You all right?”

That earned a furious look. “Do I LOOK all right? Shor’s balls, two more men I loved and adored as brothers, now walk the afterlife! And these god damned motherfuckers responsible… I’m gonna blow ‘em from here to buggery and back!”

That had a few people clearing their throats.

“Jesus, Harry…”

“What?! What did you expect from me, that we form a circle with them and sing songs together?! I’m dead serious, Justin! I’ll have them soul-trapped, burned alive, and sent to a place where they will learn what misery truly is!”

He let out a huff. “Gods… I… Voldemort… somehow, he spoke to me, while… while I was out of it.”

Both Justin and Brandon were alarmed. “How… what did he say?” Brandon pressed.

“We will take everything. The gist of it.”

“Who is Voldemort?” Walker asked.

“The dark lord before… before the witch who leads OND,” said Justin, “He was a monster and a terrorist in his own right, but I think we’re all in agreement at this point, OND’s far worse.”

“He’s been sent to a place from which he can never return,” Harry muttered, “So how is it he visits my unconscious mind?”

“It was likely just your imagination, Harry,” said Justin, “You blacked out, not having a chance to shield your mind, settle it, am I right?”

“Occlumency… right.”

Harry sucked in a breath, and blew it out. Justin was likely right. Without taking a few seconds to put things in order mentally, he left himself open to all sorts of unpleasant influences, both within, and without. Given the amount of negative energy in the area as a whole, never mind the number of stressful events over the past few months, there was lots of ammunition. The dream, or whatever it
was, took form of something particularly nasty, in the form of Voldemort.

“You were in a vulnerable state mentally,” said Mazhe.

After having lunch, they once again got moving, though Harry still leaned somewhat on his partner. More marines had joined them, as had a modified armoured personnel carrier, or APC for short, sent from the Cadogan. Not only was it able to carry the entire group, it was also well armed.

“The Cadogan’s like a destroyer, right?” Walker questioned.

“Yeah, pretty much,” said Aaron, as they crossed another intersection.

“How do they have room for that?” he jerked a thumb back toward the vehicle following.

“Magic.”

Walker rolled his eyes, and Harry couldn’t help but laugh.

“Magic’s useful for lots of things, ‘least when it works. These random disruptions... we’ve never seen anything like it,” said Justin, “It goes completely against the laws of magic.”

“Well magic goes against the laws of physics...”

“But has its own set of laws. Can’t bring back the dead, time travel can’t change the future in big ways, stuff like that... can’t conjure food... plenty of hard and fast rules.”

“So you can change the future then,” Walker guessed.

“In small ways. Going back and trying to kill Hitler... that wouldn’t be allowed,” said Justin. “But, say, you went back, meddled with circumstances that led to his birth... perhaps, the universe might allow it.

“More than likely though, the universe might replace Hitler with someone else, and the present might come out much scarier than before.”

“Careful what you wish for and shit like that,” said Aaron.

“Of course, then we have Harry,” said Mazhe.

Harry whacked Mazhe across the chest. “Thanks for the bloody reminder.”

Mazhe only kissed Harry on the head. “I’m not meaning anything bad by it. Just... you and rules don’t exactly get along. And really, Dardanos and Crixus, you gave them both a better life than they had where they came from.”

Harry let out a sigh. “I know. Just. It’s not FAIR.”

“C’mon guys. We have to keep moving.”

“Right. Swear when I reach the one responsible, I’m gonna cut his cock off and feed it to ‘im.”

“Harry. There are laws.”

“Doesn’t mean I can’t daydream,” Harry muttered, as they scrambled up yet another sand dune.

“Personally, I would love to see the one responsible crucified. I know it’s a particularly excruciating
method of execution.”

That made Walker pause. “You seen it done?”

“Yes. And for the record, they really did cut his cock off first.”

“Sounds like shit the Romans did.”

“It was. Crixus and Dardanos... were both from 73BCE. Dardanos, though, went by a different name: Spartacus.”

“How... how was... how did you...”

“Like a few others here have already said, I tend not to get along well with the rules. But honestly, the time I spent, well over a year... two thousand plus years in the past... it’s something I do not regret. It’s something I would do over without question or hesitation.

“Spartacus—Dardanos, Crixus, and the rest of the slaves in Batiatus’ home... Shor’s bones, all of them I considered dear friends at the end. Batiatus himself, to some extent; he did put up with a few events due to my presence.”


That had a few people rolling their eyes.

They had nearly reached the crest of another dune, when Aaron held up a hand.

“This is it guys.”

That coincided with a report from the air. “Gladius, Phoenix lead.”

“Go ahead, Phoenix.”

“Energy readings on the device are off the charts. Looks to be an obsidian-coloured block, maybe two feet cubed. Got ten hostiles present, one hostage. Strong anti-apparition ward, and equally strong anti-port key ward in place.”

“Expected,” said Aaron.

“So that’s why we didn’t just try flying direct,” Mazhe guessed.

“Yeah, we had to approach on foot.”

“Ah, it seems our guests of honour have arrived,” came the sneering voice belonging to the impostor, “You’ve got fifteen minutes to reach the roof, or your filthy Muggle friend will suffer a rapid unscheduled dis-assembly.”

“I’ll break his neck,” Walker swore.

“Get in line,” Harry muttered.

“Everyone. Gather around,” said Mazhe.

“What for?” one of the marines questioned. Harry, though, knew. “C’mon, join us.” He’d taken Mazhe’s outstretched hand.
Walker now knew what they were doing, and joined in, as did Brandon and Aaron. Soon, the entire unit had joined in a circle.

“May Talos watch over us with a ready sword...” Mazhe began.

“Plant the seeds of doubt and defeat in the hearts our enemies,” Harry joined in, and they continued, “Bring strength and courage to our allies... and may there be a place held for us in Arkay's realm should we part this day.”

Walker was confused as they separated; it was the most unusual prayer he’d ever heard, but... not the most insane idea, either. He’d take whatever help they might offer at this point.

“Gladius, phoenix lead, ready to engage on your order.”

Aaron looked at Brandon, who gave a nod. “Cleared to engage.”

“Roger that.”

Gladius, meanwhile, split up into a number of groups and spaced out as wide as they could. Brandon counted on their movements being reported as soon as they were seen, but on the off chance, they might get lucky. Harry, Mazhe, Justin, and Walker made up the centre unit.

The sound of an explosion had them rush over the crest of the dune, to chaos. Air wing had opened up on the OND forces present, sending the enemy scattering for cover. Walker was confused. Didn’t the enemy see the aircraft buzzing around? A bit hard to miss, right? Unless... of course. They had ways of masking their presence. And with the radio channel no longer a party line, the enemy likely had no clue whatsoever of their presence—until now.

“Gladius, heads up, deploying jamming device,” came the warning from the air.

“Roger that,” they heard Aaron answer. Then, there came a strange hum over the radio which lasted only a few seconds.

Walker smirked. Yeah, these guys were good. No doubt they likely had the ability to jam radars too. Good thing the Commonwealth weren’t the enemy here. Fuck, it was so easy to fall into step with—wait.

“Justin. Fourth floor at your eleven o’clock.”

“Got ‘im.”

Justin jabbed his wand toward the target and gave a sharp tug. The helpless wizard was hauled out of the broken window, and fell nearly forty feet, to impact with the roof of a wrecked humvee. He did not get up.

“DOWN!!” Harry roared, and Walker found himself dragged to the ground, as no less than eight green bolts of magic whizzed overhead, missing by inches. That was immediately followed by a noisy blast.

Harry looked toward the source of the blast, and found a number of vehicles had been set alight, and several bodies now littered the ground.

“Brandon or Aaron. Can we pull off an air strike?” Justin questioned, as the group hurried to take cover behind another wrecked vehicle.
“Against the building—” Brandon began.

“No, no. The front. Let’s punch a hole.”

“I like it,” came Aaron’s answer.

“Do it,” came Brandon’s order.

“Phoenix lead, prep for air strike on our target.”

“Roger that. Phoenix team on my wing, let’s punch it up.”

A series of acknowledgements quickly followed.

“Gladius, regroup at the crest of the sand dune, should be Mike Sierra Delta,” came Brandon’s order. “I’ve got the target painted.”

“Phoenix lead, Roger.”

As the group scrambled over the crest of the dune, they saw the Air Wing squadron rapidly approaching from the east, flying in a tight formation. But damn, were they ever coming in hot...

“Cover your eyes!!” Aaron shouted, and Harry ducked his head down just in time, as a tremendous blast shook the ground. He could have sworn he felt the heat on his back.

“Precision strike, phoenix team,” said Aaron.

“Seeing only a few hostiles, some down for the count.”

“Roger that,” said Aaron.

The battleground had been utterly shattered by the strike. Harry hadn’t seen exactly what it was they’d used, but it packed one hell of a punch, that was for certain. Most of the already wrecked vehicles had been rendered a heap of scrap metal. Was that—he felt his stomach twitch, realizing what he was actually seeing. Of course, seeing dismembered corpses wasn’t anything new. Still, it was unsettling.

The team pushed their way into the building itself, with marines remaining behind to watch the rear.

“Gladius, we just registered a port key activating; looks like just one hostile remaining with the hostage.”

“Roger that, phoenix,” said Aaron.

“Why would they flee?” Mazhe wondered, as they pushed further in, finding it just as deserted as the entrance.

“Damned good question, Mazhe,” said Aaron, “They should be coming at us with everything they got.”

“Yeah, something feels off. Remain on your guard, all of you,” Brandon warned, as they approached a bank of elevators. There, the team split up, since not everyone would ever fit in a single car. Harry didn’t like it, but it was the only option. No one knew what the top floor looked like, and with both anti-port key and anti-apparition wards in place, it was the non-magical way.

The elevators did not reach the roof itself, and so the team was then forced to climb several flights of
stairs, before at last swarming onto the roof. Air wing was circling about, ready to lend support if needed, but everyone quickly learned that was unnecessary. The single remaining enemy stood near the powerful device, a white handkerchief held out in front of him.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Brandon muttered, “You must—”

“HARRY NO!” Mazhe shouted, and Harry found himself in a bear hug thanks to his mate. Walker, too, found himself restrained thanks to Aaron and a second SOU soldier. At this point, he and Harry were of the same mind.

A pair of medics, meanwhile, had hurried over to where Lugo was laying. He was conscious, but barely, showing signs of being badly beaten. The man was momentarily frightened, but quickly relaxed, as he realized they were there to help.

“Both of you keep it together,” Brandon snapped, before focusing his attention on the terrorist. “So. You go through all this effort, destroy a populous city with over two million people. Why?”

That got a laugh out of the terrorist. “You played right into our hands, Potter. We knew you’d come here.”

That coincided with a warning from the Ragnar. “All teams, we’ve just lost the mobile system.”

“Shit. We’ll be takin’ the long way down then,” Justin muttered, as Aaron acknowledged the message. He glanced at his mobile, and sure enough, the dreaded ‘no service’ message was displayed. Concerning, but at the moment, there were much bigger fish to fry. Hold on... “Wait. The anti-apparition and anti-port key wards just fell.”

The terrorist gave yet another sinister grin. “This is only the beginning. We will watch as your entire civilization comes crashing down around your ears. And the kicker? There ain't nothing you can do to stop us.”

“Nothing we ain’t heard before,” said Aaron, who still had a tight grip on Walker.

“Stop it or we’ll stun you,” Brandon at last growled, “Both of you, it’s not helping.”

Harry let out a huff. “Fine. We need him alive as it is.”

“Right. Let's figure out how to shut down this device,” said Justin.

The terrorist laughed a third time. “I did say your friend here has been rather useful, did I not?”

“Stomach... made me... swallow something,” Lugo whispered, his voice dry and raspy. Likely from a lot of screaming, Harry realized. They’d likely tortured the man to near-insanity.

“Clock’s ticking, friends,” said the terrorist, his eyes flicking to a nearby clock.

“You ain't Konrad, stop talking like him,” Walker growled.

“Shit. Stun him. We’ll have to cut it out of him,” Aaron decided.

Both Walker and Lugo appeared alarmed by the idea, but Harry shook his head. “We’ve got healing potions. He’ll be fine.”

“I... you promise?” Lugo whispered.

“Promise.”
Both he and Walker had knelt down beside the man, as had Justin. He produced his wand.

“*Stupefy,*” he whispered, and Lugo fell still.

“Let us,” said one of the medics, also producing her wand. Justin withdrew, deferring to someone properly trained.

Walker wouldn’t move, and so the medic had to work around him. She first vanished the remnants of the man’s shirt, then cast a cutting charm across the abdomen large enough for a hand. Another medic then stepped in, using his wand to produce a tool which held the incision open. Now, another cut was made into the stomach itself, and the medic reached in with a gloved hand, searching for the item they were looking for. It only took a few seconds to locate it, and it was handed to Aaron.

Walker just watched on in amazement, as the impromptu medical procedure was completed, all in under a minute, if he had to guess. The wounds were closed up with what looked like staples, with more healing charms cast to make things a little more tidy, and the man was awakened and fed two healing potions.

“Is... did you get it?” Lugo whispered.

“We got it. Just... stay still, let the magic do its work,” said the first medic. “We’ll get you seen by healers as soon as possible.”

“Th-thank you.”

Aaron, meanwhile, turned his attention back to the terrorist. “So. What do we do with it now?”

“For you to figure out, of course!” the terrorist laughed.

Harry saw red.

“Think this is funny, do you?!!” he all but exploded, as his wand appeared in his hand. “*Z'u ofan hi fin mindoraan do faaz!* (I give you the understanding of pain) *Crucio.*”

The short, dirty wizard had expected the possibility of being tortured—it wasn’t anything new, after all. He did work for a very dark mistress, par for the course and all that.

The short, dirty wizard had expected the possibility of being tortured—it wasn’t anything new, after all. He did work for a very dark mistress, par for the course and all that.

However, this was not your average wizard. Harry Stormcrown—the former Harry Potter—was without a doubt one of the strongest wizards alive, and, considering he had knowledge of magic from not one, but two worlds, his curses tended to hurt.

Now, the thing about the torture curse, is the power behind it: anger. And make no mistake, Harry carried an abyss of anger for the Order of the New Dawn and its members. The wizard dropped like a shot and lurched into violent spasms, as every nerve in his body was sent into overload. His mouth wrenched open, and the most primal, god-awful shriek came from within.

“HARRY NO!!” Justin exploded, and Harry was tackled to the ground by his mate.

“NO! We need him alive!!” Aaron shouted, as the man continued to twitch and convulse, even though the curse had been interrupted.

“Are you fucking stupid?! Jesus Christ, Harry!” Brandon roared, “Total, fucking, cluster fuck!”
“IT ALREADY WAS A CLUSTER FUCK, MORON!” Harry thundered right back, wrenching himself from Mazhe’s grasp, “Shor’s bones, how can it get any worse??!!”

“You likely just did!!(1)” Aaron shouted, “Holy fuck, can’t believe—”

“Not now guys!” Justin snapped, “Just... what now? We gotta stop this thing.”

“Th-th-the s-s-s-stone... ward... put... p-p-p-put it on t-t-top,” the terrorist stuttered, still shaking violently.

As Aaron went to place the stone recovered from Lugo’s stomach on top of the obsidian-coloured cube near the centre of the room, Walker only then realized he was shaking. From what, fear? Hell, he’d seen far worse. Yet, whatever the young wizard had done... it was beyond unsettling. The level of malice, the fact that a spoken word had dropped the man like a shot. The odour of urine and feces told him both the man’s bowels and bladder had let go in the short amount of time the curse had been applied. No doubt, the man would sing like a bird, tell them just about anything now. This magic thing... he had to admit... Jesus fuck, it was terrifying.

Justin placing the stone on the cube seemed to have no effect. That was, until one of the marines glanced at the timer.

“Oh shit!”

The terrorist burst into maniacal laughter. And now, Justin realized what they’d done.

Brandon, meanwhile, gave a frown. “So be it. Orders were to destruct and dispose. Saves us the trouble.”

“Do us a favour,” Lugo whispered, flicking his eyes in the direction of the terrorist, who was still prone on the ground, “Make sure this shithead goes up with it.”

“Mu fen wahl nii ful—we will make it so,” said Harry, “Mazhe. Soul gem.”

Mazhe cautiously opened the pouch, and satisfied there would be no issue, reached in and summoned the required item, then passed it over. Harry slid it into one of the pockets of his trousers, then cupped his hands together, forming an orb. He then flung it at the man. “We have three minutes.”

“No, we only have thirty seconds!” the marine warned.

Harry gave a grim smile, then thrust his hands at the terrorist, binding him in thick, heavy cords that threatened to suffocate him. Another flick of the hand had the man propped up against the cube.

“Scabbard, need a temporary lift of your anti-port key ward so we can get out of here!” Aaron said, urgently.

“Roger Gladius, two seconds.”

Brandon, meanwhile, had already located something that would make a suitable port key for their number: a moderate-sized rucksack, likely left behind by soldiers.

“Portus,” he commanded, causing the pack to shimmer blue a moment. “All right. Everyone gather close. Sergeant Lugo, we’re gonna set this on your chest. Hold onto it.”

“Uh, okay.” Lugo wasn’t sure exactly what they were about to do, but... they’d just opened up his
stomach and removed something he’d been forced to swallow, then closed it all back up, all within a minute. So whatever they were about to do... what the hell? Better than a likely death. Beside that, Walker obviously trusted them, right?

Harry sneered at the terrorist, as he got a hand on the rucksack. “Aav dilon, dukaan kro (Join [the] dead, dishonoured sorcerer).”

“Everyone in? Activate!!” Brandon commanded, and with a blur of limbs, the party vanished, leaving the terrorist alone with the device. Though he was about to face his own death, he grinned madly. Mission accomplished, Deidre will be over the moon!

The group landed rather roughly in the small companionway which connected the ops briefing room to the Action Information Centre. Brandon had stayed on his feet, and his eyes immediately found Commodore O’Toole, who was gathered with a pair of officers at the table at the centre of the room.

“Sir! Get us out of here!” he all but shouted.

“Helm, all ahead full, maximum power! Climb to two five zero, expedited!” O’Toole commanded.

“All ahead full, maximum power, climb to two five zero, expedited, aye,” spoke one of a pair of officers manning a larger console which was elevated somewhat above the rest of the room. Harry couldn’t see what they were doing, but the result was quickly displayed on one of the displays which took up most of the opposite side of the room. The ship’s pitch was already beginning to change, and she was beginning to accelerate.

“Phoenix squadron, climb, climb and scram!” came orders through the radio.

“Roger Scabbard, gonna roof it! Step on it team!”

It was then that one of the screens went completely white, as a klaxon suddenly blared.

“Sir!! Radiological alarm! God, it’s nuclear!” an officer at another console shouted.

Another pressed a button on his console. “All hands, all stations, brace for impact!!”

Harry could hear that both in the room, and through the radio set, as yet another alarm joined the noise.

Walker, meanwhile, felt his knees give out, and slid down the wall.

“Fuck, what have we done?” he muttered, “Whole middle east... they’ll declare war...”

It was at that moment, that more than a few people noticed a purple swirl of magical energy drift in from the direction of the detonation, to connect with something in Harry’s pouch, to then vanish.

All the while, the ship continued to accelerate, but it must be made clear, the Ragnar is by no means a small object. At a little over twenty-five hundred feet, and at thirty-six decks, that constitutes a lot of metal and machinery, and most certainly, it doesn’t move with the grace of a cat. Even her ability to teleport takes a certain amount of time to prepare for.

And so, only a few seconds after the report of the detonation, everyone unprepared was either thrown violently to the floor, or against the wall, as the powerful explosion caught the tail end of the vessel, and flung it forward, sending it into a violent back-to-front horizontal spin, and causing a dangerous forty-degree roll to starboard. The violent motion was causing the vessel to shudder, her
structure being stressed beyond the design limits—only the magical strengthening charms prevented her from tearing herself to pieces, as a result of the violent rotation.

Harry felt like he was quite literally being crushed, being pressed against the floor with more than double his own body weight. Mazhe had fallen against him, and so that wasn’t helping matters either. Mazhe had managed to reach down and grip Harry’s hand. If they were going to die... at least they would die together.

“Sir, we’re losing control! We got inertia damper failures aft sections two, five, six, and eight!”

“Give me everything you got on the engines! Over-throttle!” O’Toole ordered.

“Sir?”

“Do it!” O’Toole shouted. On the ‘brace for impact’ warning, chairs had materialized, and the men at the table, including the ship’s master, had quickly sat down and strapped themselves in.

“Internal inertia dampers gaining the upper hand, sir.”

Harry could feel the force being exerted on his body lessen by the second, and in short order, Mazhe had climbed to his knees. He sucked in a breath, climbed to his feet, then offered a hand for Harry, helping him up. The pair of them then helped Walker to his feet.

“All right there, mate?”

“Yeah... fine.”

“And you, Harry?” Mazhe asked.

“Yeah, I will be. Gods, that... that wasn't normal.”

Walker let out a snort. “No shit. Fuckin’ nuke. What’d ‘ya expect?”

“Squad, report,” came a voice over the radio. Several seconds passed, before a number of voices began to answer the request, before more silence.

“Phoenix eighteen? Phoenix five?”

No answer.

“Shit. We lost two birds. Massive blast, mushroom cloud sighted. No radioactivity, so whatever it was, wasn’t a nuke. But had the power of one. Lot of dust in the air, so no visual on the ground.”

“Roger, Phoenix.”

“AIC, Engine room. We’re at a hundred and twenty percent, we got inertia dampers two and five back, but six and eight are toast. We got major damage along the starboard side.”

“Acknowledged,” said Dawson, who had gotten back on his feet.

“Coming out of the spin, sir, regaining level flight,” said one of the men at a console near the elevated platform.

Harry’s eyes flicked to one of the screens on the forward wall, which was then displaying the ship’s current and recent flight path. She had made no less than eight back-to-front clockwise rotations after being slammed by the detonation.
“Passing one seven five, sir.”

“Thank you.”

“One seven five, uh, what?” Walker wondered.

“Seventeen thousand five hundred metres,” said the officer, “Uh, about fifty-seven thousand feet or so.”

“You... you guys fly above the normal air traffic then,” Walker guessed.

“Yes, normally,” said Dawson. He then spoke, and Harry could hear it in his ear as well as in the room. “AIC to all hands, this is the XO. We are returning to level flight. All departments, damage report beginning with that demanding immediate attention.”

The reports began to come in. Three—make that five major fires, people trapped... damage... more people trapped. Poisonous gas leaking... ‘Bloody hell’, Harry muttered in his head, ‘Fourth year all over again.’

He gave Mazhe a look, then blew out a breath, and addressed the pair of healers looking after Lugo. “Take Sergeant Lugo to my rooms and fire-call healer Ferris. Everyone else... Commodore O’Toole... Commander Dawson... how can we help?”

They stopped briefly at Harry’s private suite and checked in to make sure Lugo was comfortable, before setting off. Their immediate next stop, was the secondary maintenance hanger, which had been modified to handle the number of refugees rescued from Dubai. Harry’s main concern was for Bryce—they’d not seen him since early the day before.


“Gee, thanks. You all right?”

“Fucked up ride for a few minutes, but... healers got me back on my feet pretty quick.”

“Wait... you’re Bryce Hunter,” said Walker, as recognition dawned on him.

“Yeah. Harry saved my ass in Washington.”

“Martin Walker.” He offered a hand, and Bryce shook it.

“Yeah, he’s joining us after... uh...”

“It’s complicated,” said Walker.

That got a snort from Bryce. “Sounds like Harry, yeah.”

“Look, uh, we’re... we’re helping with the rescue and clean up,” said Justin.

Bryce looked around. “These guys are good, been feelin’ like a third wheel, y’know, they just wave their wands and zip, it’s fixed.”

He indicated a witch who was putting a bunch of overturned partitions back in order, indeed, simply by flicking her wand at them.

“Come with us then,” said Justin.
“Sooner rather than later,” said Harry, seeing the hateful glares Walker was getting from the refugees.

It was sometime later. The group were headed to yet another location where people were trapped, when Air Wing’s lead once again come over the radio.

“Scabbard., Phoenix lead.”

“Go ahead,” came the response from the communications centre.

“Just spotted wreckage in the water, about five kilometres offshore.” They heard the man sigh. “Oh God.”

“Report.”

“Cadogan's been destroyed. We've got wreckage in the water.”

“Mark the location.”

“Roger that.”

Brandon looked furious. “That’s a thousand men and women.”

“We're in a de-facto state of war with these monsters,” Aaron muttered.

Harry let out a snort. “We've been at war with them for years now, Aaron! First Voldemort and his fucking Death Eaters... figured getting rid of him, y’know... but no, now we have something WORSE.”

It was then an officer approached them. He held a lanyard with a set of tags attached to it. “Captain Walker. These are for you.”

“Thanks.”

Walker quickly put the lanyard around his neck. Still very much a ‘fish out of water’ with all the magic stuff, better be safe than sorry. And hey, they were taking care of Lugo. Trusting them was the best option considering only the day prior, he had pretty much ran out of options, if he really considered it.

“It'll give you appropriate clearance while you're with these guys,” the officer explained.

“His family... they're being located and taken to safety?” Harry questioned.

“DOI's workin' on it, sir.”

“My family... why?”

“OND will kill them if they can,” Bryce answered, a scowl forming. He gave his head a shake. “Yeah, let’s just... keep going. Still got a lot of work ahead.”

It was late in the evening, when the group was summoned back to AIC. It was practically a carbon copy of the summer following fourth year, though the number of people they helped was nearly double.
O’Toole met them as they entered. “Gentlemen, you’ve all done an exceptional job, but I think we can take it from here. Now I give you a captain’s order to go get some rest.”

“But...”

“Harry, c’mon. Let’s retreat back to the flat, have a bath, and get a proper nights’ sleep.”

“’an look in on Lugo,” said Walker, mostly to himself. “He’s been given clearance and credentials?”

“Same as you’ve got, Captain.”

Harry gave a bow of the head. “Thank you, Commodore. We’ll return to the flat, then. It need not be said, that should Ragnar require our further help, we’re but a mobile call or fire call away.”

Dawson let out a chuckle. “We’ll keep that in mind, Mr. Stormcrown. Now be gone.”

Chapter End Notes

UP NEXT: Harry and his friends new and old grapple with the aftermath of the events in Dubai. The ICW are also forced to face the matter and come to terms with the potential catastrophe global war would present. The question is, can the ICW act and prevent such an event?

CHAPTER NOTES: Harry casting the torture curse? Yeah, this loathsome fool pressed just the right buttons to make him act in such a manner. And, count on there being fallout from it. Him going to jail? Not likely. Him getting called out for it? Absolutely.

(1) Intentional mis-speak. Aaron’s utterly flabbergasted by what’s just happened.
Chapter Summary

Harry and his friends new and old grapple with the aftermath of the events in Dubai. The ICW are also forced to face the matter and come to terms with the potential catastrophe global war would present. The question is, can the ICW act and prevent such an event?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

17. ENEMIES FOREIGN & DOMESTIC

January, 2008 / Sun’s Dawn, 4E203

“The fundamental purpose of government is to protect its citizens."

- Arlen Specter

The enlarged group arrived back in the flat to find further chaos. Numerous government officials were once again occupying the dining room, and security was watching the door and the fireplace. Equally startling, they found Zoey present, along with her Secret Service detail. She and Justin embraced tightly.

“What...God, are you okay?”

“Dad sent us here, he's freaking out... the Oval Office's crawling with people... State Department, the Pentagon...”

“The terrorists blew up Dubai, Dr. Bartlet,” said Brandon, “No surprise the White House would resemble a disturbed hornet's nest.”

“Where are Ellie and Liz?” Justin questioned.

“With... Mrs. Weasley, is it? She offered me go along, but...”

“Where’s your mother?”

“With my sisters.”

Walker, meanwhile, felt even more like a fish out of water. How in the world did they know the first family so intimately? Harry saw the look of confusion. “It’s complicated,” he said, “We’ll explain shortly.”

It was then the fire in the fireplace roared a brilliant green, expelling three men in black uniforms. More SOU, Walker realized. They quickly cleared the grate, and it roared up once more, expelling the Queen.
“Ten hut!” one of the men who’d arrived just ahead of her barked, and the rest of the soldiers present snapped to attention, while most others simply bowed their heads, Harry and Mazhe included.

“As you were,” said the Queen.

This only relaxed people slightly. Both Brandon and Aaron tapped themselves on the chest with their wands, instantly exchanging their desert-pattern uniforms for the black uniforms worn by their counterparts who’d just arrived by floo powder. Harry flicked a hand at himself, following suit, and quickly did the same for his partner. He then pinched the bridge of his nose.

“What’s happened now?”

That drew dark looks and scowls from more than a few people.

“Aside from the equivalent to a nuclear device being detonated in Dubai? The provincial legislature in Hunfrith—one of our cities located beneath the Canary Islands—was destroyed about fifteen minutes ago while they were in an emergency session. Delir has also suffered damage due to the explosion in Dubai, and perhaps not quite as concerning, but still with dangerous implications, a white powdery substance was found in the corridor outside the House of Commons,” an aide quickly summarized.

“Shor’s bones. Should have stayed aboard the Ragnar.”

“She’s just gone into lockdown as have every vessel in the fleet, Mr. Stormcrown,” said another aide.

“We're at condition orange, Harry,” said Brandon, “Jesus fuck, we've been attacked within and without, in a matter of hours. Over a thousand casualties—your majesty, you considering proclaiming the DOR act?”

“We aren’t quite there yet, Commander,” the Queen answered.

Harry let out a frustrated sigh. “Is… is there anything you need, your majesty?”

“The use of your residence is more than enough, Harry.”

He gave a bow of the head. “Then excuse us if we become scarce.”

“Yeah. Uh, we’d best send a message to the guild, let them know the residence is out of bounds for the next while,” said Mazhe. “Where is Sergeant Lugo?”

“Healer Ferris is borrowing Dardanos’ suite,” answered another aide.

“Then… that’s where we are headed,” Harry decided.

Justin glanced at Zoey. “Coming with?”

As they travelled the short corridor which led to the rooms, Walker was still in a haze. If the information in front of him was right, the senior levels of the Commonwealths' government were all present in the kid’s apartment, or whatever it was—apartment seemed appropriate. Whoever Harry and his friends truly were, they were important to the nation.

Stepping into the room, Walker found Lugo was sitting up, several pillows stuffed under his upper body. He looked far better than when they’d last seen each other. Damn, had it been done without magic or whatever… he’d likely have been out for months.

“Lugo,” he said, simply.
“Jesus, Walker. You look dead.”

“Might as well be. If I can ever find a hot shower, I'll feel almost human again.”

“Yeah, we've got that. And a change of clothes,” said Aaron, “I'd say your uniform's toast.”

Walker looked down at his clothes. Aaron’s assessment was not far off. “I'll take whatever you got.”

It was then Lugo noticed Zoey. “Dr. Bartlet... how...”

“It's a long story,” Zoey answered.

“We met back in September during a lecture in DC, it's just gone from there,” Justin explained, “Though I think her father’s torn between kissing my ass and locking me in the bunker.”

“Right. More like, the President likes our security better than anything the Secret Service can provide,” Harry muttered. “All I have ever wanted, was to be a normal person living some semblance of a normal life. Instead, it's a constant maelstrom of chaos. I have the Queen, the Prime Minister, the Governor General, and most of the senior members of the Commonwealth's government presently occupying the public part of my flat—for the second time in recent memory. I have a group of terrorists gunning for not only my head, but the heads of my friends and my country, having already sacked the country of my birth—and they're only just getting started. Still saying I liked Voldemort better. He was somewhat predictable. Dumbledore and this OND... they're off the rails, bat shit crazy.”

He sucked in a breath, then blew it out. “Apologies, I didn't mean to rant. But bloody hell, this has been nothing short of catastrophic. Now I'm exhausted, both mentally and physically. Gonna go die in the shower. Uh... Captain, follow us, we'll show you where the toiletries are.”

“Yeah... uh, thanks.”

“Harry, go. I'll get Dobby to sort out clothes,” said Justin.

“Gonna crash after,” said Walker.

“You can borrow the spare bed in our room, we'll be doing the same thing,” said Mazhe.

Harry was more than relieved and thankful to finally climb into bed, with Mazhe not long behind. The pair snuggled up against each other, and Harry quickly erected a privacy charm, so as not to disturb Walker, who was then sound asleep on the bed they’d conjured for him earlier. Harry had made sure to give the man another dreamless sleep potion to make sure he got some decent rest.

“I don’t know how much of this I can take, Mazhe.”

“It hurt me nearly as much. They were my friends too, Harry. All we can to, is thank the Divines that we still have each other, that we both escaped with our souls and limbs still intact.”

“But with shattered hearts! How many more times will I have to go through this? I’m nearly at wit’s end. If something happened to you...”

“Yeah, you know what I’m gonna say to that. I’d rather die by your side, than learn of it from afar. And I know you are of the same mind. Just... we have to trust each other. I dare you to tell me otherwise!”

Harry let out a sigh, then reached up a hand, and caressed his mate’s face. “If I lost you...”
January 6, 2008
Egyptian Ministry of Magic
Cairo, Egypt

The notice had been insanely short, but most members were able to quickly send representatives to the emergency session of the ICW called for that morning. Many had objected to the Commonwealth being invited, given their involvement with the incident, but the invitation was still extended, for the same reason. Additionally, they did have more intimate knowledge of non-magical governments and how they might react.

“If we could have order,” said a dark-skinned wizard. “This emergency session of the international body this sixth of January now in session—order please. I’d rather this not run as a series of interruptions scattered with the occasional bout of useful information being heard. I will resort to silencing charms if necessary!”

The room settled down rapidly.

“I turn the floor over to the representative from MACUSA.”

“Valicadia has gone too far,” said the representative, “Exposing countless American no-Maj soldiers to magic—”

“They were already exposed to magic when we intervened!” Weyland shouted, “Do not blame US for this catastrophe, we warned the international body on several occasions as to the danger the event in Dubai posed. No one in this room decided to take our warning seriously, and so here we are. A magical bomb with the signature of a nuclear weapon was detonated in one of the most politically volatile regions on our planet.

“Ladies and gentlemen, none of you can truly grasp exactly what kind of repercussions this event could have.”

“Oh, I think we understand perfectly well, Mr. Weyland,” said a wizard near the back of the room, “Perhaps it will be a small favour if they truly do decide to blow each other up.”

“None of you get it!” Weyland snarled, “World war three. That’s what may come of this. Our planet, all but destroyed by terrible weapons far stronger than what destroyed Dubai. It’s exactly what OND wants to accomplish, no matter how ignorant they are of the true consequences of such an event!

“The true consequences? Our world, our MAGICAL world, will also be destroyed if they blow each other up. THAT’S what it will mean. Nothing less.”

“We have ways...” began another witch.

“No, we don’t,” said the representative from Canada, “Our shields can only protect against so much. Against nuclear fallout... not so much... never mind the destruction caused by the explosions themselves. Trust me, we don’t want the non-magicals to go to war with each other.”

This now had most of the membership nodding, as the gravity of the situation sunk in.

The dark-skinned wizard asked, “What do you propose we do?”

“The explosion in Dubai wasn’t a bomb,” said the Canadian representative, “It was an industrial
accident. We’ll need to modify the memories of a lot of people—the UN’s meeting later today, and NATO’s likely going to meet in the coming days.”

This had Weyland nodding. “We can handle it. Our Department of Information has records on the membership makeup.”

“Thank you, Mr. Weyland,” spoke the dark-skinned wizard, “I trust Valicadia will also have the manpower to conduct such an operation?”

“More than capable, acting Supreme Mugwump.”

“Very well.”

“I have a question... two parts, if you will indulge,” said the representative from France. “First, were non-magicals rescued from Dubai’s ruins? And second, if so, what has become of them?”

“Yes, there were people rescued from Dubai,” Weyland answered, “They are presently being treated for dehydration and other physical illnesses aboard the Ragnar. Once our current domestic situation has sorted itself out, they will be absorbed into the Commonwealth as new citizens.”

“American no-maj’s included? You have no right—”

“Oh. I see. MACUSA didn’t seem all that concerned about non-magicals a minute ago,” Weyland muttered. “For the record, over a thousand people were saved from certain death by starvation. The reports I’ve seen, most of them are more than appreciative of our efforts. Should any of them truly not wish to join our Commonwealth, then it is their wish. Their memories will be modified, and they shall be returned to the United Arab Emirates.”

“Honestly, I don’t see that happening. The UAE isn’t known as a democratic nation. We are.”

The acting Supreme Mugwump gave a nod of the head. “Pass on to Queen Susan our sincere gratitude for the Commonwealth’s assistance in this matter. The international body is in the Commonwealth’s debt.”

“Thank you. I will relay the message.”

Harry awoke feeling Mazhe stroking his cheek. He couldn’t help but smile, feeling the man crushed up beside him. A brilliant way to wake up.

“Good morning,” Mazhe greeted.

“Brilliant way to wake up. Better than someone pounding on the door. You... you okay?”

“Better than when we laid down, yeah. You?”

“I... we... will take the time to mourn,” Harry answered, softly, “And... I suspect healer Ferris will speak to all of us today.”

A grunt from the opposite side of the room reminded them they weren’t alone.

“Captain? All right there?”

“Yes... and no,” came the answer.

“Healer Ferris, like I said... she’ll likely speak with all of us.”
“Meantime, we’re gonna do some mental exercises,” Mazhe decided, “We’ve missed what, four or five days, ’cause of one disaster or other. Harry, admit it, we need it, even if—”

“A point concurred. Gonna drag everyone into the VPR once we get breakfast.”

“VPR? What’s that?” Walker asked.

“Virtual projection room. It’s difficult to explain, better you just experience it first-hand. You’ll like it.”

It was then there came a knock at the door. Harry glanced at his mate, making sure they were at least semi-decent. “It’s open!”

The door opened a crack, and Bryce stuck his head in. “Where’s your chest at? Gonna show Lugo the VPR.”

“We’re all gonna do that. Let’s get something to eat first.”

“Lugo’s up?” Walker asked.

“Yeah, Ferris let him get up, but... no excitement, shit like that.”

“Agreed on all counts. If not for the lockdown, I’d say let’s see if we could spend the day in San Francisco.”

“At the theatre,” Mazhe guessed, to which Harry gave a nod. “We’ll likely do that in a few days, once all this dragon shit calms down.”

That got a snort from Walker. “Be a miracle if we don’t end up at war.”

“We’ll worry about that when we get there. All right, let’s get up.”

Seeing the ongoing chaos in the dining room, Harry decided to take breakfast in his chest, with Dobby being happy to help out. It was a larger group, consisting of himself, Mazhe, Miraak, Justin, Zoe, Aaron, Bryce, Walker, and Lugo. Tim and Amanda didn’t actually enter the chest, choosing to instead remain just outside.

“I swear it,” Harry muttered half-way through the meal, “If the government has even the slightest inkling about invading this space... that will be the final straw.”

“Harry, you know that won’t ever happen. I know the Queen herself is more than upset that her entourage has invaded your private space far too often in recent memory,” said Justin.

“Thing is, you know as well as we do, we’re in a location that’s near impossible to reach. It’s a security level we wish we’d had years ago,” said Aaron, as he poured himself another cup of coffee.

“We really need to get something sorted out so that her presence doesn’t overwhelm the flat,” said Mazhe, “I’ll speak to Delvin later, see if there’s any sort of record or drawing of the cisterns.”

“Expand the flat with a set of rooms for the government. Get that done, I’ll be more than grateful.”

“But first, we’re going into the VPR.”

Once everyone was finished, Harry led everyone to a set of doors at the end of the corridor. If Walker had to guess, the layout of the chest, or whatever it was, closely resembled the flat outside. The extra room, however...
When they stepped inside, neither Walker nor Lugo appeared all that impressed. The room was just a blank, nondescript room, with concrete walls, floors, and ceilings. A dungeon might be a better description.

Then. Right before their eyes, the room began to shift, the walls vanishing, being replaced by distant mountains and hills. Grass and a stone path replaced the floor, and a lightening dawn sky replaced the ceiling. Both men turned in a circle to take it all in.

“But holy fuck... this is incredible,” Lugo muttered.

“So this... this room, you can make it anything,” Walker guessed.

Harry gave a nod, while Mazhe gave a wicked grin, and dropped to one knee. “This is where I proposed. The threshold of Sovngarde, the Nord afterlife.”


“Trust us. It’s a very real thing. For most, a reunion with those who have parted before. For some, they will never see this.”

Harry kissed Mazhe’s hand, and as he then helped him to his feet, he gave a nasty grin. “You do remember the soul gem we used yesterday. That loathsome fool will never set foot in a place like this.”

“You can choose where someone goes when they die?” Zoey was unsure whether to be curious, or frightened.

“Yes. We can,” said Mazhe. “There are those out there who believe there is no fate worse than death. We know different. And the moron from yesterday... he’ll learn too, though it will be too late.”

“Anyway. Enough of such thoughts. This place... is meant as a place of calm, of reflection.”

Harry projected a request to the room, and a stack of cushions instantly appeared.

“Everyone grab a cushion, and let’s get comfortable.”

Both Lugo and Walker had their doubts, but they followed Justin’s example, claiming a cushion, and sitting on it cross-legged. The rest quickly followed suit.

“So, right. This is something we normally do following our morning training routine,” said Justin. “It’s a series of mental exercises, meant to ground one’s self, gain a bit of focus, and reconcile thoughts.”

“Tommy got me into doing it not long after we first met,” said Harry, “It helped me loads, particularly when I was dealing with a stressful situation. The one thing he said was, ‘you only get out of it the effort you put into it.’ So give it an honest try before dismissing it.”

Both Walker and Lugo gave a short nod. Considering the hell on earth the pair had been through over the past week, they were willing to try just about anything at this point. And really, Harry and his group had shown nothing but the best of intentions, so really, they had nothing to lose.

Intending to only spend perhaps a half-hour, they ended up spending most of the morning in the VPR. Harry had opened the exercise, but between Justin, Aaron, and Brandon, there were plenty of people to lead. Harry took advantage of the exercise, taking the chance to properly sort through the
surge of memories from the past few days; the string of crises had left him virtually no time to properly attend to his Occlumency. His use of the torture curse had more than likely been a product of that. Harry admitted silently, he would never have done such a thing with a clear head.

Leaving the VPR, they found healer Ferris waiting for them in the chest’s common area. She’d brought a large portfolio, and a second shoulder bag.

“Healer Ferris. Glad of you to make it,” said Harry.

“The Queen’s given me clearance to come no matter what’s going on. And based on the additional brief I’ve been able to review, the lot of you need my services,” said Ferris.

“These two should speak to you first then,” said Harry, indicating Walker and Lugo.

“All right. Though I take it none of you have eaten lunch.”

“No, we’ve been in the VPR all morning, doing mental exercises,” said Justin.

“Then this will be a slightly easier task, with calmer minds.”

“Yeah, no shit,” Walker agreed, “I’m... still not okay. Shit I saw, did... but... what we did this morning... it’s helping.”

“The whole point,” said Brandon, “We won’t ever get anywhere with our brains all over the place. Being able to process what you’ve experienced, you have to start someplace.”

“And that’s where I come in,” said Ferris. “Captain Walker, let’s go—”

“Use the room I’m borrowing,” said Lugo.

“Perfect.”

“And we’ll have either Dobby or Kreacher bring lunch in when it’s ready,” said Mazhe, “I’m guessin’ you’ll be an hour at least.”

“Today? No. I’ll make it a half-hour, maybe forty minutes at most. But none of you go far, I’ll want to speak with each of you individually. That goes for both Commander McAllister and Lieutenant Commander Carpenter.”

“Yes ma’am,” said Aaron, “Though Brandon’s with the Queen right now, likely will be for the day. And I still have a post-op report to file.”

Walker let out a snort. “Thing about bein’ in charge... fuckin’ paperwork.”

Aaron rolled his eyes. “No shit.”

Even with her only taking a half-hour to forty minutes for each of them, it still ate up the rest of the day. Smells coming from the kitchen had everyone moving to the dining area, which had been adjusted to handle their number.

As Kreacher set out the dishes, Harry had a thought.

“Lugo... you’ve seen a house elf before?”

“Last night,” the man answered, “While healer Ferris was treating my wounds. Scared the fuck out
of me, y’know... but... she was cool about it, introduced me.”

“Ah, that makes sense. Forgot about that,” said Harry. “All that’s been going on, lots of stuff been slipping as of late. The mental exercises we did this morning being a damned good example.”

“Yeah, felt better after. So we... we’re doing this again tomorrow?”

“Barring some other apocalypse unfolding, count on it.”

“I wouldn’t worry about going far the next while,” said Aaron, “We're in complete lockdown, likely for the immediate future, Harry.”

“So how bad is it?” Walker wanted to know.

“We're evacuating Delir, for starters. But key thing here, the Commonwealth's been attacked on such a scale not seen since the early 1200s. The Queen's nearly ready to proclaim the DOR act.”

“The what?” Walker asked.

That got nods from several others who also looked confused.

“Defence of Realm Act. It gives the Queen and her Privy Council sweeping powers that completely bypass parliament. The marines can be ordered into the streets, people can be arrested and detained with little reason, the media can be censored...”

Zoey appeared confused. “You guys don’t have Posse Comitatus?”

“No. The military can be asked to help police maintain order if necessary.”

“So, uh, instant police state,” said Walker.

“Yeah, it can be seen that way. It's why her majesty's resisting suggestions she do it. It's a heavy-handed response, something that should only ever be used in dire circumstances. But that's where we are.”

“What's happening outside... outside the Commonwealth?” Walker asked.

“Lots of finger-pointing, the UN Security Council's scheduled an emergency meeting, as has NATO. ICW met this morning, don't know what they decided to do, but bet on them having some sort of contingency,” Aaron answered.

“So the middle east doesn't attack the US,” Harry guessed.

“We know this was an attempt by the terrorists to orchestrate exactly that. And guys, expect a government inquiry.”

“No shit,” Lugo muttered, “Guess it don't matter what country you're from; the government likes their hearings.”

Aaron rolled his eyes. “Our inquiries are nothing like your 'congressional hearings', where partisan politics turn everything into a spectacle. It'll be a semi-closed hearing with a limited number of people permitted to observe. A few cameras at most. A panel of judges ask questions and collect testimony.”

Harry thought for a moment. “the inquiry from the incident in Atlantic City took most of a year”

“The testimony only took a couple of months though,” said Justin, “The remainder was spent reviewing the evidence and testimony. I think a few witnesses were asked further questions.”
“The people we rescued... what’s gonna happen to them?” asked Bryce.

“Once stuff settles down, we’ll begin relocating people, most likely to Bthalft,” said Justin.

“Along with a bunch of people from Delir? How’s that gonna work?” Lugo asked.

“You still haven’t seen what we’re truly capable of,” Justin answered, “Believe us, it’s more than possible. And something else. Both your families should be collected within the next few hours.”

“Thank you,” said Walker, while Lugo gave a weak smile and a nod in agreement.

Harry smiled back. “It’s the right thing to do. OND will kill them if given the opportunity.”

“And they... they’ll just be taken by the Commonwealth,” Lugo guessed.

Bryce scowled. “Better than being killed. Baseball season's probably fucked with all this shit now.”

Aaron shook his head. “Still a long way off, still a month and a half before you have to report.”

Once dinner was over, Aaron made to leave the chest. Harry decided to follow, and at least get an idea of where things stood. While most of the others decided to stay in the chest, Walker followed, also wanting an update. It had been nearly twenty hours since they’d returned to the apartment.

They found the common room had been once again transformed into a small broadcast studio, with a wingback chair set up, a Commonwealth flag set up behind it.

Brandon was speaking with an aide, but seeing the smaller group arrive, he broke away.

“Well, no world war three today,” he muttered, “UN and NATO memberships were convinced the explosion in Dubai was an industrial accident.”

“The larger matter of concern, is the power of the blast,” said the aide, “This is a satellite picture of the area taken about an hour ago.”

Harry accepted the photo, and held it so the others could see it. And God, oh God, the damage, it was astonishing, for the wrong reasons. Where the city centre would have been, was then a flooded crater; seawater had likely rushed into the sudden void, the motion itself having catastrophic results. The explosion itself had levelled buildings for miles in all directions—the blast radius was quite evident.

“Jesus. Look at that,” said Aaron, “The heat was so intense, some of the sand quite literally turned to glass.”

“Their explosions... they've gotten larger with each detonation,” Harry noted. “The one at Jose’s place, then the one at Hogwarts... now this.”

That had a few people nodding in agreement.

“This blast was many times the strength. Magic's a no-go in the area, it's literally a wasteland,” said Brandon.

“Crime against nature,” Harry muttered.

“And of course, the evacuation of Delir is ongoing, with the area most at risk being cleared first,” said the aide.
“How long does it take?” Walker wondered.

“A few days, though likely a little longer given what’s going on right now,” said Brandon.

It was then that the Queen stepped into the room. She once again wore her crown, and was dressed in formal attire.

“Your majesty,” said Harry.

“Good evening, Harry. I trust you’re in slightly better spirits?”

“Yes ma’am. Had some time to reflect on matters. This... the past few days have been a series of nightmares, best way to put it.”

“We’re nearly ready, ma’am,” said the technician behind the camera.

“Yes, indeed,” said the Queen, “Harry, I will wish to speak with you privately, likely tomorrow morning.”

“I will expect your summons,” said Harry, already having a pretty good idea of the subject matter.

The Queen sat down in the chair, and Chorley passed over a leather-bound folder.

“We’re just after seven o’clock Trevelyan, ma’am.”

Harry stepped back out of the view of the camera, as the technician began a three-count, finally pointing to the Queen.

“Yesterday, a series of terror attacks unfolded across the Commonwealth, aimed at government and infrastructure. And, as those events unfolded, an explosive device was detonated in Dubai, a city already ruined by a magically-induced and sustained sand storm. Two of Our ships, Ragnar and Cadogan, were caught in the resulting shock wave. Ragnar was sent in an out-of-control flight path and suffered moderate damage within, being ten kilometres from the site of the detonation, while Cadogan was by all reports, destroyed almost instantly, being much closer. One thousand, two hundred, and forty-eight of Our sons and daughters have been lost in this, the deadliest attack on Our military service men and women since the second world war, and the deadliest single-day loss since 1206 CE.

“The explosion has also resulted in damage to Delir, one of Our cities only five km southeast of Dubai. On the advice of the Minister of Infrastructure, We have instructed the city be evacuated for the safety of its inhabitants. The fate of Delir will be discussed at length in the near future, but more urgent matters will have Us delay that discussion.

“We, the Commonwealth of Valicadia, condemn the actions of Order of the New Dawn, the terrorist organization responsible for these acts, and consider it nothing less than a crime against humanity at large, and a crime against nature, to leave the soil and the air bereft of ambient magic--magic the earth itself needs so it may grow and heal. Such actions threaten the stability of our fragile planet, and all measures must be taken to prevent such an act from taking place again.

“To those responsible, I will be crystal clear. You may continue to hide in the shadows, but know light forces are mobilizing against you. You will be hunted. You will be caught. And you will answer for the terrible acts you have committed, both against Us, and against our allies.

“Finally, Our Commonwealth has suffered great loss on Friday. To that end, We proclaim Friday, January eleventh, to be a national day of mourning, so that We may honour those who are no longer
with us. A ceremony is to be held at the National Cenotaph in Trevelyan, beginning at 10:30 am local time.

“Blessed be, keepers of magic.”

Chapter End Notes

UP NEXT: What do you get when you mix: a computer virus, a half-million ton flying vessel, a time-turner, an elder scroll, and an insanely powerful Obscurus? Answer: Oh dear. And, oh yeah, spoilers for “Fantastic Beasts”
Obscured Interference

Chapter Summary

Harry and his friends new and old only get a brief reprieve, before OND triggers yet another nightmare. However, the terrorists don’t count on an interaction between several immensely powerful magical artefacts, or interference from an Obscurial over eighty years into the past… oh dear.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

19. OBSCURED INTERFERENCE

January, 2008 / December, 1926

“The strongest of all arguments against the interference of the public with purely personal conduct, is that when it does interfere, the odds are that it interferes wrongly, and in the wrong place.”

- John Stuart Mill

As expected, Harry received a message from the Queen after their exercises the following morning. So, while the rest of the group went in separate directions, Harry headed to the dining room.

The Queen was waiting, and as he arrived, she cast a privacy charm on the room. A pair of dicta-quills were poised and at the ready.

“I… I guess I know what this is about,” said Harry, softly, as the quills began to document what was being said.

“The Cruciatus curse is an unforgivable spell for a reason,” said the Queen.

“And there’s no excuse, I know that. But I wasn’t exactly in my right mind, either.”

Harry sucked in a deep breath, and blew it out.

“I’d just lost two men I loved and adored as brothers. Then the moron had the stones to then make light of our suffering…”

“It was the straw that broke the camel’s back.”

“It was, ma’am. And I… really. It’s not something I would ever do to someone… Shor’s bones, last thing I would want to do—particularly when there are far more effective means to mete out justice.”

The Queen gave a nod, and seemed to think on the matter a few moments.

“Very well. Our Minister of Justice did desire for you to face some sort of consequence given the
severity of the crime. However, We also accept that there were extenuating circumstances at play when the crime was committed. Therefore, Mr. Stormcrown, We shall invoke Our royal privilege, and declare that the matter be henceforth closed.”

Harry gave a bow of the head. “Thank you, your majesty. For the record, I suffer personal guilt for having lost control in such a manner. I promise to do my best not to repeat such an action.”

The Queen gave a nod. “We are off the record.”

The quills both stopped writing, and fell still.

“You are still seeing Healer Ferris?”

“ Likely for the foreseeable future. Things I witnessed… there are things I’ll never be able to un-see. White Phosphorus. Gods, that alone… then having to dispatch the corpses burned by it after they were turned into Inferi.”

Harry visibly shivered.

“None of the things Voldemort and his Death Eaters did… match what we saw in Dubai. Captain Walker’s still shell-shocked, I’m certain. We… we only went through a couple of days. He suffered well over a week of this sh… rubbish.”

“And you are not alone,” said the Queen, “There have been a few dozen of Our marines also needing some form of counselling after the event.”

Harry wasn’t surprised. Even the hardest men and women were still human in the end, susceptible to the same emotional forces. That some would be traumatized by the experiences of the past few days... no. Not a surprise at all.

That evening, the group once again gathered in Harry’s chest, and in turn, into the VPR. Bryce had Harry turn it into a facsimile of RFK Stadium again, with the intention they perhaps toss a ball or two around. However, the group ended up gathered in the infield, as discussion once again gravitated toward the latest invasion of the Commonwealth’s government into Harry’s personal residence.

“I’ve spoken with Delvin,” said Mazhe, “There aren’t really any proper records of the catacombs. But, he says we should be safe building additional space if we need to.”

“The government can bring in engineers to do a proper survey,” said Justin. He and Zoey were sitting close together, as had been the norm since they’d returned to the flat.

“What if we just dig down?” Aaron suggested.

Harry and Mazhe shared a look. “If the Queen doesn’t mind having to use stairs. Why not?”

“We’ll speak to her about it tomorrow,” said Aaron, “I’m sure you’d like to have your space back sooner rather than later. Thing is, a lockdown still means a lockdown. If the Queen’s here, you know the drill.”

“Yeah. And quite honestly, it’s beginning to grate on me. Not her majesty’s presence, but the reasoning behind it—that a group of terrorists have the Commonwealth squarely in their sights, with intent on wreaking as much havoc as they can manage. Bloody hell... over two million people killed as a result of their latest action. And guys. We know they’re just getting warmed up.”
“As all of us agree, yeah,” said Aaron, “Their attacks have now destroyed two cities, and have forced the evacuation of a third. We came this close—” Aaron held his thumb and index finger a quarter of an inch apart, “—to world war three. Praise the lord a few members of the ICW have some sort of common sense.”

“Your government have contingencies in place if that actually happens?” Lugo wanted to know.

“World war three? Yeah, lots of procedures in place. As it stands, given the severity of things, many of those procedures are already in practice,” said Aaron, “Having the Queen and her Privy Council sequestered in a secure location being one of them. Harry, really, you have no idea heavily in your debt the Commonwealth is. Just in case no one else’s said it.”

Harry gave a nod. “It’s noted, yeah. There is a small part of me that’s a bit chuffed that the government trusts me and those close to me by no small measure. Even if it does turn my place of residence upside-down on occasion.”

“And we’ll get that sorted out in the next while,” Justin promised, “Depending on how fast we can get contractors cleared.”

“How long will it take?” asked Zoey.

“A few days, maybe a week,” said Justin, “Magical contractors can work pretty quickly.”

“No matter what, I’ll be more than glad to get most of my residence back.”

“Why doesn’t the government construct a separate bunker? Even if it was close by, at least it wouldn’t intrude on Harry’s private apartment,” said Lugo. “His place, I wouldn’t be happy about it, having my house turned upside down.”

“The security here is unique,” said Mazhe, “There’s a group of people the pair of you haven’t met yet. Harry and I are members. And considering they control most of the criminal underground here in Skyrim, a threat to Harry’s residence is... well... the odds would be like winning the lottery.”

Lugo arched his brow. “Really?”

Zoey, meanwhile, suppressed a giggle. “God, if that ever got out...”

“No shit,” said Aaron, “Having the monarch being sequestered in a place frequented by a criminal enterprise. The media would have a field day.”

“A news cycle that never ends... at least that’s what CJ would say.”

“CJ who?” Mazhe wondered.

“CJ Cregg. She’s dad’s chief of staff. Used to be the White House press secretary until last spring.”

Lugo thought for a moment. “Does the Queen have a Press Secretary?”

“Yes,” Justin answered, “And of course, you’ve all seen her chief of staff.”

Harry raised his brow. “Chorley? I mean, I’m sure he does it well, but...”

“He does more than admirably, Harry.”

Harry smirked. “Maybe OND needs to hear that. It’ll drive them all bonkers. The thought of having to answer to a house elf—again, not that there’s a problem with that. Just—”
“We get it,” said Justin, with a mad grin of his own. “There’s a few people that had a few things to say about it. Needless to say, they didn’t last long in the Queen’s service.”

Harry smirked. “Maybe we should introduce CJ to Chorley.”

That had Zoey laughing. “She’d probably think she’s being pranked. It’s happened enough.”

Now it was Mazhe’s turn to smirk. “So much for the White House being a place of serious intellectuals.”

Zoey laughed again. “You have no idea. Between Charlie and CJ’s prank war(1)… or Josh Lyman’s assistant putting two turkeys in CJ’s office a few years ago(2)… or the goat in Will Bailey’s office(3)…”

“Shor’s bones, I’d think they’re turning the place into a zoo.”

“Well, it already is on some days,” said Zoey, dryly.

Everyone collapsed into a fit of laughter.

On January 8, the lockdown was at least partially lifted, although the Queen still remained in the residence. Lugo wished to see his family, and so a pair of SOU took him to Bthalft, where his residence had been moved. Walker, meanwhile, borrowed Harry’s mobile and spent an hour speaking to his sister and his parents, all of which had also been moved to Bthalft. He planned on meeting up with them in a few days, but still felt obligated to stay with Harry’s group for the time being.

Miraak, meanwhile, left the flat, having received a message from High Hrothgar the previous day, asking at least him, if not both he and Mazhe, to return to the monastery regarding the possible location of a word wall. Mazhe declined, wishing to remain with Harry.

Mid-morning, a team of contractors arrived by floo powder, and after clearing security, set to work with the expansion. That was the cue for Brandon to return to the Ragnar, and Harry quickly followed, having been all but trapped inside for the last few days.

Beside the point, there was still plenty to do on the ship considering the damage, never mind the refugees. Naturally, his entire circle followed, with Bryce not accepting ‘no’ for an answer. Harry mentally gave his head a shake. So much in common with Tommy—being stubborn in that way.

Once on board, Justin and Zoey headed off to the Ministry of Technomancy’s satellite office; it would be a chance for Justin to show his girlfriend what he actually did for a living, and secondly, to see if the department needed any help putting things back to rights.

Everyone else, headed toward the massive lower flight deck, with the intention of helping out with the remaining refugees. Arriving, they discovered their effort was unneeded. Only a handful of people remained, and with the number of officials and staff on hand, it would be overkill to remain.

Instead, they ended up helping in engineering, as the aft end of the vessel suffered the most damage. Even though a few days had passed since the event, the damage was still significant, and the ship’s engineers were more than appreciative of the additional wands and hands.

Late in the afternoon, they were pulled away from the repairs, as healer Ferris was waiting in Harry’s suite. He’d forgotten about the scheduled meetings all in the hurry to escape from the apartment, but... no worries, better late than never. That took up the remainder of the day and part of the
evening, as the healer wanted to speak to everyone individually, if only for fifteen minutes or so.

It was late in the evening before they were able to get something to eat—though they’d had something light a few hours prior.

“Guys... d’you mind if we stay aboard for the night?” Harry asked. They were just finishing up.

“There’s still things to help out with,” said Justin. “And I can see where you’re at, not wanting the extra commotion back in the flat.”

“We got enough room?” Bryce asked.

“More room here, actually,” said Brandon, “So no sharing. And I have my own quarters on board.”

“Curious to know, what’s it like?” Mazhe wondered.

“Comfortable. Not extravagant, if that’s what you’re asking. But being magically-enhanced, we can expand to suit if needed.”

“So you have a home... uh, on land?” Walker asked.

“No. The Ragnar’s been my home for almost a decade.”

Harry thought for a moment. “Gods, never really thought of that.”

“It’s a common thing. Guys make themselves comfortable here, ‘specially the officers. It tends to be a long-term commission, right?”

Harry pointed to Aaron. “What about you?”

“Until I was transferred, the Gideon. Now, it’s the Ragnar.”

“Gideon’s one of Ragnar’s sisters, if I follow,” said Mazhe.

“One of four, yeah,” said Aaron, “Lotharius and Arminius make up the remainder.”

“And they’re all identical,” Walker guessed.

“Visually speaking, yeah. Identical armament and defensive implements, but the interiors vary somewhat; that’s a given, of course, considering they’re magically enhanced.”

“Shit still blows my mind though,” said Walker, “You guys just... idunno, make shit out of thin air, make things fit as it’s needed... fuck, the possibilities.”

“Magic’s pretty versatile, yeah. But it’s got its own set of laws too. My flat being an example. It’s not in Wizard’s space, so we’ve gotta be careful where we build. If it was something like my chest... then it’s pretty much unlimited.”

“Think pocket dimension,” said Justin. “Has its own gravity, completely separate from the outside world.”

“Still find that fascinating,” said Zoey, “I know a few people who would be blown away by that.”

“And Justin’s explained to you why you can’t,” said Brandon. “Though at the rate we’re going, the non-magical world’s gonna learn about magic en-mass. I’m pretty sure that’s exactly what OND wants to happen. Or, they don’t CARE whether we’re exposed.”
“Enough about that, we talk about them far too much in my opinion,” Harry muttered. “Uh. Right. So we’ll need to sort out sleeping arrangements then.”

“And I’ll need to borrow your cell phone, Justin,” said Zoey.

“Of course. Your father,” Justin remembered.

Harry smirked. “I have to wonder how President Bartlett will react when Justin here takes an arrow in the knee...(4)”

That had Mazhe smirking, while everyone else looked at him blankly for a moment, before Justin finally caught on.

“Harry!”

“What?” Harry asked, innocently.

It was then Aaron felt his mobile buzz. He pulled it out, looking across the table seeing Brandon doing the same. He glanced at the message, and sighed. “OND’s launched an attack at General Motors Place in Vancouver.”

“Shit,” Harry muttered, making to stand.

“Wait. SOU and marines on scene, as are Canadian Aurors. Scene’s secure,” said Brandon, clearly having received the same message.

“Anyone hurt?” Bryce asked.

“We don’t have all the details yet, but it looks like the attack never got off the ground. I’m guessin’ there will be, but... likely not many. DOI's dispatched the MIRT just in case.”

“MIRT?” asked Walker.

“Major Incident Response Team. A multi-departmental unit which gets dispatched when a major incident occurs which involves the Commonwealth. Or in this case, we’re assisting the Canadian ministry.”

“You mean to keep the Statute of Secrecy intact.”

“Yeah, exactly. Though MIRT doesn't supply emergency shelter or anything like that. But crisis intervention after a disaster, yeah, that’s one of the team's mandates.”

“And something tells me it’s done with speed and efficiency FEMA could only dream of,” said Zoey.

“C’mon, Dr. Bartlett, they have magic,” said Walker, ruefully. “The federal government can’t ever hope to compete.”

“We can have boots on the ground in a matter of minutes,” said Brandon, “Guys get to the scene, do
Walker shook his head. “FEMA takes hours at a minimum, days more often than not.”

“That’s bureaucracy for you. Questions of jurisdiction, never mind the logistics, it gets very complicated very quickly.”

“Doesn’t that come up when MIRT’s involved?”

“No. If MIRT’s deployed, MIRT asserts authority over the scene.”

Walker raised his brows. “Even on foreign soil?”

“We speak to the local government,” said Brandon. “Whether the ICW wants to recognize it or not, we do have a good reputation when it comes to matters of law. We work with the locals, but setting some sort of chain of command makes everything run a whole lot smoother.”

Walker gave a nod. “Makes sense. But local law enforcement usually don’t like it a whole lot...”

“Worried about someone peeing in their pool. And meanwhile, the criminals get away because local police engaged in a dick-measuring contest rather than doing their jobs.”

That sent Zoey into a fit of giggles.

“Well? It’s true,” said Brandon, with a shrug.

“Uh... right. Let’s get sleeping quarters settled so I can go die in the tub,” Harry decided. “It’s been a long day.”

January 10, 2008

They’d spent the past two days on board the Ragnar. Both days, healer Ferris had visited, keeping the daily schedule with Harry’s circle, though the sessions were being kept brief for now.

The group were just finishing up the morning routine, taking advantage of the ship’s immense athletic facility. Both Walker and Bryce were more than impressed with the magnitude.

“Still blows me away this is a ship,” Bryce noted, as they finished getting dressed.

“One of the things I sort of missed when I fled to Skyrim after fifth year. Really, it was more a case of me betraying the Commonwealth, than the other way around,” said Harry, as he flicked a hand at himself, restoring his street clothes. He glanced at Mazhe, who was having to do the job manually. “Here.”

“Oh.”

Another flick of the hand had his partner dressed.

“You guys know you’re always welcome, right?” said Brandon, as he directed his wand at himself, also dressing.

“Dress uniform?” Walker questioned.

“I’m in the AIC this afternoon. So I’ll leave you in Aaron’s capable hands.”
“As if,” Harry teased. That earned a rude gesture from the man in question.

Further discussion was interrupted as a klaxon began blaring.

“Action stations, action stations, set condition orange throughout the ship. Repeat, action stations.”

“Radios, guys,” said Aaron, reaching down to his hip, and touching a button on the receiver.

“I... I need to look in on Zoey,” said Justin.

“Go. Hook up with us after.”

“AIC, Claymore. What’s going on, over,” said Aaron, as Justin activated his mobile and vanished with a soft pop.

“Claymore, AIC. Ship won’t answer to helm, over.”

“Bloody hell,” Harry muttered.

Brandon flicked his wand at himself, replacing his dress uniform with his black combat fatigues. Aaron immediately did the same, with both Harry and Mazhe following suit.

“Shit, course just updated sir!” came another alarmed voice, “Jesus... it has us track into New York... right down Park Avenue.”

“Shit, we’re beginning a descent,” another voice warned.

“AIC, weaps. We lost control of all systems here,” came yet another warning.

“AIC, comm. Floo network just went out, mobile system just went local only.”

“It’s Dr. Fraser. I’m on my way,” came Justin’s voice.

“Shit shit shit! AIC, Weaps!! Main capacitor’s charging!”

“We got it, weaps! Targeting system’s painting the Woolworth building, maximum discharge!”

The colour drained from both Brandon and Aaron’s faces.

“Jesus fuck, whoever it is, they mean to start a war.”

“C’mon, I think we know exactly who’s responsible here,” Harry muttered, “Can’t go two days without some sort of calamity being dropped on our heads!”

“Commodore, MACUSA has to be warned,” said Brandon.

“A Patronus has been sent to DOI, Commander,” came the reply.

“Christ, this rate, we’ll be at war with the ICW as a whole,” Aaron muttered, “It’ll be considered a direct attack on MACUSA’s headquarters.”

Bryce raised his brows. “The Woolworth Building?”

“Yeah. Lot of clever engineering went on to make it function for both worlds.”

Harry, meanwhile, was thinking on the matter.
“AIC, I have a question,” he said. “Ragnar's main weapon uses the same capacitor as her... teleport unit, correct?”

“Affirmative, Mr. Stormcrown.”

“Is there a way we can divert the energy then?”

There was a long pause, before the officer answered, “It might be possible. But we risk doing damage to the core.”

“Better to deal with damage to the ship than to wipe out 8 million people,” said Dawson, “Mr. Stormcrown, we could use a hand.”

“Come on. We’ll head to the capacitor chamber, that’s where they’ll need us,” Brandon decided.

It seemed to take hours, when in reality it only took a matter of minutes for them to reach the capacitor chamber, an enormous room where the ship’s massive capacitor banks were installed, along with the massive core that provided the ship with its power needs.

A row of tall cylinders took up the length of the room on both sides, while a large spherical lattice cage made of something that looked like copper, was suspended on what appeared to be nothing at the forward end of the room. It was perhaps twenty feet in diameter, and it spun on all three axis. Inside it, appeared to be a mass of intensely bright light that was almost painful to look at. Harry’s first thought, he was looking at something similar to the Eye of Magnus.

“We just crossed the Bronx River Parkway, course now two-five-oh west-south-west,” came the warning.

“How’s this thing work?” Walker wondered.

“Self-sustaining,” said an engineer, “It draws on the ambient energy around the ship. Some of the capacitors here store that energy, and the ship draws power as it needs. Electricity, wards, charms, all from the capacitors here. Most of them, meanwhile, are only used during a teleport—‘jump’ as we call it, or to fire the main weapon.”

“We’ll need all of you to help out, since normally this would be done by computer—we’ve forcibly unhooked all but essential controls,” said another.

“Just... show us what to do,” said Walker, “Flippin’ switches don’t need magic, right?”

“Just be careful,” Aaron warned, “We get this wrong, we could blow up the ship and drop wreckage for miles.”

“Crossing Cross-Bronx Expressway, course now two-three-seven southwest by west,” came the warning.

Harry and his friends were directed to different locations throughout the room. Each would assist a pair of engineers. Exactly as Walker had described, it was mostly helping to flip switches or set controls to a required position—a task normally handled by the now compromised computer system.

“Just passed East a hundred and sixty-eighth street, course now two-two niner southwest,” came the warning.

“Cross-feed rerouting twenty percent complete.” Harry heard the report both in the room, and in his ear piece.
“Roger that, core.”

“No, it needs to be at two-eight-three.”

Harry pushed the radio warning out of his head, and readjusted the knob to the setting. “Sorry.”

He was working a console beside a technician who was adjusting settings on a console of his own. “Right. Next?”

“Next set of switches, left, left, centre, left, right, right.”

Harry quickly set the switches into the required positions.

“Passing East a hundred and sixty-first street, course still two-two-niner southwest.”

Just then, a blue arc of energy shot out of the console Bryce was working on, and only his fast reflexes prevented him from receiving a lethal shock.

“Bryce?!”

“It’s okay.”

“Bloody hell, careful,” Harry muttered, as all the cylinders in the room seemed to flicker a moment.

“AIC, core. Now at seventy-five percent charge, but cross-feed rerouting at eighty percent.”

“Core, AIC. Roger that.”

“Jump drive will need a destination,” another technician warned.

“Hogsmeade,” said Harry, automatically.

“Core, Nav. Roger that. We’ll configure for the Black Lake. Now passing east a hundred and forty-ninth street, course now two-two-oh southwest.”

Now, engineers were hurrying about, double-checking the configuration. Harry and his circle simply stood back, realizing they were pretty much done.

“Now it’s just a waiting game,” said the engineer.

“Because the capacitors have to be filled,” Harry realized.

“Exactly.”

The seconds seemed to tick by, with everyone fixed on a set of gauges mid-way down the room, which indicated the charge level of the capacitors.

“Now crossing Harlem River Drive, course now two-one-oh southwest by south; now following Park Avenue.”

“Nearly there.”

“We’re slowing down.”

“All right, hold on your butts,” the engineer warned.

“You’re go for manual override,” came O’Toole’s voice.
The engineer at the largest console reached up and yanked on the largest lever. Harry heard a thunderous but soft roar in his ear—if he had to place it, it would be like hearing the ocean in a seashell. Then, there came a blinding, white hot flash, leaving behind a pile of ash where the engineer had stood only a fraction of a second sooner.

That split-second flash was followed by yet another much larger flash, as the capacitors let their energy go in one tremendous surge. Everyone then felt the sensation of a port key activating, but it was by no means subtle. Everyone in the room was hurled to the floor by the force of the motion, and Harry was overwhelmed by a sense of vertigo. In an all-too-familiar scenario, he once again succumbed to the bliss of unconsciousness.

“Harry?! C’mon, need to come back to us,” came Mazhe’s voice.

Harry opened his eyes a second, and closed them.

“What... what happened?”

“C’mon, we’ve got trouble,” said Brandon, also crouching beside him. “Core’s going unstable, we may have to abandon. Justin! Where are you?!”

“Communications centre with Zoey. Why?” came Justin’s answer, as Harry sat up. Why the hell did he feel like he’d been dragged behind a team of horses?

“Core’s gone into a runaway feedback loop. You and Zoey get back to the core chamber right away. We may need to abandon,” Brandon warned.

“You’re kidding!” came Justin’s alarmed voice.

“We got two choices,” said one of the engineers, “The core overloads resulting in a catastrophic magical explosion, or we kill it and crash into lower Manhattan.”

“We still northeast of JFK Reservoir?” Walker questioned.

“Roger, Captain,” came the answer.

“Then we land in Central Park,” said Walker.

“MAKE IT SO!” came O’Toole’s shout, “Helm come right ten degrees, expedited. Engineering, kill the core!”

Yet another engineer reached up and yanked on a red shovel-like handle at a nearby console. It resulted in a pronounced shudder, and the insanely-bright ball of light at the centre of the spinning copper-like cage immediately began to dim.

“Given current bleed, we’ve got two minutes,” the engineer warned.

“All stop,” O’Toole ordered.

“All departments, AIC. Shut down EVERYTHING not absolutely essential.”

Engineers were once again scrambling, pulling switches and pressing buttons, with some of the effects being noticed straight away, namely the room becoming rather dim with the absence of most lights.

“AIC, Comm. We’ve lost radio contact with MDHQ.”
“Comm., AIC. Roger.”

“Sir! The map!” came an excited shout.

“That ain’t present-day New York,” said Dawson.

Harry suppressed the urge to scream. “Oh for fuck’s sake, not again!”

“AIC, nav. Rate of descent, it's gonna be uncomfortable, but not catastrophic. We're in line with JKO Reservoir, should mitigate some of the impact.”

“Air wing, suit up.”

“Roger that. Airborne in five minutes, sir,” came Rowland’s answer.

From then, it was a waiting game, as the massive vessel fell slowly from the sky. Finally, the last trickle of energy was fed to the vessel’s massive lift charms to minimize the impact as much as they could. There finally came a great shudder, as the Ragnar touched down in Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis Reservoir, and with that, the ship was plunged into darkness. Both Aaron and Brandon produced their flashlights and switched them on, providing a small amount of light to the darkened chamber.

“We’re a dead stick, sir,” one of the engineers warned, “No chameleon charm, no shielding, we’re vulnerable to attack.”

“Roger that, core,” came the answer, “Work on getting the lights back on in some capacity.”

“Working on it, sir. Should have emergency power up in about two minutes. Lighting charms should come up—”

He didn’t finish, as a number of ever-burn candles seemed to materialize, providing some minimal lighting to the room. Brandon and Aaron switched off their flashlights, and stowed them.

“Guys, we’re gonna need to establish a perimeter. Repelling charms, the whole nine yards,” said Brandon.

“Right.”

“And you pair—”

“Are coming with you,” said Walker, “It’s just keeping non-magicals away, right?”

Brandon and Aaron shared a look. “Yeah. Just... guys, you know we’ve jumped through time again. Christ, think this’ll be a first.” He gave Harry a look.

Harry shrugged. “Can only happen to me.”

“But at least this time, you’re not alone, love,” said Mazhe, touching him softly on the shoulder, “You’ve got all of us along for the ride.”

“What I’m afraid of,” Harry muttered. “That we won’t all return together.”

“Harry, stop. It’s not your fault. If all you do is worry, that... that’s not living.”

“Come on, guys. We got a lot of work ahead,” said Brandon.
“No shit. And really, this... “Aaron gestured to the now cold core, “Is not gonna be a quick fix. Starting that ain't like starting a car.”

“Gonna need one hell of a boost, yeah,” said Walker, dryly.

“Actually, you’re close to the idea,” said a nearby engineer, “It’s just getting something strong enough.”

Outside, they found it was dark, with a few flakes of snow trying to fall in the chilly air. Everyone found themselves under-dressed for the weather, and outfits were quickly adjusted, before they set to work. Bryce and Walker mostly observed, though both men carried modified MP5 rifles; they were joined by four additional marines, carrying similar weaponry.

As Harry and Mazhe worked, the pair spotted an odd mass of energy appearing to circle the vessel.

“What in Oblivion was that?” Mazhe exclaimed, as it flew off to the southwest.

“Wasn't a Dementor, but... gods, that was dark. Angry, poisonous energy.”

“OND?”

“What? No, not here. ‘least I hope not. But, gods, that was dark. Angry, poisonous energy.”

Aaron hadn’t seen it, but Brandon did.

“Jesus. I think... I think that was an Obscurus.”

Both Harry and Mazhe looked confused. “A... what?”

“It's... someone who's suppressed their magic to the point that it becomes a dark, parasitic entity. It lashes out when the host becomes emotional—upset or angry. Save for a few rare examples, the individual doesn't survive past their tenth birthday.”

Mazhe looked even more confused. “Why would someone do that, to forsake their gift in such a way?”

“This is the mid-nineteen-twenties, if I have to guess,” said Brandon, “People suppressing their magic was rare, but not unheard of.”

He seemed to be lost in thought for a few moments. “Yeah. Uh... we really need to be careful. Shit's about to happen.”

Harry again found the need to go bang his head on a wall somewhere. “What do you mean?”

Brandon held his wand out in front of him, and gave it a flick. ‘7:38p December 5, 1926’ wafted from the tip.

“We have to contact the government,” said Aaron. That got a nod from Brandon. “Let’s get back inside. O’Toole will know how to proceed from here.”
UP NEXT: A connection to the future is established; Harry learns what being Promagistrate actually means; an investigation into the Obscurus’ presence begins; and separate incidents are pulling the team in separate directions, one of which posing a potential, lethal threat to the ship and the Commonwealth as a whole...

CHAPTER NOTES: I’m sure there are those of you wondering why there seems to be so many ‘incidents’ running one right after the other. It’s intended. This is OND’s behaviour, this is what they want. Most of the things they are doing affect either the magical world or the Commonwealth in some catastrophic manner, and most certainly, it falls within the theme of the story arc. So buckle up. It gets worse from here.

With regard to the Ragnar’s flight path over New York, I actually had to research this, and make sure it made sense. It should emphasize, most definitely they were moving at a pretty good clip, only slowing down as the ship was on final approach to the target. The fact they’d slowed down mitigated their, uh, controlled flight into terrain—or the pond, as the case ends up.

This is an event I’d planned to have unfold in “Orb of Magnus”, but with so much going on, and with the absence of some sort of catalyst or reason, it ended up here instead. Here, I had a perfect catalyst/reason, and, we get to once again explore a past event.

(1) Season 3, episode 14, “Hartsfield's Landing”
(2) Season 2, episode 8, “Shibboleth”
(3) Season 4, episode 11, “Guns not Butter”
(4) And Skyrim fans out there all groan along with me now. Of course, both Mazhe and Harry have likely heard this more than a few times in their travels. For those of you who don’t know, ‘taking an arrow to the knee’ is actually a Scandinavian/Norse reference to one who’s about to or has gotten married.
Creature Discomfort

Chapter Summary

A connection to the future is established; Harry learns what being Promagistrate actually means; an investigation into the Obscurus’ presence begins; and separate incidents are pulling the team in separate directions, one of which posing a potential, lethal threat to the ship and the Commonwealth as a whole...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

20. CREATURE DISCOMFORT

January, 2008 / December, 1926

“Discomfort is a wise teacher.”

- Caroline Myss

Back inside, they found the lights were all working again, and in the AIC, most of the equipment appeared to be back on line. They found the Commodore and his XO at the centre table, reviewing information now displayed on it.

“Commodore, we must contact the Commonwealth,” said Brandon, “I’m certain there’s an Obscurus loose, never mind the fact we’ve somehow travelled through time.”

“Concurred, sir,” said Dawson, “We’ll most likely have to tap into the Orb of Magnus to restart Ragnar’s core as it stands.”

O’Toole hummed. “Very well. Can’t fault the logic. Her core was started with the Orb in the first place.”

“Gonna be a problem contacting them,” said Dawson, “None of our current protocols would be recognized, never mind the fact that the Commonwealth really didn’t start using radio communications until sometime in the forties, telephone in the fifties. Computers, really didn’t come into the picture until the seventies—late seventies.”

“And if we were still using those protocols, manual inputs, this would never have happened,” an officer nearby muttered.

Harry had to agree. He still somewhat viewed computers as being a bit dodgy, and this latest incident only degraded his opinion. Sure, they may make things easier, but here they were, stranded over eighty years into the past, because of technology.

“We’ll have to send a Patronus,” said Dawson.

“Saying what, to who?” asked Aaron.
“To the Magnus chamber. Commodore, we'll need records of who the Master or Mistress Guardian of the chamber is.”

“You mean like Guardian Elaine.”

“Exactly. And Harry, it has to be your message.”

“What for?”

“Think about it,” said Brandon, “We're over eighty years into the past. What sort of questions are we gonna get?”

“All right. Just... tell me what I need to say.”

Just over an hour later, they had the answer they needed, thanks to the ship’s central database, one of the few computers not affected by the cyber attack. They then took a few minutes to work out exactly what to say. Harry then produced his wand.

“Expecto Patronum.”

To the silvery stag which appeared, he spoke, “Master Guardian Octavian, urgent. Commonwealth assets at risk, activating the Promagistrate Act. Crashed in the reservoir, Central Park, New York City. MACUSA may be aware of presence.” Then, “To Master Guardian Octavian, Chamber of the Magnus. Urgent.”

“Shouldn’t take long,” said Dawson, as the silvery animal bounded out the doorway and vanished, “Promagistrate Act practically denotes an emergency.”

“And I still don’t know what that means,” said Harry.

“We’ll explain it later,” O’Toole promised, “It’s only right you understand what your role in the Commonwealth truly is. Let’s just be ready for an answer, it really won’t take long, given the urgency.”

Sure enough, only minutes later, an answer came back in the form of a point of light. Harry still recognized it as a Patronus, as it spoke, “Promagistrate, will meet in one half hour's time at the South Gate House. Assuming perimeter is temporarily secured. Intelligence Division notified.”

“Intelligence Division?” Harry questioned.

“It’s what became the DOI,” Aaron answered.

“Let’s get to the meeting spot and be sure it’s secured,” said Brandon, indicating the map which now took up the display monitors at the front of the room. The central database had detailed maps stored locally, so it was nothing to get a map of the area.

In retrospect, it had been a good thing the meeting had been time had been set for a half hour after receipt of the message, for it took them nearly that amount of time to reach the Gate House. Ragnar’s landing in the reservoir had of course busted the ice up, and sent waves on the shore line, coating everything with an extra thick layer of ice. It made walking extra treacherous, never mind having to dodge chunks of ice.

Nonetheless, they made it with a few minutes to spare, and those who were magical wasted no time setting up a perimeter. The small contingent of marines accompanying them then set up a defensive stance while they waited.
It wasn’t long, before a blur of limbs appeared nearby, revealing a small group of people. One of them was of average size, dressed in white robes with gold trim, identical to that of Guardian Elaine. Harry immediately bowed his head out of respect.

“I am master guardian Octavius. Which one of you is Promagistrate?”

Harry stepped forward. “I am, sir. My fellow supporters now walk the afterlife, two of them, their passing is painfully recent. The Orb of Magnus now rests in Trevelyan?”

“It does, young mage,” answered Octavius. He thought for a moment, his eyes falling on the great vessel resting in the middle of the reservoir. “You have travelled through time.” It wasn’t a question.

“It is so, sir. Our ship was caught by some disturbance which originated here, complicated by a pair of artefacts in my possession.”

“2008, sir,” Aaron answered. “It’s why we had Harry invoke the Promagistrate Act. This is above and beyond state secret level.”

“Very well.”

Octavius produced his wand. “*Expecto Patronum.*”

To the ghostly ape-like creature which appeared, he spoke, “Your Majesty. Made contact with Promagistrate.” Then, “To King Alexander.”

The ghostly creature bounded off, with both Bryce and Walker watching with fascination.

“What... what kind of animal was that?” Bryce finally managed.

“Demiguise,” said Brandon, “Fascinating creatures. They can turn themselves invisible.”

“And the hair from their hide is used to make invisibility cloaks,” said Harry.

“Octavius. Something we spotted just after we crashed,” said Brandon, “There's an active Obscurus here. It circled the vessel twice.”

“Merlin’s beard... we'll have Arcane Sciences send some people along. Thank you for the warning.”

A few minutes passed before a response arrived: “Octavius. *Bring Promagistrate and party to Our residence.*”

“I'll need to clear it with Commodore O'Toole first,” said Brandon, “Should be all right, but he should be made aware.”

“Of course. You have your own set of protocols I would expect,” said Octavius.

“Yes, very much so, sir. Though with Harry around...”

Harry rolled his eyes, while Octavius could only nod. “The Promagistrate likely does create rather interesting... events, when it comes to protocol.”

“Scabbard, Gladius.”

“*Go ahead, Gladius.*”

“Made contact with Order of the Magnus. Present monarch has asked us to Trevelyan.”
"Proceed, but keep us apprised via Patronus as you will be out of radio reception range."

"Roger that."

Royal Palace,
Trevelyan,
Commonwealth of Valicadia

Harry had been to the Royal Palace on a number of occasions, so for him, this was nothing out of the ordinary. The decorations, though, were more than enough to indicate this was a very different time. So, familiar, but different.

Then...

"Promagistrate."

Harry did a double-take, seeing the house elf before him. He wore the same uniform, and the face was easily recognizable, but much younger.

"Chorley?"

"You know me?"

"Y-yes, I do. Shor’s bones..."

"House elves live a long time, Mr. Potter. I find no surprise in knowing I still live eight decades from now."

Harry only smiled. "And you’re every bit as pleasant in my time as you are here."

"And why would I not be? To show disrespect? Not in the service of his majesty. This way, if you please."

They were led to the private study, where Chorley rapped on the door three times. He then opened it, announcing, "The Promagistrate, your majesty."

Now, Harry felt under-dressed as they were ushered into the King’s private study. The man waiting inside was nearly as tall as Mazhe, fairly broad, with a rectangular face, and piercing blue eyes. His beard was somewhat unkempt, where at the chin, it almost reached his chest. His blond hair was shaved at both sides and braided, and when he turned to glance at Chorley a moment, it revealed an equally-braided pony tail which dropped a quarter of the way down his back.

Harry mentally shivered, as their eyes met again, being reminded of Sirius. And then, realization: he was meeting Susan’s father.

"Your Majesty. The Promagistrate and party," said Chorley. "Promagistrate, his majesty King Alexander the second."

"Your majesty," said Harry, once again bowing his head. He straightened. "Sir, I introduce my bonded, Mazhe Stormcrown; Commander Brandon McAllister, and Lieutenant Commander Aaron Carpenter, both of Commonwealth Forces. Finally, Bryce Hunter, and Martin Walker. And I, am Harry Stormcrown, Commonwealth Promagistrate, by will of our magical ancestors."

The King smiled. "Welcome, all of you. Come. Have a seat." He indicated seats in front of the fireplace.
The group all took seats in front of the fireplace, and it was then Harry noticed the large painting which hung over it. The man in it looked very much like the young king who was taking a seat opposite, save for his clothes. He wore mostly leather, with a leather and chain mail vest. He stood, with a longsword held in his right hand, the point resting on the ground. And those same piercing blue eyes seemed to be boring into Harry.

“My famous ancestor,” said Alexander. “If you’ve studied medieval Europe...”

“Ragnar ‘Lothbrok’ Sigurdsson,” said Aaron, “King of the Danes in the ninth century.”

“He was, yes.”

“But he wasn’t magical,” said Harry.

“No. Some of his people, meanwhile, very much were. And, it was because of raids conducted by his people after his death, that we went underground. If not for the Viking people, the Commonwealth may not have discovered the Orb of Magnus.”

“Uh, sir... when was Valicadia formed?” Bryce questioned.

“912 CE,” answered the King, “Even without its power, our ancestors needed better protection from the enemies. Growing tensions in London, the power of the church was growing, and continuing Viking raids, it was just the right catalyst for us to do something radical.”

“Go underground,” Harry guessed.

Alexander gave a nod. “Once we started digging down, those who had magical ability erected powerful wards no raiding party—whether they be Vikings, the English, or nuts from mainland Europe—could ever penetrate.”

“You have a hate on for England, sounds like,” said Bryce.

“What, you didn’t think America was the first nation to dislike British interference, did you?”

“Oh...”

“Our ancestors didn’t like the pressure from Mercia and Wessex. Eoforwin wanted to be its own independent entity, and by going underground, we gained exactly that.”

“It was in the spring of 912 that men performing an excavation to expand the settlement began to get very strange magical readings from below,” Octavian picked up, “Curiosity piqued, they began digging a small shaft to investigate. And, here we are, a thousand and fourteen years later.”

“Thank you both. Shor’s beard, I’ve learned more in five minutes about my own country, than I have in the decade or so I’ve been a citizen.”

“There are plenty of books which cover our history, Harry,” said Brandon, “When we get back where we belong, I’ll have a few books brought to your apartment.”

“Surprised, considering he reads so much—or used to,” said Mazhe. “Think he’s read half the books in the... a library we have access to.”

“So... the Ragnar... guess she got her name from him.” Bryce gestured to the painting.

Both Aaron and Brandon groaned, but Harry rolled his eyes. “Won’t be the first time we’ve affected history.”
“Indeed, we come to the purpose of our meeting,” said the King. “I won’t ask about our future, your presence only confirms it continues to exist into the twenty-first century—a fact I will take as a good omen, considering the prophecy.”

“Your majesty, you realize that any interaction with us must remain secret,” said Brandon.

“As will be covered with the activation of the Promagistrate Act,” said the King.

He seemed to appraise Aaron and Brandon’s uniforms a moment. “You are part of the present monarch’s protection detail?”

“Yes sir,” said Brandon, “As we serve at the pleasure of the sovereign, we serve also at your pleasure, sir.”

“That would have been my next question, on the matter of security.”

“It’s all well in hand, sir. I trust both Brandon and Aaron with my life, considering both of them dear friends. I’ve trained with Brandon for over four years, Aaron about five months,” Harry explained.

“Those in the Promagistrate’s party should not be questioned by security after the initial check has cleared,” said Chorley. He stood at the side of the King’s chair, holding a leatherbound folder.

Harry gave a frown. “This is news to me, considering an incident back in the fall.”

Now it was Chorley’s turn to frown. “You have not been made aware of your title and position, sir?”

The King also frowned. “Guardian Octavius, see that corrected. The father of the Commonwealth being ignorant of his title... We find it both offensive, and unacceptable.”

Harry gave in incline of the head. “Thank you, sir.”

The discussion took up the rest of the afternoon, and the King invited them to remain for dinner. Brandon dispatched a message back to the ship letting them know what was happening, and the discussion continued. Harry was more than surprised to learn of just what sort of power the title entailed: for the most part, having many privileges the King or Queen enjoyed, including immunity from the law as a whole.

“You are the creator, Harry. Your actions birthed the Commonwealth in every way imaginable.”

“So he can completely ignore the law?” Bryce was equally surprised.

“Legally, yes.”

“Morally, though... that’s the equation.”

“The same equation I face, young Harry,” said the King, “And in our positions we are held to higher standards.”

“As I know too well, sir.”

“There are some ceremonial duties you may perform as well,” said Octavius, “The most significant being the coronation ritual. It’s a shame you only came to us now.”

“Indeed,” said the King, “My coronation was back in May.”

“Congratulations, sir. But had it been my destiny to be there, then I would have been there.”
“This is true.”

It was then an aide stepped into the room.

“Sire, the Queen is returning presently.”

“I will return to the Magnus Chamber,” said Octavian, “We’ll need to run some calculations, so it’ll be a few hours, likely tomorrow morning some time. Perhaps you all should get some rest.”

“We have permission to port key into the residence?”

“As Promagistrate, you can port key anywhere in the Commonwealth, Harry. Append ‘Portus’ with ‘invoking privilege’. Do remember, while you are legally not bound by law, you do have moral obligation,” said Octavian.

“It’s still better to get permission first if possible,” said Harry.

“Come join me for breakfast in the morning if time allows,” said the King, “I shall introduce you to my Queen.”

“Thank you sir. Wait. I conduct the Coronation ritual? The ceremony that crowns the new monarch?”

“Yes. You do.”

“Shor’s bones... I would have no clue where to begin.”

“And you wouldn’t need to worry about it,” said Octavian, “One of us... my successor down the line will be right there with you.”

“Oh. Uh, right.”

December 6, 1926

Even with Mazhe spooned up against him, Harry slept poorly, and ended up getting up a couple of hours earlier. He spent the time in the library, looking for information about Obscuri, finding the information both fascinating and disturbing at the same time.

Gauging by the time, the others were likely up, so he returned to the suite, and the group once again entered the chest, and in turn, the VPR, for their morning routine. Even displaced, some level of normalcy was a good thing.

Not long after, as they prepared to take up the King’s invitation for breakfast, there came a message over the radio. “Obscurus spotted again.”

“We need to find out where it’s coming from,” Harry decided.

“Harry, no.”

“That’s what I could’ve turned into. Join me, or stay behind, but don’t stop me.”

“Of course I’m coming,” said Mazhe, “Come on guys. What do you expect from him?”

Both Brandon and Aaron sighed. There had been a reason they’d not wanted Harry to know about his title. It was bad enough with his ‘saving people’ mentality as it was. Now being ‘taken off the
leash’... both of them knew the road just got a lot harder.

“I... I’m gonna stay behind. Zoey and I are helping get some of the systems back online,” said Justin.

“It’s all right. Really, glad you guys are getting some time together,” said Harry.

A short time later, the group were on brooms. Walker rode with Brandon, while Bryce rode with Aaron. Mazhe rode on his own broom, alongside Harry. They spotted the Obscurus drifting over the small zoo, and as they approached, it flew off to the south.

Crossing west 59th street, which ran parallel to the south side of the park, it dove in behind a building and that was it. However, Mazhe and Harry’s attention was diverted to a gathering on the front steps of a building a little ways down 6th Avenue, which ended at the park.

Brandon caught Harry’s gaze, and let out a snort. “*New Salem Philanthropic Society... NSPS for short. Also known as the New Salemers. They’re on a Commonwealth watch list.*”

“No shit,” Harry muttered, “Non-magical nutcases bent on exposing and ultimately destroying the Wizarding world.”

“Why doesn't MACUSA just wipe their memories?” Bryce wondered.

“They already have on several occasions,” Brandon remembered. “Thing is, they're rather resourceful. If it was done properly, the authorities would figure out who the member base is, and destroy and erase all evidence. Only Obliviating a few people isn't gonna remove the problem.”

“But MACUSA’s non-fraternization policy in this time period actually ham-strings them from doing a proper job,” said Aaron.

“The law getting in the way of justice. Yeah, heard that one before,” Walker muttered.

Only a minute later, a lanky young man was joining the rest of the New Salemers on the steps of the building. Harry, however, was very confused. The man carried the signature of the Obscurus, but... this was a young adult, no younger than eighteen. It went against what he’d read—Obscuri normally don’t live past ten.

They have little time to think on it, as the burglar alarm began sounding, and the gathering quickly began to disperse. It was then further complicated, as a short, pudgy man was seen hurrying away with a case.

“The case the man has... it reeks of magic, even from here,” said Mazhe.

Brandon weighed the matter a few moments. “We split up. Walker, with me. Carpenter, you're with Hunter and the Stormcrows. Follow the suspect, we'll tail the Obscurius.”

“Sir,” said Aaron.

“But...”

“Harry. We're just gonna figure out where he lives. We'll keep in radio contact.”

Harry huffed. “All right, fine.”

They split up, with Brandon and Walker following the New Salemers and the Obscurius, while Harry and the rest of the group followed the man with the case.
“So what d’you guys think’s goin’ on here?” Bryce asked. “I mean, he looks like one of... I mean, like a non-magical.”

“Concurred,” said Harry, “So what’s he doing with a magical object... or a case containing a magical object?”

“We can’t interfere unless there’s a direct threat to us or innocent people,” said Aaron, “It’s the rules.”

Sometime later, the man entered a shabby-looking tenement. The group still remained aloft and disillusioned, though they drew close to the building. Harry could see the man climb the stairs to the fourth floor, and step into the flat, shutting the door behind him.

“Now what?”

“We take note of the location,” said Aaron, pulling out his mobile. He groaned in frustration. Of course, none of that was working, and wouldn’t until they reconnected with the present.

“And sitting here isn’t productive,” said Mazhe.

It was then there came a loud crash from inside, followed by the nearby window exploding outward, nearly showering the group with glass.

“Shit. That... that was a Demiguise,” Aaron muttered. “Scabbard, Claymore, over.”

“Status.”

“Magical creatures set loose, midtown Manhattan, advise.”

“Do not interfere unless directly threatened.”

“Seconded,” came Brandon’s voice, “Just stay back and observe. Obscurius is a young male, about eighteen to twenty years old. Dark hair, brown eyes. Looks like he belongs to the New Salemers.”

“Roger that. We'll conduct research and make a decision on whether further action is needed.”

“All due respect sir, but an Obscurius can't ever be left to its own devices. If the unstable magic inside him lashes out...”

“We will not engage unless there is no choice in the matter, Mr. Stormcrown.”

There was then a much larger crash, and with an explosion of bricks, mortar, lath and plaster, an invisible beast hurtled out of the opening. It landed in the street with a noisy thud, and cars were suddenly being tossed aside as if they were toys.

“Yeah. Uh... that wasn't the Demiguise.”

“Had to be something pretty big,” Bryce guessed.

“Shit. Hope it's not...”

“What, Harry?”

“There's a creature... something like a rhinoceros... except it's maybe twice as big—Hagrid would know. Thing is, it's very big, and can be very dangerous.”
“Yeah, considering the fluid in the horn tends to blow up things it’s injected into,” Aaron muttered, “Phoenix lead, Claymore.”

“Go ahead, Claymore,” came Captain Rowland’s voice.

“Need some birds to my location, let’s try and figure out where these things are going.”

“Roger that, Claymore. Spark your location. Where are you in reference to the ship?”

“South,” Aaron answered.

Harry drew his wand and sent up a shower of sparks.

“We see your sparks, ETA one minute.”

It was then a small point of light formed in front of Harry. “Promagistrate. Return to Trevelyan, connection established.”

“Commander, we’ve just got a Patronus from Trevelyan,” said Aaron.

“We’re staying close to the Obscurius. Follow instructions, but keep us in the loop.”

“Roger that, sir. Be careful.”

“They should come too,” said Bryce, “I mean—aah!”

“What happened?”

“I dunno, something just... stung me, I think.”

“We gotta land anyway,” said Harry, “Someone get me something to use as a port key.”

They all landed on the roof of the building, and while Mazhe located something to use for a port key, Bryce showed Harry where he’d been bitten—on the back of the neck. Harry thought nothing of it, casting a healing charm on the bite.

---

Less than a minute later, they were in the ministry of Technomancy’s offices in Trevelyan, the port key having dropped them in the lobby. Even the Promagistrate could not port key directly into the chamber, at least, not under normal circumstances.

As they took the elevator down to the chamber, Harry found himself bombarded by another memory of taking a similar trip not more than two years prior, at the end of his unexpected journey into 73BCE. It was a fierce fight to push those memories aside, and, distracted, he failed to note the condition of one of his newest friends.

The Magnus Chamber was, for the most part, exactly as Harry remembered it in 2008, save for the various workstations and cubicles in the room. In place of the computers, were typewriters, all of them clacking away of their own volition. In other cubicles, there were stacks of paper, dicta-quills, charts, diagrams, and naturally, the room was abuzz with people. They were either guardians, dressed in the white robes with red or blue trim, or in regular street clothes. Harry knew those in street clothes were in the employ of the Arcane Sciences Department, conducting research on the Orb of Magnus.

The Orb itself, sat resplendent as always, casting its beautiful turquoise light into the room. It was as beautiful as when he’d first seen it only a few years prior in the ruins of Saarthal. He was once again
forced to shove down a memory—a memory in which Tommy nearly died.

The portal had formed off to the right of the Orb, with wisps of magical energy bridging the gap on occasion. Just like the portal that had been formed at Batiatus’ villa, this one was a deep purple shade. And, in short notice, a few people stepped out of it, among them Guardian Elaine, and healer Ferris. Healer Ferris glanced at Bryce a moment.

“Merlin’s beard...”

Only then did Harry notice the condition of his friend. “Billywig sting. Should've caught that. Apologies, there was distraction.”

Bryce only clapped Harry on the shoulder. “D-don't worry about it.”

“You'll have to go back to our suite,” Harry decided, “The Statute is already being compromised as it is... people seeing you float down the sidewalk—”

“Yeah, I get it.”

“I'll look after him. None of you have been hurt otherwise?” Ferris asked.

“No. Though I did miss our meeting yesterday.”

“Now this... uh, portal's been opened... what now?” Bryce asked.

“Now we can synch with our present,” answered Aaron, “At least how I understand it. And the mobile system should work again.”

“Then let's get back to the ship.”

They found Justin and Zoey in the suite, sitting at the table in the common room. He had his laptop computer open, and Kreacher was bringing in a plate of refreshments. Justin looked up, and immediately noticed Bryce’s condition. “What happened to him?”

“Billywig sting,” Harry muttered, while Bryce claimed a seat on one of the couches.

“I feel buzzed... y’know...”

“Yes, a side-effect,” said Ferris, “Some wizards and witches attempt to be stung over and over again by the creature, to induce the floating effect, resulting in them floating for days. If one is allergic, the effect can be permanent.”

“Yeah, uh... no thanks,”

Justin only shook his head. “Bryce isn't having the best luck when it comes to magical beasts. First the Dementor...”

Bryce groaned. “Yeah, thanks for the visual.”

“All right. So here’s the thing. The mobile system is partly restored, so our mobiles should now work.”

Bryce looked confused. “Here?”

“The portal establishes the connection back to present times,” Justin explained, “They worked
amazing during our first experiments, and that was when we were connected to 73BCE Capua.”

“Which means, for all things holy, DO NOT let go or lose your mobiles,” Harry muttered, “Rather not have a repeat performance.”

“I’ve also sent for a local transmitter—should've been one installed on the ship long ago... so if we lose the connection to our present, the mobiles should still work.”

“So question now. What are we gonna do about the Obscurius?”

“Are there records about the incident?” Zoey wondered, “Wouldn't that tell you of its fate?”

“The government's working on it I'm sure,” Aaron answered.

“Thing is, these things are time bombs,” said Harry, “And considering he’s nearly double the normal expectancy, he’s well over due. Either that, or he’s an exceptionally powerful individual.”

“So he’s suppressed his magic. What would happen if he, uh... got magical training?” Bryce asked.

“As far as I know, it’s not been done,” said Harry, “But my gut says, the parasite would probably lessen, perhaps even vanish altogether, as he’d have a proper outlet.”

“There’s also the question of whether he’d be receptive to training,” said Aaron, “The New Salemers are also Christian extremists.”

“So they’ve filled his head full of lies about magic,” Mazhe summed up.

“Very likely, yes.”

Further discussion was interrupted, as several alarms suddenly rang out.

“**Intruder, intruder. Heading for—**”

“**Explosion on the flight deck, explosion on the flight deck.**”

“**AIC negative, it’s something else—**” Whoever had been speaking (or shouting) was silenced, and the sounds of combat could be heard in the background.

“Justin, Zoey, Bryce, stay here,” Aaron decided, “Claymore with me. AIC, Claymore en route.”

“**Roger, Claymore.**”

The three of them popped away, to land at the aft end of the enormous flight deck which occupied over half the vessel’s length. They were alarmed at what they immediately saw.

An enormous pale green dome took up the middle of the room, nearly touching the walls and the ceiling. A few of the massive hatches had been damaged, one of them broken away completely. And, a large group of people stood in the middle of the dome. Harry knew right away, the dome was some sort of shield, erected to prevent interference.

“Gods... what in oblivion are they doing?!?”

“A portal. Jesus, they're creating a portal.”

“Mazhe. Staff of Magnus. Bust through the shield 'fore they succeed. It could be a summon, for all we know,” Harry ordered.
Mazhe shivered at the idea. Last thing they needed was something like Potema to be unleashed. He reached into his pouch, and produced the Staff of Magnus. He levelled it at the shimmering dome.

“Have at it, wizard!” one of the people inside the dome crowed, “We have taken steps, so your feeble attempts at breaching will only end in failure.”

Mazhe let fly, and the last thing Harry saw, was a tremendous, angry, red flash of light.

Chapter End Notes

UP NEXT: Harry and part of his circle discover exactly what OND operatives have managed to do... something that could threaten not just the stability of the Commonwealth, but something much more significant; and a small victory is had in the melee with the capture of a sought-after criminal.

CHAPTER NOTES: So, a bit of creature interaction here. Poor Bryce, not having much luck when it comes to magical creatures, eh? And yes, do expect appearances by Newt, Tina, Queenie, Jacob, and of course, Credence. Though first, poor Harry’s being forced into yet ANOTHER detour. What’s OND done now? This chapter at first was like pulling teeth. Then, a few ideas popped into my head, ideas to provide further backstory. And the upcoming chapters, while providing some more action, also provide more backstory.
A Line Threatened

Chapter Summary

SUMMARY: Harry and part of his circle discover exactly what OND operatives have managed to do... something that could threaten not just the stability of the Commonwealth, but something much more significant; and a small victory is had in the melee with the capture of a sought-after criminal.

CAUTION: Mild spoilers for History Channel’s “Vikings”, Season 2

[Bracketed blue text]: Old Norse. Apologies, but I’m not going to even ATTEMPT a translation—I mean, it’s only a few words, really. Of course, if there’s a reader out there who might offer to do so, it would be appreciated.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

21. A LINE THREATENED

January, 2008 / December, 1926 / August, 801

“You're never alone, even during what you think are your weakest moments. You have thousands of years of powerful ANCESTORS within you, the blood of the Divine Great Ones in you, supreme intellect and royalty in you. Infinite strength is always on tap for you. Know that!”

- unknown

The world slowly came back into focus, and Harry felt, more then saw something pressed into his hand.


“Thank you.” He quickly consumed the offered potion, and passed back the empty vial. “What happened?”

“C’mon! Harry, Jesus, they... they went through the portal!” Aaron exclaimed. He was visually shaking.

“CLAYMORE, GO AFTER THEM!” came Brandon’s panicked shout.

“Roger that.”

Additional members of the SOU had arrived, and needing no further urging, the group hurried through the created portal, not giving a care where it might end up. No matter, there was silent agreement that the ones responsible had to be dealt with, and quickly.
Chaos. In the twilight, they found not only a full-on battle under way between two different factions, wizards were then hurling lethal spells into their midst. A number already lay dead, with horrible injuries. Now granted, the battle appeared to involve melee weapons: swords and axes, but these… Harry and his circle knew they were inflicted by magic.

Of course, there were others laid out with nary a scratch. The tell-tale non-evidence of the killing curse.

“SCABBARD! MIRT through the portal immediately! UOF authorization yesterday!” Aaron shouted, wand already out.

“Claymore! Report!” came Brandon’s demand, “Open channel!”

“Time travel sir! They're killing people here! OND, they're—”

Mazhe dragged Aaron to the ground, as a trio of killing curses sailed overhead, to impact with the terrain a distance away, sending three different showers of dirt skyward.

Harry gestured at himself, donning his Nordic carved armour, including the helmet—something he rarely used.

“If you’ll do mine, too,” said Mazhe.

“Uh, right.”

Seconds after, Mazhe found himself also dressed in his armour, and Harry was once again reminded they needed to locate another set like his own. Unfortunately, there’d not been time to—

Now they were forced to move, as a storm of blasting curses struck the ground far too close for comfort.

“Shit... looks medieval... Scabbard, gonna need boots on the ground ASAP,” said Aaron, as he regained his feet. He flicked his wand at himself, switching to his modern black BDU.

“How many hostiles?” came the question from the ship.

“Unknown, Scabbard.”

“Shit!”

Harry sent off a pair of ice spikes at a pair of terrorists who were chasing a pair of children. And, while Mazhe provided cover, Harry beckoned for the frightened children to approach.

“It’s all right. We’ll keep you safe,” he promised.

Both of the children, however, looked very confused, and frightened. Well, no shit. They’d just seen people killed, and chased, nearly killed themselves!

“They may not understand the common language, Harry,” said Mazhe.

“Shit.”

“We’ll look after them,” said one of the SOU.
A group of marines had then stepped through the portal, and began erecting a temporary shelter over it, while another group joined up with the SOU.

“We’re engaging,” Aaron decided.

“No shit,” Harry muttered, as they set off into the village.

“Shor’s bones. We... the architecture here... it’s like...”

“Morthal,” Harry finished, “So we’re talking Scandinavian—Viking period, maybe?”

“We must locate the Jarl and his family. They’re at least a secondary, if not primary target, Harry—”

Now they were forced to duck, as a pair of men charged at them with swords. Harry, however, sent an ice-spike at the ground, and a second to impact a shield, nearly dislodging it from the man who owned it. That sent the pair fleeing in the other direction through the narrow pathway, bickering between each other. Of course, it was insufficient for the translation charm to kick in.

The group followed the pair—Norsemen, as Harry was now all but certain—as they wound their way through the number of structures, to arrive at the centre of the village. And there, they found the bulk of the fighting still under way.

It looked like the vikings had certainly dealt out some lethal blows of their own, for three wizards and one witch lay dead, with gruesome injuries. Harry had most certainly seen that sort of thing before, considering the place he’d grew up. Bandits facing off against the Stormcloaks... or Stormcloaks skirmishing with Imperial troops, tended to result in some horrifying injuries on both sides.

Harry drew a wide arc in the air with his wand. “IMMOBILUS!”

Nothing happened... well, except that the group were forced to duck a storm of blasting curses and killing curses. Several of them struck one of the buildings nearby, exploding the wall and knocking down part of the chimney. The rest of it teetered unsteadily for a moment, before collapsing in a heap.

“Nice try, wizards!” spoke a witch from the shadows, “But we have taken a few steps to ensure we won’t be disturbed on our little excursion.”

“She sounds like a child,” Mazhe remarked, as they looked for the source of the speaker.

“A fucked up child,” Harry muttered.

“Oh no.”

“What?”

Aaron pointed to the water, where the bulk of the battle had moved. Or, more like, the terrorists had chased the Norsemen to the docks, and a dead end. They had switched to fire spells, and now half the items on or around the docks were alight.

“There has to be more than thirty,” said Aaron, as they hurried to catch up. “We get there, six guys get on the fire, get it under control.”

THWACK. An arrow impaled one of the terrorists in the chest, and he collapsed in a heap. Harry thrust out a hand, dragging the downed enemy to them, where Mazhe finished him off for good; the
corpse was then flung to the side to be dealt with later.

Unfortunately, the terrorists wheeled around, and Harry’s group was once again forced to take cover, as a hail of blasting curses struck were let fly. Harry was forced to side-apparate his mate a short distance, given there was little cover.

Mazhe cupped his hands together and unleashed a pair of ice spikes. One went wide, while the other impaled one of the terrorists in the leg. He dropped like he’d been shot—well, he sort of was, now, wasn’t he?

Now, the terrorists all centred their attack on Harry’s group, more or less what they’d wanted, and giving the Norsemen trapped behind a chance to escape. Unfortunately, rather than escape, they attacked the rear of the terrorists, once again drawing attention back on them.

“Tenacious, I’ll give them that,” Aaron muttered, as he once again levelled his wand at the terrorists.

THWACK. Another throng of arrows impaled three more of the attackers, with the others going wide. Now, Harry saw where they were coming from: the roof of one of the houses. A group of Norsemen had climbed on top, using it as the high ground.

Unfortunately, the terrorists also spotted this, and Harry knew it wasn’t gonna be pretty, as a group of five terrorists banded together. He cupped his hands together, sending a powerful fireball at them, but they simply side-stepped the powerful spell, and it instead impacted with the mast of one of the ships anchored not far from the dock, setting it alight.

“Oh for FUCK’S sake!” Harry snarled, once again charging up another spell.

The terrorists meanwhile, laughed and jeered. “Nice aim, Potter!” one of them crowed, “Saves us the trouble!”

His trouble was rewarded with an ice spike to the face. He dropped like a shot, and did not get up.

“We’re deploying a second platoon of marines, ETA two minutes.”

“Roger that, Scabbard. Notify Arcane Sciences, get Guardian Octavius and make him aware,” said Aaron, “We need all the support we can get... at least forty hostiles, now down to thirty by estimate —”

BOOM. The blast literally shook the ground, and the house where the Norse archers had been firing from, erupted into a massive fireball, showering the village with burning wreckage.

“Send some of the ship’s crew along, bloody hell they just blew up one of the houses,” Harry muttered.

“Harry, look. They’ve got...” Mazhe began, but whatever he was about to point out, Harry missed it, as part of the group suddenly vanished.

“What?”

“Mobile. I’m sure of—”

They were forced to duck yet another barrage of spell fire by the smaller group of terrorists left behind.

“They have one of our mobiles?” came Justin’s concerned question.
“I’m sure of it!” Mazhe exclaimed.

“That’s how they got on the Ragnar then! That’s what all the chaos was before... well... before...”

Another explosion rang out, this time from the opposite side of the village, having the identical result. More marines were being diverted from combat, having to instead combat the number of fires that were now breaking out; the buildings were mostly made of wood.

“Alpha team on the ground,” came a new voice over the radio.

“Roger Alpha team, sparking our location, come take over. Hostiles give no quarter. Locals likely —”

Everyone was once again forced to take cover, as yet another blast of colourful magic flew overhead.

“Locals likely Vikings, Norsemen. Do not provoke and do not kill unless absolutely necessary.”

“Roger that, Claymore.”

Aaron pointed his wand skyward, sending up a bloom of red sparks. Harry and Mazhe, meanwhile, continued to provide a distraction, keeping the terrorists focused on them, perhaps giving the Norsemen a second chance at escape.

This time they took it, jumping into the water. Some disappeared under the dock, while others scrambled toward either the shore, or another ship tied up not far away. The dock was empty, save for the number of bodies. Harry could see at least twelve, maybe fifteen dead Vikings, to the six or seven dead terrorists.

Alpha team at last arrived, all of them with automatic weapons.

“Permission to engage, Lieutenant Commander.”

“Permission to engage,” answered Aaron, “Keep ‘em busy.”

“We gotta get to the Jarl’s hall... their keep, or great hall,” said Mazhe, “Likely that one.”

In the light from the number of fires burning throughout the village, they could see the various shields and decorations that adorned the large building Mazhe pointed out. They set out for it immediately, while Harry thought for a moment, remembering what he knew, based on what he’d learned in Skyrim. The Jarl was the leader of the hold, or territory, right? But—

Now, Harry knew why they were there. The piercing blue eyes from the painting back in King Alexander’s study.

“They’re here to kill Ragnar.”

“Harry...”

“I am certain! Fucking insolent morons, they have no concept of the consequences should that action succeed! I will see the one responsible crucified and soul trapped.”

“” came the caution.

“Piss off, I invoke privilege on the matter!”

They passed by a house, but hearing the sound of frightened whispering inside, Harry held up a
hand. He carefully pushed open the door, to find it near pitch black inside. Two pairs of boots were illuminated by the outside.

“[Stay away... do not... do not... kill]” came a whisper from further inside.

Harry flicked a hand at the ceiling, illuminating the dark room. It revealed that indeed, two bodies lay on the floor, one of them with an axe embedded in his chest.

“What language is that?” Mazhe asked.

“Old Norse,” came the answer, “This may not be right but try saying, ‘gara fremr ord’.”

“Meaning?”

“Make more words,” came Justin’s answer. “You need the translation charm to work yesterday.”

“No shit.” Harry sucked in a breath. Last thing they needed was to make the person in hiding panic further. “G-gara... fremr... ord.”

 “[Make...]” There was hesitation. “[Why? Make words] for what reason?”

“Yes! Apologies. Your language is new to me,” said Harry. “We mean you no harm.”

There came a clatter of items from a shadowy part of the room, and a man crawled out of the hiding place he’d fashioned. He had dark hair which fell to his shoulders, and a short beard. He was dressed in similar clothing to the others the group had already seen.

“What... what are you?”

“A mage, gifted with magic, friend,” answered Harry, temporarily removing his helmet, “We need your help. Where is the Jarl? He is in terrible danger.”

“Ragnar? He...”

“I knew it,” Harry muttered, “Scabbard, you get this?”

“Roger that. We’ll send through an additional SOU team, ETA five minutes.”

“Gladius, where are you?” came Brandon’s question.

“I’ll spark location,” said Aaron. He stepped back outside.

Harry, meanwhile, could see the young Norseman was still weary, perhaps still a little frightened of the group who now stood in the small house.

“We promise you, we mean no harm. I’m Harry. Harry Stormcrown. This is my bonded, Mazhe, and the man just outside the door is Aaron. We are protectors of the crown and his blood line, which includes Jarl Ragnar.”

“Blood line? The... men who came... they came to kill Ragnar with magic?”

“It is so.”

Now, the young man relaxed a little.

“Young friend, we have told you our names, but you have yet to tell us yours.”
“Forgive me. It is Athelstan.”

“Well met,” said Mazhe, offering his forearm. Athelstan gripped it, squeezed, and let go, only for Harry to do the same.

“We again offer apologies for this terrible invasion. There will be many questions asked when this concludes,” said Harry.

It was then that both Aaron and Brandon stepped into the house.

“Yeah, we really have to get moving. They’ve set fire to a quarter of the village, the ship’s sending as many people to help as can be spared—we’ve still got damage from our not so-gentle landing.”

“Athelstan... where was Ragnar when... when this began?” Harry questioned.

“Still in the Earl’s hall, sir,” Athelstan answered.

“Er... there’s no need to call any of us ‘sir’. Now let us go and see an end to this.”

“Where’s Walker?” Mazhe asked.

“Back in the suite with Justin, Bryce, and Zoey. This ain’t a safe place for any of them,” said Brandon.

“We’re working logistics,” came Justin’s voice, “We’re funnelling info to DOI, see if we can’t get more SOU to the scene. Guys. Secure the Jarl and his children... they’ll likely go after the children too. Everyone on the channel, listen very carefully.”

At that, Aaron pressed a button on his hip, causing the conversation to be put on a small speaker clipped to his vest.

“Their target is Ragnar Lothbrok and his children. They intend to end his bloodline and deprive us of our Queen, as well as that of Alexander, and four generations previous to him. If they do this...”

“The results would be catastrophic,” Harry finished, “I’ve already received my fair share of warnings about meddling with time. These loathsome cockroaches have no clue what kind of chaos that would ensue, should their operation here be successful.

“I reiterate words spoken earlier: should I catch up with the individual or individuals responsible for this operation, they will be introduced to a very unpleasant afterlife.”

“We got them for high treason, Harry.”

“I would see them dealt with sooner. Now let us attend the Earl’s hall. Athelstan, if you could show us where that might be.”

Athelstan reached down and pulled the axe out of the dead man’s chest, and re-secured it to a metal loop on his belt.

“Th...this way.”

They fell behind the young Norseman, as he led them toward the larger building not far from the house they’d found him in. Harry, meanwhile, took the time to have a look at the young man’s memories... and initially regretted it. Perhaps now a Norseman, but at one point no better than a slave! How... why...
More memories came forward, and Harry relented mentally, seeing a very different present set of circumstances. The young man was fiercely loyal, a dear friend, and nothing less. No, an intervention was most definitely not required.

He snorted in his head as he withdrew. Rescued, more like it. From monk to pirate, or something like that. Well, maybe not pirate, but... the Norsemen were not known for compassion, at least toward those not of their own kind. So Athelstan was perhaps a glitch in the norm, maybe?

They arrived at the Earl’s hall, and had to step over a clump of bodies, all in leather armour. Harry couldn’t help but notice the vicious smirk which crossed Athelstan’s lips.

“Ragnar will be pleased. If one thing has come from this... invasion of wizards... the ambush has ended before it could properly begin.”

“Scabbard, you get that?”

“We need translation.”

“An apparent ambush was set to take place here. OND may have interrupted it.”

Aaron flicked his wand at nothing in particular. ‘August 18, 801CE’ wafted from the tip. “Date in question, August 18, 801CE.”

“We have no firm records from that time period.”

“Shit. All right—”

“EVERYONE DOWN!” Brandon exploded, and Athelstan found himself dragged to the ground as a dozen green bolts of magic flew overhead.

“Bloody hell, they don’t give up,” Harry muttered, as gunfire suddenly erupted from the opposite side of the... street, if Harry had to guess. It was somewhat of a crossroad. That sent the enemy fleeing, some of them Disapparating.

“They just... they just...”

“It’s normal,” Harry reassured the young man, “What they’re doing here meanwhile, is most certainly not.”

He cupped his hands together, and let fly a pair of ice spikes at an attacker trying to circle around, a shield held in place. The projectiles impacted with the shield with the crash of glass, causing the wizard to stagger.

“All you got, Potter?”

“YOL!” Mazhe shouted, causing the attacker to pop away.

“I don’t appreciate you roasting my minions, Potter,” came the voice they’d heard much earlier. A cloak suddenly materialized as it was removed, revealing the speaker.

At first, Harry thought she was a vampire, the pale skin illuminated by the number of fires still blazing in the village. But no. The eyes were normal. Probably the only thing normal about the witch who stood in their midst.

“Jezebel,” Brandon hissed.
Now, over a dozen wands, and double that number of firearms were trained on the woman.

“Ah, the loathsome witch responsible for the destruction of Dubai, and the subsequent evacuation of Delir. I have someone back on the ship who would love to have a few minutes alone with you. You know, to reward you in kind and all that,” said Harry, a vicious grin on his face.

“Of course, a better course of action would be to turn you over to Gringotts; word is the head price has risen to ten thousand galleons—a thousand more should you be turned in alive.

“Lucky—or unlucky for you... I have no need of that amount of coin.”

“You seem to be working on the delusion that you’ve won, that you have me in custody. My dear boy, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but, you are sadly mistaking,” said Jezebel, dreamily.

“Escape from this? Not a chance,” said Brandon, “You’ve fucked with us one too many times.”

Jezebel cackled. “And we are far from through with it! Oh, the amusement in seeing your world tearing itself to pieces! Filthy no-Maj blood, filthy Mudbloods, squibs, the Commonwealth is the most disgusting piece of filth to ever form in our age! My mistress and I will take great pleasure in watching it burn!”

“It’s you who will burn, Jezebel,” Aaron hissed right back, “Or should I say, Catherine Greer. Yes, our Department of Information has been rather thorough on your background.”

If the witch was surprised or startled by Aaron’s revelation, she kept it to herself. Harry’s attempts to get into her mind were all blocked; she was more than adept at Occlumency, so that avenue was out of the question—no surprise, really. Word was, Jezebel was one of OND’s top operatives.

As this was going on, another group remained behind cover, at the side of the Earl’s hall. Ragnar had already expected trouble on that night, just not from the source which had presented itself. Magic users were rare, but not unheard of, so really, he wasn’t surprised by it.

The attack—and the ferocity of it, meanwhile... his closest friends and advisers had all but restrained him from joining the fight, instead remaining out of sight. King Horik and his men might still possibly be about, and given the new, second attack... the two could be connected. So, Ragnar and his companions remained close.

Then, he could hear discussion just outside. Many of the words being spoken were foreign—a very different form of English, if his ears were hearing right. But at least a few of them were speaking in his own language. It was then time to find out what was going on.

So, they gathered outside at the corner of the hall, with a pair of men as lookouts at their back, while they listened to the peculiar conversation. In the dim light, they could see the group had surrounded a single woman, aiming strange weapons and sticks of wood at them. Wait a moment... Athelstan was among them!

But of course he was. And probably able to understand their words, too!

“What has you grinning at a situation such as this?” his wife questioned, giving him a swat.

“Athelstan is among them.”

“Shhh. There,” said Bjorn, the oldest of Ragnar’s sons. He pointed to movement a short ways down the narrow road.
“Take him. Quietly,” said Ragnar.

Bjorn crept silently out of cover, axe at the ready. Being sure of his aim, he let fly. The axe sailed through the air, flipping end over end several times, before lodging itself in the target’s chest. The man dropped with barely a gasp, the weapon having smashed through the rib cage and puncturing the Aorta.

Bjorn swiftly and quietly returned to cover, making a mental note to recover his axe once things had settled down.

While the standoff continued, both Aaron and Brandon had seen the young Norseman sneak out of cover, and commit his covert assassination. The target never saw it coming, and now lay dead in the road, the weapon still lodged in his chest.

Of course, it had been rather risky, stepping out of cover. Luckily for now, it seemed OND were all distracted in some way. From the sound around them, things were quickly drawing to a close—

A small explosion had everyone flinch, and some fled for cover. Harry, meanwhile, unleashed the strongest shock spell he could muster at the place where Jezebel had been a split-second ago. He was rewarded with the sound of crashing glass, as it impacted with an erected ward, and brought it down.

Now he was forced to duck a retaliatory spell, a purple shade, which impacted a nearby building and left a nasty scorch mark. The explosion and small dust cloud had sent some of the soldiers scattering.

*Pop, pop, pop.* Three wizards appeared in their midst, and the group was once again forced on the defensive, as the air lit up with green bolts of magic. All but one got clear. Athelstan was startled, as the man directly beside him simply collapsed to the ground as though he’d been shut off.

“Is he—”

“He’s dead, yes,” said Mazhe, as they regained their feet.

“Mazhe. Staff of Magnus,” Aaron whispered.

Mazhe reached into his pouch, and produced the fabled staff, with it almost instantly lighting up with a powerful turquoise glow, identical to the Orb back in Trevelyan.

“Careful with that,” Aaron warned, “Collateral damage...”

“As I’m aware.”


Now, Mazhe and Harry both knew what Aaron was setting up, as the marines holding the circle shuffled out of the way, leaving the Earl’s hall side exposed. A little risk, maybe, but...

Jezebel, meanwhile, looked confused. And what in the world was that filthy mage holding? Sweet Morgana, whatever it was—he was levelling it at her.

“**AVADA KEDAVRA!**” she shrieked, as Mazhe let fly.

The two blasts of magic met, turquoise blue and killing-curse green, and everyone instinctively covered their eyes from the impending flash. And flash, it did! It may as well have been a small small sun berthed in Kattegat. The two conflicting, powerful blasts of magic warred with each other, sending showers of sparks in all directions, sometimes appearing akin to molten metal, dripping to
the ground, sparking all the way. The staff itself appeared to be heating up... "BOOOOM. The second flash sent everyone to the ground—including those hidden by the side of the Earl’s hall. Ragnar swore his ears were still ringing from the blast, and he still saw two bright spots in front of his eyes from the flash.

“Claymore, status!”

“Claymore?!”

“Copy, copy. Gods...” Aaron finally answered. His ears were ringing too.

“What happened?” came Justin’s concerned question.

“Staff of Magnus versus the killing curse. The staff won,” said Harry, smirking.

Jezebel had collapsed to her hands and knees, somewhat staggered by the powerful blast in such close proximity. She struggled to regain her feet...

“Stay down or be put down,” Harry warned.

She still tried—

“Fus... RO!”

Jezebel’s world went dark, the shout sending her into the bliss of unconsciousness.

“Teams, report!” Brandon called out.

“Alpha, we’re code four. Apprehended eight hostiles.”

“Beta, we’re code four. Hostiles down, still counting.”

“Charlie, we’re code four. Apprehended six hostiles, two more punched out before we could complete inventory. We count thirteen dead.”

“Claymore. Four in custody, including one Catherine Greer, AKA Jezebel,” said Aaron.

“Scabbard, Claymore. Reporting all clear. Requesting MIRT ASAP.”

“Roger that, Claymore.”

Harry, meanwhile, thrust a hand at Jezebel, stripping her of her clothes. A second thrust of the hand cast a strong summoning charm. A second hidden wand zipped into his hand, and he sidestepped a pair of small objects—port keys, likely. More gruesome, a pair of small pill-like objects burst through the woman’s cheek. He let those drop on the ground along with the suspected port keys, before casting a strong vanishing charm.

“Good thinking,” said Brandon, as Harry cast a healing charm on the woman’s damaged cheek. “We don’t want this one getting away.”

“High treason. We’ve got her on that alone,” said Aaron, “Though the other charges will damn her too.”

“Uh... Mazhe. The staff...”
Only now did everyone notice, the Staff of Magnus seemed to be pulsing a brilliant green colour, matching the killing curse. Worse still, several threads of energy snaked their way to the south, most of them toward the temporary structure, while the last snaked off further west.

“Shor’s bones... what have we done? P-put it away.”

Mazhe quickly stowed the still-warm staff back in his pouch, and the threads seemed to dissipate.

“Claymore!” came the alarmed shout.

“Claymore here, what’s going on?” Aaron questioned.

“We... we’re shutting the portal. Some wierd shit’s goin’ on with the Orb of Magnus... Aaron, check your mobile,” came Justin’s answer.

Only a second later, Aaron’s mobile buzzed, indicating a message. He switched it to tablet form so everyone could get a look.

“What... what is that?” Athelstan questioned.

“The heart of our country,” answered Brandon, “And it’s not supposed to be that colour.”

“The killing curse... must’ve created feedback,” Harry guessed, “I mean, it’s strongly attuned to the Orb, right? So any ‘feedback’ likely gets channelled back to it.”

“The implications are alarming,” said Justin.

“No shit. Tainted is what we’ve done... or what she’s done. Loathsome witch,” Harry muttered.

“Scabbard, is Trevelyan in danger?”

“Negative, Claymore.”

It was then Harry felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned, to find the man from the portrait now standing behind him. He was easily as tall as Mazhe, and equally well-built.

“Jarl Ragnar,” he greeted, simply, as he pulled off his helmet.

“Earl,” Ragnar corrected him. If he were startled by the unexpected familiarity, he didn’t show it.

Athelstan, meanwhile, shuffled over so the pair of them stood together.

“Apologies. My mate knows more of custom than I. On behalf of my Queen and the Commonwealth of Valicadia, I offer deepest apologies for this intrusion on your home and your people.”

Aaron made to object, but realized that Harry was absolutely right. As the Promagistrate, he could quite legally represent the Queen and the country. And what he’d just said, it was bang on, a perfect statement. There would be no objections from protocol.

Ragnar, meanwhile, weighed the young mage’s words, although his eyes were still fixed on the device in Aaron’s hands. “Your Queen?” he questioned.

“Your descendant. We number over a hundred million, with a nation which spans the globe.”

“My descendant?”

“Yes. A portrait of you hangs in... her... great hall,” said Harry, being careful to use ‘she’ rather than
he’, and further confuse the famous Viking King.

“Ragnar, there are more pressing matters,” spoke one of his guards.

Harry scowled. “Yes, there are. Namely, the matter of this loathsome witch in our midst.”

“Sir, as much as you would want to dispense justice, the law does not permit it,” said Aaron.

“Trust us,” said Harry, “She will suffer a very unpleasant afterlife when we are finished. Her death will only be the beginning.”

Mazhe gave a sinister grin. “This woman has committed a number of atrocities against the people of Valicadia, if not our world as a whole. So, count on her being given exactly what she deserves.”

“Crucified,” said Harry, “Her soul shall be condemned to the Soul Cairn, a place of eternal misery.”

“Hel,” said another guard.

“It could be considered that, except that it is a very real thing,” said Mazhe. “And this vile waste of a human being, shall be sent there. A cursed afterlife.”

“Now here, a pair of men after my own heart,” said another of Ragnar’s men. Even in the dimming light as the fires were being contained, Harry could see the dark paint on his face. His hair and beard were just as wild.

“Floki...”

“What?”

Harry only grinned. “You must be the crazy one.”

“At your service, mage,” Floki grinned right back.

“All right. So this is the thing,” said Aaron. “MIRT’s not comin’ until we get the portal reopened. And Obliviating the entire village... not happening without substantial manpower.”

“Obliviate?” Athelstan questioned.

“Nothing you guys need to worry about,” said Harry. “One of a series of... operations we’ll do to... well... put most things back as they were.”

“With the exception of the dead,” Brandon picked up, “It is not possible to bring back the dead, even with magic.”

Harry sucked in a breath, then blew it out. “So much rubbish. One calamity is enough already. I mean, we're still dealing with the ra... the ship back in... well, you know... and there's still the Obscurius—Brandon, what was happening when we were pulled away?”

“He was helping serve the meal. And Harry, we have to talk about them. What I have learned... it's... disturbing.”

“Our priority is our new friends here,” said Mazhe, “Wizards have meddled in the affairs of non-magicals, ancestry and bloodline be damned. This is our mess, and therefore our responsibility to make it right.”

Aaron finally grew annoyed with Ragnar trying to look at the mobile, and simply passed it over.
After all, it wouldn’t matter what he saw; he would have his memories modified in the end, and really, the device was well-protected against being dropped, among other things.

Of course, Ragnar couldn’t read a word of what was on the screen.

“Uh... with permission, sir. We can fix it so you can understand what's printed.”

Ragnar gave a nod, and Aaron produced his wand, and made a simple gesture at the Earl. “It takes a minute or so for it to take hold. Our language will seem a bit... complicated.”

“This is... magic, then.”

A blond-haired man had moved to stand beside Ragnar. He was slightly taller, and by the facial features, Harry figured he was either a son, or brother.

“My son, Bjorn,” Ragnar introduced him.

“I am Harry Stormcrown. My bonded mate, Mazhe. A dear friend, Brandon, and an equally close friend, Aaron. Brandon and Aaron serve as Crown protection detail.”

“Then why are you here?” asked Floki.

“Performing our duties. This... woman... violated natural laws, forcing her way here... to murder the Earl and his family,” said Brandon, scowling. “Her secondary objectives likely would entail destroying everything and everyone here, leaving nothing but ashes. We take unnatural magical threats to the Crown and its bloodline VERY seriously, friend.”

“And if we are to be taken by the Saxons?” questioned Bjorn.

“That is not our place. To interfere with the natural fates...”

“Would be unnatural in themselves,” Ragnar finished, though his eyes were still fixed on the enlarged mobile in his hands.

“Scabbard, status,” said Aaron.

“Portal remains closed, we're out of contact with our present, no time line for reconnect,” came the answer.

“Then we must get advice from... elsewhere. This woman cannot remain in our custody long. Given the nature of luck concerning our Promagistrate...”

“Hey!” Harry protested.

“Come on, Harry. You know how it is,” Mazhe teased, “How do you phrase it... oh yes... 'the gods once again part cheeks and ram cock in ass.'”

Ragnar nearly dropped the mobile, and burst out laughing. His son, Floki, and the others also laughed. Sure, they’d heard plenty of vulgarities, but gods, the way the young mage had just phrased it. It summed up common misery and misfortune perfectly.

Harry could hear people laughing through the speaker, too, and had to close his eyes, as he was slammed with a storm of memories from his incursion into 73BCE Capua.

Mazhe touched Harry on the shoulder. “Harry?”
Harry ducked his head and wiped his eyes.

“All right. I’m returning to the ship. We’ll take Jezebel here to lockup, and we’ll interrogate her with truth serum in a few hours.”

“A potion compelling one to speak only the truth? Useful,” said Ragnar.

“Very. And trust us, this witch will be interrogated with it at length,” said Brandon, viciously, “Detail. Begin survey of the scene. Determine if cause of death was by magic.”

“We won’t be able to question her about OND matters,” Harry remembered, “They lock away their memories with the Fidelius Charm.”

“We can still question the woman about the events here. The can’t hide all of her mind.”

“I will be present during this... interrogation,” Ragnar decided.

Brandon and Aaron both were about to object, but Harry gave a nod. “It is his people who have suffered, some died, by the hand of this abomination. He may bring one, perhaps two others.”

“I’ll make sure O’Toole is aware. It likely won’t be until morning as it is. I’m off, but count on others joining shortly.”

With that, Brandon reached down, grabbed the bound woman by the foot, and the pair vanished with a barely audible pop.

“Ragnar! You must see this!” came a shout from behind.

That had wands and firearms at the ready once again, but it was unnecessary. One of Ragnar’s guards had discovered the bodies Athelstan had pointed out to Harry and his group earlier.

“Horik is among those killed earlier,” said Athelstan, “We came upon their remains before encountering...”

“Jezebel,” Harry finished.

“We expected his ambush,” said Ragnar, “Bjorn, search his quarters; you know what to look for.”

Bjorn hurried off, entering the Earl’s hall, while marines began to fan out, spawning a number of lights to properly illuminate the narrow pathways.

“We’ve counted five marines and one SOU KIA so far,” a marine reported.

“Lucky,” Aaron muttered, “These monsters cause nothing but misery and chaos.”

“They have attacked you before?” questions another viking guard.

“We won’t get into detail, but yes,” Aaron answered, “This here... perhaps one of the scariest events for us. Meddling with... the normal order of things... they came to kill all of you... to hurt all of us.”

“How many years?” Ragnar questioned.

“How...” Harry groaned.

Of course he’d pick up on it. These people were by no means stupid. Their culture, their way of life was... different. But by no means were they stupid.

“We still have no answer as to how they managed to do it,” said Aaron, “The government’s investigating, so count on plenty of people in and about over the next while.”

“And count on us restoring any damage that was done... and you have my personal apology for the destruction of one of your ships. It will be restored to original condition,” Harry promised.

It was then Bjorn reappeared from the hall, bringing with him something wrapped in a dark cloth.

“Father! I have found it!”

Ragnar accepted the item, and tugged the cloth off of it, revealing a longsword which gleamed in the firelight. Harry guessed it was made of silver, with a number of precious stones inlaid within the handle. He could barely make out something inscribed on the blade itself.

Mazhe immediately understood the significance. He bowed his head, speaking, “Your majesty.”

Aaron, meanwhile, felt his credentials in his vest pocket get warm a moment—even separated by over twelve-hundred years, the great wards of the Commonwealth had recognized what Mazhe had just said.

A marine nearby snapped to attention, calling out, “Ten-hut!”

Ragnar and his companions were all more than confused, as well over a dozen men and women snapped to attention, as had Aaron. Both Mazhe and Harry had also stood rigid, heads bowed. This... this was confusing.

“Say, ‘stand down’, or ‘at ease’,” Harry whispered.

“S-stand down.”

The soldiers all relaxed, as did Harry and Mazhe.

“The... behaviour is... foreign,” Ragnar confessed.

“It’s respect given, sir,” said Aaron, “Your bloodline fathers... one, two, three, four... yeah, five generations of Kings and Queens for our Commonwealth. Your blood is revered.”

Chapter End Notes

AUTHOR NOTES: So why are we here? I needed to kill some time with regard to the NY incident. Of course, this little idea came about. Now of course it’s ludicrous: the universe just wouldn’t allow OND to kill Ragnar and his family. We’ve visited this sort of scenario before, right? Thing is, it shows just how crazy they are, to even attempt it. At the same time, they have drawn Harry and his circle into the mess, and cause the Commonwealth to use up even more resources, dealing with yet another mess. And the scary question is: how did OND manage to gain access to the ship, and create a portal 1,200 years into the past, with very little time to prepare for it?

It’s a shame I can’t let Ragnar mete out justice to dear ol’ Jezebel, eh? Yeah, sorry. He’ll have to get in line; the Commonwealth gets first bite at the apple. And the question is, will the Commonwealth be able to hold her? This little worm has more than one trick
still up her sleeve.
We’ll be returning to NY shortly. Say, what happens when a viking, a monk, and a wizard walk into a 1926 speakeasy?
Chapter Summary

SUMMARY: Ragnar and Athelstan end up going along for the ride, as Jezebel’s interrogation is interrupted, forcing the group to flee the ship, and end up in a wizarding speakeasy; and Athelstan’s not having a great experience with wizarding things... oh dear.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

22. ALONG FOR THE RIDE

January, 2008 / December, 1926 / August, 801

“I can drive. Let's just say you don't want to be in the passenger seat.”

- Nicolas Berggruen

With SOU and marines continuing to do clean up, Harry and his circle were invited into the Earl’s hall for food and drink. Harry thought doing such a thing was in bad taste, considering the number of people who’d just been killed in the battle… but no. That was their culture. To meet a glorious end battle and take their place in Sovn—no, Valhalla. He was finding great difficulty in separating the culture he was seeing here in 801CE from Nord culture in Skyrim. So many parallels. Almost as if… considering the Orb of Magnus originated in Skyrim…

Thank the gods for Mazhe being at his side; so many things were triggering memories from Capua. The presence of his dear friends mitigated some of the impact, but definitely not all. Just so much similarity playing out.

It was sometime later that Harry heard Aaron almost howling with laughter.

“What’s going on?” Mazhe questioned.

Aaron simply enlarged his mobile, and played back the video clip he’d just received. It featured a wizard attempting to corral an enormous magical creature of some kind by doing a… some sort of weird dance... looked completely ridiculous... only for another individual to cause distraction and subsequently be chased by the giant beast.(1)

Now, Harry too collapsed in gales of laughter.

“Shor's balls,” he wheezed, “That counts as the most ridiculous thing I've ever seen!”

Mazhe had seen it too, and also found it incredibly funny. “Foolish, but you must admit, it was... thinking outside the box, no? The wizard does also appear to know his way around magical animals.”
“Newt Scamander,” said Aaron, “You must have read his books, considering the pair of you virtually grew up together.”

Harry gave a nod. ‘Considering ‘Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them’ is a required text book at school, yeah.”

Bjorn glanced up from the video. “You attend a magic school.”

“Yes. From age eleven until we come of age,” Aaron explained. “We won't get into detail, but a witch or wizard must learn to control their magic, to properly wield it. Without such training, they can become a danger.”

Only when it became very late did Harry, Mazhe, and Aaron call it a night. They travelled back through the portal, promising to return after getting some rest and looking after a few matters back on the ship.

August 18, 801CE / December 7, 1926

It was late morning before they returned to Kattegat, given the morning routine, as well as meetings with healer Ferris—she’d been on board the ship when the portal back to 2008 was severed. This time, both Bryce and Walker joined the group, though Justin once again remained behind on the ship with Zoey. There was no way in hell she would be permitted through the portal, and equally, there was no way Justin was just going to leave her on her own. Of course, he did enjoy the idea of spending more time with his girlfriend—who wouldn’t?

They found most of the damage done to the village had been repaired, including all of the damage done to the dock area. The long ship set alight and sunk had also been put back to rights; Harry was mortified the previous evening when his errant spell had destroyed someone’s prized possession.

All of the fallen SOU and marines had been moved back to the ship much earlier, and Harry once again mentally groaned in frustration: yet another funeral, this time for Commonwealth soldiers slain over a thousand years into the past.

The weather seemed to agree with the sentiment, as it had poured buckets for most of the day, soaking everyone to the bone. The pathways winding through the village had been rendered little-better than muddy tracks, or in some cases, small rivers.

They found Ragnar near the Earl’s hall, speaking to someone with dark hair.

“My brother Rollo,” he introduced, “He was helped by one of your... healers.”

“Of course. Well met,” said Harry, “I again offer apologies for the terrible disruption caused by the monsters from our world. Most things should be put back in their place in the next few hours.”

“It was fascinating, watching them put the ship back together,” Athelstan remarked, “It was as if... it were being... un-destroyed.”

“As remarkable as it is, it should not have been required,” Mazhe muttered, “Your homes, lives, all interrupted by chaos.”

“Our lives are chaos as it is, mage,” said Rollo, “Ragnar has told me of events last evening. If anything, the interruption ultimately fell in our favour.”

“No matter, we still see this event as being unforgivable. It should never have happened,” said Harry,
sadly, “Magical terrorists attacked your homes and your kin with impunity.”

“The government’s still investigating how they managed to pull it off—they would’ve had a few hours at most from the time the portal to our present was opened,” said Brandon.

“We got an estimate on how soon they’ll reopen the portal?” Harry asked.

“No. The Orb of Magnus is still green, the Order’s considering doing a bleed off in the hopes of getting it to calm down. And my gut says the orb in our present’s likely doing the same thing.”

Brandon pulled out a vial. “Arcane Sciences wants a pensieve memory from your perspective.”

“Oh. Uh, of course.”

Harry placed an index finger to his temple, and began to draw out the required memory. Longer and longer the gassy-looking string looked, until he gave it a sharp tug, leaving it to dangle at the end of his finger. He then carefully dropped it into the vial, and capped it, passing it back to Brandon.

“You have ways of seeing another’s memories?” questioned Athelstan.

“Yes. it’s a device called a pensieve,” Aaron answered, “Very useful in looking at a memory from a different perspective—even one’s own. You can see the entire scene, not just from your own eyes.”

The three Vikings all nodded along. Very useful indeed!

Mazhe, meanwhile scowled. “I grow tired of being a drowned rat.”

“Oh, cover your ears,” Harry warned, already knowing what his mate was about to do.

Brandon also knew what he was about to do. “Mazhe—”

“Lok... VAH KOOOR!!”

The shout once again rolled up into the heavens, a clap of thunder echoing across the land.

Ragnar had of course heard the young mage ‘shout’ the previous evening, but this...

“The voice of Thor himself!” he exclaimed.

“Hi los dovahkiin—he is Dragonborn,” said Harry.

“A man with the blood of a dragon... at least according to the... uh... order of mages I have spoken to about it,” Mazhe explained, “Only a few of us exist, and to many, my powers appear godly.”

Rollo raised his eyebrows. “A dragon? You are part dragon?”

Mazhe only laughed. “Well... no. Just a rather unique trait. The gods in my world required a champion to prevent the end times.”

“Mazhe...”

“I speak too much about our world. But put simply, I was given special tools—”

“And saved your world,” Ragnar finished.

Both Mazhe and Harry gave a nod, while Mazhe continued, “We have both faced terrifying destinies, both escaping with our lives, and plenty of scars, both physical and mental. I read a quote
Once. Probably getting it wrong here, but... ‘If you battle monsters, you don’t always become a monster. But you aren’t entirely human anymore, either.’ (2)

“Whoever said such words was wise,” said Athelstan.

“Both of us left pieces of ourselves behind in those events,” said Harry.

The rain had stopped completely, with the clouds already starting to dissipate, with the late afternoon sun’s rays making themselves felt. Now, the three Vikings in their midst understood exactly what the young mage had done with his voice.

“You command the weather with your shout, then?” Rollo questioned.

“In only one way,” Mazhe answered, “The shout cleared the unpleasant weather conditions. I do know of another which can induce it, but doing so would not be unwise... the thunderstorm it would invoke... does not differentiate between friend or foe.”

“To call on Thor’s power in such a manner...”

“Unsure whether to be astounded, or frightened by such a possibility, mage,” said Ragnar.

“As I just said... not something to be done with friends around. Very useful in a place where I am alone and outnumbered. With good fortune, I have not needed to call on it.”

“The shout you used last night...” Athelstan remembered.

“Unrelenting force. You only saw part of its strength. I wished only to incapacitate the target, rather than send her to the afterlife.”

“For what reason did you keep her alive?” Rollo questioned.

“She has committed atrocities which have killed millions of people. One attack alone destroyed a city of over two million people. Most of its inhabitants were killed.”

“Gods... such destruction...” All three men looked unsettled at the idea.

“Never mind what happened after,” said Aaron, scowling, “The ground is forever poisoned against magic itself, the very energy that brings life to the soil. Nothing will grow there again.”

“A crime against nature. The gods would weep at such a thing.”

“And now you understand why we wanted her alive,” said Harry, nastily, “We're going to grant her a most unpleasant afterlife.”

Athelstan looked sick. “You have ways of cursing someone in the afterlife?”

“Tell me, can you not name someone who would deserve such treatment? Someone whose crimes are so great, no punishment in this life could ever balance the scale? All of us, deep in our hearts, have such desire, know at least one person in our lives. That death, is sometimes too easy.”

Ragnar took in the brief conversation, and made a quiet promise to himself not to purposely anger these people. They could very easily curse his existence, his afterlife, and likely that of his loved ones and friends. Yeah, best not tempt fate in any way, shape, or form.

A few more hours passed, with Ragnar showing the visitors around. Rollo and Athelstan didn’t venture far, and at times, others also joined for the tour. Mazhe was most curious of the ships, and
Floki was more than happy to show him one of the vessels moored to the repaired dock. They carried similarities with the Nord ships in Windhelm, but... something more elegant about them.

As they continued on, Harry said, “I knew people very much like you. They were famous in their own right. A pair of them, I loved as brothers. I should be attending their funerals today or tomorrow. Instead, I once again find myself the victim of circumstance.”

He ducked his head a moment to wipe his eyes, sucked in a breath, and blew it out.

“The past four months have been nothing but chaos; I shudder at what lies ahead.”

It was then Brandon received a message on his mobile.

“It’s time. Aurors from Trevelyan are waiting back at the ship.” He gestured to Ragnar. “Sir, have you chosen your companions?”

“Athelstan shall join me. I leave my brother and my son to act in my stead.”

“Very well.”

“No matter what may happen, remain close to us,” said Aaron, “A number of protocols are being... bent... so you may—”

Walker let out a snort. “Yeah, call it what it is, we’re breakin’ the rules.”

“Yeah, fine. So it underscores the importance that the pair of you remain close. The interrogation will likely take a few hours, at which time we will be returning here.”

“The sentence should be carried out here,” said Rollo, “We were the victims of her last crimes.”

Harry and Mazhe both gave a nod of agreement.

“I can’t promise that,” said Brandon, “But we’ll do our best to make it happen.”

They arrived back at the portal, still covered by a temporary shelter. A number of soldiers were present, and as they approached, they all snapped to attention.

“I could get used to that,” said Ragnar.

Harry rolled his eyes, while Mazhe only smirked.

It was then two people stepped through the portal. Both wore dark hooded robes, the hoods obscuring their faces: unspeakables. No surprise the most secretive branch of the Arcane Sciences division would be called in. Harry had strong doubts they would get any sort of explanation from Jezebel, on exactly how they’d managed to force a portal here in the first place. Yeah, it was unlikely they were going to get much out of her at all... but who only knew? They had to start somewhere, and having a top OND operative in custody had to bear some fruit? Right?

“We just step through? It won’t hurt?” Athelstan questioned.

“Just like stepping through a doorway,” said Aaron. He stepped into the glowing sphere, and vanished.

Athelstan still looked hesitant, but Ragnar confidently stepped forward, feeling certain the ‘portal’ or whatever it was wouldn’t hurt him. More so, he had full confidence that should something happen to him, his death would be avenged in short order.
Gone was the village, and in its place was an enormous space that seemed to stretch out of sight. Well, maybe not, but it seemed that way. Like the other end, the space seemed to be crawling with soldiers, while a group of people seemed occupied with... gods, was that a door of some sort? It was being magically hoisted up in the air by a team of wizards.

“Ragnar?” Athelstan had followed close behind.

“I am well. We must trust them.”

Moments after, Harry and Mazhe stepped through, with the rest only moments after that.

“Where are we?” Athelstan questioned.

“One of our battleships,” Brandon answered, “Now follow me. We’re going to the brig—the ship’s jail. We have an interrogation room.”

“We have to tell him,” said Aaron, as they got moving.

Brandon shook his head. “No.”

“It’s official record, sir.”

“We could apply a muffling charm when necessary.”

Now, Ragnar grew suspicious. “There are secrets being kept from me.”

“A number of them, yes. It’s information you should not know, sir,” said Brandon. “Though this one may stroke your ego.”

Athelstan lets out a snort. “I have doubts anything can further stroke his ‘ego’, as you say.”

Harry smirked. “Like, let’s say, a giant naval vessel bearing his name?”

Aaron rolled his eyes, while Brandon groaned.

Ragnar, meanwhile, looked surprised. “This vessel is named after me?”

“Ragnar, Lotharius, Arminius, and Gideon. All fighting names, chosen by a former king when they were conceived,” Brandon explained, “Ragnar was first, taking nearly ten years to build. They’re all visually identical, but each has had modifications based on the previous design.”

Harry grinned. “Never in a million years did I ever imagine speaking to the man behind the name. Yet, I also never envisioned meeting Spartacus, a legendary Roman slave-turned-warrior nearly a thousand years prior to your... world... lifespan... age...”

He shrugged. “Instant chaos. Just add Harry.”

“Or perhaps, Loki has taken an interest in you,” Ragnar suggested.

Harry sighed. “Perhaps.”

It took a bit of time, but they finally arrived at the ship’s brig, temporary holding cells for those caught causing mischief on board. Under normal circumstances, they would be quickly transported to the Auror offices in the closest city, but this was by no means an ordinary circumstance.

“So let me get this straight,” said Walker, “This woman’s not getting a trial?”
“This will be the closest she’ll get to it. Being caught red-handed, and with our ability to determine guilt or innocence... our justice system is rather swift. There will be someone present who will act in the interest of the accused, but they don’t ask questions or interfere normally,” said Aaron. “If you’re worried about things being fair... it is. Or, it does well enough that Supreme Court challenges against judiciary procedure have always failed.”

“Thing is, we don’t arrest someone without just cause. Someone arrested, they’ve done something,” said Brandon, as they were cleared into a room with a number of chairs. “This is the observation room.”

He knocked on what appeared to be a solid metal wall, and it suddenly turned clear, showing another room on the other side. This room only had a single table, with a chair on either side. A pair of Aurors already stood in the room, dressed in the traditional crimson robes, a pin adorning their left breast.

“They can’t see or hear us,” Aaron added, “Though the Aurors and staff do know we’re here.”

In short order, the accused was led into the room, wearing heavy shackles on both her wrists and ankles. Ragnar noted she was angrily shouting, but no sound was coming out.

“Silencing charm,” said Harry, to the unasked question.

“From what I’ve been told, she wouldn’t stop screaming obscenities at the staff since being woken early this morning,” said Brandon, as another woman stepped into the room. She was dressed in a business suit, and carried a thick leather-bound folder.

Jezebel was forced into a seat, and an Auror waved a wand, removing the wrist shackles. Another wave of the wand had a pair of bracelets snap in place instead.

“Magic-suppressing bracelets, just in case she can cast without a wand,” Aaron explained.

Now, the first Auror took a seat across from the accused, and with a gesture from his wand, a folder appeared in front of him. “Is the defender satisfied?”

“We are satisfied,” answered the woman in the suit, “You may begin.”

The Auror glanced at the sheet of paper on top of the folder, while another quill stood up on its own, looked poised to begin writing.

“This proceeding December 7, 1926. The accused, Catherine Greer, charged with multiple offences. Auror...”

The second Auror had drawn his wand, and now stunned the accused. A vial was then produced, and from Ragnar’s point of view, it looked to be completely colourless. They tipped the woman’s head back, pried open her mouth, and let three drops of the potion to fall into it. They then closed it, and waited a few seconds, before reviving her.

They waited just a little longer, glancing up at the clock every couple of seconds, before the defender gave a nod.

“You are Catherine Greer, of no fixed address?”

“Yes.”

“Did you participate in an operation which resulted in the destruction of Dubai, the United Arab
Emirates?”

“Yes.”

“Was it the ultimate goal of that operation, to place the Commonwealth city of Delir in danger of exposure?”

“Yes.”

The Auror glanced at the paper and the quill, giving it a moment to catch up.

“What is that?” questioned Athelstan, gesturing to the quill.

“Dicta-quill. It’s recording the interview verbatim,” said Aaron, “Official proceedings are always recorded both with dicta-quill, as well as modern recording equipment.”

“Fascinating.”

The quill had caught up, and so the Auror continued, “Were you involved in the event in Washington, wherein RFK Stadium was attacked?”

“No.”

The Auror glanced at the other, who shook his head. It was still worth checking.

“If you did not participate, are you aware of those who did?”

“Yes.”

“You will list their names.”

“I am unable.”

The first Auror again glanced at the first.

“It was expected. The Promagistrate did warn of her memories likely being protected,” said the second. “Let the record show she does have knowledge which is in some way protected.”

“Were you responsible for the creation of an illegal portal into the year 801CE?”

“Yes.”

“On whose instruction?”

“Dumbledore.”

“As in Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, the former headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft & Wizardry?”

“Yes.”

While the Auror waited for the quill to catch up, Harry sucked in a few calming breaths, not wanting to explode in present company. No surprise, really.

“Gonna strangle the man with his own beard,” he growled, under his breath.

Athelstan laughed, while Ragnar cleared his throat. “A most amusing visual, young wizard.”
“Oh, trust me, we think it’s likely possible.”

The quill had caught up, so the Auror continued, “When was this plan organized?”

“No, Dumbledor is a cryptic, secretive wizard; secrets on top of secrets.”

“And when was this plan put in action?”

“As soon as our operative confirmed the Ragnar was vulnerable.”

The Auror paused, glancing up at the glass.

“AIC, brig,” said Aaron.

“Go ahead.”

“Possible mole on board.”

“Roger that.”

Brandon tapped the glass with his wand, and the Auror again nodded, receiving the unseen message. “Was a mobile phone used in this attack?”

“Yes.”

The Auror again stopped the interview, as Aaron relayed the information back to the field team in Kattegat. A more thorough search would be made for the device. Not only did it not belong there, it could have been sabotaged in some way.

The Auror then continued, “The tome ‘Twisting the Elements’ was taken from a Gringotts vault in August last year. Miss Greer, were you responsible for that theft?”

“Yes.”

“Is the tome still in your possession?”

“No.”

“Of course it isn’t,” Harry muttered, as the Auror continued, “Who now has possession?”

“I cannot answer.”

“Did you get instructions on how to create the time portal from ‘Twisting the Elements’?”

“Yes.”

“Are you able to remember all the steps and items required in the creation of the portal?”

“Yes.”

“You will then detail the procedure, from beginning to end.”

“I will not.”

“Of course, she’s protected that too,” Harry growled, while the quill was again allowed to catch up.

The Auror finally continued, “Is it true that, the ultimate goal of the operation was the murder of then
Earl Ragnar Lothbrok and his family?"

“Yes.”

“In the hope their deaths would then deprive the Commonwealth of its current monarch?”

“Yes.”

“Were you aware that the universe would never allow for such an event?”

“Dumbledore did hypothesize that, should the time-travel be formed by unorthodox methods, then certain events might be altered,” she answered. “However, even if the operation was not successful, it would further strain Commonwealth resources, and further, create unexpected interference with their sacred artifact.”

“Meaning, the Orb of Magnus.”

“Yes.”

“Did Mr. Dumbledore clarify what that interference might entail?”

“No. Only, unpleasant.”

The Auror again paused, as Aaron relayed the information to the AIC. The Commonwealth in 1926 would need to be warned, as would the present, as soon as a portal was reopened.

The questioning proceeded for at least another hour. A steward had brought in a platter of snacks and light refreshments, although it was getting on to dinner time. The questioning seemed to confirm Jezebel was the lead for the operation against Ragnar, but it was the operation against Dubai and Delir that damned her. Murdering over a thousand Commonwealth sailors? Mass murder alone earned the death penalty.

Just as Aaron made to touch the glass with his wand, everyone felt a subtle vibration in the floor. Almost instantly, several alarms and klaxons went off.

“Explosion on the flight deck, explosion on the flight deck!” came the panicked voice over the intercom. Harry also heard it in his ear piece.

“Fire fire fire, fire on the flight deck.”

Both Aaron and Brandon immediately drew their side-arms. Both Harry and Mazhe also went alert, with both Walker and Bryce also drawing weapons. Ragnar looked confused, but given the protective stance... he glanced over at Athelstan, who’d drawn his axe, also alerted.

In the interrogation room, the Auror had immediately stunned Jezebel, and she was being taken back to her cell.

“What’s going on?” Ragnar asked.

“We don’t know. Just... be ready for anything. Guys. We put down anything that’s a threat, got it?” Brandon instructed.

“Sir,” said Aaron.

Both Harry and Mazhe only nodded, as did Bryce and Walker.
Now, a second, more pronounced vibration shook the floor.

"HARRY!" came Justin’s alarmed shout, making him wince, “Get Ragnar out of here!!”

“Shit! Port key. Right now. Don’t care where.”

Brandon reached into his pouch and pulled out a baseball, and with a tap of the wand, enlarged it so everyone could get a hand on it.

“Portus,” he commanded, causing the object to shimmer blue a moment. “Everyone get a hand on it, we go in ten.”

Both Ragnar and Athelstan were confused, but did as Brandon instructed. Clearly, they were in danger where they stood, and Brandon was providing an immediate escape from the unknown threat. In a strange place and a strange time, Ragnar couldn’t be certain if he could stand up to it. Unknown numbers, unknown threat? Better to flee.

The Blind Pig Speakeasy
New York, NY

The group landed in a pile of bodies in an alleyway. It was already past sunset, the darkening sky casting a shadow over their arrival. Both Ragnar and Athelstan were both very much disoriented by the bizarre method of transportation, and the younger man very quickly lost the remnants of the brief snack they’d had earlier into a nearby trash can. Ragnar had to admit to himself, he wasn’t in rough shape. He could still feel the butterflies in his stomach after that...

“What... what... what was THAT?!” he finally demanded.

“It’s disorientating at first, but you get used to it,” said Bryce. “Where are we?”

“Air Wing sent me a picture yesterday. Says it’s a wizarding speakeasy. People won’t ask too many questions, a good place to lay low for a few hours while the ship figures out what’s going on.”

Harry was about to protest, but... no. With Ragnar with them, it was too dangerous. Their number one priority at this time was his safety. The ship would have to look after itself... and really, best to leave that to the pros.

Brandon produced his wand, and pointed it at himself, switching out his uniform for a suit appropriate to the time period. In quick succession, Aaron followed, as did Harry.

“What about them?” Harry gestured first to Bryce and Walker, then to Ragnar and Athelstan.

“If we must blend in...” said Ragnar.

“Yes. Your wardrobe would...”

“Look out of place,” Athelstan finished.

“We’ll restore your wardrobe once we’re clear of this place,” Aaron promised. “If you’ll permit.”

“Of course.”

In short order, everyone was dressed appropriately, and Brandon knocked on what looked like a picture. Once... then twice, then once more. The eyes then seemed to come alive, flicking to their right, before a small opening appeared, with someone peering through the other side. Nothing was
said, but the door opened, and the group was permitted to enter.

The room they’d entered reminded Mazhe of the cistern back in Riften, though, he suspected the ceiling there was higher. Nonetheless, the room carried a high vaulted ceiling, and was well-lit. There was a small band at one end of the room, and a... woman... was singing something about a Hippogriff... he’d ask Harry about it later.

The bar looked empty, but... nope. A witch was sitting at the bar, and a small platter of drinks had just appeared. So someone—or something—was working behind it.

In another corner... is that... a giant? At least two house elves were flitting in and about. A wizard sat alone at a table, his nose in a book, idly stirring some sort of hot drink with his finger(3). Or at least, he was making a stirring motion, and the spoon was doing the work without physical interaction.

It was also hard to miss all the wanted posters plastered to the walls. No surprise, likely a good number of people with questionable intent passed through the location at any point. But, so too, did the Ragged Flagon at times cater to questionable clientele.

Athelstan, meanwhile, was doing pretty much the same thing as Mazhe, taking in the scene he’d walked into. The wizard with the book and the self-stirring drink was probably the most tame thing going on! It was finally too much, as his eyes rolled into the back of his head, and he collapsed in a dead faint. Only Bryce’s fast motion had prevented the man from striking the back of his head on the armrest of a chair.

Both Harry and Mazhe couldn’t help but laugh, as the man was revived and helped to a seat at the nearby table, which was vacant. Brandon dragged another table over, and everyone gathered around it, while Aaron headed over to the bar.

“What... what is this place?” Athelstan asked, quietly. He was still shaking slightly, and so Harry produced a calming draught.

“Here. It tastes nasty, but it’ll help you feel a bit better.”

Athelstan cautiously accepted the vial, and quickly consumed its contents. He made a sour face, passing the empty vial back.

“Thank you. I won’t ask what’s in it.”

“You don’t want to know. Nothing harmful, but... some ingredients are unsettling,” Mazhe answered.

“This is a speakeasy,” said Brandon, “Alcohol is illegal in America, so places like this sprung up. Naturally, it’s also a den for the criminal underworld, so we all have to remain on our guard.”

“It can’t be any worse than the Ragged Flagon at times,” said Mazhe.

“A fair point,” Brandon conceded, “But this is slightly different. In that the bad guys carry wands as well as guns. We’re at an elevated protocol. Speaking of. Justin. Claymore.”

“What’s going on?” came Justin’s question, while Brandon fiddled with his mobile. Athelstan watched with curiosity.

“You’re receiving a bookmark with my location. Both you and Zoey to us immediately. The Ragnar’s not secure.”
As Aaron joined them bringing a platter with a bottle and some small glasses, there came a blur not far from them, revealing Justin and Zoey.

“Should have just came with you guys in the first place,” Justin muttered, as a third table was brought over to make extra room. “Uh... everyone’s all right?”

“Well enough. We’ll lay low until whatever it is blows over,” said Brandon.

“How long?” questioned Ragnar. “We were only to be gone for hours.”

“We didn’t foresee this sort of problem,” Aaron muttered.

“But we should have,” Harry snapped, “Shor’s balls, a simple task, and everything goes for a complete utter shit. Perhaps we should have conducted the interrogation back in Kattegat. Save bringing that nightmare onto the ship, where she’s clearly caused chaos already. Gut tells me of more chaos sewn by her hand!”

Both Aaron and Brandon made eye contact, already knowing exactly what’s happened. They’d already received a message from AIC: ‘keep everyone in the dark for now while we determine a solution.’

“I’ve been speaking with the Arcane Sciences division by floo powder,” said Justin, “The Orb’s still green here, so—”

“They’ll have to do a ‘bleed’ or something,” Harry remembered.

“What’s that mean?” Bryce wanted to know.

“Sometimes the Orb becomes a little more active than the government likes. So we do what’s called an energy bleed. Kind of like, when a tire gets too much air in it. We let some of the air out, right? So it’s akin to that.”

Everyone save for Ragnar and Athelstan caught on. They still looked confused.

“Ah. Uh. The pot’s got too much water in it, so we have to dump some of it out.”

Now, both Vikings nodded, seeming to understand.

“What happens if this is not done?” Ragnar asked.

“We really don’t know. And that’s the frightening thing. The Orb could explode, for all we know. I mean, the Psijic Order were unsettled with its appearance in Skyrim, when Ancano was messing around with it,” said Justin, looking uncomfortable.

“This is true,” Mazhe remembered, “They were very alarmed by what Ancano did. Uh... I don’t think the Orb will actually explode, but... out of control... gods. It nearly destroyed the College of Winterhold and the town of Winterhold, created magical anomalies that still plague the province...”

“Wait, since when?!” Harry questioned, also alarmed. “Why was I not told?!”

“Because the College is dealing with it, Harry. Really, we have far more pressing matters on our plate as of late, you know that’s true.”

“And guess what, moron! I’d rather be chasing after those things for a change, than having this
constant shit storm—"

Mazhe gave him a swat. “I’m no moron.”

“He didn’t mean that,” said Justin. “Just take a breath. Getting pissed isn’t gonna solve anything.”

Mazhe thought for a moment. “Maybe... if someone could get me to Trevelyan, I could probably try helping with... with the staff, right?”

“No. I mean... not right now. It’s something we can try once things calm down,” said Aaron.

“He’s right,” said Mazhe. “Look, this is nothing like when... when you were stranded in Capua, Harry. You could have ended up here alone.”

He reached down, and gave Harry’s leg a squeeze. “You’ve got all of us along for the ride, never mind a twenty-five-hundred foot ship of Her Majesty’s navy at your back.”

“It... this shouldn’t have happened.”

“God only puts in front of you that which you can handle,” said Athelstan.

“And I’m tired of being tested, Athelstan!!!” Harry thundered. “I have been tested again, and again, and again, by this lunatic universe that’s decided I am it’s kicking dog, whipping boy, or sacrificial lamb! I am just about THROUGH saving people.”

Athelstan shrank back, painfully aware he’d drawn the young wizard’s ire.

Mazhe pulled his mate into a hug, but addressed the newcomers. “Forgive him, he’s had a lot of shit thrown at him as of late. We lost some very close friends only days ago. A teacher, mentor, someone who was a brother in all but blood... four months ago. So it’s not been a pleasant period for any of us. Catching Jezebel yesterday’s been one of the few successes we’ve had in recent memory.”

“Thing is, this past week has been a series of disasters and nightmares, strung one after the other.”

“We’re going away once this is concluded,” Harry muttered, “Away from the flat, away from Riften and Bthalft... might like to visit the College for a while.”

“If that’s what you want to do, we’ll make sure you get there, Harry,” Brandon promised. “I likely won’t come along, but...”

“You know I’ll be along. I’ll likely have someone join me, as there really should be a pair of us.”

Harry glanced across the table at Ragnar and Athelstan. “Considering these two are with us, that should have been done in the first place.”

“We know you don’t appreciate the extra attention.”

“Unless there is no choice. We have two people in our midst who are alien of both time and location, never mind the President’s daughter being with us. I would see your number doubled given circumstance.”

“Sir,” said Brandon.

Harry again muttered to himself, as Brandon sent off another message back to the ship. He really didn’t like Brandon calling him ‘sir’...
Ragnar also caught the interaction. “Why did he call you ‘sir’?”

“Because of my title. According to the Commonwealth, I have rank and standing equivalent to the Queen on a number of matters.”

“He fathered the Commonwealth,” said Aaron, as Brandon held the mobile up, and snapped a picture of the group, “He and his descendants, should he have them, have many powers and privileges. So in most cases, if he gives us an order, we treat it as if her majesty herself gave the order.”

“I can act in the Queen’s stead should I choose to... not that I would. I would consider that overstepping. The keepers of magic have chosen her as the Commonwealth’s head, not me. If anything, I fulfilled my role two thousand years ago.”

Ragnar only gave a nod. “It sounds to me, young friend, like the universe only put you in the place where you would do the most good. Nothing more, nothing less.”

Harry let out a sigh. “I... I guess so.”

“Harry. Without you and your friends, I’d be dead,” said Bryce. “You keep forgettin’ the people you’ve saved. Jose and his wife, you got no idea how much they respect you for what you did. Any of the other guys, for that matter, like fuck. We all owe you big time.”

“Me too,” said Walker, “I would’ve died, but you guys come along, talkin’ to me on the radio, puttin’ the imposter in his place. Gave me just that sliver of hope, y’know. I still got a long road ahead... but I’m better than I was a few days ago. I owe you my life, don’t ever forget that.”

“And dad wants to kiss your ass, Harry,” said Zoey, “He’s probably not all that happy right now with me being out of contact, but really, you have no idea how thankful he is for the support and piece of mind. Knowing we’re all out of harm’s way.... that no matter what might happen to him, we’re all safe.”

Harry could only nod along, knowing all of their words were true. Even the two Vikings sitting across from him. Without quick action, they too would have quite possibly been killed.

“All right, fine. I didn’t ever say I was useless. Just, it does get overwhelming at times.”

“Yeah, this week has been pretty nuts,” Justin agreed, “I do like the idea of us getting away. And there is the matter of the boy—”

“Credence Barebone,” said Brandon. “I’m still looking into records, see if there’s any further history about the family. We absolutely must get him away from that witch who calls herself his mother. If it were Commonwealth jurisdiction, she’d be jailed for a slough of abuse charges.”

“A... slough...” Athelstan sounded out the odd word.

“A lake full of charges,” Aaron clarified. “The abbreviated meaning is a large, but shallow lake. Usually chalk full of weeds. Uh... sir, what’s the plan?”

“We have to talk to him. It was something I’d wanted to do yesterday, but—”

“Events unfolded that prevented it,” Harry finished.

“We probably can’t take him by force. It may trigger the Obscurus, likely kill everyone there—” he stopped, feeling his mobile buzz. He pulled it out, and read over the message. “Shit. The
Commonwealth just got a report from someone within MACUSA. There was a murder last night, and they’re certain a beast did it. But listen to this: no apparent injury save for a burn-like mark on the side of the face.”

“The Obscurus... Credence did it,” said Harry. “The mark matches the description I read in the book.”

Ragnar looked confused. “What... what is an... Obscuri... uh...”

“Obscurus,” Harry answered, “It’s a parasitic magical force which occupies a young witch or wizard who actively suppresses their gifts. In most cases it becomes violent, killing the host in the process, usually before the child turns ten.”

“So this child... has become some sort of monster,” Athelstan summed.

“No. The child is nearly normal, and may appear normal on the outside. It’s the suppressed magic inside that becomes dangerous.”

“Why would someone do such a thing?” Ragnar asked, looking confused, “To suppress one’s gifts in such a way... such ability... if the gods did not wish it, they would not have permitted it.”

“Tell that to his mother,” Brandon muttered. “There are a few of us who would love to demonstrate to her exactly why a no-Maj should fear a wizard.”

“Yeah, unfortunately, there are also laws against doing that sort of thing. Abuse of a non-magical person is a crime. Even here in the US, at least in the present,” said Aaron.

It was then a pair of men appeared, looking around a moment, before their eyes fell on Brandon.

“Reporting as ordered, sir,” said one of them.

“Keep an eye on the room, the both of you.”

“Sir,” said both. They separated, one taking up a position by the door, while the other picked a table on the opposite side of the room.

Harry again blew out a breath. He relented, and filled his glass with... well... whatever it was Aaron had brought over. ‘Giggle water’. What the hell was Giggle Water? He gulped it down, and the silliest giggle escaped his lips. Not quite a full-on laugh, but it sounded ridiculous! Mazhe looked at his mate, grinning madly.

“Shor’s bones, that was good.”

“Then let’s see you try this foolish concoction,” Harry muttered.?

A couple of hours passed, with the other indulging in the unusual drink, among other things. There didn’t seem to be a kitchen, so Harry made a note to have Kreacher bring something to eat when they were somewhere more private. He’d still not figured out the time difference, but Kattegat was a few hours ahead of New York, he was certain.

It was then four people entered, one of them carrying a medium-sized case. Harry had seen this case before, as well as two of the people who’d just walked in. The one with the case and one of the females claimed the next table over, while the other pair headed for the bar.

Their conversation was hushed, but Harry was able to pick up a few words of it, particularly parts
referencing the Barebone boy.

“His mother beats him,” the woman said.

Unable to keep silent any longer, Brandon remarked, “That woman needs to be obliviated. Permanently.”

“You know of them?” the woman asked.

“We’ve been observing the residence since yesterday. Given our misfortune early yesterday we find ourselves stranded. The Obscurus was sighted near our... crash site on two separate occasions.”

“Do we know you?” asked the man.

“Sort of. We saw the... difficulties you and your friend...” Brandon flicked his eyes toward the bar, “...had, as we were tailing the Obscurus. We narrowed it to those nutcases from the NPSA, but with the disturbance, we split into two groups. I followed the suspected Obscurius, while the others followed the other gentleman—”

“Jacob,” said the man.

“And you must be Newt. I’m Brandon, this is Harry, Mazhe, Bryce, and Martin. We were tailing the Obscurus yesterday.” Brandon decided not to introduce the others, since revealing their identities might cause far more serious complications.

“Tell me, Mr. Scamander, have you located all of your magical creatures?” Harry questioned.

“Not all of them, it’s why we’re here,” Newt answered.

The woman, meanwhile, processed the small bit of information now in front of her.

“Who are you really?”

Aaron muttered to himself, before producing his credentials. “Aaron Carpenter, Commonwealth of Valicadia, his majesty’s Royal marines.”

Brandon also produced his credentials. “Brandon McAllister, also of the Commonwealth of Valicadia, his majesty’s Royal marines. Our ship suffered a catastrophic malfunction, and was forced to set down in Central Park the day before yesterday. It’s taking a massive effort to keep MACUSA from investigating.”

“President Piquery is aware of your ship.” The woman reached into her purse, and produced her credentials. “Tina Goldstein, Magical Congress of the United States of America.”

Both Brandon and Aaron looked annoyed. “We didn’t come looking for trouble—”

“Wands away, gentleman,” said Tina, dismissively, “Given the circumstances, MACUSA’s not exactly concerned about your ship right now.”

“Yet it will be,” said Aaron, “Though we have taken steps to be sure non-magical people cannot see it or enter the cordoned-off area.”

“We call them Muggles,” said Newt.

“Making it sound like we’re mentally-challenged or somethin’,” Bryce muttered, “Ever think about that?”
“No, not really.”

Tina groaned and rolled her eyes. The Commonwealth, of course, blatantly breaking the International Statute... no surprise there, really. She guessed the unnamed people at their table were likely all no-maj’s. Madam Piquerry would pitch a fit seeing this!

It was then a goblin approached the table and took a seat opposite Newt. To Ragnar, the most striking feature, was his chin. Never mind his twisted fingers! How in the world did the... man... write with such disfigurement?

“Gnarlak,” said Tina, simply.

“You're the guy with the case full of monsters, huh?” said Gnarlak. It wasn’t a question.

“News travels fast,” said Newt.

Harry couldn’t help but smirk. “Wizard space, most useful.”

“Harry.”

“You’ve got a magical case too?” Newt questioned, distracted by the question.

“Well, skip the part with the magical creatures, but yes.”

Harry reached into his pouch, and produced the miniature chest. Gnarlak, meanwhile, was fixed on the pouch.

“Goblin enchanted,” he remarked.

“The pouch? Oh yes. We’ve all got them. Gringotts has been very good to me. The last name’s Black. Harry Black.”

Newt seemed to think a moment. “Any relation to a Regulus Black(4)?”

“A distant cousin. They have a dark reputation, rumoured to support Grindelwald.”

“So you’re still looking for one final animal,” said Aaron, deciding to get things back on track.

It was then Brandon’s mobile buzzed. He glanced at the message, then discreetly cast a spell under the table.

“Just one. Dougal, my Demiguise.”

“Shit. Of course, one of the most difficult animals to capture, given their ability to turn completely invisible,” Justin muttered.

Newt raised his eyebrows. “You know of magical creatures?”

“It was a favourite class when I was a student,” said Justin, “The... uh... textbook was very helpful.”

Harry ducked his head, and smirked.

Newt, meanwhile, turned back to Gnarlak. “I was hoping you'd be able to tell me if there have been any sightings. Tracks. That sort of thing.”

“You've got a big price on your head, Mr. Scamander. Why should I help you instead of turnin’ you
“I take it I'll have to make it worth your while?”

“Let's consider it a cover charge.”

Newt reached into his coat pocket, and pulled out a pair of rings, then slid them across the table.

“MACUSAs offerin' more'n that.”

Newt fished into his pocket, pulling out a cylindrical object with a pair of rings on top of it. He pushed it across the table.

Gnarlak looked less than impressed. “Lunascope? I got five.”

“Mr. Uh, Gnarlak. How about...”

Harry reached into his pouch, and produced a handful of diamonds, some of them uncut. He passed them over to Brandon, who then put them on the table in front of the goblin.

“What else ‘ya got?”

“How about...”

“Wait a minute. That's Bow... That’s a Bowtruckle, right?”

Gnarlak had seen something in Newt’s coat pocket... something green. Newt had covered up whatever it was, but it was too late.

“No.”

“Come on. They pick locks, am I right?”

“You're not having him.”

“Suit yourself,” said Gnarlak, standing, “Good luck gettin’ back alive, Mr. Scamander, what with the whole of MACUSA on your back.”

“All right.”

Newt sighed, and pulled out the tiny creature which was hiding in his coat pocket. It was green, reminding Ragnar of a plant, maybe. Save for the fact that it had arms and legs, and two beady eyes. It was a little person made of wood.

The little creature seemed to fight the change in ownership, as it was passed over.

“Pickett...”

The creature settled down, and Gnarlak gave a satisfied grin.

“Somethin' invisible's been wreakin' havoc around Fifth Avenue. You may wanna check out Macy's department store. Might help with what you're looking for.”

“-Dougal,” Newt corrected him. “One last thing. There's a Mr. Graves who works at MACUSA. I was wondering what you knew of his background.”

“You ask a lot of questions, Mr. Scamander. That can get you killed.”
He looked around a moment, as though he were expecting something. Brandon smirked, knowing what he was looking for.

“You were expecting, perhaps, some friends from MACUSA?”

Tina looked furious. “You tipped them off!?”

“No worries, we were warned ahead of time that might become an issue,” said Brandon. “The ship notified us there could be a complication.”

“We’re in your debt, Mr. McAllister,” said Newt, while Gnarlak stormed away.

Brandon gestured to one of the men watching the perimeter, indicating he follow. The man gave a nod, knowing what needed to be done.

“Well, it appears we have a similar matter at hand. You’ve dealt with the New Salemers, am I correct?”

“Yes, of course,” said Tina.

“The Obscurius is the oldest child—”

Both Tina and Newt looked alarmed. “He’s not a child!”

“Exactly my reaction,” said Harry, “But it’s the reality.”

“He has to be removed from that woman’s care,” said Brandon, “If she continues to provoke him, it —”

“It’ll be disastrous,” said Newt, “He’s already killed once.”

“The Senator for New York. We received notice of it a few hours ago.”

It was then the fourth SOU member returned, giving a vicious nod. He approached the table, and passed Pickett back to Newt.

“Thank you.”

“He does belong to you, Mr. Scamander. I get the sense you have a strong attachment to your animal friends,” said Aaron.

“You could say that.”

Mazhe glanced around. “We might want to move our conversation elsewhere.”

Brandon gave a nod. “MACUSA’s likely trying to bust through the ward as we speak.”

Tina waved at the pair at the bar, who hurried over. The woman was quickly delighted by the much expanded group. “My, my, Tina,” she giggled, “More men?”

“Friends from the Commonwealth of Valicadia, Queenie. We’re all leaving.”

“And I expect a proper introduction!”

Harry couldn’t help but grin. The blonde had a bubbly personality that simply radiated. Her partner would be a very lucky wizard.
“Phoenix lead, Gladius, over.”

“Go ahead, Gladius.”

“Need a bookmark for Macy's Department Store, expedited.”

“Stand by.”

“A bookmark?” Newt and his companions all looked confused. So did Ragnar and Athelstan.

“So what is the Commonwealth doing in New York?” Queenie asked.

“Dealing with complications that crashed one of our ships in Central Park.”

“It’s why we couldn’t approach the reservoir,” Newt remembered. “Did... did your ship see the Erumpent?”

“We were aware of it, yes. The CO was arranging a response team when you and... forgive me, who are you?” Brandon questioned, gesturing to the third of Newt’s companions.

“Oh. Jacob Kowalski. Just a no-maj,” he answered, offering a hand.

“That’s no matter for us, Mr. Kowalski,” said Brandon, shaking hands. “The Commonwealth’s inclusive of its people, whether they be magical or not.”

“So people in your country... they know about magic?”

“Very much so.”

“We lose at least a handful of witches and wizards to the Commonwealth every month, I think,” said Newt.

“The ICW’s policies against non-magical people is backwards at best. It doesn’t work now, it’s not worked in the past, and it won’t ever work in the future.”

Brandon looked down at his mobile, feeling it buzz. “All right. Because we’re a large group, we’ll have to split up.”

“Two groups should do,” said Harry. “Mazhe and I will take these two and Bryce...” he indicated Ragnar and Athelstan. “And these two.” He gestured to the additional security.

“Then the rest will come with us. Harry, the bookmark.”

Harry felt his mobile buzz, and he pulled it out.

“What are those exactly?” Newt questioned.

“Commonwealth devices that let us get around swiftly, among other things. Now. Gather close—”

“It’s... you’re using a port key! You can’t do that here!” Tina protested.

“A port key is the least of our worries, sis!” Queenie hissed.

“It's the only way we're leaving. MACUSA's likely outside trying to bring down the ward as we speak.”

“What is a ward you speak of?” Ragnar questioned.
“We’ll explain later. Now let’s go,” said Brandon.

Macy’s Department Store
New York, NY

The second ‘teleport’ or whatever they were calling it in a matter of hours was making Ragnar’s head spin. Gods... in the blink of an eye it seemed, they’d travelled to three? Different locations... this one being the third. There had been no chance to look around when they’d landed last time, the method of travel being so disorienting.

Now, he was astounded at the massive building that loomed in front of them. There were strange contraptions resting nearby, some sort of strange cart-like device, illuminated by overhead lights that seemed to stretch down the path out of sight.

Newt, meanwhile, approached the set of doors, drawing his wand. “Alohamora.”

There came a click, and he pushed the doors open. The group hurried inside, with Justin re-locking the doors, being the last through. Unlikely that would stop a Demiguise, but...

Justin could already see evidence of things being disturbed. In the low light, a number of displays had been shifted, some of their contents out of place. A short ways down the wide isle, a mannequin had been upset, items strewn across the floor.

“Zoey, uh, look. We... it’s better if you stay here. Uh... you both keep watch.”

“Justin...”

“No, he’s right,” said Aaron.

“I’ll stay with,” Walker volunteered.

“So Demiguises are fundamentally peaceful, but they can give a nasty nip if provoked,” Newt explained, keeping his voice low. “Er... everyone split up into pairs. And try very hard not to be predictable.”

“I saw——” Athelstan began.

“Don’t look at it,” Newt warned him.

“Then how are we to catch it?” Ragnar muttered.

It was then there came a strange sound from somewhere above them that had everyone looking around.

“Was that... the Demiguise?” Tina whispered.

“No. No, I think it might be the reason that the Demiguise is here,” Newt answered. He looked around a moment. “Its sight operates on probability, so it can foresee the most likely immediate future.”

The group split up, heading in different directions. Both Ragnar and Athelstan were somewhat distracted by the contents of the store, but they did keep an eye on what was going on around them. It was perhaps the strangest environment either of them had ever found themselves in. One hell of an adventure, that much was for certain!
A loud crash echoed behind them.

“Oof,” Jacob uttered, as he was knocked to the floor by an unseen object. Athelstan, though, had a pretty good guess, having seen the animal briefly. He could hear it scampering across the floor, then up onto the nearby counter... closer... he grabbed at what appeared to be nothing...

Next thing he knew, he was being dragged along the floor by an invisible animal! He tried to let go, but now found he’d become entangled with the straps of some object the animal was carrying...

“Aaaaaaaah!” he cried out, being slammed into a pile of boxes, sending them flying, and crashing to the floor, their contents breaking on contact.

“Athelstan?!“ Ragnar shouted, as now everyone was drawn to the commotion... the Demiguise didn’t seem to realize that Athelstan was entangled with the purse and could not let go, and so continued trying to flee, once again colliding with objects, this time a trio of mannequins, sending them flying in all directions.

The straps on the purse finally gave way with this, leaving the young Viking in a heap, as the Demiguise briefly materialized, before scampering up a staircase.(6)

“Athelstan!”

The man was out cold. Harry and Mazhe hurried over, with Mazhe reaching into his pouch and producing a healing potion. Ragnar was already at his side, concerned for his friend.

“Bloody hell... didn’t expect...”

“Yes, they can be very strong,” said Justin. “Uh... you guys stay here. Newt, Tina, Queenie, Jacob and I will go sort out the Demiguise.”

“G-good thinking,” said Harry, as Aaron produced his wand, and began checking Athelstan for any more serious injuries.

“Well... nothing broken. Just knocked out by the impact, I think.”

He gestured with his wand, speaking, “Rennervate.”

Athelstan opened his eyes. “Ragnar...”

“Are you all right?”

“I...”

“Here,” said Mazhe, “Healing potion. It’ll help.”

Having already had one of their potions, the young Viking quickly accepted it this time, and as was promised, quickly began to feel better.

“The beast was... much stronger than expected,” he confessed, “My hand... became entangled and I could not get free!”

Now, Harry could see the welts left on the man’s wrist by the straps. They were fading quickly, however, as the healing potion did its job.

Seeing everything was in hand, Justin led Newt, Tina, Jacob, and Queenie off toward the stairs to the upper levels.
“So what do we do now?” Bryce wanted to know.

“We wait. If the Demiguise comes back down, they’ll need to know,” said Aaron.

Bryce only shook his head and smirked. “That was one hell of a ride though. Jesus.”

“It wasn’t funny!” Athelstan protested, as he was helped to his feet.

“Sure it was, bro,” Bryce quipped. “Just relax, the magical world still throws me once in a while, ‘an I’ve been in it nearly five months. Just... be ready for anything.”

“Right. So you two... let’s fix your wardrobe,” said Aaron, gesturing to Ragnar and Athelstan. “We did promise for it to be temporary.”

“We trust you,” said Ragnar.

Aaron once again gestured with his wand, and the pair found their outfits and armour restored.

“We still had our weapons,” Athelstan noted.

“Yes. Though they were hidden, you still had access to them. And we would never take them from you. Quite likely, if things continue as they are, we’ll likely give the pair of you additional weapons.”

“Anything we might give you will have to be returned when it comes time to say good bye,” said Brandon. “Stuff like that, it wouldn’t be possible for you to keep them. Gods above, the number of rules being broken right now with the pair of you in our midst... if any of it were to get out, there’d be a lot of problems for the government, and likely her majesty.”

“That’s what the Promagistrate act is for,” said Aaron.

That got a snort out of Harry, as he worked putting the mannequins back in order. “As if that ever stopped a secret from getting out.”

“No one ever knew about Dardanos and Crixus,” Mazhe pointed out. “Really, it was as big a thing as our connection with these guys. And that interaction had massive consequences, am I right?”

“A fair point, I guess,” Harry conceded.

It was then they heard a series of crashes above.

“What in the world?”

“Roach!” they could hear Queenie shout.

“Teapot!” came Tina’s shout, along with more bangs and crashes that were shaking the floor.

“What in Oblivion would they need those for?!” Mazhe exclaimed, looking confused.

“That thing did seem to want trinkets,” Athelstan muttered.

“Newt is the expert,” said Harry, with a shrug, as he set to work, putting another pile of scattered boxes back in order. The broken objects seemed to zoom about, mending themselves and packing themselves away, almost exactly in the reverse order they’d been damaged or destroyed. Both Ragnar and Athelstan were fascinated by this.

“How easy does it come to you, your magic?” asked Ragnar.
“Now? It comes easy as breathing, I guess. One who has a strong connection with their magic, well-trained in its use, it comes second nature.”

“Harry's a little special in that he doesn't rely much on his wand,” said Brandon, “Most of us need our wands to do magic.”

“Or we're not magical at all,” said Walker, “Yeah, what Bryce said, this stuff still trips me up 'an I've only been around for a few days.”

Harry again scowled, as they could hear a bit more commotion from upstairs. “It's been one calamity after another in recent days. If one more thing is dropped in my lap...”

“Just please don't cast any more unforgivable spells, Harry. Really...”

Harry smiled sweetly. “Not even on dear Jezebel? C'mon, I would love to make her scream for her life, make her both soil and piss herself.”

“Harry...”

Harry burst out laughing. “Piss off, Brandon, you know I wouldn't ever do that while sane. No matter WHAT I might think of the bitch, she's not worth staining my soul over. Beside the point, and we've been over it many times already, I have something far more effective in store. How she dies won't matter a whole lot.”

It was then the two groups reunited.

“There was a complication,” said Justin.

“But all creatures are accounted for?” questioned Aaron.

“I am certain,” said Newt. He set his case on the floor, and opened it. Then, to both Ragnar and Athelstan’s amazement, he climbed into it, and began to disappear.

“How is that possible?”

“It’s bigger on the inside,” said both Newt and Harry in unison. They shared a look, momentarily startled by the other’s words, then burst out laughing.

Athelstan was as confused as ever. “How is that possible?”

Harry shrugged and smirked. “Magic.”

It was hard not to miss the eye-rolling and groans that ensued, as Newt vanished from sight.

“Come on!” he called.

Tina quickly followed, with her sister and Jacob immediately after.

Chapter End Notes

UP NEXT: Harry and his friends new and old get a look at the inside of Newt’s case, only for them to be interrupted by events happening outside; they swiftly find themselves in the middle of a confrontation between a powerful magical anomaly and
American Aurors; and events which follow have Harry and his friends encountering someone just as dangerous as OND, if not worse...

CHAPTER NOTES: At just over 10,000 words, this is so far the longest chapter in the story. I did end up breaking it, and moving the rest of the ‘chest/case’ scene to the next chapter, but this needed to run together, as it did have a theme. Ragnar and Athelstan aren’t supposed to be here. Unfortunately, given Harry’s bad luck, here they are, 1,200 years into the future, in a magically-saturated environment, with chaos unfolding. So, Athelstan’s not having a great go of things here, now, is he? Yeah, this magic stuff’s gonna give him fits, challenging his religious beliefs in a big way. Remember, he’s not renounced his Christianity at all. So to be dropped in the middle of a place with giants, half-goblins, house-elves, and other bizarre things going on... yeah, he’s not gonna do very well.

(1) Newt & Jacob attempting to capture the escaped Erumpent. This scene had me seeing stars, I was laughing so hard.
(2) As quoted by Jonathan Maberry. I used this quote in the opening of chapter 5, but it just so fit in the discussion here.
(3) Borrowing this from the scene at the Leaky Cauldron in the movie version of ‘Prisoner of Azkaban’. Say, did you guys notice the book the wizard was reading? >:D
(4) This is not Sirius’ brother. There was another Regulus Black alive in the 20s, according to the Black family tree. And it’s very likely Newt would be aware of him, and likely, the family’s reputation.
(5) I was originally gonna have Harry bail Newt out here, offering something Gnarlak might accept in place of Pickett... but, I quickly realized, Pickett would trump just about anything Harry might come up with.
(6) This was inspired by the deleted scene in which Jacob attempts to catch the Demiguise and ends up being taken for a ride. Instead, it’s Athelstan who attempts, and gets tangled up with the purse the animal’s carrying.
(7) Saw this in a piece of fan art I saw. I forget who did it or where I saw it, but it featured the 11th Doctor with his TARDIS, and Newt with his magical case. They exclaim to one another, “It’s bigger on the inside!” Had me laughing hysterically.
Harry and his friends new and old get a look at the inside of Newt’s case, only for them to be interrupted by events happening outside; they swiftly find themselves in the middle of a confrontation between a powerful magical anomaly and American Aurors; and events which follow have Harry and his friends encountering someone just as dangerous as OND, if not worse...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

23. LEVEL SIX: EMERGENCY

January, 2008 / December, 1926 / August, 801

“A man's mind will very gradually refuse to make itself up until it is driven and compelled by emergency.”

- Anthony Trollope

Athelstan still looked unsure. “It’s safe?”

“Perfectly. It’s very powerful magic, but perfectly safe,” said Harry, “I would bet Mr. Scamander has a very comfortable home inside, fitted out so he may care for his animal friends.”

“They all live in there?” Now it was Walker’s turn to be surprised.

“C’mon, Walker. We ain’t seen nothing when it comes to magic,” said Bryce.

“I’ll go first. Trust us, it’s perfectly safe,” said Harry.

He climbed in, quickly finding the rungs of the ladder. It was almost exactly like his chest, save for the decoration. It was more of a rustic work shack he was seeing right away, but... a door, of course. It was set up as a sort of wildlife sanctuary.

He stepped off, and moved aside, seeing Ragnar was making his way down the ladder, a little more quickly. Of course, he was likely used to scaling ladders and other such things.

“Come on! It’s safe!” he called up, and only then did Athelstan dare follow.

Harry couldn’t help but laugh. “He was rather brave, taking on the Demiguise.”

Athelstan scowled as he reached the bottom. “It was not funny.”

He looked around. Well... not as terrifying as he had imagined, but still. How was this even possible? An entire space, somehow contained in that little case?
“I will show the pair of you mine when I have the opportunity,” Harry promised, “The interior will be less... unsettling.”

“That’s not a bad idea, Harry,” said Brandon, as he climbed down, “Let’s get everyone together a minute. We need to have a discussion about a few things.”

“We should be returned to Kattegat,” said Ragnar.

“And we’ll get to that. Mr. Scamander?!”

“Come through the door!” Newt called back.

A sanctuary. That described the space exactly. The door led them into a small clearing of sorts, with various ‘habitats’, separated by partitions. Jacob was helping the Demiguise into an egg-like enclosure made of twigs. Newt, meanwhile, was putting the recaptured Occamy back in a smaller enclosure.

“Merlin’s beard... there is still one missing,” he muttered.

“I thought you said you had all of them!” Tina hissed.

“And arguing about it won’t help either,” said Justin, “We know they like enclosed spaces...”

Aaron groaned. “Still means it could have gone anywhere.”

Ragnar, meanwhile, was looking in the pen which held the Erumpent.

“What... is this?”

“Erumpent,” said Justin, “You did see the video yesterday, remember.”

Now it was Jacob’s turn to scowl. “You saw us?”

“Men from our ship. We were aware of it not long after it escaped,” said Brandon, “But given our situation, we chose to monitor the situation. If anything, you’re somewhat lucky the no-maj repelling charms only encompass the reservoir.”

“No-maj repelling charm...” Ragnar seemed to think on this, then it clicked. “You keep non-magical people away.”

“Yes. Necessary in situations like we’ve got. We’ve also erected a misdirection charm. No-maj people will simply see a small boat or something like that, rather than a twenty-five-hundred foot magical vessel.”

“So what would happen if a non-magical person ran into it?” Zoey wondered. She still remained very close to Justin.

“The no-maj repelling charm? It would be like... you forgot your house keys. Or you left the stove on. Or you’re late for an important appointment,” said Aaron. “It’s designed to make a non-magical person want to be anywhere but inside the perimeter of the charm.”

Bryce smirked. “Let’s put one in the middle of Grand Central.”

That had Aaron, Brandon, and Tina frowning.

“Yeah, the Commonwealth wouldn’t like that. Or MACUSA,” said Aaron.
“We execute people for doing that sort of thing!” Tina exclaimed, “It's not a thing to joke about.”

“Yeah, the Commonwealth doesn’t like that sort of thing either. We won’t execute people for it, but count on a nasty fine at minimum. It’s considered Abuse of a non-magical person at minimum. Never mind the Section 13 violation if it happens outside the Commonwealth.”

Walker thought on this. “That kind of shit happen inside the Commonwealth?”

“Yes,” Justin answered, “Not frequently, but you get someone who thinks it’s funny to prank non-magicals. Or worse, you get someone who thinks they’re better than non-magicals. If there’s a history, the crown will act harshly.”

“And they have to,” Brandon picked up, “It’s why we don’t have all that many problems with people like... Grindelwald. His people have difficulty gaining any sort of traction within our community.”

“Doesn’t mean he’s no less of a threat to us,” said one of the extra SOU. “He’s a monster who wants to rule the world, simple as that.”

“Yes, well put,” Newt agreed, as he continued to check on on some of the other creatures.

Harry, meanwhile, was drawn to odd voices coming from a nearby opening. It somewhat resembled a cave, with a set of red-painted stairs leading up to it.

“Mr. Scamander... what’s in there?”

“Runespoors. Do be careful, they’re being rather cranky lately.”

“No doubt. I can hear them arguing with one another.”

Newt’s eyes grew wide. “You’re a parselmouth?!?”

Harry looked confused. “A... a what?”

“You can understand them?”

“Yeah. Before I was... before the Commonwealth rescued me, there would be times I would be in my aunt’s back garden. There was a family of snakes behind the garden shed... I was four or five, forgive me for not remembering clearly. They were my only friends.”

“It’s incredibly rare,” said Justin, “And naturally, it’s considered a dark trait.”

“Shor’s bones, Harry. I never knew you could do that,” Mazhe confessed.

“Considering snakes don’t exist in Skyrim, there haven’t been many opportunities. And yes, it doesn’t surprise me that such an ability is considered dark.

“Thing is, there is no true dark and light. We have each inside us. It’s our choices that make us who we are. Nothing more, nothing less.”

Newt thought for a moment. “That sounds exactly like something Professor Dumbledore would say.”

Harry kept his face neutral, though he mentally frowned. “Perhaps. Thing is, no one is perfect. We all have our flaws. It’s as nature intended.”
“Mr. Scamander. Are you now certain the Occamy is the only animal still missing?” Aaron questioned.

“I am certain.”

“Phoenix lead, over.”

No answer.

“Scabbard, Gladius.”

“Go ahead.”

“Still one magical animal unaccounted for. We need Air Wing back up in the air soon as possible.”

“What sort of creature is missing?” came the question.

“Occamy.”

“Roger that. It may be an hour or so, Air Wing needed some rack.”


“What are Gladius and Scabbard?” Newt wanted to know.

“Gladius is our call sign when talking to the ship,” Aaron explained, “This...” he gestured to his ear piece, “Connects us with the ship’s communications system. We all have them, but normally I coordinate communications.”

“So you can hear each other,” Tina guessed.

“Exactly. If we’re out of sight, we can still be in communication.”

“So we know what each other’s doing... or what another team’s doing during an op,” Brandon added.

“Now something like that would be very useful,” Ragnar agreed.

“And it’s a very advanced tool the Commonwealth developed. You won’t find this kind of thing elsewhere. Which also means, we can’t share it. Doing so would violate a number of government policies,” said Aaron.

Harry and the others with ear pieces all nodded along. Of course, Brandon was speaking a half-truth, but... close enough.

“Let me understand this,” said Athelstan, “These... animals... they all exist in the outside world? There is possibility of encountering one?”

“Yes. All of them exist—though many are becoming rare, or endangered,” said Newt. “As for you running across one in the wild, it’s highly unlikely for a Muggle under normal circumstances. All of you being in here, is above and beyond normal.”

“Yeah, no shit,” said Walker. He was still fixated on the nest of Occamys.

“An’ up to this point, the most magical... uh, animal I’ve seen is Harry’s phoenix,” said Bryce.
Newt looked gobsmacked. “A phoenix?! You’ve bonded with a phoenix?”

“He belonged to someone else,” said Harry, as a dark look crossed his face. “For those of you who don’t know, phoenixes only bond with people who are light wizards, or walk a light path. The moron ventured to the dark side and the phoenix deserted him for it. We bonded four months ago, I think it was...”

“Back during our wedding, Harry,” Mazhe remembered. “He’s back in the flat though, or we could summon him.”

“No bother. You are only the second person I know to have a phoenix familiar, the other being—”

“Albus Dumbledore,” said Harry, evenly.

“You know him?”

“Yes, though forgive me for not wanting to get into it. Our relationship was—is... complicated.”

“I didn’t mean to pry,” Newt apologized.

Everyone seemed to lose track of time, as Newt continued to look in on the number of animals inside the preserve. It was truly fascinating, if Harry had to admit... gods, Hagrid would be over the moon if he was ever able to see something such as this. A pensieve memory would have to do. How was the half-giant doing these days anyway? His hut had been moved a few days after the castle, if he remembered correctly.

He watched as Ragnar and Athelstan wandered around, looking at the various enclosures and their occupants. Gods... it was so much like how he’d been around Tommy in the beginning. No question, they adored each other, exactly as Harry and Tommy had adored each other. Therein, was why it was the steward, rather than the brother.

“You look lost in thought.”

“Mazhe... gods...”

“Didn’t mean to startle you. What has you so fixated?”

“Those two,” Harry said, discreetly pointing at the Viking King and his friend. “They remind me so much of when Tommy first joined us. When Ragnar insisted on his steward joining, there was confusion. Why not his brother? But now... I know.”

“They love each other?”

“As I loved Tommy. The bond that goes above and beyond romance. I would count on Athelstan following Ragnar anywhere.”

“Just as the pair of you didn’t stray too far from one another. I am really sorry that happened.”

“It’s not your fault, Mazhe. There are only a few people I truly blame for sending him to the afterlife. And when I catch up with them...”

“You have said it a number of times already.”

They’d come back to the door to the shed and the outer work area, where Newt was mixing some sort of potion, if Harry had to guess. The Demiguise had decided to latch onto Justin, much to his amusement, and now rested around his neck. Zoey was, naturally, dangerously close, her hand in
Justin’s. Gods, how long before there would be some sort of announcement? Good on him, was the only thing Harry could think on the matter.

Queenie and Newt were talking about school as he worked. And of course, Jacob caught onto this.

“Did you say school? Is there a school? A wizardry school here? In America?”

“Of course, Ilvermorny! Its only the best wizard school in the whole world!” Queenie answered, enthusiastically.

“I think you’ll find the best wizarding school in the world is Hogwarts!” came Newt’s rebuttal.

“Hogwash,” said Queenie, flatly.

Justin grinned. “Of course, both of them being boarding schools. Me, I attended Sir Malcolm Davis Institute in Trevelyan.”

“And what about you, Mr. Stormcrown?”

“I’d rather not say. Only that my school experience left something to be desired. I’ve still not completed my NEWTs... something I should be preparing for. Instead, I keep being sent on a series of unfortunate adventures that put myself and dear friends, old and new, in life-threatening situations.”

“What is a NEWT?” asked Jacob.

“Nastily Exhausting Wizarding Tests,” said Justin, “It’s a final exam at the end of seventh year. In the Commonwealth, NEWTs also match up with high school exams, so a wizarding student’s course load is significantly higher. I tell you that first hand.”

“So you study no-maj subjects too then,” Tina said. It wasn’t a question.

“Very much so. Everyone is held to identical education standards—”

The interruption came in the form of an animal’s screeches overhead, the flapping of wings, and the sound of thunder. Dougal jumped off of Justin’s back, and retreated back to his nest, while the rest of the group hurried over.

“What’s wrong?” asked Bryce.

“Danger. He senses danger,” said Newt, looking alarmed.

“Let’s get to the roof,” Brandon decided.

“Why?”

“I dunno, my gut says that’s where we should be.”

Minutes later, the large group was gathered on the roof of Macy’s. Both Aaron and Brandon were looking out over the city scape, looking for something. Ragnar and Athelstan were doing something similar, but for a different reason. They knew somewhat of where they were, a large city, but this... it was astounding!

Brandon felt his mobile buzz, and pulled it out, looking at the message. “Shit. MACUSA’s just gone into emergency a few minutes ago. Massive magical disruption—”
“Guys!”

Mazhe pointed to something a few blocks away. A twisting, angry mass of energy, pulsing and streaking red. Its scale was fluctuating, at times engulfing the entire width of the street, to then contract to something about the size of the average car or truck.

“Jeez. Is that the Obscuriathing?”

“Obscurus,” Harry corrected him.

Newt looked unsure whether to be astounded or horrified. “That’s more powerful than any Obscurial I have ever heard of.”

He reached into his coat pocket, pulled out a leather-bound journal, and passed it to Tina.

“If I don’t come back, look after my creatures. Everything that you need to know is in there.”

Tina looked alarmed. “What?”

“They’re not killing it.”

Before anyone could react, Newt Disapparated.

“Newt!” Tina exclaimed. She thrust the journal and the case at her sister.

“You heard him, look after them!” Then she too, Disapparated.

“Keep holda that, honey,” said Queenie, making to pass the journal and the case to Jacob. The pudgy man was having none of it.

“No, no, no!”

“I can’t take you. Please let go of me, Jacob!”

“You’re the one that said I was one of youse, right?”

“It’s too dangerous.”

“She's right, Mr. Kowalski,” said Aaron, “That goes for any of you not magical.”

“I—we will stay with these guys in the Promagistrate's chest,” one of the extra SOU offered.

“Good thought,” Harry agreed. “It’s too dangerous—look at the damage it’s causing.”

“I'll remain behind as well,” Aaron decided, “I know there are some things Harry wouldn't want people messing around with.”

Harry produced his chest as Queenie Disapparated.

“C’mon, hurry it up,” Brandon pressed, “Everyone else mount up.”

“Mount up?” Athelstan looked confused, as Zoey climbed into the chest.

Harry simply retrieved his broom from his pouch, and resized it to normal by touching it.

“You fly on that,” Ragnar guessed, as Brandon produced his.
“Yes. Now get in. Really, it’s not safe.”

With Aaron being the last one in, Harry picked up the chest, and stowed it away, before mounting his broom.

“We could probably follow it by Apparition, but this should be more effective,” said Brandon.

“What are we doing?” Mazhe questioned.

“Pursue but do not attack it. If we can get close... Harry, you seem to know a bit more about these things...”

“More about the wizard behind it, Brandon. If he’s been abused... I might be able to get through to him,” said Harry, as they began heading in the direction of the swirling mass.

“Shor’s bones, look at the destruction,” Mazhe noted.

“MACUSA’s gonna have a bad day, cleaning this up. If this were 2008, we could have MIRT assist, but...”

“When was it formed?”

“Back in the sixties.”

“Doesn’t mean the government can’t supply people from the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes... Shit but this is destructive,” said Harry.

The street scape below resembled the aftermath of a bomb, put simply. Windows completely blown out, light standards bent and twisted though made of aluminium foil, vehicles overturned and rendered scrap metal—it was both an impressive yet scary demonstration of the power of magic.

They at last reached an intersection where the Obscurus was vandalizing what Harry guessed was a bus station or the sort. A wizard dressed in sharp clothes was speaking to it, but it was near impossible to make out what was being said at that distance.

“Harry... look.”

Mazhe pointed to a pile of wrecked cars.

“Isn’t that Newt and Tina?”

“Yeah, think so.”

It was then that Tina engaged the other wizard, much to the others’ surprise. Harry made to cast a spell, but Brandon shook his head.

“No. Don’t intervene. Look. She’s just causing a distraction.”

Sure enough, the Obscurus had took off, with Newt following by Apparating short distances.

“C’mon, let’s follow it.”

“Catch up to Newt, let’s pick him up,” Mazhe suggested.

“Yeah, all right.”
They took off, quickly catching up to the dark magical mass. Now, they could hear the other wizard trying to talk to it. Though if Harry admitted, something seemed very off about the man. Why was he giving off Voldemort vibes?

“Mr. Scamander!” Brandon called out.

“Jump aboard, it’ll be easier this way!” Justin added.

Newt stopped, and Justin flew over to hover close enough, allowing Newt to climb on behind.

“Who’s that man trying to talk to him?” Harry questioned, as they took off again.

“Graves... Director of Magical Security, what Tina told me,” Newt answered, “Nearly had us executed...”

“Yeah, something feels very off about him.”

“He did ask some peculiar questions regarding my relationship with Professor Dumbledore,” Newt remembered, “Quoting, ‘What makes Albus Dumbledore so fond of you?’.”

Brandon gave a nod, as they continued to pursue the energy mass. “We’ll be extra careful in our dealings. It’s why we didn’t intervene a few minutes ago.”

“Split up, left and right,” Brandon decided, “Harry and Mazhe right side.”

“Good thinking,” Harry decided, “Deflect the Aurors’ spells off of him. It might gain more of Credence’s trust. I doubt he’s in control, but he’s not completely unaware either.”

“You realize that’s going completely counteractive to what we did earlier;” Justin noted.

“Let’s just do it,” said Harry, “Brandon, get us some support from the ship, tap the present government if necessary.”

“Sir.”

Keeping the broom steady, he reached down and pressed a button on his radio pack attached to his hip.

“Scabbard, Gladius lead.”

“Go ahead, Gladius.”

“We need assistance from Trevelyana, ASAP. Massive damage.”

“Roger that.”

Now, the four brooms flew just above, and on either side of the Obscurus, as it rocketed down the street, deflecting many of the Aurors’ aimed spells harmlessly into the atmosphere. This, naturally, drew the ire of the Aurors, who were clearly confused as to why a group of wizards would be actively supporting a dangerous magical anomaly.

Mazhe was forced to roll his broom, as an angry bolt of magic missed by inches. The offending Auror suddenly found himself flung off the roof of the building he was on by a long tendril of dark, swirling magic, and was forced to quickly Disapparate a short distance before he fell to his death.

“Shor’s balls...” Mazhe muttered, as he straightened out. “Thank you, Credence.”
“Mazhe... don’t encourage him.”

They were running out of street, the massive facade of a building looming not far away. And there, a wall of police were waiting, weapons trained on the approaching magical mass.

“Now what?!” Justin shouted.

The Obscurus flared, and the four brooms were forced into a rapid climb to escape being enveloped by it, as it flung itself forward in a frightening rush, sending vehicles and people flying. And then, it simply shrank down, the storm of energy folding in, a figure emerging on the ground, morphing into a lanky young man they’d seen a couple of days before. He hurried into an entrance leading underground: New York’s subway system.

“Land! We must follow,” Newt decided.

They shot over top of the wrecked vehicles, and touched down only feet from the entrance. They then hurried inside and down the stairs, brooms being stowed as they went, knowing MACUSA Aurors were only seconds behind.

The mezzanine and the ticket area were abandoned, but a busted gate indicated Credence had been through, and so they followed, finding more stairs leading down to platform level.

“Everyone remember, no magic unless we absolutely have to; he’s already scared shitless,” Brandon warned.

“No shit.”

Harry was surprised by the shape of the platform: curved. Sure, he was aware of the London Underground’s numerous curved stations (if not New York’s), but seeing the design for real was something very different. It featured a vaulted arched ceiling, glass and iron, all lit by elegant chandeliers.

They found Credence at one end of the station, crouched in the shadows, looking at the group wearily.

“Credence... It’s Credence, isn’t it?” Newt asked.

Credence didn’t answer. Harry could see the young man was shaking like a leaf, likely still traumatized by whatever had set him off in the first place.

“It is Credence, isn’t it?” Newt persisted.

“We’re here to help you,” said Harry, “I know... I know exactly what it’s like. Exactly how you feel, though you may not believe it. To be mistreated, abused, neglected... just because of who you are.”

That got a look from Newt.

“I’ve met someone exactly like you, Credence,” he added, “A girl. A young girl who’d been imprisoned, she had been locked away and she’d been punished for her magic.”

“Credence? Can we come down there?” Justin asked. “We don’t want to hurt you, we promise.”

“You... you promise?” Credence whispered, looking hopeful.

“We—”
Everyone was forced to duck, as an angry blast of magic soared overhead, to impact with the wall down the tunnel. Harry let out a hiss, unleashing a pair of ice spikes back at the attacker who’d stepped out of the shadows. That was the cue for the others to add their offensive spells, and the assailant popped away, only to reappear on the platform.

“Graves...” Newt muttered. “He wants Credence!”

“No he wants a weapon!” Harry shouted, unleashing a fireball and an ice spike. The ice spike went wide, while Graves batted the fireball away easily. He answered with a storm of magic. Harry simply grabbed Mazhe and Credence, and popped away, to reappear at the opposite end of the platform. He then answered with a shock spell of his own, and smirked, as he scored a hit.

He was shocked when Graves simply popped away himself.

“Bloody hell, he didn’t just... that should’ve dropped him!”

“Harry! Whoever this guy is... it ain’t what we see!” Justin called.

“Whatd’ya mean!?”

“He’s transfigured himself! Saw it glitch when he popped away!” Justin shouted back.

Boom. Harry felt himself shoved forward by the force from behind, and was forced to Apparate before being slammed into a wall. He looked around, finding that Mazhe had dragged Credence to the ground and so neither had endured the full brunt of the explosion.

Another storm of magic flew from the tunnel, but this time Brandon and Justin were ready for it, deflecting the spells up into the ceiling. Several of the chandeliers fell victim to the violent magic, crashing to the platform and shattering on impact.

Harry was again forced to dodge, as Graves reappeared on the platform, unleashing another storm of deadly magic. Harry and his circle answered back, but the man once again popped away.

“Anti-apparition ward,” Justin whispered.

“Trying. Harry or Mazhe, boost my spell for me!” Brandon called, as he summoned one of the broken chandeliers to him.

Harry flung a hand at Brandon. Feeling the additional power, he quickly cast the ward on the object.

“Mazhe! Where are you!?”

“Other end of the platform!”

“Is Credence with you?”

“Yes—Fus... RO!”

Harry, Brandon, and Justin saw Graves be lifted off the ground, and sent skidding down the platform. However, the man quickly got control of himself, and again launched a volley of spells.

“Bloody hell this ain’t normal,” Harry snarled, again attempting to nail the man. This man had took the power of Mazhe’s Shout with nary a scratch!

“Harry! Guys! He’s losing it!” Mazhe warned, as Graves unleashed another volley of deadly magic. Mazhe responded with a storm of fireballs—in this case, the much stronger fire bolt, knowing his
companions were at a safe distance. It bathed most of the platform in fire, and Graves was then forced to produce a strong shield to protect himself, knowing he couldn’t Apparate.

“Outside the box, guys!” Brandon shouted, producing his pistol, as they were again forced to duck another barrage of spells from the increasingly dangerous wizard.

“Fus... RO!” Mazhe again tried.

This time, Graves was somewhat expecting it, and Mazhe was horrified to see his love and his friends summoned into the path of the dangerous shout. Everyone was thrown heavily against the wall.

“Harry!!”

Now, Mazhe could only watch, as Credence lost control, devolving into the swirling dark mass. It had only one target in its sights: the sharply dressed wizard. Unfortunately, Graves was proving to be no ordinary wizard, rapidly casting a shrinking charm on himself to avoid being caught up by the Obscurus. It swamped the entire platform a moment, before blasting up through the ceiling, sending debris and rubble in all directions.

It was only gone for a few seconds, long enough for Mazhe to get back on the platform and try to get to his mate and companions. Harry and Newt were starting to come around, but the others were still completely out of it.

Mazhe was once again forced to erect a strong shield to deflect another storm of curses from the enemy wizard.

“Harry, c’mon. Need you up.”

The Obscurus blasted back down through the hole, once again making Mazhe duck, though he now realized that was unnecessary: the Obscurus only swirled around him. So Credence did hold some level of control over it, then. It now hugged the ceiling, akin to some messed up sculpture, pulsing and retracting, as though breathing heavily.

“It’s gonna kill you, Mr. Graves,” said Mazhe, calmly. “Quite honestly, I don’t think many here will shed a tear if it does.”

Graves answered with another storm of spells, all of which were easily deflected. This only angered the Obscurus again, and it swirled, pooling overhead, poised to fulfil Mazhe’s prediction.

“Credence no!”

Mazhe flicked his eyes to the tunnel, where Tina had emerged, wand pointed at Graves.

“Mazhe?” Harry whispered, trying to sit up. Newt was getting into a sitting position as well.

“Credence? Don’t do this,” Tina pleaded.

“K-keep talking Tina. He’s listening,” Newt whispered.

“I know what that woman did to you. I know you’ve suffered,” said Tina, softly, “You need to stop this now. Newt, Harry, and I will protect you.

“This man... He is using you—”

“Don’t listen to her, Credence,” Graves interjected, “I want you to be free—”
Now, the Obscurus reeled back, as Aurors rushed in from both the stair well, and the tunnel.

“Shhh! You’ll frighten him!” Tina pleaded.

“Wands down!” Graves commanded, “Anyone harms him, they’ll answer to me.”

“Credence...” Tina spoke, “Shh... shhh... it’s all—”

The room was suddenly bathed in a brilliant storm of lights, as dozens of powerful spells impacted with the Obscurus.

“NO!” came a quartet of voices, joined by an almost unearthly scream, as there came a terrible blast, the parasite disintegrating, raining down millions of tiny pieces—all reminiscent of the death of Alduin less than a year prior.

“Bloody morons,” Harry muttered, reaching into his pouch, and producing his chest. He set it on the floor, and with a touch of the finger, had it restored to proper size. He opened it, calling, “We’re clear.”

“You fools,” said Graves, looking disgusted, “Do you realize what you’ve done?”

“The Obscurial was killed on my orders, Mr. Graves,” spoke a tall, dark-skinned woman in a sharp robe. Aaron had climbed out, and was then helping Brandon to sit up.

“Yes. And history will surely note that, Madam President. What was done here tonight was not right.”

“He was responsible for the death of a no-maj. He risked exposure of our community. He has broken one of our most sacred laws,” the President spoke, gravely, as others climbed out of the chest. Mazhe was helping Harry back to his feet.

“A law that has us scuttling like rats in the gutter!” Graves snapped back, “A law that demands we conceal our true nature! A law that directs those under its dominion to cower in fear lest we risk discovery!”

He glanced around the room, momentarily startled by the extra people who’d joined the strangers.

“I ask you, Madam President. I ask all of you... Who does this law protect? Us?”

He then pointed to the ceiling.

“Or them? I refuse to bow down any longer.”

Harry had heard just about enough. “So you then believe that witches and wizards should rule over those who are not? Is that your argument? That those 'no-maj's' as you call them should cower in fear of us?”

“Harry...” Brandon cautioned.

“No, have to agree with Harry,” said Justin, as he put away another empty vial, “Valicadia's surpassing every nation in the ICW. Why? Because we embrace ALL of our people, whether they be magical or not.”

“And why is it that you remain on the outside of ICW business?” Graves sneered, “Collaborating with no-maj filth, rather than let yourselves become something grater!”
Bryce looked at the man a moment. “Is it just me, or is he channelling another bitch you guys just caught?”

Harry immediately charged up a spell, as did Brandon, Aaron, Justin, and Mazhe. Bryce and Walker immediately produced pistols, and aimed them at the man. Though clearly out of their element, both Ragnar and Athelstan also drew weapons, quickly pushing Zoey in behind them.

The President looked strangely at the odd group, then back at the wizard she thought she knew. No, something was most definitely wrong here.

“Aurors,” she decided, “I’d like you to relieve Mr. Graves of his wand and escort him back to—”

Graves didn’t allow the President to finish, instead unleashing a storm of spells.

“**ZUN!**” Mazhe shouted, the sound echoing loudly due to the room’s shape. Though it didn’t work as Mazhe had hoped, Graves was momentarily startled by the shout, long enough that Bryce took the opportunity. Two shots rang out just as a strange, winged creature seemed to explode from Newt’s hand.

Graves was attempting to heal the gunshot wounds, but suddenly found his arms bound behind his back, and driven to his knees. It had happened in under a second, Newt had yanked hard on the magical tether the creature had created. Bryce, meanwhile, stowed his pistol back in his pouch.

“You dare?!” Graves hissed, from his prone position.

“Not sure if I’d get away with puttin’ a bullet in your skull, moron. You think we’re weak little things that should cower under your boots? A couple’a bullets’ll give you something to think about won’t it?”

“Harry. You all right?” Mazhe asked.

“Will be.”

“Madam President... this man... he’s wearing a disguise... self-transfiguration,” said Justin, as Tina summoned the wand.

Newt thrust his wand at the prone man. “**Revelio.**”

The group had various reactions, as the transfiguration was reversed. The face reverted to one of fair skin, white hair, and a thin moustache. The first impression Harry got, was of ice, of cold.

Ragnar and Athelstan were unsure of what to think. A man being able to change their appearance at will? To look like anyone they chose? If one could also imitate the personality... it presented terrifying implications.

The magical President hid her shock pretty well. Though Harry could easily guess the terrible implications running through her head. The thing is, what purpose did the man gain by impersonating an Auror?

Aaron, though, had a very different reaction, nearly hissing at the man now in their midst.

“Aaron... what’s wrong?” Justin asked.

The captured man only sneered. “Do you think you can hold me?”

“We’ll do our best, Mr. Grindelwald.”
Now, Harry was equally alarmed, knowing EXACTLY who the man was.

“Guys! In the chest. NOW.”

“No. We got this, Harry,” Aaron reassured him, “He’s not going anywhere.”

A pair of Aurors dragged Grindelwald back to his feet, and began to lead him away.


“You know of him?” asked Newt.

“I’ve... yes, I know of him. He threatens Valicadia as much as he threatens Europe. Though he should know better than to even attempt to set foot inside our borders. My government would deal with him quite differently.”

“Be that as it may, New York is our jurisdiction, Mr...”

“Forgive me, Madam President. Harry Stormcrown, Commonwealth of Valicadia.”

“I see,” said the President.

“Newt. Your case,” said Jacob, handing over the suitcase.

“Thank you.”

“We owe your an apology, Mr. Scamander,” said the President. “But the magical community is exposed! We cannot Obliviate an entire city.”

“Actually, I think we can.”

Harry and most of his circle looked at Newt like he’d grown a second head. So did most of the Aurors for that matter. Thousands of people had been exposed to magic! No way could they just... make everyone forget. Nothing could be that powerful... right?

Newt, meanwhile, simply put his suitcase on the floor, and opened it up. He stuck his face in, making an odd, but loud call everyone could hear.

“What happened?”

“Queenie! Where were you?!?” Tina all but demanded.

“I was stuck outside the barrier until it failed. You okay sis?”

“You?”

“I’ll be okay. Where—oh!”

Newt had pulled his head back out of the suitcase, and a great winged animal soared out of it, to then land in front of him. It was truly beautiful, with gold-coloured feathers which glittered in the dim light.

“I was intending to wait until we got to Arizona, but it seems like now you are our only hope, Frank.”

The animal clucked, sounding almost affectionate, if Harry guessed. Newt rubbed the animal’s beak.
“I'll miss you too. You know what you've got to do.”

The animal again took flight, as Newt reached into his coat pocket, and pulled out a vial filled with a dark blue substance. He flung it up in the air, and the great beast snapped it up in his beak, to then soar up through the gaping hole in the ceiling, into the dawn’s early light. Only a few seconds after, there came a tremendously loud crack of thunder.

“Shor’s bones...” Mazhe muttered, as rain began to fall through the opening. Another crack of thunder came only seconds after.

“Mjolnir!” Ragnar cried, “It wields Mjolnir!”

“Thor’s hammer,” Harry recalled.

“Yes, there have been those who believe that,” said Newt.

Brandon was only just getting to a sitting position. “Jesus Christ... what... what happened?”

“Grindelwald happened,” Aaron answered. “MACUSA’s got him in custody.”

“Gellert Grindelwald. He was here?”

“Disguised as my Director of Magical Security,” said the President.

“Harry? You all right?”

“I’ll have a few bruises, nothing permanent. You all right?”

“Still screwed up a little. G-guys. Help put this place back in order.”

“Er... right.”

That was the cue for those magical to begin repairing the damage to the station. Since just about everyone non-magical had seen it done before, it wasn’t a great shock, but Ragnar still thought it impressive, seeing the massive columns being restored to their original condition. Pieces of broken concrete, bricks, and porcelain tile all zipped around, finding their proper place, the shattered glass was reassembling itself and fitting back into the iron framework which was untwisting itself, restoring itself to its proper shape. The chandeliers were reattaching themselves to the ceiling, untwisting and returning to their pristine condition, the lights coming back on... and in only a matter of minutes, it was as if the battle never happened.

“They won’t remember anything,” said Newt, “That venom has incredibly powerful obliviative properties”

Brandon looked at Newt a moment, before reaching into his pouch, and summoning a pair of lanyards with tags attached to them.

“Ragnar, Athelstan. Put these on so you will be protected from its effects.”

“They’re no-maj’s? Obliviate them!” an Auror exclaimed, as both men put the lanyards around their necks. Ragnar reached back and lifted his lengthy braid clear of it so it would fit properly.

The President held up a hand. “I trust there is a good explanation for your presence.”

“Apologies,” said Brandon, “Our ship suffered a catastrophic malfunction and was forced to land in Central Park’s reservoir while we conduct repairs. The short of it, we spotted the Obscurus yesterday,
and have been investigating it.”

“When we spotted it rampaging through the streets a couple of hours ago, we joined pursuit, madam President,” said Aaron. Brandon raised his brows. President? Ah, of course, it would make sense.

“I see. Well, the Commonwealth's assistance is appreciated, though ultimately not necessary.”

“Though we do have different policies regarding a number of matters, an Obscurus rampaging through the streets is a threat to everyone.”

Aaron reached into his pouch, and produced his credentials. “Aaron Carpenter, His Majesty's Royal Marines, King's Protection Detail.”

Brandon now mirrored Aaron. “Brandon McAllister, His Majesty's Royal Navy, King's Protection Detail. The rest of our party join us at His Majesty's pleasure.”

“In our territory!” another Auror protested.

“I've already received more than an earful from the ICW, I would rather not end up at odds with Valicadia,” said the President, “Though I trust your companions are aware of the laws.”

She turned back to Newt, who had been watching a curious thread of magical energy sliding into Harry’s open chest. “We owe you a great debt, Mr. Scamander. Now, get that case out of New York.”

“Yes, madam President.”

She then looked around, seeming to search for something. “Is that no-maj still around?”

Jacob stepped out from behind Bryce, looking sheepish.

“Obliviate him. There can be no exceptions,” said the President. “I'm sorry, but even one witness. You know the law. I'll let you say good-bye.”

“Said it before, I'll say it again. It's a stupid law,” said Bryce.

“It's all we have,” said the President.

Brandon looked at the non-magical people who were in the group, then back at the President. “And you know madam President, that things are changing. Our world is changing, whether we want it to or not. How much do you know about the modern world, here and now? Grindelwald did have somewhat of a point—who does Rappaport's Law really protect?”

“We're not saying Grindelwald is right. Only that, there are other ways of protecting ourselves,” said Aaron.

“What would you have us do, then?!” questioned another Auror.

“For starters? Have a word or three with King Alexander. I'm certain he would accept an owl from your President.”

“Laws are not easily changed, Mr. Carpenter.”

“No, madam President, but you have to begin somewhere.”
UP NEXT: Harry and his circle say good bye to Newt, Tina, Queenie, and Jacob; and Harry discovers a stowaway in his chest...

CHAPTER NOTES: Of course, Credence has survived. It’s canon, people. Just, in this case, he’s been drawn in a different direction. I’ll say this. He has an important part to play in the future… poor Dumbledore.
(1) In canon, Harry loses this ability when the Horcrux in his head is destroyed. This is AU, so bite me.
The Stowaway

Chapter Summary

SUMMARY: Harry and his circle say good bye to Newt, Tina, Queenie, and Jacob; and Harry discovers a stowaway in his chest...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

24. THE STOWAWAY

January, 2008 / December, 1926 / August, 801

“Oh, captain, my captain, there's a stowaway on board; Alert the watchmen; Sound the alarm”

- My Eyes Fall Victim, “My Dark Passenger”

After seeing Jacob off, the group once again gathered in the mezzanine of the subway station.

“Where to now?” Justin asked.

“We still have to locate my missing Occamy,” said Newt.

“We’ve got Air Wing looking for it,” said Aaron, “I’ve already shared a memory of our adventure at Macy’s with the government; they should be more than capable of catching it. When they do, they’ll bring it to us.”

“Unharmed.”

“Trust me, Mr. Scamander, it’ll be looked after with care. The Ministry of the Environment does amazing work in situations like this.”

“How come we didn’t summon them in the first place?” Mazhe asked.

“With everything coming at us as fast as it did, there was little time,” answered Justin. “With better time to think and react...”

“Though we did admirably all considered,” said Brandon. “No one was seriously hurt, a dark wizard is in custody...”

“Credence was killed, Brandon!” Harry snarled, “Tina had him nearly calmed down, a bit more time and he would have been fine! No, instead MACUSA Aurors roll in like cowboys and blow everything to fuck!”

“And getting angry about it won’t solve anything, Harry,” said Mazhe, giving his shoulder a squeeze. “Let’s find some place to regroup and think on matters. I assume the Ragnar’s still not
secure.”

“No, it isn’t,” answered Brandon.

“The Polo Grounds,” Bryce suggested, “It’s a baseball stadium in Upper Manhattan.”

“Given this time of year, it wouldn’t be in use,” said Aaron, “Sounds good to me.”

That got a nod from Brandon. “Get us a bookmark.”

“Phoenix lead, Gladius.”

“Go ahead, Gladius.”

“Need a bookmark for the Polo Grounds, baseball stadium.”

“I’ll need more than that,” said Captain Rowland.

Bryce pressed a button on his radio set. “Uh… it would be directly across the Harlem River from Yankee Stadium.”

“Roger that, Mr. Hunter. Give us two minutes, we’re in the area.”

“Why the Polo Grounds?” Harry asked.

“This place doesn’t… it’s a place I wanted to see. And like Aaron said, won’t be people around.”

Harry quickly caught on to what Bryce was about to say.

The Polo Grounds
Upper Manhattan, New York City

The bookmark dropped them quite literally on home plate. Harry made a wide circle with his hand, creating a shield from the pelting rain.

“I could get used to travelling that way,” said Ragnar. “We have travelled many miles in a matter of seconds.”

“Exactly,” said Justin.

“Right. Let’s get out of the weather so I can set down my chest.”

“Over there. The visitors’ dugout,” Bryce suggested, “There shouldn’t be anyone here, but y’never know. Visiting side, almost a sure bet no one’s around.”

“Right.”

They crossed the field to the visitors’ dugout, and down the steps leading into the locker room. An unlocking charm provided access, and they stepped inside.

“You pair, keep watch. Anyone comes near, I wanna know about it,” said Brandon, gesturing to the additional SOU present.

“Sir,” the pair chorused.

“Harry, produce your chest.”
In short order, everyone save for the additional SOU climbed in. And there, they got an unexpected surprise: Credence lay slumped up against the wall in the common room. He looked unharmed physically.

“But... they killed him,” said Tina.

“No, he’s still alive,” said Justin, who’d knelt down to check for a pulse. He found one, though a little soft.

“The Obscurus...”

“Likely saved his life,” said Harry, “I think we need healer Ferris.”

Justin let out a snort. “I think we all need her services, Harry. Gods above, you were nailed with Mazhe’s shout. We were all nailed by Grindelwald at one point or other...”

“D’you mind going out and calling for her?”

“Sure.”

Justin got back to his feet, and climbed out of the chest, with Aaron following.

“But... why did he come in here?” Mazhe wanted to know, “Of all the places...”

“C’mon, Mazhe. This place likely acted like a magnet for his tortured soul.”

“MACUSA can’t know he’s alive,” said Tina.

“No, agreed. He can come back to England—” Newt began, but Harry shook his head. “No. No offence, but he can’t be anywhere near either of you. If there’s even a hint he may still be alive...”

“But then where will he go?”

“With us,” said Brandon, “We have access to a number of people who have the best chance of helping Mr. Barebone deal with the parasite, while also teaching him about magic.”

“And I think healer Ferris will be able to help him work through the trauma he’s suffered.”

“Yeah, she’s awesome,” said Walker, “I’ve only been meeting with her for a few days... but she’s helped a ton. I’m in a better place mentally, much thanks to her.”

“She’s helped all of us at one point,” Mazhe agreed.

“And if she can’t, she’ll get someone who can.”

Brandon, meanwhile, did a quick scan to make sure there was no hidden injury. Satisfied, he then levitated Credence off of the floor, and onto one of the couches. Finally, he tucked one of the pillows under his head for extra comfort.

Mazhe, meanwhile, couldn’t help but shake his head. “Gods, Harry. Ever the magnet for tortured souls.”

Harry gave him a swat. “Hey, it ain’t my fault!”

“an’ my soul ain’t tortured,” said Walker, annoyed, “Maybe my mind was, but...”
“We get it. Thing is, Harry’s got a way of attracting those who need help the most,” said Mazhe, “I mean, your case... and Bryce... and—”

“Tommy,” Harry finished, softly.

“He was my friend too, Harry.”

It was then Justin re-entered the chest, with healer Ferris following, and in turn, Aaron.

“Where is he?” Ferris asked.

“Here,” said Brandon, indicating the unconscious figure now laid out on the couch.

Ferris set her bag on the floor, and tapped it with her wand, causing it to expand. She then began to cast several scanning charms.

“How was he found?”

“Over there,” said Mazhe, pointing to a space against the wall.

“I moved him onto a couch after determining he’d not been injured physically,” said Brandon.

“And nothing else was done to this point?”

“None.”

“Very well. I’ll need a bit of time to perform a deeper examination.”

“Thank you,” said Harry. “C’mon, we’ll go into the dining room.”

“How alike is the magic here... to that in Mr. Scamander’s case?” Athelstan wondered.

“Identical,” said Newt, “Mine is configured and decorated for a different purpose, but by all other accounts, it’s identical magic.”

“And it is unlimited?”

“I have not encountered any hard limit, no. My case has been expanded many times to accommodate the creatures in my care.”

Harry couldn’t help but chuckle. “I can quite imagine that, Mr. Scamander. This chest... it was a gift given to me, let me see... going on three years ago now? Forgive me, a number of experiences I’ve had over the past couple of years have skewed my exact memory on a number of things.”

“Two and a half years ago,” said Justin. “Remember, the Ragnar’s crew was becoming annoyed at your use of their VPR.”

Harry smirked. “Right, yes, I do remember that.”

“VPR?” Tina asked.

“Uh. It’s a room that can turn into anything we need it to,” said Justin.

There were more than a few surprised looks from the faces gathered around the table.

“There’s rumour such a room exists at Hogwarts.”
“The Room of Requirement. I’ve seen it,” said Harry, “And it’s just as awesome as our VPR, though it won’t keep its form if it’s vacated.”

Zoey, who was sitting beside Justin, let out a yawn. “Justin... we need sleep. Been awake way too long.”

“Yes, agreed,” said Brandon, “We’ve been going nearly twenty-four hours, so a bit of sleep’s in order.”

Harry glared at Brandon. “No, the first thing is, you’re going to tell us why we’re not going back to the Ragnar. I'm invoking privilege.”

Brandon gave a pained expression, and Harry already had a pretty good idea. “How angry is this gonna make me?”

Brandon gave another pained expression. “The... you know... where these guys come from...” he gestured to Ragnar and Athelstan, “The portal's what blew up. Caused damage two decks below, massive fire. We’re lucky Air Wing was in the air at the time; we would've lost birds otherwise.”

“And?” Ragnar pressed.

“The portal was completely destroyed, sir.”

Harry looked furious.

“We’re working on reopening it,” Brandon promised.

“Jezebel,” Harry hissed, “Likely sabotaged the portal. I'll shred her fucking brain if I have to...”

“Harry, the government's already questioned her. Whatever spell, or ritual she used to create it, it's protected by the Fidelius charm.”

Queenie looked gobsmacked. “Hold on a minute, honey. Someone put a Fidelius Charm on their mind?”

“It is exactly that, Miss Goldstein,” answered Brandon, “The individual has led a number of catastrophic attacks against the Commonwealth.”

“Grindelwald,” said Newt, simply.

“No. Though I'm sure the faction she belongs to has researched his tactics.”

Harry still looked furious. “We get the connection wrong, we could miss the mark by...”

“We know, Harry. Gods, we know,” said Aaron. “Honestly, it may not be attempted until the ship's back in the air and back where she belongs.”

“Really, it'll be best if we get back where we belong as it is,” said Brandon, “The Commonwealth will be in a better position to deal with Jezebel permanently.”

Queenie, meanwhile, was picking up some of Ragnar’s thoughts. She let out a gasp, as her eyes got wide. “Oh my... are you ever a long way from home!”

“Queenie!” her sister hissed, but Harry knew it was too late.

“The three of you weren't meant to know that.”
“How did...” Ragnar began.

“She’s a Legilimens, like I am. Though it is impolite to invade someone’s thoughts.”

“I can’t help it,” Queenie confessed, “No-maj’s are so easy to read...”

“It’s still not polite,” said Aaron, “And in this case, you’ve now become privy to state secrets.”

“We’ll have to be Obliviated,” said Newt.

“We don’t want to, but...”

“Either that, or we apply a secrecy charm.”

“We have to Obliviate them,” said Brandon, “The future...”

“Then you’re all time travellers,” Tina realized.

“Yes. Because of something that happened to our ship. A number of events—pieces came together that created a massive port key through time.”

“It was either that or have the Ragnar blow up MACUSA’s headquarters in 2008. We’re pretty sure it’s what the terrorists tried to do.”

Now, Tina and her sister both looked angry. “We would declare war!”

“We know that,” said Justin, “It was Harry who suggested we divert her energy charge into a teleport. It worked, albeit a little too well. And, here we are.”

“And so your intrusion into our world... came after,” Ragnar guessed.

“The events are somewhat related. From her own words, OND orchestrated the second attack shortly after we re-established a link with 2008. Now it looks like they also rigged the portal to self-destruct after a certain amount of time. Almost like...”

Harry gave a nod. “They expected we’d go through after them. It was likely an attempt to trap us in 801CE.”

He thought for a moment. “It took over a year for contact to be reestablished last time I time-travelled... though by different circumstances.”

“Your time in... 73BC, you said,” Athelstan remembered.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Harry,” said Zoey, “We can’t do anything about this ourselves. We really need some sleep.”

“Yeah, agreed,” said Justin.

“All right, fine,” Harry huffed. “Uh...”

“Ragnar and Athelstan can use Tommy’s room,” said Mazhe.

“They’ll need an extra bed. I’ll look after it and worry about the others,” Justin volunteered. “Seriously, Harry. Go get some rest.”

“Five hours. Let’s be up and about in about five hours,” said Aaron.
Harry and Mazhe slept for eight hours, with a little help from the time turner, and a pair of dreamless sleep potions. Harry knew he wouldn’t get any rest without it, considering the ongoing situation. If one more thing was dropped in his lap, he again raged in his head... no. The second things were resolved with Ragnar and Athelstan, the lot were going away. Perhaps back to the College. But at this point, Harry planned on putting as much distance between him and the Commonwealth as was possible. No mobiles, owls, or other forms of contact, for a couple of weeks at least.

Of course, Bryce did have spring training coming up, and they’d need to be back mid-Sun’s Dawn(1), but... the group needed rest, mentally, and physically.

“You look lost in your thoughts,” said Mazhe, as they got dressed.

“Thinking is all. We’ve had no chance to rest since at all since before the events in Dubai. Once we see to Ragnar and Athelstan’s safety and get them back where they belong, we’ll be going back to Skyrim, and away from Valicadia altogether until the end of Morning Star(2). Unless the world’s coming to an end, I don’t want to hear about it.”

“The past couple of weeks have been a series of unfortunate events, I agree. But you know it’ll be difficult to be completely out of contact; Aaron’s gonna come along, whether you want him to or not, never mind Brandon. And Bryce... he’s got baseball training coming up, right?”

“Yeah, I know that. It’s why I said end of month. He’s told me about spring training—they start up around mid-Sun’s Dawn. And you know, we’ll stay close. He’s one of us, pretty much.”

“And you know that’s gonna get... interesting... if shit goes down while he’s at a game.”

Harry scowled. “And knowing my luck, it’s not an if, but when. And I thought last year was bad.”

Justin’s door was still closed, and Harry decided not to bother him, since it was likely he was spending some proper time with his girlfriend. Perhaps, it was time to consider inviting Zoey to training—if she was going to be hanging around them with increasing frequency, it would be better if she had an inkling on how to defend herself. Now as to whether her father would allow that to happen, that was another matter altogether.

The rest of the expanded group were already up, gathered in the VPR.

“Healer Ferris asked us to stay out of the common room,” said Brandon, at the unasked question.

“He’s woke up then,” Mazhe guessed.

“Yes, about an hour ago,” said Aaron.

“We could go outside, have a look—” Bryce began, but Brandon shook his head. “It’s already dark.”

“Shit.”

“We might have some time to look around in the morning. But I think Dobby’s just about got food ready for us.”

“You could’ve let us help,” said Queenie.

Harry only shook his head. “No. Dobby relishes the work. The kitchen’s kind of his domain.”

“Where’s Justin?” Brandon asked.
“We’re leaving him and Zoey alone for now,” said Harry, “Think it’s gonna be a bit before we leave...”

“The morning, at the earliest,” Brandon agreed. He spotted healer Ferris standing in the doorway.

“Mr. Barebone is awake, but no excitement. He’s calm, but still very stressed under the surface,” she warned.

“It’s Harry’s space. Maybe he should talk to Credence first,” Bryce suggested, “Then he can meet the rest of us after.”

“Sounds good to me.”

Harry and Mazhe followed healer Ferris back out to the common room, where Credence was seated comfortably on one of the couches. He looked up, and Harry could still see the fear in his eyes. No shit, the young wizard had been through a nightmare. He snorted in his head. Look in the mirror.

“Mr. Barebone. Uh... I’m Harry. This is Mazhe.”

“I... the thing in me... it brought me here. Drawn into it by something. I'm sorry...” Credence answered, softly.

“There's no reason to be sorry. We did want to talk to you, help you. It's unfortunate things unfolded as they did; I would have rather met under slightly more pleasant conditions. So goes my life.”

He glanced at healer Ferris. “I know Brandon did check for injuries, but...”

“No physical injuries, Mr. Stormcrown. However, we are in agreement that there are other issues that will take much longer to work through. You lot are now consuming most of my billable hours.”

“If payment is an issue...” Harry began.

“Oh nothing like that. I rephrase, your group takes up most of my time. The taxpayer picks up the bill, as it is for any person receiving the services of a healer.”

“I... Modesty,” Credence whispered.

“Your young sister,” said Harry, “Miss Goldstein did mention...”

Credence once again looked frightened. “She... Graves was trying... I led him to her.”

“Was she still alive?” Mazhe asked.

“I... I think so.”

Harry and Mazhe shared a look. “We’ll have someone look for her. Actually. You remember the woman who was trying to talk to you in the underground—the subway station?”

Credence gave a nod.

“She’s in here with us. Is it all right if she and her friends join us for a minute?”

Credence again gave a nod.

“Newt, Tina, Queenie, come on out a minute!”
In short order, they joined Harry and Mazhe, sitting across from the young wizard.

“Credence thinks his young sister may still be alive.”

“Then we have to find her,” said Tina.

“And I’ll go along,” said Aaron, from the hallway leading to the rooms.

“Get more support from the Ragnar if necessary. I think we should consider this a priority.”

Aaron gave a nod. “Sir.”

“Bring her back here. She can join her brother and come along when we return to... well... when we return to where we belong,” harry decided.

Credence looked surprised. “You want me to stay?”

“Yes. MACUSA will kill you if they learn you're still alive,” said Aaron.

“We have people and resources who can help you deal with the parasitic force inside you, if not get rid of it completely. You will also have the opportunity to study magic. In my opinion, you'll make a smashing mage,” Harry grinned.

That earned a shy grin out of Credence. It was what he had wanted in the first place, after all. Just perhaps, these kind people might be telling the truth. Still...

“Why did you save me?”

“Because it was the right thing to do,” said Harry, simply.

“We should get going. It’s dark, gonna be more than a challenge,” said Aaron, “I’ll get Air Wing to help out.”

“Be careful, sis,” Queenie said.

“I’ll look after her,” Aaron promised.

And with that, the pair were climbing up the ladder leading outside.

Credence watched this. “Where is this anyway?”

“I have a very special chest given to me by some dear friends,” Harry answered, “The inside has been magically expanded into what you see.”

“This is all magic?”

“Most of it, yes. Though there are a number of things brought in that are not.”

Harry’s eyes flicked to a pair of books on the bookshelf. He flicked a hand at both of them, and summoned them. “I would ask you be careful, as some things are not safe to be handled.”

He stuffed the pair of black books into his pouch. “Mazhe, where’s the Ohgma Infinium?”

“Miraak has it.”

“Right. Harry, we should just create a bookshelf with doors for those ones—or any other unsafe materials,” Mazhe suggested.
“I did notice Athelstan was reading some of the book titles earlier,” Harry agreed.

He thought a moment. “Speaking of whom. Uh... Credence, there are a few others you haven’t met yet. Is it all right they join us?”

“I... I guess.”

“I can only guess how overwhelmed you might be. I have walked your path in many ways over the past couple of weeks. Just... know that anyone in here, they’re perfectly safe. The wards placed on it ensure it.”

“Then how did I get in here?” asked Credence. “The... thing inside of me...”

“The ward likely did not sense personal intent do do harm, Credence,” Newt answered. “I assume your ward is attuned to those who would intend harm.”

“Yes. Among other things. The thing is, an Obscurus is unknown territory. We’ll just have to learn as we go. Mazhe, go fetch the others, and we can have something to eat. I suspect it’s been ready for a while.”

“We should have eaten before sending Tina and Aaron out,” said Mazhe.

“We’ll make sure there is a plate left for the both of them. And bang on Justin’s door.”

“How many... how many of you are there?” Credence asked, as Mazhe headed down the hallway he’d seen Aaron come out of.

“Well... there’s me, Mazhe... Justin and his girlfriend, Aaron and Brandon... Bryce... they’re my close circle of friends. You may or may not remember Newt and Queenie, as well as her sister. Then there is Martin, who’s recently joined us. And finally, a pair of new friends who are displaced much as we are, Ragnar and Athelstan.”

“Your... chest... it holds that many people?”

“It was designed well,” said Harry, as the others filed in. “Magic, as you likely know somewhat, can be quite versatile. Such as.”

Harry flicked a hand at one of the book cases, and instantly, a set of doors appeared. Credence watched with rapt fascination, as some of the books were then quickly moved around, with Harry conducting things such as a conductor would a symphony.

“Some of the books here are dangerous to open, let alone read. This is something I should have done some time ago, given the number of non-magical people who are in my company on a regular basis.”

He reached back into his pouch, and retrieved the two Black Books, adding them to the newly created locked book case. The doors were then closed, and a touch of the finger had them locked.

Credence still looked overwhelmed by all of the extra people, but with healer Ferris’ help, they guided him into the dining room where food was waiting.

“Come, help yourself,” said Harry. “Knowing Dobby, he’s made enough to feed everyone twice over.”

“This chest has a kitchen too?” asked Newt, as he took a seat.

“Yeah,” said Justin, “We wanted to make sure Harry had everything he could need in a short term, in
case he got stuck someplace without access to proper facilities. The supply’s only good for a week or so, but..."

“Dobby’s been getting supplies form the ship,” said Harry, as he plucked a bottle of ale from the ice chest at the centre of the table. “Uh... ale, mead, cider, soda pop, wine, and...”

“Colovian Brandy,” said Mazhe, as he snatched up a bottle from the chest.

Ragnar took a bottle of mead, while Athelstan snatched up a bottle of ale. Credence hesitated, but chose a bottle of ale.

Harry smirked. “How old are you anyway?”

Credence moved to put the bottle back, but Harry waved him off. “In here, we don’t care, really.”

“I’m twenty.”

“A year won’t make that much difference, honey,” said Queenie.

“It’s nineteen in the Commonwealth,” said Brandon, as he fixed his plate, “So, he’s more than old enough. And he’s of wizarding age as it is.”

“Wizarding age?” Both Credence and Ragnar asked.

“Wizarding age of majority. When a person is able to cast magic outside of school without getting in trouble for it,” Newt supplied.

“Our rules are slightly more relaxed,” said Justin, “Considering we have no secrecy laws within our borders.”

“What was it like, growing up in Valicadia?” Queenie wondered.

“Well... just like you guys, I did go to school. Thing is, on top of magical subjects, we have the traditional school subjects like math and English, chemistry... a lot more work.”

“The homework had to have been a nightmare,” said Newt.

“Sometimes,” Harry agreed, “But... it’s expected. See, magic is only a small part of who we are. We still bleed red at the end of the day. We’re all human beings with the same skills, the same potential strengths, and the same weaknesses. It’s what we do with it that determines truly who we are. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“Something OND, or Grindelwald, or another individual we know currently... has forgotten a long time ago,” said Brandon.

“Same as every terrorist we know,” said Walker, quietly, “All claim religious shit or some other pathetic excuse... but they’re all the same in the end.”

“Monsters, nothing more, nothing less.” Harry scowled. “Can we go an hour without talking about such rubbish? It’s all we do, it seems.”

Brandon gave a sad nod. “We do, don’t we? I’m sorry.”

“And the entire lot of you need to step back,” said Ferris, “Since the eighth of the month, it’s been an ongoing series of disasters. Harry, you’ve lost two members of your close circle, men you adored and loved—”
“A decision I’ve already come to on my own, healer Ferris,” Harry interjected, “We’re going off the radar once a couple of matters are resolved. At minimum, until the beginning of Sun’s Dawn—February.”

“I will have spring training...”

“The reason we will return in February, Bryce. And even then... the only time I want to know about something, is if it’s a direct threat to us personally. As much as I hate the idea...”

“You cannot save the world, Harry,” said Ragnar.

“No. I can’t.”

“I’ll make sure DOI’s aware when we get back,” said Brandon. “But you know Aaron’s gonna go with you no matter what.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way. I’d ask you to come, but... you’ve got a new assignment.”

“If you want me along, you can do it, Harry. The Queen will respect your wishes.”

Harry gave a nod. “As long as it doesn’t cause problems for the Ragnar.”

Credence looked confused. “Why is there... he is named Ragnar... but...”

Harry chuckled. “I understand the confusion. Our ship. She is named after him.”

Credence looked at Ragnar. “You have a ship named after you?”

Ragnar gave a nod and grinned. “It was no small surprise when they informed me. I have little doubt you will see her in person.”

“Oh, I would count on it... likely sooner rather than later,” said Harry, “This chest is not meant for long-term living. We have a set of rooms on the ship more appropriate. And, once we get back where we belong, I have an even better apartment.”

“As to my being missing... Harry, it’s the Queen’s prerogative, and somewhat yours, given your position,” said Brandon.

“Then... I would like you to come with us. Not only as our protection, but as a dear friend.”

It was then Brandon’s mobile chirped, indicating a message. He pulled it out, and read it.

“The ministry of Natural Resources has captured the Occamy,” he said, getting to his feet. “Mr. Scamander, if you’ll come with me.”

“Oh. Of course.”

They were only gone for about five minutes. Newt looked more than relieved, as he set his case at his feet and retook his seat. Brandon, too, sat back down, and continued with his meal. So, another loose end had been tied up. Of course, there was still the issue of altering their memories and sending them on their way.

The same went for Ragnar and his companion. Sure, they were already aware of magic, but knowledge of the future was a big no-no. Harry admitted, his interaction with Batiatus’ ludus in 73BCE had been a massive violation of the rules, but at the time, he really had no choice.
With Ragnar and Athelstan, the interaction had only been over a few days, and likely to wrap up in no more than two or three more. At that point, their memories would have to be modified. At least, their memories concerning the future. Harry did make a silent promise that they would at minimum remember who he was. Just perhaps, a few small matters of history could be adjusted.

The Northmen had been adversaries, some cases enemies of Eoforwin immediately following Ragnar’s lifespan. What if that could be adjusted slightly? Perhaps, plant seeds of friendship between the pre-Commonwealth city and the Vikings? Was that a big thing, or a small thing?

No matter, no one could know of his idea. He knew there would be more than a few people who would have plenty to say about attempting such a thing. But... as father of the nation, he saw a potential opportunity to strengthen the Commonwealth’s footing.

Sometime later, Tina and Aaron returned, bringing Modesty with them. Credence was relieved as they were reunited.

“You were unharmed?”

“No... I stayed hidden after...”

“It’s all right. We... we’re safe here,” Credence promised.

“I know of two girls a few years older than you; they’ll probably not mind having an honorary younger sister. I’m Harry, this is Mazhe. We’ll make sure you and your brother are well taken care of.”

“And that man?” Modesty asked, “Will he come after us?”

“He’s gone. I promise,” said Harry. “You both will be coming with us where he can’t ever reach you.”

“He wanted Credence, but...”

“We know,” said Justin. “And like Harry said, he won’t threaten either of you ever again.”

That spurned yet another round of introductions, as the group settled in the common room. Harry had to make a few adjustments, making room for the additional people.

He couldn’t help but laugh. “Gods, seems I’m doing that a lot lately.”

“At least everyone here’s a friend,” Bryce pointed out, “God, just an endless load of shit.”

“Yeah, enough about that. But we need to have a conversation about a few things. Uh...”

“Miss Barebone, let’s go into the kitchen and see if we can find some milk and cookies,” Zoey suggested.

“I’ll come with,” said Justin.

“But... ma didn’t—”

“Ma’s gone, Modesty,” said Credence, getting to his feet. “Let’s go with miss Bartlet.”

‘Nice save,’ Harry thought, as the four of them headed into the dining room. He waited until they were gone. “Zoey was clever to get them out of the room. Not sure if they’re ready for the naked truth yet.”
“That you have travelled through time,” Athelstan guessed.

“Exactly.”

“But we won’t be able to keep it from them long,” said Aaron.

“No. Definitely not. But I think both Credence and his sister have been through enough calamity and chaos over the past few hours, let’s give them a bit of time before dumping another bizarre set of circumstances on their heads,” said Harry.

“Yes, I have to agree,” said Ferris, “And it would be a good idea they not be exposed to too much stress for the next while, give them a chance to rest mentally. I’m sure you would like to begin showing him magic, testing his ability and so on.”

“There’ll be plenty of opportunity for that in the future. For now though, I’ll have them stay in the chest, have either Dobby or Kreacher cater to them.

“Long term, I’m going to introduce Credence to Tolfdir. I believe the College of Winterhold will have a better chance at helping him with his magic, given they do work with adult novice mages.”

Ferris seemed to think on this a minute. “The Arcane Sciences department will likely want to have a look at him as well—only if he agrees to it, I should stress.”

“Yes. I have no doubt Credence hasn’t had a whole lot of choice in his life... so much alike, he and I. Except there was no one to rescue him sooner. Seeing Credence... that could have been me.”

“We know, Harry.”

“We should part ways in the morning,” said Newt.

“Yes, agreed,” said Brandon, “And we have to modify your memories. Your knowledge of the future could cause many problems.”

“As we understand,” said Tina.

“Merlin... I don’t think I’ve said thank you,” said Newt. “Your assistance last night and this morning... it was indispensable.”

“You’re quite welcome, Mr. Scamander,” said Harry, “It’s our responsibility to look out for one another.”

“His ‘saving people’ thing,” Bryce muttered.

“Hey!”

“He’s right, love,” said Mazhe, gently, “Too many people owe you their lives, put simply. I mean...” he gestured to Bryce, then to Walker, then to Ragnar and Athelstan. “Your intervention saved their lives. Never mind Tommy, Dardanos, Crixus...”

“Pietros, Varro... yeah, I know.”

“Right. So as Brandon’s said, we’ll need to modify your memories. You’ll remember us, but no details about the future.”

“Do it while we sleep,” said Tina, “We’ll take a dreamless sleep potion.”
“Thank you. That will make it easier,” said Brandon. “And thank you for trusting us.”

“All of you have been nothing but honest with us,” said Tina.

“It’ll be best if we move on tomorrow as it is. I have a cannery to visit,” said Newt.

“Newt...” said Tina, narrowing her eyes.

“He won’t know. But there’s something I have to do. That job he has is killing him; his words.”

Mazhe was confused. “What kind of job?”

“Works at a cannery,” Newt answered, “We met at the bank, where he was attempting to secure a loan for a business.”

Harry gave a nod. “You have a way of helping him get the loan.”

“Occamy shells. They’re made of pure silver,” said Newt.

Harry reached into his pouch, producing a pair of gold bars. “Add those to the, uh, donation.”

Ragnar and Athelstan both looked astounded. “Gods...”

“These mean absolutely nothing to me,” said Harry, dismissively, “Physical wealth means nothing if you have no one to share it with. You have wealth beyond measure, Ragnar. A dear friend at your side, a wife who waits for you at home, never mind your children. All of that, wealth beyond measure. Never, ever forget that.”

He reached into his pouch, and pulled out two more bars, passing those over to Newt. “Obtaining more of them would take a bit of time, but it’s unimportant. Helping a friend reach his dreams, priceless.”

Standing at the doorway into the common room, Zoey rolled her eyes. “You sound like a MasterCard commercial.(3)”

Those with knowledge of the modern non-magical world all burst out laughing, while the rest, including Harry, looked confused.

“We’ll tell you later,” Aaron promised.

December 9, 1926

The enlarged group once again stood outside shortly after sunrise. Brandon had created a port key that would carry Newt, Tina, and Queenie to an alleyway close to the Woolworth building.

“So I guess this is good bye,” said Newt. “I can’t thank you enough for all your help.”

“It was our pleasure, Mr. Scamander,” said Harry. “Best of luck with your book, I’m sure it’ll be a smashing success.”

“Here’s hoping.”

“And thank you for taking care of Credence,” said Tina, “He deserves better than the life he’s had.”

“Couldn’t agree more, miss Goldstein,” said Harry, “Trust us, we’ll take very good care of him.”
“It’s been an adventure, Mr. Stormcrown,” said Queenie.

“It has, yeah.” Harry smirked. “Perhaps we may see each other in the future.”

“Harry...” Brandon muttered.

“Right. Think we should be off,” said Newt, as Tina produced the port key. He offered a hand, and Harry shook it. That spawned a round of handshakes between the two groups. Ragnar and Athelstan had picked up on the ‘modern’ handshake, and so participated, though a little stiff. Then, with a final good bye, the trio vanished in a blur, leaving only footprints in the mud as any indicator they’d been there.

Harry smirked to himself, as they retreated back to the chest. How long would it take before Newt discovered the time-sealed envelope that had been left on the worktable inside of his suitcase? Harry was well aware both Newt and Tina still lived in 2008; moving them away from the danger OND now presented couldn’t do any harm, right?

Aaron’s feet had barely touched the floor of the chest being the last one in, when Brandon’s mobile chimed, indicating yet another message. He quickly read it.

“All right. Ragnar’s core won’t interface with the Orb of Magnus because of the energy bleed-off. And worse, the guardians say it could take months for the bleed-off to be completed.”

“Couldn't we just, idunno, have a hundred wands pointed at it?” Walker suggested, with a shrug.

“Doesn't work that way,” said Brandon, “The amount of magical power, not even a thousand wands would be enough.”

“Staff of Magnus then,” Bryce suggested, “They’re... compatible, right?”

Mazhe looked doubtful, pulling the staff out of his pouch. It still pulsed green.

“And likely fuck up the Ragnar's core like we've seemingly fucked up the Orb of Magnus. Not bloody likely,” said Harry.

Credence seemed to think a moment. “The... thing inside me—”

“The Obscurus. No, Credence. You could hurt yourself, or do damage to the ship.”

“Harry, he might have a thought,” said Justin, “Credence, how much control do you have when you shift?”

“It depends.”

“A more important question, does it hurt you?”

“No. Sometimes... it's easy to just... let it go. Not much can hurt me when I'm in that form.”

Harry once again felt angry that someone had been tortured in that manner, forced to rely on something so unnatural for comfort.

“We need to speak to Arcane Sciences first,” Brandon decided, “Obscuri are within their purview. But Harry, honestly, we can't wait two months.”

“I know that, Brandon! I just... don't want to hurt a friend.”
Credence looked hopeful. “You want me to be your friend?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

Brandon, meanwhile, had his mobile out. “I’m sending a message to the ship outlining Credence’s suggestion. It’ll likely be a while before they get back to us so…”

“VPR,” said Mazhe, “We haven’t done any of our morning routine given our guests.”

“Right. We’ll work on swordsmanship, given a pair of our guests’ knowledge. Work within their comfort zone,” Aaron suggested. “Where is Modesty?”

“Zoey’s looking after her,” said Justin, “I pulled out a few colouring books we originally got for Tommy’s nieces. Figured they would be appropriate.”

“What do you want me to do?” Credence asked.

“You can watch us,” said Harry, “If you are to remain with my circle, knowing how to protect yourself without magic is a requirement.”

Mazhe smirked. “Gave Grindelwald something to think about yesterday.”

Harry gave a vicious smirk of his own. “Oh, but it did. Drove him mental that something he sees being beneath him actually attacked him, left nasty injuries.”

In the VPR, both Ragnar and Athelstan easily joined the exercise, as they went through a series of swordsmanship practices. The weapons they produced were somewhat different, but... the skill was no different; the pair most definitely did not feel out of place as they practised.

Chapter End Notes

UP NEXT: The Ragnar’s core is restarted thanks to an unorthodox plan; and Jezebel may have a ‘get out of jail free card’...

CHAPTER NOTES: Count on seeing Newt & Tina again in the future.
(1) February
(2) January
(3) Come on, we’ve all seen those, right? Apologies for the cheese, have some wine.
The Bargaining Chip

Chapter Summary

The Ragnar’s core is restarted thanks to an unorthodox plan; and Jezebel may have a ‘get out of jail free card’...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

25. THE BARGAINING CHIP

January, 2008 / December, 1926 / August, 801

“Sometimes a deal with the devil is better than no deal at all.”

- Lawrence Hill

As they were finishing up, Brandon got yet another message on his mobile.

“Ancane Sciences says the risk should be minimal. They do suggest using the staff first, before resorting to more... unorthodox methods.”

“And I agree,” said Harry, “It could blow up spectacularly, damage the ship, kill every one of us...”

“As Arcane Sciences also agrees, Harry. Thing is, we’re nearly out of options, unless you want to wait for two or so months.”

“That’s not possible,” said Ragnar.

“And the government agrees, or we wouldn’t be discussing this. All of you understand, what we’re doing, it’s very dangerous. The ship’s core is... it’s like a massive battery that’s constantly drawing on the magical energy in the atmosphere. The amount of energy it needed to start... to reach its self-sustaining state... it’s insane.”

“Orb of Magnus,” said Mazhe, “That’s why it needed the Orb of Magnus.”

“The only other thing I know of that might provide the same amount of power, is a nuclear bomb. And quite frankly, we’ve got no way of containing that kind of explosion.”

“Or one of those magical bombs, like the one that took out Dubai,” said Walker.

“Same difference.”

“What is a... n-nu...clear—” Athelstan began.

“A terrible weapon. Put it from thought, it’s nothing neither of you need to worry about here,” said Harry.
“These guys should stay in the chest,” Aaron decided, “At least for now. Let’s figure out what’s going on before we put people at risk.”

Harry easily agreed with that, as they left the VPR. “Let’s get cleaned up first, before we return to the ship.”

Just before 11 o’clock, Harry, Mazhe, and Brandon returned to the Ragnar, and in turn, headed to the core chamber. Aaron and Justin remained in the chest with the others. Maybe they would get lucky trying the staff, and Credence’s participation would not be necessary. ‘Right, when have we ever been that lucky?’ Harry muttered in his head, as they got set up.

The room was dimly lit, with only a few of the consoles and instruments showing any sort of life. With only bare minimal power being produced by emergency generators, most of the equipment present was not powered.

The core was as dark as they’d left it a few days earlier, the cage resting on the cradle rather than levitating. Up close, it looked to have many of the same etchings and markings the Orb of Magnus contained. Very risky, using symbols without knowing what they meant. Yet, the core had functioned without incident up to this point, and if the government trusted the work, then so be it.

“Mr. and Mr. Stormcrown. Good of you both to come. Likewise, Commander.”

“Harry, Mazhe, this is Chief Engineer Issac Morris,” Brandon introduced them.

“Sir,” said Harry, simply, as they shook hands. The man was average height, with sandy-blond hair. But gods, was he thin. The man needed to eat, was Harry’s immediate thought.

“All right, gentlemen, are we ready to give this a try?” Morris questioned.

“Stations manned and ready, sir,” an engineer at a nearby console reported.

Morris pressed a button on a panel nearby. “AIC, core. We’re about to attempt boot-up.”

“Roger, core. Proceed with boot-up,” came the answer over the speaker.

Harry touched his ear piece, switching the radio set on, and Mazhe quickly did the same; being able to hear communications between the department and AIC was important.

“We’ll need the staff, Mazhe.”

“Uh... right.”

Mazhe reached into his pouch, and produced the Staff of Magnus. It still pulsed green from the unexpected interaction with the killing curse two days earlier.

However, the more interesting reaction came from the still cold core. The cage, which had been resting on the metal pedestal, now lifted off, to again be suspended in mid-air.

“Promising,” said another engineer.

Morris once again pressed a button on the console nearby. “Electrical, core. We’ll need some juice for our equipment.”

“Roger, core.”
It took a few seconds, but more and more of the instruments and consoles began to light up, and the room began to get brighter.

“We’re sacrificing power to other areas for now,” said Brandon, “But if this works…”

“We’ll get power back everywhere,” Mazhe guessed. “So I just point the staff at the core.”

“I’ll provide a boost,” said Harry, “How many filled soul gems you have?”

“One grand, one black. Uh, three common, I think.”

“Strongly suspect we’ll burn through at least one of those. What’s the charge now?”

Mazhe held the staff a moment. “Two-thirds.”

“Use one of the common gems so we start with a full charge.”

“Good thought.”

Mazhe recharged the staff as suggested.

“I would suggest you put more distance between yourself and the core,” said Morris, “We still don’t know what this is gonna do.”

“Yeah, agreed,” said Mazhe, as he took a few steps back, in that he was nearly up against one of the capacitors. Now he brought the staff to bear on the cold cage.

“Ready?”

“Ready, Harry. Mr. Morris, we good?”

Morris once again pressed a button on the console he was in front of. “AIC, stand by.”

“AIC, standing by,” came the answer, which Harry also heard in his ear.

“Proceed, Mr. Stormcrown.”

Harry again provided a magical boost, as Mazhe let fly, a powerful channel of green magic bursting forth, to impact with the levitating cage. It shuddered and turned a brilliant blue a moment, before the colour shifted to green, as the cage began to spin clockwise on one axis—horizontally, to you and me.

“Five percent,” an engineer reported.

Now, the cage began to spin on a vertical axis, this time, counter-clockwise, if Harry had to guess.

“Ten percent.”

Unfortunately, Mazhe felt the staff shudder, as the last of its charge bled out. The core fell silent, softly dropping back to the pedestal, cold as ever.

“Shit,” Mazhe muttered, reaching into his pouch for another soul gem.

“Can those things... overcharge?” Morris wondered.

“No, it’s impossible,” Mazhe answered, as he recharged the staff.
“Then we need to do something else. We need someone else to use the staff. Mazhe and I can then both provide a magical boost. It should at minimum double the magical output.”

“Ragnar,” said Brandon.

“No way! He stays in the chest,” Harry snapped, “Gods, if this blows up...”

“Harry, it’s unlikely gonna matter if that happens. It’ll probably take us and the ship with it,” said Mazhe. “Think about it. This thing’s modelled after the Orb of Magnus... a miniature copy of it in many ways... am I right, Mr. Morris?”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

Harry huffed. “Guess you’re right. Still... I don’t like it. And why don’t we use... I mean, Brandon...”

“The ship bears his name,” said Brandon, “He’s not magical, but his bloodline carries historical significance. Just as... if King Alex were here...”

“Or Queen Susan,” Harry finished. Of course, Brandon was right. And it wouldn’t be the first time a non-magical wielded a powerful magical artefact. Not to mention, it was unlikely they could get Alex or Susan to attend with any speed.

Harry reached into his pouch, and produced his chest. After setting it on the floor, he pulled the lid open, and called down, “Ragnar! Can you come join us?”

In short order, the Viking king was climbing out, with Athelstan immediately following.

“Were you able to—”

“No. But with your help, we might be able to,” said Mazhe. “We need you to use the staff on the core, while Harry and I provide the magical boost.”

“Is doing such a thing safe?” questioned Athelstan.

“A non-magical using a magical tool? Perfectly safe,” answered Mazhe, “The tool or weapon itself contains the magic it needs... at least normally. In this case, Harry and I will be adding our own magic to help things along.”

“And I will become a channel,” Ragnar guessed.

“A little,” said Harry, with a nod. “You’ll likely feel a little lightheaded, but nothing more.”

“Then I will help you.”

“Ragnar...”

“The gods placed us here for a reason, Athelstan.”

“You hold the staff like this,” said Mazhe, and then gave a demonstration how to aim it. “You only need think, ‘fire’, or ‘deploy’, to make it work. It’ll continue to fire until you tell it to stop, as in, ‘end’, or ‘stop’. Keep firing until we tell you to stop, or it runs out—hopefully it won’t run out as it did a few minutes ago.”

“Only one way to find out then,” said Ragnar, as Mazhe passed the staff over.
“All right. Let’s get ready. Harry...”

“Right. Athelstan, you should stand over there, by Mr. Morris,” said Brandon, “We don’t want any bizarre interaction. This shit’s all unknown territory.”

Harry couldn’t help but burst out laughing.

“Bloody hell... unknown territory?! Lately, some part of me thinks I’ve died and gone to hell.”

“Harry...”

“Right. Focus. Let’s get into position.”

“Ready, sir?” Morris questioned.

“I am ready,” said Ragnar.

Morris again pressed a button on the console in front of him. “AIC, core. We’re about to try again.”

“Roger that, core.”

Ragnar aimed the staff at the cage, and still unsure of the idea of using only a mental command, shouted, “Loose!”

A column of blue energy once again burst from the end of the staff, to collide with the cage. That was the cue for Harry and Mazhe to provide the amplification spells, which caused the cage to once again lift from the pedestal, the brilliant blue energy shifting in colour to green.

“Five percent,” an engineer called out, and Ragnar could feel every hair on his body seem to stand on end, as the energy surged through the powerful artefact in his hands.

“Ten percent!” the engineer proclaimed, as the core had once again began to spin on two axis. Brighter and brighter it was getting, the light casting the intricate lattice pattern of the cage onto the walls and ceiling of the room.

“Fifteen percent!”

Harry dared look behind, and could see one of the capacitors beginning to light up, as it began to tap energy from the charging core. A large meter on the wall near Morris’ console also showed the progress, creeping ever closer to the magical ‘unity’ mark.

“Twenty percent! Nearly there!”

Unfortunately, the staff once again fell silent, and with it, the cage sinking back down to the pedestal, the light dimming within seconds.

“Why doesn’t it hold the charge—I mean, why does it bleed out so quickly?” Harry asked.

“You likely saw the capacitor begin charging,” said Morris. “Until we reach unity, the capacitor just sucks all the energy out of the core.”

“But that didn’t happen when we... when the core was shut down.”

“Because it was at or above unity when we did. And remember, it drained pretty quickly after we shut it down,” said Morris.
Harry gave a nod of understanding, as he reached into his pouch, and produced a soul gem. He gave a vicious smirk, seeming to remember something. “This is the fate that awaits Jezebel when she dies.”

He held up the gem. “We soul-trapped this bastard back in Dubai. Now...”

Harry pressed the gem against the staff, and Ragnar felt it get warm, as the gem was consumed.

“He walks an eternity of nightmares.”

“Harry...”

“Right. Let’s try again.”

“Harry, it won’t matter. We’re gonna need Credence’s help,” said Brandon.

“Core, AIC. What happened?” came the question over the speaker.

Morris again pressed the button on his console. “We should have it in another try; Mr. Stormcrown’s getting the assistance from his new friend.”

Harry huffed, not liking being boxed into a corner. Balls, it wouldn’t matter anyway if everything blew up... everyone would likely be killed by the explosion.

He once again opened the lid to the chest, calling down, “Credence, come on up.”

A few seconds passed, before the dark-haired young wizard popped his head up. He looked around, as he climbed out.

“That chest still plays with the mind,” said Ragnar.

“I’m sure it does.”

“I guess the... staff didn’t work,” said Credence.

“It almost did. But...”

“You still need my help. I don’t know how much...”

“It should do more than admirably, young wizard,” said Morris, “Your job will be rather simple, in that we want you to circle the cage—” he indicated the cage, still resting on the pedestal, “While our friends here use the staff on it. The energy from your... alternate form... should be enough for us to reach unity.”

Credence furrowed his brows. “Unity?”

“Unity. The point at which the core becomes self-sustaining, drawing from the ambient magic in the atmosphere.”

“Magic is not only in us, but in the very air around us,” Brandon explained, “It’s something taught in basic magical theory, one of the early courses a young witch or wizard has to take in school.”

“So then I will learn it too?”

“Definitely,” said Harry, “Don’t worry, there are lots of us who will help you out.”
“Indeed,” Morris agreed. “Now, once the core reaches unity, it runs on its own, and passes into an over-unity(1) state... that is, it provides more energy than it consumes. According to the laws of physics, that’s impossible. But, being magical, the core is not bound by the laws of physics.”

“Magic breaks lots of nature’s rules,” said Athelstan.

“Actually, it doesn’t. Magic has its own set of rules,” said Brandon. “But we need to get on with this. Credence, when you’re ready.”

“Oh. Uh...”

The young man seemed to concentrate a moment, before shifting right before their eyes, transforming into a cloud of dark energy. His face re-materialized at its centre. “Wish me luck.”

Harry gave a grim nod. “Yeah, we’re all gonna need it.”

“Gods. It’s almost like an Animagus,” another engineer remarked, as Ragnar again readied the staff.

Morris once again pressed the button on his console. “AIC, core. We’re about to try one more time.”

“Roger, core.”

Credence was then circling the cage, already influencing it, causing it to lift off its pedestal.

“Do not pass through the staff’s beam,” Harry warned, “We don’t know what it would do to you. All right guys, here we go.”

Ragnar again aimed the staff at the cage. “Loose!” he shouted, and for the third time, a strong column of blue energy burst from it, to impact with the lattice cage. Unlike before, a series of yellow bands of energy began to also encircle the cage, seeming to bulge where the Obscurus passed near. Harry and Mazhe quickly added their boost spells, making the column swell to nearly twice its size.

“Eight percent!” an engineer called out, as more and more yellow bands of energy wound their way around the cage, with the mass of light inside growing more and more intense, casting the lattice shadows on the wall.

“Fifteen percent!”

Now, Athelstan could feel the tremendous build-up of energy, above and beyond what they’d tried only minutes earlier. The yellow bands of energy were now threading back along the beam from the staff, tiny tongues of orange energy were weaving around Ragnar’s hands; even the staff began to get warm—the floor itself began to vibrate, perhaps the entire room.

“Harmonic resonance!” came a warning over the speaker.

“Hold fast! Stay with it!” came the shouted reply.

“Twenty two percent, nearly there!” the engineer shouted.

The staff was then painfully hot, but Ragnar would not let go... it was nearly drained, but more and more bands of yellow had formed—he could barely see his own hands now, from the energy, pure magic; the core itself was becoming almost painfully bright to look at, with the entire room vibrating, before—

There came a great shudder, as the light inside the cage bloomed with the intensity of a welder’s torch. Ragnar had instinctively closed his eyes, but still saw the brilliant flash through his eyelids, as
the staff was once again emptied of the last of its charge, and fell silent.

“Core has passed unity, sir. Twenty-five percent and climbing,” an engineer reported.

Credence floated over, and shifted back into human form. “Is it done?”

“We did it, Credence. Thank you for your help,” said Harry. His lips twitched. “Bloody hell, I think you’re glowing.”

Credence looked down at his hands, and now found that indeed, they were glowing blue, much like the core. So, too, was Ragnar. Both were glowing from head to foot.

“Odin’s beard...”

“The effect won’t be permanent. But you’ve just channelled a titanic volume of magical energy with no core of your own. So count on some residual effects. Trust us, it’s not harmful, and will dissipate,” said one of the engineers.

“Main capacitors now charging, will reach full charge in about five minutes. Core now at thirty percent and climbing,” another engineer reported.

Sure enough, the large meter on the wall indicated what was just reported, five ticks past the red ‘unity’ line.

“Core, AIC. Report.”

Morris again pressed the button on his console. “Core at thirty-one percent and climbing. Main capacitors will reach full charge, ETA five minutes.”

“Roger, core. Helm, ring stand by. All stations, stand by; flight deck rig for climb.”

The core was by this point nearly impossible to look at, the light being so bright.

“Sir. Is there anything else you need?” Harry questioned.

“We've got it from here, Mr. Stormcrown. Your assistance was greatly appreciated,” answered Morris.

“C’mon, we'll head for the AIC, watch things from there,” Brandon decided. “Commodore O'Toole will likely wish to see us as it is.”

“Harry, your mobile. There should be a bookmark for the corridor just outside of the AIC,” said Brandon. “Save us from walking.”

“Right.”

Harry collected his chest and stowed it away, then produced his mobile. It took him a minute to find the bookmark, given the number of addresses he now had.

“Get close.”

The Action Information Centre was structurally the same as Harry remembered it last, but he noticed some things had changed dramatically. Primarily, the ship’s helm platform no longer resembled other stations in the room. Instead of a large console, it now contained a pair of large wheels such as would normally be found on a naval vessel. A pedestal was found on each side of them, and a number of
brass instruments took up the wall behind them. A pair of officers manned the station.

“Bloody hell,” Harry muttered.

“Promagistrate,” said O’Toole, by way of greeting.

“Sir,” Harry replied. “I’d say she’s gone through a few modifications.”

Dawson let out a snort and made an angry face. “Yeah, you could say that. We ain’t gonna be caught with our pants down again—this was humiliating, having our own damned computers turned against us.

“We ripped out all of the direct interfaces and it’s strictly manual control from here on out. And when we get back, NDHQ’s gonna see reason, one way or another. Fucking computers have no place in control of a war machine, this being a direct example of why.”

“No matter, we’re nearly back in business. Now let’s see, Mr. Barebone is it?” O’Toole questioned, gesturing to Credence.

“Credence, sir.”

“You have our sincere thank you for the assistance. Seems, you were the final piece of the puzzle.”

“Harry and Mr. Scamander and Miss Goldstein... they saved my life. It... it was only right.”

“And likewise, King Ragnar. Your assistance was just as critical as Mr. Barebone. You have the thanks of the Commonwealth.”

“Returning a favour,” said Ragnar.

“Indeed, as I have read in Commander McAllister’s report. Know you’re in very capable hands, sir,” said O’Toole.

It was then the lights momentarily flickered, and the rest of the lights came on, brightening the room considerably.

“AIC, electrical. Main power’s been restored, a few systems still need to be reset, but otherwise we’re in working order.”

Dawson pressed a button on the inlaid display on the table. “So noted, electrical.” He then pressed another button. “Wards and security, report.”

“Waiting on your orders,” came the reply.

“Reapply our security protocols and wards. All access lists to be revoked save for Promagistrate and the Crown.”

“As ordered.”

Dawson pressed yet another button. “Environmental, report.”

“We have pressure seal. Pressurization has been roughly configured, but we’ll need to properly calibrate after jump.”

“So noted.”
Dawson looked at O'Toole. “We’ll not want to exceed six one zero(2) until we get back to the present.”

“Concurred.”

Dawson now pressed yet another button. “Attention all hands. This is the XO. We have successfully restarted our core, and will very shortly return to the sky. All stations, rig for ascent.”

Harry could hear this in his ear, as well as through the speaker.

“AIC, flight deck, rigged for ascent, all birds stowed and accounted for.”

“Noted,” said Dawson.

“AIC, core. We are now at one hundred percent charge.”

“Thank you.”

“AIC, engine room. At stand by.”

“Thank you.”

Dawson looked at the Commodore. “Ship is ready, sir.”

Harry could easily read the man’s relief. “Then let’s get off the ground. Helm, slow ascent, take us to Mike Sierra Alpha.”

“Slow ascent to Mike Sierra Alpha, aye sir,” spoke one of the crew members at the helm. She took hold of the starboard wheel, and began to turn it counter-clockwise. The needle on a gauge directly in front of the helm now registered her input, as it increased its value, finally reaching 1,600, at which there was a red tick mark. A second hand on the gauge still sat on the peg, at zero.

“What’s Mike Sierra Alpha?” Harry wondered.

“Minimum safe altitude,” Dawson answered, “Sixteen-hundred metres, or about five-thousand feet.”

It was then there came a shudder from the floor. O’Toole and Dawson looked at each other, momentarily concerned.

“And we’re clear the ground, sir,” said a crew member at another station. Sure enough, the second needle on the gauge had left the peg.

“So we... fly, then,” Ragnar guessed.

The crew member simply pressed several buttons at his station, and the display at the front of the room now showed a view from the bottom of the ship, as the ground was rapidly being left behind.

“By Odin's beard...”

Harry only grinned.

“Passing five zero meters, sir,” the second helmsman reported.

“Then let’s get out of New York,” said O’Toole. “Helm, make your course zero six zero northeast. Make revolutions for twenty knots.”
“Making my course zero six zero northeast, making revolutions for twenty knots, aye sir,” said the helmsman.

He and his assistant moved to the pedestals at either side of the wheels, and began to manipulate a small crank at the back of them. Only now did Harry notice the pair of dials directly in front of them. The right one was red, while the left was green. Each turn caused a pointer to shift once, and a small ‘ding’ rang out.

“Each crank is one engine order,” Dawson explained, as the pointers now both indicated ‘SLOW’.

“AIC, radio. Order of the Magnus reports a portal’s been reestablished to our present.”

“Roger.”

O’Toole looked at Harry. “Mr. Stormcrown, it’s time we get you home. We’ll send the prisoner along so she can be properly dealt with.”

Harry gave a bow of the head. “Thank you, sir.”

Brandon was already looking for the bookmark on his mobile. “We’ll head back to the apartment for now, give the ministry a chance to get Miss Greer into interrogation.”

“Sounds good. Thank you, Commodore, for the hospitality. May the ancestors bless you with speedy return to our present.”

With that, the group vanished in a blur.

Arriving back in the apartment, Harry mentally groaned. The contractors were still present, working on the expansion.

“Where is this place?” Credence asked.

“My residence. There’s a fair bit of commotion, given the government’s building an addition.” Harry glanced at the doors which led out into the cistern. Two SOU meant the Queen was likely present.

“Come this way so we don’t disturb an important guest who might be using the dining room. I’ll open the chest so the others can join us.”

“And not everyone can come along when we go to the ministry,” said Brandon.

“Agreed. I want you along, and probably Justin—”

“I insist on being there,” said Ragnar.

“It should be secure,” said Brandon, “Our concern is exposure.”

“You must do to us as you did to Goldstein and Scamander. Our further exposure will mean little in the end,” said Athelstan, “Tell me if this is incorrect.”

“No, you’re right. It’s more from our end. If it gets out who you guys are, it could cause lots of problems. Even though all of our interactions are supposed to be covered by the Promagistrate Act, it doesn’t guarantee secrecy. If you insist, then—”

“That woman murdered a number of my people, caused great damage to our homes... no. I insist on being present,” Ragnar spat.
“Just know, the outcome is likely going to be unpleasant,” said Brandon, as his mobile again chirped. He read the message. “All right. They’ve transported Jezebel to an interrogation room at the ministry.”

“Let’s let the others out of the chest first.”

“I can... look after my sister,” said Credence.

“Zoey and the others will be staying behind, too. Maybe Aaron can put in a floo call to Remus, see if he can bring Emily and Rosie for a meet and greet,” said Brandon. “Modesty’s what, eight?”

Credence simply gave a nod.

“Emily and Rosie are a little older, but I’m sure they’ll love having an honorary little sister,” said Mazhe.

That earned a smile out of Credence, as they stepped into Harry’s room. Harry set down his chest, and opened the lid. “Guys! C’mon out, we’re back!”

Bryce stuck his head out. “Oh. Back to the apartment.” he climbed out. “So the ship...”

“Back in the air,” said Brandon, as Bryce cleared the opening, allowing for Aaron to follow.

Very quickly, everyone who’d been in the chest, now stood in Harry’s bedroom.

“So we’re back in Skyrim,” said Brandon, “But we’re on our way to central holding in Trevelyan to deal with Jezebel. Aaron, need you to stay behind along with everyone else. Justin you’re with us—”

“Zoey...”

“Justin, I’ll be perfectly fine. I’d like to talk to my mom...”

“I’ll loan you my mobile,” Aaron promised.

“And don’t even think about telling me I can’t come,” said Mazhe, firmly.

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

“And Aaron. It’s likely Susan’s present, so...”

“Right. We could just head back into the chest, use the VPR,” said Aaron.

“Get in contact with Mr. Lupin, see if he wouldn’t mind bringing Emily and Rosie over, introduce them to Modesty.”

“Sounds good.”

“All right. Let’s go.”

The interrogation room was about the same as the setup on the Ragnar, with a single table. There was an observation room separated by a partition with a window made of one-way glass. Like before, a pair of Aurors were already present, as was a defender.

Jezebel was led into the room a minute or so later by a second pair of Aurors, and forced into a seat, while a pair of familiar faces also stepped into the room: the two attorneys who had looked after legal
matters on behalf of the Commonwealth during the Triwizard tournament, and then again when Dumbledore had Harry trapped at the school in the fall of 2005.

Unfortunately, the interrogation got nowhere, as all the information the Commonwealth needed, was protected by the Fidelius Charm. No amount of coaxing and cajoling would circumvent it.

“What if we got Bill down here?” Harry wondered, as the questioning continued.

“It could take weeks, depending on the complexity,” said Brandon, “That was a thought suggested by Arcane Sciences... the Fidelius Charm can be broken, but...”

“There is not time,” said Ragnar, “We must return to where we belong.”

Justin knocked on the window. Miss Connor picked up a phone handset mounted on the wall by the door.

“As her what we could give in turn for her surrendering the information. Much as we hate to admit it, she’s got us boxed in,” said Justin.

Harry gave his friend a dark look. “Justin...”

Brandon huffed. “Justin’s right.”

Miss Connor hung up the phone. “Miss Greer, we need that information. We’re willing to make a deal...”

“If you release me, and ONLY if you release me, free and unharmed, will I do so,” said Jezebel, calmly.

Harry angrily punched the wall, leaving a bloody impact mark behind. Hissing, he cast a healing charm. “Curse that woman.”

“Now you know we won’t ever agree to that, knowing just how good your word will be,” said Mr. Sampson.

“Then we are at an impasse, aren’t we?” Jezebel simpered.

“Unbreakable vow,” said Justin, quietly, “We’ll have to make an unbreakable vow with her.”

“Justin, you willing?”

“Yeah.”

“No way,” Harry snapped.

“Harry, we have to get Ragnar back where he belongs.”

“I know that, Brandon! Always one calamity and fuck up after another!”

Brandon tapped the glass with his wand, causing the entire partition to vanish.

“All right, Miss Greer, this is what we’re gonna do,” said Brandon. “We will make an unbreakable vow with you. Harry...”

“The terms are as follows,” Harry began. “Dr. Fraser will act as the binder. She will be free to go, if, and ONLY if the information she provides works. As in, the portal must function, it must reconnect
with the exact date and time we left. Naturally, the violation would mean instant death dealt out by magic itself. Our part of the bargain, she is free to go, without fear of immediate reprisal.”

“Without fear of reprisal, which will expire in two days,” Brandon added, “We will not track or pursue for two days.”

Jezebel smiled sweetly. “Then we have a deal.”

“This action is under the purview of present invocation of the Promagistrate Act, and so shall not be included in the public record,” Brandon declared.

“Who is the agent acting for the Commonwealth?” Miss Connor questioned.

“Harry. He’s Promagistrate,” said Mazhe, “The laws say he can act as such, do they not?”

Harry claimed the chair opposite the witch, and they then clasped hands. Mazhe then drew his wand, and touched it to them.

“Will you, Catherine Greer, also known as Jezebel, provide all relevant and required information, in order that the Commonwealth of Valicadia may, recreate the portal to august 18, 801CE, specifically to the village of Kattegat, Norway?”

“I will,” Jezebel answered.

A thin tongue of flame came from Justin's wand, to wind its way around their clasped hands.

“And do you, Harry James Stormcrown, speaking for the Commonwealth of Valicadia, make promise that, should Catherine Greer, also known as Jezebel, provide information as specified, and that information provides the working portal as required, she will be released to a location of her choosing, and will not be pursued or harmed by the Commonwealth of Valicadia for a period of two days after?”

“I make that promise,” Harry spoke.

The second band of flame issued from Justin's wand, to bind with the other. Witch and wizard shook as Justin withdrew his wand.

Brandon gave the witch a dark look. “You must know, Miss Greer. Next time we meet, there will be no quarter. We’ve already confirmed your guilt on at least two offences which garner the death penalty by our laws. You either fight to the death, or we carry out summary execution if you are captured. Is this clear?”

“Crystal.”

Chapter End Notes

UP NEXT: After spending one final night in Kattegat, Harry and his friends say good bye to Ragnar and Athelstan.

CHAPTER NOTES: So we get a look at the inner workings of the ship. Something I’d wanted to do in “Orb of Magnus”, but there never seemed to be a proper place for it. Having her suffer a near-catastrophic failure gave a perfect opportunity. Now of course,
we’re nearly done with this; Ragnar, both man and ship, will be back where they belong in the next chapter.

(1) *snorts* over-unity. Yeah, right. Google this. It’s an interesting read, considering the number of ‘claims’ out there of devices that can run on their own, provide ‘free’ energy and other such nonsense. Remember kids, in our bland real world, there’s no such thing as a free lunch. Nor is there such a thing as free energy. If there was, we’d all have pocket generators that run on nothing in our houses.

(2) Reminder, this is in metres, so 6100m or roughly 20,000 feet. Above 15,000 feet, without proper pressurization, everyone would suffer from Hypoxia. The pressurization system is working as it sits, but not optimally.

(3) It might seem backwards, but remember, these indicator dials face the room. Red is Port, while Green is Starboard. Additionally, the type of engine order telegraph they’re using was pretty standard for naval vessels built in the 30s and 40s: Chadburn’s “Wheel Handle” telegraph, which featured a dial and a ‘crank’ handle. Each turn of the handle changed the order pointer by one notch, hence one order. The linkage to the engine room was done through a flexible steel rotating shaft, instead of wires and chains. The speedometer on many vehicles worked this way—not sure if this is still the case or not.
Sidelined

Chapter Summary

After spending one final night in Kattegat, Harry and his friends say goodbye to Ragnar and Athelstan.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

26. SIDELINED

January, 2008 / Morning Star, 4E203

“What was sleep? A blessing, a respite from life, an echo of death, a demanding nuisance?”

- Colleen McCullough

It was Brandon’s mobile which carried the group back to the apartment. Ragnar looked furious.

“You promised she would face justice!”

“She will. Trust us,” said Harry, “She lives on borrowed time. We catch up with her, it’s over. Neither of you have any idea just how much damage she’s caused—having to do what we just did…it infuriates me to no end.”

“This is the chaos we’ve had to deal with since September,” said Brandon.

He thought for a moment.

“Harry, get your pensieve.”

Harry reached into his pouch, and produced the clay bowl. He set it on the small table in between the couches.

“What memory?”

“Some of the shit that went down in Dubai—wait. Let me do it,” Brandon decided. “Some shit that happened there…”


“A among other things.”

Both Ragnar and Athelstan watched, fixated, as Brandon began to draw what looked like a silvery, gassy strand from the side of his temple using his wand. Longer and longer it got, until he finally gave a slight flick, and it detached completely. He then dropped the strand into the bowl.
“Stick a finger in the fluid, I’ll join you.”

“How—”

But Brandon had stuck a finger in the shimmering liquid, and became frozen.

“It’s perfectly safe,” Harry promised.

Ragnar hesitated, but... no, they had been nothing but honest with him up to this point. He followed Brandon’s example, with Athelstan quickly following. They both became frozen.

“Harry, we should let the others out,” said Mazhe.

“Shit, yes, this is true,” Harry agreed.

He reached into his pouch, producing his chest. He set it down on the floor against the wall, and restored it to proper size, before opening the lid.

“Guys! We’re back.”

In short order, everyone climbed out.

“What is it they are doing?” Credence wanted to know, seeing Brandon, Ragnar, and Athelstan frozen.

“They’re looking at a memory,” Justin explained, “Brandon is sharing some of our past experiences with them so they understand an important point. The interrogation didn’t go well.”

“What’d ’ya have to give her?” Walker wanted to know.

“We had to let her go free.”

Now Walker looked furious. “You let the bitch go!? You’re fuckin’ crazy!”

“And what would you have us do, Captain?! These guys don’t belong here! We don’t have months of time in which to dissect someone’s head!” Justin shouted right back.

“Trust us... like what I already said to Ragnar, she’s toast. Next time we catch her, it’s all over. It’s KOS.”

Credence looked confused.

“KOS?”

“Kill on site. Just... you don’t have to worry about that. We’ll be introducing you to a few friends who’ll be more than willing to teach you loads about magic, without you being thrown into one calamity after another,” Harry promised. “And you’ve already met healer Ferris. She’ll be meeting with you for the indefinite term, as there are a number of personal issues you need to work through. I ask you to do your best. Do I have your word?”

“Yes sir.”

Harry grinned. “Uh. I’m no ‘sir’. I’m just Harry.”

“You wish,” Aaron smirked.
“Piss off.” Harry grinned as he said it, though.

Walker relented. He wasn’t surprised, if he really thought of it. Considering the amount of luck the group seemed to have... or more like, the absence of it. How was it that one person could attract such terrible luck? Jesus, he’d only been with the group for a little over a week, and there’d been what seemed like one disaster after another—never mind the problems they’d run into not long after they’d met. Maybe Lugo had the right idea.

“Mr. Stormcrown... uh, Harry.”

“Harry is fine.”

“Lugo’s gone to be with his family. I was thinkin’...”

“If you want to join him, we can do that,” said Aaron. “Only thing is, your seeing healer Ferris is still a requirement.”

“No shit. I still ain’t okay with... what I saw, what I did,” said Walker. “Still get nightmares an’ shit.”

“And healer Ferris will help you through that. Just... give us an hour or so, let us get a few things sorted out, and I’ll have one of the guys take you to Bthalft,” Aaron promised.

“Thank you.”

“Actually. I’m gonna take Zoey into Bthalft so she can see her mother and sisters. I can take Captain Walker along,” said Justin.

“That makes it easier. We’ll keep in contact and let you know when the portal’s been reopened back to Kattegat.”

“The portal to 1926 is still open, isn’t it?” Harry asked.

“Far as I know,” said Aaron. “But it’s best if we don’t use it. Just prevent tempting fate, all that shit.”

“I just feel a little bad that we had no chance to say good bye to King Alexander. We spent an evening in his company. I think it was a bit rude,” said Harry. “Just dropped everything, and not a word of thank you or anything.”

“I’m sure a letter wouldn’t be a problem, Harry.”

Finally, Ragnar, Athelstan, and Brandon un-froze. Both Ragnar and Athelstan looked shaken up, and Harry had a good idea what they’d just seen.

Brandon, meanwhile, fished into one of the pockets on his vest, pulling out a pair of vials.

“Here. It’ll settle the nerves a bit.”

Both men accepted the offering, and quickly consumed the contents.

“Sit. Need to decide what we’re doing for the next bit, while the Commonwealth works to get a portal reopened.”

Both Ragnar and Athelstan quickly took seats on one of the couches, with everyone else following suit. Athelstan still looked rather pale, struck silent by the memories.

“I have seen Ragnarok,” said Ragnar, softly. “Such weapons, such tools... they have no place in the
Harry let out a frustrated sigh, having a very good idea of what Brandon had shown them. “But they have been created, and they do exist, and they have been used, as much as we wish it not to be so.”

“Once we get you both back where you belong, we’ll make sure you don’t keep those memories. I didn’t expect they would be that upsetting,” Brandon apologized.

“I have sent many a man to his end. That I will freely admit,” said Ragnar. “What you have shown me... to cause such death. Such destruction to the very land, without reason, with little regard for those who might come after. This world, it truly leaves me frightened.”

“It scares me too, Ragnar. The atrocities we’ve seen over the past five months, have only gotten worse. The rate things are going, we’ll blow each other up before the year’s up.”

“Harry...” Brandon muttered.

“What? Every one of those explosions they’ve unleashed, they’ve gotten progressively worse. They set one of those off in New York—”

“Eight million people. We know, Harry,” said Justin. “DOI made sure MACUSA knows.”

Bryce made a face. “They bomb NYC, there goes the economy.”

“We know that too. NYSE, NASDAQ, many of the big American banks... the watershed from that, we really can’t even begin to guess what would happen. I mean, DOI can take a guess, but...”

“Scary thing... we pretty much expect them to do something like that. New York, Washington, Chicago, LA, San Francisco... it’ll be one of those,” said Aaron.

“Dad...” Zoey said, voice barely above a whisper.

“We’ve got SOU in the White House. First hint something’s going pear-shaped, we’ll get him to safety,” Brandon promised.

“I find your world a truly scary place,” said Athelstan, quietly, as he at last found his voice, “I will not miss it when we return to Kattegat.”

Ragnar gave a nod of agreement. “Nor will I, Athelstan.”

Bryce looked up at the clock over the fireplace mantle. “I’m goin’ into the Flagon for a drink. Who’s comin’?”

“Good thought,” Harry agreed, casting a glance to the dining room. There was a ward on the doorway, and likely a silencing charm. So the Queen was likely meeting with the Privy Council again. Best if the group were elsewhere, then. Ragnar meeting one of his descendants might not be the best idea.

“Meanwhile, I’m off to Bthalft,” said Justin. “Credence, where’s your sister?”

“Still inside the... trunk,” Credence answered, gesturing to Harry’s chest.

“Take both of them to the Weasleys’ for now,” Harry decided, “Just until we get things sorted out, and conclude our business with Kattegat. Then we can travel to the College of Winterhold.

“And really, I mean it. I don’t want to hear a PEEP about shit going on back on... well, back...”
“We got it, Harry,” said Brandon, “I’ll make sure we’re not bothered.”

The group split up, with Justin, Zoey, Credence, Modesty, and Walker vanishing in a blur. The rest, headed through the door leading out to the outer cistern and the Ragged Flagon.

The first thing Harry noticed, was the additional shop which had opened up. An alchemy shop, he quickly realized, seeing the various vials and bottles arranged on one side of the counter. The shopkeeper was busy working at an alchemy station at the back.

“We seem to have acquired a new merchant,” Harry remarked.

“He set up shop yesterday,” said Delvin, from his usual place. He took note of the extra members of the group. “Still ongoing issues?”

“You could say that,” said Mazhe, “Things are settling down a bit, and we hope to have things back to normal in the next few hours, a day at most. If there’s something—”

“I need you to meet with Erikur in Solitude; he’s got some kind of shill job planned. Now he may not welcome you with open arms...(1)"

“I know of him,” Mazhe answered. “Harry, you mind if I take it?”

“Go, we’ll be fine. Knowing how quickly you work, we’ll see you back in an hour or two.”

“Get this done, and we’ll acquire a valuable ally in Solitude,” said Delvin.

“Oh. So it’s one of those jobs,” Harry realized.

“Harry, this is good for us.”

“I know, Mazhe. Just... be careful.”

“My mobile’s always on, you know that.”

The pair embraced tightly, with Mazhe planting a kiss on Harry’s forehead. They separated, with Mazhe pulling out his mobile. He found the bookmark he was looking for, and vanished.

“Some semblance of normal,” Harry muttered. “Actually. Guys, let’s go into the inner cistern. Everyone should be up, so we won’t disturb anyone.”

“Harry...” Brandon cautioned, flicking his eyes toward Ragnar and his companion.

“Well, we could go to Trevelyan and wander down King Street. Considering afternoon rush is about to start. Give them the grand tour of twenty-first century life—”

“Okay, okay,” Brandon surrendered, holding up his hands.

Harry smirked, as he led the group through the narrow passageway which linked the two large chambers. “Zu’u prodah hi wah koraav ol zu’u dreh.” (“I expected you to see as I do”) 

“What?”

“Uh... you know the translation charm doesn’t work for Dovahzul,” Brandon reminded him.
"What is... dovah—" Athelstan began.

"The language of dragons, dovah," Harry answered, as they stepped into the inner cistern. "I have two instructors who have been teaching me since last spring."

"Dragons... they exist?" Ragnar wanted to know.

"Very much so. Most, are considered hostile enemies. A pair of them... are friends and allies."

"And there are dragons where we live?" questioned Athelstan.

"Yes. Though they tend to remain out of sight," said Brandon. "A matter of fact, there’s a dragon native to Scandinavia, the Norwegian Ridgeback."

"I have seen one of those, briefly," Harry remembered, "Going on four years ago now. But... you shouldn’t worry about encountering one, as Brandon has already said."

Ragnar shuddered at the thought, but then smirked. "If only we could have one at our side in battle."

"Yeah. Uh, that won’t ever happen. The Norwegian magical council would have plenty to say about non-magicals messing around with a magical creature. Never mind the near-impossible task of controlling one. It takes an entire team of handlers to control just one dragon," said Aaron. "And dragon handlers tend to be quite gifted with magic."

"One of Ron’s brothers works as a dragon handler," Harry remembered.

They’d crossed the cistern, and now stopped at a workstation in an alcove that contained a ladder leading to the surface. It was in the shape of a pentagram, with five symbols etched into its surface. There was a claw-shaped receptacle at dead centre at the back, with a series of candles in decreasing height falling away from it, ending at a pair of serpent heads which framed the sides.

"What is this?" questioned Athelstan.

"An Arcane Enchanter," Harry answered. He gestured to Ragnar’s armour. "If you would take off your armour. I’d like to put a few protections on it."

"Harry—" Brandon began, but Harry gave him a look that would kill.

"Athelstan, if you would..."

"Oh."

Athelstan undid some of the lacing at the top of the armour, and Ragnar was able to slip it off over his head. Harry, meanwhile, reached into his pouch, seeming to look for something.

"Right. Here we go," he said, at last retrieving a purple-coloured gem twice as large as his hand. It seemed to have several crystals protruding from it at different angles. "This is about as strong as the gem we used to recharge the staff, but, it doesn’t have a person’s soul trapped in it."

Athelstan once again looked uncomfortable, as Ragnar set his armour on the table.

"So this is how enchanting works," Bryce guessed.

"Yes," Harry answered, as he touched one of the symbols. He then touched the armour, causing it to shimmer a purple shade for a moment. "That’s tuning the object to the table, meaning it’s now ready for enchanting. One more thing."
He reached into his pouch, producing the Elder Scroll. He set it at the back of the table, then touched it with a finger, causing the entire table and its contents to shudder a moment.

“Harry... Jesus, one of these days you’re gonna blow us all to fuck, messing around with that,” Aaron muttered.

“What told you to try doing that?” Brandon wanted to know.

Harry averted eye contact. “Don’t ask questions you don’t want the answers to. Or, framed another way, that’s privileged information.”

Brandon looked like he wanted to bang his head against the wall. Harry had been difficult at times, but now with full knowledge of his rights and privileges, things would only get more difficult.

Aaron, meanwhile, had a pretty good idea. “Hermaeus Mora’s gonna own your soul, the rate you’re going.”

Harry said nothing, as he lifted the armour and touched one of the symbols on the table. “Fortify, damage resistance. Fortify, healing rate.”

“Harry!” Brandon shouted.

“What?”

“Jesus Christ. Statute of Secrecy. What’s that gonna look like, his injuries healing on their own?!?”

“Good thing the statute doesn’t exist in 801CE, now, eh?” Harry answered, waspishly, as he again touched the table. “Final.”

The armour shimmered a brilliant red shade, before falling still, the crystal in the receptacle fading out of view.

“Though I am certain he lives to an old age, I only take steps to ensure it. Ragnar, a gift. Use it well.”

“A gift well received, my young friend,” said Ragnar, as he slipped the armour back over his head. Swiftly, Athelstan re-did the lacing, making it secure.

Harry, meanwhile, collected the Elder Scroll, and placed it back in his pouch.

“Do remember, it will not prevent injury, rather, it will limit the magnitude, and speed recovery from them. I would suggest you not test its limits, doing so could be fatal.”

“I will keep that in mind. I wonder, are you able to place more than a pair of enchantments on an item?”

“There are some master enchanters who are able to do just about anything they want. I’m only able to place two enchantments on an item.”

“On any item of clothing?”

“Any.”

Ragnar regarded his companion a moment. “Athelstan. Your belt.”

As Athelstan undid his belt, Harry reached into his pouch, and produced another crystal, along with the Elder Scroll. And, in short order, the item was enchanted in exactly the same way.
“How long will the enchantment last?” Athelstan questioned, as he put the belt back on.

“As long as the item lasts. I can also put an unbreakable charm on it, but that will wear off after a while. So not so practical.”

Harry seemed to think a moment, as he once again stored the Elder Scroll in his pouch. “Right. Come this way.”

They crossed the cistern, to where Brynjolf was working, looking over a message.

“Brynjolf. With permission, I’d like to enter the vault and offer these two compensation for some nasty business.”

Brynjolf looked up from the letter. “Long as you replace whatever you take. We’re not in the business of charity.”

“As I’m aware. I’ll clear the debt with my own coin if necessary,” Harry promised. “Coin is of little use where these guys come from.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” said Ragnar.

“Come this way.”

They again crossed the cistern, to arrive at a pair of heavy steel doors.

“Normally two keys are required to open it, but with an incident which happened last year, we’ve had to make a few adjustments.”

Harry flicked a hand at the doors, and there came a series of clicks, before they swung open.

“Even if I didn’t tell Brynjolf what we were doing, he’d still know someone had opened the vault. It’s all recorded in a ledger, along with the number of people who enter it, if anything’s added to it, or if anything’s taken out of it. So, no more of people taking things and the leadership not knowing about it.”

Both Ragnar and Athelstan were astounded at the vault’s contents. Jewels, gold, silver, chests upon chests of gold coins, trinkets; cups, plates, weapons, the list of precious items was virtually endless.

Bryce let out a whistle. “Holy shit...”

“This,” said Harry, gesturing to the room, “Means everything to the guild. To me, it means very little. Now. Ragnar and Athelstan. You may both claim three things. Consider it a personal payment for the absurd inconvenience you’ve been forced into.”

“We may take anything?” questioned Athelstan, still awe-struck at what he was seeing. Ragnar appeared to be in the same situation, taking it all in.

“Anything. A good number of the things in here were claimed by my hand; it is only fair I have some say as to who might have access.”

“Poor Dumbledore,” said Brandon, with a smirk.

“Yes, a fool who sits at number two on my shit list, an individual who has stomped on my dick nerve one too many times, and so has a date with the gardener of men. Not that he knows it yet.”

“Harry.”
“Brandon, we’ve been over that already. I am CERTAIN Hermaeus Mora will take great pleasure
mind-raping the fuck out of him.”

“Who is Hermaeus Mora?” Athelstan wanted to know, as he looked around, trying to decide on
what he would take.

“It’s something you don’t need to know, other than he’s an... unusual ally,” Harry answered. “Take
your time, we don’t need to be anywhere.”

It took about a half hour for the pair to choose their items. Harry couldn’t help but grin at the amulet
Athelstan had picked up.

“This looks like Thor’s hammer,” he’d remarked.

“That’s an amulet of Talos. It... Mazhe wears one, though he keeps it hidden. There are a number of
people who don’t like it,” said Harry.

“If it has significance...”

“Keep it. Unsure why the Guild had it as it is.”

“Who is Talos?” questioned Ragnar, as they left the vault, Harry re-sealing the door with a gesture of
the hand.

“He’s like... he was a great general here, who lived thousands of years ago. According to ancient
text, he joined the Pantheon of the Gods here.”

Ragnar looked at the piece. “It strongly resembles Thor’s Hammer. Perhaps they are related. Your
world has gone through so many changes. I feel more lost than ever.”

“Just... give the government some time. They should get the portal open in the next few hours,”
Brandon promised. “Uh... let’s go back out to the Flagon, and follow Bryce’s suggestion of having a
drink.”

“Good thought,” Harry agreed.

The next few hours passed by with the six of them gathered in the Ragged Flagon. Brandon received
several messages on his mobile, and Harry assumed they were only updates to what was going on
with the portal. Harry, too, received a few messages, all of them from Mazhe. The job was taking
more time than expected, requiring him to travel to a ship moored a few miles outside of Solitude. It
was a location he’d not been to before, and so it meant getting there on foot. Harry had immediately
asked if he needed help, but Mazhe declined. “It’s a stealth job, and illegal. Trust me, I have it in
hand.”

Then, as it approached dinner time, Brandon received yet another message on his mobile.

“All right. They’ve reopened the portal back to Kattegat. Ah shit. We really need to get back, sounds
like there are difficulties.”

Harry could immediately guess exactly what was going on. “I would be furious, too, in their place.
We all but abducted their king. Accident or not.”

Brandon had already received a bookmark, and with a blur of bodies, they vanished.

August 18, 801CE
Village of Kattegat, Southern Norway

They arrived to a stand-off, between the Commonwealth’s soldiers and officials, and Ragnar’s men. They only relaxed slightly, seeing Ragnar and Athelstan appear amongst the new arrivals.

“Ragnar?” questioned Rollo, “You are unharmed?”

“All is well, put your weapons away.”

“What they have done, it is not right!” protested yet another man down the line.

“No, it wasn’t,” Brandon agreed, “But this was not by our doing. We apologize for what’s happened, and had we known...”

“Sir...” Aaron began, but Harry muttered something incoherent before saying, “Given our luck, we shouldn’t have allowed Ragnar to join us. As luck has it, neither he nor his companion were injured in any way.”

“It is so,” said Ragnar, “It was an unusual adventure at worst.”

Now, swords and axes were put away, as the Norsemen realized their leader was unharmed.

“Now come. Let us have food and drink, so I may share some of our adventure.”

“Ragnar...” Brandon cautioned.

“Not all, but they should know of some.”

Brandon relented and accepted the compromise. The entire population would need their memories modified no matter what, something that would take the night, even with the Commonwealth resources being marshaled.

“How long were we missing?” questioned Athelstan, as the large group made their way toward the Earl’s hall.

“A few hours, at most,” answered Bjorn, “There was much panic when the sphere vanished with no warning.”

“There was an additional trap placed on the portal, intended to possibly trap Harry and his circle of friends here,” said Aaron. “Instead, we got...”

“Thing is, no matter what, we would’ve had to reopen the portal somehow; there are people here who don’t belong here. They have a life, families back in our own world. Just as, Ragnar and his steward belong here,” Brandon explained. “Things are still out of place which must be fixed before we part ways for good.

“And all of you... everyone, I have to make this clear: we have to part ways tomorrow.”

“Is it possible? Can MIRT clear this up overnight, I mean?” Harry wanted to know.

“Easily, Harry,” Aaron answered, “We’ll have about a hundred people here overnight.”

He looked around.

“Most of the damage has been fixed as it is... likely would’ve been finished had the portal not suddenly closed.”
“And what has become of the woman responsible?” Rollo demanded.

“In order for us to re-connect the portal here, we were forced to let her go,” answered Brandon, “And before all of you become angry for it, there was no choice. Just as our people do not belong here, neither does Ragnar belong in our modern world. He belongs here with his family.”

“I have their promise that she will face justice, already being found guilty of her crimes,” Ragnar added.

“We made that very clear to her,” said Brandon, “She’ll be either killed or executed. There’ll be no pleading, or other such garbage. Nothing she might have will mitigate or cancel out her punishment. No deals, no bargains for information. We’ll execute her on the spot, it’s that simple.”

Rollo still looked furious, but he relented, as they at last entered the hall.

It was then Harry’s mobile rang. He pulled it out.

“Hello.”

“**Harry. Where are you guys?**”

“Back in Kattegat. The portal’s reopened.”

“**Hang on, I’ll—**”

“Best you stay there, Justin. You’re still with Zoey and the Barebones?”

“**Yeah. Just returned to the apartment for a minute. We’re all at the Weasleys. Ron’s wondering where you are.**”

“Wrapping up some unfinished business. May be a while yet. Tell Ron I’ll try and get over to see them in the next few days... maybe something to think about, get everyone together for a day or something.”

“All right. Be safe.” He heard a click as the call disconnected.

Almost immediately, the Vikings realized there had been no food prepared, considering they’d been preoccupied for the past couple of hours.

“Let us solve that problem,” said Aaron, “Considering we’re somewhat the reason for the distraction.”

“I should be impressed if you are able to produce with such short notice,” said Floki, looking doubtful.

Both Aaron and Harry smirked. “Just watch us.”

“Mead and ale on the other hand, should not be difficult to come by,” said Ragnar.

As they all sat around the long table, Bjorn questioned, “Where is the red-haired man?”

“My partner? He’s running an errand back where we’re from. I expect he’ll join us later.”

“And the other?”

“Justin. I just spoke to him on my... mobile. He likely won’t be joining us. He’s taking care of a
different matter, and seeing to his girlfriend.”

“Your group has indeed grown smaller,” Rollo observed.

“And it was done to limit further exposure. Just as we limited your party to only a pair of people, we’re doing the same here,” said Brandon, as Aaron spoke on his own mobile off in a corner.

“A third member has decided not to travel with us for the next while,” said Harry, “He’s joining a friend in one of our cities.”

Aaron wasn’t kidding. In under ten minutes, an enormous feast arrived in their midst, all of it most familiar to the Viking hosts.

“I count myself lucky not to have made wager,” said Floki.

“All bow down to the great and powerful Oz,” Bryce smirked.

“Bryce...”

“What?”

“What’s this... ‘Oz’?” Bjorn wanted to know.

“Uh... don’t worry about it. My friend was only being an ass,” said Harry. “Uh... actually, I don’t even know what he meant.”

“Oh. I’ll put it another way. It’s more awesome if you don’t know how they pulled it off. I’m guessin’ they had more time than you might think.”

Now Harry smirked. Oh yes, the Commonwealth had more than enough time. He absently clutched at the amulet hanging around his neck. Speaking of, it was likely he’d need more time later. He’d left something for Newt, it was only right he also left something for Ragnar... right?

Shortly after they began to eat, there came a blur nearby, and Mazhe appeared. He took a moment before his eyes found Harry.

“All is well?”

“The... quest was completed successfully, yes, Harry. Erikur promises he’ll contact Delvin in the next day or so.”

Brandon shifted over, making room so Mazhe could sit down.

“Gods above, food is about right now... we haven’t eaten proper since breakfast.”

“Yeah, today’s been an adventure.”

“But we got plenty of things settled,” said Brandon, “Getting the ship back in the air was a massive victory for us—you guys have no clue how much of a state the Commodore was in... the prospect of being stuck over eighty years in the past... Harry, count on there being more accolades for you, Mazhe, and Credence.”

Harry muttered something incoherent. “Shouldn’t have needed to. I mean it, Brandon. I’ve had just about enough. We get back to our present, we’re unplugging. Even if it’s just a couple of weeks. Little if not no contact with the government.”
“And I’ll make sure of it. Just give us a few hours tomorrow. You plan on returning to the College?”

“Yes.”

Harry thought for a moment.

“I do hope the unofficial record will also show of Ragnar’s participation this morning. Without his help, the core would not have restarted.”

“Count on it. And as much as the Commodore would like to give him official accolades, you know that’s not possible. There can’t be any official record he was ever there... Gods help us all if that sort of thing was to ever get out.”

“I don’t understand... why would that be seen as a negative thing?” questioned Bjorn.

“Time travel is heavily regulated by every magical nation, including the Commonwealth. Now granted, Harry does have a great amount of latitude, but it would draw outright condemnation from a number of sources, and strain our already very fragile relationship, with most of the international magical community,” Brandon explained.

“We’re not supposed to be here, just like Ragnar was not supposed to be in the future,” said Harry. “That said... not all of our adventure here has been unpleasant.”

As the evening wore on, Brandon continued to receive messages on his mobile, as the Commonwealth’s officials and most of the soldiers retreated back through the portal to Trevelyan. A very small contingent of soldiers did remain to provide additional security, but it was agreed that at this point, it was for the most part unnecessary. The opposite end of the portal was in the Magnus Chamber, and presently under lockdown.

It grew late, with a number of people departing for home. The fire in the fire pit had died down to mostly embers, tongues of flame occasionally flickering to life, only to die down again.

“Harry, c’mon. Time for bed,” Mazhe whispered, “Fetch your chest.”

“I, uh...”

“We have extra room,” Bjorn offered, “Travelling through your portal may be... difficult.”

“Thank you. C’mon, Harry.”

Mazhe glanced over, and found Bryce had fell asleep, resting his head on the table.

“We have had a long day, Mazhe. Gods, gonna need a pepper-up potion or three,” Brandon muttered.

“You don’t plan on resting?”

“Not until we close the portal in the morning,” Brandon answered, “Mr. Ragnarsson, if you’d show these guys where they can sleep.”

“Of course,” said Bjorn, quickly getting to his feet, though he for a moment looked confused at how he’d been addressed. Mazhe, too, climbed to his feet and clumsily pulled his mate up.

“Gods, Harry, you’re getting heavy.”

“Mmmmph...”
Brandon only shook his head, then drew his wand, and levitated Bryce away from the table, as Bjorn led them over to a side room. Brandon could still smell the blood—someone... likely several people had been killed in there, and quite recently. He set Bryce on the bed, and another gesture from his wand had the room freshened up.

“You want another bed?”

“No, Brandon. We’ll share... doubt he’s gonna mind too much,” Mazhe answered, flicking his eyes toward Bryce, as he put Harry down. “Not the first time we’ve all shared, all considering.”

“Right. I’m out, now get some rest, all of you.”

Both Bjorn and Brandon retreated, with a curtain being pulled across for privacy.

“C’mon, Harry. We need rest,” Mazhe whispered.

Sometime later, Mazhe woke up, feeling Harry get up. He thought very little of it... most likely needing to answer the call of nature. He grinned to himself, feeling Bryce pressed up against his side. This was nothing new to the three of them, considering the time the guy had spent back in the fall. If only he were more willing... the possibilities. But... no. That wasn’t what the guy needed, and pressing him would likely not be taken well. No, the guy only needed a bit of comfort. He’d find someone special eventually. Gods, Justin and Zoey... Mazhe had no doubt there would be some sort of announcement, likely sooner rather than later.

Harry returned a short time later, and in the dim light, Mazhe missed how much more exhausted his mate looked. He all but fell into bed, and Mazhe wasted no time pulling him close.

“C’mon... sleep now.”


All too soon, Harry and his circle were saying good bye to Ragnar and his people. Only a very few officials from the Commonwealth remained, along with only a pair of extra SOU.

“Your presence will not be soon forgotten,” said Ragnar.

“Nor will we forget you, sir,” Harry returned, “I say again, not all of our experiences here were unpleasant. I do lament that we aren’t able to stay longer, but... doing so, it tempts fate for further calamity. All of you do be well.”

“What if the witch tries coming here again?” questioned one of the women.

“Then we will return also,” said Aaron, “We’ll know. We have ways of knowing. Just trust us, we’ll look after things.”

“Right. We really have to go,” said Brandon.

Harry shook Ragnar’s hand one last time, and the group stepped back through the portal, to land in the Magnus Chamber.

“All clear?” came the question.

“All clear, master Guardian.”
“Then close the portal.”

“At once, madam Guardian.”

Harry turned around, to find Guardian Elaine observing, as the second guardian gestured with his wand at the Orb of Magnus, which still pulsed green off and on. There came a noisy crackle, and the second portal disintegrated.

“Forgive us for wishing to be elsewhere,” said Harry, softly.

“It’s understood,” spoke Elaine.

Harry only nodded stiffly, as he un-clipped his mobile from his belt, and opened it up.

Mazhe and Bryce looked over his shoulder. “Where we going?”

“Ron’s place. We’ll meet up with the others. Then we’ll go to the College. I mean it, we’re unavailable for the next couple of weeks at minimum... this shit... been nothing but a cluster fuck since the eighth.”

“Then be off, Harry Stormcrown. We understand all too well,” said Elaine, softly.

The group vanished in another blur of limbs.

Chapter End Notes

UP NEXT: Things somewhat return to normal, with Harry re-establishing himself back at the College, attending classes and training; Walker and Credence continue to see Healer Ferris and an associate; and Frea requests a bit of help with a missing smithy back at the Skaal settlement...

CHAPTER NOTES: So Ragnar gets a taste of war & conflict in the 21st century. Maybe magical in nature in cases, but... the result’s the same: hundreds of thousands dead in a single event, millions killed in another. I think he’d be stunned by it.

Now, has Harry gone off the rails with the power he’s got? Heh, heh, guess we’ll find out, now, won’t we? And, count on there being fallout from stuff he’s doing here, both on and off screen. His trip to the bathroom did take much longer than it seemed, right? So what’s he done?

(1) not verbatim, but close to what Delvin actually says in the game.
(2) Though he goes by Ironside, Brandon’s not aware of his ‘earned’ title and so addresses him based on traditional Norse naming conventions. Or what he assumes is correct. And actually, Bjorn’s effectively a prince, considering Ragnar’s now the King of Denmark. So Brandon’s perhaps forgetting protocol here.
The Missing Smithy

Chapter Summary

Things somewhat return to normal, with Harry re-establishing himself back at the College, attending classes and training; Walker and Credence continue to see Healer Ferris and an associate; and Frea requests a bit of help with a missing smithy back at the Skaal settlement...

Note: spoilers for the Dragonborn DLC quests “A New Source of Stalhrim”, and “Deathbrand”; graphic violence.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

27. THE MISSING SMITHY

January, 2008 / Morning Star, 4E203

“Something isn't right Fanari. I feel it in my bones and I smell it in the air. Baldor wouldn't leave without telling someone.”

- Deor Woodcutter of the Skaal

Harry and Mazhe’s room in the Hall of Attainment was exactly as they’d last left it what seemed like an age ago. With Aaron and Brandon’s help, the room was once again modified to provide beds and privacy for their number. It was expected that Justin would be joining them, and likely Zoey, and so a private room was added. So, too, was a proper private area provided for Harry and Mazhe, considering they were married, a major change since the time they last occupied the space.

The floo connection was quickly reactivated—it had been disabled with Harry and his companions not actively occupying the room, and the College having other ways of keeping in touch. Though Harry didn’t wish any contact with the Commonwealth, Brandon still insisted it be reconnected, for emergencies. Not to mention, not everyone had a special mobile—the teleport features were still somewhat limited to only a handful of people within the Commonwealth.

As the changes were made, various members of the college, both students and teachers, ventured in to say hello. After all, both Harry and Mazhe were well-liked and well-respected. No surprise, some people were asking whether Harry planned on teaching classes again.

“Yes, absolutely,” he’d said, “Though it’ll likely be a few days at minimum, while we get settled. And I’ll want to sit in on a few classes just to see what’s being taught.”

Brandon, meanwhile, had sent a message to DOI: ‘Absolutely no contact unless it’s a COG event. Harry and his companions are virtually burned out from the series of events they’ve faced since the early part of the month. Harry has requested I remain with him, a replacement will be required on board the Ragnar.’
A simple ‘Acknowledged’ was the reply.

It was later in the evening before Justin joined them, along with Zoey and Credence.

“You made room for all of us, I guess,” said Justin.

“We assumed you and Zoey would be sticking around,” said Aaron.

“Long as I can stay in touch with dad,” said Zoey, “He wants to hear from me at least once a day.”

“Well, he wants to hear from your mother and your sisters at least once a day, too,” said Justin.

Credence, meanwhile, was looking around the room. “You grew up here.”

Harry grinned. “I did. It was both my home and my school for five years. Then, when I joined another school back… well… someplace else, it became less so, but… it’s always been home, really. And we won’t have the government wandering through at all hours of the day…” That last bit was said mostly to himself. He softened. “The second school I went to… you’ll eventually see it. I think you should know of magic from two places.”

“Harry, tell him,” said Justin, “He needs to know.”

“Fair enough. How about we take a seat, it does need a bit of time for a proper explanation.”

Everyone took seats on the couches and armchairs which took up the middle of the room. The configuration did change depending on what was going on, or what the need was. A platter of snacks had appeared on the low table in the middle, as did a small ice chest with various beverages.

“The short of it, this is not Earth, but a planet called Nirn.”

Credence looked astounded. “Is that… is that even possible?”

“Very much so. The long of it, begins a few decades ago, when the Commonwealth inadvertently made contact here through a portal created by an immensely powerful magical object.”

“Something like the Ragnar’s core,” Credence remembered.

“Yes. Except something much more powerful, called the Orb of Magnus, or, Eye of Magnus—you’ll hear it identified by the latter here at the College. The Commonwealth and the College became good friends over the years… plenty of information-sharing took place, but… I can’t be certain. All I know, I’m thankful it happened.

“I told you back… back in New York… I know exactly where you’ve been, because, I’ve walked an almost identical path. At least, until I turned six years old. Then, some very kind people from Valicadia took me away from my abusive aunt and uncle, and sent me here.”

“When he came, he was five years younger than me, but I didn’t care. He needed a big brother, and I needed someone closer to my age than the adult mages,” Mazhe threw in.

“Yeah, it was the beginning of a beautiful friendship,” Harry smirked.

“What are… what’s life like here, then?” asked Credence.

“You mean, are there more than humans around? Yes. You’ll be meeting a few non-humans here at the College, likely tomorrow. Their appearance may seem intimidating, but trust me, I know most of the people here, and you have nothing to be afraid of,” Harry promised.
“Just don’t introduce him to J’zargo or Enthir yet,” said Mazhe, smirking, “Their penchant for mischief might level the building.”

“Well, they can’t be any stranger than... Dobby, was it?”

Harry looked at Justin and raised his eyebrows. “You introduced him to Dobby?”

“He’d meet him eventually, right?”

“Fair enough.”

Harry seemed to think a moment. “As to what it’s like outside and so on... it’s very similar to Earth, so same air, and the ground’s the same. Though it’s very cold outside right now given we’re in the dead of winter. So we’ll need to get you fitted out with some better clothes.”

“A better wardrobe, period,” Justin remarked, “You look like you’re dressed for a funeral.”

Credence looked down at his hands. “This is what ma wanted.”

“Well, we’ll fix that in a hurry. Credence, your mother was a horrible person. She hated you for the beautiful gift you were given, just as my aunt hated me for the exact same reason. Never for one moment should you believe anything she said to you or taught you... it was all rubbish.

“Instead, I want you to be yourself. If there’s something you don’t know, I want you to ask about it. Let your curiosity loose. Just as we’ll help you to free your magic, nurture it into something far more constructive, something amazing. You’re a wizard, Credence, and there’s absolutely nothing wrong with that.”

“And Mrs. Weasley will take care of Modesty?”

“Count on it,” said Harry, “I’m thinkin’ she’s afraid of having an empty nest once Ginny comes of age. I’d say let Modesty stay with us, but...”

“It wouldn’t be practical,” Aaron picked up, “Given our positions and reputation, her having appropriate supervision wouldn’t be guaranteed. It’s better she has a full-time guardian, and Molly can most certainly do that.”

“As it stands, your sister should also be attending school; the government will see where she’s at academically, and set her up with tutors to catch her up if necessary. Then hopefully in September, she’ll be able to join classes at Hogwarts. The school’s still magic-only, but that will be changed over the summer,” Justin explained.

Harry looked thoughtful. “So it’s gonna become a day school.”

“For non-magical students, yes. Those who are magical, I don’t know, really. We’ve got a thousand years of tradition, versus our modern policies.”

“So you’re gonna be teachin’ classes,” said Bryce.

“Yes, a couple.”

“While he’s away for classes, you can train with us,” said Brandon, “We can use the VPR, long’s Harry leaves the chest open.”

“Yeah, I’ll make sure of it. The point being, I’m done. Hell, I haven’t had the chance to properly grieve for Crixus and Dardanos. Two men I adored now walk the afterlife. So for the next while, I
plan on having very little to do with affairs back on Earth, and limited contact with the Commonwealth as a whole."

“And no one will fault you for that, Harry,” said Brandon, “I sent a text to DOI earlier saying hands off. So the only way we’ll hear from the government is a catastrophic event. I mean, the apocalypse or something like that... nothing less.”

Harry gave an incline of the head. “Thank you.”

“And I think, even when spring training starts, we’ll keep a low profile. We’re powerful wizards, yeah, but we’re not all professionals. We can’t save everyone, and one of these days, we’re all gonna end up dead,” said Justin, “Gods above, Grindelwald could’ve wiped the floor with us.”

“Oh, yes, we know,” said Brandon, “I’m sure Mrs. T. will have a bunch of things to say to us about that. We were in WAY over our heads there, even with Harry and Mazhe’s abilities combined.”

“He shook off a shock spell, my Shout, then threw you and Harry in front of it the next time! I was mortified!” Mazhe exclaimed, “Shors balls, had I used the full force of it both of you would’ve been dead.”

“Mazhe, it’s not your fault. And in the end the situation was handled.”

Brandon gave a vicious smirk. “I think Bryce shooting him in the shoulder threw him for a loop, not expecting to be attacked by a non-magical.”

Bryce scowled. “Hope it gave him lots to think about. So what happens to him? I mean, obviously he was beaten for good, right?”

“Who is Grindelwald anyway?” Credence also wanted to know.

“Gellert Grindelwald. He was... a very dark wizard. And yes, he was soundly defeated. It’s ironic, in a way, that the man responsible for his defeat, now walks an identical path,” said Harry. “Gods, how difficult it was, for me to keep my mouth shut around Mr. Scamander. I know he looked up to Dumbledore.”

“It’s likely that then, he was the honourable man we thought him to be,” said Justin, “You know people change. Sometimes for the better, and sometimes, for the worse.”

“Either way, Grindelwald is no longer a matter for us to worry about. He died a few years ago, if my info’s right.”

“Yeah, it would have been when you were here during the spring of your fourth year.”

“When Ancano was being a pain in the ass,” Harry remembered. “No matter. My plan is for things to be similar to that. Classes here or at Hogwarts...”

“We’ll want to continue lessons with Balimund, he’d love to get more time with the Aetherium Forge, Harry,” said Mazhe.

“Yes. And I’ll want to continue lessons with Paarthurnax. Oh, yeah, something else, Credence. Two friends and allies who are... well, very special. We’ll show you a memory of what the look like before we take you, since they’re rather... startling.”

“What will I be doing while you’re in class?”
“You will have lessons of your own. I still have to have a word with Tolfdir. He’ll want to see what sort of magical talent you have, and most definitely he’ll want to see the Obscurus.”

“What if he’s... what if he says no?”

“He won’t, Credence,” Harry promised, “The College deals with some truly extraordinary... sometimes incredibly volatile magic... anomalies such as an Obscurus won’t be a great concern—not that it would ever be treated without care—but it’s a curiosity worth studying.

“Don’t think they will treat you as a specimen... if I have an inkling that’s what’s gonna happen, we’ll be going someplace else and I’ll never come back here.”

“Something you must know” said Justin, “Harry’s extremely protective of his friends.”

Harry gave a slow nod. “Trust is everything. If you cannot trust the man at your side, the entire unit is compromised. Something Tommy said a long time ago, but something I already knew, even then. Everyone in this room, I trust without question.”

Credence looked surprised. “Even me?”

“You’ve done nothing that would make me question it.”

January 14, 2008 / 14 Morning Star, 4E203

It was no surprise to anyone that morning, when healer Ferris did not arrive by floo powder alone. Harry had received a message the previous night warning of such.

“Harry and friends, this is a colleague of mine, healer Andy Chen. I felt that, given the number of you, it would be better if I bring on a bit of help.”

“No. Just insuring that, should I not be available, another healer is familiar with all of you and can easily look after you in my stead,” Ferris answered.

“Additionally,” said Chen, “I do specialize in unusual magical illnesses and anomalies.”

Healer Chen was an Asian man of average height, with black hair and brown eyes. Similar to Ferris, he carried with him a portfolio.

“Welcome, healer Chen,” said Harry. That spawned a round of handshakes.

“Healer Ferris has already shared a brief case file on the group of you, but I would like to spend some time getting a general history, uh, straight from the horse’s mouth, if you will.

“I’d also like permission to view the entire case file—”

“Of course,” said Harry, “I mean, if—”

“We have to get written permission from each of you,” said Ferris, “We don’t work out of the same office.”

“Oh. I see. Makes sense.”

Healer Ferris reached into her portfolio, producing a stack of papers. “Mr. Barebone, we’ll also start
a file for you, given—who is his guardian?”

“He’s twenty,” said Harry.

“And, that reminds me,” said Brandon, reaching into one of his vest pockets, and producing a sealed envelope, “Queen Susan sent this along overnight.”

He passed it over to Credence, and Harry had a very good idea what was in it.

Harry grinned. “I’ll call you an honorary brother now. Er... are you able to read that?”

“Oh... yes, quite well,” Credence answered, as he broke the seal, and pulled the letter out.

“Now, everyone, these are Form twelve-A’s. I fill in the detail of what I plan on sharing, and to whom—it’s already been filled in. The form has to be signed by you, and witnessed by another, either a friend or family.

“It only authorizes me to share exactly as detailed on the form, and nothing more. It’s for your protection.”

“Right, got it,” said Harry, as Ferris passed the form over.

“Asylum... what does that mean?” asked Credence, as Harry took a seat at the table.

“You’re protected by the Commonwealth, in a nutshell,” answered Brandon. “Namely, you’ll be staying with us while you find your feet.”

Mazhe noticed Brandon and Aaron hadn’t been given a form. “Don’t you guys need a form too?”

“No,” said Brandon, “We have a series of waivers and declarations already on file with the government. Our privacy rights concerning our medical care is somewhat less than yours.”

“Does that bother you?”

“No. It’s part of the job, Mazhe. It comes with the territory of what we do. Last thing we need is for some information barrier when we’re laying horribly injured in another jurisdiction. That make sense?”

“I see.”

After the forms were signed and tucked away, Chen began to ask Credence some general questions about himself, while Ferris pulled Harry aside for a discussion of their own. They’d spoken a couple of days prior, but things were still turbulent, even with the Occlumency exercises he did frequently. It was agreed they would meet regularly for the next while.

That ate up the rest of the morning. It appeared Credence was getting along well with healer Chen, and the man seemed friendly enough. There was still a nagging feeling at the back of his mind they were about to lose their healer. If not immediately, sometime in the not-so-distant future.

The afternoon, meanwhile, was spent in the Arch-mage’s office, while Tolfdir asked Credence a bunch of questions, mostly around his magic. He also asked to see the Obscurus, which Credence reluctantly demonstrated.

“Remarkable! It in some ways resembles the magical anomalies which have cropped up on occasion since the Eye of Magnus was removed by the Psijic Order,” he noted. “Differing colour, but similar energies. And you are able to affect the physical world while holding that form?”
Credence’s face materialized in the cloud. “Yes sir.”

“He helped restart the Ragnar’s core, that in itself similar to the Eye of Magnus,” said Harry.

“Remarkable. And this formed because you actively suppressed your magicka pool.”

“Yes sir,” said Credence, as he shifted back into human form.

“Have you difficulty in reaching your magicka pool?”

“Not recently.”

Tolfdir seemed to think a moment. “I would say the manifestation is something that will remain with you for the rest of your life. It’s somewhat formed into its own entity.”

“It has a mind of its own, you mean,” Harry guessed.

“Yes, and no. Credence, you are able to control the anomaly somewhat, is that right?”

“It depends. If I’m upset—stressed—angry... the control is lessened.”

“But it never fully takes over.”

“No completely. I... the Senator...”

“Credence. Don’t dwell on it. You were under emotional distress brought on by many factors. No sane court in the country would ever convict you,” said Harry. “But, going forward, you must not ever lose control in that way again.”

“I... I know.”

“Healer Ferris and healer Chen will help you work through the guilt that goes with it... know that it does lessen with time.”

“Harry, if I understand it, a number of mages in your world are able to shape-shift into an animal form.”

“Exactly. It’s called an Animagus form. Professor McGonagall is able to, and my... my godfather was.”

“Then I would almost consider the Obscurus to function in a similar manner. If he’s able to shift at will, maintain control over it, and shift back,” Tolfdir remarked, “Unusual, but also similar.”

“But me learning magic...”

“I think you’ll be more than capable, Credence.”

“A test, perhaps.”

Tolfdir went over to a nearby table, and picked up a yellow tome. He passed it to Credence. “When you open it, it will disappear, but you will absorb the knowledge within it. This is a lesser ward, a type of shield most novice mages know how to cast.”

Credence accepted the book, and though he’d been warned what would happen when he opened it, he was still momentarily startled as the book instantly vanished, and a brief storm of information flooded his consciousness. It was as if... as if he’d instantly read the entire book.
“Did you see how it works? The spell?” Harry questioned.

“Yes, I think so.”

“Good. This is one of the first spells novice mages learn when they come to the College. To cast it, you hold your hand out like this,” said Harry, as he demonstrated, holding his right hand out in front of him. Credence quickly copied the position.

“Good. Now, visualize the spell forming. It’s all thought-based—Perfect!”

A blue shield had popped into being in front of Credence.

“Now. I’m going to cast a spell at you—it won’t be anything lethal, but it can sting if it connects... just hold the shield in place, and it should bounce harmlessly off of it.”

Credence looked nervous, but gave a nod.

“Right. Just hold it steady.”

Harry brought his left hand up, and flung a shock spell at the shield. As promised, the spell impacted with the shield, and fizzled out.

“Excellent, well done!” Tolfdir praised.

“How do I get rid of it?” Credence asked, as he dropped his hand. He got the immediate answer, as the shield vanished.

“The ward will only remain in place as long as you power it,” Tolfdir explained, “Something you must keep in mind as you learn.”

“Also, you are unable to do anything else while the ward is in place,” Harry picked up, “So it’s rather limited. Later on, once you get through the basic material, you’ll learn of much more effective shields.”

“Indeed, as is the nature of our lessons, which I daresay, you will be most suited here. You bring back memories of young Harry here, when he first started at the College.”

Harry couldn’t help but laugh. “Yeah, we all have to start someplace.”

“And Hogwarts?” Credence asked.

“Oh, you’ll take some classes there, too,” Harry promised, “I have more than a few friends there, both student and teacher, who will be anxious to meet you. But we’re starting here. That’s if you want to.”

“I would like that very much, Mr. Stormcrown.”

“It’s just Harry. We are friends, after all.”

By the end of the week, Harry and his circle had returned to somewhat of a routine. Harry was at this point only sitting in on the pair of classes he planned on teaching; Tolfdir was more than appreciative of Harry wanting to teach the novice Alteration class. That would free him up to handle some of the administrative work that came with being the acting Arch-Mage. Harry was also observing the novice Destruction class; carrying that class would then free up Faralda, though her other duties were somewhat less than that of Tolfdir.
Outside the College, Harry once again picked up his weekly smithing lesson with Balimund, as well as his lessons with Guild members: Delvin covering stealth, while Niruin covered bows and crossbows. He also returned to some lessons at Hogwarts, considering he was supposed to be in seventh year, preparing for NEWTs. Right, like that was going to happen. Given the nightmares of the past few weeks, he’d missed far too much to have any hope of attending exams with his friends. Next winter would likely be the best bet, if he were honest with himself.

Lessons also resumed with Paarthurnax and Sahrotaar. Harry found his knowledge had slipped somewhat, not attending lessons since before the holiday. So much of his life had been interrupted by the goings-on of the OND.

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Weekends, meanwhile, were kept light, meant to relax and breathe. This case, the group were in the dormitory’s common room that Sunday morning, with Mazhe and Harry showing Credence some of the basics of Alchemy. For now, they kept it rather simple, mostly covering the properties of some common plants; a heavy tome originally belonging to Savos Aren lay open on the small table they were using.

Justin and Zoey were cuddled together on one of the couches, though they were working with a laptop computer. A small table had been pulled over, and it contained several open books, and a pile of paper.

The others were in their own corners, doing their own thing: Bryce had laid on his bed, and was listening to his iPod, while Brandon and Aaron were both reading. Aaron had his nose in a pocket novel, while Brandon was reading a report of some kind, if Harry had to guess.

It was then there came a knock at the door. Harry simply flicked a hand at the door, causing it to open on its own. It revealed Arniel Gane, along with a courier.

“Thank you, Arniel.”

“I will wait.” Arniel gestured that the courier enter.

“Wait a sec’,” said Brandon, getting up and producing his wand. He gestured at the courier, casting several detection spells. After all, the last time someone in the circle received unknown mail, it had resulted in nightmares for not only the flat, but the Ragged Flagon AND the inner cistern.

His spells turned up nothing hostile or untoward, so he beckoned the courier enter.

“Been looking for you,” said the courier.

“Which one of us?” questioned Mazhe.

“It would be you, Dragonborn.”

The courier reached into his satchel, producing a sealed letter. “A rather anxious Shaman in Solstheim paid a little extra to see you get this as soon as possible.”

“At least he’s wearing clothes this time,” said Mazhe, as he accepted the letter.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Mazhe...”

“What?”
Harry reached into his pouch, and produced his coin purse. He pulled out a stack of coins, and passed them over. “Take this for the expedited service.”

The courier gave a nod and a smile, before leaving the room, Arniel following.

“Well?”

Mazhe broke the seal on the letter, and opened it.

Dragonborn,
We need your help, Skaal-friend. Baldor Iron-Shaper, our smith, has gone missing. Considering the great service you did for us last year, you were the first person I thought of.

Frea

“Gods. The Skaal—Frea, needs our help. Their smithy’s gone missing.”

“Let’s go speak to her first, see what’s going on. Uh... Brandon, coming with?”

“’an I’m comin’,” said Bryce, sitting up. He switched off his music player, and stood up.

“Probably just a little investigative work, but... get close, I’ve got us a bookmark,” said Harry, having already produced his mobile. “Uh. Wait. Clothes. Winter gear, guys.”

Brandon produced his wand, and gestured at himself, exchanging his street clothes for his winter gear. Harry was doing the same, though in his case, donning his carved Nordic armour. A second gesture of his wand had his partner also dressed in his armour.

“Now...”

“Let me,” said Brandon. “If you don’t mind something like I’m wearing, Bryce.”

“Go for it.”

Brandon gestured with his wand, and Bryce found himself dressed identical to Brandon.

“Damn. Shame this ain’t permanent.”

“We can get you a set,” Brandon promised, “Should have something warm here anyway, Skyrim’s winter’s fucking brutal at times, us being so far north.”

“Right. Let’s go.”

“Be safe, guys,” said Aaron.

They vanished in a blur.

Skaal Village,
Solstheim

The bookmark dropped them not far from Frea’s house. Mazhe quickly knocked, and the door answered immediately.

“Dragonborn. Glad you got the message so quickly,” said Frea.

“What happened?”
“Baldor Iron-Shaper has not been seen in several days.”

“Who do we talk to for more information?” questioned Brandon.

Frea regarded Brandon a moment, before answering, “Speak to Deor Woodcutter. He’s usually found near the forge. It is he who raised the alarm at first.”

“Thank you. We’ll do our best to find him,” Mazhe promised.

Harry, meanwhile, was already making a track for the forge, located not far from the shaman’s house. A lone individual was working the forge, quite well, if Harry had to guess. An apprentice perhaps? Like the rest of the inhabitants of the village, he wore heavy clothes made of animal skins and a hood covered his head.

“Deor?”

“I am in no mood to talk, outsider,” the man answered, gruffly, turning to face them.

“Frea sent for us. We’re here to help,” said Mazhe, catching up.

“I see. Of course she did,” said the man, sounding resentful. He huffed, then relented. “Baldor Iron-Shaper has gone missing. As our only smith, Baldor is very important to the village.”

“Did you see anything unusual?” Brandon questioned, “Or put another way, did Baldor behave unusually in the time leading up to his disappearance?”

“I do not remember Baldor acting strangely,” Deor answered.

He seemed to think a moment, before adding, “Now that you ask. I did see something in the woods on the day he disappeared. I’m certain I saw two elves, dragging something behind them. Hunters often visit our lands, so I thought little of it at the time.”

“What way were they headed?”

Deor again seemed to think on it a few moments. “South and west, toward Raven Rock.”

“Can you think of any reason someone would want to abduct Baldor?”

“Well, there is one reason that comes to mind. Baldor is the keeper of an ancient tradition, the forging of Stalhrim. It is an art we Skaal hold sacred. If someone wanted to make such weapons, they would have to get that knowledge from Baldor.”

Mazhe looked angry. “Yeah. Sounds like a damned good reason to me. The Thalmor, always looking for more powerful weapons and tools. We’ll locate Baldor. It’s a promise.”

Brandon took the lead, as the four of them headed out of the village, following a narrow trail uphill. It had been a few days, perhaps, but... there. Tracks, and evidence of something being dragged.

“This way.”

“Been lucky then. This time of year, the weather as it is,” said Mazhe, “Tracks in the snow tend not to last all that long.”

Even with a fairly decent track to follow, it took them the better part of the afternoon, before they arrived at what looked like a small cottage, not far from Raven Rock. There were at least five
individuals present, including one dressed in Thalmor Robes, the dress of an important official in the Aldmeri Dominion.

“Harry and Mazhe, focus on the one in fancy clothes. Bryce and I will work on the others,” Brandon whispered, as they crouched low out of sight at the edge of the clearing.

“Harry, work with Brandon and Bryce.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. And no prisoners.”

At Brandon’s nod, Mazhe produced a crossbow, and set up to fire. He could shoot from the hip, as they say, but it was definitely more accurate to fire from a crouching position. He lined up a shot, and seeing the others were ready, he let fly.

The tall Altmer happened to turn his head to look in their direction as the projectile landed, and instead of entering the back of his head, it penetrated his nose and sinus cavity, to finally be lodged in his brain. He dropped like a sack of stones.

“Who’s there?!” another shouted, as spells and weapons were instantly readied.

The question was answered by a storm of spells and gunfire. Three were swiftly ended, with the fourth diving for cover behind the small cottage.

“Filthy human!” the elf shouted, “You will learn your place!”

“Guys. Watch out,” Mazhe warned, quietly, “Miraak taught me a new shout, stay behind me.”

“Have at it,” Harry smirked.

“Ven... GAR NOS!!” Mazhe shouted.

It was a terrifying column of swirling air that came into being, borne from the clap of thunder which echoed overhead, roaring across the clearing, flinging anything and everything loose high into the sky. Even the corpses of the dead were picked up and tossed around like toys. It reached the opposite side of the clearing, and ravaged the copse of trees on the other side, nearly uprooting them, stripping some of the bark off, and stripping many of the branches away.

“Filthy cur!” the elf shouted, as he unleashed a powerful fireball.

Bryce answered back with his pistol, forcing the elf back into cover.

“Harry. Go around that side,” Brandon whispered. “Everyone else, keep the target busy.”

“Got it.”

Harry produced his invisibility cloak, and threw it overhead, instantly vanishing. With a muffle enchantment on his boots and silencing charms on his armour, he was all but undetectable (at least without non-magical detection devices, such as Brandon carried).

While the others kept the hostile busy, Harry crept around the back of the cottage. He approached cautiously, just in case there were others hidden out of sight, but that proved unnecessary. It was just a single hostile elf remaining.

Harry produced his dagger, and got close, waiting... and with a swift motion, he plunged the blade
into the Altmer’s neck, instantly puncturing the jugular artery. The dark elf dropped just like the first, as a fountain of blood erupted from his neck.

“Clear!”

the others hurried over, finding him casting a cleaning charm on his cloak.

“Shor’s bones, Harry. You bathed in his blood, I think.”

Harry gave a shrug. “Better his than mine. Where’d the first one fall?”

“Over there,” said Bryce, pointing out a corpse laying awkwardly against a tree on the other side of the clearing.

Brandon produced his wand, and pointed it at the corpse. It lifted into the air and zipped over, to drop at his feet. “What’d you need it for?”

“See if the morons were kind enough to leave some sort of record,” Harry answered, as he flicked a hand at the body. A number of contents seemed to fly out of the pockets, but only two items were of interest: a key, and a handwritten note.

I grow impatient with your lack of progress. If you cannot break the smith, I will be forced to find a more capable interrogator. I expect your next report to contain more encouraging results.

- A

“This confirms they had him,” said Harry, “And there are more of them involved, someone with a name starting with ‘A’.”

“Let’s search the cottage.”

When they first entered the cottage, it looked like it was deserted. The elves had most definitely been using it as a base of operations, but...

“There’s someone down below,” Harry whispered.

Brandon flicked his wand at the centre of the room, and waited a moment, before saying, “One person present. Looks like a flight of stairs down, over there.”

“Hello?” came a voice from below.

The group hurried down the stairs, to find the subject of their search huddled in the far corner of the cellar. Harry flicked his hand at the ceiling, producing a strong light.

“Baldor?”

“Thank the All-maker,” Baldor said, his voice barely a whisper. “These cursed elves have taken me from my home.”

“Let’s see to your injuries,” said Harry, already digging in his pouch for healing potions.

“My wounds are not serious,” Baldor answered.

“Nonsense. You look like death warmed over,” said Mazhe. “Let’s get you back to the village and into a warm bed.”
“I will be fine.”

“No, we insist,” said Harry, “It’s what friends do for one another.”

Baldor gave a weak smile. “All right, I surrender. You are all too kind.”

While Harry helped the man take a few healing potions, Mazhe was already looking up the bookmark for the village on his mobile.

“All right. Get close, guys. Uh... Baldor, we’re gonna teleport back to the village. It’s a quick, safe method for us to get around.”

“And your friends will want to see you sooner rather than later; it took us most of the afternoon to get here.”

“Mazhe, I trust you,” said Baldor, “You are Skaal-friend.”

In a matter of seconds, the group plus one reappeared not far from Frea’s place. The sun had set, with the Aurora Borealis already beginning to show in the twilight, the blue and turquoise accenting the darkening blue of the sky.

“Baldor?! Thank the All-maker!” Deor exclaimed, hurrying over. “Did... did they hurt you? Are you injured?”

“Nothing our friends here weren’t able to fix.”

“Come on, let’s get in where it’s warm.”

“There’s just a couple of things we need to ask first,” said Brandon. “Deor said the Thalmor might have taken you because of a smithing technique known only to the Skaal.”

“Yes. I do not know this word ‘Thalmor’, but if you mean elves, they were trying to learn the secrets of forging Stalhrim. Their leader, an elf named Ancarion, has a map. He says that it shows the location of a hidden source of Stalhrim.”

“So what exactly is Stalhrim?” Bryce asked.

“Enchanted ice as hard as iron and cold as death. Stalhrim can be forged into deadly weapons, but the art is known only to the smiths of the Skaal,” Baldor explained.

“That confirms who the ‘A’ is in the note we found on one of the elves outside,” said Brandon.

“And this also confirms what I suspected when we spoke to Deor,” said Mazhe, “The elves would do anything to get their hands on such tools and weapons. Do you know where we might find this Ancarion?”

“They have a ship. They took me there and showed me the map. You will find it on the northern coast of the island.”

Mazhe enlarged his mobile, and pulled up the map of the island. “Do you remember where it was?”

Baldor studied the map for a few moments, before touching it with a finger. He was momentarily startled, as it zoomed in. “I think their ship is docked here.”

“Northshore Landing,” said Mazhe.
“West of Searing’s Watch,” Harry said, pointing out the location. “We can teleport to Saering’s Watch, and fly the rest of the way.”

“Please, do not let Ancarion make his weapons. Kill him or let him live, but take the map from him. It belongs with the Skaal.”

“We’ll deal with him properly, Baldor, you have our word,” said Mazhe, nastily. “We’ll return with the map soon as we collect it.”

“Thank you, Mazhe. May the All-Maker bless all of you.”

Northshore Landing
Solstheim, Morrowind Province

Though it was already dark, there was agreement the matter needed to be concluded sooner rather than later. Not to mention, cover of darkness would provide an additional advantage. Harry had sent a message back to the dormitory at the College, letting Justin know they would be a while yet, and to have dinner without them.

The ship was more of a boat, really, no larger than the one owned by Gjalund Salt-Sage. Brandon counted only a pair of lookouts, as well as another standing at one end. He was dressed in Thalmor robes.

“All right, guys. Your show. Negotiate or attack?” questioned Brandon.

“Attack. The Thalmor are monsters,” said Mazhe, simply. He seemed to gauge the position of the three elves. And then—

“Fus... RO DAAAAH!”

The three elves were catapulted into the air from the violence of the Shout. Two of them were blasted into the sea hundreds of feet away, while the third was slammed into the ship’s railing, and from the angle, Bryce had no doubt the man’s back had been violently broken.

The group closed the distance and boarded the vessel, weapons and spells at the ready. There may have been only three visible, but others could be about. Brandon once again cast a detection spell.

“No one else here,” he declared.

Mazhe, meanwhile, was searching the pockets of the corpse that remained on the ship.

“Jackpot. Just as Baldor described. Looks to be close, too.”

“It’s after dark. We’ll investigate in the morning,” said Brandon, “We had little for lunch.”

“All right, sounds good to me. Let’s get back to the village and get the map back in Baldor’s hands,” said Harry.

“Oh hold on a moment.”

Mazhe had found another note in another pocket on the corpse. He snorted, and started reading in a pompous voice:

Be on the look out for a Breton named Mazhe Stormcrown. He is an enemy to the Thalmor, and has actively disrupted our activities and caused great harm. If spotted, you are to destroy him with
extreme hatred.

Be advised, he is extremely dangerous, is quite able to defend himself, and is known to travel with several companions and bodyguards. If caught by local authorities, we are unable to offer you any assistance.

For the glory of the Aldmeri Dominion!(2)

Harry smirked. “Sounds like you’re doing something right, Mazhe.”

Mazhe smirked right back. “I’ll have it framed.”

Brandon rolled his eyes. “If you both are done.”

This time it was Harry’s mobile which carried the group back to the Skaal Village. No one had bothered to learn which house was Baldor’s, and so Harry ended up knocking on Frea’s door.

“It’s the one beside the forge, Harry. You were able to recover his map?”

“Yes. And we dealt justice to the ones responsible for his abduction and abuse.”

“You have my thanks, Harry.”

“Any time, Frea.”

She smiled and closed the door.

“Right. That one,” said Harry, pointing to the house by the forge. “Should’ve been the obvious thing... being daft as usual.”

“Harry...”

“Yeah, we all forget our heads once in a while,” said Bryce, as they crossed the grounds.

Mazhe knocked on the door, and moments later, it opened to reveal Baldor was not alone. A woman was also present.

“We recovered the map. We won’t keep you since—”

“Come in, come in,” Baldor beckoned for them to enter.

“We don’t want to intrude.”

“You aren’t intruding, Mazhe. This is Fanari Strong-Voice, our leader. She was concerned.”

“Oh. Uh...” Mazhe felt like a moron.

Harry, meanwhile, was grinning madly, knowing exactly what his mate had assumed was going on. “No matter, we need to get back to the College.”

“Uh, yeah.”

Mazhe reached into his pouch, and produced the map.

“We didn’t have time to investigate the location; we’ll probably do so in the next day or so, depending on our schedule.”
Baldor looked more than relieved. “You have done a great service to the Skaal in the past, and faced
great danger to both rescue me, and recover this map. I name you friend of the Skaal, and I will trust
you with the knowledge of forging Stalhrim. If you bring Stalhrim here to my forge, you can use my
tools to make what you will from it.”

“Thank you, Baldor. Though, Harry must be included,” said Mazhe, firmly, “He is my bonded, and I
keep nothing from him.”

“And know, anything we learn, if it's meant to be kept secret, it will remain secret amongst us,”
Harry added.

“You have already demonstrated your word can be trusted, and so it will be,” Baldor answered. “For
now, you will need an ancient Nordic pickaxe, it's the only thing that will break apart Stalhrim. As it
so happens, I do have one, though it is with my tools at the forge.”

It was then he caught a glimpse of the intricate gold and Aetherium chain around Bryce’s neck.

“The chain you wear... what is it made of?”

Bryce reached into his shirt, and pulled out the amulet which Mazhe had given him months before.

“By the All-Maker...” Baldor spoke softly, appraising the piece. Even Fanari had moved in for a
closer look.

“The work has me speechless. What is this made of?”

“Aetherium, sir,” Harry answered.

Baldor raised his eyebrows. “Then, you have found the legendary forge of the Dwarves, the
Aetherium Forge.”

“It is so,” Mazhe answered. “Brandon, how difficult would it be for us to show him the forge?”

“Your partner is Promagistrate, Mazhe. The Commonwealth will accommodate.”

“As you will share your secret with us, it's only right you experience one of ours. When you are
well, we will bring you to visit the forge,” said Mazhe.

“There is still the matter of replacing the amulet as it is,” Harry added, “We frequently work with
Balimund, the smithy in Riften.”

“It would be an honour. Though I will need someone to look after things while I am gone.”

“Deor is more than capable, Baldor,” said Fanari, still fixated on the amulet around Bryce’s neck.

“We wouldn’t be gone for days at a time anyway,” said Harry, “Our mobiles can have you back
before dinner. We wouldn’t want to keep you away from your business too long.”

“Maybe we should get these guys a mobile,” said Brandon, “If we’re gonna be in closer contact, it
would make sense.”

“Then there is one more thing that I will give you in trade. Fanari, fetch that satchel.” Baldor pointed
to a satchel tossed haphazardly on a table in the corner.

Fanari snatched it up, and passed it over.
“Now let me see. I’m sure I tossed it in here... ah. There it would be.”

Baldor pulled out a crumpled up parchment.

“A map I ran across some time ago, of a location rumoured to have valuable treasure.”

“Thank you,” said Mazhe, “A treasure hunt has to be better than the series of ordeals we've all been through this last couple of weeks.”

“Killing a few bandits... yeah, rather those, than the nightmares OND’s dropping in our lap. Thank you, Baldor. We'll bring you say twenty-five percent of the coin we might recover. I would offer more, but there is an outstanding debt I have acquired with some dear friends, that I want settled sooner rather than later.”

Mazhe looked at the map. The label ‘Haknir’s Shoal’ had been scribbled near an X marked on the Northeastern shoreline.

“The location isn’t far from the Wind Stone,” said Harry, having brought up the map of the island on his mobile. “I said it before, I strongly doubt anything here will match the shit we've just been through.”(3)

“Not today. It’s past dark and I’m starving,” said Bryce. “Doubt the loot’s gonna grow legs overnight.”

“Yeah, yeah, sold. Food’s about right.”

“Thank you again, Mazhe and friends,” said Baldor.

The group once again vanished in a blur.

Chapter End Notes

UP NEXT: The group go after some legendary treasure—not that they know it—resulting in an encounter that has Harry eating his words; and activities in the past begin to have an effect on the present, making a few people quite upset...Harry included...

CHAPTER NOTES: I thought it better that Brandon questioned Deor instead of Mazhe, considering Brandon has training in questioning and interrogation techniques.
(1) Some of this verbatim dialogue, (C) Bethesda.
(2) Only a matter of time before this came up. Yeah, the Thalmor will most certainly have it out for Mazhe, considering he’s disrupted one of their critical operations (the Eye of Magnus). It’s taken them a little longer, or perhaps, he’s avoided them for the most part up to now. Two ways to earn the Thalmor’s displeasure: completing “Diplomatic Immunity” as part of the main quest, or completing “The Eye of Magnus”, the final quest in the College of Winterhold main quest.
(3) Oh dear. Harry, Harry, Harry. You must NEVER tempt fate.
Chapter Summary

The group go after some legendary treasure—not that they know it—resulting in an encounter that has Harry eating his words; and activities in the past begin to have an effect on the present, making a few people quite upset...Harry included...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

28. AD NAUSEUM

January, 2008 / Morning Star, 4E203

“Did I ever tell you what the definition of insanity is? Insanity is doing the exact... same fucking thing... over and over again expecting... shit to change... That. Is. Crazy.”

- Vaas Montenegro, "Far Cry 3 (2012)"

Haknir's Shoal,
Northeast coast of Solstheim
Jan 28, 2008 / 28 Morning Star, 4E203

Given it was a Monday, it was later in the afternoon before the group were able to investigate the map Baldor had given them. Once again, it was only a small group consisting of Harry, Mazhe, Bryce, and Brandon who teleported to the Wind stone, then flew on brooms the rest of the way—the location was just a short flight to the northeast. Bryce rode with Brandon, while Mazhe and Harry flew on their own.

Three bandits were at the location, no surprise really. It looked like they’d set up a small camp; a pair of boats were beached on the eastern side of the shoal. A large chest lay partially buried at the northern tip, with a pair of shovels and pickaxes resting against it.

The enemies proved no match, being neutralized in only a matter of seconds. Two were ended before they realized what was going on, while the third, somewhat stronger enemy had managed to get off a single ice spike, before she followed her companions to the afterlife. She wore a set of armour identical to Harry’s, though it was in poorer condition. After all, when did bandits take time to properly maintain their weapons and equipment?

Quickly, the group touched down and dismounted, with Harry, Mazhe, and Brandon stowing their brooms. Bryce and Harry made straight for the chest, while the others began to poke around the camp.

“Well, looks like the map was right,” said Harry.

Bryce tried to open the chest, but found it locked.
“Harry...”

“Right.”

Harry flicked a hand at the chest, and there came a click. Now, Bryce was able to open the lid.

“Damn... check this out.”

He pulled out a helm which appeared to be made out of a light blue glass-like material. It had a pair of tall horns protruding from the top which looked to be made of steel, and Harry visually shivered, being assaulted by a memory from a few years prior.

Bryce caught Harry’s expression. “What?”

“Tommy. A couple of years ago, during an... adventure... he was attacked by a Draugr wearing a helmet similar to that. It used a shout... like Mazhe can—it blew him across the room and nearly killed him.”

“If it’s upsetting—”

“No. Your find, you keep it,” Harry decided, “If you’re going to be travelling with us, I’d see you well-protected. May I see it?”

Bryce passed it over, and Harry held it a moment. “Yeah, brilliant find. It will let you breathe freely underwater, and...” he furrowed his brows. “A full set of whatever armour this is... doubles the protective value of it. Most bizarre... the substance feels cold to the touch, though the lining does not.”

“Hold on,” said Bryce. “Another map. Check this out.”

He held it so Harry could see it. “Guessin’ it’s the rest of the armour. Three other places.”

The others had joined them.

Mazhe hummed a moment. “The second location, I know it sort of. It’s at Tel Mithryn—Neloth’s place.”

“The place built from mushrooms,” Harry remembered, as he passed the helm back to Bryce.

“Exactly.”

“And the third... it’s north of the Earth Stone—Sahrotaar and I flew over it last spring. We could fly there from the Earth Stone.”

“So it leaves the fourth location,” said Brandon, “Looks to be not far from the dock where Ancarion had his ships. Likewise, we could just teleport there and fly the rest of the way.”

It was then Harry felt the most peculiar sensation, as if someone had dumped a bucket of cold water over him.

“Harry? Are you all right?” Mazhe questioned, seeing his puzzled expression.

“Y-yeah. Just... odd sensation. It just felt like... someone cast a disillusionment charm on me.”

Mazhe smirked, and pulled his mate close, locking their lips together. They separated, with Mazhe hissing playfully, “You're still visible to me, Harry.”
“Prat.”

“I know you are, but what am I?”

Bryce rolled his eyes as he continued to rummage in the chest. A rusty iron sword, a few ruined books, and...

“Harry. Got a bag of coins. You were gonna give some of it to Baldor, right?”

“Let me see.”

Harry looked in, and quickly realized he wouldn’t be lifting it without magic.

“Gods. Whoever this belonged to... I’m guessing there may be a thousand coins here, perhaps more.”

“Who gets the other set of armour?” Brandon asked.

“Mazhe,” said Harry. “The armour you’ve got is good, but this stuff is better.”

Mazhe smirked. “And it would be nice if we looked the same.”

“Definitely.”

“It’ll have to be resized. That woman is half your size at best,” Brandon noted.

“Not that it will be a problem. We’ll cast an enlargement charm on the pieces for now, but it’ll have to be done properly at a smithy,” said Harry.

“Why won’t the charm stay on it?”

“The magic wears out eventually,” Brandon answered, “Depending on the witch or wizard’s ability, it can last for years. But like so many things, it deteriorates after a while.

“Just like the non-magical world has rules, so does the magical world.”

“What about Harry’s chest though?”

“It follows a different set of rules... stuff I don’t really understand. I’m pretty sure the Arcane Sciences department had a hand in setting up the enchantments on it. So those... have a much longer shelf-life... rumoured to be permanent.”

“And the guys working in the Arcane Sciences department aren’t your average witch or wizard,” Harry noted, as he cast a shrinking charm on the bag of coins. He then cast a featherweight charm on it, before lifting it out.

He thought for a moment, before producing his chest.

“Better if we just stow it inside for now.”

While Harry climbed into the chest with the bag of coins, Brandon got to work casting an enlargement charm on the armour. Mazhe had already stripped it off of the bandit.

Ten minutes later, the group teleported to Tel Mithryn. With a wave to one of the apprentices practising in the courtyard, the four of them once again mounted brooms, and made the short flight to the location indicated by the map.
Sure enough, another large, ancient-looking chest lay partially buried in the sand, framed by a curious rock formation—hexagonal in shape. The strange formations were prominent in the southern part of Solstheim. A pair of bandits lay dead close by, sporting very nasty burns on their bodies.

As they dismounted and began to approach the chest, they were startled as something suddenly began to stir in the sand. A humanoid-like creature crawled out of it, appearing to be made of ash, glowing in a number of places.

Harry didn’t wait, instantly attacking with a pair of strong ice spikes, which knocked the creature back. Mazhe then nailed it with a strong shock spell, staggering it further, and Brandon finished it off with a well-placed reductor curse. The enemy seemed to disintegrate into a pile of ash.

Unfortunately, that wasn’t the last of them, as two more creatures were rising out of the sand and ash.

“What the hell are they?!”

“Don’t know... no fire, I’m guessin’ they’re fire-based, right?” said Brandon.

“Yeah, no shit.”

*BOOM.* Bryce had fired a shotgun blast into the nearest enemy, all but blowing its left leg off. Harry finished it off with a reductor curse to the face.

Now, the group was forced to duck, as the third ash enemy unleashed a lethal blast of fire, confirming Brandon’s guess. It struck one of the rocks and exploded into a fiery blaze.

*KAWHACK!* Harry’s ice spike narrowly missed, impacting with the ground, but still coated the monster’s legs with ice for a moment. It reacted with no sound, but unleashed yet another lethal fireball, this one sailing over their heads and out to sea.

*ZZZZAP.* Mazhe’s shock spell, meanwhile, was dead on, staggering the strange ash creature. Bryce capitalized, and his shotgun blasted the monster’s left arm off.

“Together guys!” Brandon shouted. Spells and firearms combined, the last creature was finally reduced to ash.

“Bloody hell...” Harry muttered, “Just when we think we’ve seen it all.”

“Everyone okay?”

“Yeah, think so,” said Mazhe.

“All right here,” said Harry.

“Same,” said Bryce.

Brandon flicked his wand and turned in a circle. “Looks like everything’s quiet for now. Got a few hits in that direction, but I don’t think we’ll be bothered.” He indicated a spot to the southwest.

Harry knew the guy would be watching that direction until they left.

Bryce, meanwhile, went over to the chest, and unsurprisingly, found it locked like the first.

“Bryce. Here. Try one of these,” said Mazhe, reaching into his pouch, and pulling out a scroll.

“If he can use that, I’ll be very surprised,” said Brandon, doubtful, “You need a magical core.”
“Or be attuned to the magical environment. C’mon, Brandon. He’s been around our lot since the end of Hearthfire, been using magical devices just as long,” said Mazhe. “Many Nords have little do do with magic, but still rely on certain magical tools.”

Bryce, too, looked doubtful. “Guess there’s only one way to find out. How’s it work?”

“Hold the scroll with one hand, and touch the lock with the other. The scroll will be consumed but the magic in it will be applied to the lock,” Mazhe explained. “At least, that’s how it works for us.”

“But why when Harry or Brandon—”

“But we might not always be around,” said Brandon. “Won’t hurt if you can do this on your own, right?”

Bryce already understood the logic, and so followed Mazhe’s instructions, holding the scroll with his left hand, while touching the locking mechanism with his right. There came an audible click, as the scroll disintegrated.

“So... just one use out of it.”

“Yes. But... what did you feel as it worked?”

“My hands both got warm. And I got a warm feeling in my chest, neck, and... feet.”

“Magic passed through your feet, heart, the base of your head, and then out your hands,” Mazhe explained. “When I use one of those, I feel it only in my chest and hands.”

“So the scroll... pulled magic from the ground,” Bryce guessed, as he pulled the lid of the chest open.

“Yes. Sort of. It’s the magic around us, since you don’t have an active magical pool—or a very weak one at this point. I think one being continuously exposed to a magically-saturated environment does start to develop a pool himself, but... we’ll have to see. Someone not having a pool of magicka, it’s completely foreign here.”

“So you’re sayin’ I’ll be able to cast magic one day.”

Mazhe gave a shrug. “Who knows. I mean, Tommy was with us for a few years but didn’t. But he did use magical devices and weapons without trouble. I guess it’s also how far you want to go, what you’re willing to try.”

“Guess whatever I can to be safe,” Bryce answered, as he pulled a pair of boots out of the chest. “Damn. These are like the helmet.”

The boots were made mostly of the same blue-shaded material as the helm, with fur trim—a wolf, if the others had to guess. They were felt-lined, with leather accenting. The upper part was trimmed out in fur—wolf fur.

Harry reached over, and felt the item a moment. “These’ll let you carry more. Not that that will be an issue given your pouch.”

Bryce sat down on one of the shorter rock formations, and began to remove his boots.

“I can keep these too?”

“Yeah. The chest piece and the gauntlets, too. But I think we need to figure out how to make this stuff, it looks wicked,” said Harry.
“Yeah, agreed. The pieces look beautiful,” said Mazhe. “Though our outfits are equally impressive, Harry.”

“Though I’d love to try out the gear Bryce is getting.”

“We’ll trade for a bit. I’d love to try yours out.”

“Mazhe’s will be a better fit. Wait for us to resize it properly at a smithy. Beside the fact, Baldor or Balimund will be able to tell us what yours is made of.”

“Maybe it’s that Stalhrim Baldor mentioned,” Brandon suggested, glancing at his mobile. “So are we checking out the third location, or do you guys wanna get back? It’s gonna be a while before dinner’s ready.”

“What do you feel like?”

“I’m game for the next spot,” said Bryce, as he finished putting on the new boots. “Damn. Are all the armours in this world like this?”

“No. The iron stuff’s brutal, so is the leather kit,” said Mazhe, “Dunno why the leather’s so bad. I’ve heard of glass armour, same with the Elven... both being pretty bad, comfort-wise. I think we’ve lucked out with this stuff, with all the pointy edges but still being really nice inside.”

“Well, we should talk to provisioning. They make some pretty awesome materials that are really comfortable and just as durable,” said Brandon.

“Magic,” Harry guessed.

“Actually no. Our uniforms are pretty much made without magic, with non-magical substances and materials. Care to guess why?”

“So magic can’t mess with them,” said Bryce.

“Exactly. Something that’s made of magic is more susceptible to magical influence. Last thing we want is for our equipment to be turned against us in a fight.”

“Or malfunction.”

Harry scowled, knowing all too well what Bryce meant. Flying around on a broom still made Harry weary.

“Ready?” Brandon questioned, glancing at Bryce.

“Yeah. Let’s go.”

They all gathered around, and Brandon activated his mobile. They vanished in another blur of limbs, to then arrive at the Earth Stone, which was then deserted. And, from there, they remounted brooms, with Harry taking the lead as they flew north.

The flight took a little longer than at Tel Mithryn, and though the group were expecting enemies, the number caught them off guard: at least ten bandits were present, two of them busily digging an ancient chest out of the ground—they appeared to be half-finished. Like at Haknir’s Shoal, one of the bandits was wearing a set of Nordic Carved armour like Harry’s.

ZZZZZAP. Harry was horrified, as the powerful arc of electricity connected, striking Brandon in the
He plummeted to the ground, and Bryce was forced to swiftly take control of the broom before he followed.

“BRANDON!” Harry shouted, as they were all forced to take evasive action, the other bandits now letting loose a storm of arrows.

“Focus, Harry!” Mazhe shouted back, aiming his broom for the ground, and cuing up a shock spell of his own. It narrowly missed one of the bandits, but interrupted their attack, and gave him a chance to hop off his broom, leaving it to hover. He’d fetch it after.

Harry and Bryce quickly followed suit, with Harry also sending off a pair of ice spikes. They had very little cover, none, actually, with the water at their back and left, a sharp hill to their right.

“I’ll look after Brandon, keep ’em off me!” Bryce shouted, hurrying off to where Brandon fell in the shallow water. If anything, the water likely saved his life; they’d been over a fifty feet up.

Two against ten. No way was that a fair fight. Harry cupped his hands together, and an acid-green glow formed in his hands. He let fly at the ground, and from the purple orb that formed, a Seeker appeared.

“Get them!” Harry hissed.

“Ven... GAR NOS!” Mazhe shouted, sending a violent cyclone of air at the left flank of the enemy. It caught three of them, and they were lifted high into the air—their deaths would be unpleasant. It carried on, stripping branches and bark off the small copse of trees on the spit of land, before finally dissipating out over the water. A pair of bodies dropped to the ground, one of them narrowly missing Bryce and Brandon.

“Watch it!” Bryce shouted.

“How’s he doing?” Harry chanced a look back, to see Bryce was feeding the man another healing potion.

“Still fucked up, Harry! Jesus, he’s been electrocuted, how do you think?!”

ZZZZZAP. Both Harry and Mazhe were forced to dodge another deadly blast of electrical energy, and only a hastily-erected shield blocked an equally-dangerous fireball.

The caster, however, was then forced to erect shields of his own, as the Seeker unleashed a powerful attack of its own. A second enemy wasn’t so lucky, and collapsed, a quivering wreck, being tapped for both his life force and his magic pool.

KAWHACK! The Seeker was staggered a moment, but sent another attack toward the source of the ice spike, narrowly missing.

“Mazhe. The staff,” said Harry, as he once again produced a shield to deflect a pair of ice spikes. The enemies were all using magic, forgoing their weapons.

Mazhe didn’t need further encouragement, reaching into his pouch and producing the powerful staff. He levelled it at the particularly strong bandit dressed in Nordic Carved armour, and let fly.

“Shor’s balls,” he muttered, startled by the orange blast of energy which surged from the staff. The bandit had formed a shield, but it was no match for the offensive magic and shattered, sending the bandit flying.
“Filthy ’wah!(1)’” he shouted, regaining his feet, and sending a pair of ice spikes back at Harry and Mazhe. He then gestured at the ground, and to the pair’s shock, two of the bandits killed were regaining their feet, having been reanimated.

“Fus... RO DAAAH!” Mazhe shouted, and swiftly, one of the thralls was destroyed, the other being staggered and damaged. Two more, very much alive enemies were also caught by the shout, and blasted hundreds of feet into the sea.

*KAWHACK!* The stronger bandit once again unleashed an ice spike, this time dispatching Harry’s Seeker.

“Keep ‘em busy, Harry...” Mazhe spoke, his voice sounding rough, as he rummaged in his pouch for a magicka potion. “Might only be able to shout once more, ‘an if we don’t wrap this up...”

“I know that!”

*ZZZZZAP*. The second thrall disintegrated from Harry’s shock spell. He then produced his wand, and formed a shield with his free hand. He slashed angrily at a bandit trying to skirt around, and snarled, “*Sectumsempra*!”

Blood, and lots of it. The bandit collapsed to the ground, spasming, his torso being violently sliced open from his right shoulder down to his left midsection.

*KAWHACK!* Harry hissed, feeling the ice spike penetrate his arm, nearly making him drop the wand. Mazhe brought the staff to bear once again at the armoured bandit, and let fly.

As Harry tried to heal the damage, he felt yet another odd sensation like earlier, the feeling of cold water being dumped on him. The bandit, meanwhile, had managed to get clear of the magical blast. Gods, this enemy was strong! Two others were still about, but the armoured one was equal to three or four on his own.

“Fus—”

Mazhe could not complete the Shout, as a body seemed to fall out of the sky, knocking him over. The staff flew out of his hand, and rolled on the ground, toward the enemies.

“Oh hell no!” Harry hissed, flicking his hand out, and summoning the staff before the enemy got any ideas. He flicked his eyes toward where Brandon and Bryce were—Bryce looked busy with Brandon, but...

“Bryce!! Here!”

Harry flung the staff toward them, and Bryce expertly caught it.

“He stable enough?!”

“Think so.”

“Help us! Gods...”

Bryce got up, and levelled the staff at the remaining enemies.

*Reducto!* Harry growled, and this time he did not miss. The blast struck the left-most enemy square in the chest, resulting in a gory explosion of blood and flesh.

*Ven... GAR NOOOOOOS!*”
It was as if the young dragonborn had pushed all of his anger into the shout, for it was a terrifying cyclone that formed, perhaps twenty feet wide and soaring into the sky, as it ripped forward. There was no escaping the violent column of air, as it stripped the ground of everything on it, be them living or dead... the previously damaged trees were also upended and violently ripped from the ground, being sent high into the sky. And, as the tornado touched the water, it turned an angry grey, twisting out into the sea.

Mazhe sagged to the ground, both physically and magically spent, while Bryce absently tucked the staff into his pouch, no longer fazed by it being automatically shrunk to fit.

Harry crouched down beside his mate, putting a hand on his back. “Mazhe?”

“S-shor’s bones...”

“GUYS!” Bryce shouted.

Both Harry and Mazhe craned their necks to see what was going on, with Harry charging up a spell. He instantly realized it was unnecessary.

“What. The. Fuck?”

Mazhe, too, looked dumbstruck. “How... how is that possible?”

Harry had originally thought the body which had fallen on Mazhe had been one of the bandits picked up by Mazhe’s earlier shout. Instead, it was someone far more familiar, someone they had parted ways with only a couple of weeks earlier.

“Ragnar...” Harry whispered.

“Is... is he alive?”

Bryce reached down, and felt for a pulse.

“Weak. Jesus, he’s... he’s not dead yet, but will be.”

“Fawkes,” Harry said, simply.

It took a few moments, but the bird appeared in his customary flash of golden flames. In an instant, he fluttered over to the injured man and sat on his chest, letting out a long, mournful cry.

“G-get... no... stay here,” said Harry, glancing over at Brandon. The man was still completely out of it. He flung a hand at the beach, and a light formed to compensate for the coming darkness; the sun had set sometime ago. Had they been there that long? It seemed like only minutes.

Fawkes continued to cry into the most serious wound on Ragnar’s forehead, while continuing to sing. The man was also out of it, thank the gods for small miracles. The number of injuries... what the hell had happened?

“How... how did this... how’s this possible?” Bryce asked, equally confused.

“We don’t know,” Mazhe answered, while Harry summoned Brandon to them.

“Just... don’t ask. I... I don’t know anymore,” said Harry, as he transfigured a pair of stones into pillows. “Put this under Ragnar’s head.”

“Got it,” said Bryce, while Harry did the same for Brandon.
“Harry... perhaps, it’s the same circumstance that brought Dardanos and Crixus back to us,” Mazhe suggested.

It was the wrong thing to say. Mazhe caught the look of rage that crossed his mate’s face, before there came a terrible blast of raw energy, aimed at the one thing still intact on the tiny spit of land: the ancient chest, which had been mostly uncovered from the pair of Mazhe’s cyclone shouts.

The chest was reduced to firewood by the power of the blast, its contents sent flying high into the air. A set of chest armour crashed at Bryce’s feet, while it seemed to rain hundreds of gold coins. Mazhe was forced to put up a shield so they weren’t struck by any of them. Harry, meanwhile, sagged to the ground, completely out of it, once again mentally overwhelmed by the event.

“Oh my God...” Bryce whispered, as Mazhe knelt down, and scooped Harry up into his arms. Mazhe, too, was shocked by what had just happened, but he understood too well.

“We... healers. We need healer Ferris,” said Bryce, softly.

“Can... can you get us back to the College?”

“Yeah.”

Bryce picked up the armour, and for now stowed it in his pouch, before making to retrieve his mobile.

Fawkes, though, let out a musical cry, before offering his tail feathers. He was already clutching Ragnar’s ruined shirt.

“Of course!” Mazhe remembered, “Fawkes can get us there. Get... get Brandon close, keep him in contact with us. Then grab onto me.”

Once Mazhe was satisfied everyone was linked in some way, he took hold of the bird’s tail feathers, and the group vanished in another flash of golden flames.

Their arrival back in the suite of rooms in the Hall of Attainment did not go unnoticed.

“What happened?!?” Justin demanded. He and Zoey were again cuddled up on a couch, but Justin was already putting the laptop on the small table beside it. Aaron was not in sight, but Credence was, seated in one of the chairs, reading an alchemy tome borrowed from the Arcaneum.

“Bandits... lots of them. Need healers immediately,” said Mazhe, as he carried Harry over to one of the vacant couches. Bryce was doing the same with Ragnar; Fawkes had fluttered over to the third couch and waited for the man to be settled, before hopping down onto his chest again. Most of his wounds were now just angry red spots, but they too were quickly vanishing.

“Can you guys look after him?” Mazhe flicked his eyes toward his unconscious mate. “I need to have a word with Tolfdir and make sure someone will cover Harry's classes tomorrow. Justin, d'you mind visiting the Ragged Flagon? Ask Vekel for a few of his specials, tell him Harry's in a bad place, he'll get it.”

“Yeah, got it.”

“What... Jesus, what happened?” questioned Aaron, having just stepped out of the bathroom, as both Justin and Mazhe hurried out. He quickly vanished everything off of the larger table, and levitated Brandon onto it. Zoey hurried over, and began to look him over, having medical training.
“Just... a lot of bad shit,” Bryce answered. He reached into his pouch, searching for a moment, before producing a calming draught, and consuming it. He made a mental note to replace it later, he only had a few.

“Is... is that man going to be all right?” Credence pointed to Ragnar. Fawkes was still singing softly.

“Phoenix tears have powerful healing properties,” Aaron explained, “They can bring a person back from the brink of death even. They're rumoured to be the only antidote for basilisk venom(2).”

“What’s a Basilisk?” Credence asked.

“Known as the king of serpents,” said Aaron, “It’s the largest known snake, and perhaps one of the most dangerous. It’s been a long time since one was seen.”

It was then the fire in the fireplace roared to life, and both healer Ferris, and healer Chen stepped out of it, to dust the ashes off of their clothes.

“What happened?” healer Ferris questioned. She was momentarily startled to notice Ragnar was once again among them, but with Fawkes sitting on the man’s chest, he was likely the least problem.

“Merlin, he’s shaking like a leaf,” Chen noted, gesturing toward Brandon.

“Shock spell and a fall off his broom,” said Bryce.

That had the attention of both healers, as they set to work. “What’s he been given?”

“A bunch of healing potions,” said Bryce, “No chance to do anything else, we were still gettin’ fired on.”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Aaron, “Protect yourselves first, worry about casualties after.”

“Chen, take over. I’ll check in on Mr. Stormcrown and King Ragnar,” Ferris decided.

“Harry just... fainted,” said Bryce, “But... he did use a lot of magic. Think we all did... I mean...”

“We get your meaning.”

For the next few minutes, things fell quiet, as the healers continued their examinations, with Fawkes finally moving so Ferris could get a better look at the injured man. Of course, the tears had done a wonderful job, and at this point, there was barely any remainder of the terrible injuries the man had suffered.

“We should have you come spend some time at the hospital, Fawkes,” said Ferris.

The bird let out a string of notes, and Bryce could have swore it sounded like laughter.

It was then that both Mazhe and Justin returned together. Mazhe wasted no time lifting Harry up so he could sit down, then letting his mate back down so his head rested in Mazhe's lap.

“We’re taking Commander McAllister in for observation,” said Chen, “He's got an irregular heart rhythm and I'd prefer he be closely monitored overnight.”

“I’ll make sure Harry knows,” Mazhe promised.

“And the both of us will be back in the morning so we can have a discussion about the event which put you all in this state,” Ferris added.
“We know,” said Mazhe, quietly, “Brandon almost died.”

“And I will be honest, there is a possibility he might still,” said Chen, “It’s known individuals suffering the effects of severe electric shock on rare occasions go into cardiac arrest. Another reason we’re taking him for observation.”

“But if Fawkes...” Mazhe began.

Ferris shook her head. “Commander McAllister was electrocuted. Whether by magical means or not, the effects are identical, not easily fixed by magic. It’s something that would take some time to explain, but we would like to get him to the hospital.”

“Oh. I’m sorry, just... my mind is elsewhere,” Mazhe apologized. “I... I’ll make sure Harry knows.”

“You’re not gonna wake him up?” asked Bryce, surprised.

“Better he rests,” said Ferris, “If he wakes up, make sure he gets a calming draught immediately.”

“We will. We’ve been down this road before,” Mazhe muttered.

“And we will be back in the morning, as I said,” Ferris reminded them.

It was sometime later before Harry began to stir. Food was out, being kept warm and fresh thanks to magic, but no one was really in the mood to eat. Harry found Mazhe was gently stroking his hair.

“What... what time is it?” he whispered.

“A little after eight o’clock,” Justin answered. He’d transfigured one of the chairs into another couch so he and Zoey had a place to sit. “Healer Ferris took Brandon to the hospital for observation.”

Harry gave a slow nod as he sat up. “Could’ve died. Bloody fuck, blindsided again.”

“We had no way of knowing, Harry. Here. I visited Vekel just after we got back.”

“Brilliant.”

“There's food, but... I know that's probably the last thing you want about now.”

Harry gave another short nod, as he consumed the offered vial, and dropped the empty bottle back in his pouch.

“Harry... thing you have to take from this, is that no one died. Injured, but nothing that wasn't fixed,” Zoey reminded him, “Brandon was electrocuted. It's a standard practice to send the patient to the hospital for observation.”

“Still. Shouldn’t have happened.”

“But it did,” said Justin, “This is our life, the hazard of being one of your best friends. And really, no matter what, I wouldn't trade that for the world.”

“Just breathe. Shit happened, we got through it, right?” said Bryce, “Besides, this armour's pretty sweet.”

The helmet and chest piece rested at his feet. He still wore the boots, finding them unexpectedly comfortable considering what they were made of. “I'm guessin' the gloves—”
“Gauntlets or bracers.”

“The gauntlets will be at the last place. ’an really. This ain’t the worst that’s been thrown at us, right?”

Harry let out a frustrated sigh, knowing Bryce was right.

“Beside the point...” Justin gestured to Ragnar, who was still asleep, though looking far better then earlier. “I’d say he was likely saved from a horrible death.”

“He’ll be angry about it,” said Mazhe, “Just as the Nords revere a heroic death, so did the Vikings. We interrupted it.”

“Dying of snake bites hardly qualifies as heroic,” Justin muttered, ”He was tortured and executed.”

“By the King of Wessex,” said Aaron, “Got a chance to do a bit of research while you guys are all off doing other shit.” He gave a vicious smirk. “Happen to know his sons made King Aella pay for it. Something called the ‘blood eagle’ –”

Harry made a nasty face. “Yeah, uh, I know what that is. Probably the one thing that could match a Crucifixion.”

“Let me guess... you would try it if you could,” said Mazhe, shifting uncomfortably.

“No. It’s a ritualistic killing with parameters that would allow the victim of it to ascend to the afterlife freely if they are followed. Secondly, the victim frequently dies before its completion.

“The thing is, for someone to be condemned to such a thing, meant that they did something truly terrible to warrant it.”

“And you have more than a few enemies that fit that criteria,” said Mazhe.

“Me, I don’t worry much about how my enemies die. It’s their afterlife where I inflict my punishment, as I have said many times already. To torture their souls is far better than torturing the frail bodies they inhabit in the mortal coil.”

“Do you talk to healer Ferris about these thoughts?” Zoey questioned, “Having that kind of anger’s not a good thing.”

Harry let out a huff, but relented. “I don’t mean to. But you’ve been around us long enough now, you know my life is just one disaster after another. I don’t dare ask what else could go wrong, considering all this.”

It was then Ragnar slowly opened his eyes, and a smile touched his lips, if only briefly.

“I have... little doubt, that my sons and our allies would avenge my passing. How is it I come to be here? Though my delivery into the afterlife is delayed, I cannot find fault in once again being among friends.”

“It’s not right, sir,” said Harry, “The consequences...”

“If I must die...”

“NO! Bloody hell, that’s not what I’m suggesting.” Harry once again let out a frustrated sigh.

“Any pain or discomfort, sir?” Justin questioned. “Fawkes did a beautiful job getting you patched up, but...”
“None. Know that I feel better than I have in years,” Ragnar answered.

“This... Gods. Harry, the staff... when I used it on the bandit, it turned brilliant orange, just like back when we restarted the core.”

“Maybe he was somehow bound to the staff,” Credence guessed.

Harry gave a short nod. “Mmindin daar, fahsedaaar.” (“after this, [therefore] because of this”)(3)

Ragnar looked confused.

“English, Harry.”

“After this, therefore because of this.”

“And it's a logical fallacy, Harry. Whether or not the staff interaction may have caused it, there's no way to prove it,” said Justin. “And like Bryce said earlier, no one died, though that could have been the result.”

Harry relaxed somewhat. “I guess... it's not a complete disaster. Had I forethought during battle, I would've soul-trapped the treacherous bastard beforehand.”

“I think we’re out of black soul gems, Harry.”

“Then a trip to Morthal when we get the chance.” Harry smirked. “Too bad we couldn't go back and soul-trap Aella too, whoever he was.”

“And I think you take too much pleasure doing that,” Mazhe muttered, uncomfortably.

“Useless wankers who insist on stepping on my dick nerve, you bet. Or to make a fool pay dearly for Maar Tahrovin—terrible treachery? Count on it.”

Ragnar thought for a moment, before asking, “Has the woman been caught?”

“No, sir. It has only been a couple of weeks since we parted ways. We're staying away from the Commonwealth for the next while, the idea being to avoid further chaos. Unfortunately for me, chaos seems to have no trouble finding me. Again, apologies for interrupting your being reunited with loved ones and friends in the afterlife.”

“It is not your decision to make, young mage. And I am king no more. Such titles are no longer necessary.”

“That might be difficult,” said Aaron, “But if that's your wish, it will be respected. Thing is, there is protocol. But gods, the chaos this will cause. Harry, I can guarantee we'll be getting a visit from the Order of the Magnus whether you want it or not. Never mind the protocol office...”

“No shit,” Justin added, “Uh. Yeah, Ragnar, you're gonna end up getting a crash course in modern history.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Never mind the truth of where we really are.”

He glanced at the door leading out into the main part of the building, noting the door was already closed. “I'll need to speak to Tolfdir—”

“Already looked after, Harry,” said Mazhe, “He'll cover your classes tomorrow and the next if necessary.”
“And I’ll be pulling in at least one more guy,” said Aaron, “Brandon's gonna be off his feet for the next few days, I'm guessin', if they had to take him to the hospital.”

Mazhe looked angry. “Loathsome bandits. Nearly killed him with a shock spell, and then nearly got their hands on the Staff of Magnus.”

“Yeah, that would have been a disaster,” Harry agreed.

“What were you doing that led you into that state in the first place?” asked Ragnar.

Harry indicated the nearly-complete set of armour resting at Bryce’s feet. “Chasing after treasure. We were once again caught with our pants down. We have grown complacent with familiarity.”

“And there's no sense in getting worked up about it, Harry. Take a lesson from it and make sure we don't repeat it,” said Aaron.

“There’s one more place we ain’t been to yet,” said Bryce.

“And we’ll be going there with an army,” Harry muttered. “Wonder if we could borrow Captain Rowland and call in an air strike?”


“Well, I don't think we need to go that far. But calling in some extra support... we could get Sahrotaar to help. And we'll get Miraak to join us,” said Mazhe. “Maybe pull Enthir and J’zargo along... or Onmund. They’re both more than capable mages.”

“It won’t be for a few days anyway. Healers will be coming back in the morning, and you do have classes,” Justin reminded him.

“No, not tomorrow. But you’re right, we’ve got loads of issues that take higher precedence. With Brandon elsewhere, we should have a replacement.”

“I don’t think we need to go overboard here, Harry,” said Mazhe, “Bandits would be insane to try and attack the College.”

“I’m still bringing in another guy. This... how come none of you called? We could’ve been—” Aaron began.

“Trust us. There was no chance,” said Bryce, “There were ten bad guys, they nailed Brandon with a shock spell, I nearly crashed the broom, then I was busy looking after Brandon, making sure he didn’t drown while these guys were kept busy by the enemies. Fuck, just... we were lucky no one was killed.”

“Yeah, fair enough. Unofficially, you have the thanks of the unit for looking after the Commander. Count on there being something more official once we see memories and get a proper report.”

“Brandon usually files one of those,” Harry remembered.

“We’ll need an account. Just write down what you remember.”

“Tomorrow,” said Harry. He flicked a hand at the chest of refreshments on the table, and summoned a bottle of ale. “Tomorrow, I’ll view things in a pensieve, and make an attempt at something appropriate. I know Brandon’s meticulous with his reports... tough boots to fill.”

“For what reason?” Ragnar wondered, as he accepted a bottle of ale from Justin.
“It’s the official account of an event,” Aaron answered, “Any time we engage in a combat situation, we file what’s called an ‘after action report’. Once in a while, DOI reviews it and asks some additional questions, sometimes reviews our memories of an event, making sure certain protocols and procedures are properly followed.”

“Rules of engagement, something like that,” Bryce said. “I know the US military follows a code.”

“Yes, that’s about it. We have something very similar here, to keep things in check, making sure someone doesn’t let the power go to his head.”

“I have to wonder, what becomes of me now?” Ragnar questioned.

“You will be staying with us, of course,” Harry answered. He smirked dangerously. “Perhaps you should be given the staff again, and join us when we hunt for the remaining piece of treasure. That we encounter further resistance, with us being properly prepared this time... fucking bandits will learn their place.”

Ragnar gave them a warm smile. “To join in your hunts and adventures, how could I not? My twilight years saw little in the form of adventure.”

Mazhe let out a snort. “Remain with us, and there’ll likely be no shortage of it.” He looked at his mate. “Are you all right?”

“I will be,” Harry answered. “This... yeah, it’s difficult.”

Ragnar was confused. “Why?”

“Your rejoining us... it’s just one more thing, another set of circumstances which play out in identical form to an event I’ve already experienced. I have mentioned Dardanos and Crixus?”

At Ragnar’s nod, Harry continued, “We parted ways, though in much more of a hurry than when we parted ways with you only weeks earlier. Only days later, the pair of them arrive in a similar manner as you did, suffering injuries which were much worse. Both could have died. At the time of their arrival, Fawkes was not in my company.”

Harry indicated the magnificent bird who still rested on the back of the couch Ragnar was sitting on.

“He is beautiful.”

“He belonged to someone else, but fled his company when he saw that individual’s true colours. To anyone not aware, a phoenix will not bond with someone who travels a dark path.”

“You do some pretty dark things at times, Harry,” Mazhe remarked.

“I admit that, yes. But I think we all have done dark things at times. But light cannot exist without the dark. And I think all of us do our best to do what’s best, what’s right, what’s just.

“Dumbledore, Jezebel, Deidre, and those who follow them... they do not act for those reasons, only for selfish gain. And think, the things I have done, have been in the name of justice, to mete out justice to those who deserve it. Zu’u dreh ol fussero(4)—I act as the force of balance.”

“That language you speak... why does this spell you cast on me not work to translate it?” Ragnar asked.

“It’s a language from a magical creature not from Earth,” Justin answered, “Now there are some
languages it does work on, but...”

“Dragons. We told you about them. It’s not something that can be explained. Not even Paarthurnax or Sahrotaar—both of them dragons, really know.”

Harry seemed to think on something a moment. “Perhaps, tomorrow, we should travel to Hogwarts. Sahrotaar is there, and we should introduce you and Credence. He’s a strong ally, friend, and teacher.”

“He teaches you his language,” Credence guessed.

“Yes. Among other things.”

Now, Justin grinned. “Gotta wonder what Mr. Scamander would think, meeting either of them.”

“Over the moons, I’m sure.”

Mazhe again looked at Harry, and asked him for a second time, “You sure you’re all right?”

“I will be.” He took a deep swig from the bottle of ale. “One friend returned to us, unshackled from his fate, and another in the care of healers I trust explicitly. I know things can always get worse. Today, no friends were sent to the afterlife... and that’s the best I can hope for.”

Ragnar held his bottle aloft. “To friends here and departed.”

“To friends who never truly leave us,” said Justin.

Bottles were raised and drinks taken. Harry was then momentarily startled as Mazhe leaned in and they locked lips together. Through the corner of his eye, he could see Justin and Zoey doing the same thing.

Chapter End Notes

UP NEXT: Harry and his circle learn just how much the Commonwealth has been changed by his actions in the past; Harry receives a rather angry letter from the Order of the Magnus; and Brandon’s temporary replacement is a surprise to Ragnar, for rather personal reasons...

CHAPTER NOTES: Now question is, how many of you had suspicion Ragnar would be coming to join them again? I have a few plans for the former King of the Danes, I will say that. Now of course, the Commonwealth’s gonna have a conniption, aren’t they? Yeah, count on some fallout from this...and I should note that his arrival is nothing to do with something Harry did while back in Kattegat.
(1) N’wah – For those who have played The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind, you'll know what this means. Those who don't, it's a Dunmeri insult meaning foreigner, outsider, slave, or intruder, depending on the context.
(2) Remember, Harry didn't encounter the basilisk in 2nd year.
(3)fahsedaar, compound word, fah se daar. You've probably heard the Latin version of the phrase Harry’s quoting: “Post hoc ergo propter hoc”.
(4) fussero – fus se ro, force of balance.
Altered Present

Chapter Summary

Harry and his circle learn just how much the Commonwealth has been changed by his actions in the past; Harry receives a rather angry letter from the Order of the Magnus; and Brandon’s temporary replacement is a surprise to Ragnar, for rather personal reasons...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

29. ALTERED PRESENT

January, 2008 / Morning Star, 4E203

“The past is a very determined ghost, haunting every chance it gets.”

- Laura Miller

Jan 29, 2008 / 29 Morning Star, 4E203

Not surprisingly, the lot were up late, and did not stir until the middle of the morning. With no one in any shape to make modifications, Ragnar ended up sleeping on one of the couches. He was awakened by the clattering of dishes; someone, or... some-thing... was putting plates and food on the table. A... house-elf, wasn’t it, if he remembered correctly. He sat up, and gave his head a shake. Perhaps someone would have something for the aching head...

“Master Ragnar, sir,” the elf greeted, his voice low and bullfrog-like. “It is being late in the morning, brunch is being put out.”

“Thanks, Kreacher,” came Harry’s voice, from behind the partition to their private area.

A curtain opened to another compartment, and both Justin and Zoey sat up. Ragnar smirked to himself, seeing the goofy expression on the wizard’s face. He had a very good idea what they’d been up to.

Bryce, too, was getting up, and he also noticed Justin’s appearance.

“Uh. Doubt the President’s gonna like it if you end up, uh, you know...”

Zoey’s face turned red, but Justin let out a snort. “Two words: contraception charms. Rather not end up in front of a firing squad.”

In short order, everyone was having brunch, the table being properly enlarged to suit the number present.

“Harry, perhaps we should consider an arrangement like we have back at the flat,” Mazhe suggested,
“If we’re gonna have this number from here on out, we may as well make it comfortable.”

“I’ll have to talk to Tolfdir first, just make him aware; it would mean a significant structural change to the building.”

“You can’t just make the changes with magic?” Credence asked.

“It’ll be done with magic, yes,” Justin answered. “The thing is, we’ll want to make permanent changes to the building; not just something temporary such as we have now.”

“Yes, seeing magical construction was fascinating,” Ragnar noted.

“I would hear about your exploits and adventures since we bid you good bye,” said Harry, “I trust you made a few more magical friends.”

“Yes, very much so.”

“And on that... Harry, you know there’ll be more than a few people that are gonna have loads to say about him being here again,” said Justin.

“Don’t remind me. It’s not as if I had a say in the matter, Justin. Much as I’m glad he’s with us again, it shouldn’t have happened. But. This is me we’re talking about. I don’t have to go looking for trouble, it finds me easy enough.

“He’s in exactly the position Crixus and Dardanos were in. And quite honestly, another experienced blade, someone who knows how to fight, I’m not about to turn that down.”

“We get it, Harry,” said Aaron, “Though he will need a... he needs to know about the modern world, never mind the world here.

“Yeah, biggest thing, sir, is to be ready for anything.”

“My one request, is that you not address me in that way. My titles died as I breathed my last. Here, I am only Ragnar.”

“Just out of habit,” said Aaron, “But you’re by all intents and purposes a member of the royal family.”

“I have never asked, but... how big is Queen Susan’s family?” Harry wondered, as he poured himself a cup of coffee.

“Just herself, Harry. You know she was very young when she ascended.”

“And no child? How will the line continue when she passes on?” asked Ragnar.

“She’s appointed someone,” said Aaron.

“Do we know them?”

“No. She’s named several successors, actually. Then she changes her mind, and chooses someone else.”

“She can do that?”

“Harry, she’s the Queen. She can do what she likes,” said Justin. “The last few choices... all of them turned out to be poor in one way or another. They end up doing something that displeased the
Queen, so she revoked the appointment and chose someone else.”

“Does make sense,” said Mazhe, “Whoever she names... they take the crown when she dies. To end up with someone who turns out to be a tyrant...”

“We’ve been fairly lucky there, I think,” said Aaron, “Sure, a few of our kings and queens haven’t been the greatest, but... we’ve only had one really bad one. Only time in history we’ve forced a sitting monarch to abdicate.”

“You mean like impeachment,” said Zoey.

Justin gave a nod. “Except that... well... you guys think you have it complicated... it’s nothing like here. Removing the King or Queen... first there has to be a Censure motion, passed by the House of Commons, then ratified by the Senate.

“That’s a warning to the crown that they’ve done something that’s detrimental to the nation. Something very bad, as you can imagine.”

“How often has that been done?” Bryce wondered.

“I think every sitting king or queen we’ve had’s been censured at one point or other. Remember, it’s normally a lifetime job.”

“So plenty of chances to make bad choices,” Harry realized.

“Exactly,” Justin picked up, “Except that, say, the monarch continues on his or her path of bad choices. Lets the power go to their head, starts meddling with the elected government, circumventing their wishes, violating the constitution...

“Now we have a problem. It’s a situation like that, where the elected government can take the next step: a motion of non-confidence in the Sovereign. Thing is, not only does the House of Commons have to pass it, the city-states—provinces must also pass the motion through their own parliamentary bodies.”

“Should that pass,” Aaron picked up, “The government can then petition the Order of the Magnus to revoke the authority and titles from the Sovereign. His or her successor would then ascend as per normal process.”

“And this is something that could take years,” said Justin, “It’s something crazy difficult... but it was MEANT to be difficult. The king or queen being forced out just because the Prime Minister doesn’t get along with them... wouldn’t be productive. It would go against the spirit of having the crown in the first place.”

Mazhe thought for a moment, before asking, “But what would prevent the king or queen from stopping the government from passing the motion in the first place?”

“The Order of the Magnus,” Aaron answered, “The government would inform the Order they’re introducing the motion. The crown interfering with it would result in it automatically passing without further involvement from the provinces.”

“All of this... sounds complicated,” said Ragnar.

“It’s meant to be complicated. Valicadia’s population as of our last federal census in 2005 came in around a hundred and twenty-six million people. Governing with just a simple court of peers... it would never work,” Justin explained.
“You seem to know a lot about the government,” said Mazhe.

“I took political studies as an elective in grade ten. It was the year before I met you guys.”

“Justin, you’re a nerd,” said Harry, smirking.

It was then a regal looking owl flew in through one of the fake windows, to drop a letter in front of Harry. It did not land, but flew back out from whence it came.

Harry glanced at the envelope, but had no chance to do anything else as it seemed to come to life, morphing into an angry face.

“Harry James Stormcrown,” came the loud voice of Guardian Elaine, “Be it known that we, the Order of the Magnus, are both angered and disturbed by your recent actions, which have resulted in significant alterations to the time line.

“Though your title does permit unprecedented leeway on a great number of matters, the laws of magic and nature must always be respected. Planting letters with certain parties centuries into the past could have had disastrous consequences, thank the gods that is not the case!”

The voice softened.

“Harry, we know your intentions were genuine, but you must exercise great caution when meddling with tremendous forces. And meddling with time itself, even now, the effects on changed events cannot be known. We could still face severe consequences, days, months, perhaps years into the future.”

The letter simply plopped back down to the table, silent.

“What... what was that?” Credence asked, shocked.

“I have to ask the same thing,” said Ragnar, also startled by the angry piece of mail.

“Not quite a howler, but... a letter of displeasure, as we call it,” said Justin. He cleared his throat several times.

“Yeah... Brandon served Dumbledore with one of those,” said Harry, softly, “Gods... I don’t remember—”

“You do not remember leaving me a letter?” asked Ragnar.

“No. When would I have...”

Harry stopped, realizing very well what he’d done. With a time-turner? He had all the time in the world.

“Do you remember what was written? Not verbatim, but... the essential points.”

“That we should make contact with a settlement on the south coast of England—”

“Eoforwin,” said Justin. “And I’m guessing a letter was left for the leaders of Eoforwin—what’s now called Erwin... for them to expect visitors from the north.”

“As we found out when we arrived,” said Ragnar, “Eoforwin’s people became friends and allies and trading partners. I would guess that our relationship continued even after my passing. I impressed on my sons the importance of keeping that alliance.”
Justin shook his head. “Damn, Harry. I can only guess how far that would’ve went. Our relationship with the northmen was never all that strong... at least as I remember our history.”

“Maybe we should figure out what changed,” Zoey suggested, “But... why do you remember the way it was originally?”

“I can’t answer that,” said Justin, “A quirk of being involved with the person who created the alternate reality, maybe.”

“So does the original time line still exist, or is it permanently altered?” Bryce asked.

“Gone. Permanently altered,” said Harry, “It’s why time travel’s so heavily regulated.”

“Why don’t you remember doing it—changing things then?” Credence asked.

“I was thoroughly pissed the night before we said good bye. So not remembering everything I did, yeah... not surprised. Though I have to wonder how coherent my letters were if I was in a state.”

“It did take time to make sense of it, yes,” Ragnar remembered. “From the angry message you have received, it sounds as though the plan you executed was rather successful.”

“I’m going to forgo the training today and return to Trevelyan,” Justin decided, “I’ll figure out exactly what’s happened. From the letter, I would gather it was nothing truly detrimental.”

“But I’m still confused,” said Bryce, “If the universe wouldn’t let those OND morons screw around with Ragnar... how did Harry do it?”

“C’mon, Bryce. It’s Harry we’re talking about,” said Mazhe. “He and rules have never gotten along.”

Eye-rolls and muttering came from the long-time members of the group.

Aaron drank down the remainder of his coffee and stood up. “Uh. I’m heading back to Bthalft, gonna look in on Brandon, and pick up his replacement.”

“We won’t be going far,” said Harry, “I’m expecting healer Ferris.”

“Yes, right. Well she’s probably still tied up at the hospital. I’ll likely run into her coming or going.”

“Shit, that reminds me,” said Justin, “I’ll need to pick up a second mobile and an additional pouch. If Ragnar’s staying with us, he’ll need equipment.”

“Yes, we’ll look after some of that,” said Aaron.

“And as for armour...” Harry smirked. “I think we got that covered. And I think some of Mazhe’s stuff will probably fit him—though a trip into Bthalft is needed so he has proper clothes.”

It was late in the afternoon before Justin, Zoey, and Aaron both returned; Aaron had not come alone. They found the others inside Harry’s chest, and more specifically, the VPR. With the lid open, the newcomer was not prevented from entering.

Harry had turned the room into a close facsimile of the Polo Grounds, though it looked like they’d been doing other things beyond just tossing a ball around. At present, everyone was gathered in the home dugout, taking a break and having some refreshments.
At first, Ragnar looked out of sorts, seeing the stranger. By all accounts, the man looked identical to Ragnar’s eldest child, save for the fact he was clean-shaven with short-cropped hair. And he was a little older, if Ragnar had to guess. “Bjorn?” he questioned, his voice barely a whisper.

“I am perhaps related, but no, I am not your oldest son,” answered the man.

“This is Lieutenant Ludvig Jarisson. He’ll be joining us for the next few days until Brandon is on his feet again.”

“Welcome, Lieutenant,” said Harry, offering a hand.

Ludvig shook it. “Glad to be with you guys, uh, sir.”

“Shor’s bones, please don’t call me that,” Harry muttered, “Makin’ me feel old.”

“Oh, uh, forgive me.”

“And you won’t believe where he’s from,” said Aaron, “This had me do a double-take.”

“Kattegat, of course,” said Ludvig, as though stating the obvious.

Now it was Harry's turn to do a double-take. “For real?”

“Oh, Harry, it gets better... or worse... depending on which side of the fence you’re on,” said Justin, as he gestured at the ground, creating a comfortable seat for himself and his girlfriend.

“The Commonwealth getting an entire new city out of it? That’s gonna be hard to top,” said Mazhe.

“Massive Norse influence in Erwin and Hunfrith that persist in the present, never mind the number of Norse-speaking people—”

“You mean old Norse?” Harry clarified.

“Yes. The Commonwealth now has three influencing cultures instead of only two. Granted, Norse culture was there before... just not on the scale it is in this new alternate reality.”

“Harry, it’s likely I wouldn’t exist without your actions,” said Ludvig. “No matter what the government might tell you, gods above... you advanced our realm, kept another civilization alive... this is the deed of a father caring for his child. Don’t ever forget that.”

Now Justin couldn’t help but nod along. As crazy as his actions had been, that’s exactly what Harry had done: strengthen the Commonwealth’s position, by strengthening its roots.

“I knew we had formed a special friendship,” Ragnar remarked, “But to see my descendants reap such great rewards...”

“Your people live on, both in our great Commonwealth, and in the world at large, Ragnar,” said Ludvig. “Though, in the outer world—the world outside the Commonwealth, only traces still exist. The original site of Kattegat... you wouldn’t recognize it today.”

“What brief history I was able to look up, the settlement faded from memory about fifty years after Eoforwin was founded, and right around the time Kattegat was created as an underground settlement.”

“The people simply moved underground,” said Ragnar, “Some of my descendants included.”
“Yes, very much so. You do know our Queen shares your blood, am I right?” questioned Ludvig.

“Yes, they have made me aware. Five generations from my blood.”

“And there have been others,” said Justin, “Three generations back in the sixteen-hundreds. So eight kings and queens have bore your blood. It’s been fascinating, seeing the watershed effect—knowing what the time line used to look like.”

“And we have to be very careful with that,” said Aaron, “Not many people are aware it’s happened. If it were to get out... you guys know our relationship with the ICW is shaky at best; they’d be all over us for doing something as big as this. And really, Harry, you don’t want a censure.”

Zoey furrowed her brows. “They could censure him? The international government censuring an individual?”

“No... no, that’s not where it would come from. It would come from parliament. The government could pass a motion of censure against the Promagistrate, just like they can pass a motion of censure against the Crown,” said Justin. “It doesn’t carry any legal weight—at least not in the sense of any legal repercussions, but from a public standpoint—”

“It would make me look bad,” Harry finished. “Not that I really give a flying fuck about what people think of me. I acted with the Commonwealth’s interests in mind, with the interests of the Viking people in mind... and from the limited information I now have, it appears the seeds I have sewn bore prosperous fruit.”

“The government won’t like that answer, Harry.”

“If they expect me to apologize for what I have done, they will be sorely disappointed. If placed in a position to do it over, I would not hesitate.”

“Harry, we don’t deserve you,” said Ludvig.

Mazhe smirked. “My mate has created a Dragon Break. Outside of Nirn.”

Harry shook his head. “No. A Dragon Break is a fracture of time and space, where a series of events all happen at once—several outcomes happen all at once. Better described as Akatosh going crazy for a bit.”

Bryce furrowed his brows. “Yeah, that explains things well.”

“Gods. You have no idea,” said Harry. “I had to read the text that talks about it several times before I could get my head around it. And yeah, it’s most definitely as fucked up as it sounds.”

“Why would such a thing happen?” Ragnar asked.

“A question best asked of the gods,” said Harry, “I think it’s just another example of the terrifying power of magic. You think our history books are crazy... you should see the ones here.”

“This then... is some alternate universe,” Ragnar guessed.

“We’re not really sure,” said Justin, “It’s a possibility, but the Order of the Magnus thinks it’s just a different star system, perhaps even a different galaxy in our own universe.”

“See, space is a big place. You look up at the night sky, for example. Thousands upon thousands of stars... and each one could very well have a number of planets orbiting it. That we are the only
intelligent beings in the universe... the math is against that kind of assertion.”

Harry smirked. “Here’s an out-there theory: the Dwemer made it into space, left Nirn behind.”

Mazhe laughed out loud. “Go home, Harry, you’re drunk.”

February 1, 2008 / 1 Sun’s Dawn, 4E203

Immediately following morning exercises, the group split into two. While Justin and Zoey remained in the chest to work with Credence, the rest headed to the Aetherium Forge. Harry collected Baldor from the Skaal Village, while Mazhe collected Balimund from Riften; both smiths were more than interested in getting a chance to work with the legendary forge.

The room itself had undergone a few changes since the group had last seen it. Though it was strictly off limits to the regular public, it was still connected to the Commonwealth’s newest city, and so was now well-lit with electric lights. An additional smelter had been added, as well as additional workstations and storage. Strong cooling charms had also been put on the room, so it no longer felt like a sauna.

“So the fire suit isn’t needed anymore,” Aaron joked, as they looked around.

“Department of Infrastructure likely did it,” said Ludvig, “This looks awesome.”

“We still need to invite Eorland Grey-Mane to see this,” said Mazhe, “Thing is, I don’t know him well enough. Only spoken to the man on a few occasions.”

“Your reputation as Dragonborn would be more than sufficient, Mazhe,” said Balimund. “And that device you have does take pictures, does it not?”

“Fair enough. I just don’t want to intrude, I do know that a smith’s time is valuable.”

“Nonsense,” said Baldor, “By the All-Maker, I’m astounded. Any smith would give just about anything for the opportunity to be here.”

Ragnar, too, was taking in the enormous space. He had seen more than a few forge and smithy setups, but this...

“Odin’s beard... a forge fuelled by the fires of the earth itself...”

“Built by the Dwemer, perhaps thousands of years ago. No one really knows,” said Mazhe, “According to ancient texts and research, four cities allied to build it, then went to war over it. It was lost, and only discovered a few months ago. You have seen Bryce’s amulet... it was made here.”

Harry reached into his pouch, and pulled out the last Aetherium ingot. “This is the last ingot we have. Really need to locate more of them.”

“And we still haven’t explored Blackreach,” Mazhe remembered. “That, and a visit to Raldbthar, thought to be an Aetherium repository.”

“We have enough for now. Shall we get to work?”

They split up, with some working with Balimund smithing Aetherium, while others worked with Baldor, as he introduced them to Stalhrim smithing. Harry was still working on the replacement amulet, while Mazhe decided to start with something relatively small, going with a Stalhrim dagger.
“Harry, can I see your dagger for a moment?” Mazhe asked, as they were half-way through the morning.

“Of course.”

Harry reached into his pouch, produced his dagger, and passed it over.

Baldor inspected the piece. “Daedric.”

“Only smith I know who can craft Daedric pieces is Eorland Grey-Mane. I had it crafted for my mate.”

“Yes, a well-made piece. I am not familiar with the smith, though I have heard of him, as well as his famous forge.”

“The Skyforge,” said Harry, “Legendary in its own right. I’ve seen it, but not had the chance to use it.”

“You find it intimidating,” said Mazhe.

“Something like that.”

Ragnar could only shake his head. “Young mage, you sell yourself short. If what you say is true, then this forge would be the others’ equal.”

That earned a nod from both the smiths.

“This is true, Harry,” said Balimund, “The Skyforge and the Aetherium Forge are equals in every sense of the word.”

“What is that you’re making?” Balimund questioned, gesturing to the half-formed piece Ragnar was working with.

“Axe head. Your pieces are functional but strange to me.”

“Ah, of course. You will need a handle for it.”

“There should be a pre-made supply of handles,” said Mazhe, “It’ll be up to you to customize the fit.”

“I will select a handle from the wild.”

“Oh,” said Mazhe. “I didn’t mean…”

“No offence taken, young mage. But the handle must be crafted in a certain way. Your saws and tools do not account for the natural shape of the wood.”

“We’ll have to go for a walk then. The hardwood trees around Riften… you’ll likely find what you need there.”

“Though it’s unlikely we’ll have the tools you’re used to,” said Aaron, “Though their techniques are similar to yours, they’re not identical.”

“I will make do.”

“Whatever you can show us, it’s certainly welcome,” said Mazhe.
By the end of the morning, the piece Ragnar was working on was only half-finished. It was starting to take on a familiar shape, but was still quite rough. Harry guessed he’d need at least two more sessions to complete it, and then to craft the handle... that would be interesting in its own right.

Mazhe’s piece meanwhile, was a dagger made of Stalhrim. Or at least, the beginning of one. He still needed to forge a handle, and the blade was still rough, much like Ragnar’s. After all, one did not create a weapon in a couple of hours(1), no matter HOW skilled one might be.

While Mazhe returned Balimund to Riften, Harry returned Baldor to his village. With the mobiles, this only took a few minutes, before everyone regrouped back at the College.

There, they found Brandon had returned, looking much like his normal self.

“You are well again?” questioned Harry.

“Clean bill of health,” answered Brandon, “Jesus, though, that was probably one of the worst experiences ever.”

He looked Ragnar over. “Welcome back, sir. I’ve been given a brief of what’s been going on while I’ve been laid up.”

“I am only Ragnar here, Commander. My kingdom, my realm no longer exists as I knew it. So I defer to my descendant, Queen Susan.”

“Have you met her yet?”

“No.”

“Perhaps we should pay a visit sometime in the near future. And Harry, she will want to see you.”

“Likely to give me shit. No thanks, I’ve already heard it from the Order of the Magnus.”

“She cares for your well-being, whether you want to believe that or not,” said Brandon, “Can you blame her for being a little upset?”

Harry let out a sigh. “I guess not.”

“Now. As it stands.”

Brandon glanced at Ludvig, before retrieving a set of papers from his pouch. “How’d you like travelling with this lot?”

“A break from the routine, sir. I welcomed the opportunity. Quite honestly, a small part of me did hope for you to, uh...”

“You don’t need to say it, Lieutenant. I’m not offended.”

Harry thought for a moment. “I would see him remain with us, given recent events.”

“If that’s what the Promagistrate wants.”

Brandon looked at Harry expectantly.

“It is the wish of the Promagistrate, yes. Uh. Given recent incidents, I would see an additional member of Her Majesty’s Special Operations Unit be placed with us for an indeterminate length of
“Sir,” said Brandon. He stowed the papers back in his pouch, then turned back to Ludvig. “Your recall order is rescinded.”

Ludvig snapped to attention a moment. “Sir.”

Brandon then turned to Bryce. “Let me see. Right.” He reached into his pouch, and produced a sealed envelope. “My personal thanks for looking after me. I would’ve drowned if not for your actions. But you also have the thanks of her majesty, and receive royal commendation for your actions.”

“The right thing to do. ‘an you’re a friend, right,” said Bryce, simply, as he accepted the envelope. It had the same blue handwriting on it that he’d seen months earlier. He broke the seal, and pulled the parchment out.

“Uh... thanks.”

“You earned it, Mr. Hunter. Rate you’re going, you’re gonna be just as famous as Harry here.”

Harry let out a snort. “As if.”

“Yet you keep doing things that keep increasing your fame, Harry,” said Mazhe.

“And I would trade it all, if it meant keeping my friends and my countrymen safe. I do what I must in that end. Now. I think lunch is out.”

“Still planning on visiting Hogwarts this afternoon?” asked Brandon.

“Yes. I’m introducing Credence to some of the teachers, and Sahrotaar,” said Harry.

“And where is Mr. Barebone now?”

“In class. Uh, novice Restoration. Should be finished shortly.”

“And you normally have stealth and archery this afternoon,” Brandon remembered.

“I let both Niruin and Delvin know what I was doing this afternoon, so they’re not expecting me.”

It was then Justin appeared, alone for the first time in a while.

“Where’d Zoey go?” asked Harry.

“A function in Washington. I’m only back for a while, I’ve been invited.”

“Oh, uh, right,” Harry grinned. No surprise, the President hosting or attending a major function, and his daughter would bring her boyfriend along.

“A single whiff of something wrong, I expect to hear about it,” said Harry, “We’ll be there in a heartbeat.”

“Count on it,” Justin promised. “Now. Uh... only have time to eat and change... got a rehearsal and crap to go through. Reminds me of graduation.”

“But you’ll do it, ‘cause of Zoey,” Mazhe teased.
UP NEXT: The circle hunt down the remainder of the treasure, and come face to face with a ghostly legend...

CHAPTER NOTES: Ludvig’s name is spelt that way on purpose, just to be clear. I could have went with Ludwig, but decided to go with something that fits a little better with Norse/Norwegian naming. Also, Alexander Ludwig plays Bjorn. So... and, oh. Of course, if you want an idea what Ludvig looks like... you know how Google works, right? :p

(1) taking a dig at the crafting system in games like Skyrim. I would think that, crafting a beautiful weapon is not something that happens in a matter of seconds. No, this is a thing that would take many hours of work, even for a simple tool such as a dagger or axe. And, with more superior elements such as Stalhrim and Aetherium, the crafting time would increase dramatically. Once again, no such thing as a free lunch, people.
30. DEATHBRAND

February, 2008 / Sun's Dawn, 4E203

“The past is a very determined ghost, haunting every chance it gets.”

- Laura Miller

Unknown Location
Northwest coast of Solstheim
February 3, 2008 / 3 Sun’s Dawn, 4E203

In hindsight, the extra manpower—or dragon-power—was unnecessary. The large group consisting of Harry, Mazhe, Miraak, Brandon, Aaron, Ludvig, Bryce, Ragnar, and Sahrotaar, all touched down on the beach a short distance away from the ancient chest which lay half-buried in the sand. A group of mudcrabs were resting nearby, but Harry simply banished the lot; they were hardly worth wasting spells on, in the larger scheme of things, being mostly nuisance creatures.

“I am somewhat underwhelmed,” said Harry, smirking, as they made for the chest; Sahrotaar remained where he had landed, considering dragons were anything but graceful on the ground.

“I’d almost say you’re looking for a fight, Harry,” said Ludvig, as Bryce once again did the honours, using an unlocking scroll to open the chest.

“A small part of me, yeah, but... I’m ultimately glad our number was not needed. Considering what happened last week, we were woefully outmatched. There was no chance to summon any sort of backup.”

Bryce, meanwhile, was pulling items out of the chest. “Looks like five or six large sacks of coins. Oh.”

He’d pulled out a pair of gauntlets which matched the rest of the armour. He slid them on.

“Damn. That’s pretty sick,” said Aaron, apprising the final kit.

Ragnar looked confused. “Sick?”

“Oh. I mean, it’s really cool—uh, good,” Aaron clarified.
“It is better than this, then,” said Ragnar, gesturing to the set of armour he was wearing—one of the sets they’d claimed a week prior.

“We don’t know. I would say they’re likely equivalent,” answered Harry, as he produced his chest. “Let’s dump the coins in here for now, and count it later.”

“Hold on. There’s a map... and a key,” said Bryce.

“Let me see it,” said Brandon.

Bryce passed the map over, while Aaron pulled out his mobile.

“We been there before?” Mazhe asked.

“Give me a few moments. I’m not that fast, Mazhe.”

“My bet... probably the final stash... the rest of the treasure for whoever owned this stuff,” said Bryce.

That got a nod out of both Harry and Mazhe, as Aaron compared the found map with the map on his mobile.

“Right. Looks like a ruin a little east of the Skaal Village.”

“We flew over it last year,” Harry remembered, “But that’s as close as we’ve been to it.”

“We can teleport back to the village and fly from there,” Mazhe decided, “That’s... if we’re going for it.”

“We came this far,” said Harry.

Gyldenhul Barrow
East Coast of Solstheim

The flight from the Skaal Village only took a few minutes. This time, they found a group of bandits were camped outside. Two of them wore the Nordic carved armour, and most of them were casting magic. However, considering the painful lesson a week prior, it was still an unfair fight. Two of the bandits, including one wearing the heavy armour, found herself frozen courtesy of Sahrotaar’s frost breath.

“Sahrotaar. I would fight from the ground,” said Miraak.

The dragon set down heavily, and Miraak quickly dismounted.

“Fo... KRAH DIIN!”

Another bandit barely got clear of the frosty blast, but left herself open to Harry’s shock spell.

“Die, n’wah,!!” came a taunt from one still remaining. The two others had took cover behind the rocks steps east of the ruin.

It proved to be futile, as Bryce and Aaron easily kept up, and while Bryce held control of the broom, Aaron let fly a string of blasting curses. The bandits were swiftly buried by the ensuing avalanche of rocks and debris.
Harry finished off the remaining bandit only seconds after, and everyone swiftly dismounted. Sahrotaar set down as gently as possible, but still made the ground shake with contact.

“Right. Since a couple of you are new here, a quick primer on Nordic ruins, such as what we’re about to enter. We’ll likely find Draugr—mummified, zombie-like enemies inside,” said Mazhe, “They aren’t all that strong physically, so they’re vulnerable to melee attacks.”

“Doesn’t mean they’re not dangerous,” Harry picked up, “It’s a fifty-fifty split, some using weapons, while others will use magic. Stronger ones are able to Shout, so watch out—or keep an ear out. ‘Fus’ or ‘Fo’ means a lot of pain. They typically wear helmets with tall horns like the ones on his helmet —” Harry gestured to Bryce.

“No fire shout?” Ludvig asked.

“No. Never seen a Draugr use the fire Shout, and quite honestly I’d rather not,” said Harry.

“Not many of the Dragon Cult were taught the Shout,” said Miraak, “Though my brethren believed themselves equal to the dragons, it was an illusion at best; we were slaves and nothing more.”

“And to be given the signature Shout of a dragon would put them on even footing,” Harry guessed.

“It was never outright spoken, but yes, that is very likely the reason.”

Mazhe gave a nod. “It would make sense. Now. Other things to be concerned about are traps. Watch your step, keep an eye out for trip lines and pressure plates. The Nords were rather ingenious with their trap mechanisms: spikes, swing gates, rock falls, poisoned darts, fire jets... have I missed any, Harry?”

“Think there was a shock trap a few years ago, but that was a one-off, I think. Just... everyone keep your wits about you, these places can be unpredictable.”

Brandon flicked his wand at the dark metal door, and there came an audible ‘click’, as it was unlocked. He pushed it open, to reveal a small vestibule on the inside.

“Shit. Looks like it’s a dead end. Whatever’s in here’s sealed by a collapsed tunnel.”

Sure enough, the corridor going forward was caved in, a chest being half-buried in the rubble. Brandon flicked his wand at the chest and it popped open, revealing only a small pile of coins.

Harry and Mazhe, meanwhile, were inspecting a sarcophagus to the right.

“Harry, you feel that?”

“Yeah. A little bit of a draft coming from the side of it. Back up, guys.”

Once everyone had given the pair room, Harry unleashed a strong blasting curse at the coffin. Unfortunately, it had little effect, other than knocking a few pieces off the wall, and scattering a bit of dust.

“Betting that’s the same stuff this armour’s made of,” Bryce guessed.

“So, resistant to magic,” said Ludvig.

“C-four,” Brandon decided, “Shaped charges should move it. Everyone outside. Carpenter and Jarisson with me.”
“What is C-four?” Ragnar asked, as they stepped back outside.

“Explosive,” said Bryce, “They’ll knock the coffin out of the way with it.”

Harry smirked. “Yes, always more than one way to skin a cat.”

“But will we be able to move it after?” Mazhe wondered.

“Why not? It’s likely just wedged into the hole—if it’s a hole. We still don’t know what’s behind it.”

“What has happened?” asked Sahrotaar, who still rested nearby.

“A small obstruction. The SOU’s dealing with it,” Harry answered.

It was then the three SOU members appeared, with Aaron tugging on a small reel, leaving a wire behind, snaking back inside. Brandon pulled the doors shut, before joining the others.

“Should be good enough. You got the detonator?”

“Yeah.”

Aaron passed over the reel, then fished in his pouch, producing a small box with two terminals. Brandon had already produced a knife, and cut the wire—now revealed to be a red and black wire pair. While Aaron held the device steady, Brandon wrapped the ends of the two wires to the corresponding terminal.

“All right, guys. Fire in the hole,” Aaron warned, before pressing the single button.

There came a noisy bang from inside, and the ground momentarily shook, before everything fell still.

“Jarisson, Carpenter, with me. Everyone else hold back a moment while we check,” Brandon decided, and pushed the doors open. A thin cloud of dust rolled out, but the trio of men cautiously stepped inside.

Only moments later, Brandon called out, “Clear!”

The sarcophagus had fallen backward from the blast, and chunks of the wall had been blown away. And, as Harry and Mazhe had suspected, there was a passage hidden behind it.

“We’ll have to lift it out,” said Aaron.

“We’ll amplify the spell,” said Mazhe.

“Yeah, sounds good. Everyone clear a path,” Brandon ordered, “We’ll shove it over there for now.”

He pointed to the foot of the rubble blocking the centre passageway.

“Ready?”

At Harry and Mazhe’s nod, Brandon pointed his wand at the fallen coffin. “Locomotor coffin!”

With both Harry and Mazhe providing the magical boost, the coffin lifted from the hole, and Brandon carefully manoeuvred it over to the location he’d pointed out, before cancelling the spell, letting it come to rest at the foot of the rubble. That left the way clear, with only a few small chunks from the wall littering the floor.
The passageway twisted around a corner, before descending.

“Watch your footing, guys,” Aaron warned, as they made their way along.

“Gods. We have to be the first people in here in centuries,” Mazhe remarked.

“How is it then, that torches continue to burn here?” asked Ragnar.

“A question we’ve all asked at one point or other,” said Harry, as they reached the bottom. “Only logical answer, they’re magical.”

They had then arrived at a pair of large doors. Brandon once again produced his wand, and flicked it forward.

“No life signs ahead.”

“Doesn’t mean there won’t be. Draugr will only be detected if they wake up,” Harry warned. “Everyone be ready.”

The others pressed against the walls on either side, while Brandon pushed the doors open.


Spells and firearms were instantly at the ready from Aaron’s exclamation. However, it proved unnecessary. The room, or corridor, was well lit, stretching for perhaps fifty feet. And, scattered within, were chests, jewels, coins, weapons, armour, and more coins. Coins in vast numbers, easily surpassing the wealth contained in the Guild’s vault at present.

“By Odin’s beard…” Ragnar muttered, as he and the others took it all in.

“Treasure indeed,” said Harry, grinning madly. “Bloody hell, Baldor’s gonna pass out when he receives his cut from this.”

“Fifty percent of this goes to the Guild, right?”

“Of course, Mazhe. The rest, we will split amongst ourselves. Though I would estimate, even that, will be a staggering sum.”

“There must be thousands of gold pieces here,” said Ragnar, as he reached down and picked one of them up.

With a noisy scraping sound, a heavy metal portcullis slid into place, blocking their way back out.

“Shit,” Ludvig muttered.

“Anyone see a way to open it?” Aaron questioned.

“Negative.”

Others only shook their heads.

“If there’s a lever or switch, it’s not here. Guessin’ the treasure was booby-trapped with magic,” said Aaron.

Harry only scowled, before flicking a hand at the offending gate, instantly vanishing it.
Mazhe smirked. “This much wealth in this little chamber alone, the main chamber will be a sight to see. We can retire early, buy ourselves an island somewhere(1).”

Harry also smirked. “Too bad we didn’t have Newt’s niffler; he’d have this place cleaned out in a matter of minutes.”

They passed through the double doors at the opposite end, and followed the narrow passageway as it descended further and further into the earth. It seemed to twist and turn before ending at a narrow gate. This time Ludvig did the honours.

The passageway opened up into an enormous chamber, dimly lit by ominous blue lights.


He barely got the words out of his mouth, when there came a noisy rumble from behind them. The group turned to find the way out now sealed by stone.

“We’ll have to find another way out. Something’s messing with the mobiles here,” said Aaron.

“Thought they worked everywhere,” said Bryce.

“There are a few places they don’t,” said Mazhe, as they started walking. “Justin’s got people working on it—”

“Who dares disturb my sanctuary?!” came a voice from the opposite end of the chamber—a raised section with stairs leading up to it. A ghostly shade then faded into view. If Harry had to guess, he was wearing an identical set of armour to Bryce. Very likely the owner, then. He wore two scimitars—curved swords, one on each hip.

“Apologies,” said Harry, cautiously, “We were unaware this place was still occupied. If you’ll unseal the opening we came through, we will leave you be.”

But the ghost had seen the armour Bryce was wearing.

“You dare steal MY armour!?” the ghost roared, and charged at them, both blades drawn.

The chamber almost instantly lit up with a storm of spell fire, as the group did not hesitate. The ghost seemed to disintegrate, and the chamber again fell silent.

“Most unfortunate,” said Harry, as the group once again began to cross the chamber.

“We took the risk, Harry. Always a chance the dead linger,” said Mazhe, softly. “Perhaps it was best, whoever this was... to be trapped here, and not move on... not a pleasant thing.”

“The ghost may have unfinished business,” said Ragnar, thoughtfully.

No one had a chance to comment, as the room suddenly came alive with more than a dozen ghostly shades.

“Mul... QAH DIIIV!” both Mazhe and Miraak shouted, shrouding themselves in the aspect of the dragon.

Harry quickly summoned a Seeker, who at once went after a pair of the ghosts. Bryce, meanwhile, produced the Staff of Magnus, and brought it to bear on a group of apparitions who were getting too close. They were instantly rendered piles of... goo, for better terms. Puddles of blue, glowing essence.
“Hunter! Your six!” Ludvig shouted.

Bryce wheeled and fired, dispatching another pair who were about to attack from behind.

“Nearly out, need a soul gem!”

“Here!”

Mazhe tossed over a soul gem, before turning to dispatch another enemy. Ghosts tended to exist in a somewhat weaker form, and individually didn’t normally pose much of a threat. Naturally, there were exceptions, but the lot they were presently facing fell under the former.

Finally, the chamber once again fell still, though the group still held weapons at the ready.

“We are not done,” Miraak warned, “There is still strong magic afoot.”

“Agreed. I can still feel it,” said Mazhe.

They were right. There came a crackling of magic, as a purple orb formed near the sealed entrance. It dissipated, revealing the first ghost.

“The endless sleep comes for us all!” he taunted, as several more shades appeared, this time up on the raised platform. One of them wore a set of Nordic carved armour, while the other wore a set of steel armour.

“Fo... KRAH DIIIN!” Miraak shouted, and the cold blast nailed the ghost wearing steel, causing him to stagger. Harry immediately followed up with a strong blasting curse, which swiftly banished the apparition. A puddle of glowing essence appeared against the wall of the chamber.

That, however, only caused another wave of enemies to spawn, with the leader still in their midst. Harry’s Seeker was at last destroyed, as five of the ghosts teamed up on it.

Ragnar, meanwhile, went toe-to-toe with the ghost dressed in the Nordic armour.

“Die now and live forever!” the ghost taunted, as he backed up, and readied an arrow. However, being long-range skilled, that put him at a disadvantage. Ragnar pressed, finally planting his axe in the ghost’s chest, leaving yet another pile of glowing material.

That, unfortunately, brought another wave of lesser ghosts, this time nearly twenty of them.

“Gods... GUYS. Upper platform!” Aaron shouted.

The group hurried up the stairs, throwing the strongest magic they could muster, as the leader once again vanished.

“The leader dude’s resurrecting his friends somehow!” Bryce shouted, “We’re gonna get killed here!”

“Embrace eternal slumber!” a ghost cried, before being vaporized by Brandon’s blasting curses.

“Ward wall,” said Mazhe. “Harry, Miraak, help me out.”

The three of them cupped their hands together, and a shimmering blue barrier rapidly formed.

“I have an idea,” said Miraak. “The leader must be restrained but not destroyed.”
“Bend will,” Mazhe realized. “Guys?”

“If it puts an end to this,” said Brandon.

“Agreed. Do it if possible,” said Harry, as Aaron dispatched yet another ghost who got too close.

“Carpenter, Jarisson, help me out.”

The three SOU went around the barrier, wands drawn.

“What are they doing?” asked Ragnar.

“I don’t—oh, gods...”

Harry knew exactly what they’d done, as the terrible fiery shapes bloomed from the three wands: Feindfyre. Directed by the three wizards, the flames attacked the ghosts, the heat rapidly becoming unbearable. Keeping a hand focused on the shield, he flicked a hand at Mazhe, and then Miraak, applying a strong cooling charm. Still, he realized that wasn’t enough.

“Have to break away!”

“It’s... it’s all right, Harry,” said Mazhe, as the shield dropped.

“You guys see the leader?”

“No,” said Harry, as he applied cooling charms to the others.

Surprise came in the form of the ghost leader appearing in their midst.

“Keep him off us!” Brandon shouted, as he worked to keep control of the cursed fire. Only a few of the ghosts still remained, the others being rapidly incinerated by the raging inferno.

Ragnar attacked, swinging his axe and narrowly missing. Mazhe quickly joined, casting a strong shock spell which also barely missed, leaving a scorch mark on the ruined floor. The ghost sprang forward, slashing with both blades—one casting a blue glow, while the other a fiery red shade.

“Ahh!” Mazhe hissed, feeling the red blade slice his forearm, a red mist connecting to the assailant.

“Soon you will know the cold of death!” the ghost mocked, as he again attacked with his blades.

Harry took exception, and launched a blasting curse at the ghost’s head. It missed by hairs, to impact with the sarcophagus behind them, scattering the remains in all directions.

Bryce, however, did not miss, the orange blast from the Staff of Magnus striking the ghost square in the chest. Frustratingly, the shot drained the staff, and was not enough to do away with the ghost completely, only staggering him.

“Shit.”

“Gol... HAH DOV!” Miraak roared, and he too, did not miss, the Shout hitting the ghost full-on(2). The ghost was sent flying, crashing into one of the massive support columns.

“Harry, need your wand!” Aaron called, “Help us put out the fire!”

“Right.”
Mazhe cast a weary eye toward the staggered ghost, before stepping to the edge of the raised platform. “Fo... KRAH DIIN!!”

The icy, frosty blast roared across the chamber, beating back the cursed fire, leaving a frosty track on the floor.

The ghost slowly got to his feet, to face the group. Everyone still had weapons and spells at the ready.

“A Dragonborn,” the ghost muttered, “Of course it would be a Dragonborn.”

“We are both Dragonborn,” said Mazhe, moving to stand beside Miraak. He produced a healing potion, and consumed the contents. He’d get the wound in his arm looked at later.

“Who are you?” questioned Miraak.

The ghost looked surprised. “You do not know? My name has truly been forgotten?”

“Enlighten us, then,” said Ragnar.

“I am Haknir,” said the ghost.

Harry turned around, looking surprised. “As in Haknir Death-Brand... the pirate king from the first era?”

“Then you do know of me.”

“There is a book describing your final days. The ghosts here... they were your men?”

“They were, as are many more,” said Haknir.

The fire was finally being brought under control, the floor of the chamber now being completely flooded with an inch of water. Brandon, Aaron, and Ludvig were all soaked with sweat, and looked physically beat.

“Shor’s bones...” Harry muttered, taking in their appearance.

“You try fighting a fire like that,” Ludvig muttered.

“Says the ones responsible for creating it.”

Haknir, meanwhile, took in the group. “You are an unusual lot, it appears.”

“You could say that, yes,” Mazhe agreed.

Haknir let out a sigh, but Harry could see the faintest hint of a smile forming. “I said to my crew, ‘Until the day when one of you can best me in combat, you shall have not a single coin.’ Here, I stand defeated by unexpected means. What was mine, is now yours.”

Miraak only glanced toward Mazhe. “And in turn, I defer to my better. Like you are bound to me, I am bound to my fellow Dragonborn.”

“I see.” Haknir gave a slow nod of understanding. With a gesture from his hand, there came a low rumble, and the blockage in the passageway slid back up into the ceiling.

“Guess introductions are in order,” said Mazhe, “I’m Mazhe. This is Harry, Miraak, Ragnar, Bryce,
Brandon, Aaron, and Ludvig.”

“How long has it been? How much time has passed since I was buried here?”

“Fourth Era,” said Mazhe, “Thousands of years have passed.”

“Shor’s bones,” Haknir whispered.

He thought for several moments, as Mazhe consumed another healing potion. “You should be aware, Lord Dagon will be displeased a servant has been taken from him.”

“Is that so? You were in his service?”

“He did grant me an unusually long life, yes.”

“Mazhe already belongs to the lady Nocturnal,” said Harry, dismissively, “Miraak, meanwhile, already belongs to Hermaeus Mora. I would expect that, should the lord of destruction want to claim either of them, he'll have to get in line.”

Haknir laughed. “Young mage, the Dragonborn cannot be claimed by either of them.”

Both Mazhe and Miraak looked confused, so Haknir questioned, “You do not know?”

That only earned more confused looks.

“The Dragonborn is a creation of Akatosh, borne through time of need,” the pirate king explained, “The body of a man, with the blood of a dragon.”

“It is something we will concern ourselves with when we pass on,” said Miraak. “Let us leave this place.”

“And he will follow, without becoming a threat,” said Ragnar.

“He has little choice in the matter,” answered Mazhe, “Just like Miraak is under my control, Haknir is now under his.”

Bryce only shook his head, and laughed. “Jesus. It's like a daisy-chain or somethin’.”

That left a few people confused.

“Uh. Well, Mazhe's got Miraak subjugated... and now Miraak's got Haknir subjugated. So if Mazhe tells Haknir to do something...”

“Yes, I would have to do as he says,” said Haknir. “If that is how it has been done.”

Mazhe gave a short nod. “It's exactly that. Miraak has done to you, exactly what I have done to Miraak. The power of our thu'um, as I continue to learn... astounding power.”

“Do you know of the reason you came to exist?” questioned Haknir.

“To defeat Alduin, the world-eater,” Mazhe answered.

“Then we all face the end-times.”

Mazhe only gave a broad smile. “DID face the end times, Haknir. All of us defeated Alduin about a year ago. Miraak stood with me at the threshold of Sovngarde, as we destroyed him for good, with
plenty of help.”

Haknir stopped, and bowed his head. “Then I acknowledge my defeat at the hands of the Dragonslayers.”

He pointed to Bryce. “This one is worthy of my weapons and armour.”

He gestured with a hand, summoning a blade which had clattered behind the sarcophagus. “Soulrender and Bloodscythe. May they serve you as they have served me.”

“Thank you,” said Bryce, as he accepted both scimitars. He put both weapons in his pouch for the time being; proper scabbards would have to be fashioned later.

Haknir gave a curt nod. “Now, what becomes of me?”

“We have need of your assistance, pirate warrior,” said Ragnar, “Our people come under threat from strong enemies.”

“Then your enemies become mine.”

The ghost seemed to change before them, becoming solid, the ghostly effect fading away. Harry couldn’t help but wince, seeing the horrible gash that still looked fresh. It crossed from the middle of his forehead, across his right cheek, down his neck, to disappear under his armour. His armour was identical to Bryce's.

“Odin's beard... where did you earn such a horrible injury?”

“Through pact with lord Dagon. Through it, I gained great reputation, and immense wealth.”

“Some of it remains in the chamber above. Though you must know, the gain of such wealth has unwanted side effects. Yes, you attained great power, great wealth, but who did you truly trust? Who stood by your side, gave you friendship, love, and fellowship?” Harry questioned, as they began walking toward the exit. “Those standing with me here, I trust all of them without question. My mate, I love and adore with all my heart, and know he loves me equally in return. This...” Harry reached into his pouch and pulled out a coin, “is worthless to me. I give it all away freely in return for the safety of those I hold dear.”

“I would disagree slightly with that,” said Ragnar, “But the love of friends and family, and food and drink in my belly, yes, that exceeds the importance of wealth.”

“But you would kill for friends, food, and family,” Harry pointed out.

“Yes.”

“As my fellow Dragonborn has also demonstrated to me, power and wealth mean nothing without those to share it with,” Miraak added. “There is such a thing as the true greater good.”

They swiftly navigated the passageway, back to the corridor containing the coins and treasure. There, Harry once again produced his chest.

“Let’s just dump everything into the chest for now, we’ll sort through it later.”

“For one who does not want for wealth...” Haknir began.

“This is your treasure, is it not?”
“I see.”

“My original plan was to split some of it with my companions. There is then an outstanding debt I do need to settle, and a part of it would go to a smithy in a village nearby. However, your presence does have an unforeseen, uh...”

“I am defeated by your circle, young mage. It is yours to do as you see fit.”

“We’ll collect all of it for now, and determine how to divide it.”

“There is another location I will share with you. I trust that you recovered the map, given he wears all the pieces of my armour.”

“Yeah,” said Harry, as they continued to drop coins and other items into the chest.

“Is it here on the island?” Brandon questioned.

“Yes. On the northeastern shore. If thousands of years have passed, the name may have changed.”

“We can look for it later,” Harry grinned. “Bloody hell, this is completely unexpected.”

“In what way?” asked Mazhe.

“We came looking for treasure, and... well, I think we might have done far better. Not only coins and profit, but another ally.”

“Agreed on that. Given the things going on right now, I think we can use all the help we can get.”

Chapter End Notes

UP NEXT: Spring training and the opening of the new baseball season; a leak of classified information; a reunion with a pair of old new friends; plans are made for the annual vacation in San Francisco; and Bryce, Haknir, and Ragnar have their first encounter with a hostile dragon... I do hope their armour’s fire-proof.

CHAPTER NOTES: So the circle pick up another member. Like Miraak, we won’t see him all the time. But he will come in very useful in events coming up. I’d not intended on adding any more people or characters, but as I did the framework for this event, it just seemed to work.

Haknir’s a pain in the ass to fight, as I discovered the first time I played the Deathbrand quest. He vanishes when he starts to take damage, summons members of his crew, reappears, disappears again, summons more members of his crew, including his 2 lieutenants, more of his crew, before he can finally be destroyed.

Here, I figured that someone, Bryce in this case, realizes what’s happening, and Miraak offers an unorthodox solution. So they end the fight early, and gain a valuable ally.

So, onward and upward, we finally escape the month of January. Looking back on the events that have happened to start the year, just, holy shit. It’s no wonder healer Ferris is a regular visitor right now. I do plan to slow things down for a chapter or so before I drop everyone back in the fire. Harry is on the knife-edge of going completely off the deep end; quite honestly in his shoes, I would’ve went mad a long time ago. Locked ward at St. Mungos, here I come!
(1) The actual line spoken by bandits: ‘...retire some day... get myself an island...’ It’s one of a number of lines that bandits say if you can get close to them without being discovered.

(2) The Bend-Will Shout normally won’t work on undead beings, but Haknir is not considered undead, nor are his 2 Lieutenants. According to the USEP, “Undead are immune to the shout which only staggers them.” I explain it working here as such: Haknir has unfinished business. His soul is more firmly anchored to the mortal plane than lesser ghosts.
Spring training and the opening of the new baseball season; a leak of classified information; a reunion with a pair of old new friends; plans are made for the annual vacation in San Francisco; and Bryce, Haknir, and Ragnar have their first encounter with a hostile dragon...

Outside, they found Sahrotaar waiting. Haknir was surprised by the scaly creature’s presence, but was quickly put at ease, as Mazhe spoke to it.

“Sahrotaar. We’ve gained a new ally. This is Haknir. Haknir, this is Sahrotaar, one of two dragon allies.”

“Well met,” said Haknir.

“Best we return to the College, weather’s moving in,” Ludvig noted.

Indeed, the sky toward the west was growing darker, with the sun already being dimmed by the thin cloud cover already present.

“I will get Sahrotaar back to Hogwarts and meet up with you guys after,” Brandon decided. He had already pulled out his mobile. “Sahrotaar, get in contact so we can go.”

The beast put a claw on Brandon’s shoulder, and with a blur of limbs, the pair vanished.

“Shor’s bones...” Haknir muttered, looking astounded, “What sort of magic is that?”

“Magic coupled with some very advanced technology,” Harry answered, “One of my best friends came up with it a few years ago, it’s been indispensable on too many occasions to count.”

“All right. Everyone get close,” said Aaron, who’d produced his own mobile. “You’ll feel compelled to hold on until we arrive at our destination. Perfectly normal.”
Haknir followed the motion of the others, getting a hand in on the enlarged device, and they vanished in a blur.

Only seconds later, they arrived with an equal blur of limbs in the Hall of Attainment.

“Shor’s bones,” Haknir muttered for a second time, as he tried to regain his bearings. “Where are we?”

“The College of Winterhold. Mazhe and I were students, and I continue to teach some of the classes.”

“We have travelled great distance in only seconds. Astounding!”

“As I also thought,” said Ragnar, as they pushed through a set of doors into Harry’s suite.

“Harry. Everything all—” Justin stopped speaking, noticing the addition to the group.

“Yeah, we’re fine. Where’s Credence?”

The young wizard in question poked his head around a curtain that separated his compartment. “Did something—oh.”

He pulled the curtain back, and stepped into the room to join the others.

“Is this Haknir. He’ll be joining us from here on out,” said Mazhe.

“We’ll need to make more changes to the room then,” Justin guessed.

“And a trip to Bthalft for more clothes,” said Ludvig. “Gods, Harry, you’re gathering a small army.”

Harry gave a shrug and sat down on one of the couches, with Mazhe quickly following. “Strength in numbers, something like that. I’ll take every advantage I can get. The universe wants to keep dropping shit in my lap and all that... I’ll fight back with whatever I can.”

“Ludvig or Aaron, give me a hand adjusting the room,” said Justin.

“I’ll help,” Ludvig volunteered, while Aaron and Brandon took seats at the table. The rest took seats where they could, and Bryce began to pull off his armour.

Haknir, too, began to pull off his armour, starting with the helmet, to reveal a short braid of dirty blond hair.

Mazhe smirked and said, “The braid seems to be a common thing. I wonder...”

“Now that would be wicked to see,” said Harry, grinning. “If you’ll let me.”

“Go for it.”

Harry gestured at Mazhe’s hair with a finger, causing it to lengthen before everyone’s eyes. Another gesture had it twist and braid, quickly matching that of Ragnar.

“Odin’s beard. The time needed to do this without magic...”

“I can only guess,” said Harry. He conjured up a mirror so Mazhe could have a look.
“Oh. Yes, I like it.”

Bryce looked at Mazhe, then at Ragnar. “Do mine.”

“You sure? If he does it, you’ll be stuck with it. And he couldn’t give you the same length, it would raise questions,” said Mazhe.

Bryce weighed the idea for a few moments. “Half your length, then.”

Harry gestured at Bryce’s hair, and just like Mazhe’s, it lengthened somewhat. Within seconds, it now matched both Mazhe and Ragnar’s, save for it being a little shorter.

“How difficult is it... to do that... to change their hair?” Credence wondered.

“For me, not a whole lot of work. Thing is, I’ve had—all of us—have had loads of practice. That’s one of the things you’ll find about magic... it’s not just understanding how it works, but the practice. Doing something over and over, it just comes naturally after a while.”

“As you learn, you’ll also find some kinds of magical skills come easier than others,” Justin added, “Myself, for instance, charms comes quite easily for me, easier than transfiguration—not that I can’t... it’s something I do have to work a little harder at. But in most cases, a witch or wizard will develop a natural affinity toward one branch of magic over the others.”

“It somewhat works the same for us here,” said Mazhe, “Both Harry and I have affinity toward destruction magic, but even in that field, we differ. My fire-based spells tend to be stronger, while Harry gravitates toward frost.”

“Being Dragonborn likely governs your strength, Mazhe,” Miraak noted.

Mazhe gave a nod. “Yeah, agreed. Thing is, an affinity doesn’t stop us from learning other things, other branches of magic. So that’s the other thing you must keep in mind: keep an open mind, be receptive to new ideas. Having a broad knowledge of magic is a good thing.”

“Yeah, it can save your life,” said Harry.

Mazhe looked at his mate. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah. Crazy as this was... nothing on what happened a few days ago.”

“You have encountered worse,” Haknir guessed.

“Recently? Yes,” Harry answered, “Tracking down your armour. We encountered a group of bandits, some of them strong magic-users. Brandon was nailed by a deadly shock spell and would have died if not for Bryce.”

He let out a sigh. “Really though, this adventure... not the worst thing that’s been thrown at us. Hang around us long enough, you’ll see what I mean.”

“Harry...”

“What? Mazhe, you know I speak the truth.”

It was the following weekend before the group could investigate the final stash of treasure belonging to Haknir. It proved to contain the bulk of the treasure, overwhelming the previous find by nearly double. Baldor was astonished when he was given the cut from the haul, and nearly refused.
“It was the deal, Baldor,” Harry had said, “If I make promise, I keep it.”

The guild, meanwhile, were also astounded by the haul. The take more than doubled the value of the vault.

“By the eight,” Delvin muttered, “Where oh were did you come up with all of this?”

“A bit of an adventure, Delvin,” Harry answered, as the various chests were being moved into the vault. “Not only wealth, but a new ally. This is Haknir. The treasure was his.”

“And you part with it? Why?”

“Defeated by a worthy opponent,” Haknir answered, pausing between lifting one of the chests. “I do keep some of it.”

“It was only right he do retain a bit of it.”

Delvin raised his eyebrows. “You mean to say this is only part of it.”

“Half, actually,” Harry answered, “Twenty-five percent went to another friend who put us on the trail of the treasure in the first place. I made a deal with him that he would receive twenty-five percent of the cut. Fifty goes to the guild, while the rest would be split amongst us as a group. And when I give my word, I keep it unless there’s a damned good reason not to.”

February 12

With spring training less than two weeks away, Bryce was then working out with the other players who’d been brought to Bthalft. Harry could see the effect it was having; the guy was getting back into doing something that was familiar. In fact, for Harry and the group, the past while had been somewhat of a normal routine, with classes and training of his own to attend. As had been requested, the Commonwealth tended not to bother the group a whole lot, no matter what might be going on—though Harry did hear about some things. Brandon and the two other SOU members did discuss things among themselves, and it was hard not to pick up bits and pieces of what might be going on.

Things that directly impacted Harry, meanwhile, could not easily be avoided, and as the group was having breakfast and getting ready for the morning, Kreacher brought in the paper.

“It was insisted you should see this,” he said.

“Thank you, Kreacher.”

Several photos took up the upper part of the paper. One was taken at the Parliament Buildings, where several government officials including the Prime Minister were speaking to the media; all of them looked like they’d been forced to eat several very sour lemons. The others featured Harry and his group, including one taken while they had been helping clean up after the events on the Ragnar.

RENEGADE PROMAGISTRATE
May Have Violated Several International Statutes, Revealed Future; May have altered present;
Government, Order of the Magnus scrambling for answers

Harry didn’t bother to read it. “Thought this shit was supposed to be kept secret.”

“The government’s looking into it. Someone’s leaked classified information,” said Brandon, “It’s a severe breach of security.”
“Count on having to speak to crown counsel about this though,” Ludvig warned, “The ICW will come at us for breaking the rules around time travel.”

“Yeah, kind of expect that,” Harry muttered. “Part and parcel of being me.”

“Will you get into trouble for it?” Credence wondered.

“No,” Brandon answered, “Harry has a rather unique position within the Commonwealth. Legally, he can’t be prosecuted. However, there is the moral responsibility that goes with it, to set a good example. That’s what will cause problems.”

“The thing they fail to realize, is that I don’t care a whole lot what the press or the media might think of me. I act to protect those I care about, and the Commonwealth, in that order.”

The remainder of the month passed in a flurry of meetings, training, and, for Bryce, the start of spring training in Florida. Harry had insisted on going along at least the first day, but realized it was somewhat redundant, given the amount of security present. He guessed there were at least a dozen people from the Commonwealth present, and Aaron had volunteered to be the primary escort.

Naturally, there had been a number of meetings with both the Department of Information and crown counsel. In the case of crown counsel, it was a series of meetings with familiar faces: Joyce Connor and Albert Simpson—the pair who had looked after legal matters on his behalf during the Triwizard Tournament.

Now, on March 2, Harry had received a letter from Newt, and smirked to himself. So the man had at last been able to open the letter. Why now though? It should have been opened back in February.

No matter. The man had accepted the invitation to move to the Commonwealth. Of course, he’d still need to run this buy a few people, but really. Who was going to say ‘no’, right?

The following morning, Harry and a few of his circle travelled to the Nationals’ training field in Viera, Florida. He’d sent a response back to Newt with a port key enclosed that would activate at twelve o’clock sharp, whether he was ready or not, and bring them to Florida. It being seven o’clock in the morning local time, there wouldn’t be many people around.

“Why didn’t we just send him to the theatre in San Francisco?” Mazhe wanted to know, as they waited in a secluded area behind the venue—Brandon had roped in a few marines to keep the area secure.

“I checked, it’s in use this weekend.”

it was then there came a blur of limbs, revealing two people. Harry recognized both of them immediately, although eighty years had passed since last time he’d seen them. Both now sported silvery hair.

“Mr. and Mrs. Scamander,” he greeted.

“Mr. Stormcrown,” said Newt. “Merlin’s beard, you’ve not changed at all.”

“For us, it’s only been a couple of months.”

“Yes, yes, quite right.”

“Why is it only now that you contact us?” Mazhe asked.
“My husband is absent-minded at times,” said Tina, “I was searching for documents I’d misplaced, and I happened on the letter you left him.”

“She showed it to me,” Newt picked up, “I immediately remembered discovering it not long after you left. I set it aside seeing the instructions, and thought nothing of it. And as tends to happen, life does make us forget.”

“That makes a load of sense, I guess. But my offer still stands. Staying anywhere near Britain these days is a risk. And I can’t think of a better place for a world-renowned Magizoologist than in Bthalft,” said Harry.

“We can easily relocate your residence and the property around it, knowing you do have an extensive preserve,” said Brandon.

“Oh, yes, quite,” said Newt, “No matter how much we try, no matter the amount of education out there, people still continue to harm and mistreat animals—whether out of fear or spite.”

“Then you accept our invitation,” Harry questioned.

“Yes, yes we do,” said Tina.

“Hold still a moment while we do a security scan. Your case is the same as—” Brandon began, gesturing to the suitcase at Newt’s feet.

“Yes, identical.”

“Right. We won’t poke and prod too much then.”

It took a half-minute for Brandon and Ludvig to perform the security scan. Though Harry really wasn’t expecting them to find anything, he did feel just a little bit of relief when the scan turned up nothing.

“Clear.”

“And clear my side,” Ludvig concurred.

“What happens now?” Tina asked.

“Now, we get you set up in Bthalft,” said Brandon. “I’m sending a message to DOI to get the ball rolling. We’ll likely have your residence and its property moved sometime tomorrow.”

Newt looked impressed. “That quickly?”

“They did move Hogwarts, dear,” Tina reminded him.

“Oh yes, quite right.”

Newt looked around a moment, then noticing Ragnar. “I remember you. How is it you’re still with the group? Is the connection—”

“Closed, Mr. Scamander,” answered Ragnar, “I was in some way prevented from passing on when my body died.”

Newt looked surprised. “So you’re a ghost then?”

That got a laugh out of Ragnar. “No. My only guess is the gods decided I was needed here. So here I
“The only ghost here is me,” said Haknir, and with a simple gesture of the hand, shifted to become nearly transparent.

“I see. The various exploits I have been able to read about, Mr. Stormcrown does surround himself with the most interesting characters. Newt Scamander, at your service. And of course, my lovely wife, Tina.”

“Haknir Death-Brand,” the ghost introduced himself, as he once again became solid. Handshakes then followed.

Newt once again looked around. “How is Credence?”

“He’s doing very well. He has classes this morning, or we would have brought him along,” Harry answered, “The College of Winterhold’s been a great fit.”

“And his Obscurus?”

“We encourage him not to be afraid of it,” said Mazhe, “It’s dangerous, yes, but we all agree it’s a part of him that can’t be just ignored.”

“But he’s finding his feet as a mage and it’s brilliant,” Harry picked up.

“Has he been to Hogwarts?”

“Yes. He gets a couple of classes there, but it’s still slow going and likely will be for a time.”

“How is he doing otherwise?” Tina wanted to know.

“Mentally? He meets with a mind healer and likely will for the foreseeable future,” said Brandon, “We have more than a few experts who know how to handle cases like Mr. Barebone.”

“It sounds like things worked out better than we could have hoped,” said Tina, “That boy needs all the love and support he can get.”

“Trust us, he’s getting exactly that.”

“Come on, we can go sit up in the bleachers,” Bryce decided, “I’ll need to get going soon, the rest of the guy’ll be arriving in an hour or so.”

“Right, you’re the baseball player,” Newt remembered.

“And still a dear friend,” said Harry, as they started walking.

They passed through a set of doors at the back, and climbed several flights of stairs, leading to the outfield stands.

“Never did get much into sports of any kind,” Newt confessed, as they took seats.

“But you never did fit in at school as a whole, dear,” said Tina.

“No.”

“We all find our feet in one way or another,” said Mazhe, “Correct me if I’m wrong, but the study of magical animals isn’t a major field in the magical world.”
“You would be correct. There aren’t many of us.”

Harry smirked. “Still have your niffler?”

“I still have ‘a’ niffler, yes. Though, sadly, not the one you remember. All creatures have a life expectancy, whether magical or not.”

“This is true.”

“I thought phoenixes are immortal,” said Bryce.

“No. They will die eventually. Just, for them, its an incredibly long time, no one really knows for sure,” said Newt. “It’s possible they live thousands of years.”

He thought for a moment. “Oh yes. Mr. Stormcrown has a phoenix.”

“He tends to stay around my flat back in... well, it’s near Bthalft,” said Harry. He decided holding off on telling them the truth. They would learn the real story soon enough.

“And I assume that’s where the rest of your group of friends are,” said Tina.

“Yes. Given the time difference, I expect no one’s up just yet. Once we returned to the Commonwealth, things have for the most part settled back into a proper routine—something I’ve been eternally grateful for,” Harry confessed. “The month of January kicked our asses, I think.”

“Merlin that had to be confusing,” said Newt, “We first met you... it was December.”

“Oh trust us, it was confusing as hell,” said Brandon. “Never mind us travelling into his time.” He jerked a thumb toward Ragnar. “They were August, we were January, and you guys were December. Thank the gods for being able to pull pensieve memories to make notes and file a report!”

Tina seemed to think on something a moment, before asking, “How much did you know of us when we first met?”

“I took ‘Care of Magical Creatures’, “Harry answered, “I knew a fair amount, though nothing about what was about to happen. I think Brandon and Aaron knew though.”

“We did,” said Brandon, “DOI warned us soon as we told them where we were. At least, enough to go on before we were cut off.”

“I guess that would explain your discomfort discussing Dumbledore,” Newt remembered.

Harry gave a sad nod. “Yeah. I was being careful, knowing you looked up to him.”

“Learning of his betrayal... was difficult,” Newt admitted, “How much of his character was just a veneer, a charade, hiding his true nature?”

“Those are questions we’re all asking, Mr. Scamander,” said Ludvig.

March 14

“Mr. Hunter. Unusual you’re with us today,” said Balimund. The partial group were once again working the Aetherium Forge; Mazhe had collected Baldor from the Skaal Village and so the group had split into two different groups—one worked with Balimund, while the other worked with Baldor.
Bryce let out a snort. “Freak storm threatening evacuation orders, yeah, not the best conditions for spring training. Grapefruit League’s cancelled its games ‘till Monday at the earliest.”

“Yeah, NOAA’s completely baffled by the strange weather,” said Aaron. He was content to just observe from the side. “Of course, the Ministry of the Environment thinks it’s OND having another go with that book of theirs. The storm looks exactly like a hurricane.”

Bryce smirked. “They should name it after you then. First storm of the season and all that.”

“Fuck off.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Seriously though. If this is OND shit...”

“Not a whole lot we can do about it, Harry,” said Mazhe, as he tapped the hot link resting on the taper. It dropped to the table.

“Who is ‘noah’” Baldor wanted to know.

“It’s an acronym, a short form. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration,” said Brandon, “They’re an American scientific organization who study the oceans and the atmosphere back on Earth. Severe storms in the oceans are one of their areas of study.”

“Why would they be confused?” Mazhe wondered, “I mean, storms in the Atlantic, isn’t that a typical thing? I know storms can form on the Sea of Ghosts here just about any time if the conditions are right.”

“cept that hurricanes don’t usually form in March,” said Bryce. “It’s fucked up.”

“It’s not unheard of, at least as I’m aware,” said Brandon. “Hold on, I’ll ask Justin, he’s the nerd in the group.”

Harry grinned. “I’ll tell him you said that.”

“Still find that astounding you’re able to do that,” said Haknir. He was using a workbench on his own, working on one of his scimitars. He paused, watching as Brandon composed a message on his mobile.

“What, send off messages?”

Haknir gave a nod.

“It’s near vital we’re able to. Being able to communicate near instantly is critical to many of our operations. Though there are limits—your tomb for example.”

“We would’ve just dynamited our way out of it ultimately,” said Aaron.

“The stone seal would have fell had I been destroyed.”

“Why? Entrapping your slayer forever within your own tomb would have been an ultimate, last word to your defeat,” said Ragnar.

“This is true,” Haknir agreed, “However, it is something of a declaration I made before my remains were buried, that should I be defeated by worthy opponent, that my wealth, my armour, and my weapons should then fall to them. That my vanquisher should carry my weapons and armour out into the world, my legacy continues on.”
It was then Brandon’s mobile rang. He pressed a button. “Justin? You’re on speaker.”

“So, hurricanes. The season usually starts in June and ends in November, but they can form earlier or later, if the conditions are right. But it’s really rare. This storm, the government’s investigating.”

“They think it’s OND,” Harry guessed.

“Yeah. What I’m hearing, DOI’s studying the event, and the Navy’s putting resources in the area. Ragnar should be doing a pass over in an hour or so to get our own pictures, hopefully get a few magical readings on the area.”

“This OND, they managed to create a dangerous storm of some sort,” Baldor summed up.

“It’s what we suspect, yes,” came Justin’s reply. “Had they done this in the spring or summer...”

“Would’ve been a disaster,” Bryce finished, “What I heard this morning, they pegged it a cat-two.”

“Which has since weakened to a category one and twisted back east. Conditions aren’t right for a hurricane. We’re lucky these morons don’t know much about storm mechanics—again, assuming OND actually did this.”

“Well, let’s not celebrate too soon,” said Aaron, “These guys are unpredictable AND smart. They’ll figure it out if they have the time.”

“Yeah, what the government’s afraid of,” Justin agreed. “Right. Gotta go, Zoey just got back.”

“Behave, lover boy,” Harry smirked.

As it neared the lunch hour, everyone began to pack up and put tools away. With Baldor’s guidance, Ragnar had the rough beginnings of an axe head, formed with Stalhrim. Harry had to admit, it would be a beautiful weapon when completed.

“It will need a proper handle.”

“Let me get Baldor back to his village, then we can take a walk in the woods outside Riften. It’s a hardwood forest.”

“The wood should be ideal, then,” Ragnar agreed.

Sometime later, the group were walking through the bare and leafless trees, not far from Riften’s east gate. They’d returned to the flat for a few minutes in order to grab warmer gear, considering it was still the middle of a brutal winter in Skyrim. Balimund had been more than appreciative of the offer to work with the Aetherium forge for that reason alone—the forge was inside, out of the elements.

Up to this point, Harry hadn’t given a whole lot of thought into crafting handles for weapons. Most of the time, a solid chunk of wood was picked out and carved with tools. At least, that’s how Balimund did it.

Ragnar, meanwhile, seemed to be analyzing the branches, looking for something. Many branches would make a fine handle, right?

“What is it you’re looking for?”

“I’ll show you when I see it,” was Ragnar’s answer. “The ideal shape, it takes time to find it.”
“But you still need to use tools, right?” Mazhe questioned.

“Ultimately, yes. But having a piece of wood whose curves already resemble the finished product...”

“You’re talkin’ the grain of the wood, stuff like that,” Bryce guessed.

“Exactly so. Why fight against the grain, when we can instead harness it? Think about this: the bats you use in your games... if it were cut cross to the grain, how long would it last?”

“Not very long.”

“The same goes for a handle crafted for a weapon or a tool.”

Harry shared a look with Mazhe, then smirked to himself, as they moved on, Ragnar unimpressed with what he was seeing presently.

Finally, Ragnar chose a branch from a medium-sized aspen. They’d circled all the way around the city, and southwest a ways.

“This looks like many other branches you looked at,” said Mazhe.

“I am certain this will make my axe handle,” said Ragnar, confidently.

“This one,” said Harry.

“Yes.”

Harry made a careful flick with a finger, casting a cutting charm close to the trunk. The branch fell a moment until Ragnar expertly caught it. He then tipped it up, to look at the cut.

“Cleaner than any blade could ever do,” he remarked.

“The point of it. I suspect that the less damage done initially, the better off, is that not true?”

“That the wood not incur more damage than necessary, yes. A wise observation.”

“Up to now I really didn’t give any of this that much thought,” Harry answered, “But... it does make sense.”

“Well-crafted tools and weapons last longer. Your modern world, so obsessed with obtaining things, the quality of what is produced only suffers. Correct me if what I said is untrue.”

“No, you’d be spot-on, Ragnar,” Brandon agreed. “The nature of consumerism. Even the Commonwealth is plagued by it, even with magic on our side.”

They started walking back toward the city gate, the sun hanging low in the west, painting the sky a brilliant yellow.

“Getting close to dinner,” Aaron noted.

“Yeah, thought we might have to pick this up tomorrow. Not that I’m complaining,” said Harry, “This has been a fun day for a change. It’s a bit cold, but getting some fresh air is good now and then.”

“Being confined indoors, not good for the soul,” Ragnar commented, as he stowed the collected branch in his pouch. It was a curious sight, seeing the lengthy branch be swallowed up by the small
There came the beating of wings, and the ground shuddered, drawing everyone’s attention behind them: a dragon had landed about a hundred feet from them.

“Yol—”

“MOVE!!” Mazhe bellowed, and the group split off to the side as a terrible blast of fire consumed the spot they’d been in a moment sooner.

“Mul... QAH DIIIV!” Mazhe shouted, while Harry instantly summoned a Seeker. Brandon produced a 40mm grenade rifle from his pouch, while Bryce produced his MP-5.

“Aim for its wings,” Mazhe instructed, “We have to cripple it, keep it on the ground.”

“Yol.. TOOR SHUUUL!”

Another blast of fire now set more of the trees on fire, while both Brandon and Bryce took aim at the dragon’s left wing.

**BOOM.** The dragon let out a terrible shriek, as the small grenade detonated just in front of it, piercing its wing in several places. But it was then occupied by the Seeker, who was then blasting it with its own very painful attack.

Now, Harry and Aaron joined Bryce as they unloaded a volley of projectiles, both magical and not, against the scaly creature. The concentrated attack busted some of the bones in the left wing, causing the beast to growl in fury.

“Nivahrii joorre!” (Cowardly mortals!)

“Fus.. RO DAAAH!” Mazhe shouted, and a shower of broken timber, embers, and flames were sent backward, along with the dragon, who let out more terrible screams. It came to rest two hundred feet back, and sagged to the ground.

Mazhe reached into his pouch and drew the ebony sword he’d shown to Bryce sometime back.

“Wuld... NAH KEST!”

The shout carried him the distance, and he used his momentum to plunge the blade deep into the beast’s skull. It let out one final, pathetic roar, before collapsing.

“Mazhe? Are you all right?” Harry asked, has he hurried to catch up.

“Yeah. Fine. Just... watch out.”

Harry already knew what was about to happen, but four others in the group had not up to this point seen Mazhe kill a dragon. The beast began to burn, the skin and flesh burning away, the paper-like ashes soaring up into the sky, as a swirling mass of energy began to waft away from it, to connect with the young mage. He became almost painful to look at, the dragon aspect seeming to amplify by the strange storm of energy swirling around him.

“What’s... what’s happening to him?” Bryce asked, not sure whether to be afraid or astounded.

“It’s... it’s—”

“Dragonborn,” said Haknir, “The Dragonborn, able to steal the soul of a slain dragon.”
“Odin’s beard...” Ragnar muttered, as the effect finally dissipated. Only bones remained of the dragon.

Harry wrapped his arms around his mate. “All right?”

“Yeah. Just... a little light headed.”

“So you ate its soul,” Bryce guessed.

“No. Absorbed it,” Mazhe answered, “It’s... it’s a normal thing, at least for me and Miraak. A unique ability, the best way to explain it.”

“Why would you need to do that, though?”

“Shouts... another rare ability I have... I can learn those shouts using the soul. It’s hard to explain the mechanics... something like instinct, I guess. Trust me, I was just as astounded over a year ago, learning about this.”

Ragnar, meanwhile, was looking at the pile of bones.

“Have any of you considered crafting weapons from the bones?”

“Never thought of it, no,” Mazhe answered, “There hasn’t been a lot of time to experiment.”

Ragnar picked up one of the bones, seeming to appraise it. “The structure of bone is very different to that of wood... but...”

“You’re gonna try?”

“I would like to. Dragons are... magical creatures, are they not?”

“Very much so.”

Haknir nodded along. “It should create a most powerful weapon. The bones from a magical animal combined with a magical ore.”

“I can only hope,” said Ragnar, as he picked up another bone. “This one. This will be the handle for my new axe.”

“Then let’s get back. I’m thinkin’ a drink and a bite to eat will do us all some good,” said Mazhe, “Anyone object to us dropping in on the Flagon for a few hours?”

“I’ll message Ludvig and make sure he knows where we are,” said Aaron.

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March 16 was a day wasted, as it was Bryce’s twenty-third birthday. Between his teammates and Harry’s circle, it seemed one party blended into the other. No one got a whole lot of rest until later the following day, and the man of the hour was more than appreciative of both hangover cures, and pepper-up potions. There was no way he would have made it through the day without them. Harry was wise in keeping him away from Vekel’s specials.

The 30th of the month, meanwhile, brought about the Nationals’ home opener against the Atlanta Braves. It was only natural that Harry and most of his friends attended, taking advantage of the private box leased by the government—or Valicor, the fictitious company under which the Commonwealth operated in the non-magical world.
Harry was surprised to discover Zoey had been asked to throw out the first pitch of the game.

“Is that... uh, safe? I mean——”

“Dad’s only a little worried,” Zoey had answered, before the two groups had went their separate ways—Justin going with Zoey and the lower part of the building, Aaron and a pair of SOU providing security.

The private box was situated half-way between home plate and first base, completely opposite the one they’d used in RFK Stadium. For some reason, it also felt a bit more spacious, though no magic had been used. Perhaps it had something to do with it being a brand new facility.

No matter. It proved to be a successful and uneventful outing, with the Nationals winning 3-2 over the visiting Atlanta Braves. Justin and Zoey had returned shortly after the national anthems, and it was well over an hour after the game finished before they met up with Bryce for the return to Skyrim.

“You are in brighter spirits than I have ever seen,” Ragnar commented, as they regrouped in Harry’s suite at the College.

“’till I did it... took the field... some part of me still thought some sort of shit would come up, stop it from happening.”

“OND knew better than to try something,” said Ludvig, as he parked himself at the table and pulled out his mobile.

“Yeah, we had a lot of eyes on all the games today, just like we’ve been doing since the season began last week,” said Brandon, as he took a seat opposite Ludvig. “Now. Harry, you’re still planning on going to San Francisco, right?”

“Yes. Tomorrow morning. The theatre’s not in use for the next while, so we’re there for the next week, minimum.”

“Thought there was the... the show choir competition,” said Mazhe.

“Moved,” said Justin, “I’m not sure where they moved to, but the organizers decided they wanted a larger venue.”

It was not hard to see the look of relief on Harry’s face, and Mazhe couldn’t help but agree. “Some of the musical choices last year were terrible.”

“Yeah, lots of suckage,” said Justin. “Gods, is that even a word? The competitors tend to pick from what’s popular, and popular these days is well...”

“People who don’t know how to sing,” Mazhe finished. “Mostly noise and flash if you ask me. I can understand why Ron and Hermione and the others didn’t stick around last year.”

“So a return on the 8th then,” Brandon guessed.

“Yeah. Though the Giants’ home opener is the 7th, and I’d like to attend. Jose’s been awesome helping the guys here, right. Only fair I attend some of his games too.”

“And that’s easily done,” said Brandon, “The thing about being magical. And I might suggest we go see Oakland play too. They’re just across the bay.”
“We’ll put that on the list, too. Do... do we have a private box in their building?”

“We’ve got a private box in every ball park, every NHL arena, and I think, most if not all NBA arenas—the NHL and the NBA overlap in a number of cases. But even if we don’t, it doesn’t take a lot to get us into an event.”

“That’s good to know.”

Zoey, meanwhile, rolled her eyes. “Let me guess. Memory charms.”

“Actually, no. We’d purchase the tickets legitimately. Or get access to a private box, again, legitimately. The right amount of money can buy just about anything.”

Harry furrowed his brows. “Yeah. Uh... I’ll keep that in mind.”

“And Zoey is joining us?” asked Ludvig.

“Of course. Dad will probably want Secret Service there, but...”

“We’ll work with them,” said Brandon, “Tim and Amanda, wasn’t it? They already know about the magical world, so it shouldn’t be difficult.”

“They were with us tonight,” said Justin.

Brandon had produced a pad of paper and a pen, and was scribbling out notes. “Next up, Bryce. I know team-building is an important thing on and off the field, so, if you need to be with your teammates, we’ll accommodate.”

“We had lots of discussions about that,” said Bryce, “And the league’s discouraging us from doing stuff away from the field, less we’re a target.”

“Exactly. And if there’s even a hint there’s shit going on, expect to be pulled. Mr. Barker has someone in place in case that happens?”

“Brandon, it’s likely that if he’s pulled out of the game, the game’s probably gonna be cancelled or called anyway,” said Aaron.

“For the next while as it is, we’ll want to bring you back here—or back to San Francisco for the next week or so—as soon as possible. So be quick post game,” said Brandon.

“Got it.”

“Good. Less time hanging around, less chance there is for OND to pull something. That should be stressed at your next team meeting.”

“How about one of us be there,” Ludvig suggested.

“Right. Enough of that. I know it’s important, but the idea of going away is to try and push that as far off to the side as I can,” said Harry.

Brandon gave a short nod, scribbling out another note. “Who else you inviting? Do you intend to have your school friends attend?”

“Well, the twins do have a birthday on the 1st.”

Bryce let out a snort. “Should’ve known. Born on April first, explains everything.”
Harry only smirked. “They’ve been blessed with mischief, I’ll say that. Now... others... Walker and Lugo. They should come enjoy some normal activities for a change. And Credence. He’s been working really hard since he was introduced to the College. I’m sure he’s earned a break. Not that I’m forcing anyone here.”

“And I will come along,” said Ragnar, “There will be more opportunities to see your modern world, am I correct?”

“Very much so. We’ll be doing a few outings.”

“Harry likes visiting the Golden Gate Bridge, I think,” said Justin, smirking.

“Maybe.”

Bryce had a thoughtful look on his face for a moment. “Harry, I have a thought.”

“All right.”

“Don’t know if it would be possible—no. Forget it. Not everyone knows.”

“What?”

“Well, just an idea for a, Idunno, a weird photo with the guys. But...”

“Only six of your teammates know about magic,” Harry finished. “You know we can’t. I could probably authorize them to learn the secret, but... I’ve overstepped far too much in the past while.”

“And there will be a place for all of us to stay?” Haknir questioned.

“The theatre’s upper suites can be modified to suit,” Justin answered, “There’ll be more than enough room for all of us.”

It was then the fireplace roared to life, expelling Credence. He dusted himself off, and looked around. “How was the game?”

“We won,” said Bryce, “You should have came.”

“We’re all going on the ninth, right?”

“Yeah, that’s the plan,” said Harry, “And I know Justin’s got a day trip planned for us in Washington. Funny thing, we’ve never really done it.”

“We keep getting side tracked with one disaster after the other,” said Justin, making a sour face. “Now come and sit, Credence, tell us how your visit with your sister and friends went.”

Chapter End Notes

UP NEXT: Harry and his circle begin their annual vacation in San Francisco; Harry and Mazhe experience an event which is rather common in the Bay area; another baseball game; ...and what is OND up to now?

CHAPTER NOTES: The chapter title is only part of the line from the poem "An essay on man" by Alexander Pope, written in 1734. The phrase goes “Hope springs eternal in
the human breast”.
(1) The Nationals moved to a new spring training facility in Palm Springs in 2017, Ballpark of the Palm Beaches. They share the facility with the Houston Astros.
Harry and his circle begin their annual vacation in San Francisco; Harry and Mazhe experience an event which is rather common in the Bay area; another baseball game; ...and what is OND up to now?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

32. THE BALL IS IN PLAY

February - April, 2008 / Sun's Dawn - Rain's Hand, 4E203

“Move in silence, only speak when it's time to say 'checkmate'.

- unknown

March 31, 2008
British Ministry of Magic

OND’s leadership once again gathered around a large table that had been conjured to accommodate their number. Numerous charts had been tacked up on the wall behind them.

“As we have discovered, no amount of magic can sustain a storm if conditions aren’t right for it in the first place,” Jezebel was explaining, “The ones responsible for the faulty information have been punished accordingly, although they still live; their knowledge of the subject is valuable to us.”

“And?” a wizard down the table questioned.

“As our sources have carefully explained to us, tropical storms typically only form when the ocean is warm enough. The hurricane season begins in June, and ends in November.”

“So had we ran this sort of operation during the summer...”

“The storm would have persisted. With the energy we fed it, it would have been immensely powerful, causing catastrophic damage had it made landfall.”

Deidre looked thoughtful. “The event’s failure was disappointing. However, we shall try again with more favourable conditions. I won’t tolerate a second failure, Jezebel.”

“She can’t be held completely responsible, Deidre,” Dumbledore admonished, “We are dealing with natural forces. Though the conditions will be more favourable in the summer, there is still no guarantee of the outcome we’re looking for.”

Deidre cast a glare at Dumbledore, but softened. “No matter. Jezebel’s work has been impeccable.”
“And with that,” said Gilbert, standing, “The project in San Francisco could benefit from the book you’ve obtained.”

“What are you looking for?” Jezebel questioned.

“Something along the same line as the harmonic resonance which destroyed Spiraminis.”

“How far along is the project?” Dumbledore questioned.

“It’s ready as is, though I do have a few ideas in mind on how to tweak things a bit. I would also recommend we not leak details of the Commonwealth’s hidden facility until after the event. It should only further damage their credibility both with the ICW and the Americans,” said Gilbert.

Both Dumbledore and Deidre shared a look, before Deidre gave a nod. “I see the logic. How much damage do you estimate will come from this?”

“With what I have in mind, every population centre on the west coast should be impacted by it. As it stands right now, only San Francisco and Oakland will be affected by it. It would still be a devastating event to No-maj’s in the area.”

“How long would you need to tweak it?” Jezebel questioned.

“It depends on how complex the rituals are—I’m assuming it does involve rituals.”

“Yes.”

“Jezebel, work with Gilbert on this.”

“Of course, mistress,” said Jezebel.

“It would be ideal if we could set this in motion in the next week or so, mirroring our operation in Scandinavia,” said another witch about half way down the table. “Sources tell me Ragnar has somehow rejoined Potter and his band of misfits; it should be interesting, his reaction, when we sack his homeland.”

Deidre hummed a moment. “I’ll leave it to your discretion. Having the Commonwealth scrambling from one incident, to then face events on a much greater magnitude... this does work in our favour.”

“Of course it does, mistress. All of our projects work toward the final, much larger project already in motion by our brothers and sisters,” said Gilbert, “There are only a few more pieces of the puzzle that need to fall in place, but our present timeline looks like early summer at the latest.

“Given our last method of infiltrating one of their ships has been eliminated, we’re working on something that could prove far more promising. And this time, we’re targeting a ship other than the Ragnar, knowing Potter and his circle spend time aboard frequently.”

“Wise decision,” Dumbledore agreed, “Our projects have been interrupted on several occasions on count of his interference.”

“Something we’re well aware of, Dumbledore,” Gilbert snarked, “Trust me, we’re taking precautions so there won’t be interference with this.”

“Which ship you targeting this time?” came the question from the far end of the table.

“Gideon. She’s identical to the Ragnar in most cases, with only a few cosmetic differences inside. But she’s mechanically identical, and their operating procedures are identical.”
“I need not say exercise caution,” said Dumbledore, “But do be aware, the Commonwealth will most certainly be extra vigilant with regard to their warships after one of them was compromised.”

“We are playing it very carefully,” said Gilbert, “This is part of our ultimate mission, are we not all in agreement? And I will not fail.”

This drew sinister grins from those gathered around the table.

April 1

Harry and a large group of his friends had arrived in San Francisco the previous day, and took most of the day to get settled in the theatre’s guest suites. Bryce had to be in Washington for that evening’s game, and so left mid-afternoon, with Aaron going along.

Today, meanwhile, was an off-day for the Nationals, and so Bryce joined the group for the day.

“You do not worry about being recognized?” Haknir questioned, as they got ready after the morning’s exercises inside the VPR in Harry’s chest.

“Harry puts a charm on me that keeps people from seeing me, something like that,” Bryce answered, “Sometimes wish I had that last year, y’know.”

Mazhe smirked and said, “Well, there is that non-magic repelling charm...”

“And illegal to do in crowded places,” said Aaron. “The notice-me-not charm is more than effective. The added bonus, he won’t get weird questions. Being seen here and in Washington only hours apart. Non-magicals wouldn’t take long to start asking some very awkward questions.”

“And your world continues to prove itself unnecessarily complicated,” said Ragnar, “Magic is magic, part of nature and nothing more.”

“Tell that to christian extremists,” Ludvig muttered.

“Or any other bigoted asshole. Thing is, there are laws in place for our protection.”

“Right. C’mon, let’s see if the others are up and about,” Harry decided.

Outside the chest, they found some of the others waiting, including Walker and Lugo.

“You guys could have joined us,” said Mazhe.

“Still doesn’t feel right,” said Walker, “And we did have a session with Ferris.”

“Good to see you’re still seeing her,” said Harry, “You look well, the both of you.”

“Feel better, too,” said Lugo. “Don’t remember if we said it before, but thanks.”

“It was the right thing. What OND did to you, to Dubai as a whole... it was unspeakable evil. To see you guys, and the others for that matter... climb back to your feet, it flies in the face of their effort. Best thing you guys can do is live on.”

“Well put, Harry,” Brandon agreed, “Nothing enrages the terrorists more.”

Footsteps could be heard coming up the stairs, and Bill appeared.
“Mr. Weasley,” Brandon greeted.

“Morning everyone. Glad I caught you before you headed off.”

“Something wrong?”

“No, no nothing like that. Just came from Gringotts, they’ve passed along upgrades to all your pouches.”

Harry momentarily glanced down at the pouch on his hip. “Not sure if they could improve it more —”

“They did,” said Bill. “They’ve been able to build in safeguards to prevent them from exploding if opened in a magically-dead area.”

“And prevent people from being killed, such as happened to Crixus and Dardanos,” Mazhe guessed. Bill gave a nod of the head. “Precisely. The bank was disturbed by the implications, considering the spells used on the pouch are also employed heavily by the bank—I ask that remain a secret, by the way.”

“Of course.” Harry could immediately guess exactly where the bank might use such charms, considering he’d seen the inside of several vaults he had access to. The spatial reasoning just didn’t add up.

“So everyone empty your pouches, I’ll take those back to Gringotts so they can be modified,” said Bill.

“That reminds me,” said Justin, as everyone began to empty their pouches, “There was a network upgrade overnight, meant to improve reliability. The mobiles should still have partial function, even in an area where magic’s been disrupted. Teleport function won’t work though, given it—”

“Requires magic to function,” Harry finished. “Why would the mobiles still work though?”

“We get it to fall back on the non-magical infrastructure—the satellite network,” Justin explained. “When these things work normally, it’s strictly a magical network floating on the top of non-magical infrastructure. The absence of magic, it now falls back on the non-magical system to form the connection.”

“And that all goes over my head,” said Ragnar.

“Don’t feel bad. Most of this stuff is insanely complex, and that’s excluding magic. Add magic to the mix, it gets infinitely more complicated,” said Justin.

“Just trust him, he knows what he’s talking about,” said Harry, “It’s his field.”

“So where we headed first, anyway?” Lugo wanted to know.

“The Golden Gate Bridge,” said Mazhe, “We need another weird photograph.”

He thought for a moment. “How difficult would it be to get Mr. Armando to join us?”

“The Giants are in LA,” Bryce remembered. “Uh... second game against the Dodgers, but that’s tonight.”

Harry could see where his mate was going. “We’d only borrow him for an hour.”
“If he doesn’t want to come...”

“We won’t force anyone to do anything, Bryce. ‘least not unless it’s some sort of emergency,” said Brandon.

“Get him to bring his uniform.”

Bryce rolled his eyes, but then smirked. “Let me guess. I’ll need mine.”

Both Harry and Mazhe smirked right back. “Smart one, this one is.”

“It seems they have him trained,” Ragnar quipped.

“All right. I’ll Go see if Mr. Armando wants to join us,” said Brandon, pulling out his mobile, “I know where he’s staying.”

Sometime later, the large group gathered at the Golden Gate Bridge Pavilion, located at the south end of the famous bridge. Brandon had arrived first, choosing a secluded location where their arrival wouldn’t be seen, before sending the all-clear, allowing the rest of the group to follow.

Jose had easily accepted the invitation, and had arrived wearing his uniform, though he’d also brought a change of clothes.

“So what are we doing then?” Walker wanted to know.

“Something like this,” said Justin, producing his mobile. “This was a picture we took last year.”

Walker, Lugo, Bryce, and Jose all got a look at the picture.

“Yeah, someone was on a broom, I think,” Bryce muttered.

“Another great friend we lost last year,” said Justin.

“I’ll do the honours this time,” Aaron volunteered, “Where you planning on taking it?”

“How about... up there?” Mazhe suggested, pointing to the top of the south tower.

Harry grinned. “I like it. Actually never thought of going up there. Never mind the idea it’s probably illegal.”

“Far as I know,” said Jose.

“And dad can’t ever know,” said Zoey. “There’s a reason it’s illegal.”

“But we’ve got magic on our side,” Harry grinned. “ Doesn’t completely negate the danger, but we should be fine.”

Both Ragnar and Haknir, meanwhile, were fixated on the massive bridge.

“Shor’s bones,” Haknir remarked, “The effort needed to make such a thing...”

“Considered a modern engineering wonder,” said Justin, catching the uncomfortable look Harry was giving. “As complicated as the modern world is, we’ve come up with some truly incredible buildings and structures.”

“You guys should visit the Statue of Liberty,” Jose suggested.
“And where is that?” questioned Ragnar.

“New York,” Credence answered, as they began walking. He too, was fixated on the massive bridge. After all, from his time, the famous landmark was still more than a decade away.

“Then we should see it,” Harry decided, “Not immediately, but later in the spring.”

Bryce thought for a moment. “Uh... I think we’re in New York later this month. The Mets are division rivals.”

“Then we have a date,” Mazhe grinned.

“So when you guys coming to see us?” Jose asked.

“Your home opener,” answered Brandon, “We’re here for a week at least. And I think Queen Susan’s planning to attend, too.”

Harry was momentarily surprised. “Really?”

“Think she’s taking an interest in the people she’s given sanctuary, Harry.”

“How come she didn’t come to mine?” Bryce asked.

“Think she had a function to attend,” answered Aaron.

“Doesn’t she worry about security?” Lugo questioned.

“Not with Harry and his lot, no. And given it is a non-magical venue outside of the Commonwealth’s borders, very few there would know the significance of her presence,” Brandon explained. “Make no mistake, there’ll be lots of security present—more so than already being provided.”

“If I didn’t know what to look for, I’d never know,” said Jose. “You guys are pretty much invisible.”

“It’s the way it’s supposed to be. Security shouldn’t interfere with peoples’ enjoyment of the event, or the event’s participants. We only reveal ourselves if it’s necessary,” said Ludvig.

“But wouldn’t that encourage the bad guys to try something? I mean, the whole point of security is to show the bad guys the event’s well-protected, right?”

“There are some of us visible. Never mind the non-magical security presence. No, the bad guys know we’re there. Think of it. The season’s still young, but we’ve not had an incident yet, nor at spring training. Last event we had to deal with was in Vancouver.”

“Not that we don’t expect it,” Aaron picked up, “Count on them trying something, it’s part of their nature.”

“Yeah, let’s talk about something else,” Harry muttered, “Point of coming here, was to forget about that shit. It’s all we talk about.”

“Hard to avoid it, Harry.”

“So we’re just going to take a picture,” Credence guessed.

“We’ll take a few,” said Justin, “Maybe take a short video too.”
Harry smirked. “I have an idea for something, I’ll explain when we get there.”

Ragnar knew the bridge was enormous even from a distance, but as they approached the south tower, he was further astounded by the size. Up close, the tower’s steel columns were gigantic.

“By Odin’s beard,” he whispered, running hand along the massive steel plates.

“They’re over seven hundred feet high,” Justin commented, as he snapped a few pictures of the group.

“And how will we reach the top of it?” Haknir questioned.

“I’ve been up there already,” said Aaron, “So I’ll go up first, and put down a few safety charms, since there’s not a whole lot of room. Brandon and Ludvig will also help keep an eye on everyone.”

“Lots of magical people here, so no worries if you fall off, we’ll catch you,” Justin promised. “But the barrier charms will prevent that in the first place.”

“Still, watch your footing, it gets really windy up there.”

“And no one will see us,” said Credence.

“Nope. That’s the beauty of the notice-me-not charm. How many people have walked right past us, not giving either Bryce or Jose a second glance? They’re rather conspicuous.”

Harry gestured to both Bryce and Jose. Jose had gone with his home uniform—white jersey and white pants, while Bryce had gone with his red alternate jersey and grey road pants.

“So I’ll be able to learn how to do it someday.”

“I would count on it, yes,” said Harry, as Aaron vanished. “You’re making amazing progress since you’ve started. I told you you’d make a smashing wizard.”

Credence grinned at the praise, as Brandon got a message on his mobile.

“All right. He’s ready for us. Think we’d best go up a few at a time, so we don’t knock each other off. When we get up there, it’ll be on this end...” Brandon gestured to the column at their back.

“Move to the opposite side of the tower so there’s room for the next group.”

It took a couple of minutes before everyone was gathered on top of the massive tower. Indeed, as Ludvig had warned, it was incredibly windy, and Brandon ended up putting up an invisible barrier to shield them.

“Now that we are here, what’s next?” Ragnar questioned.

“Right. Haknir, you mind getting into your armour?” Harry questioned.

“Of course.”

“Pull it out, and I’ll help you into it,” Brandon offered.

“While he gets ready. You guys...” Harry gestured to Bryce and Jose, “Stand there. And Aaron, mount up.”

Bryce and Jose moved to the middle part of the tower, while Aaron mounted his broom and took off.
“Now. Justin and Zoey, there. Credence, with Mazhe and I. Then Walker and Lugo. Uh... Brandon, Ludvig, opposite side. Yeah, that should do.”

“And where will we be?” Ragnar gestured to himself and Haknir, who’d nearly finished pulling out his armour.

“Behind these two. Uh... right.” Harry gestured to a spot behind where Bryce and Jose were standing, conjuring up a platform.

Brandon gestured with his wand, and Haknir found himself instantly dressed in his armour.

“Brilliant,” said Harry, gesturing first to himself, and then to his partner. Their armour was instantly in place.

“All right, are we ready?” Aaron questioned, having to amplify his voice.

Harry gave a thumbs up.

“All right. Everyone. Three... two... one... say titties!”

Zoey looked momentarily scandalized, while everyone else burst out laughing, as Aaron took several pictures, smirking all the while.

Ludvig then switched places with Aaron, as a couple more pictures were taken. And, all in all, over a dozen pictures were taken, with the group as a whole, then with smaller groups in various poses. One had Harry, Haknir, Mazhe, and Ragnar pose in a mock four-way battle. Another had both Bryce and Jose appear to strangle each other, with Mazhe and Harry appearing to cheer them on.

Finally, the group retreated back to the theatre, with the intention of then returning Jose to Los Angeles. Jose had other ideas.

“I’m not really needed back in LA until five o’clock,” he said. “You guys are sight-seeing, shit like that, right?”

“Yes, that’s the plan.”

“Shame you have a game. We’re having a party in the game room tonight. The Weasley twins’ birthday and all that,” said Mazhe.

“Right, the ginger kids. They own a joke shop in the city, if I’m remembering right.”

“There were complications during last year’s party, so we’re keeping it in house and private,” said Brandon, casting a glare at Harry and Mazhe.

Mazhe smiled sweetly. “Who me?”

Brandon rolled his eyes. “Among other things.”

“So if we’re goin’ out. I’m changing,” said Bryce. “I’d almost go with the boots from my armour, they feel better. Guessin’ we’re going walking places.”

“Good idea, yeah,” Jose agreed. “Did bring a change of clothes just in case. And I got an idea. You guys toured our building yet?”

“No,” Harry answered.
“Now that sounds like an awesome idea,” said Justin, “Never really thought of doing something like that. But... won’t there be odd questions, you being seen here when you’re supposed to be out of town?”

“We do have confundus charms,” said Brandon.

The twins’ party had lasted well into the night, with everyone finally getting to bed around three in the morning. Perhaps it was a good thing they were playing it by ear during the day, as it was unlikely anyone would be moving all that much until the noon hour. There had been plenty of music, a couple of movies, more music, and more alcohol than Mrs. Weasley would have ever permitted had she known, her sons being grown men or not!

As luck would have it, mother nature decided to give the lot of them a rather rude wake up call only a couple of hours later. It was Mazhe who felt it first, but Harry quickly woke too, feeling the entire room vibrating.

“What in oblivion?!”

“I’s just an earth tremor,” Bryce muttered, “G’back to sleep.”

“A what?” Harry was now wide awake, being sent into a fight-or-flight awareness from the strange sensation. The entire room was vibrating, the dresser drawers rattling, even the glass in the window was rattling.

“Shor’s bones...” Mazhe whispered, pulling his partner close. “This is most unsettling. Harry... remember Arkngthamz?”

“The ruin where we met Katria,” Harry remembered, as the shaking at last stopped.

It was then there was a loud knock on the door and it opened, with Brandon sticking his head in.

“You guys okay?”

“We’re fine, Brandon. Just... a little unsettling. This... earth-tremor... only the second time experiencing such a thing,” said Harry, having to concentrate to sound coherent. Yeah, way too much firewhiskey.

“C’mon, guys. It’s normal here,” Bryce said.

“How’d you end up in our bed?” Harry asked, as Brandon withdrew and pulled the door closed behind him.

“You were—still are shit faced, Harry. I can find my own bed if that’s—”

“N-uh-uh. You’re stuck with us,” Harry grinned, pressing the strange event from the forefront of his mind.

It was no surprise both Ragnar and Haknir had questions about the strange event as they got ready later that morning.

“Earthquakes are a common occurrence in this area,” Justin explained, as they got ready after the abbreviated exercises.

“What causes them?” Ragnar wanted to know.

“The earth’s outer crust—skin—is not solid. It’s made up of large chunks, called tectonic plates.
Now... these pieces, they move around, right? Some places, they’re pulling away from each other, and in other places, they’re pushing up against each other. And when they shift, or move, we get earthquakes.

“Sometimes, it’s gentle, like this morning. Other times... they’re powerful, destructive events.”

“There was one in the Indian Ocean a few years ago,” said Bryce. “Lot of people killed.”

“That was a megaquake,” said Justin. “And it wasn’t so much the quake itself that did the damage, but the massive tsunami it triggered.”

Mazhe looked confused. “What’s a s-sunami?”

“A really big wave,” said Zoey, “The ones in the Indian Ocean were between fifty and a hundred feet high.”

“Odin’s beard... entire villages would be swallowed up by such waves.”

“They were,” said Justin, “Hundreds of thousands of people were killed in a matter of hours... one of the worst disasters in modern history. The quake itself was between nine-point-one and nine-point-three on the Moment-Magnitude scale. It was classified as one of the strongest earthquakes ever recorded.”

Harry thought about the small tremor they’d felt earlier that morning. “Could a big quake happen here?”

“It’s possible, yeah,” said Justin, “On the scale of what happened in the Indian Ocean... highly unlikely. The fault line here—the meeting between two plates... is a slip-motion, rather than subduction, such as what triggered the event in the Indian Ocean. It’s two very different actions.

“Large quakes in this area do happen, but... nothing like the Indian Ocean event.”

“There was a big one here in ’89,” said Bryce. “I was only four years old, so I didn’t really know what was going on, but dad said it was a big thing.”

“The Loma Prieta quake. That was only six point nine. But yeah, it did a lot of damage.”

“You’re from the area?” asked Ragnar. He still looked lost by the scientific terms Justin was throwing around.

“No. Las Vegas,” Bryce answered, “But the World Series was on. The TV coverage got interrupted, right? Didn’t understand what was going on then, only when I got older.”

“First time in history such a massive event was covered on live television,” Aaron remembered, “It brought live pictures of the post-quake devastation into peoples’ living rooms.”

“No matter what, if something like that does happen, we won’t stick around.” said Brandon. “President Bartlet would be furious if his daughter were left in harm’s way.”

“Seconded,” said Justin, “First sign of trouble, we’re teleporting back to Skyrim. We almost did this morning.”


“C’mon, Bryce. No way the Secret Service could provide the level of protection these guys offer,” said Walker, gesturing to Brandon and his colleagues. “Against magical threats, not a lot the Secret
Service could do.”

“The argument we made to Ron Butterfield, head of the President’s protection detail. He reluctantly agreed,” said Brandon. “We do file reports of our movements, just so they are aware.”

“Never mind what I would do to someone who tried something against Zoey,” Harry muttered, “I’d see them soul-trapped and sent to the Soul Cairn. End of story.”

Mazhe leaned in an planted a kiss on Harry’s forehead. “Yeah, think that goes for any of us, Harry.”

That evening, the group attended a game at McAfee Coliseum in Oakland, where the Athletics played the second in a four game series against the visiting Boston Red Sox. Rich Parker started, but had a bad night, giving up four runs in the fourth inning before receiving the hook, and the home team couldn’t muster any sort of offence, and ended up being shut out 5-0.

Getting there and back had been a bit of an adventure, at least for Ragnar, as he experienced the marvels of the modern subway system. This gave Harry an idea on something to do in the next couple of days, maybe. And they did tour that World War II steamship... yes, most certainly lots of things to do. But that would have to wait until tomorrow, or the day after. It had been a long day, with the unsettling wake-up call. Best keep the late-night antics to a minimum, and start fresh in the morning. Or at least, that was Harry’s plan.

Unfortunately—or perhaps fortunately, depending on which side of the coin you wanted to look at it, Mazhe had other ideas when they got back to the guest suite. Sleep was the last thing on his mind, and quite honestly, Harry didn’t mind in the least. Good thing there was such a thing as silencing charms.

Chapter End Notes

UP NEXT: leaked pictures cause plenty of headaches for the group; the Giants have their home opener; and OND trigger a pair of operations, one of which having disastrous implications on an unimaginable scale...

CHAPTER NOTES: So yeah... earthquakes in San Francisco. Need not say, it’s a common occurrence. Only a matter of time before Harry and his friends experience a different side of life in the Bay Area.

(1) Someone just got a massive fine for doing this (2017).
(2) The Nationals did not start using the red alternate jerseys on the road until 2011, so this outfit would be incorrect. I’d originally put Jose in an orange alternate, until I did a little research, and discovered the Giants didn’t start using those until 2010.
(3) I absolutely loathe the idea of corporate sponsorship of buildings/venues. This ball park has had four(?) different names in the decades it’s existed.
leaked pictures cause plenty of headaches for the group; the Giants have their home opener; and OND trigger a pair of operations, one of which having disastrous implications on an unimaginable scale...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

33. MISINFORMATION

April, 2008 / Rain's Hand, 4E203

“It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts.”

- Arthur Conan Doyle, Sherlock Holmes

6 April, 2008

The previous night had been another late night for the group, with everyone finally calling it a night as it approached three in the morning. Bryce had a game in St. Louis, with Ludvig working escort duties this time; they returned a little after nine o’clock, in time to join the group for yet another movie.

Now, as the somewhat delayed morning activities wrapped up, Mazhe couldn’t help but notice Harry looked a little distracted.

“Harry, what’s wrong?”

“Nightmare. But... I can account for the source. We were at a game in Washington... this wall of water spills over the top of the building in right field.”

“We were talking about tsunamis a few days ago,” said Brandon, as he got dressed, “No surprise it would manifest in your dreams.”

“It was... unsettling. I mean, Bryce plays right field, right?”

“Something like that happening, we’d be out of there long before,” said Aaron, “We’ve got lots of sensors, see. There wouldn’t be a whole lot of notice, but for us... more than enough.”

“What about my teammates?”

“Yeah, we’d get everyone out, the statute be damned. Thing being, a tsunami is a rare event. There’d be an initiating event we’d already be aware of.”
“You have sensors and shit like that, or do you borrow from others?” Bryce asked, as he too got dressed.

“We borrow from the US Geological Survey,” said Justin, from the doorway. The VPR in Harry’s chest had provided a proper change room, including a separate area for Zoey.

“Jesus. What the hell?!”

Bryce had pulled out his mobile, and appeared shocked at what he was seeing.

Harry immediately became worried. “What’s wrong?”

“NO. No, no... that... that wasn’t supposed to be SHARED!” he shouted.

“Bryce?”

“I... one of the pictures. Jose KNOWS not to share stuff like this!”

“Which one?” Brandon questioned.

Bryce tapped his mobile so it enlarged, and pulled up the image in question, just as Brandon’s mobile buzzed, indicating a message. Aaron and Ludvig’s mobiles also buzzed, and Harry didn’t need to imagine what was being said.

“One of you will retrieve Mr. Armando and bring him here in the interest of security,” Harry decided.

“Sir,” said Ludvig, as he pulled out his mobile. He was gone a second after.

“MACUSA’s likely sending Aurors as we speak,” said Justin, “Jesus.”

“We’re... his teammates... they’re gonna have to know,” said Mazhe, “And really, Jose doesn’t strike me as someone who’s irresponsible. There has to be a logical reason behind this.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Bryce agreed, “He wouldn’t share shit like this. Only way someone... shit. When we get cleaned up, shower... we usually leave our stuff in our lockers. If his phone was unlocked... it would be nothing for someone to pick it up and mess with it. And his ain’t magical.”

It was then Ludvig returned, with Jose in tow, looking worried.

“I know... shit, I know,” he said, “It was one of the guys. Got into my phone...”

“And sent himself a copy of one of the pictures,” Bryce finished. “Y’know this shit’s beyond top secret, right?”

“I didn’t mean to do it, Bryce! Shit!”

“No sense in blaming each other, it’s happened,” said Brandon. “The government’s working on a response.”

“It was photoshopped,” said Zoey, now framing the doorway with her boyfriend.

Harry looked confused. “It was what?”

“Photo manipulation. It’s a perfect explanation,” said Justin, “You guys did it back during the winter while in hiding. A thing out of boredom.”
Harry, Mazhe, Ragnar, and Haknir all looked doubtful. “Such a thing, is it even possible?”

“Oh, very much so,” said Justin, “A talented artist could easily come up with the pictures we took.”

“We’ll still get some tough questions from the league though,” said Bryce. “Shit.”

“But why would they be concerned with such things? It was done outside and away from your respective venues, correct?” questioned Haknir.

“That’s just the point. The league will see this as a stunt, unsanctioned, never mind dangerous.”

“What will they do?” Mazhe questioned.

“Fines. Suspensions. Both. Maybe nothing at all, but that... no,” said Bryce. “We can count on a nasty fine at minimum.”

“I’ll cover the cost,” Harry volunteered, but both Jose and Bryce shook their heads. “Dude, don’t worry about it. Not like we don’t have deep pockets.”

Bryce once again looked at his mobile, seeing another flood of messages in his inbox. “Damned thing’s gone viral.”

Mazhe looked confused. “Viral?”

“It’s getting shared again and again, passed on through messages, e-mail, shit like that—spreads to a whole lot of people really quickly,” Jose explained, “I... I’m sorry.”

“First thing, lock your mobile so it doesn’t happen again,” said Brandon. “Now... yeah, we’re getting a visit from MOJ in an hour. Let’s finish getting dressed.”

“MOJ? Who are MOJ?” questioned Ragnar.

“Ministry of Justice. Likely attorneys from the Crown Prosecutor’s office.”

Now, Jose looked even more worried. “Do... do we need a lawyer?”

Brandon glanced at Harry a moment, before shaking his head. “Somehow, I doubt Harry here would permit them to lay charges. Though honestly, they could. Inadvertently, you’ve put the Statute of Secrecy at risk. Luckily the photo can be explained, but it’s caused headaches for both the Commonwealth, and MACUSA.”

“If you want my opinion, perhaps it’s best to say nothing at all about it,” Haknir offered, “It was a photograph. If it is truly as simple to edit things as you make it to be... to respond would invite further chaos.”

“The government won’t like that suggestion, but... it does make sense,” Ludvig agreed.

Brandon also nodded along, and began composing a message. “I’ll suggest that to DOI, see what they think.”

“This isn’t a traditional breach of the statute,” Aaron also agreed, “So Haknir’s suggestion’s not bad.”

“What would normally happen?” asked Jose.

“A serious breach, the non-magical plausibility commission assembles and comes up with a
plausible, non-magical reason for the event. It can take time, since we want to come up with something that truly makes sense in the non-magical world.”

“So what would happen if someone captured a magical event on video, then posted it on YouTube? You guys ready for that?”

“The blunt answer, Jose? No. We’re not. No one is. I know the ICW discussed that eventuality, but really, we can’t just Obliviate millions of people,” answered Justin. “The day that happens, we’ll be forever exposed to the world at large... uncharted territory for the magical community as a whole.

“Now there are some of us who think we should just reveal ourselves, get that eventuality over. But we’re a minority. The establishment, the ICW, most magical governments are terrified by the idea. And some places, such as Britain, think non-magical people beneath them.”

“cept that it’s all bullshit,” said Bryce. “The magical world wouldn’t want a war with us.”

“Exactly that. Thing is, those old farts stuck in their old ways think magic is superior, that magic alone wins the day,” said Brandon. “The end of the day, it’s a combination of things the determine the result, magic only being part of that equation. It’s something we drill on constantly—you all know this from our training. A varied skill set makes for a better soldier even on a bad day.”

“Right. Let’s finish getting dressed and ready, don’t want to keep the Crown attorneys waiting,” Harry muttered.

The meeting went about as well—or as uncomfortable—as Harry expected, with the attorneys grilling the entire group about their exploits on the Golden Gate Bridge. Even Credence was summoned, his meeting with healer Chen being cut short due to the urgency of the interview.

Harry made a silent vow to himself following, that should they return to the Golden Gate Bridge the following spring, they would stick to non-magical methods for taking pictures. This incident had become a fiasco. The entire group was lucky to escape facing charges, and would have, if not for Harry’s titles and privileges.

The following night was the Giants’ home opener, and the final night the group would be spending in San Francisco. They’d been in town for a week, and if Harry really thought about it, he was looking forward to getting back to a routine.

The private box they had access to this time was different from that of last year, situated closer to home plate, along the first base line. That provided a similar view to the box they used in Washington. As expected, there was plenty of security already present, with Brandon assuming command as they arrived, and the Queen arrived shortly after by port key. Oren Brown joined her.

“Promagistrate,” Oren greeted, as they shook hands.

“It’s just Harry, Mr. Brown.”

“Oh, of course, yes. Though quite the step up from last time we met.”

“None of it by choice,” said Harry, ruefully.

“Yes, he has been a victim of circumstance on more than a few occasions,” the Queen interjected. “I see you’ve had yet another on your vacation out here.”

“Somewhat, ma’am. And worst thing, I can’t guarantee it won’t repeat. Shor’s bones, what a fiasco.”
He sighed. “Right. Your majesty, I present Ragnar Lothbrok.”

Ragnar had come to stand beside Harry as they were speaking, and monarch past and present shook hands.

“Your majesty,” Ragnar greeted.

“Likewise, your majesty,” the Queen returned.

“Please. Titles all fell when I left my world. I am only Ragnar Lothbrok, friend of the Promagistrate and willing defender of the realm I now find myself in.”

The Queen gave a laugh. “Perhaps we should switch places for a while.”

“I’ll have to decline,” said Ragnar, as the group moved to the seating area beyond the partition. “I have only seen a small slice of the present world, and it leaves me bewildered at times, that things have become so complicated. I see so much dysfunction, disconnection between people who live as neighbours.

Rather than cooperate with each other, help each other, they work against each other. Is it any question as to why you walk a path toward destruction? Communities divided amongst themselves, defying the basic law of the land cannot survive for long.”

“Once again talking about rubbish,” Harry muttered. He brightened. “I also introduce Credence Barebone.”

“Of course,” said the Queen, as they shook hands, “You’re finding your feet here, I trust.”

“Yes ma’am,” Credence answered, “Still getting used to it... but... Harry and his friends have been a great help.”

Harry then indicated Haknir, saying, “Lastly, I introduce Haknir Death-Brand. He joins us thanks to Miraak, who’s at High Hrothgar these days.”

“I did see the reports. The battle was unusual and challenging,” said the Queen, as they shook hands.

“And I was defeated in an unexpected manner, yes,” said Haknir, “To be bested by a Dragonborn, so be it. It has only presented me with opportunity to once again walk amongst the living, perhaps serve a more noble cause than I followed before. Perhaps make amends for the man I was.”

“Is that a trace of regret?” Harry teased.

“Perhaps,” Haknir answered.

Just as the third inning finished, Aaron received a message on his mobile.

“Bryce and Ludvig are on their way back.”

And, sure enough, less than a minute later, there came a blur of limbs at the back of the room, revealing the pair.

“Sorry we’re a bit late. Had a team meeting,” said Bryce, as he sat down in one of the seats behind Harry and Mazhe. He’d changed into street clothes, but his hair was still wet. “Gonna need to get back to Washington really early tomorrow, got an extra practice.”

“Losing five in a row, not a pleasant thing,” said Mazhe. “What? I do pay attention to how you guys
are doing.”

“I dunno what it is, but we suck.”

“Don’t feel bad, Bryce. These guys aren’t doin’ all that well either,” said Walker. “It’s still early.”

Harry could still see the effect the string of bad luck was having on his friend. There might be a solution, but... how to pull it off, that was the question. He’d have to speak to Professor Slughorn—or Professor Snape. He shuddered at the thought. They weren’t exactly on speaking terms, and really, Harry didn’t know Professor Slughorn all that well. Then again... maybe he didn’t need to obtain the item. No, it still needed more thought.

The game finally ended, with the home team losing 8-4. The Queen and her entourage said their good byes, and were gone only minutes after, along with the additional protection detail.

“Hey Bryce... it’s time to go,” said Harry, reaching back and touching him on the shoulder. He’d fallen asleep in his seat.

“What? Oh.”

“C’mon, you can sleep in a proper bed. That can’t be comfortable.”

“No shit. Last I remember, it was the sixth.”

“How can you be tired?” asked Credence, “I thought you guys could go all day and night.”

“Quiet, kid, you’re new here,” said Bryce, as he stood up.

“He was pretty busy tonight,” said Ludvig, “Lots of balls hit his way. Let’s get back to the theatre.”

9 April

“As nice as it was spending a week away, I’m more than glad to be back in my own bed,” said Harry, as they sat down to breakfast. They’d returned to the college the previous afternoon, and today would be the last day before they returned to a proper routine.

Mazhe only nodded in agreement, as he fixed his plate.

“I have a mixed opinion on our trip,” said Ragnar, “This world... Skyrim... feels far less confusing, than in yours, Harry.”

“Don’t feel bad, I feel the same way. Here, things are relatively simple, people live very simple lives. Realize, had I to do over, I would never have gone to Hogwarts when I was eleven. Even though that would mean not meeting Ron and Hermione... and a number of others... it would mean less interaction with Earth.

“I would have taken my schooling from the Commonwealth but from a distance, remaining here. I would have still met and fulfilled what destiny planned for me, but with far less complication.”

“We’d still end up facing Dumbledore, Harry,” said Justin. “No guarantee things would be any easier now. Possibly, things would be much more difficult.”

It was then an owl swooped in, bringing a copy of the morning paper. Harry collected it, and unrolled it.
A large picture took up the top half of the front page, featuring a group of people standing outside the front doors to the Parliament Buildings. An inset picture featured Harry and the group at the Queen’s residence—during an award ceremony back during the fall, if he remembered correctly.

*OPPOSITION TO TABLE CENSURE MOTION AGAINST PROMAGISTRATE*, the headline read.

He flipped it over, to find yet another headline: *FRIENDS IN HIGH PLACES; Armando, Hunter escape criminal charges after Promagistrate Interference*. This featured three pictures: one of Harry, one of Bryce, and one of Jose.

“Ain’t the first time we’ve been vilified by the media, Harry,” said Bryce, seeing the headline.

“And they can all piss off. I really don’t give a shit what the government thinks of me,” said Harry, dismissively. “I will say this. Come after me. I dare them.”

“Harry...”

“They start harassing any of us, I’ll make them regret it.”

“Harry, they can’t do anything to you,” said Justin, “It’s just someone trying to score political points. The government has a majority, so no motion like this will ever pass. And even if it did, it’s likely the Senate would never approve it. Never mind the Queen’s reaction to such garbage. It wouldn’t survive ascent, and she’d likely issue a very strong rebuke.”

“It’s not so much me I worry about, but the rest of you.”

By late morning, Harry had forgotten about the newspaper articles, as they spent the day touring several historic sites and attractions in Washington. A quartet of Secret Service agents joined them considering Zoey was present, and it did mean they had to travel by non-magical means, since some of the agents didn’t know about magic. If anything, Harry didn’t mind too much; magic did make travel a little too convenient at times, right?

They capped off the day at Nationals Park, where the Nationals faced the Florida Marlins in the second of three games against the division rival. Some of the Secret Service remained, though those in the private box were all in on the secret.

Perhaps that was a good thing, for in the middle of the fourth inning, Brandon received a message on his mobile, with both Aaron and Ludvig receiving one moments later.

“Shit. OND just stormed the Norwegian Ministry of Magic. Lots of casualties, Commonwealth’s going into partial lockdown,” said Brandon. “We’ve gotta go.”

“No. See security elevated here,” Harry decided, “This is an incident happening on the other side of the Atlantic. Where’s the Ragnar?”

“Mid-Atlantic, I think,” said Ludvig.

“Get her here at once.”

“Sir,” said Aaron.

“The slightest twitch of something out of place, we're out of here. Make sure Bryce is aware,” Harry decided. He thought for a moment. “Where is Queen Susan?”

“Being moved to the apartment.”
“I'll send a message to Brynjolf to expect elevated security in and around the Flagon,” said Mazhe, as he produced his mobile and enlarged it.

“I think they all know better than to discuss guild business in the Flagon by this point, Mazhe.”

“Not that Valicadia would ever interfere, guys,” said Ludvig, “Long as the guild's business doesn't cross into Commonwealth territory.”

“As they already know,” said Mazhe, “The membership knows the Commonwealth is off limits. Still, it's just better we keep any discussion about our operations private.”

Sometime later, as the Nationals took the field for the top of the fifth inning, there came a noisy crack from the east that had everyone looking around for the source. Those in the box, and a few people on the field, however, had a pretty good idea of what it was.

That coincided with a voice over the radios. “Gladius, Scabbard now in position.”

“Roger that, Scabbard. Requesting Air Wing suit up as a precaution. Prongs is remaining in situ.”

“Copy. ETA five minutes.”

Harry looked at Aaron funny. “Prongs?”

“Your Patronus is a stag, is it not?”

Now, Harry understood. “You have code names for all of us?”

“No. But you are the Promagistrate. It's an updated protocol,” Aaron explained.

Though Brandon and his colleagues continued to receive updates as the game continued, it ended uneventfully, with the home team suffering another loss. A pair of errors on the part of Bryce contributed to the lop-sided loss, both of those coming after he’d been warned of the unfolding incident.

Instead of returning to the College, they travelled back to the apartment, if only momentarily, before invading the Ragged Flagon.

“Cold beer and a bite to eat, sounds about right,” Bryce said, as they took seats at their usual tables. “I was doin' fine until the warning. In the future, don't tell me shit. We gotta go, then we gotta go, fine. But don't tell me about shit going on when I'm playing.”

“Apologies. I thought it best you know what was going on,” said Harry. He glanced at Brandon. “What’s happening now?”

“OND’s in control of the Norwegian ministry. We’re expecting some sort of statement or demand in a few hours. Otherwise, we’re in partial lockdown with elevated security.”

“Security’s been increased at other games?” Mazhe asked.

“Yeah. We’ve doubled the presence at the other games still running tonight, as well as a number of other events we think might be a target. Thing is, I think OND’s got bigger fish to fry,” said Ludvig. “They’ll want to cement their authority in Norway, so they’ll be occupied.

“Doesn’t mean we can relax though. They’re crazy and we know it.”

“Agreed,” said Brandon, “Yeah, expect much more security for the next while, Bryce.”
“Expected. The terrorists invaded another magical country. Just... can we not talk about this shit? Game was tiring as it was, then all this bullshit on top of it.”

11 April

The previous night had been another late one, as Harry insisted on attending every game Bryce and Jose played for the foreseeable future. It meant a lot of baseball, and a number of things would have to be put on the sideline for a while, but Bryce was one of Harry’s best friends, and Jose was the second guy they’d rescued after—never mind the effort the guy put in behind the scenes. No question, he would be an equally high-profile target for OND.

Now, in the early morning, the exercises over and breakfast nearly finished, some of the group were getting ready to go in separate directions, at least for part of the day. Harry did have a smithing lesson, while Credence had classes at the College. Justin, meanwhile, had plans to work out of the ministry field office on the Ragnar, with Zoey in tow. Naturally, Mazhe wouldn’t go far from Harry, and neither would Brandon, Aaron, or Ludvig. That left Ragnar, Bryce and Haknir, and they likely wouldn’t stray too far either, at least until Bryce needed to be in Washington, but that wouldn’t be until mid-afternoon.

“Yeah, expected that,” Bryce muttered, seeing a message that had just arrived on his mobile.

“Something happened?”

“Gonna need a lift to New York on Monday. Jose and I have to report to the head office.”

“Disciplinary hearing,” Brandon guessed. “We’ll make sure you get there.”

“Thanks—Harry... what’s... what are you doing?”

Bryce had noticed Harry was putting something into his drink. Justin, too, saw it. “Harry, no.”

“First off what the hell?!”

“I tire of your funk, Bryce. This should help you out of it,” said Harry, conspiratorially.

“They check for shit you know. Last thing I need right now.”

“Not the magical sort,” Harry smirked. “I know it’s banned in magical competitions and tests, but... nothing about using it in the non-magical world.”

Justin narrowed his eyes. “Yeah, it’s banned for most things in the Commonwealth, too, Harry.”

“But he’s not playing in the Commonwealth, now, is he?” Harry answered, waspishly. “Now drink. I promise, you’ll have a smashing day and a smashing game to cap it off! I would wager a year of your salary that you won’t.”

Bryce hesitated, but huffed. “Can’t make it worse.”

“Well?” Harry pressed.

“Jeez, Harry, give him a second. It’s not a miracle potion,” said Justin.

“Don’t feel any different, really,” said Bryce, with a shrug.

“Trust me. It’ll show up when it matters... if that makes any sense.”
“Have you ever consumed the potion yourself?” Ragnar questioned.

“No. I wasn’t really aware of it until recently. Or specifically, a couple of days ago.”

“It’s *Felix Felicis*, or ‘liquid luck’, the more common name,” said Justin, “It makes the drinker have incredible luck, lasting about twelve hours. Thing is, it’s banned in all competitive sports in the Commonwealth, along with a long list of other activities, such as exams and shit like that.

“It’s also toxic in large quantities, causes giddiness and recklessness... so it’s not meant to be used frequently. I believe the current Hogwarts potions professor has used it twice in his life.”

“And it’s also very difficult to brew,” Aaron added, “Six months before it’s ready to be used. So question, Harry, how in the world did you obtain it?”

“C’mon, Aaron, I think Harry can get just about anything he wants,” said Justin, “Not like we watch him like a hawk or anything.”

Harry smirked again. “C’mon, got a smithing lesson to attend.”

51°36’8.77"N – 130°49’50.76"W (2)
40 km southwest of Cape St. James,
British Columbia, Canada
1pm PDT (-8 UTC)

It was yet another small boat piloted to the chosen location. The ride had taken the morning, with weather not being the greatest for the small craft. The vessel had nearly sunk on several occasions due to the strong swells, but... magic was rather useful, was it not?

Now, the three mages on board levitated yet another cylindrical object over the side, allowing it to begin its long descent to the bottom, nearly two kilometres down. With that completed, another device was activated before the mages vanished in a blur of limbs.

Only moments later, there came a terrible flash, as the small vessel was consumed by a fiery explosion, leaving a trail of burning wreckage and petrol drifting on the waves, while the heavier pieces quickly sank.

Nationals Park
Washington, DC
10:25p EDT (-5 UTC)

“Jesus Christ, Harry, you weren’t kidding,” said Bryce, as he was reunited with the group. He still wore his uniform, as they were pressed for time, with the game in San Francisco having already started.

“I tell no lies,” said Harry, “Four home runs in a game... that’s rare, right?”

“Only fifteen others have done it.”

Harry grinned again. “Stand still a ‘sec.”

“Right.”

Harry flicked a hand at him, and Bryce felt like he’d just had a shower. His uniform was replaced by
street clothes—jeans, and a tee shirt, though he kept the jersey over top, and his cap.

“Thanks.”

“Something my department’s working on, is a bracelet or something the user can just touch, and change clothes instantly,” said Justin, “Still lots of bugs or kinks to work out, so it’s likely gonna be a while yet before it’s practical.”

“Now that would be awesome,” said Bryce, as Aaron produced his mobile.

“All right, everyone gather around so we can go.”

AT&T Park
San Francisco, CA
7:25p PDT (-8 UTC)

The teleport dropped them right in the private box.

“The press are gonna be disappointed in me not giving a post-game interview,” said Bryce, as they took seats.

“We’ll arrange for you to be in Washington early, if you want.”

Bryce shrugged. “Not something I’m gonna worry about now—thanks.”

A caterer had brought over several bottles—a mild pepper-up potion and a mild healing potion, along with a non-magical muscle relaxant. Bryce accepted and consumed all of them, more than appreciative of the effects. It had been a tiring game, and now it would be another couple of hours at minimum before he’d get some rest.

“You guys absolutely killed it tonight,” said Ludvig, “Been a while since I saw that kind of lopsided score.”

“It’s a shame Credence didn’t come, he missed a great game,” said Mazhe.

“He wanted to spend time with his sister,” said Justin, “And I think Professor Sinistra invited him to join the astronomy class at Hogwarts tonight.”

Harry smirked, seeing Justin changing the seats he and Zoey occupied into a comfortable sofa. Justin caught the look.

“What?”

“Oh, just giving me ideas of my own.”

Harry gestured with a hand first at his, then at Mazhe’s seat, forming an identical joined comfortable seat.

“We’ve set a trend,” Zoey laughed.

“So we did.”

Now, Harry and Mazhe snuggled together, while another server had appeared, with a tray of drinks. Food would likely arrive shortly, knowing how Dobby and Kreacher worked. Sure, they’d had something to eat before attending the game in Washington, but that was hours ago. The game had
lasted longer than usual given the number of runs scored, never mind the power outage in the sixth inning which delayed things a quarter of an hour.

“I need not remind the pair of you to behave,” said Aaron.

“You mean the bit about the lust potion?” asked Harry, innocently.

All three of the SOU looked ready to bang their heads on the nearest wall, while Bryce only rolled his eyes. He smirked. “I’ll just loan them my uniforms later.”

“A lust potion? There is such a thing?” Ragnar questioned.

“There is,” said Brandon.

“I was only joking,” said Harry.

Ragnar put a few pieces of the puzzle together. “It would have something to do with the way you three seem to be attached most of the time.”

“Leave out the sex and the lust potion,” said Mazhe.

Bryce once again rolled his eyes. “Yeah, these two wouldn’t have any clue what to do with me.”

“I think Mr. Hunter’s issuing a challenge, Mr. Stormcrown,” Harry stage-whispered.

“I think you’re right, Mr. Stormcrown,” Mazhe smirked right back.

Now it was Harry’s turn to smirk, as he gestured at Bryce’s seat, merging it with theirs, forming a couch.

“So much like Tommy, y’know,” said Harry. “Not saying you’re replacing him, but...”

“I know that. This should be weird but... it isn’t.”

“Why should it be?” Ragnar questioned, “No, your world is weird for the shaming of those who are different.”

“I would agree with that,” said Haknir. He chose to sit in behind, still somewhat confused by the modern sport.

Food soon arrived, this time more substantial than the snacks they’d had in Washington, in this case plates all prepared from the Ragged Flagon. Vekel’s seared slaughterfish was Harry’s favourite, along with a pint of mead. Harry didn’t care for the non-magical beer they tended to serve at the ball park, equating it to over priced horse piss.

As he ate, Harry thought about what Ragnar had said. “You loved Athelstan.”

Ragnar gave a sad nod. “His death... a piece of me died with him. However, as much as I loved him... I needed heirs. Making love to a man would not provide such.”

“No, he wouldn’t. Though I’m sure there are many women out there who wish men could get pregnant. And before you ask, no, it’s not possible, even in the magical world,” said Justin. “Yeah, we’re magical, just not that magical.”

That reduced Zoey to a fit of giggles. She finally recomposed herself. “Oh god the bad visuals you just gave me, Justin!”
It was then the crowd let a collective boo, and everyone was drawn back to the action. The visiting St. Louis Cardinals had put a run on the board, and now led 1-0 in the third inning.

Commonwealth of Valicadia
Arcane Sciences Department, San Francisco Research Facility

Though it was outside of normal business hours, the facility was still rather active, with more than a few people still around, fussing about with various projects. After all, the facility was gigantic, covering dozens of square kilometres. In fact, the western limit of the facility brought it in near direct contact with the San Andreas fault, one of the most active earthquake fault lines on the planet.

It was in one of the many labs which lined that limit, where a group of witches and wizards were manipulating yet another cylindrical object. It had been extremely challenging to get the device into the building, given the security, but with the right amount of luck, that part of the plan had gone off without complications.

Nothing was said between them, as one kept an eye on his watch. Then, at exactly 7:45 pm, he gave a nod to the others who had their wands drawn. They gestured simply at the device, causing it to flash a brilliant red for a moment, before falling still.

“We flee. The device will activate in a minutes’ time in unison with the others.”

The group popped away, leaving the for now dormant device behind.

Exactly a minute later, a series of alarms rang out throughout the facility. The on-duty site manager quickly picked up a telephone, and punched in a number, resulting in a chime over the facility’s public address system.

“Seismic activity, ETA thirty seconds. Prepare stations. Non-essentials evacuate now.”

AT&T Park

The Giants had two on, with two out, now in the bottom of the third inning. It was then Harry noticed a flock of birds suddenly taking to the skies. Given it was just after sunset, it was curious, given most birds tended to stay on the ground or in their nests as darkness approached, right?

“What?” Mazhe asked, seeing Harry’s confused look.

“Birds—”

The room went sideways.

Chapter End Notes

UP NEXT: San Francisco is slammed by a cataclysmic quake, part of a much larger event triggered by unnatural forces.

CHAPTER NOTES: Another event I’d wanted to use in the first part of Chronicles, but found it just didn’t work with what was going on. Now, it fits with other events that are going on. Hang on, it gets wild from here. But I said that before, right?
(1) They did not become the Miami Marlins until after the 2011 season.
(2) This location is geologically significant, as it’s the meeting of three different tectonic plates. Most importantly, it’s the northernmost end of the Cascadian fault line.
(3) Professor Slughorn confirms this in ‘Half Blood Prince’.
(4) As of the 2008 season. As of now, the number is 17.
(5) Apologies, but it’s just too easy to take pot shots at M-PREG fanfictions out there.
Shaken

Chapter Summary

San Francisco is slammed by a cataclysmic quake, part of a much larger event triggered by unnatural forces.

WARN: Death, destruction, scenery ‘gorn’.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

34. SHAKEN

April, 2008 / Rain's Hand, 4E203

“We have become a force of nature. Not long ago, hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, drought, forest fires, even earthquakes and volcanic explosions were accepted as 'natural disasters' or 'acts of god.' But now, we have joined God, powerful enough to influence these events.”

- David Suzuki

Unlike the shaking Harry and Mazhe had experienced a few days ago, this was much more violent; those not seated were thrown to the ground by it. There came numerous thumps and crashes, as furniture was being thrown around.

“Cover up and hold on!!” Aaron shouted.

Justin and Zoey had both ducked, covering their heads, with Harry, Mazhe, and Bryce doing the same a moment after. Only seconds after, the glass partitions separating the private seating area from the inner part of the box shattered.

Time seemed to crawl, as the violent shaking continued. Now, some of the advertizing and signage lining the bottom lip of the upper bowl seating began to peel away, crashing down onto the seats below. And, moments after that, the enormous wooden Coke bottle sculpture sheared away from its anchoring, and fell with a noisy crash to the walkway outside the building.

The baseball glove structure was next to topple, also falling to the walkway, sending up a shower of debris. Perhaps it was lucky both pieces fell outside the building, otherwise there would have been many deaths.

The false ceilings began to come down, along with some of the light fixtures. Ragnar let out a grunt, feeling one of the ceiling lights strike him in the back. He knew he’d need a healing potion once able.

Now, the massive scoreboard structure was beginning to fail, first with the advertizing panels;
unlucky for spectators seated below, as the pieces fell, and dozens of people now found themselves trapped by the debris and wreckage. The much taller light framework then gave way, sending much heavier wreckage crashing to the ground and onto the field. That, in turn, caused the rest of the structure to topple over, sending up sparks as electrical connections were severed, and crashing to the field in a heap of wreckage.

The players on the field had all scrambled to the middle of the infield with great difficulty by this point, with the others joining them from both dugouts. Perhaps this was the safest place in the building, as cracks were beginning to form in many of the support columns from the violent shaking.

“Can we get out of here!?” Mazhe shouted.

“Trying. No, it’s a no-go,” Brandon answered. He’d pulled out his mobile only seconds after the event started, and had to use both hands to keep it steady.

“Why don’t it work?!” Bryce questioned.

“The quake’s probably disrupted the ambient energy—” Justin began.

“Like in Dubai,” Harry guessed.

“Similar.”

It was then the lights went out, and with it, there came a noisy crash from above and behind them.

“Jesus Christ,” Aaron exclaimed.

Harry chanced a look, just in time to see parts of the massive lighting structure on the north side of the building crash into the upper bowl seating, with some of the lights detaching and slamming into the Giants’ dugout.

Then, the shaking stopped, and the silence was as loud as the event.

“C’mon! We gotta move!” Justin exclaimed, getting to his feet. “It’s not over!”

“How do you know?!?” Mazhe questioned.

“How do you know?!?” Mazhe questioned.

“History! Now come on, I think I can get us down to the field.”

Justin once again thanked everything holy for Jose’s impromptu tour of the building a week previous; they’d taken more than a few pictures on the field, meaning he could craft a bookmark.

Seconds after, the group were down on the field, in front of the Giants’ ruined dugout. Some of the heavy light fixtures had smashed through the roof. Some of the spectators were climbing over the small partition and onto the field, directed by stadium staff.

Jose spotted the group, and waved them over.

“You guys all right?” he questioned.

“Yeah, shaken a bit,” said Harry.

“Guys! It’s not over!” Justin warned again.

“Ragnar, here,” said Aaron, noticing the nasty cuts on his hands. He produced a healing potion, and passed it over.
“Thank you.”

Haknir, too, was consuming a healing potion. He’d been on his feet when the quake struck, and had been thrown to the floor. His head still swam from being knocked silly.

“Gods, the number of injured from this... it’s gonna be a frightening number,” said Mazhe, taking in the wrecked field.

“Had to be eight or more,” said one of the St. Louis players.

“More than eight? Not possible,” said Justin, “The San Andreas fault’s not capable of more than that. (1)

“This building’s been all but wrecked, man. Look!” said another player, gesturing to the wrecked right outfield wall. The structure had collapsed into a pile of twisted steel and rubble.

Harry turned to take in the scene, but the ground started shaking again, just as Justin had warned. He dropped to the ground, pulling Mazhe down with him. Others quickly followed—better to be on the ground, rather than to be knocked over.

More of the signage on the facing at the bottom of the upper bowl gave way, already loosened by the shaking earlier, while small pieces of concrete began to break off, as the building became further compromised by the quake.

The shaking at last stopped eight minutes after, though it felt like an eternity. Once again, everything fell deathly still for several moments, the question unasked being, was it over?

Gradually, the noise level began to pick up, punctuated by the occasional crash as debris continued to fall. Then, there came a noisy explosion from somewhere outside the building, and Harry looked up to see a cloud of smoke rising from the north.

Justin was helping Zoey to her feet.

“I’m thinking we might have to re-think having dates at ballgames,” he remarked.

“Doubt you guys being here had anything to do with it,” said Mazhe.

“I was joking. But gods, what a nightmare.”

“Yeah, we need to get out of here. Now,” said Ludvig, gesturing to Zoey.

“Open to suggestions. Teleport functions are hit ‘n’ miss,” said Justin.

“The Theatre,” Brandon decided, “We’ll have to hike it, but it should still be secure.”

Bryce looked doubtful. “After this shit?”

“Trust me, it’ll be intact. Shaken up but still sound. It’s got heavy protection charms on it.”

“What about the magical disruptions we’re getting?” Mazhe challenged, “Won’t that interfere?”

Now, Justin furrowed his brows. Mazhe did have a point. But... “No. My gut says it’s still sound. Brandon?”

Brandon gave a nod. “Arcane Sciences did the work with the help of Gringotts. We should be all right.”
Of course, some of the players not in on the secret could hear the conversation, and so looked very confused. Charms? Arcane Sciences? Teleport functions? Magical disruptions? Who were these people? Never mind the fact Bryce was among them. The Nationals had played only an hour prior, right?

“Everyone! Everyone, listen up!” Brandon spoke, raising his voice. “We're heading to a secure location. We should find food, water, and first aid within a couple of hours. Security detail on the field, form a perimeter.”

Though some of the marines and SOU deployed for security had been helping with the crowd, they quickly joined up with the group on the field. Brandon was the senior officer present.

“How we getting out?” one of the players asked.

“We’ll have to go over the wall,” said Jose. “But shit, look at that.”

He pointed south, to the numerous columns of smoke rising from areas on the other side of McCovey Cove.

“We know, it’s bad,” said Brandon, “Now let’s get moving. Flashlights if you got ‘em.”

Some of the soldiers had already produced non-magical flashlights, knowing magic was a no-go for now.

“Harry, how about producing your chest?” Mazhe suggested.

Harry gave his mate a sour look. “No thanks. Last time we used our pouches in a magical outage—”

“The pouches were upgraded, Harry.”

“Doesn’t mean I trust them any further. Minds and hands to purpose, we have a lengthy walk ahead.”

“Or climb, in some cases,” said Justin, as they began to climb over the wreckage. “If we could just use our wands—”

“We know, Justin.”

Clear of the wreckage, they found the quay cracked and buckled by the quake, including an eight foot section which had all but slid into McCovey Cove, leaving an open chasm behind.

“How we getting over it?”

“Guys! Gather around,” called one of the soldiers, gesturing to one of the steel beams from the wrecked outfield wall.

Members of the SOU were quickly joined by some of the players, and with the combined effort, the heavy beam was lifted and moved to the edge of the gap.

“Right, need to stand it on end! Careful now!” Aaron called out.

“Easier said than done! Gonna need something to work as a lever,” said Justin.

“Just let it drop into the hole,” said Brandon, “Let some of us go first, we’ll hold the beam secure and help people up on the other side.”
“Good thought,” Harry agreed, “I’ll help keep it steady.”

The beam was shoved into the gap, and it dropped, resulting in a six-foot face on the opposite side to overcome. Then, while Harry and Mazhe held the beam steady, Brandon, Aaron, Ludvig, and a pair of marines shimmied down to the opposite side.

In turn, the pair of marines were hoisted up to the opposite side, and got into position. One of them reached into his pouch and produced a flare, then activated it, casting an eerie red glow over the scene.

“All right, we’re ready! Justin, bring Zoey across first,” Brandon decided.

There was no argument, as the pair carefully began to cross the heavy steel beam. Sure, it was heavy, but it was not all that wide. A slip, and they would fall to the jagged concrete below.

Ultimately, they reached the bottom without incident, and both were helped up the other side by waiting marines. That was then the cue for the rest of the group to follow, though it was slow going.

The entire process took nearly a half hour, as some of the people from the stands had followed, swelling the group to a little over a hundred.

After taking a minute or two for people to get their breaths, the large group continued on to Third Street. And there, Brandon realized it would be a much tougher trek than first thought, as the street scape better resembled the aftermath of a bomb.

“Shor’s balls,” Harry muttered, taking in the devastation.

“This... is going to be significantly more difficult,” Mazhe agreed, “Such destruction, unfathomable.”

“Impossible as it sounds... this... this was worse than eight,” said Justin, softly.

“Eight what?” Mazhe questioned, as they again started moving.

“Moment-Magnitude scale. It’s a scale which gauges the intensity of an earthquake. But I said before, San Francisco... this area... shouldn’t get anything over seven-point-nine. How this happened... it’s unnatural.”

“Now’s not the time to be thinking of hows or whys. Let’s just keep moving,” said Brandon, “Now everyone be mindful of what’s around you, watch your footing. Lots of broken glass and we’re running low on healing potions.”

With that, the large group began to pick their way northwest along Third Street. Not only were they having to dodge wreckage and debris from collapsed structures, but abandoned vehicles. In several situations, they worked to free people who had become trapped in their vehicles due to wreckage.

Their first significant hurdle came at the elevated I-80 highway. Or at least, what had been the elevated structure. It had collapsed at Third Street, by all intents and purposes forming a wall blocking their path.

“We’ll have to go up Bryant Street,” a woman suggested—one of the people they’d pulled from a vehicle not long earlier.

“Sounds like a plan,” Brandon decided, producing his mobile, and pulling up the map. Sure, many magical functions weren’t available, but it didn’t stop it from connecting to GPS.

“We can try again at Forth Street. Where are we going?”
“The Fox Theatre. It’s been reinforced in a special way and should still be sound.”

The woman looked doubtful. “No way that place’ll be intact.”

“Just trust us. There should be some emergency supplies, but more importantly, shelter overnight,” said Aaron.

Unfortunately, Forth Street proved to also be blocked, as more sections of the highway had collapsed. If Brandon had to guess, it looked like maybe a third of the highway’s sections had come down. It may have been better-built, being constructed more recently, but if Justin was right... retrofitting wouldn’t matter a whole lot.

So, they kept moving southwest along Bryant Street, which was at this point relatively clear, save for the number of abandoned vehicles and the occasional downed telephone pole.

“Everyone pay attention where you’re stepping,” said Ludvig, “Got a lot of glass on the street.”

“Hey, d’you smell that?” Mazhe questioned, wrinkling his nose. “Smells like rotten eggs.”

“Shit, gas—”

**BOOM.** The street scape seemed to explode into a giant fireball, forcing everyone to the ground. In a split second, the area ahead was transformed into a fiery hell on earth, as flames shot high into the night sky.

“Everyone back up!” Brandon shouted, “Back to Forth Street!”

There was no argument. Harry could feel the intense heat on his back as they retreated back the way they’d come, the way ahead being lit by the towering flames.

“It’s eighty-nine all over again,” someone muttered.

“The Loma Prieta event,” said Justin, “It was before my time, but I know of it. Lot of fires.”

“Yeah,” the guy said, “Entire Marina district was gutted.”

“You live here,” Mazhe guessed.

“Dolores Heights, yeah. My parents lived—still live in the Marina District. The house burnt to the ground in eighty-nine.”

“Why do you still live here after all of that?” Haknir wanted to know.

“Earthquakes? You get used to it,” the man answered.

It was then the ground started shaking again, forcing everyone to drop and cover. There came a thunderous crash, as more sections of the elevated highway collapsed, having been weakened by the main event earlier. That, in turn, brought down several small buildings which backed onto it, showering the group with dust.

The shaking finally stopped about fifteen seconds after.

“Aftershock,” said Justin, regaining his feet. He offered Zoey a hand, helping her up.

“Everyone all right?” Brandon called out.

“An aftershock?” Ragnar questioned.

“After a big quake, there’s always aftershocks. Sometimes they can be as bad as the original event. So... be aware,” Justin warned.

At Forth Street, they travelled south, back to Brannan Street, which proved to be more of a mess than Bryant, with a number of buildings having collapsed into the street.

“We could go one more—”

“No. Let’s just... work our way through,” Brandon decided.

“Hold on... I think...” Mazhe flicked a hand, and a globe of light appeared over his head. “We have magic.”

Justin produced his mobile. “Still don’t have teleport, and probably won’t for the next couple of days.”

“What about a port key?” Bryce suggested.

Harry flicked a hand at some nearby rubble, but it seemed to take extra work to lift and move it. “Looks like we’re really limited. A port key would be risky.”

“Come on, let’s keep moving,” Brandon pressed, “Watch your footing, shit’s gonna be unstable.”

Half-way up the block, Aaron held up a hand. “Hear that?”

“Yeah. Coming from over there,” said Mazhe, pointing to a partially-collapsed storefront. It was faint, but...

Both Harry and Mazhe hurried over.

“Hello?”

“Help us, please!!!” came the pleading cry.

“How many are you?” Mazhe questioned.

“A dozen of us!”

“Just sit tight, we’ll figure something out,” said Aaron.

The three SOU were already looking at the wrecked building. The second floor had completely collapsed, the outer walls falling down to effectively block the doors. How was it the first floor had remained intact at all? It was quickly discovered the same thing had happened in the back, giving reason as to why the group were trapped inside as they were.

“Harry, Mazhe, boost our spells. We should be able to clear the front,” Aaron suggested as they finally regrouped.

“Worth a try,” Harry agreed.

Brandon, Aaron, and Ludvig all produced their wands.
“On your go,” said Harry.

“Go.”

Both Harry and Mazhe provided the magical boost, while the three SOU channelled their magic to vanish the wreckage blocking the doorway.

“Magic...” one of the people rescued earlier whispered, as Harry, Mazhe, and the SOU hurried inside the wrecked building.

“Yes. There’ll be a proper explanation once we get somewhere safe,” Justin promised. “Just trust us, we’re here to help.”

Only seconds later, Harry reappeared, escorting part of the group of people trapped.

“Justin! Come help Aaron, we’ve got some injured.”

Justin hurried over, with Zoey quickly following. But Brandon held up a hand. “Building’s not stable. We’re stabilizing them and moving them out first.”

“Vanish the upper floor,” Justin suggested.

With Mazhe and Harry once again providing the magical boost, and four wands present, the wrecked upper floor was then vanished, removing the immediate danger.

“We still need to get clear, if we get another aftershock, that building could come down on top of us,” said Justin, pointing to the taller building next door, which was still somewhat intact.

“This shouldn’t take long,” said Aaron, “We just need to get him stable and we can move him out to the street.”

In reality, it took close to fifteen minutes before the four injured people were moved to the street. Two had suffered broken legs, while another had a fractured vertebrae, and the last suffered head trauma. Two could be fixed relatively easily, but the others... not in the field.

“We can’t treat those injuries in the field,” said Justin.

Ragnar looked on, as the man with the broken back was stabilized.

“If his back is broken...”

“He’ll be fine,” said Justin, “Even in the non-magical world, he’ll be good as new if the hospital handles it well. In our world, healers would have him back on his feet in a day or so.”

It was then there came a noisy rumble, as the taller building next door finally gave way, wreckage tumbling into the smaller building they’d just been in.

“Gods... we acted just in time,” said Mazhe.

“Think we’ll see more than a few close calls before the night is over,” said Harry.

Planks of wood scavenged from the wreckage were bound together to form a pair of backboards, and the injured secured to them, before the group once again got moving. A few of the players offered to carry the makeshift gurneys, but it was still slow-going with the amount of wreckage in the street.
At Fifth Street, they found the intersection at Bryant was engulfed in flames, as the fire was spreading—no surprise there. So, they were forced to travel one more block west, up to Sixth Street. Half-way along the block, Brandon had Aaron scout the parking lot on the north side of the street and determine if that might be a better path than the rubble-choked street itself.

“Yeah, the parking lot makes more sense,” said Aaron, when he returned. “Lots of cars, but there’s room to get through.”

At Sixth Street, they were then able to make their way back toward the highway, and this time, luck was with them, as they found the way clear, with the elevated highway still intact.

That didn’t mean things got any easier. The streets proved barely passable at best, and in some places, the large group were forced to detour where the street was completely blocked by wreckage. In some cases, they also came upon survivors, trapped in their homes. Even with magic being limited as it was, the large numbers present were enough to make all the difference, and the group was made larger by the rescues.

At Howard Street, Brandon made the decision that they walk up to Ninth Street, rather than trying to get there along Market Street. A number of taller buildings lined Market Street, and very likely, many of them have come down. That, and Howard Street seemed relatively clear, at least as far as Brandon could see.

It proved to be a wise choice. The trek to Ninth Street took less time than they’d taken to get past the highway, with most structures still relatively intact and only a moderate amount of wreckage. Still, they did rescue a number of people, making for a very large group by the time they reached Market and Ninth Streets.

There, they were again lucky to find the street relatively clear. And more importantly, the theatre was still standing, though the marquis and the sign had both collapsed. A few marines and engineers were already present, likely from inside the building, and they were working to clean up the mess and put things back to rights.

“Status, corporal,” said Brandon.

“You’ll need to use the Hayes Street entrance, sir. Arcane’s on scene doing an assessment, but the building’s still sound. We’ve been able to raise DOI, and the government’s mobilizing.”

“Thank you.”

Minutes later, the large group were filing through the Hayes Street entrance, to gather in the lobby. If Harry had to guess, there were at least two hundred people, including both teams, some of the field staff, spectators, and a number of people rescued on the trek over.

Justin and Brandon had been right in their assumptions, and the building was pretty much intact. Some of the lights had come down, as had most of the curtains and decorations, and some of the plaster had cracked in a few places, but other than that... more than serviceable.

While those more seriously injured were being taken to the mezzanine level and made comfortable, everyone else was pressed into the auditorium, which was in about the same shape as the lobby; no serious damage, though some of the lights had come down. Nothing that couldn’t easily be fixed.

“All right, everyone take seats,” said Brandon, raising his voice slightly.

“What now?” Mazhe questioned.
“We stay put,” Brandon answered, “Protocol dictates we get all of you to safety.”

“The people outside...”

“Will have to fend for themselves; we don’t have much in the name of resources here,” said Justin, “As much as we should be out there... even this many. Brandon, you been able to talk to DOI?”

“No. The signal’s really glitchy.”

“So no teleport functions... least not long distance. We were lucky we were able to get down to the field. Gonna need to speak to my colleagues, see if we can’t solve that somehow for the future.”

“Never mind us not being able to cast magic,” said Mazhe, “I feel naked here.”

Others not in on the secret can hear the conversation, and the group suddenly found themselves bombarded with questions.

“Just hold off your questions,” said Brandon, once again raising his voice a little, “We’ll give you all a proper explanation once we can get some assistance from the government.”

“FEMA...”

“Will take hours to get organized,” Aaron finished, “Once we get access to our own resources, we’ll be in much better shape.”

It was then another SOU soldier hurried over. “Elevators are both busted; figure the shaft’s been sheared off.”

“Expected,” said Justin, “The facility’s builders took that into account forty years ago.”

He thought for a moment. “Harry, are you able to summon Kreacher or Dobby?”

Harry gave a nod. “Kreacher?”

The seconds ticked by, and as it closed in on a minute, Harry shook his head. “Should have appeared by now. Fawkes?”

Once again, he was greeted with a no-show.

“You’re not gonna try calling Dobby?”

“No. Whatever’s interfering... it’s preventing them from hearing my summons. Almost like when I was trapped in Capua.”

“We find ourselves in the same boat, then,” Ragnar summarized.

Justin gave a slow nod. “For now. My guess, the quake disrupted the natural energy flow... the ambient magic that’s in everything. Guys, this was a massive event... hundreds of square kilometres of land affected by this one event.”

“But not like Dubai,” Mazhe guessed.

“No. It'll take some time for everything to settle down, but the energy flow will return to normal. Think of it like this. You get a cut on your arm, right? It takes time for it to heal. The ground... the thin layer of the earth’s crust... it just suffered a major wound.”
Brandon seemed to think a moment. “Aaron and Ludvig, take Gladius upstairs. I’ll be up later.”

“Sir.”

Harry gave a short nod. Sounded like a plan. He glanced at Jose. “Coming?”

The guest suites, as they discovered, had been reverted to the default configuration of only four rooms and a larger common area.

“Shit, looks like we’ll be sharing,” said Justin.

“You guys take a room to yourselves,” said Aaron.

“Won’t be the first time sleeping on the floor,” said Jose.

“You’re with us,” said Harry, grabbing both Mazhe and Bryce’s shirt sleeves.

Jose eyed the trio curiously, then gave a shrug. “Right.”

“Yeah, don’t read anything into it,” said Bryce, scowling. “It’s...”

“Complicated,” Mazhe answered, smirking.

“Not my place to judge. Just, the other guys...”

“Our relationship isn’t like that,” said Harry, also scowling. “He’s just an occasional passenger. Though...”

“Fuck off.”

“Yeah. Uh... everyone try to get some rest,” said Aaron, “No telling what chaos is headed our way, but count on us being here for hours, if not days, depending on how quickly the government can get boots on the ground.”

Chapter End Notes

UP NEXT: Harry’s group deal with the aftermath of the earthquake... and a run-in with Dumbledore reveals a sinister reason for the event...

CHAPTER NOTES: I mean no ill-will toward San Francisco; I think it’s a beautiful city which I’d love to visit someday. But this is an event I’ve been planning since the early part of ‘Orb of Magnus’, another event I had written with other characters; would have taken place toward the end. Then I scrapped it, as it didn't fit with what was going on at the time. Here, it made all the sense in the world.

(1) The largest earthquake ever recorded in California was 7.9 and that was in 1857. However, this is by no means a naturally-triggered event, influenced by outside energy, so all bets are off.
Chapter Summary

Harry’s group deal with the aftermath of the earthquake... and a run-in with Dumbledore reveals a sinister reason for the event...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

35. AFTERMATH II

April, 2008 / Rain's Hand, 4E203

“You may weather the storm, but will you weather the aftermath?”

- Anthony T. Hincks

Just before dawn, everyone was quite rudely awakened as the entire room seemed to once again go sideways, being violently shaken.

“Jose! Get over here!” Harry shouted, seeing the man had sat up.

Jose did as asked, though with difficulty, and the four of them huddled together, waiting out the second aftershock.

As it finally stopped, there came a smaller vibration, and a noisy rumble from outside.

“A building collapsed, probably close,” Jose guessed.

He barely finished speaking, when there came a second noisy rumble. That was accompanied by someone knocking loudly on the door. “You guys all right?” came Brandon’s voice.

“Yeah, we’re good,” Harry answered. He flicked a hand at the ceiling, and to his relief, a point of light formed, bathing the room in a soft blue light.

“Magic’s working again,” Bryce guessed.

“With difficulty, yeah.”

The door opened, and Brandon stuck his head in. “Radios on.”

“Oh. Uh, right.”

Harry reached down to his belt, and switched on the receiver. “Should’ve done this last night.”

He was just in time, as a voice came over the radio: “Gladius, Firebrand, over.”

“Firebrand, Gladius,” came Aaron’s voice, “What’s our status?”
“Now in situ in San Francisco Bay. Air Wing's began survey. Be warned, this is a cataclysmic event; whole west coast's been affected.”

Now, another voice chimed in, “Attention on the channel. Firebrand's changing call signs, designation Scabbard.”

There came a series of “Roger,” or “Acknowledged,” as the order was recognized.

Harry touched his ear piece. “Scabbard, this is Prongs. Who are you? I mean, what ship are you?”

“HMS Arminius, sir,” came the answer.

“Forgive my breaking protocol. Used to working with the Ragnar, over.”

“She’s on her way,” came another voice over the radio, “Her majesty’s ordered most of the fleet into the area.”

“Scabbard, our mobiles are still out. Can you patch a call over the radio?” came Justin’s question.

“It’s possible. For what reason?”

“Zoey needs to speak to her father, let him know she’s all right.”

“Give us a minute or so.”

As the group met in the common room, those with radios could hear the conversation as Zoey was connected with her father. No surprise, the call was routed to the White House Situation Room(1). It further underscored the seriousness of the event. Everyone else on the channel remained quiet, knowing most people with the President weren’t in on the secret.

As that took place, someone brought in a large platter of food, more than enough for everyone in the suites. It was still rather light, but given the circumstances...

“Harry, we should be able to use your chest now,” said Mazhe. “Your kitchen’s better-stocked, isn’t it?”

“Well...”

Zoey at last disconnected the call with her father. “Dad would be happier if I were in a more secure location.”

“All right. But this...”

It was then a pair of men practically barged into the suite.

“We need help, right away. Building across the street’s collapsed, buried one of our crews working outside, twenty or more,” said one of them.

“Shit, all right,” said Brandon, relaxing only slightly.

“Harry, pull out your chest. Zoey and I can stay inside,” Justin decided.

Harry reached into his pouch, and retrieved his chest, then set it on the floor. A moment later, it was restored to proper size, and the lid wrenched open. Justin hurried in, with Zoey following shortly after.
“Go, Harry. We’ll be listening in, and I’ll be talking to the government when possible,” Justin called.

Harry slammed the lid shut, and moments after, the chest was again safely stored in his pouch.

“Blows me away you can do that,” said Jose.

“One of the best birthday presents I ever received,” said Harry, as he flicked a hand at himself, dressing in his heavy armour. Bryce was doing the same thing, though forced to do so manually.

“Jose. Here,” said Mazhe, pulling out his old armour from his pouch, “Pieces will be a little big, but —”

“We can adjust the size,” Brandon finished, “Let’s hurry this up.”

Though it was still dark, another crew had already erected a number of lights to illuminate the scene. Immediately, it was plain to see this was not going to be a simple task. The building across the street had pancaked, but had also spewed outward, dumping hundreds of tons of rubble across the street, right up against the theatre’s south wall. It was a literal mountain of wreckage and debris.

“It will truly be a miracle should anyone be still alive under all of that,” Mazhe remarked.

“But not out of the question,” said Aaron, “Just... guys, be very careful.”

“The debris field has to be twenty feet deep,” Brandon guessed, “Where were they... the workers... where were they working?”

“Against the... they were packing the sign up for transport, sir.”

“Why were they worrying about shit like that when there’s people trapped everywhere?” Mazhe questioned.

“No shit,” said Harry, “Much bigger fish to fry. Now c’mon. Let’s get to work.”

That put everyone in motion, now having an idea as to where to start looking. It was slow-going at first, as magic was still questionable, but as night was becoming day, so too was the magic. By the time the sun made its appearance, Harry found he was moving perhaps ten times the material compared to when they’d started.

And now, they began to discover victims. Four dead, their bodies mutilated and crushed by the tremendous weight of the wreckage. But they also found survivors. Three, crushed up together in a small pocket formed by slabs of concrete. The wreckage was easily vanished, and the survivors spirited away by other members of the crew for treatment inside the theatre.

The next group of survivors were found in one of the storefronts—the theatre had five stores to the left of the main entrance on Market Street. Those were now filled to the ceiling with rubble from the collapsed building. With magic coming easier, it took only a matter of minutes to vanish the debris. Like the others, the injured were taken inside for treatment.

That then led the team to the next group of trapped survivors, totalling four. Like the first group, they’d been ultimately protected by a large chunk of concrete falling in just the right way. It turned out to be the last group they would find alive, as remains were discovered close to the site they’d just excavated. Further excavations uncovered eight bodies, some unrecognizable.

“That’s everyone accounted for,” said one of the soldiers who’d raised the alarm earlier.
“You’re positive?” Ludvig questioned.

“Yes sir.”

“Hold on. Getting a hit over there,” said another soldier, pointing to the southwest side of the scene. “At least one alive.”

Minutes later, three more victims were pulled from the wreckage. Healing charms had them stable enough to be moved to the theatre and the care of professionals.

“Healers are gonna be busy today,” Harry muttered.

“It’s a code red call, Harry. Every healer we can spare are on their way.”

“You guys aren’t worried about the statute?” Jose wondered.

“We’ll worry about that later,” said Brandon, “Right now, it’s providing help to friends and allies who need it.”

It was then a squadron of aircraft blasted overhead. They were identical to the aircraft on the Ragnar, and it was confirmed as a voice broke in over the radio.

“Gladius, Dragon lead, over.”

“Good to have you with us, Dragon. What’s it look like up there?” Aaron questioned.

“As bad as you can imagine. Lots of fires, flooding—looks like most of the marina district’s been washed away.”

“It’s Prongs. From what?” Harry asked.

“A tsunami, sir,” came the answer, “DOI’s getting reports of massive damage in Asia, it’s gonna be bad. Some estimates have the wave pegged at between forty and fifty feet.”

“Seventy feet confirmed in Washington state and British Columbia,” came Justin’s answer, “Yeah, this is catastrophic. And guys, heads up, we’re investigating some strange readings south of the Queen Charlotte Islands. A strange vibration was recorded on hydrophones in the area.”

“Hold on. You mean like the vibration that took out Spiraminis,” said Harry.

“It’s a possibility.”

“Gladius, we could use a hand,” came another voice over the radio, “Massive fire, Dolores Heights area.”

“Spark location, we’ll get there soon as possible,” said Aaron. “What direction you in from the Fox?”

“Look to your west-south-west,” came the answer, “You should see the smoke as it is.”

“Ready for your spark.”

Sure enough, they could see the thick black cloud of smoke rising into the early morning sky to the southwest. Of course, there were plenty of plumes of smoke, but this one was notable. Seconds later, they spotted a firework from the general location.
Brandon thought a moment. “Let’s mount up. Think we got enough brooms.”

“Mazhe, take Jose. I’ll take Bryce,” Harry decided.

“Ragnar with me,” said Brandon, “Ludvig, take Haknir.”

Shortly after, they were aloft, and only then did it really sink in as to just how bad it was.

“Mara have mercy,” Mazhe whispered, stunned by what he was seeing.

Harry, too, was astounded by the scene below. “Equally floored by this, Mazhe.”

“We have left earth, perhaps entered another dimension,” said Ragnar, “Such destruction... an entire city left in ruins. Nothing I remember past, can measure this.”

“And it wouldn’t, Ragnar,” said Brandon, “It’s the risk they take, building so close to such a volatile fault line.”

“Shor’s bones... the Golden Gate Bridge...” said Mazhe, looking to the northwest. Only half of the north tower, and the very lowest part of the south tower remained. Everything else had fallen into the ocean.

“Even if it had survived the quake, the tsunami likely finished it off,” Brandon guessed. “Damn. Looks like all the bridges were taken out either by the quake, or the wave.”

They set off, heading for the massive column of smoke to the southwest.

“When we get there... Ludvig, work with Jose, Bryce, Ragnar, and Haknir, look for survivors or people who are trapped. Rest of us, we’re on the fire,” Brandon decided.

“You find something that’s extra difficult, pull one of us away, but the priority has to be the fire,” said Aaron, “People are likely trapped and will be burned alive if we don’t act quickly.”

“And I’m including everyone in this—do not go off alone. Stick to groups, two or more,” said Ludvig. “It’s crazy the number of search and rescue people who are killed.”

“And most important,” said Harry, “We’ve got our radios. Keep in contact. Shit, keep forgetting how useful these things are. And guys. Food. Those of us who are magical. It’s still a bit more difficult to cast magic, so keep your energy up.”

“Yes, very wise advice,” Brandon agreed. “All right, coming up on site.”

Up close, it was literally an inferno, with flames shooting high into the early morning sky. The heat was almost unbearable, even from the point where they set down.

Harry squared his shoulders. “Let’s get to work.”

Mazhe cupped his hands together, sending a strong stream of frost at the outer edges of the fire, causing great clouds of smoke to billow outward. He was quickly joined by Harry, Brandon, and Aaron, as three streams of water added to the mix.

Ludvig, meanwhile, took the others, heading for the opposite side of the street, to begin searching the wreckage. Ludvig cast a detection spell, and almost immediately got two hits in the lower part of the ruins.

“Got two hits. Gonna vanish the top part of the building.”
He gestured with his wand, causing the upper part of the structure to disappear, and what remained shuddered.

“Careful, shit’s really unstable,” said Jose.

Ragnar and Haknir, meanwhile, began poking around the building next to it, which appeared to be in slightly better condition. It was still for the most part intact, at least visually.

Harry’s team, meanwhile, moved on to the next building, applying the identical technique, dousing the flames with torrents of ice and water, or vanishing parts of the flaming structure. If anything, vanishing the structure was proving more successful; even magical in nature, the amount of water they could produce wasn’t making all that much of a dent in the fire.

It was later in the morning, when there came a tremendous CRACK overhead. Harry glanced toward the east, and the source of the noise, to see a second battleship now hovering over San Francisco Bay. She was identical to the ship already present. The Ragnar had arrived.

“Scabbard, Mjolnir arriving on scene,” came a voice over the radio.

“Gladius, requesting we revert to our default station,” said Aaron.

“Roger that, Gladius. Mjolnir, Gladius is in your hands. We are now call sign Firebrand.”

“Roger that, Firebrand, we are now call sign Scabbard.”

There then came a series of acknowledgements across the radio.

“Welcome to the nightmare, Scabbard,” said Brandon, “But gods, this is a mess. On scene of a fire in Dolores Heights, partially contained. Pulled thirteen survivors and so far eighteen bodies.”

Only a short time later, there came a blur of bodies not far from where Harry’s group were working, revealing a group of people dressed in protective gear. One of them hurried over.

“Mr. Stormcrown?”

“Yeah.”

“Gina Francis, MIRT. We’ll take it from here.”

“Err... but...”

“Harry, c’mon, let the experts take over,” said Aaron.

“Wait. I thought they only responded to an incident involving magic.”

“Harry, remember what I said,” came Justin’s answer, “There’s a possibility this might be a form of magical attack.”

Harry looked angry. “If they did this...”

“Harry. Just... don’t think about it for now,” said Mazhe, “C’mon, there are many others needing our help.”

Ludvig’s team reconnected with Harry’s, as MIRT asserted control over the scene.

“Where now?” questioned Ludvig.
“The stadium,” said Jose, “Thousands of people there, right?”

“MIRT’s already there, so are local officials,” said Justin, “They’re setting up a makeshift shelter on the field. They’re stabilizing questionable parts of the building, vanishing wreckage…”

They took to the air again, and this time, evidence of the tsunami’s destruction came to light. The beach facing the Pacific ocean had been devastated, with most homes close to the edge being completely obliterated, the ground being scrubbed of just about everything. Small pieces of wreckage had washed up on shore, but very little remained.

“But gods, we could’ve been swept out to sea,” said Mazhe, softly.

“No. We were well clear of the water by the time it hit. It took some time to come down the coast,” Justin answered, “We’re only now just getting the damage reports from across the Pacific.”

“It’s 2004 all over again,” said Ludvig.

“Indian Ocean tsunami. It happened while you guys were attending the Queen’s ball, Harry,” said Brandon.

“I remember reading about it. But this…”

“It’s worse, yeah.”

“So if MIRT is here… that means your teleport functions are working, I guess,” said Bryce.

“Not reliably,” came Justin’s answer, “But the floo’s back up again, and port keys are working. MACUSA says they’ve re-routed floo network control through Las Vegas temporarily. LA’s still out, and the north’s still sketchy.”

“So… it’s sort of like the phone system,” Bryce guessed.

“In many ways, works exactly like the telephone system. It’s got a series of control points, and if one goes out… you get an outage,” Justin explained.

“There was the interruption in Trevelyan last year,” Harry remembered, “Didn’t they have to route things through Erwin?”

“That’s right. It caused a slow down on the network, with a small exchange having to handle the volume from a much larger location.”

“You’re talkin’ bandwidth, like on the internet,” said Jose.

“Exactly,” said Justin, “Even with magic, there are still rules, limits, and so on. Of course we keep trying to push those limits, just like the telcom companies are constantly trying to make the internet faster. More alike than people might think.”

Brandon looked at his watch. “Let’s head back to the theatre for something to eat and a break. We’ll come back out later.”

Shortly after noon hour, the group was back in the air. For the next couple of hours, they flew around, with Brandon, Aaron, Ludvig, or Harry casting detection charms as they went. If they got a hit, they landed, and vanished the wreckage, rescuing the individual or individuals who’d been trapped. A radio call to the Ragnar had a team arrive within minutes to collect the victims, and take them to one of several marshaling sites now set up in the ruined city.
The largest by far was AT&T Park and the promenade park directly east of it, where a number of tents were being set up. MIRT worked quickly, with both local authorities, and the US National Guard providing additional support, having been deployed by the President earlier that morning. It would still be a number of hours before FEMA would arrive on scene.

The theatre, too, was an operation point, though this one was run by the Commonwealth only. That didn’t mean people were being turned away, however, as the public rooms had become makeshift treatment rooms, where healers looked after the flood of injured. Some of the wounds were horrifying, but magical medicine had most of them stabilized within minutes.

The more seriously injured were being sent to either the Ragnar or the Arminius by floo powder, where they would receive more advanced treatment by healers on board. The statute was the least of the Commonwealth’s worries at this point.

Mid-afternoon, the group were a little south of what remained of the marina district, having just pulled another family from the ruins of their home.

“Gladius, Dragon lead.”

“Go ahead, Dragon,” said Aaron.

“Just passed over Coit Tower and Telegraph Hill. Spotted number two on your shit list, Prongs.”

“Dumbledore? What the hell’s he doing here?” Harry muttered.

“He alone?” Aaron questioned.

“That’s a negative, Gladius. We see at least eight bogeys. What are your orders?”

Aaron looked to Harry, who seemed to be deep in thought. Could call in an air strike, blast the son of a bitch into oblivion. But...

“Do nothing unless ordered. We will engage,” Harry decided.

“Roger that, Gladius.”

“Dragon, Phoenix Lead. Remain in situ.”

“Copy, Phoenix.”

Harry and his group, meanwhile, remounted their brooms. Coit Tower and Telegraph Hill, indeed, was a hill in the northernmost part of San Francisco. Up until yesterday, the tower was a rather prominent landmark.

Now, the tower lay in ruins, the violent quake proving too much for the historic structure.

“There,” said Bryce, pointing to a spot partially obscured by vegetation. “Sure I saw—”

The group were forced into evasive manoeuvres as no less than six bolts of green magic flew at them. They recovered, and Harry pressed a finger to his throat.

“Aw come on, Dumbledork, you can do better than that.”

“Harry...” Brandon warned.
“Guys, land,” Aaron decided, “I’m staying aloft. Dragon, tighten your circle, provide support as able.”

“Roger that.”

Jose didn’t wait for them to touch down, but practically rolled off the broom, to do a roll on the ground, to get back to his feet. Bryce, Ragnar, and Haknir also quickly dismounted, all quickly arming themselves once they gained solid footing.

Now, Dumbledore appeared, a pair of wizards flanking him, as Harry and the others dismounted, to join the non-magicals.

“What are you doing here, Dumbledore?” Harry all but hissed.

“I received word there had been a terrible incident here in San Francisco. This level of destruction, I must say, Harry, the ICW will be deeply disturbed.”

Bryce quickly put two and two together. “What are you implying old man? That the Commonwealth had something to do with this? Thought you were crazy first time I saw you. Now this just proves it.”

“Yeah, think that’s exactly what he’s implying,” said Brandon, “You just go ahead and prove it. It’s our record up against that of your mistress. Who will MACUSA believe first? A band of terrorists, or a long-time ally and friend?”

“Who have no inkling of your secret facility which lies beneath this now ruined city. What will they think, when such secrets come to light?” asked Dumbledore, softly. “It is truly astounding, what sort of chaos rumours can create. It will remain to be seen, whether Valicadia will be able to worm its way out of such damning information.”

“If this is a form of blackmail...”

“Oh no, my dear boy, it’s a statement. The New York Ghost will likely run the story in tomorrow’s early edition; likewise, I suspect the Daily Chronicle in Toronto will also carry the story... and I should imagine the Daily Prophet is going to print as I speak.”

“Scabbard, you getting this?” came Aaron’s question. He was aloft, just out of earshot, but they could still hear him through the radio. Likewise, he was hearing the conversation on his end.

“Roger that, Gladius. Government’s being warned, expedited.”

Harry smirked. “Our government will respond before it appears in the paper. We have ways of passing information.”

“I did warn you, Dumbledore,” one of the wizards to his right warned, “Now we’ve revealed our hand!”

“Enough!” Dumbledore snapped, “It won’t matter all that much in the end. The west coast is in ruins, millions of useless Muggles, scampering like the animals they are. Seeing Valicadia scrambling only makes the experience that much more satisfying.”

“Why, because we continue to do the right thing? This is a nightmare, Dumbledore! Yes, millions of people are here suffering, but you forget, so are thousands of innocent magical people!” Ludvig shot back, “You’re all fucking crazy!”
“Perhaps, then, those magical people might think next time, before they decide to live amongst inferior people. No-maj’s serve no useful purpose,” the wizard to Dumbledore’s left sneered.

Bryce caught the look of the wizard on the right, who’d been glancing to a spot over his shoulder. But he needed not act, as there came a series of soft ‘zip’ sounds, felling some of the foliage to the side of the parking lot. There came a soft ‘thump’ as something dropped to the ground.

“One down,” came Aaron’s voice.

“Roger,” said Brandon.

Now, the area lit up with spell fire and gunfire, as the two enemies clashed. The remaining five enemies swiftly joined the fight, abandoning their cover, as Air Wing riddled the brush and foliage with bullets—each aircraft carried twin 5 millimetre Gatling guns which discharged roughly nine-thousand rounds per minute. They were rather handy for mowing down enemies, or flushing them from cover.

“Fo... KRAH DIIIN!” Mazhe roared, and a pair of attackers were dropped by the deadly frosty blast.

“Avada Kedavra!” came the snarl from one of the remaining enemies.

Bryce didn’t hesitate, but jumped in front of the angry green blast of magic aimed at Jose, who was pulling the trigger on his MP5.

There came a terrible blast, as both Bryce and Haknir were thrown to the ground, and a sickly green arc of energy seemed to be reflected from both men back on the attacker. The terrorist collapsed in a heap, a look of surprise plastered on his face.

Adding to the confusion, there came a series of blurs, as a number of ghostly figures began to appear.

“Who dares disturb my rest?!” one of them snarled, brandishing a pair of scimitars exactly like Haknir.

Dumbledore stood there, back against the ruined tower, confused as to what he was seeing. How was it a Muggle had somehow reflected the killing curse? The man was definitely injured, but was still moving, rather sluggish, but still very much alive!

“Bryce?!” Harry shouted, alarmed. He was torn between the two clearly injured members of his team.

“D-don’t worry ’bout me!” Bryce stammered, as he tried to sit up. Jose was already at his side, brandishing his weapon in defence.

However, it was proven unnecessary, as the remaining attackers found themselves rather busy with the ghostly figures who had come out of nowhere.

“We’ll meet again, Mr. Stormcrown,” Dumbledore promised, before pulling something out of the pocket of his robes. He vanished. One by one, the remaining four terrorists also port keyed away, and the scene fell still.

Harry hurried over to where Bryce still sat, still looking very much out of sorts.

“Hit in the chest with a sledge hammer,” he muttered, reaching under his armour and pulling out the amulet. It was still very warm, casting a faint green glow.
“Bro. Your armour’s green, too,” Jose remarked.

Only then did Harry also notice, that sure enough, the Stalhrim had taken on a green tinge.

Mazhe, meanwhile, was looking after Haknir, as a number of the ghostly apparitions stood off to the side.

“Are you all right?”

“Just... knocked a little silly,” answered the former pirate, finally getting into a sitting position. He slowly reached into his pouch, and produced a healing potion.

“You somehow summoned an army,” said Ludvig.

“We answered his distress,” said one of the ghosts. “If you are well, captain...”

“All is well, Thalin.”

“Your assistance was welcomed,” said Ragnar.

“Thalin Ebonhand was my helmsman,” said Haknir, indicating the speaker. He gestured to yet another. “Garuk Windrime, my quartermaster.”

“Both of you are remembered,” said Ragnar. “Back in the barrow.”

“We still serve our captain, even in the afterlife,” said Thalin. “If you are well, captain, we will return to our rest.”

Ludvig gave a short bow of the head. “Your assistance was greatly welcomed.”

Now, the ghosts began to vanish, leaving the much smaller group.

“We need to return to the theatre,” Brandon decided, “At least get you pair checked out by a healer.”

“I’ll be well,” said Haknir, getting up on one knee.

Mazhe offered a hand, helping the pirate captain back to his feet. Bryce, meanwhile, was still somewhat dazed by the normally lethal curse, and so was supported in between Harry and Jose. Aaron had landed, and now picked up a piece of wood from the wreckage. He tapped it with his wand, causing it to shimmer blue a moment.

“All right. Gather around, it goes in ten.”

The theatre was slightly less busy than when they’d been in earlier. Some of the people were gone, the lobby being less-crowded. They were set on by a team of healers almost immediately.

“What happened?”

“Combat. Nailed with blasting curses,” Brandon lied. After all, it only appeared like the pair had been knocked a little silly. The truth could cause complications.

The healers began performing a series of scans on the injured men, a process which only took a couple of minutes at most.

“Muscle relaxant, a calming draught, and a mild pain reliever. I would have the pair of you take it
easy for the next few days, but knowing who you are, that’s unlikely. My advice still stands, to try not to over-exert yourselves,” said one of the healers.

“We’re in for the night,” said Brandon, “Shit just went down, and really, protocol’s being bent as it is—Harry, don’t argue. The pros are here, take a rest.”

Harry made to protest, but Mazhe put a hand on his shoulder. “C’mon, let’s take a break, regroup, at least until the morning.”

“All... all right, fine. Just...”

“Harry. Breathe. We’ve done some amazing things today, a lot of people saved. Now let’s look after ourselves for a bit,” said Ludvig.

“Harry. Put down your chest so we can come out,” came Justin’s voice.

“Oh. Uh, right.”

Harry reached into his pouch, and retrieved his chest. It took a few moments before he chose a spot on the floor, and pulled the lid open. And, less than a minute later, Justin and Zoey joined them.

“We’ve just about got full mobile functions back, the cellular network really took a hit from the quake,” said Justin. He looked Bryce over. “You okay?”

“Yeah, getting there,” Bryce answered, as Harry stowed his chest away again. “Really startled. But damn, it went right back in the guy’s face. Think he was more shocked than I was.”

“My armour shouldn’t have done that,” said Haknir, “A reflect enchantment was not included.”

“As we’ve already experienced on a few occasions, items enchanted in Nirn sometimes react differently here,” said Mazhe.

“As magic from here sometimes acts differently in Nirn,” said Harry, as Bryce got back to his feet. He still looked a little unstable.

“Here, lean on me,” Harry offered. “Uh. Where we going then?”

“Into the auditorium. I think there’s food and drink out,” Aaron suggested.

“And if not, we can summon either Dobby or Kreacher,” said Mazhe. “If magic’s working reliably again, that is.”

“I think it would be safe, yeah.”

Aaron was right. The orchestra pit had been lowered to the floor, and the barriers taken away, making for more than enough room to set up tables. A buffet of sorts was laid out with various dishes to choose from.

The organ console had been raised, and someone was playing a deep, sombre melody, the powerful sounds filling the auditorium.

“It’s J.S. Bach,” said Justin, recognizing the tune. “Come, sweet death(2). Fitting, all considering.”


“Yeah. Sure.”
“You sure you’re all right?”

“Just... still a little fucked up. That hurt like a sonofabitch. Worse than taking a hard line drive to the chest.”

“Killing curse. You didn’t expect it to tickle, right?” Ludvig’s comment was laced with sarcasm.

“Fuck off.”

“All I know, he could’ve died, and didn’t. That’s twice now,” said Harry, as he began to fix two plates. The distance from the front row of seats to the back of the orchestra pit was relatively short, so he could still hear what was being said.

Mazhe smirked. “Perhaps, Mr. Hunter has the soul of a cat. You know, that thing about them having nine lives and all that.”

Harry gave him a swat, then cursed softly. Mazhe was still dressed in his armour, meaning the gesture hurt Harry more than anything. Mazhe only smirked again, then stuck his tongue out at Harry.

“Right. You’re sleeping alone then.”

“You wound me.” Mazhe then smirked again. “That’s okay. Bryce will keep me company.”

In the front row of seats, Jose just shook his head. “They always like this?”

Bryce rolled his eyes. “You’ve got no idea. Thing is, their insanity helped me keep myself sane, if that makes sense.”

It was then Aaron felt his mobile buzz, as did Brandon and Ludvig. That coincided with a number of mobiles ringing. Justin pulled his out, and passed it to Zoey.

“Call your dad.”

Harry and Mazhe returned to the seats, bringing prepared plates—one for Bryce, and a second for Haknir.

“I caught Dumbledore’s look when the killing curse was deflected. His mask slipped for about a second, I think he was astounded,” said Aaron. “I’ll have to look at the memory in a pensieve, but the man was definitely shocked by it.”

“Great. Something else that makes me special,” Bryce muttered.

“Hey, it kept you alive for a second time. It’ll leave the old man rattled, know that much,” said Brandon, looking up from his enlarged mobile. Clearly, whatever he’d received was a detailed message.

“Jesus, this is bad,” Ludvig muttered, “Pictures coming in from LA, they’re in about the same shape as San Fran. Some of the skyscrapers downtown toppled over by it. Never thought I’d see that.”

“Yeah, and reports are starting to come in from Japan and Asia. Tokyo’s suffered massive flooding... estimates put the tsunami at between fifty and sixty feet,” said Brandon.

“Gods, that’s... millions of people...” Harry began.

“There’ll be thousands of deaths, yeah,” Justin answered, “But they have an early warning system
over there.”

“It’s still catastrophic,” said Brandon, “Korea, both north and south, Vietnam, this shit’s beyond bad. Every coast in the Pacific will be touched by it.”

“So the bastard wasn’t exaggerating,” said Bryce, “Thought he was just talking out his ass.”

“If anything, he only told us part of the story. But yeah, the whole west coast’s been impacted by earthquakes between eight point one and nine point three on the MM scale.”

“And... shit. Getting reports of several planes having missed approaches. Six... no, up to ten now,” said Aaron.

“Here?”

“No. San Fran’s on full ground stop, so is Oakland, LA, Seattle... damaged infrastructure. No this is a report out of O’Hare.”

Jose looked confused. “Chicago?”

“The government’s investigating.”

“So this thing may not be over,” Bryce guessed.

“We don’t know.”

“Well, there’s been warnings about the big one. Guess this was it,” said Bryce. “Some theories said the whole west side of the San Andreas fault would fall into the Pacific, make a whole new coast.”

Justin let out a snort. “And it’s bullshit. For that to happen... Jesus. Let’s just say, that event would likely be the least of our worries.”

Bryce gave a shrug. “Didn’t say I believed it. Uh... Harry... d’you mind taking this off of me?” He gestured to his armour. “Leave the boots.”

Harry flicked a hand, and the chest piece was instantly removed, to reappear at his feet.

“Thanks.”

Harry flicked a hand at himself, and instantly, his armour was also removed, and stowed away in his pouch. He thought for a moment, before doing the same for his partner.

“How about mine?” asked Jose.

“Right.”

And, quick as was asked, the borrowed armour was removed and stowed away.

“Hey, Jose?”

Jose turned to face the speaker. “Adam. You... you guys all right?”

“Yeah. We didn’t lose anyone. Your side?”

“Same. Uh... guys, this is Adam Wright. Adam. Harry and Mazhe Stormcrown, Ragnar Lothbrok, Justin Fraser, and of course, Zoey Bartlet.”
“Dr. Bartlet,” said Adam, with an incline of the head. “Your dad knows you’re all right?”

“Yeah, just spoke to him.”

“Oh. Well that’s good. Uh. Anyway, Jose, we’re gonna borrow some instruments and play a bit, you game?”

“Sure.”

Harry only now noticed it had gotten quiet, and glanced up to find the organist was securing things, the console gradually descending into the stage floor. Jose and Adam stood up, and made their way up the stairs to the stage, with a few others following shortly after. Some of them players, some of them not.

Indeed, a variety of instruments had been set up at the back of the stage, and the small group seemed to have a discussion for a minute or so, before choosing their pieces and getting organized.

Initially, the group just jammed together for a while, perhaps to get used to playing with each other. It brought back memories of the previous year, with the Glee club, and Harry found himself wiping his eyes.

“Harry?”

“I... I’ll be all right.”

Now, the group began to play in earnest, with Adam taking up the vocals:

It's all over but the crying
And nobody's crying but me
Friends all over know I'm trying
To forget about how much I care for you
It's all over but the dreaming
Poor little dreams that keep trying to come true
It's all over but the crying
And I can't get over crying over you(3)

It was no surprise some of the older people in the auditorium sang along, and if Harry had to admit, it was a perfect analogy to what was going on. The world had changed in the past few hours, and definitely not for the better. He found himself pulled into a hug courtesy his mate.

Chapter End Notes

UP NEXT: More fallout from the massive quake; several meetings between high level officials results in a conference involving Canada, the US, and Valicadia; More music at the theatre, wherein Justin sings for Zoey, much to her delight...

CHAPTER NOTES: Anyone want to guess as to why planes are suddenly missing their approaches, at airports thousands of miles away from the event?
(1) Had the quake only involved one city, it’s likely things would have been coordinated from the Oval Office. However, given the gravity of the event, it’s being managed from
the situation room. It’s an event affecting well over a quarter of the American population.

(2) A most fitting piece for the organ in this circumstance. One of J.S. Bach’s most famous pieces. Look up Virgil Fox’s rendition on the legendary Wanamaker Organ. It’s a masterful, deeply emotional piece. Now granted, a theatre organ doesn’t have quite the same sound as a pipe organ, but it would still sound incredible. I would so love to hear this piece done on the organ in Atlanta’s Fox Theatre. For the curious, Atlanta’s Fox Theatre was a ‘sister’, if you will, to the San Francisco Fox, with a comparable auditorium size, and organ installation.

(3) “It’s All Over But the Crying”, released in 1946. Writers: Seger Ellis / Russ Morgan. The Ink Spots version of the song has been featured in another Bethesda title released in 2015.
Discussions

Chapter Summary

More fallout from the massive quake; several meetings between high level officials results in a conference involving Canada, the US, and Valicadia; More music at the theatre, wherein Justin sings for Zoey, much to her delight...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

36. DISCUSSIONS

April, 2008 / Rain's Hand, 4E203

“If it's in your control, why do you do it? If it's in someone else's control, then who are you blaming? Atoms? The Gods? Stupid either way. Blame no one. Set people straight, if you can. If not, just repair the damage.”

- Marcus Aurelius

The following day proved just as chaotic, as the group continued to assist with the rescue operation. Feeling pressure from the Commonwealth, MACUSA also began to provide support, though the response still paled in comparison.

Likewise, in Canada, the Canadian Ministry was providing support in both Victoria and Vancouver, with numerous members of the magical community joining in the effort. Both locations had suffered massive damage, perhaps on the same scale as San Francisco. That left thousands trapped by wreckage. With evidence pointing toward it being an act of terrorism on the part of OND, the Canadian magical community felt it only fair they help out putting things back in order—or at least, attempting to. Magical or not, the level of destruction was astounding.

It was no surprise that a number of Harry’s friends and former classmates also joined in the operation. As much as he didn’t like the idea, it was ultimately their choice, considering they were of age by this point—or close to it. A few other familiar faces also joined, including Newt and his wife, who had resettled in Bthalft quite nicely.

“Guys. Let’s take a break,” said Brandon, “Just got a bunch of updates.”

They were again aloft on brooms, working the Potrero Hill area, looking for trapped survivors. Ron and Hermione had both joined them, as had the twins.

“We can land there,” said Aaron, pointing to a pair of baseball fields.

The group touched down, and brooms were stowed, while both Aaron and Brandon checked their mobiles.
“Damn... still getting reports of planes missing their approaches... interesting. It’s like—”

“GPS,” said Bryce, “The quake somehow fucked up GPS.”

“But how would that be possible?” Harry questioned, “That’s run by satellites, right?”

“It’s the only explanation,” said Aaron, “Hang on, sending this to Justin, see what he thinks.”

“What’s GPS?” Ron wondered.

“Global positioning system,” Ludvig answered, “The details are complicated, but in a nutshell, it’s a system that lets us know exactly where we are in the world, with five meter accuracy—about fifteen feet in the old scale.”

Hermione seemed to think a moment, before saying, “The earthquake might have altered the earth’s rotation.”

“Odin’s beard,” Ragnar muttered.

“Yeah, it’s very likely that’s exactly what’s happened,” Aaron agreed, “The 2004 Indian Ocean event altered the length of our day. Granted, that does happen over time, but that event... it was sudden. It’ll take a bit of time for it to be confirmed, but... just puts things into perspective, if you think about it.”

“That men are not the masters of the universe,” said Mazhe.

“And this dude’s not even from here,” said Jose.

That earned him a rude gesture.

“Well, this ain’t a surprise,” said Brandon, “Got both the NHL and NBA also scrambling—the San Jose Sharks are in the playoffs, their building’s also suffered major damage. MLB’s suspended the season for the next week while they figure out what to do.”

“No shit. The Padres, Dodgers, Angels, us, the A’s, and Mariners... if their fields are anything like ours... we won’t be playing at home for a while,” said Jose.

“Spring training fields,” said Bryce, “Probably my guess what’ll happen. Shit, likely for a good part of the season.”

That got a nod from both Aaron and Brandon. “No power, no phones, no water, no gas, broken roads, yeah, big sports venues will be the least of their worries. And even with our help, this will take months.”

“Uh... shit. Need to get back to the theatre,” said Brandon.

“Something wrong?”

“We’re being summoned back to the Ragnar for a meeting.”

“All of us?” asked Harry.

“No. Just... gather close.”

A few moments later, the group arrived back in the suites at the theatre, thanks to Brandon’s mobile. Things had once again been expanded to suit the group’s number.
“All right. Ludvig. You remember Mr. Wright?”

“Yeah. The Cardinals’ pitcher; we met him last night.”

“If you could track him down, and bring him up here.”

“Sir,” said Ludvig, before popping away.

“Did something happen?” Mazhe questioned.

“No. Well, nothing more, anyway. It’s a conference, they need some input from a few people. I’ll be going along, but everyone else is...”

“We’ll return to the field,” said Aaron. “Anyone not going to the conference can help out.”

“Sounds good,” Brandon agreed, “With Harry and Mazhe going with us, pull in an extra pair of guys.”

“I’ll see to it.”

There came another pop, and Ludvig reappeared, bringing Adam Wright with him. The guy looked more than a little green, and slightly startled.

“Here,” said Bryce, reaching into his pouch, and producing a stomach calming draught. “Unless you wanna puke all over the floor.”

“Oh, thanks.” Adam accepted the small bottle, and popped the cork.

“Be aware, they taste nasty, but they work,” Harry warned, as Adam consumed the contents.

“Jesus... don’t know what’s worse,” Adam muttered, as he passed the empty bottle back. However, as Bryce had promised, the nausea and discomfort he was feeling quickly dissipated.

“I did warn you it would be unsettling,” said Ludvig.

“Why didn’t you just use your mobile?” questioned Mazhe.

“The time it takes to pull it out, look up a bookmark... while it takes a split second to Apparate. Rather obvious choice, isn’t it?”

“Okay. So this is the thing. Some of us have been summoned to the Ragnar for a conference discussing this... event. Harry, Mazhe, Bryce, Jose, and Mr. Wright. I’ll also be going along.”

“Who else will be there?” Harry wondered.

“The Prime Minister and officials from several government ministries. They want our observations and opinions on a few matters,” Brandon answered. “Justin and Zoey will be meeting us on board.”

Harry turned to his friends. “You guys’ll be all right with Aaron and Ludvig; I trust them with my life.”

“Harry, it’s all right,” said Hermione. “Beside the point, I really haven’t had much chance to speak to some of your new friends.”

“Hermione, they won’t like being badgered with questions.”
It was then Brandon’s mobile buzzed with yet another message. He quickly read it.

“Uh. Looks like they want Ragnar to join us as well.”

Hermione looked deflated. Harry only smirked. “I’m sure there will be time tonight; we’ll be coming back here after the meeting.”

“Yeah, that’s the plan,” said Brandon. “Get close, so we can go.”

Adam glanced down at his clothes. “No chance for us to clean up?”

“They won’t care about it,” said Brandon, “Though if it matters...”

He produced his wand, and flicked it at the guy. Adam instantly felt like he’d had a hot shower and a change of clothes. And, in short order, everyone else was cleaned up, thanks to other magic users present.

“Everyone good? Let’s go.”

The Ragnar’s Ops Briefing Room had changed, and now resembled a large conference room, rather than a lecture hall, such as it was when Harry first saw it. Most of the attendees were already present, including the Prime Minister and some of her staff.

Justin was also present, along with Zoey, who shared a notebook computer between them.

“Promagistrate,” the Prime Minister greeted.

“Prime Minister,” answered Harry, with a polite incline of the head. “Is this everyone?”

“We’re still waiting for—”

An officer had appeared at the door.

“Ten-hut!”

Everyone seated got to their feet, as the Queen stepped into the room, with Chorley following close behind. For a moment, Harry felt under-dressed, but noted the Queen had not bothered to dress up by any means. It wasn’t like she was dressed in pyjamas or the like, but ‘casual’ was stretching it.

“Your majesty,” said Harry, giving a bow of the head.

“Harry, and friends. Thank you for joining us,” said the Queen, “If we could take our seats, we can get down to business.”

Adam was still confused as to why he’d been asked along, but now felt very much like a fish out of water, horribly under-dressed, now realizing the importance of the people in the room. An entire country, hidden from the rest of the world using magic... never mind the existence of magic, itself being an astounding revelation... it was making the guy’s head spin.

“Know exactly where you’re at,” Bryce whispered, as everyone took their seats, “This was me back in September.”

Adam opened his mouth to answer, but someone else had stood up, and started speaking.

“Prime Minister, your majesty, promagistrate. We’ve gathered to discuss the crisis which has
unfolded, and continues to unfold in San Francisco, and other major population centres on North America’s west coast.

“My ministry, as well as the Arcane Sciences department, continue to investigate the root of the event, and determine if it was truly triggered by magical means. Our contacts within the USGS are still waiting on exact numbers, but initial estimates peg the earthquake at nine point three in the northwest—cities including Vancouver and Seattle, eight point seven in San Francisco, and eight point five in the southwest—cities including Los Angeles and San Diego. Sacramento also suffered moderate to major damage.”

He sat down, while another stood up, producing a small remote. A large monitor took up the front wall of the room—the feature had not changed since the last time Harry was in the room. He pressed a button on the remote, pulling up an image of the North American west coast. Four locations were marked with a circle, one of them in San Francisco. The rest were all out to sea. A pair of lines were also marked on the map—one blue, off the coast, the other, red, dissecting the western edge of California.

“We’re still investigating three sites, and have included a fourth, all of which exhibit signatures identical to the incident which destroyed the city of Spiraminis back in September—namely harmonic resonance.

“The blue line you see is the Cascadia fault line, stretching from the Queen Charlotte Islands in British Columbia, south to northern California. The red line represents the San Andreas fault line, travelling the length of California, south to the Mexican border,” the man explained, using a laser pointer as a visual aid. “The first point we’re investigating is here.”

He used the laser pointer to indicate the first marked location, just south of the Queen Charlotte Islands.

“My department has discovered the wreckage of a small vessel at this location, and strong traces of magic. There are also mild to medium traces of harmonic resonance. The wreckage is being recovered, and sent to the crime lab in Trevelyan for analysis.”

“We should have those results in a couple of days,” said a woman further down the table, “Non-magical processes take a little more time.”

“Our next point of interest is here in San Francisco,” said the presenter, once again using the laser pointer to indicate a location in the western part of the city, “Our research facility has been severely compromised by the event, and so conducting an investigation has been, bluntly, dangerous. But getting to the bottom of what’s happened has been our paramount objective once it was determined the event may have been artificially triggered.

“Like at our first point of interest, we’ve been able to detect the signature of harmonic resonance. We’re still reviewing security recordings, but it’s proving challenging as it appears the equipment may have been damaged in the event.”

“Damaged?” Harry questioned, “More likely sabotaged.”

“Yes, our suspicions, Promagistrate,” the presenter agreed, “Nonetheless, the equipment has been sent to the crime lab for analysis, before we attempt repairs.”

He used the pointer to indicate the last two locations—one just north of San Bernardino, and the other south of Palmdale—both markers sitting right on the red line.
“We’ve verified further harmonic resonance at the site in San Bernardino, but Palmdale still has a question mark.”

“So what did these people do, set off... some kind of magical explosion?” Adam questioned.

“Not quite,” the presenter answered, “It’s more like—”

“Sound waves,” Justin answered, “Think sound waves. Except that this was magically-produced. The device likely caused massive vibrations—harmonic resonance, that in turn aggravated the fault lines to the point of rupture. Once triggered...” he let out a sigh. “You’re seeing the result.”

“This sort of... weapon... destroyed one of our cities last summer,” said the first presenter.

“Five hundred thousand dead,” said Harry, “And the scale of their attacks have gotten worse, exponentially. A half million in September, the attack in Washington—that one rather mild, only nine thousand... still horrifying. Attacks against athletes, musicians... then the attack in Dubai. Two million dead. And now this. Never mind the death toll! Millions homeless... roads, power, telephones, water supply... all knocked out. This is the worst they’ve done so far.”

“No, worse would be us ending up at war with the ICW,” said the Prime Minister, standing. “Even with us doing some very fast talking, a majority of member nations are ready to declare war—something we cannot afford. We’re already losing the PR battle.”

Harry thought for a moment. “Our traditional allies, where do they still stand?”

“Luckily, still in our court for the most part,” answered the Prime Minister, “But MACUSA’s raking us over the coals about our research facility.”

“We’re leaning toward closing it for good, given the amount of damage. A good number of experiments and projects were ruined in the quake,” said one of the earlier presenters.

“And the theatre?” questioned Harry.

“Will be moved. Once it ceases to be needed as a marshaling point for quake relief. It's being sent to Bthalft. It's still a Commonwealth asset.”

“So why are we... why am I here?” Adam questioned.

The Queen rose. “And now we get to the real purpose of the meeting. As the Promagistrate has previously mentioned, this latest event paints a most alarming future trend, with regard to the secrecy of our world. Our enemies, a faction of magical terrorists, have masterminded a series of devastating attacks, against both Us, and the non-magical world.

“If things continue as they are, we risk a widespread breech of the International Statute of Secrecy, a law which up until now, has kept our two worlds segregated. Three of you who have been invited to sit in on this meeting, have all been introduced to the magical world under perhaps undesirable circumstances. However, you have also experienced the positive side of our world.

“So the question, a question which will be asked of a number of people: what sort of reaction do you think we will receive, should we publicly reveal ourselves?”

The room fell quiet, as Adam processed the question. He did consider himself to be progressive-thinking, open-minded, and all that. Whether his opinion would ultimately matter, on the other hand...
“Personally? You have magic. So what? Just something else that makes you who you are, no different than say, red hair—” he indicated Mazhe, “—or green eyes—” he indicated Harry.

“Thing being... if you’re talkin’ the US, it’s gonna depend on region—I mean, don’t quote me on that... but many folks in my neck of the woods—they ain’t gonna like it.”

“We factor that sort of thing in, Mr. Wright,” said someone across from him, “Religious views do taint one’s perspective on matters, we agree.”

“I guess if you’re askin’ how much of a fight you’ll get... I dunno, really. You guys’ll get lots of goodwill, helping out the way you are here. But superstitious people... extremist nuts... y’all know what I mean. That’s where the problems’ll come.”

“Mr. Hunter?” questioned the Prime Minister.

“Think Adam’s covered the bases pretty well. Only thing I got to add... I’d be dead without Harry. He saved my life, something I won’t ever forget.”

“Mr. Armando?”

“Same thing here. I saw that... the effects of that device they set off near my house back in Florida. Thanks to the Commonwealth, I’m still alive, and my family’s still alive.”

“Ragnar. Your thoughts?”

“I believe my opinion on the matter carries little weight. Where I come from, magic was accepted just as it is here in the Commonwealth... or in Skyrim. That it be treated as some dark secret, it serves no positive purpose. Perhaps the world needs a reintroduction, if to restore some semblance of balance. I have said before, as it currently stands, your world races toward its own destruction. Discord, distrust, the antagonistic nature of various societies, their endless need to obtain useless things...

“The world needs a little more magic in it.”

That had more than a few people around the table nodding along.

Jose seemed to think on things for a moment.

“Then you’re thinking of... just up and showing yourselves.”

“It’s exactly what we plan on doing, Mr. Armando,” said the Prime Minister.

“Where do the Guardians of the Magnus stand on this?” Harry wondered, “Has Guardian Elaine been made aware of this?”

“She is aware, yes,” said the Queen, “We had a discussion early yesterday when the sinister nature of the events here came to light. She defers the ultimate decision to you, Promagistrate.”

“That doesn’t surprise me.”

“And your thoughts on the matter?” the Queen prompted.

“If we don’t do it ourselves, OND’s gonna do it for us. Our hand’s quite literally being forced. The better question, is the Commonwealth in a position where it can defend itself, in the event this revelation blows up spectacularly.”

“A question that we’re working on, Promagistrate,” said one of the few people in uniform. “As it
stands, the entire fleet is operating under elevated protocols, and has been since OND first revealed themselves and all but declared us a target.”

“We’ll likely elevate the security threat level to five before we actually do that,” said another aide.

“So... you guys have a terror alert level meter and all that shit,” Adam guessed.

“Similar, yes,” said the Prime Minister. “It ranges from level one to level six, and we’ve been at level four since the beginning of November.”

“So the lockdowns we went through—” Mazhe remembered.

“Levels five and six,” said the first aide. “The most severe protection protocols activate, which most of you have experienced on several occasions.”

Harry let out a huff. “All comes back to that bitch getting through the portal back in Capua.”

“It was a lapse in security, Promagistrate, we’re all in agreement,” said the man from the Ministry of Justice.

“And rehashing something that’s already happened won’t solve the problem,” said Mazhe, “My gut... the world’s gonna be more receptive to magic than you guys might think.”

“I sincerely hope so, Mr. Stormcrown,” said the Prime Minister, “If it does work out as we hope, it will take the wind out of OND’s sails, at least on one front. Particularly if we spell out exactly the sort of danger they represent to the non-magical world.”

“Talk to dad,” Zoey suggested, “The Commonwealth already has plenty of goodwill with him. If your communications office can speak with dad’s... Mr. Ziegler knows plenty on how to spin a story.”

The Prime Minister let out a chuckle. “That, he does, Dr. Bartlet.”

The conference ate up the rest of the day, and Harry was more than relieved when the group returned to the theatre. Of course, he knew it wasn’t the end of it; another conference was being arranged between Valicadia, Canada, and the US, with the magical and non-magical leaders of both nations being invited. It would depend on how quickly such a meeting could be arranged—Zoey had been reduced to a fit of giggles when the Prime Minister equated it to ‘herding cats’.

Harry mentally rolled his eyes at the visual, as they once again entered the auditorium. ‘I’m sure President Bartlet would enjoy being compared to such things,’ he thought.

“Doesn’t seem to be as many people around,” Mazhe noted, as they claimed a group of seats near the front, but off to the side. The rest of the group quickly joined them.

“It’s somewhat of an exodus,” said Aaron, “The national guard’s come through with trucks—flights have been leaving SFO fast as they can be loaded. Now that the mobile system’s working and the airport’s been reopened...”

“How come these guys are still here?” Bryce pointed out both baseball teams, still either in seats, or wandering around the auditorium.

“I’m guessing logistics. And we did have Mr. Wright with us for most of the day,” said Brandon.

“Clear them for Bthalft,” Harry decided, “If not tonight, in the morning. Things go as we hope, it
won’t matter anyway.”

Justin gave a nod. “Might be a thing... if this goes as we hope, I’ll send a message to Oren. Maybe we can help the affected teams out a little. We do have baseball fields in the Commonwealth, size comparable to what you guys are used to. Seating capacity, I mean.”

Bryce nodded along. “We have played games outside the US and Canada on a few occasions, yeah. But this won’t be just a few games.”

“We know that. But again, this all hinges on what happens in the next few days,” Justin answered. He glanced over at the instruments up on stage a moment.

“Mr. Wright, Jose, care to join me again?” He took Zoey’s hand, and led her up on the stage, with both Adam and Jose following. The organist was still there, though things were at the moment silent, as he was leafing through sheet music at the console.

Justin pulled Adam and Jose over, and the three of them spoke quietly for a few moments, with Jose at one point gesturing to a drum kit tucked out of the way to the side back stage. He then beckoned to a teammate to join them. That, in turn, had Adam do the same thing, and now four of the players were on stage, with Justin helping to drag the drum kit out.

“Gods, this is becoming a bit of a production,” said Harry, softly.

“I think it’s a good thing, Harry. Tell me, did the music not do a good thing for us all last year?”

“Oh, don’t think I disapprove,” Harry answered, “If anything, I kind of envy them. They have an extra skill or three.”

“Not that you’ve had much time for that,” said Aaron, “The universe has kicked your ass too many times.”

Harry let out a snort. “Tell me about it.”

By this point, word had gotten around that some sort of performance was setting up, and so people in other parts of the building were filtering in. And of course, as the makeshift band started mucking about, playing snippets of songs, that brought the majority of the stragglers in—at least those who can—remember, part of the building was also being used as a makeshift hospital.

Justin did much of the singing this time, with the others helping out. Harry was once again surprised by the somewhat hidden talent. Not that he’d win awards or anything—most certainly not professional, but make no mistake, the guy could sing, and quite well.

This stretched on for over an hour, before Justin finally spoke, “So, uh, Carly Simon recorded this back in the seventies, and it was featured in the James Bond movie ‘The Spy Who Loved Me’. But I’m going with a Radiohead cover I saw sometime ago on the net, an’ see if we can pull it off. Zoey, uh, this is for you.”

Harry couldn’t help but grin, as they started playing. Justin seemed to turn goofy around his girlfriend at times.

Bryce, meanwhile, could only shake his head. “Damn. That’s gonna be a tough act to even come close to.”

“You seen them?” Harry questioned.
“No. But I’ve seen the video he’s talking about(1).”

“Their music, it any good?”

Now, the organist had started playing as well, providing the orchestral accompaniment. Using the pedals, he was able to dampen the sound so it didn’t drown out the other instruments. That was the cue for Justin to start:

\begin{verbatim}
Nobody does it better
Makes me feel sad for the rest
Nobody does it half as good as you
Baby, you’re the best
\end{verbatim}

As Bryce had expected, it was a bit rough, but still passable, as Justin and the makeshift band ultimately pulled it off, receiving a strong ovation from the somewhat captive audience. Harry had noticed more than a few mobiles were out, likely recording the event.

The following morning, as had become the routine, both the SOU present and Justin received another update on the situation.

“The government’s helping now with clearing the roads of cars and wreckage,” said Brandon, “And likely today will be the last day we’re helping with rescue as we’re nearly at the seventy-two hour mark.”

“What happens at seventy-two hours?” questioned Haknir.

“A person dies of thirst,” replied Bryce. “We can live longer without food, but... yeah, seventy-two hours is pretty much it.”

“People sometimes get lucky,” Justin picked up, “If it rains... they get trapped where there’s water within reach... but that... that’s pretty rare.”

“It sounds like giving up,” said Ragnar.

“It does, yeah. But with thousands of people without food and water who are still alive... restoring infrastructure is becoming a priority,” said Justin. “And our resources are being taxed as it is, dealing with this nightmare on top of watching OND. It’s two sovereign, sitting governments they have now unseated. We’re quite literally being pulled in four different directions at once.”

“Four?”

“MOJ is monitoring several protests taking place in Trevelyan and Erwin,” said Aaron. “People are getting stressed out by all the tightened security, among other things.”

Harry let out a snort. “We’re unofficially at war. People should be aware of that.”

That had Ragnar looking confused. “And what stops her majesty from making it official?”

“The elected government,” answered Justin. “The Queen cannot arbitrarily declare war; she requires an act of Parliament to proceed. At least under normal circumstances.”


“Exactly. But again, she won’t do that. People are angry enough as it is; going roughshod over the elected government wouldn’t be wise.”
“And the government at this point is really not sure if declaring war on Britain or Norway would do all that much good... their people are not at fault for the actions of OND.”

“Dad was in the same place after nine-eleven,” said Zoey. “No one nation being responsible.”

“One of the biggest problems with a terrorist group: they operate in multiple places,” said Brandon, as he continued to read the messages on his mobile.

“Okay. Our theory about the GPS system doesn’t hold any water; the system glitched a moment according to our sources, but the issue was corrected in under a second. But there’s been further reports of planes missing approaches, and... radio signal blackouts... hold on.” Justin looked perplexed. “This sort of thing’s what I’d expect from a CME—a solar event.”

Now more than a few people looked confused. “A CME?” Mazhe questioned.

“Coronal mass ejection—a massive release of plasma and magnetic energy from the sun. If the earth’s hit by it, it can cause damage to satellites, communications systems, and even the power grid itself,” Justin explained.

“Shor’s bones... not sure if I’m amazed or frightened by such a thing.”

Harry seemed to think a moment before asking, “The explosion in Dubai... what did that do to communications in the area?”

“Non-magical? It was glitchy, and still is,” Justin answered, “Where you going with this?”

“Well, if the disruption was many miles underground, triggering an event thousands of miles long... my guess, we’re seeing something similar to Dubai, except on a much larger scale.”

That earned a slow nod from Justin. “I’ll pass that on to the department, see what they think. Definitely plausible, considering what we’ve seen.”

“So sending the guys anywhere by plane’s probably not a sane thing,” said Jose.

“And that won’t happen anyway. Given Harry’s ‘request’, we should have both your teammates, and Adam’s teammates cleared through security, likely this afternoon or evening,” said Aaron. “We’ll arrange a pair of port keys.”

“Drop everyone at my place for now; I’ll message Lisa and let her know.”

“We’ll have support in place to help out, and get everyone settled for the interim,” Brandon promised.

It was then Bryce’s mobile buzzed. And, as he pulled it out, Jose’s mobile also buzzed. So, too, did Justin’s.

“It’s a YouTube video,” said Bryce.

“Us singing last night,” said Jose, “Damn, it’s already got a hundred thousand views.”

“Is that considered... viral?” Haknir questioned.

“Well... by YouTube standards. It’s trending—popular, I mean,” Bryce explained, “It’s still pretty new, only been around a couple years.”

Ragnar looked confused. “How did such a thing end up on the internet so quickly? A person
requires a computer to post such... movies, as you call them, do they not?”

“Most newer mobile phones have web capability,” Justin explained, “They’re almost as good as the ones we have. Almost.”

“Cut out the teleport ability, and being able to enlarge the screen at will,” said Bryce. “Hold on.” He’d felt his mobile buzz again. “Jesus. The team’s just donated a million bucks to the relief effort.”

“The Nationals?” Harry clarified. That earned a nod from Bryce.

“Not to be outdone, looks like the Cardinals are also donating a million for the relief effort, and they’re challenging others to do the same.”

“Harry? You have that look,” said Mazhe.

“I’m willing to part with, say, one million galleons... for the relief effort.”

Some of the others present looked gob-smacked.

“What’s that in American?” questioned Jose.

“About ten million,” answered Justin, “Jesus, Harry.”

Now it was Jose’s turn to be astounded. “Holy shit. Knew you had money but...”

“It means very little to me in the end, Jose. I see a way to make up for the nightmare a small portion of our community has foisted on the non-magical world a few days ago. It won’t bring back the dead, but it should help get communities back on their feet, help people to put their lives back in order.”

Brandon cleared his throat several times, but began composing a message for DOI. The young wizard never ceased to surprise him.

“Uh, right,” said Justin, shaking his head. “Okay, so it looks like the President’s gonna be here tomorrow to survey the aftermath in person, beginning here. According to this... there’ll be a meeting in Sacramento—the state capitol building suffered minimal damage. Our Prime Minister, the governor general, MACUSA’s President, Canada’s Prime Minister and their Minister of Magic, and President Bartlet.”

“Are we invited?” questioned Harry.

“No. Though Zoey and I’ll likely go along, we won’t be in on the meeting.”

“And dad wants to see me in person,” said Zoey.

“Understandable,” said Harry. “What do you think’s gonna happen?”

“The Prime Minister’s already got most of the others on board, even MACUSA can’t deny we’re out of options at this point.”

“And my dad’s a reasonable man; if the meeting goes anything like yesterday’s, he’ll go along with the plan.”

April 16
The day previous had been a long one, not helped by yet another powerful aftershock; Harry and his friends had been up until late at night, once again putting things back to rights in the building, and assisting with another round of rescues. Buildings already weakened by the main event, and previous aftershocks, finally gave up the ghost, resulting in more trapped people—people who had most certainly been warned of the danger.

Needless to say, having to be up at four in the morning did no wonders for Harry’s mood—or anyone else’s for that matter.

“Yeah, three hours’ sleep, this is gonna be a fun day,” Aaron muttered, as everyone gathered in the common area of the suites.

“Lots of pepper-up potions to go around,” Mazhe snarked, as he fiddled with his necktie. “Do we really have to wear this?”

“We’re meeting the President, Mazhe. A foreign head of state. So yes, we have to dress up. Don’t feel so bad, I hate this too,” said Harry.

“Me, I don’t mind it,” said Bryce, “Almost makes me feel normal.”

“Mate, you’re never gonna be normal again, not after hanging around with us,” said Harry.

“I’ll rephrase, ‘more normal’. You go to enough gigs off-season, it’s expected.”

“Right. So the plan goes like this,” said Brandon, “Air Force One returned to Andrews overnight. A couple of our guys went along, to make sure the President got some sleep. It’s a known thing that he usually doesn’t sleep when he flies—no good for attending a potential day-long meeting.

“We’ll be taking a port key directly into the White House—MACUSA has secured an office in the sub basement level so our arrival won’t be immediately noticed.”

“The actual meeting will take place in the Roosevelt Room,” Justin picked up, “There’ll be a few senior staff present, and the President wants them to be aware of our...”

“They need to be aware of magic,” said Zoey, “Dad’s words.”

Bryce thought for a moment. “Not that I’m familiar with the White House, but... what about other people wandering around?”

“The Secret Service will be taking care of basic security, and there’ll be a restriction on communications out of the building,” Brandon answered. “The White House press corps won’t like it, but we’ve fed Mr. Ziegler a plausible reason for the restriction.”

“Well, the events here on the west coast, just that’s justification,” said Mazhe.

“Those of you not going, meanwhile, we’ll be continuing with cleanup efforts here,” said Ludvig. “I’ll be staying behind along with Aaron here.”

“We want to keep this a small group,” said Brandon, “It’s the White House, and magical or not, they’re gonna ask some very serious questions into our backgrounds. Some of you...”

“You need not explain further,” said Ragnar. “It could result in very uncomfortable questions.”

“Just having Mazhe go along was challenging,” said Brandon, “But knowing Harry, we made sure they got the right answers. The Queen absolutely wants him at this meeting, and if Mazhe wasn’t
“Yeah, I wouldn’t be going either.”

Harry reached into his shirt, and produced his time-turner. “What if... once we do our introduction, we use this? We can get eight hours, be out of sight—”

“And where you plan on doing that, Harry? Having a bunch of people disappear from the Roosevelt room... only to reappear sometime later, the President among them...” Justin pointed out.

“We use my chest. Can the Roosevelt room be sealed?”

“No,” answered Zoey, “Doors on all but one side, with glass panels. People are able to see in. If we use the Mural room...”

“How many entrances?” questioned Brandon.

“Two, and only one that would need to be secured; the other leads into—Debbie’s office?”

“Who’s Debbie?”

“Debbie Fiderer, dad’s executive secretary. She already knows about magic... a ‘squib’?(2)”

“That’s right. Justin?”

“Sounds like a plan. Send off a message to advance, let them know of the change. We can just port key right into the room—we’re on the ward white list.”

“So when we goin’?” asked Bryce.

“Soon as we’re ready. So let’s hurry it up.”

Harry pulled out his mobile. “It’s going on six thirty Washington time. Won’t we be early?”

“No. Remember guys, we’re expected,” said Justin.

Chapter End Notes

UP NEXT: Harry and a few of his group attend critical meetings at the White House, where the President’s staff is introduced to magic, culminating with a most absurd press conference...

CHAPTER NOTES: The GPS thing. Ended up doing some more research into the system, and realized the scenario I was painting didn’t hold water. So we get plan ‘B’, wherein satellite and radio communications is glitchy, still caused by the west coast event. And, I get to let Justin ramble some about another very scary cosmic event that could happen. Mazhe’s not exactly impressed.

As far as the story goes as a whole, I'm presently working on chapter 40, with likely 2 more to follow. Which means, I'm very close to the end. I do hope to have the story completely posted by the end of the year.

(1) The video Bryce and Justin are talking about here is amazing. Radiohead does an
astounding job on the cover, and I’m a massive sucker for covers. God, if only this was available as a single, I’d buy it.

(2) This just makes sense, given her sometimes quirky behaviour. Don’t ever ask my to choose between Debbie and Mrs. Landingham, though. Thought both were amazing at their job. And I have to shudder at the idea of MACUSA trying to get some of the President’s time, and having to go through Debbie. Yikes.
At a quarter-to-seven, the smaller group arrived in a blur of limbs, in the White House Mural room. Harry’s immediate impression, the room was a bit dark, even with the morning light pouring through the windows. Weren’t they supposed to close the drapes?

Almost immediately, the door at the back of the room opened, and a trio of men entered, all sharply dressed in suits.

“Commander, Promagistrate,” one of them greeted. “Do you need a minute, or can we get rolling?”

Harry glanced at his companions, and getting no objections, he gave a nod. “I think we’re set.”

“Very good. One of us will be staying in the room, and... I believe the head of the President’s security detail—”

“Ron Butterfield,” Zoey clarified.

“Yes ma’am,” the first soldier, Harry now realized, answered, “He will be sitting in on the meeting as well. There will be one other Secret Service agent in the room, his request.”

“It’s expected, and acceptable,” said Brandon.

“The President should be joining us in about ten minutes.”

“Did dad get some rest on the flight home?”

“He slept perfectly well, according to his personal aide, ma’am.”
It was then the door at the back of the room once again opened, and a few more people filed in: a strikingly tall woman with blonde hair, a balding man with dark hair and a neatly-trimmed beard, and a somewhat older gentleman. The thing about the third which struck Harry, was the way he dressed. Old school, a double-breasted suit jacket, rather than the single button suit his colleague was wearing.

“Mr. Stormcrown, I introduce CJ Cregg, the President’s Chief of Staff; Toby Ziegler, Director of Communications and acting Presidential Press Secretary, and finally, Leo McGarry, Senior Counsellor to the President,” the first soldier introduced.

“It’s an honour,” said Harry, stepping forward to shake three hands. “I introduce my partner, Mazhe; Commander Brandon McAllister, her majesty’s Special Operations Unit; Bryce Hunter; and lastly, though I’m certain you lot already know him, Dr. Justin Fraser.”

“Oh yes, we certainly know of him,” said Leo, “Your adventures with the President’s daughter recently continue to give us grey hairs.”

That earned a pained expression from Toby.

“And the President knows that none of the incidents we’ve been involved in have been planned or intentional,” said Brandon, “We don’t intentionally put Dr. Bartlet in harm’s way.”

“Oh, we know that too,” said Toby, “Not that it makes things any easier.”

“I’m sure it doesn’t,” said Harry. “I know all about the endless press cycle; the media gets hold of something and runs with it. Not that I give a rat’s—ow.”

“Watch your tongue,” said Brandon, “You wouldn’t curse in the queen’s residence, so don’t do it here.”

“The Queen of where?” CJ questioned.

“We’ll explain in detail when the President arrives,” Brandon promised. “But he knows about us, and has arranged this meeting this morning. In case he didn’t underscore the importance...”

“No, no, he made it very clear on the phone last night,” said Leo.

Toby still looked annoyed. “Are you able at least give us an overview of why we’re here?”

Brandon looked at Harry. “They’ll know all of it shortly. Just omit the... you know.”

Harry gave a nod. “The gist of us meeting you all, is in response to the increasing severity of recent terrorist attacks against the US, and ourselves. The faction is striking American targets in order to get to us; to fracture and divide our allies, and far worse, to reveal secrets—secrets which could—if revealed in a negative manner—destabilize modern society as a whole.”

Leo seemed to process this, but CJ quickly put the pieces together. “A hidden country. How?”

“Part of what we’ll go over when President Bartlet arrives—”

“Magic, CJ. Magic,” came a voice from the doorway at the back of the room.

Everyone turned to find the President walking into the room, a pair of agents tailing behind. Harry guessed the man was about his height—perhaps a little taller, with broad shoulders. Definitely younger than Leo, if he had to guess, maybe a generation.
CJ squared her shoulders and stood up just a little straighter, though mentally confused by her boss’s words. “Friends, the President of the United States.”

That spawned another round of handshakes.

“Is this everyone?” one of the soldiers asked.

“Yes. Unless, Mr. President...”

“No, this is everyone.”

“Excuse me, sir,” said one of the soldiers, with another quickly following, out the door at the back of the room. It was then pulled closed.

“Commander McAllister,” said one of the agents.

“Agent Butterfield,” Brandon reciprocated, as the pair shook hands. “Guys, this is Ron Butterfield, in charge of the President’s protection detail.”

President Bartlet, meanwhile, took in the sight of his youngest daughter, before the pair embraced tightly.

“Dad.”

“You’re well, keeping safe?” he asked, as they separated.

“It’s been crazy, but nothing these guys couldn’t handle,” answered Zoey.

The President looked at her thoughtfully, then at Justin. Yes, the young man had kept his promise—no doubt helped by the others in the group. Sure, there had been more than a few moments where he’d almost insisted she return to Washington, but... if he were truly honest with himself, she was in good hands. What little he was able to learn of the young wizard with dark hair and green eyes... he’d taken care of the last dark wizard—Voldemort, was it? Keeping his daughter safe was likely a small chore in contrast.

He was pulled out of his thoughts, as the second agent took his place by the door at the side of the room, while the first SOU soldier took his place by the rear door. Brandon appraised the situation, before giving a nod. “We’re secure.”

The President indicated everyone sit down, and so everyone did so. Two couches faced each other, with a pair of chairs at one end, and a pair of tables at the other.

“Mr. Hunter,” said Toby, “Why are you here?”

“He’s here at my request,” said Harry. “His observations of the past... uh... six or so months... it’ll help us paint a picture of things. Wait. Brandon, how difficult would it be to fetch Captain Walker and Sergeant Lugo?”

“No,” said Brandon, “They wold cause too many complications, never mind getting them clear of the wards.”

“A... ward? Ward of who?” asked CJ. “And what did you mean by ‘magic’, Mr. President?”

“CJ, Toby, Leo, what would you say if I told you magic is not just something out of a fairy tale, but in fact very real?”
Harry had to work very hard mentally, to not smirk. But the way he’d just delivered that line, deadpan calm... gods above.

CJ had a look of disbelief, while Leo had a thoughtful look on his face. Toby, meanwhile, furrowed his brows. “I think the first question I have to ask, is did somebody put something in your coffee, sir? Or do we need to schedule a mental health examination?”

“Mr. Ziegler, I assure you, the President is perfectly sane, and perfectly sober,” said Brandon. “I’m a wizard. So is Mr. and Mr. Stormcrown, here, as well as Dr. Fraser.”

“But...” CJ began, but the President shook his head.

Justin produced his wand, and flicked it at the table directly beside him. In an instant, it was replaced by a chicken, which then clucked twice, and scurried off toward the other side of the room.

“Real original, Justin,” Harry muttered, before flicking a hand at the animal. It instantly reverted to its original form, and another flick of the hand restored it to its original position.

“I could’ve made it dance, but... just going for the practical demonstration.”

Toby muttered something unintelligible under his breath, while CJ was still fixated on the table. Leo still looked thoughtful, still processing what he was seeing and hearing.

“I’m sure you would like to see more examples, and trust us, in the next while, there’ll be plenty of demonstrations,” said Brandon, “But we are pressed for time.”

“Why the urgency?”

“Think, Toby,” said Leo, “The attacks we’ve seen unfold since September... correct me if I’m wrong, Commander.”

“No, you’re exactly right, Mr. McGarry. The group responsible, ‘Order of the New Dawn’, as they’ve called themselves, are a magical terrorist faction. All terrorist groups are dangerous, but these guys... particularly so.”

“What’s their mantra—what do they want?” CJ questioned.

“For all of us to die,” Bryce answered, “Not just Americans, but everyone. Anyone who ain’t magical. They don’t give a sh—a damn about who we are. Rich, poor, world leader, doctor, they don’t care. If you’re not magical, you’re...”

“A nuisance, an insect that must be squashed,” Harry picked up. “The magical community is split on the opinion of non-magical people, but where we come from, magical people and their non-magical counterparts coexist perfectly well.”

“How long have you known, Mr. President?” Leo questioned.

“The first night alone in the Oval,” the President answered, “You had already left. There is a painting.”

“The one no one’s ever been able to remove,” said Brandon. “It’s been there since the early 1950s, when MACUSA began to coordinate with the non-magical government.”

“As the gentleman explained that night,” the President continued, “It was certainly a startling, and eye-opening conversation.”
“I can only imagine, sir,” said Brandon, “Now, who is MACUSA? It’s an acronym, Magical Congress of the United States of America. The magical authority here in the US.”

“And there are other magical counterparts in say, Mexico and Britain,” Leo guessed.

“Yes. Unfortunately, the British magical authority is now an enemy. Specifically, they’ve been taken over by Order of the New Dawn—OND for short,” Justin explained.

He reached into his pouch, and produced his mobile, then his laptop.

“Let me locate the audio of the broadcast they made in Britain after taking over.”

“Since we are still in good standing with Britain, I’m assuming they haven’t bothered the non-magical government,” said Leo.

“We’re working with the Canadian ministry to keep the terrorists away. Just as we’re working with MACUSA to provide security here, and at other critical government installations.”

Now, the three senior officials understood exactly why this meeting was taking place.

“A witch or wizard could just waltz in here unimpeded, walk off with sensitive information, sell it off to the highest bidder...” Toby began, getting up a head of steam, “My god...”

“Toby... it’s not that simple,” said the President.

“No. It wouldn’t be,” said Brandon, “With MACUSA being one of our allies, we’ve been able to demonstrate just how dangerous these monsters could truly be, so the threat’s taken very seriously.

“The three of you, among others, are being shadowed at all times by Aurors—magical police, to keep it simple, or some of our guys. If something looks odd, count on it being investigated. If it’s urgent, they’ll intervene.”

“We’ve been working alongside MACUSA since September,” said Butterfield, “I won’t go into details due to the sensitive nature of it, but MACUSA and Commonwealth agents are providing additional manpower to the security detail.”

“Justin, it’s there,” said Zoey, drawing everyone’s attention to the laptop. Justin was flipping through a directory of media files, but Zoey had spotted what he was looking for.

“Sorry, right. So this is a recording of the message OND broadcast over the wizarding radio in Britain the day after their coup.”

Justin opened the media clip, and let it play. Both the President and Leo only sat quietly, listening to the recording, but both CJ and Toby had begun taking notes.

It proved to be rather short, and Justin closed the media player.

“I have a transcript of the address if it’ll make it easier,” said Brandon. He reached into his pouch, and produced a page of paper.

“I’ll take an extra copy,” said Leo.

“Right.”

Brandon produced his wand, and in an instant, it was duplicated twice. “It doesn’t produce magically useful copies of things, but in this case, it’ll more than suffice.”
“I assume, then, there are rules for magic,” Leo guessed.

“Very much so, sir,” said Harry, “Just like there are rules in the natural world. I guess... magic is just an extension of the natural world. That’s the one thing we want all of you to remember: if nature hadn’t intended for us to exist... we wouldn’t exist.”

“Who am I to argue?” Leo spoke, “We have too many enemies to worry about nature’s creations.”

“That we do, sir,” Harry agreed, “Now if only OND would get that. Instead, they do this nonsense, and in doing, threaten humankind’s existence as a whole.”

“And now we get to the heart of this meeting,” said Brandon. “President Bartlet is already aware of what we’re about to tell you. As is Canada’s Prime Minister. His staff are sitting in on a meeting identical to this one at this very minute; that should underscore the severity of the situation.”

“I think I see where this is going,” said Leo. “The magical world is now at risk of exposure because of these... incidents.”

“It’s exactly the case, Mr. McGarry. We’re being forced to choose the lesser of two evils: expose ourselves in a controlled manner, or be exposed under horrifying, destructive, and devastating circumstances. The choice between having a portion of the non-magical world hate us... or having the entire non-magical world come at us with everything they have. A fight which we know we’ll lose, and badly.”

“The Salem witch trials,” said CJ.

“It’ll make that look like a minor inconvenience.”

“You want to hold a press conference wherein you will reveal the magical world,” said Toby. “What do you plan on doing, performing this... transformation—”

“Transfiguration,” Justin corrected.

“Fine, this... transfiguration... on live television?”

“Perhaps not quite that simple, but the gist of the plan is that. The Canadian ministry will be doing the same thing.”

“And you need our help to do so,” CJ guessed.

“We need help from our allies, Miss Cregg. Most of our interactions with the magical international body have come with support from both the United States and Canada.”

“Now you do know that your little demonstration might easily be explained away,” CJ pointed out, “Written off as special effects.”

“We know,” said Justin. “One of the things being suggested, is that we have a team of MIRT working to fix a building in San Francisco, and get it on camera. Make sure there are plenty of people around to see it, so we get a raw reaction. My department should be able to coordinate with the non-magical television networks to get it covered.”

“Who are you people, exactly?” Leo questioned.

“The one detail we’ve left out,” said Brandon. “We’re from the Commonwealth of Valicadia. Our capitol city lies roughly four miles underground in Canada’s Northwest Territories, but we have a
number of other cities in other places in the world.”

“And are any of those cities in American territory?”

“No. Trevely—our capitol—is the only city in North America. It was founded sometime after our original capitol of Erwin, below England’s south coast.”

“You hide underground,” CJ deadpanned.

“Yes. Though it’s not as dark as you might think,” said Brandon.

“How old—how long as the Commonwealth existed?” this from Leo.

“We were founded officially in 912 CE, but the community at Erwin—originally named Eoforwin, existed for several centuries prior. Now, I know there are likely many questions about our makeup and so on, but we’re somewhat pressed,” said Brandon, “Trust us, there’ll be lots of opportunities for you to get to know us—we’ll put you in contact with the Royal Communications Office; they’ll be more than willing to talk to you.”

“You touched on the quake in San Francisco,” said Leo. “I assume the magical community is involved.”

“Heavily, yes,” said Justin, “And we’ve stopped censoring videos being posted to social media, so there’s already evidence out there of magic.”

“As these folks have mentioned, the magical world is heavily involved in the event, but that’s not the entire truth, is it, Commander McAllister,” said the President, giving Brandon a sharp look.

“No, sir, it’s not,” Brandon responded. “Our Arcane Sciences department has been investigating four sites along both the Cascadia fault line, and the San Andreas fault line, where powerful magical devices were placed and activated. I won’t go into detail, but put simply, it’s our belief that the quake may have been triggered magically.”

The three presidential aides looked gobsmacked.

“That’s... insane,” said Toby, softly.

“It’s what they’ve been doing, Mr. Zeigler. Washington, Dubai, the west coast... this is what they’re doing,” said Justin, “Couple that with several incidents only affecting us, or the magical world... they’ve murdered millions of people—the quake being the worst—if they’re truly responsible.”

“What they might do next... quite honestly, it’s scaring the hell out of us,” said Harry. “Every attack, it’s increased in magnitude. What was it, Justin? A half-million killed in Spiraminis?”

“FEMA’s estimating we may have a million dead when all is said and done on the west coast,” said Leo.

“MIRT pegs it at about five million,” said Brandon. “Major Incident Response Team—our equivalent to FEMA. They’ve been on the ground since the morning of the 12th—once we had an inkling of it being a magically-triggered incident.”

“And I have already expressed gratitude on behalf of the nation,” said the President, “Though I can see doing so in a much more public manner during this... I would assume, press conference.”

“That would go a long way, sir,” said Harry.
“All due respect, Mr. President, but we can’t just hold a press conference and let these guys perform a few parlour tricks, and pass it off as credible,” said Toby.

“We don’t expect it overnight, Mr. Ziegler,” said Brandon, “We expect this to take a few days, but the thing is, every minute we spend debating the validity, is one more minute OND has to plot and execute another attack.”

“Mr. President?” Leo prompted.

“I want you three to work with these guys,” said the President, “Get a plan together that won’t look ridiculous.”

“Surely there are others more suitable than me,” said Toby, still doubtful. “And CJ—”

“Charlie can look after some of my schedule. You’re the Communications Director, Toby. This is exactly the sort of thing you need to be in the room on.”

“You guys still doubt us. Harry, show them your Patronus,” said Mazhe.

Harry produced his wand. “Expecto Patronum.”

Now, Toby couldn’t help but be amazed at the ghostly animal which had been spawned from Harry’s wand.

“What’s it for?”

“Protection against several dark creatures in the magical world,” Justin answered, “Creatures OND does like to call on sometimes in their attacks. One of them, non-magical people aren’t able to see them. They’re called Dementors.”

“Feels like all the happiness gets sucked out of you,” said Bryce, “F—screwed me up for nearly a day. Harry says they can take someone’s soul.”

Harry flicked his wand again, dispensing with the magical shade. “Dementors were set on a magical school full of young children during one of OND’s attacks in November. They don’t differentiate between magical or non-magical people. They show no mercy, and yes, as Bryce said, they will ultimately take the victim’s soul if given the opportunity. In November, he came within a hair’s breath of being kissed—losing his soul.”

The three aides and the President all looked ill from the revelation.

“Without witches and wizards, they could run unchecked, attacking unsuspecting non-magicals without impunity. This is one of the reasons the Commonwealth needs your help, Mr. President.”

“CJ, help them with whatever they need. Toby, Leo, same thing. And we’ll need to speak to MACUSA’s President, make sure they’re on the same page,” said the President, standing, “Now I have a security briefing that began five minutes ago, but I’ll be in throughout the day. I want progress on this.”

“Yes, Mr. President.”

“Yes sir.”

“We’ll get it done, sir.”

Everyone rose, as the President left the room back the way he’d come in, with Butterfield following
close behind.

“Well, there goes the idea of using the... never mind,” said Harry, seeing the glare Brandon was giving him.

“First thing you guys have to keep in mind... what Harry and Mazhe kept telling me when we first met. Be ready for anything. The magical world still throws me six months later. And I mean the good stuff and the bad,” said Bryce. “Whenever that happens... I keep remembering that these guys saved my life back in September.”

“The attack on RFK Stadium,” Leo remembered, “It was an eventful evening, for the wrong reasons.”

“As we’re aware,” said Brandon, “The President was in Chicago that evening, if I remember correctly.”

“Still didn’t make for a pleasant evening here, Commander,” said Leo, sounding annoyed.

“Nor was it a pleasant evening in Valicadia. Our terror threat level has been at four since.”

“Never mind the number of times her majesty has called at my residence on the count of those security protocols,” said Harry. “She prefers the confines of my residence rather than the security bunker.”

“And we’ve discussed that many times, Harry. Your residence is in an unreachable location.”

“Which is why the President has sent the First Lady into your care,” Leo now realized, “He only said she’s been sent to Bthalft or something...”

“Bthalft,” Brandon clarified, “It’s one of our cities. The security protocols in place for someone to get there are the toughest in the country. And, her actual location is watched around the clock by some of my colleagues.”

“What branch of the military you from?”

“Originally Navy, sir, but I come from a unit under the direct control of the Queen, her Special Operations Unit.”

“SpecOps, then,” said Leo.

“Equivalent to your Navy Seals, or Britain’s Special Air Service. We serve at the pleasure of her majesty.”

“And now a few more things make sense,” said Leo, “The President was adamant the First Lady be sent away, along with the rest of his close family.”

“And as you also know, they’re in contact on a daily basis, if perhaps less-so with Zoey recently. We try and make sure she talks to her father as often as possible.”

“The President appreciates that.”

“We should get started,” said CJ, “I gather all of you have some amount of experience in dealing with the press...”

The following day, the group once again found themselves in the White House Mural room, as the
conference picked up right where it left off, after a long day of discussions which stretched deep into the evening. Rather than returning to San Francisco, the group had spent the night at the White House—though staff were only aware that Justin and Zoey were staying.

In reality, Harry, Brandon, Mazhe, and Bryce had climbed into Harry’s chest, after which Justin had picked it up, and took it up into the residence with Zoey. It might have been breaking the rules, but no one needed to know. Beside the point, it would avoid the circus that was the theatre, still being used as a marshaling point in the aftermath of the quake... and being woken up by yet another aftershock hadn’t done any wonders for the group’s nerves.

The majority of the day was then spent bringing various members of the staff into the room, and introducing them to the group, and giving a demonstration. Only a few reacted poorly, but ultimately, the process went relatively smoothly, with everyone being asked to keep quiet for now, as there would be a very public revelation in the coming days. Those who did react poorly were sent to other senior members who would handle things appropriately.

With most of the West Wing now aware of the secret, the conference was then moved into the Roosevelt room to take advantage of the table space—not to mention, with them working through dinner, it just made sense. No surprise, the food consisted of Chinese take-out. Harry had grown annoyed with the accumulated mess, and simply vanished the garbage.

“I could get used to that,” CJ quipped.

“Magic does make some things easier, yeah,” Harry agreed, “Many people on the west coast are experiencing this on a larger scale. We won’t be able to rebuild everything, but it doesn’t mean we can’t try.”

It was then Brandon’s mobile rang. That coincided with Justin’s mobile buzzing, the notification of a new message. They both pulled out their devices, and while Brandon took the call, Justin read the message.

“Jesus. OND just attacked Buckingham Palace.”

“Hang on, putting it on speaker,” said Brandon, setting the mobile on the table and pressing a button. “Aaron, you’re on.”

“DOI’s sending reinforcements, and the royal family’s been taken to a secure room.”

“It won’t last,” said Brandon. “Coordinate with the Canadian Aurors. If I remember correctly, there was a plan in place to evacuate the family to Canada.”

“Which was never practised, sir.”

“No time like the present.”

“See it done,” said Harry, “I may be a British ex-patriot, but I do know the importance of the royal family.”

“Sir,” came the reply.

It was then Brandon’s mobile rang a second time. He glanced at the number, before pressing the button to accept the call. “Mrs. T., you’re on speaker with Lieutenant Carpenter.”

“You’re still at the White House?”
“Yes ma’am,” Brandon answered.

“We’re raising the terror threat level to five,” said Mrs. T.

“Aaron. Send Ludvig to my location. And Mrs. T., I’d appreciate an expansion of the protection detail here. If they’ve gone after the British monarch…”

“Way ahead of you, Commander. The Secret Service has likely already received a warning of the incident…”

It was then a number of men in suits hurried by in the corridor outside. That coincided with a blur just behind where Brandon was standing, to instantly reveal Ludvig, mobile in hand.

The senior aides present were all staring agape.

“How… how is that… he just…” Toby stuttered.

“It’s a form of teleportation, Mr. Ziegler,” Harry explained, “Part magic, part technology.”

“But… he just…”

“This is Lieutenant Ludvig Jarisson, part of my unit,” Brandon explained, “We would have explained this sooner, but the urgency dictates that we have additional resources given what’s going on.”

“We’re now also getting a report of magical activity at 10 Downing Street—” Mrs. T. Began.

“The British Prime Minister’s residence,” CJ clarified.

“Who has been taken and secured,” said Mrs. T., “We’re already sending off emergency messages to our magical allies so they’re aware.”

That effectively ended any meaningful discussion for the night, as the SOU coordinated with DOI on security. With it being an incident posing a threat to non-magical leaders, both the Aurors and the Secret Service locked down the building, meaning no one entered or left.

And, that wasn’t the end of the very sour night, for just after 9 pm, one of Toby’s assistants stepped into the room. “You need to see the television.”

“On TV? What channel?” questioned Brandon.

“Thirty-one, sir.”

Brandon touched his mobile with his finger, causing it to enlarge so everyone could see it. A few button presses had the channel in question.

The picture was obviously being recorded from an aircraft—a helicopter, if Harry had to guess. It seemed like the ground was engulfed in flames for as far as the eye could see.

“What happened?” questioned CJ.

“Two airliners collided in mid-air northwest of Miami International. Still sketchy on the details.”

Ludvig already had his mobile out. “We’ll get Arcane Sciences on-scene to make sure magic wasn’t involved.”
April 20, 2008

Harry, Mazhe, and Bryce stood quietly off to the side of the dais set up in the East Room of the White House. A sea of reporters had already filed in and taken their seats, while technicians hurried about, making last-minute adjustments to their equipment. A large video screen was set up on the opposite side of the stage, and the picture showed a similar scene taking place in a cathedral-like corridor somewhere in Ottawa. Harry thought it looked similar to one of the corridors at Hogwarts.

The last couple of days had been mentally exhausting, as he and his group answered many questions posed by the President’s staff, and sometimes, by the President himself. As he had promised, he sat in on the discussions at several times during the days, but given his position, he was quickly pulled away by some other meeting or crisis.

Arcane Sciences had investigated the crash site, and determined that the event had been caused by a magical disturbance, in the same manner as the GPS disruptions. All of it rooted back to the earthquakes on the west coast. As to whether it would improve or get worse, no one could answer for certain.

Harry was pulled out of his thoughts, as the President stepped into the room, followed by CJ, Toby, and Leo. That had everyone seated scrambling to their feet. Harry could see something similar was happening in Ottawa, where a man was stepping up to the podium there, flanked by several people, one of them being the Commonwealth’s Prime Minister.

The President was then at the podium, taking out his glasses, to then read a page of paper in front of him. He then looked up, and began;

“My fellow Americans...”

Chapter End Notes

UP NEXT: Fallout from the massive revelation on a number of fronts; a snap election is called; and OND seems to be hatching yet another nasty plot...

CHAPTER NOTES: So yeah, I’m not even going to ATTEMPT to write a speech here. I’m not Aaron Sorkin, nor am I a high-profile speech writer for the President. Nothing I could write would match what’s required there. So I’ll leave it up to you to imagine what he’d say & how this would play out.
I can now tell you there are at maximum six chapters left--perhaps only five, as I have just finished writing an event that was quite literally six years in the making. I have hinted at something big, anyone care to guess where I'm going with this?
Politics

Chapter Summary

Fallout from the massive revelation on a number of fronts; a snap election is called; and OND seems to be hatching yet another nasty plot...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

38. POLITICS

April - May, 2008 / Rain's Hand - Second Seed, 4E203

“Laws, like sausages, cease to inspire respect in proportion as we know how they are made.”

- John Godfrey Saxe(1)

April 21, 2008
Ministry of Magic,
London

OND’s leadership were once again gathered in the Minister’s office, only hours after the joint press conference held in both Ottawa and Washington. If Dumbledore were honest, it had been a bold step, one OND hadn’t expected. Most of the membership now present looked somewhat rattled by the move, and if not for his age, Dumbledore would have been unnerved as well.

“Have to hand it to Potter,” said Gilbert, “His actions can be astoundingly brilliant at times.”

“No proof Potter had a hand in this, Gilbert,” said Jezebel, waspishly, “Though I would suspect he readily agreed with the plan when introduced to it. And let’s keep that in mind, he’s a high-level government operative with virtually no legal limits.”

“My sources have it originating from the Prime Minister’s office,” said a witch down the table. “They held a meeting on board the Ragnar, and followed it with a meeting with Presidential aides in Washington. We’ve seen the result.

“MACUSA’s been a Commonwealth supporter since the late twenties, Canada since they became a country; Canada’s ministry has sponsored a number of appearances of Commonwealth representatives at the ICW over the years.”

“The ultimate result, they have somewhat stolen some of our thunder,” said Gilbert, flicking his wand at the mural at the front of the room. It was replaced by a collage of newspaper photos. “The no-Maj media’s eating it up. ‘We’re here to help’, the tag line reads. Look at this one.”

He flicked his wand again, bringing a picture up to the front. It was non-moving, from a non-magical
paper, showed a group of wizards, restoring a damaged building on Market Street in San Francisco. The picture had been snapped as the building was half-way to being fixed.

“No-Maj’s are astounded. And this.”

He flicked his wand again, pulling another picture up to the front.

“The baseball players are donating millions of dollars to restoration efforts, never mind what Potter’s thrown up—a million galleons in the beginning, now he’s upped the amount to ten times that. Nearly a hundred million American dollars.

“Like I said, the no-Maj media’s eating this stuff up.”

“Worse still,” said the woman who’d spoken earlier, “The Muggle authorities have been warned about our possible involvement. Everyone needs to be aware that they should exercise extreme caution running operations in the Muggle world from here on out—over and above the previous cautions. They’re expecting us.”

“They might expect us, but do they truly expect to stop us?” Jezebel sneered, “They’re filthy Muggles, and nothing more.”

“Do not discount their ingenuity, Jezebel,” Dumbledore rebuked her, “Arrogant thinking will lead us to ruin. But a demonstration of our might must be considered. A concentrated effort should strike doubt into their hearts.”

“A brute-force attack against no-Maj targets? The losses would be unacceptable for our side, never mind putting one of our priority operations in jeopardy,” Gilbert warned. “I think we should stay focused on our current projects, let the foolish no-Maj lovers have their moment.”

Several made to protest, but Deidre spoke, “Continue, Mr. Gilbert.”

“My team has discovered a way to plant our mole on the Gideon, which is currently deployed in Los Angeles. I underscore, this is a priority operation, with perhaps one opportunity for success. It’s one of the final pieces of the puzzle needed. Then it won’t matter what sort of foolish plot or plan they might come up with.” Gilbert gave a nasty smirk. “In the end, we’ll see them buried in every sense of the word, with perhaps the rest of the no-Maj world.”

“With our current success in Norway, we might consider extending control to Sweden or Finland given their close proximity,” spoke another wizard.

“With our numbers as it stands, it’s more than possible,” another wizard agreed. “Bulgaria has already unofficially extended support to our organization, with many witches and wizards swelling our membership.”

“As have a large number of Russian witches and wizards,” spoke another, “Recruiting is becoming easier as of late, and I expect that to accelerate given this latest stunt.”

“We launch our own publicity campaign,” said yet another, “Targeted toward the community at large. The actions of the Commonwealth, Canada, and MACUSA directly contravene many of the core values held by our world. There will be many who sympathize.”

There was a murmur as everyone agreed with the statement.

“I’ll leave you to come up with appropriate language,” said Dumbledore, “Most certainly, it will draw attention to our position, and in turn, more followers.”
“Concurred with Dumbledore,” said Deidre, “Craft a message, it can only strengthen our position. Perhaps their action has stolen an avenue by which to strike. Yet, another opens. Many will only be angered by this action.”

“Count on most member nations in the ICW being outraged by this,” Dumbledore added. “We craft just the right message, and their campaign will ultimately have the same success as the Titanic.”

Gilbert caught the number of blank looks.

“For those who do not understand the reference, the Titanic was an English no-Maj passenger vessel, declared virtually unsinkable by the press at the time. It struck an iceberg and sank on its maiden voyage in April of 1912—ninety-six years ago,” he explained. “Valicadia is attempting to paint witches and wizards as being helpful… being mostly benign, with only a few less-savoury elements. Together, brothers and sisters, we can prove them so very wrong.”

That was met with nasty smirks and voices of agreement.

23 Rain’s Hand / 23 April

Even though it was spring according to the calendar, it made no difference at the summit of the Throat of the World, as the snow was blown about by the fierce winds. For the first time in a while, only Mazhe and Bryce joined Harry as he made the trip. With it being in Skyrim, Brandon wasn’t too concerned, given where they were going.

Mazhe wasted no time clearing the skies, and not more than a half-minute passed, before a shadow descended on them. Paarthurnax settled to the ground a short distance ahead of them.

“Greetings,” he spoke, “It has been some time since you have came to visit.”

“Apologies, Paarthurnax, but there has been a terrible event back in my own world. Many people have died,” Harry answered. “We’ve been going long hours helping to undo the damage.”

“Wizards in Harry’s world caused… an earthquake, a great shaking of the ground,” Mazhe picked up, “It destroyed entire cities.”

“The very ground moved?”

“Yes. Some of us were tossed around like toys,” said Harry, “I have faced many terrible things, but this was… beyond belief. That was twelve days ago.”

“I think we’ve all been a little overwhelmed by it, Harry.”

“No shit,” Bryce muttered, “The guys were lucky not to get killed.”

“And that is the question I put to you: those close to you are still well?” questioned Paarthurnax.

“Some injuries, but nothing we couldn’t fix.”

“There is more?”

“Yes,” Harry answered. “The Commonwealth revealed the magical world two days ago.”

“To those who are not,” Paarthurnax clarified.

“Yes.”
“and how has such a revelation been received?”

“It’s still early to tell,” Harry answered, “It’s only been two days. But there is concern on more than a few fronts.”

“We expected there to be risks, Harry,” said Mazhe.

“It adds one more threat to the larger issue, Mazhe. Our work crews now need security present.”

“Your kind are resilient, Harry,” said Paarthurnax, “Even in the face of Alduin many, many years ago, they found ways to persevere. It cannot be any different in your world.”

“I want to believe that. What’s been happening… what I’ve seen… it’s terrifying.”

“Harry, OND can’t possibly match what Alduin did here. He almost ended the world, twice.”

“OND caused an earthquake that levelled six cities and countless smaller places on the west coast, Mazhe!” Harry snapped, “Every attack has been significantly worse than the last! So them destroying the world? Not as far-fetched as we might like.”


Harry let out a huff. “All right, yeah, maybe I’m exaggerating, but… thing is, that’s exactly what they’re trying to do. Make it uninhabitable, thinking that, they as wizards will live on. ‘cept that they won’t. If the world’s not habitable for people, food won’t grow all that well either, and food is one thing that can’t be conjured from nothing.”

“Perhaps if they were made to understand such a point,” Paarthurnax suggested.

That got an angry look from Harry and his companions. “Negotiate with terrorists. That won’t ever happen.”

24 Rain’s Hand / 24 April

A copy of the National Daily Chronicle was waiting on the table as the group sat down to breakfast. There were a pair of photos that took up the upper part of the front page, both showing a group of officials. At a glance, Harry couldn’t tell were it was taken. ‘TURMOIL AT ICW: Expulsions & Withdrawals Mar Heated Debate,’ the headline shouted.

“Both Canada and the US were expelled from the confederation,” said Justin, “There’s rumblings about forming our own confederation—us, Canada, and MACUSA.”

“But with No-Maj’s knowing about the magical world, won’t that be, Idunno—” Bryce began.

“Redundant? Not necessarily,” said Brandon. “No matter what, affairs in the magical world are different. I think if anything, it’s gonna get more complicated, namely the rules around what non-magical people can get access to. Much like it is here in the Commonwealth.”

“Yeah, agreed there,” said Justin, “So many things available in the magical world that are absolutely dangerous if not handled properly. So yeah, an international magical authority is definitely not redundant.

“The role will change though. Cooperation with the non-magical governments of member nations, stuff like that. Major regulatory roles… it’s something that will likely take years to get organized.”
Harry couldn’t help but smirk, reading part of the article. “Love the Commonwealth statement here… ‘we won’t be treated like errant school boys summoned to the principal's office’. ICW ‘summoned’ us to the meeting yesterday.”

“Yeah, lots of condemnation from members, but we still have a few friends,” said Justin.

“And ICW’s threatening to expel them too,” said Aaron. “We did ultimately break one of the hard and fast rules—the statute’s been in effect since 1692. So anyone who agrees with us are considered traitors. That’s the way they’re treating it.”

It was then Brandon’s mobile chirped indicating a message. He pulled it out, and read it.

“Mexico’s withdrawn from the ICW as a show of support for ‘our neighbours and allies’. Idea of a new international body being floated, calling it NAMA, or ‘North American Magical Alliance’.”

“Union would be better,” Harry offered. “NAMU for short. Perhaps they could simply adopt most of ICW’s policies for now, excluding the Statute of Secrecy. At least to just get off the ground. Then tweak things as they go.”

“I’ll make sure the government gets the suggestion. I take it you’re just making a suggestion,” said Brandon.

“Yeah, absolutely. I’m no expert... I’m sure there are people far more qualified.”

“All right.”

“Does anyone object if we take the day and do something else?” Harry asked. “It’s been two weeks... or nearly two weeks of going non-stop.”

“It’s your show, Harry,” said Ludvig.

“And I have to be in Washington for five o’clock,” Bryce reminded them, “Pre-game prep.”

“We’ll make sure you get there,” Aaron promised. “Good to see you guys get back to work.”

“Gonna be a bitch to make up though. Lots of double-headers.”

Harry smirked. “We’ll give everyone pepper-up potions for the second game.”

Most of the morning, and part of the afternoon, was then spent at Hogwarts. No surprise, Harry was invited as somewhat of a guest instructor for Defence Against the Dark Arts. He turned it into a practical lesson, seeing they were first years, demonstrating the use of shield charms.

It was also an opportunity for Harry to see how Credence was doing; the young wizard was tied up in class, and therefore unable to help out in San Francisco. Or, more like, Harry ensured he was kept busy. Sure, Credence wanted to help, but with limited knowledge, it was best to keep him in Skyrim.

26 Rain’s Hand / 26 April

That morning’s National Daily Chronicle carried pictures of rioters and protesters clashing with police. At first, Harry thought it was from some place in Europe. The assumption was partially correct, but the headline ultimately proved him wrong.

PROTESTS IN KATTEGAT TURN VIOLENT; Hundreds Arrested, State of Emergency Declared
Kattegat’s Premier declared a state of emergency late yesterday, after the city was all but paralysed by a second day of violent protests against the government’s continued investment of resources, in the wake of the disaster on North America’s west coast.

Assistance crews deployed to California, Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia were halved yesterday afternoon, as security forces were redeployed to respond to the crisis, and could not guarantee the safety of work crews—a measure put in place as a simple safety precaution.

A spokeswoman for Pat Truman, Kattegat’s Minister of Justice, issued a statement late yesterday saying, “People do have a right to protest, but when those protests degenerate into nothing better than an angry mob, whose only interest is to do harm to people and property, the government is forced to take action in the interest of public safety.

“A mandatory 8 pm to 6 am curfew is now in effect for the next three days. All businesses and government services in the city are to remain closed. If you are not authorized to be in the streets, you will be arrested.”

Nathan Blake, the federal Minister of Justice, will issue a statement sometime later today addressing the matter, but a spokesman from the ministry has gone on record saying, “The federal government has already deployed additional resources to help the city cope with the violence which has unfolded yesterday afternoon and evening. We’ll re-evaluate the situation later today and determine if further...”

PRIME MINISTER, GOVERNMENT GRILLED ON WIZARDING WORLD EXPOSURE, EXPENDITURES ON WEST COAST CRISIS

The official opposition went on the attack, grilling the government during yesterday’s Question Period in the House of Commons, demanding an answer on several fronts, the foremost being the deliberate, widespread exposure of the magical world.

“The matter should have been brought before the House of Commons and debated,” said Opposition Leader Al Harris, “The Government, the Crown and the Promagistrate absolutely circumvented the scope of the elected membership, and I believe the public has a right to know why. We have process in this country.”

When other members of the opposition Conservative Union Party began voicing agreement with Harris’ comments, Prime Minister Martin responded, “We did not have time for a lengthy discussion and debate on the matter at hand, given the extreme actions of our enemy.

“The government and the Crown acted with the advice of several crucial departments, all of them spelling out a clear, immediate, inevitable danger, wherein the Order of the New Dawn WILL commit an act severe enough that the Statute of Secrecy would be forever breached.

“We therefore decided that, in the interest of the safety of the magical world as a whole, we should work with our few allies, and preempt such a revelation in a much more orderly, and perhaps a more positive manner. By most accounts, we have achieved our objective, and more importantly, taken some of the wind out of OND’s sails.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the safety of our Commonwealth is first and foremost in the minds of the government, and though it is regrettable the issue was not brought before this house for proper
debate, it is again emphasized, we felt it was crucial it be handled at a higher level. Her Majesty agreed with the assessment.”

Harris then pounced on the Prime Minister’s comments, grilling her on the ongoing diversion of critical resources to the American west coast and British Columbia. “If you truly had the safety of the nation in mind, madam Prime Minister, thousands of Her Majesty’s marines would not be deployed outside of the Commonwealth’s borders, nor would we be investing thousands more men and women in a matter that is not our concern! The absence of Aurors and police has resulted in a spike in the crime rate over the past two weeks. So tell us, Prime Minister, how is this working for the greater good, when citizens at home are made to suffer?”

Some very direct questions on the issue at hand, as Harris’ quoted statistics are from the Justice Ministry’s own records, underscoring the noticeable absence in law enforcement at home. The Ministry declined to comment on the matter, but a (see ‘REVIEW’, page 2)

Opposition’s Questions: did the government overstep? Page 8
Government will table budget May 1, infighting may pave way for defeat, Page 3

“Didn’t realize they were depriving cities of security,” said Harry, quietly, as he tossed the paper aside.

“There was a risk, yeah,” said Brandon, “So we’ve scaled back the deployment, at least until the situation in Kattegat’s been settled.”

“I still do not understand,” said Ragnar, “Our people are trying to help; why would people be upset?”

“Ultimately it comes down to money,” Aaron answered, “It does cost money to have so many people deployed out of the country, magical or not. Quickest way to anger the voters, is to fuck with their pocket book.”

“Is there anything we can do?” asked Mazhe.

“No. We have it in hand. If anything, it would probably not be a good thing to show up there. We aren’t exactly popular at the moment,” said Brandon.

“Don’t worry about it, guys. Let’s get ready for the day,” said Aaron, “We’ve gotta be in New York for three o’clock local time—so noon hour here.”

Harry smirked. “Justin, you plan on singing to your girlfriend again?”

That earned a rude gesture, though Justin then smirked right back. “Nope. Something better.”

It was then a pair of agents stepped into the common room, escorting a man in a suit.

“Promagistrate, Mr. Stormcrown, Commander McAllister, Lieutenant Carpenter, Dr. Fraser, and Mr. Hunter, I have subpoenas for each of you,” said the man, reaching into his shoulder bag, and retrieving a stack of papers.

“Saw that coming,” Brandon muttered. “I take it Captain Walker and Sergeant Lugo have also been served.”

“They’re next on my list.”

“Why do they want me?” Bryce questioned, as the man left.
“Though you weren’t on the ground, you were still witness to things happening on the Ragnar. So you’re still considered a witness,” said Justin, as he looked over the summons.

Bryce still looked confused. “So let me get this straight. Even though it’s a military vessel, the enquiry is bein’ run by the government. Wouldn’t this be a military tribunal?”

“The crown handles all matters of justice, whether they be military or civilian in nature,” Aaron explained, “The military has no business policing itself, ever. The government did away with the judicial arm of the military about fifty years ago.”

“Thing is, it’s not just a military matter,” Justin added. “A lot of civilians were killed too. Trust us, no one here is in trouble, the government just wants to get a clear picture of what actually happened.

“I’d like to think they are looking for ways to prevent it from happening again, but honestly, I think we’re all in agreement here, that’s not likely.”

“No shit,” Harry muttered, as he stowed the summons in his pouch.

“It’s not something we’ll need to worry about any time soon. June 16th is a long way off,” said Justin.

The benefit concert festival were split over two days, the Saturday and the Sunday. Set up in New York’s Central Park, the event attracted nearly seventy thousand people. It would have drawn many times that amount, had there not been restrictions on the number of attendees—lingering security practices which resulted from the events of September 11, 2001(2). A number of musical acts performed over the two days, many of them a cross-section of the most popular artists of the day.

On Sunday night, Harry finally understood what Justin meant when he’d said, ‘better’, as Radiohead performed ‘Nobody Does It Better’ in their set. In the VIP section, front and centre, Justin danced with Zoey, while Harry danced with Mazhe.

7 Second Seed / 7 May

It had been some time since Harry had attended one of Bryce’s games. The fault was certainly not his, considering everything going on at the moment. On this rare occasion, Credence joined them, after Harry made sure the young wizard completed any homework.

Mid-way through the second inning, as the home team was taking to the field, both Brandon and Aaron received a text on their mobile, with Ludvig getting one only a moment later.

Brandon let out a huff. “Morons.”

Harry gave him a look. “What now?”

“The government’s budget was just defeated.”

“It’s a confidence issue,” Justin clarified, “Jesus, they just... the government’s been defeated.”

Zoey appeared confused. “I thought it was a majority.”

“Except that some members of the government voted against their own bill. Yeah, getting this now... members voted in protest of recent actions... quoting, ‘putting my seat at risk, to ensure the people who elected us get to have their say on a matter...’ Thing is... it’s a bit late, and the Prime Minister
was only one player in the decision,” said Brandon.

“In a nutshell, we’ll be going to the polls in about five or six weeks,” said Justin, “But damn, totally unexpected.”

“What do you think will happen?” questioned Harry.

“Well, Prime Minister Martin’s rather popular, so I’d expect she’ll get a fourth mandate. Virtually unheard of, but the government’s got a pretty good track record until recently,” said Justin. “They spin it the right way, this won’t hurt them much.”

“Will we... I mean, I... and what about Bryce... will we vote?” Harry asked.

“You’ll get voter registration cards sometime after the vote is called,” said Brandon. He stopped, as he’d received yet another text. “Yeah, day after tomorrow we’ll be attending the Queen’s residence when she drops the writ.”

Harry was again confused. “When she does what?”

“The Royal Writ of Election. The Prime Minister will attend the Queen’s residence, and officially ask her to dissolve parliament and call an election. ‘Dropping the Writ’ is just jargon for the process,” Brandon explained.

“Why do we have to be there?” Mazhe questioned.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Because we’re the government, Mazhe. Or we represent the government. I think being the Promagistrate sort of requires us to be there. Wonder if I could get away showing up starkers?” he muttered, mostly to himself.

Brandon resisted the urge to groan, while Zoey was sent into a fit of giggles.

9 Second Seed / 9 May
Queen's Residence, Trevelyan

They’d been asked to arrive an hour early, and very quickly, Harry and his group came to realize why. The Royal Reception Hall was jammed with a number of people, mostly those from various media outlets, clamouring for a view of the event about to take place. Justin, Zoey, Ragnar, and Haknir remained behind, since at least two of them would draw attention on their own.

Brandon wore his red dress uniform, an outfit Harry nor the others had seen him wear up to this point. “Every member of the military is expected to wear their dress uniform when attending the Royal Residence,” he’d explained earlier, “There are a few exceptions, such as our presence during our visit to 1926.”

Ignoring the shouted questions from the gathering, the group entered the anteroom, where the Prime Minister waited along with a few of her aides.

“Prime Minister,” Harry greeted.

“Promagistrate,” the Prime Minister returned. “Most unfortunate business.”

“Agreed. I think an election is the last thing Valicadia needs right now. But I also think it would be a mistake for either me or her Majesty to interfere with... uh...”

“Due process, Harry,” Brandon finished.
“Yeah, that’s it. I’m still somewhat in the dark as to why I’m here. The Queen conducted this process perfectly fine without my presence, as did her father.”

“It’s written that the Promagistrate should be in attendance if he exists, or rather, is alive and present,” the Prime Minister answered, “Whether you like it or not, you are an instrument of the Commonwealth, every bit as much as her Majesty is.”

It was then one of the Queen’s aides entered the room through a separate door.

“Promagistrate, glad you have arrived. You were not informed of the separate entrance?”

“No. Though I wish I’d known. There are a lot of people here.”

“Expected. Please accept the apologies of our office, a lot is going on and a few details have been forgotten. Now. The matter of protocol. Members of your party will remain off to the side, and out of the way of the proceeding.”

“I will make sure they’re in the right place,” Brandon promised.

“Very good. Now. Her Majesty will ask a question of you when the Prime Minister makes her request,” said the aide, producing an index card. “We would like it if you use the highlighted answer, and avoid unnecessary complications.”

“As I have already said to the Prime Minister, it is not my place to interfere with the elected government. If this is part of the process, then so be it,” Harry answered.

“Excellent. Then if everyone is ready, I shall inform the Queen.”

The aide gave a short bow, and made a quick exit back through the door he’d entered by.

Less than a minute later, the door opened again, this time with the Queen entering the room. Everyone gave a bow of the head in respect. She was once again dressed in royal robes, the royal crown adorning her brow.

“Your Majesty,” Harry greeted.

“Promagistrate,” the Queen answered. “If we are ready.”

An aide glanced at the clock, before giving a nod to an attendant manning the door back out to the hall. It was two minutes past nine.

“Madam Prime Minister...” the aide indicated. She made for the door, with her aides following.

“Your Majesty...” the aide then indicated. Now, the Queen moved to follow, a pair of her aides then following.

“Lastly, Promagistrate,” the aide indicated.

Harry followed the Queen, with Mazhe at his side, and the others following behind. The procession entered the Royal Reception Hall, and crossed the room, to where a table had been set up, with only a single parchment resting at its centre. A pair of SOU were at either side, both also dressed in their red dress uniforms.

As the group approached the table, Brandon indicated the members of Harry’s party step off to the side. One of the Prime Minister’s aides passed her a leather-bound folder, after which the aides all made for the same spot as Harry’s circle.
The Queen, meanwhile, moved to stand behind the table, indicating that Harry follow. Now he understand the meaning: the ruling heads in perpetuity versus the elected government. The table stood as a separation.

The Prime Minister reached into the folder, and withdrew a single page of paper, speaking, “Your Majesty, as you are already aware, parliament has lost confidence in my government. Therefore, I hereby submit official resignation, and request the dissolution of parliament, and for the issuance of your Writ of Election, at your earliest convenience.”

The Queen turned to Harry. “Promagistrate, do you carry objection to Our Prime Minister’s course of action on this day?”

“No, I do not,” Harry answered, “I may not agree with the mechanics at play, but it is not my place to interfere. Members of the government wished to make a statement of protest. I leave the simple thought as we undergo this process: do be careful what you wish for. But for official record, I do not issue challenge, and will not obstruct the Prime Minister’s business here.”

“Very well.” The Queen accepted the page of paper, speaking, “Acting with the advice of Our Crown Counsel, We accept your resignation and declare it to bear effect immediately.”

She picked up a quill off the table, dipped it in the nearby ink pot, and scrawled out her signature on the document. She then re-inked the quill, and signed the document already present.

“Chorley. Our seal, if you will.”

There came a soft pop, and Chorley appeared, also dressed in his best. He brought two boxes with him, and quickly placed them on the table. He opened both, producing what looked like a large coin —maybe one and a half times the size of a Galleon. The other box appeared to contain a red substance. With a snap of his fingers, the coin-like object was lifted out of the box, while a clump of the red substance lifted out of the other, to float over to the document. The coin was then pressed into the substance, making it squirt out from under it. And, when the coin was lifted away, a circular image was pressed into the substance.

“We do then issue our royal writ, wherein there shall be an election of members to the House of Parliament on Monday, June twenty-third, two thousand and eight.”

She indicated the wax seal on the document. “Our Great Seal, now marks this document as bearing all the weight of Our authority, issued here, at Our Royal place of Residence, on this Ninth day of May, by the grace of Our ancestors and Our creators, in the fortieth year of our reign.”

11 Second Seed / 11 May

HMS Gideon, like the rest of her sisters, had been deployed to the west coast only hours after the massive earthquake. She had been in position over central Los Angeles since the morning of April 12. Now, as things calmed down and things were gradually returning to normal, it was time for the ship to return to her normal position.

However, it quickly became evident that a member of Air Wing was missing, having not returned from patrol. Given the aircraft design, it was unlikely it would have been shot down, and so they spent nearly an hour attempting to get in contact.

Finally, as it neared 11 am, they were able to raise the missing squad member, and the bird returned to the ship. It was instantly evident that the aircraft had been involved in combat, from the scorch marks. A few came from below, while most came from head on, or from the sides, indicating the
craft had been on the ground for a time. The pilot was quickly interviewed, and it became quite clear what had happened.

“I encountered a strong magical dead zone,” the pilot had explained, “Nearly crashed, but was able to put it on the ground and reassess. Encountered hostiles, did something that temporarily prevented me from flying. Non-magicals assisted in chasing them off and I was able to get back in the air. Locals should be advised, hostiles operating in the area, it’s bookmarked in the flight computer.”

The CAG and the ship’s CO were not surprised by the report, but still had the pilot carefully examined for unwanted influences and potions. Everything came up negative, and so the man was cleared to return to his unit.

8 pm  
Ministry of Magic, London

Gilbert gave a nasty smirk, as a ghostly shape materialized in his office. “Gilbert,” it spoke, “Package has been delivered.”

The plan had been risky. Yet, his hand-picked team had gotten it done. Now, to circumvent the more difficult security protocol. So for now, it was a waiting game. But Gilbert was fine by that. If it took a month, then so be it. No matter what, OND would be ready.

Chapter End Notes

UP NEXT: The group have some down time with Harry introducing Credence to a friend and trainer; Harry is at last able to serve justice to a hated foe; poor team and personal performance start to affect Bryce; Bill and Fleur at last tie the knot in front of many friends and family; and unseen events have the crew of the Ragnar scrambling. What have OND done now?

CHAPTER NOTES: The chapter title was rather fitting for this one, as we see more of the political mechanics of the Commonwealth. The election won’t have much screen time, I’d rather not bore you guys with it when there are much bigger fish to fry.
(1) According to WikiQuote: '...similar remarks have long been attributed to Otto von Bismarck, but this is the earliest known quote regarding laws and sausages, and according to Shapiro's research, such remarks only began to be attributed to Bismarck in the 1930s.' Leo McGarry paraphrases this quote in S01E04 of the West Wing, 'Five Votes Down'.
(2) The city of New York put strict regulations in place regarding large concert gatherings in places such as Central Park.
The group have some down time with Harry introducing Credence to a friend and trainer; Harry is at last able to serve justice to a hated foe; poor team and personal performance start to affect Bryce; Bill and Fleur at last tie the knot in front of many friends and family; and unseen events have the crew of the Ragnar scrambling. What have OND done now?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

39. BAD MOON RISING

May - June, 2008 / Second Seed - Mid-Year, 4E203

“Do you know how sometimes - when you are riding your bike and you start skidding across sand, or when you miss a step and start tumbling down the stairs - you have those long, long seconds to know that you are going to be hurt, and badly?”

- Jodi Picoult, “My Sister’s Keeper”

With everything going on, it had been some time since Harry had attended a Conjuration lesson with Falion. In fact, most of the training had been put on hold since the events of April 11. Mazhe was starting to feel pressure from the guild, and Harry had to admit, he was missing out on Credence’s progress.

So, the purpose of the visit on this particular day in mid-Second Seed served a dual purpose: to introduce Credence to the master of Conjuration, and to get a lesson of his own. It was also the first time both Falion and Credence got a look at a Seeker.

“Where did you learn to conjure such a thing?” Falion had to ask.

“You know of my… unusual relationship with Hermaeus Mora?”

“The Daedric Prince, yes.”

“One of his books provided the method. I rely on it sparingly, for obvious reasons,” Harry explained, as he dismissed the summon.

“And I am certain you have been warned against continued contact with him.”

“We’ve all given him plenty of warnings,” said Mazhe, scowling. “Unfortunately, Hermaeus Mora has helped Harry to dispatch the previous dark lord he was destined to fight,” said Mazhe. “He may very well be the only way we might do away with the current dark lord, or dark mistress…”

“Just Dumbledore,” Harry finished. “Jezebel, and her mistress Deidre... I have a different fate
planned. Still leaning toward crucifixion, if given the opportunity.”

“And you know, Harry, it likely won’t happen,” said Brandon, who had set up a small table off to the side of the stone circle. “We’ll likely have seconds to dispatch either of them.”

“Long as I can soul trap them. That alone will guarantee a fate worse than death.”

“And on that note,” said Mazhe, “We are in need of more black soul gems.”

“As your missive mentioned. I have four,” said Falion.

“For the standard rate?” Harry reached into his pouch, and produced a bag of coins.

“Conjuration here, how much alike is it to conjuration back in our own world?” asked Credence.

“Very little similarity, really,” Harry answered, “Here, it’s a specific, major branch of magic, mostly oriented toward offensive casting—raising the dead, summoning creatures from Oblivion, or soul-trapping an enemy killed in combat.

“In our own world, conjuration is an advanced branch of transfiguration, NEWT-level. It’s mainly used to create objects out of thin air.”

“Out of nothing?”

“Not exactly,” said Brandon. “What is air?”

Credence seemed to think a moment, before giving a nod of understanding. Falion, too, immediately understood the meaning.

“Indeed,” said the mage, “Everything has structure, even the air around us.”

“Even with that fundamental understanding, actually performing conjuration is something not easy to master,” said Brandon, “I’m passable, but Justin’s much better at it.”

“He is the nerd of the group, Brandon,” said Mazhe.

“And where is Mr. Fraser this morning?” asked Falion.

“Where else? Spending time with his girlfriend. Though I think they went back to Washington. Been plenty of meetings with...”

“Her father’s staff,” Harry finished. “Everything going on lately, things have gotten very complicated, as I did explain in my letter.”

After spending the morning with Falion, and returning Credence to the College, the group returned to Riften, where they spent the afternoon working with Balimund. The old smithy and his apprentice were working on a moderate order of weapons he’d received from the Jarl, and so travelling to the Aetherium Forge was out of the question.

Still, it gave Ragnar the chance to finish his new axe head, and work on the handle, as it didn’t require the special properties of the forge as Aetherium. From what Harry remembered of his old axe, it was almost identical, save for the material.

“Once you finish the handle, I’ll apply a few enchantments on it,” Harry promised.

“As you did with my previous weapon,” Ragnar remembered.
“Yes. I’ll also put a sharpening charm on it so it’ll stay sharp.”

“Something you were unable to do when we met last.”

“And you remember why.”

Ragnar gave a nod, as he continued the final work. “I believe that has to be one of the... selling points... benefits... of being magical. That wizards can be helpful, a benefit to those who are not. It’s something I do remember from our alliance with Eoforwin.”

“Yes, it’s something that’s reinforced right from the beginning. Young children are introduced to magic at school, whether from a teacher directly, or from someone being brought in,” said Brandon. He’d occupied a nearby table, and had one of his numerous rifles completely disassembled. “This is something we’re very busy promoting, and the work we’re doing on the west coast does help.”

“Entire sections of the elevated roadway being put back together in less than an hour... how long would something like that normally take to repair?” Mazhe wondered.

“Years,” answered Brandon, “To demolish the wreckage, then go through the environmental approval process, lots of red tape, then the actual construction... Years, easily.”

“Even though they would be replacing the structure which stood there before?”

“Mazhe, our world is complicated,” said Harry, simply. “I’m thinking there would be lots of politics involved.”

“Yeah, count on it,” Brandon agreed. “Even in the magical world, there’s lots of politics. And as all of you know, it can be just as ugly as in the non-magical world.”

“You mean those stupid attack ads the Conservative Union’s running against the Prime Minister,” Harry remembered. “Think they need to worry about their own house, rather than what the other party’s doing. Talk about the issues, rather than dragging each other through the mud.”

“Both sides do it,” said Brandon, “Though there’s been attempts to put a stop to it. The problem is, it does fall under constitutional protections.”

“Something like the American First Amendment,” said Mazhe.

“Almost identical. Except that it wasn’t an amendment,” said Brandon. “When our modern constitution was drafted, the freedom of expression was one of the core tenets.”

They ended up spending the afternoon and part of the early evening helping Balimund, before retreating to the Ragged Flagon for something to eat. The rest of the group joined them, save for Bryce—he had a game in Baltimore, and had been gone for most of the day for team functions. Justin and Zoey also joined them, and Harry had to smirk, noting he’d not bothered to change, still dressed in a suit.

“What?” Justin questioned, seeing Harry’s look.

“Still dressed in the monkey suit.”

Justin rolled his eyes, before producing his wand, and exchanging his clothes for something more comfortable. In this case, jeans and a maroon jumper with Malcolm Davis Athletic Dept stencilled on the front.
“I would think you might have something against dressing nice, Mr. Stormcrown,” said Zoey, as Vekel brought over a platter of tankards.

“Conformity, more like it,” said Harry, simply. “We spend too much time trying to impress, put on false faces. Granted, it is nice to get cleaned up, dressed up, but I throw out the question: who are we trying to impress? Decisions and process have the same meaning, no matter what someone looks like.”

“It’s about presentation,” said Brandon.

“I will respect a man no less, whether he be dressed in his best, or in his worst. It is title that matters at the end of the day,” said Ragnar. “I believe a man in your father’s position does carry the right to dress however he likes, Dr. Bartlet.”

Harry couldn’t help but smirk. “I can only imagine the President conducting business in the Oval Office while starkers.”

Zoey looked scandalized. “Harry!”

Brandon was sent into a coughing fit as the swig of ale he was swallowing went down the wrong pipe.

“Yeah, I doubt he’d make it out of the residence,” said Ludvig, barely remaining composed. “Someone would, uh, rather delicately point out the glaring omission.”

“Never mind what mom would have to say!” Zoey finally managed, “God, Harry, you have a scary mind at times.”

Harry smiled serenely. “You know nothing of the dark side.”

Mazhe rolled his eyes. “Yeah, spending too much time around Hermaeus Mora.”

“What? It’s been months since I’ve summoned him.” Harry then stuck his tongue out at his mate.

“All right. You’re sleeping alone tonight.”

“That’s okay. Bryce can keep me company.”

“Harry. You’re terrible.”

Now it was Justin’s turn to roll his eyes.

It was then Delvin appeared from the short hallway connecting the pub with the inner cistern. “Harry, Mazhe. Good to see you.”

“Likewise,” said Mazhe. “We’re sorry we’ve been so tied up as of late.”

“We did see the pictures you sent us,” said Delvin, “Don’t worry about your absence. We all understand the severity of what’s going on.”

“We do hope to get back into a normal routine,” said Brandon, “With Commonwealth presence being aided by our allies, these guys don’t have to be there.”

“Feels like we’ve been saying that for months though,” said Harry, ruefully. “Every time we make an attempt to return to some sort of normal routine, something else comes along that sends everything right out the window again.”
“There is little you can do about it,” said Ragnar, “Only do what you are able.”

“We try, Ragnar. We try.”

“On that. Maybe tomorrow we should spend some time and have a meeting,” Mazhe decided. “Us, Brynjolf, Delvin, and Vex. Just get a sense of what’s been going on the past while. I’ll get a look at the ledger, and have a peek in the vault while we’re at it.”

“Tomorrow morning, then?” Delvin suggested.

Getting a nod from Harry, Mazhe also gave a nod. “It’ll likely be mid-morning. We do have a morning exercise regimen.”

“I’ll make sure the others know.”

The group had dinner, and Harry was more than content to take the evening and relax for a change. Aaron returned just after 8 o’clock, with Bryce in tow, and Harry didn’t have to ask to know the game didn’t go well.

“Had a team meeting after the game,” said Bryce, as he occupied the vacant seat at Harry’s table.

“Figured as much.” Harry began to dig in his pouch.

“Don’t worry about it,” said Bryce, knowing what Harry was looking for, “I carry that stuff myself.”

“Uh, right. Forgot. A drink, then?”

“Yeah.”

Vekel was already making a track for their table, a bottle and a tankard in hand.

“Thanks.”

“The game wasn’t all that bad,” said Aaron. “Jesus, that catch you made in the sixth... highlight reel. Robbed a grand-slam.”

“Yeah, well we still lost.”

“Not on your count,” Aaron challenged, “The other guys didn’t work hard enough.”

“Or luck wasn’t on your side,” said Harry. “Think you guys keep forgetting that. Doesn’t matter how hard you might work. If luck favours the other side, there isn’t a whole lot you can do about it.”

“Still sucks,” Bryce muttered, as he filled his tankard. He then took a deep swig before setting it down.

“Uh... Harry, I think the spell on his hair’s starting to come undone,” said Mazhe.

“Right.” Harry flicked a hand at Bryce’s head, reapplying the transfiguration.

“Is there a way to make such a thing permanent?” questioned Ragnar.

“I think there are some witches and wizards who could, yeah,” said Harry. “Dumbledore probably could. And Voldemort... he was incredibly powerful. It’s all about power and intent.”

“I would figure you would be able to accomplish such a thing, too.”
“Maybe when I get older,” said Harry, with a shrug. “I don’t think I’m that powerful.”

“And you keep selling yourself short,” said Justin, “Come on, Harry. You’ve got power in spades, abilities from two worlds, two similar and yet different... uh... systems of magic.”

“Then I chalk it up to lack of experience.”

Sometime later, Brandon’s mobile buzzed. He pulled it out, and quickly read the message. “Guys. Jezebel’s been seen in San Francisco.”

Harry quickly rose, with the others quickly following. “Got a bookmark?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m remaining behind with Zoey,” said Justin, “Keep us posted.”

“Will do,” said Ludvig.

Bryce was already digging out his armour, as was Ragnar, and in short order, everyone was ready to go.

The teleport dropped the group at a work site where a group of witches and wizards had been restoring a section of the elevated expressway. The workers had all vacated the scene, as MACUSA Aurors and Commonwealth Marines fought against a contingent of OND operatives.

Harry cupped his hands together, quickly summoning a Seeker. “Get them!” he hissed.

It was then a blur of limbs appeared nearby, which turned out to be Miraak and Haknir.

“Where is she?” questioned Miraak.

“Still looking for her. Intel has her here,” said Brandon, “Wits about you.”

Harry thought for a moment. “Haknir, how difficult is it to summon your crew?”

The former pirate simply closed his eyes, and opened them again. And, only a moment later, ghostly shades began to appear in their midst.

“Do not kill, subdue,” Haknir spoke, quietly.

“Kill if they are men!” Harry corrected, “Keep the women alive!”

“Catch me if you can!” a girly voice cackled, before everyone was sent ducking for cover, as a storm of green magic seemed to come from every direction.

“Fus... RO DAAAHH!” Miraak roared, and a pair of enemies were sent flying by the Shout.

A pair of Haknir’s crew, meanwhile, had cornered an OND operative, and though neither of them wielded magic, they proved more than adept at keeping the enemy on his toes.

“I do not fear a ghost!” the wizard shouted.

“You should, mage,” as the wizard was forced to dodge a thrust of a scimitar.

“Avada Kedavra!”
With that, one of the attacking crew members was dispatched, but the wizard was again forced to duck another thrust from the sharp weapon. And, quickly as the crew member had been dispatched, another took his place.

“We are unending, mage,” said the replacement, and now the wizard was forced to produce a shield, as the replacement was magical. The shield shattered with the impact of a frosty projectile, and the first crew member took advantage of the wizard’s exposed flank, pressing the scimitar into his side. The last thing the wizard saw and heard, was the incoming ice spike, and the crash of glass, as it penetrated his nasal cavity.

Others, now seeing their fortunes had rapidly shifted, attempted to Disapparate, but discovered they couldn’t. An Anti-Apparition and Anti-port key ward had been erected earlier. And, their attempts at fleeing left many of them open to attack, and Haknir’s crew took full advantage. In a matter of minutes, three quarters of the enemy force had been either killed or subdued.

Jezebel, meanwhile, was by no means about to go quietly. She remembered the outright warning Brandon had given her months earlier. She faced off against Harry, unleashing a storm of dark magic.

“Do you honestly believe you can dispatch with all of us?” Harry spoke, as he let fly a chain of spells of his own.

“Stupid if you ask me,” said Bryce, from off to the side. “What did you think was gonna happen?”

“A foolish No-Maj dares question me?!” Jezebel made to cast spells at him, but was forced to duck a barrage of spells from Harry. “No matter. Mistress will want to examine him and his toys very closely. To somehow survive the... unsurvivable... much like Potter here. There are questions which must be answered, so we might prevent such things from happening again.”

“That he’s able to survive and overpower one of the darkest spells in the Wizarding world? I think it’s to be celebrated,” Harry spoke, calmly.

Brandon, seeing the witch was distracted, unleashed a chain of spells, all designed to disable and entrap the witch. It had been underscored that Harry wanted the witch alive.

Jezebel side-stepped the spell at the last second, to then send a retaliatory blast, which Brandon batted away with his wand.

“All you got?!”

*KWHACK!* Jezebel hissed, feeling the ice spike penetrate her right arm.

“Fus... *RO!*” Miraak’s Shout did not miss, and Jezebel was knocked off her feet. Harry seized the chance, and Jezebel’s world went dark.

She began to stir a few minutes later, and found herself surrounded, with blades and wands aimed at her. An axe head was pressed against her throat.

“Twitch an inch and my blade goes through your throat,” Ragnar promised.

“I have decided sending her to the Soul Cairn would be too easy.”

“Mazhe...”

“Mazhe, think on it. She does seem to have most interesting knowledge,” said Harry. Taking on a
more official tone, he spoke, “I do believe the *Gardener of Men* will be most curious. And I do also believe, should I ever recover the book she’s obtained, it will be offered as a gift. It contains dangerous knowledge no man should have access to.”

Now Bryce gave Harry a pained look, knowing exactly what he had in mind.

“Her sentence was death, Harry,” Brandon reminded him.

“Which the Promagistrate can alter or overrule, sir,” said Ludvig. “I have seen a pensieve memory of what became of Voldemort.”

Brandon let out a groan. “All right. So be it. You’ll be filing the report then.”

Harry reached into his pouch, and a moment later, produced one of the Black Books: *Waking Dreams*.

“You seem to have a penchant for obtaining knowledge, my dear Jezebel,” he said, sweetly.

“Therefore, your revised sentence shall be thus: that you be turned over to the Keeper of Forbidden Knowledge. You will walk in the isles of an unending library. Knowledge you crave will be at your grasp, but you will not be able to practice it. Power just out of your grasp, for eternity. You will wish for death, but death does not reach the realm of Apocrypha... the realm of the Keeper of Forbidden Knowledge.”

Harry ran a finger down the spine of the Black Book, whispering, “May the owner of this book claim the next soul who opens it.”

“There is nothing you can do that will scare me, Potter,” Jezebel ground out.

“We’ll see, now, won’t we.” Harry flicked a hand at the witch, first applying a strong compulsion charm, then releasing the binds. That was Ragnar’s cue to withdraw his axe, allowing the woman to sit up.

Jezebel had been waiting for this opportunity, but found she could not act, as the compulsion took hold, and Harry simply obliged, pressing the book into her hands. She opened it—and was suddenly impaled by a sickly-black tentacle which burst from it.

The anti-port key and anti-Apparition wards both fell, as a mass of eyes and tentacles appeared suspended in mid-air nearby. Seeing this strange abomination had most of the OND operatives still present popping away. It was also the cue for Haknir’s ghostly crew to depart, and the shades all began to fade, with Thalin having a brief word with Haknir before he also vanished.

“Well met, Hermaeus Mora,” Harry once again greeted, “Yet another foolish witch who I am certain will pique your curiosity, having delved into some most obscure secrets. Should I obtain the text she’s obtained her knowledge from, I’ll pass it on.”

“Indeed? I do look forward to your offering,” said the Daedric Prince, seeming to appraise the captive. “Well, well. Unleashing such powerful magic, having little understanding of the consequences of doing so... no appreciation of the delicate nuances of manipulation... you have so much to learn about power, mortal.”

Jezebel now knew exactly what Harry meant. Oh yes, whatever this demon was... it was far more terrifying than she could have imagined. She knew there would be no use pleading or grovelling; she had nothing to offer. But how... where? Where did Potter come into contact with such a thing?

Harry could easily guess her thoughts, and answered, “Dear old Tom wondered the same thing when
he was in exactly the same position over a year ago. And I’m certain the whiskered wanker will be wondering the same thing when we catch up to him.”

He refocused on the Daedric Prince. “I leave her to your tender mercies. I am certain she will have time to reflect on her choices.”

Hermaeus Mora let out a chuckle. “Indeed, she will. Until we meet again, Harry Stormcrown.”

Another tentacle blasted from the book, to wrap itself around Jezebel’s neck, and she vanished, as did the tentacles, letting the book drop. It didn’t even reach the ground, as Harry summoned it with a hand, and stowed it away. The eyes, too, then vanished.

Only then did Bryce relax somewhat, though he still reached into his own pouch and produced a calming draught.

“You got no idea how disturbing... he is.”

“Apologies, but killing her wouldn’t have been justice. Trust me, she’s gonna suffer for eternity.”

Ragnar thought to protest, but... no. Harry was right. Death would have been too easy for the witch.

“Harry, the book Jezebel was using doesn’t belong to us,” Brandon reminded him.

“It has spells and magic that have no place in this world. If Hermaeus Mora wants it, then so be it. I’m seizing it in the interest of national security. It'll go to Apocrypha, and won’t be seen here ever again.”

“We still have to find it.”

“I’m certain we’ll uncover its location; they can’t keep it hidden forever.”

Harry looked around. “We clear?”

“Three headed for lock-up after treatment,” said one of the SOU, “We’ve cleared any port keys or other devices. They won’t be getting away.”

“I’ll remain on the scene,” Brandon decided, “Carpenter, Jarisson, return these guys to the Ragged Flagon.”

21 Second Seed / 21 May

With the theatre no longer being needed as a marshalling point following the earthquake, the Ministry of Infrastructure finally decided it was time to move it. There had been discussion about selling the building back to the city, but an appropriate location had already been arranged in Bthalft, given the rather unique shape of the structure.

Harry and his friends were on hand, though Justin headed to Bthalft to help on that end with the placement. No surprise, the media were on hand to capture the event, as were a number of protesters —only natural, considering the theatre had been a part of the city since the late twenties.

Ultimately, that did not matter, as in the end, the Commonwealth owned the structure, and moving it or demolishing it was well within their rights. Sure, there had been numerous attempts at getting it added to the National Register of Historic Places, but such motions were prevented—and being added to the register wouldn’t have prevented it from being moved.
So it was, that morning, a device identical to that deployed to move Hogwarts had been set up in the theatre’s lobby. Exactly like in the fall, a tall rod on the top of it let out a green pulse every so often, indicating a marker had been set and recorded. The group had spent the earlier part of the morning doing a check of the building, mostly outside, making sure there wouldn’t be any sort of obstruction or interference, and people not supposed to be there were escorted off the property.

“We’ll only need about a hundred sensors this time,” one of the technicians explained, “You lot were at Hogwarts when it was moved if I remember correctly.”

“We were, yeah,” Harry answered.

He thought for a moment, before asking, “What happens to the research facility below?”

“It’s been permanently closed by the Ministry,” answered another technician, “There was significant damage, and the Ministry decided to abandon the site rather than risk a repeat in the future.”

“Engineers are sealing things up and removing access as we speak,” said the first.

“So our presence here are pretty much over,” Mazhe guessed.

“Official presence, yes. It’ll definitely get MACUSA off our backs; the government’s been getting a lot of grief.”

“We have five more—four more to set,” said the second.

“It safe for us to be in here when it goes?” Bryce asked.

“Perfectly. It’s a variation on a port key,” the first technician answered, “Perhaps a little more uncomfortable, but not dangerous.”

“Two more.”

“One more.”

“All right. Ten seconds,” the first technician warned.

Harry already knew. One would have to be sensually dead not to feel the intense build-up of energy. The very floor was starting to flicker, beginning to turn translucent, as were the walls... a tingling sensation was travelling up and down his entire body... and then... the sensation of the hook about the naval, though this was by no means subtle. Giant hook, more like it, as everything seemed to twist and warp, being flung through the ether.

Only seconds later, he felt his feet touch the floor again, as everything seemed to refocus, the room once again becoming solid, as the instrument in the middle of the room at last fell silent.

“Readings indicate one hundred percent perfect transmission,” said the first technician, glancing at his mobile. The others were taking readings from the instrument.

“Concurred. Teams outside beginning their inspections, but we should be good.”

“C’mon, let’s go outside,” Harry decided.

“Give me a moment,” said Ragnar, “That was... most unsettling.”

He reached into his pouch, and produced a stomach-calming draught.
“The sensation’s a bit rough, but it does require a lot of magic.”

“Well no shit,” Bryce muttered, “You just moved a fucking building.”

Harry smirked. “Well, I did read somewhere that it’s illegal to mail a building in the US. Some bloke decided to send something like eighty thousand bricks through the post, all in the name of avoiding shipping costs.” (I)

“Where in the world did you read that?” Mazhe dared ask.

Harry shrugged as they headed for the doors. “What can I say? The internet can be a dangerous place at times.”

Stepping outside, they found the streetscape had changed dramatically. Gone was Market Street, replaced with King Street, Bthalft’s main thoroughfare. A small crowd of people had gathered, as the operation had been rather hard to miss.

“Harry,” Justin greeted.

“Guess everything moved okay then?”

“Perfectly. Getting pictures from San Francisco, the plots were an exact match. Now whether the city will keep the park we gave them, it’ll be wait and see.”

“Well, if the Commonwealth retains the land, they won’t have much of a choice, will they? We do still own the land, am I right?”

“We do,” Justin answered, “Justifying the expense, though...”

“A fair argument, true. Err... I thought Zoey was with you.”

“She went back to Washington for the afternoon. Aaron went along.”

“Oh. Right.”

Of course, the group had gotten somewhat smaller, with Miraak and Haknir working in the VPR, and Credence having classes.

“And I need to be in Washington in a few hours,” Bryce reminded them.

“We know. Actually, I’m thinking we should go. It’s been a while since we went to a game.”

“Up to you,” said Brandon.

They had walked a block, before turning to look back at the structure.

“An astonishing feat, being able to move such a massive structure,” Ragnar commented.

“You have seen Hogwarts? It was moved back in the fall, under a much more pressing schedule,” said Harry.

“With the bad guys quite literally at the gate,” said Brandon.

Bryce made a sour face. “Don’t remind me.”

“Right. So a bit of happier news,” said Harry, as they began walking back. “Bill and Fleur having
their wedding on June the twelfth. We’ll be getting official invitation in a couple of days.”

Bryce had to think a moment. “Uh... think we’re in Pittsburgh that date.”

“The wedding will be late morning, with the reception in the afternoon, so plenty of time,” said Harry.

“So they gonna make it small, or will it be something like ours?” questioned Mazhe.

“Somewhere in the middle, I would imagine. They didn’t tell me much about the guest list, other than we’re on it.”

“Where they holding it?”

“At the Burrow. Again, don’t know all the details, but Bill’s hired a catering service, which I’m covering as part of their wedding gift. You guys know how much the Weasleys resist any sort of charity... that’s my way of getting around it.”

Mazhe grinned. “Well, Harry, you do have a way of twisting peoples’ arms.”

Bryce was confused. “Why they waitin’ for the last minute?”

Harry shrugged. “I suspect the whole idea was last minute. At least, the wedding itself. I’m guessin’ it’s probably driving Mrs. Weasley crazy. Knowing she likely wanted to make a big fuss about it, make a grand affair.

“You guys know what Bill’s like, so this is his way of not making it a big spectacle. Thing is, there’ll still be more than a few guests.”

“Not to mention, Mrs. Weasley’s not really a fan of Fleur,” Justin remembered.

That evening, Harry and Mazhe attended the Nationals’ game in Washington. Everyone else remained either in the chest, or at the College. Justin had gone with Zoey to spend some time with her mother, and so it was a really scaled down group occupying the private box, with only Ludvig providing the security. He remained inside the partitioned area, allowing the pair to have some space, and really, given the additional security being provided at the event in general, things were more than safe. Aaron, as usual, was right down on the field, or at least, at the edge of it.

“Been some time since it was just us,” said Mazhe.

“Too true. Not like I’ll ever say no to any of them though. Justin’s like a big brother... same with Brandon... gods, we all grew up together, pretty much.”

“Family in all but blood, yeah,” Mazhe agreed. “Never mind Bryce. Tends to stick pretty close if he’s not working out with the team or playing.”

“Closer than family, I think. He loves the both of us.”

“Really?”

“C’mon, Mazhe. I can see his thoughts, though his body language betrays him. How often does he sleep with us rather than use his own bed?”

Mazhe could feel his face getting hot. “But... well...”
“It’s not weird,” said Harry, smirking.

“Says the one who couldn’t keep his eyes off him back in September.”

Harry gave his mate a swat. “Just being sure we’re on the same page. And really...”

The rather loud chorus of boos from the crowd had their attention back on the field. The Phillies were running away with the game, up by a bunch in top of the sixth inning.

“Yep, sleeping with us again,” said Mazhe.

“Maybe I need to slip the entire team a dose of Felix,” Harry muttered. “Gods, the many ways they find to lose a game.”

“Doesn’t help when the referees—”

“Umpires,” Harry corrected him.

“Uh, right, umpires... keep blowing calls.”

“Piss off, you know what they’re called.”

Mazhe smirked. “I do remember seeing this clip on the internet a while ago. It was from that ice sport—”

“Hockey.”

“Right. It was a clip of one of the coaches or something. He was wearing a pair of dark glasses, and had a stick, tapping it on the ice, like he was blind or something.”

“Yeah, and blind people would find that offensive.”

Mazhe gave a shrug. “No, offensive is officials who mess around with a game. Isn’t it bias?”

“I dunno. I’d figure it was. No different than when Snape officiated the Quidditch game in third year. Everyone has bias, Mazhe, whether they want to admit it or not.”

The Nationals were finally leaving the field after the third out, but the score was ugly. They’d surrendered three more runs, now trailing by nine. Worse, Bryce was having a disastrous outing in right field, having spiked the ball on one play, and pulled a Jose Canseco in another. No, not a good night on defence.

His night only got worse with his next at-bat. He fouled the first pitch into the seats directly behind home plate, before taking the second low and inside for a ball. The count even at one, he then let the third pitch go by, but the umpire still called it a strike though it was high in the zone.

Count now one and two, he sent the next offering into the seats just a hair foul—mere feet from being gone. Wash, rinse, and repeat, the fifth pitch of the at-bat was sent to almost the same place, still foul. That set up the sixth—high and inside, identical to the third. Bryce let it go by, and same as before, the umpire called it a strike, three and out.

Harry had seen Bryce get animated on more than a few occasions, but here, the young player seemed to lose his mind, slamming his bat down, followed by the helmet, which bounced on the ground to strike the home plate umpire in the shins. That, naturally, resulted in an instant ejection, the crowd echoing a massive chorus of boos in protest.
Bryce, however, was not done, continuing to let the umpire have it in very animated fashion.

“Shor’s bones, he’s lost the plot.” Harry muttered, as the team’s manager also stormed onto the field, perhaps a little too late to protect his player. Aaron was already moving in, as were several teammates, to prevent Bryce from doing anything worse. That, in turn, led to the manager being ejected, along with the second baseman.

Harry switched his radio on.

“Get Bryce to my location, expedited.”

“Prongs, status,” came Brandon’s question.

“Handling it.”

“Harry?” came Justin’s concerned voice.

“Handling it, guys!”

“Copy that,” came Aaron’s voice. Harry could see Aaron grip Bryce by the arm, and they popped away, to appear only a second after in the partitioned area of the box.

“Jesus. FUCK. Are you guys fucking kidding me?!” Bryce exploded, “I’ll get—”

“Cool it or we stun you,” said Aaron.

“I dare you—”

“Stupefy,” came Ludvig’s softly spoken spell.

“That really necessary?” Harry questioned, as he and Mazhe stepped into the room.

“He’s acting erratically. Better to knock him out and deal with things more calmly after,” said Ludvig, “Let’s get back to the College.”

“I’m sending a message to the team, let them know we’re handling it,” said Aaron, “Barker knows me. I’ll also contact Oren, see if he can smooth things over with the league—”

Harry shook his head. “Bryce won’t like that. Just let the team know he’s with us.”

Along with a one-game suspension for making physical contact with the umpire, Bryce had been nailed with a nasty fine, as had the manager. Being physically removed from the field left him in a terrible state, and he refused to talk to any of the group for several days, until Brandon threatened to have him seen by Healer Ferris.

That did nothing for his performance slump, which culminated in another disastrous outing two weeks later on June 6th, wherein he was booted from the game in the fourth inning under identical circumstances. This time, Harry only heard of the incident after, since he was helping out with some of the preparations for Bill’s wedding.

The YouTube video posted hours later painted just as vivid a picture as the Pensieve memory Aaron shared: not only did the bat go flying this time, it quite literally disintegrated. The helmet ended up out near second base; both cleats flung out into the outfield toward first base; gloves somewhere out near the pitcher’s mound, and only when Bryce shed his jersey and cover home plate with it, did Aaron finally move in and pop away with the young player, before he did something truly
embarrassing.

The bat disintegrating, though... how had that happened? Bryce seemed not to have noticed, and likely hadn’t, given the circumstances. It would be something worth exploring, when the guy was in a better state of mind.

Turdas, 12 Mid-Year / Thursday, 12 June

No question, the past week had been the realm of insane. Bryce’s second outburst prompted the SOU to call in healer Ferris. He was furious and resented being forced into the sessions, but Brandon gave him a choice: speak to Ferris, or be force-fed calming draughts and sleeping potions for the next week. And he would still have to speak to the healer AFTER.

The final preparations for the wedding seemed to eat up the group’s time otherwise, as a large tent had been erected on the Weasleys’ property, meant to host the reception which would follow. The plan had been for the tent to also host the wedding, but with the weather being calm and predictable—one of the benefits of being underground—Bill had decided the ceremony itself would be held in the open air.

So now, here it was, approaching the noon hour, as what seemed to be about seventy guests filling the rows of seats split by a red-carpeted isle. Bill was already standing at the head of the isle, to the right of the short podium, his brother Charlie at his side. A witch in white robes with blue trim stood behind the lectern—Order of the Magnus, Harry realized. He filed that away for later.

Bill had asked Harry to be his best man, “For everything you’ve done for us,” but he’d politely declined, replying, “It’s your special day, I would only be a distraction.”

The guest list had included most of the Hogwarts professors, and a number of student alumni. There were also a few goblins present, all of them being coworkers from his department. Once again not unexpected, given the goblins’ warmer relationship with the Commonwealth. If Harry had it right, they’d even presented a wedding gift, something virtually unheard of in the UK.

Naturally, the entire Weasley family was present, all seated in the front row. Mrs. Weasley looked lovely in a new set of Amethyst-coloured robes, her husband in a new set of dress robes himself.

The other two Triwizard Champions were also present—both Cedric and Viktor sat in the row behind Harry’s group. Events had once again prevented the group from uniting more frequently, and training together. Harry again made a note to try and make arrangements.

Then, there came a collective gasp of excitement, as Fleur appeared at the back of the assembly, escorted by her parents. The young witch looked positively aglow, and it seemed to radiate, as they began to make their way up the isle. Mazhe absently gripped Harry’s hand, as the family passed, to finally stop just short of the podium.

There, her parents stood back, while she turned to face Bill.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the white-robed witch began, “Ancestors and keepers of magic, we gather here at this time in this place, to witness the union of this man and this woman...”

Harry found it hard to focus on the witch, instead feeling the hand clasped tightly in his. Almost a year had passed since their union. Ten months, if that. Ten months of events and circumstances that, without Mazhe... he likely would have gone off the deep end.

“William Arthur Weasley. Do you take this woman, Fleur Isabelle, to be your wife, now and forever,
before all of these witnesses, before the Ancestors of magic?”

“I do. Now, and forever,” said Bill.

Harry squeezed Mazhe’s hand a little tighter, remembering the words he’d spoken the previous summer. ‘Now and forever’.

The witch was speaking. “Fleur Isabelle Delecour. Do you take this man, William Arthur, to be your husband, now and forever, before all of these witnesses, before the Ancestors of magic?”

It was hard to miss the radiant smile that came from the young witch, before she answered, “I do. For ever and always.”

A good portion of the female contingent were openly crying by this point, as the guardian witch placed a hand on both Bill and Fleur’s head. “It is then hereby declared, that these two, William Arthur, and Fleur Isabelle, are bonded from this day forward.”

Once again, one would have to be sensually dead not to feel the strong wave of magical energy that rolled out from the place the pair stood. The guardian again smiled, speaking, “The Ancestors smile on your union. May they bless you until the end of your days.”

She paused a moment. “The reception shall begin in fifteen minutes, allowing for those of you needing to tend to personal needs.”

Harry, however, made for the guardian witch as soon as he was able. “Madam guardian?”

“Promagistrate,” she answered.

“I have a question. I thought you guys only looked after the Orb of Magnus.”

“It’s the majority of our duties, yes. However, we do also oversee other functions, marriages being a popular one. Queen Susan asked us to perform the marriage given your relationship with them.”

“Oh. I see.”

“Do not see it as overstepping. Our services are not exclusive.”

“Okay, uh... that’s good.”

“We know you prefer not to be given special treatment, but with due respect, Harry, at times you do draw attention.”

Harry let out a frustrated sigh. “I know. I know all too well, madam guardian.”

Then, the afternoon seemed to fly by, as Harry and his circle mingled with the others. Both Walker and Lugo were also present, as were the other members of Harry’s circle.

Just before two o’clock, Bryce had to leave, given he had a game in Pittsburgh.

“Promise me you’ll behave,” said Harry.

Bryce grinned. “Or what?”

“We’ll have to get creative,” Mazhe grinned right back.

“Yeah, uh, uncle. But seriously, I know guys. I’ll take a calming draught on the bench if needed.”
Barker’s threatening to bench me a month next time.”

He clapped Harry on the back, before he and Aaron popped away.

“Gods, hope he has good luck for a change.”

“Harry, don’t worry about it. His rotten luck can’t last forever. Now come on, we need to dance for a bit.”

“Now that sounds like a smashing idea,” Harry agreed, and allowed his mate to lead him over to the dance floor.

“Harry...”

“Bill and Fleur. Congratulations, the both of you.”

“Thank you. Glad your lot could make it. Wouldn’t have been right, the help you gave putting this together.”

“Oh no worries. No way I was going to miss it.”

“And you weel be joining us at ze theatre tomorrow?” Fleur asked.

“Oh yes. You guys settle on where you’re going for your honeymoon?”

“Eet is still wait and see.”

“Just like us. We could never decide where to go,” said Mazhe. “Guess the thing is, it really doesn’t matter in the end. You have each other now.”

Bill let out a laugh. “This is so true.”

Harry smirked. “And it looks like it won’t be long before the Weasleys have another wedding.”

He flicked his eyes over to where Ron was dancing with Hermione. “They haven’t stopped since the reception started.”

“We noticed,” said Bill.

Well into the evening, with the meal already over, the reception was still going strong, though a few people had said their good byes. Harry and Mazhe had tired of dancing, and so took to a table off to the side. Harry had transfigured their seats into a comfortable couch, where they snuggled close, content to just watch everyone else for a while.

“Mr. Stormcrown.”

Harry looked up to see Walker had wandered over along with Lugo.

“It’s Harry. Formalities make me feel old.” He indicated a pair of vacant seats.

Walker sat down, with Lugo quickly following.

“You guys are well?”

“Yeah. Commander McAllister’s asking us to come train with the unit,” said Lugo.

“You both would be more than welcome,” said Harry. “Tommy was... well, before he lost his leg...
they were aggressively courting him, you could say.”

“Guess my worry is this hearing—” Walker began.

“Inquiry,” Harry corrected him, “Don’t worry about it. It’s not a criminal investigation. It’s official record, more an attempt to figure out how OND pulled it off. Four months, they had, to cause that much chaos and no one noticed.”

It was then there came a blur of limbs, which revealed Aaron, Bryce on his arm. Bryce was still in uniform.

“Shor’s bones, not again—” Harry began.

Aaron held up a hand. “OND were seen near the ballpark. We left soon as the game finished.”

“Oh,” Harry made to stand up, but was slammed with a bout of vertigo. Too much ale again, he muttered in his head, as Mazhe pulled him back down.

“It’s being handled,” said Aaron, “We put more boots on the ground, and non-magical authorities are aware. The rest of the guys are safe.”

“Good. Love to see them introduced to pepper spray and a taser for starters,” Bryce muttered. “least you guys waited ’till we were finished. Game sucked as it was.”

Harry reached out and snagged Bryce by the belt, pulling him onto the couch beside him.

“Uh…”

Mazhe snatched a bottle of ale from the ice chest on the table and passed it over. “Relax.”

Aaron only shook his head. “If you guys are well… uh… we’re going back to the Ragnar, right?”

“The plan, yes. Been a few days since we’ve helped out with the clean up,” said Harry, “Though we’re at the theatre in the afternoon.”

“How come you guys are still there?” Walker asked, as Aaron moved off to speak with another SOU nearby.

Harry shrugged. “Right thing to do.”

“Maybe we should tag along,” said Lugo.

“You guys would be welcome.”

“Won’t these guys get in trouble with the… I mean, thought the government’s looking for them.”

“C’mon, Bryce, we’ve been to the White House how many times now? No doubt the Commonwealth has smoothed things over,” said Mazhe. “They did something similar with Tommy, and that was before we knew the President’s daughter.”

It was nearing 1am before Bill and Fleur at last retreated inside, that being the cue for the party to wrap up. It was a very drunk and giddy party who travelled back to the Ragnar, this time thanks to Mazhe’s mobile. He was the only one still coherent enough to do so. The protection detail followed shortly after, along with Justin and Zoey almost immediately after that.

“Good grief, Harry,” said Justin, shaking his head. “Get some sleep or you’ll be no shape later.”
“Piss off,” Harry grinned.

“It was a good party?” Ragnar was seated in one of the chairs in the common room, as were Miraak and Haknir.

“It was a beautiful ceremony, yes,” answered Mazhe, “We’ll tell you about it in the morning, need to get these guys off to bed.”

“If you guys are all here, where’s Credence?” questioned Justin.

“He is here as well, went off to bed about two hours ago,” answered Miraak. “He wishes to help out in the morning.”

“Wha... I... no, not enough knowledge,” Harry tried to protest.

“And we’ll talk about it in the morning,” said Justin, “Guys, get some sleep and take a couple of potions.”

Mazhe led his companions to their room, and practically fell onto the bed. To hell with undressing, that required far too much effort and concentration. Bryce once again found himself sandwiched between the two wizards.

“Some of me was hopin’ you’d go off again,” Harry whispered conspiratorially, as he faced Bryce. “Mazhe wanting to get...”

“Creative,” Mazhe finished.

“So gettin’ me drunk’s plan ‘B’...”

“Maybe,” Harry hissed, playfully.

“So much of my brain’s sayin’... ‘you’re out of your mind’, but... fuck it.”

“Resistance is futile,” Harry sing-songed, and Bryce felt a hand slip in through the front of his jersey.

Fredas, 13 Mid-Year / Friday, 13 June
3:14 am Local Time
Action Information Centre, HMS Ragnar

Unless there was an ongoing action, the ship’s control centre tended to be a quiet place during the overnight watch. With the ship presently on fixed station in the middle of San Francisco Bay, a minimum crew was on, and it was just another forty-six minutes before shift change.

The relative quiet in the room was broken, as a set of red indicators lit up on the large bank of display screens at the front of the room, and the radio came to life.

“AIC, Comm. Flash traffic by internal transmission. Recommend condition yellow.”

“Say again?”

“It’s an internal transmission, sir. Recommend condition yellow.”

The watch commander glanced at his aide. “Get the CO and the XO.”

“Sir.”
While the aide picked up a telephone handset, the watch commander mentally groaned. Drills in the middle of the night, this close to shift change, it drove him mental. Never mind the fact the Promagistrate was aboard...

“Sir, we have a properly formatted Emergency Action Message auto-generated by internal systems, pass phrase ‘deadswitch’. Permission to—”

“You have permission to authenticate,” said Commodore O’Toole, stepping into the room. Commander Dawson was right behind him, still stuffing his shirt into his pants. The aide at the table pressed a virtual button on the inlay, causing the lights to brighten.

It was then an image of the printed message now framed one of the screens, while a red card with the word ‘NINECATS’ took up a second.

“November-India-November-Echo-Charlie-Alpha-Tango-Sierra. Sir. Message is authentic.”

At the same time, a runner rushed in with a hard copy of the message. The Commodore and the XO held it between them, both reading the message:

DELTAVALE . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . EMERGENCY ACTION MESSAGE (X01)

From: HER MAJESTY’S ROYAL RESIDENCE

To: HER MAJESTY’S SHIP RAGNAR (SRN 01)

Subject: THREAT CONDITION BASILISK


1. Assume Readiness State Alpha

2. Assume designation, OPERATION FOE GLASS.

3. Commonwealth now at threat condition BASILISK.

AUTHENTICATION CODE: NINECATS

Commodore O’toole let go of the paper, as the colour drained out of his face. Over a quarter of a century serving on the Ragnar, ten of them as her CO. Sure, they’d trained for such a thing, but this... the absence of the ‘DRILL’ tag at the top of the printed page told him this was as real as it could get. There was only one way such a message could be created—it could not be forged or falsified by any means. It would then mean that, not only was Trevelyan destroyed, but likely so was Erwin, and several others. Obviously an attack of unimaginable scale. How bad, they would soon find out.

“I concur, sir. Message is authentic,” said Commander Dawson.

“Number one, take us to action stations. Condition red.”

Chapter End Notes
UP NEXT: Harry and his companions are presented with an utterly absurd set of circumstances, as the Commonwealth reacts to a devastating attack.

CHAPTER NOTES: So, the shit has hit the fan. Exactly what, and what will it mean for Harry and his friends? Trust me, nothing good. Naturally, they’re in for a VERY rude awakening about three seconds from now, no?

If you guys haven’t figured out who Bryce’s real-world counterpart really is by now... his outbursts and ejections are rather legendary. The incidents above are rather textbook. Well, maybe not shedding the jersey, but... you get the point, right?

So, I'm not going to give a big, winded explanation for where things have been, just know I'm around, still working on this and its follow up. I should warn, it'll likely be just as dark as this, if not worse. OND's far from done, as you have and will see.

Apologies for not going into great detail with the wedding. Just no way I’m ever going to match J.K.R. on that, though there are a few similarities. Some elements were pulled from the book, but weddings in the Commonwealth would be closer to what we have. Non-magical weddings would be more common.

(1) This is true. Look up ‘The bank that was sent through the post office’. No, this did not inspire the idea of ‘teleporting’ buildings, though I did have a good laugh when I stumbled across it recently.

(2) It wasn’t an official, but minor-league hockey who coach did this in 2013, protesting a series of bad calls by the officials. Again, look it up.

(2) The infamous ‘ball goes off Jose Canseco’s head for a home run’ incident.
Harry and his companions are presented with an utterly absurd set of circumstances, as the Commonwealth reacts to a devastating attack.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

40. ATLANTIS HAS FALLEN

May - June, 2008 / Second Seed - Mid-Year, 4E203

“The Queen is dead, long live The King!”

- Proclamation immediately following the death of Queen Victoria in 1901

Of the three sleeping companions, only Bryce was still awake, though just barely. He lay pinned between Harry and Mazhe—Harry was half-on top of him, while Mazhe was crushed up against his left side. No, they hadn’t gone all the way, but the activity had left him hot and bothered, if he admitted it freely. He hadn’t felt like this since Sarah—or Ian.

He’d seen both sides of the fence, and honestly, it really didn’t matter to him in the end—emotionally or physically, that is. But this... Harry and Mazhe were married. Last thing he wanted to do was drive a wedge between them, cause conflict.

However, if he really thought of it, the pair were clearly more than okay with it. How often had he shared a bed with them? Not like he’d imposed, it was either Harry or Mazhe dragging him to join them. So why the resistance? Not like what they did in the flat—or on the Ragnar, as they were now—would ever get out, right?

He mentally sighed. It was still dangerous, given the current climate in professional sports. Gay, or any hint of being anything but straight as an arrow, usually meant career-ending. That was the million-dollar equation. The reason why—

His thought train was shattered by the sudden blaring klaxons and bells. Even though it was in the outer room, it did have the volume of a typical smoke alarm.

“Action stations, action stations. Set condition red throughout the ship. Action stations, action stations. This is not an exercise. Threat condition Basilisk. Action stations, action stations. Threat condition Basilisk,” came a voice over the PA system.

Harry stirred, opening his eyes. “Wha?”

“Harry?” Mazhe asked, flopping over on his back. “What... what’s going on?”

“I dunno. Get... we...”
Now someone was pounding on the door. “GUYS!” It opened, and Brandon stuck his head in. “Hurry it up, we gotta go.”

“Condition red is set, capacitor charge for emergency action initiated, full charge in T-minus eight minutes even,” another voice over the PA spoke, this time louder because the door was open.

Harry shifted off of Bryce, then planted his feet on the floor. “Oh, this is gonna be really fun,” he muttered, while reaching for his pouch.

“Sobriety draughts and hangover cures, I think,” Mazhe muttered, reaching for his own. “Bryce... you okay? We didn’t mean...”

Bryce waved him off. “No regrets. Gotta talk later though. C’mon, whatever this shit is...”

Harry gave a nod, as he consumed a pair of potions. Mazhe was doing the same, while Bryce re-buttoned his jersey. He reached up, feeling a tender spot on his neck. “The hell?”

Harry glanced at Mazhe. “You marked him?”

Mazhe looked first at Bryce, then at Harry, with an expression which read, ‘who me?’

Harry rolled his eyes, and flicked a finger at the dark spot, casting a healing charm.

There came another pounding on the door. “GUYS! Hurry it up!”

“AIC, Comm., widespread floo network outage, cell network is becoming fragmented.”

“Copy, comm., initiate compensation procedures, we need that network.”

“Roger that. We’re patching our local with San Fran’s node. Should hold for now. Cell’s running from our local transmitter.”

The three of them were finally dressed, and hurried out to the common room, where everyone else was already gathered. Justin and Zoey stood off to the side, both looked weary. Of course they had just suffered the same rather rude awakening Harry and his companions had. So did Credence, though he’d gone to bed sooner, if Harry remembered correctly.

Walker, Lugo, Ragnar, Miraak, and Haknir were in their own group, looking a little less weary—likely having consumed pepper-up potions already. Of course, the alarms and the warnings over the PA system likely put the group into a battle stance.

If Harry admitted it, he was in a battle-stance himself. “What happened?” he questioned.

Brandon looked ashen. He answered, “Really bad shit. Harry, we need Fawkes here. I don’t trust the mobiles or the floo network.”

“Fawkes,” Harry called.

It took only a few moments, before the phoenix appeared in his customary flash of flames, to land on the back of a nearby couch. “Where we goin’?”
“Back to the flat,” said Aaron.

Harry gave a short nod. “Fawkes, we need to get back to the flat.”

The bird simply offered his tail feathers.

They landed in the common room of the flat, which up to this point, was deserted. Harry expected that to change in a hurry, if his gut was right.

“How bad is it?” he again pressed. “I assume the Queen’s on her way.”

“We’re following COG procedures,” Brandon answered, indicating everyone take a seat. Fawkes fluttered over to the couch as Harry, Mazhe, and Bryce did so. Justin and Zoey took the couch opposite, and Harry could see it in the man’s eyes.

“You know what ‘basilisk’ means.” It wasn’t a question.

Justin gave a slow nod. “Guys. This... it’s COG procedures, for real. Harry. The Queen’s likely dead. So is the Prime Minister... Governor General... cabinet... everyone. ‘Basilisk’... it means that Trevelyans been destroyed, likely along with Erwin—it being the immediate fall back command centre.”

He glanced at Brandon. “They’re looking for the successor and the designated survivor?”

“Still waiting on confirmation.”

“And we have been evacuated due to Harry’s title,” said Ragnar.

“Yes,” Aaron confirmed.

“And yours too,” said Harry.

“Actually, no. Ragnar’s not eligible to take the crown, considering he’s legally dead,” said Ludvig. “Just trust us, guys. We’re following procedure.”

At that, Brandon glanced at the fireplace, but found he didn’t need to do anything further, considering the fire was out.

Harry, meanwhile, produced his wand and flicked it at the vacant spot beside the couch, speaking, “Expecto Patronum.”

To the ghostly stag, he spoke, “Tolfdir, urgent. Lockdown in effect, Commonwealth under attack. Seal the College and be on alert.” Then, “To acting Arch-mage Tolfdir, urgent.”

Mazhe, meanwhile, produced his mobile, and began composing a message.

“We’ll need to notify Hogwarts as well,” said Harry, as he produced his own mobile.

“The phones, they still work here?” questioned Credence. He’d remained quiet up to this point, feeling very much out of place.

“Yes. They’re working off a different network here,” Justin answered.

“Bottom line, we’re at threat level six,” said Ludvig.
“And we should be out there helping then,” Harry muttered, looking up from the message he was preparing. “Not being locked away. Promagistrate or not—”

“Harry, I think this is way beyond the scope of anything we’ve faced up to this point,” said Mazhe, pausing in composing his message. “Running out there without an idea what we’re facing... last thing you want to do is get someone killed.”

Harry deflated. Of course his mate was right. Never mind the fact there were at least two people present who would be at risk, one of them being the President’s daughter.

“For what reason did we flee from the ship?” came Haknir’s question.

“She’s configuring for a battle posture,” answered Brandon. “As you heard on the PA, she’s preparing for a fight, condition red is the highest level of readiness. It’s better we’re not there. Given a few of you are not magical, nor are you military...”

“And our titles or whatever,” Harry muttered.

“Yes, that as well. For all we know, you could be a target, and given the severity, just trust us. It’s better we’re away from the ship.”

Mazhe, meanwhile, realized something as he sent the message. “Justin... I’m sorry. I know your family... lived in Erwin.”

Justin looked stoic, but gave a short nod. “I... I will think... grieve later. We... our heads need to be here,” he said, softly, feeling Zoey pull him closer.

Now Zoey thought of something. “My father...”

“The White House will be evacuated; we’ll get MACUSA to help with it,” Aaron answered. “Though I’m guessing they already know. If Trevelyan’s been destroyed, the... the explosion would have been picked up by satellite.”

“Jesus. They’ll think world war three’s broke out,” said Bryce.

“And we’ll make sure they understand it’s not. Guys, listen to me,” said Brandon, who seemed a little calmer now. “Even if the government’s been destroyed... we still have a chain of command, contingency plans in place. Commodore O’Toole knows exactly what ‘Basilisk’ means, they’ve drilled for it.”

“Your ships... have they ever been in combat?” asked Zoey.

“Directly? No. But Air Wing’s been involved in combat on a number of occasions,” said Brandon.

“Quite recent,” Harry remembered, as he at last finished his message.

“In Dubai,” Walker also remembered. “They lost a couple guys in the explosion.”

“Yes, exactly.”

“Think OND did this then?”

“I would count on it, Walker,” Brandon muttered, “This feels exactly the same. They caused an earthquake which broke the west coast, so I’d think by now destroying an entire city’s a cake walk. Destroying multiple cities even.”
“What about Bthalft?” Harry questioned.

“No word yet,” said Aaron, “But you guys know what the wards are like there, and the security’s been over and above from the beginning. In retrospect, it’s the sort of security we should have had in place everywhere.”

“The people helping out in San Francisco, on the west coast... what happens to them?” Credence asked.

“They’ll likely not know anything for another hour or so. Right now all resources are being spent ensuring the chain of command’s intact. As of this minute, the Commonwealth doesn’t have a living sovereign,” Justin explained.

“The effort right now is locating the next in line,” said Brandon.

Now, Mazhe remembered something. “King Alexander said it was Harry who would do the... the ritual, right?”

Brandon mentally groaned. Of course one of them would remember that. “Yes. It’s correct.”

Now Harry looked like he was going to be ill. “That’s why... that’s why we’re here. That’s why we’ve always been squirreled away whenever the shit hit the fan.”

“Yes. Harry, you’ve always known that for the most part. No matter what you might think, you’re an important figure to all of us,” Brandon said, calmly. “You’re part of the crown in perpetuity... and so are any children, should you have them, naturally or otherwise.

“Just trust us. There’ll be a Guardian of the Magnus who will assist with the procedure.”

“But why... why didn’t anyone tell him this before?” came Bryce’s annoyed question. “I mean... think it would’ve been better with him knowing this could happen, aren’t I right?”

Harry gave Brandon a look that said, ‘yeah, same question’.

“Her Majesty’s orders. I know you want to be informed about things, Harry, but sometimes, honestly, I don’t have a choice. On matters of security, we do have the right to maintain secrecy.”

Harry sucked in a breath, then blew it out. “Total... utter... cluster fuck.”

Fawkes clicked his beak a couple of times before letting out a musical trill.

That was followed only moments later, when both Dobby and Kreacher entered from the kitchen, bringing a platter of mugs and some snacks.

“Thanks, guys, a brilliant plan,” said Harry, as he relieved Dobby of his tray and levitated it onto the coffee table. Aaron quickly helped Kreacher with his.

“We heard master and his friends return,” said Kreacher.

“If the pair of you would stick around. There’s been some unfortunate incidents over the past half hour or so,” said Brandon.

“We is hearing what you said,” said Dobby, sadly. “Chorley was a good friend, he was.”

“I know, Dobby. Queen Susan... was like a grandmother to me,” Harry confessed.
“No mistake, she was very fond of you, Harry,” said Brandon. “Over and above your title, she thought you were a very special young man the first time you were introduced. Your title ultimately had no influence on what she thought of you. She told me that on several occasions.”

“Well, she did attend the Halloween party at the Longbottoms’ place rather than the dozens of other much higher-profile events she could have attended,” Aaron remembered. “Trust me, she gets invitations to many, many events... I mean—”

Harry held up a hand. “We get it.”

“You’re taking this better than we expected.”

Now Harry looked furious. “You have no idea what I’m thinking... what I want to do right now. No, I’ll save it. I’ll save all of my rage for when I catch up with the mey joor (foolish mortals) who orchestrated this... this atrocity. I WILL crucify them. I’ll eviscerate them. And then I will soul-trap them and send their miserable, useless souls to the Soul Cairn.”

“And there will be more than enough time for vengeance, Harry. Just... keep it together,” said Justin, softly. “This... we’ll likely be heading back to the Ragnar. She’s the flagship of the fleet. If Erwin’s gone... control will go to the Ragnar.”

“What about the Orb?” Mazhe questioned.

“It’ll also return to the Ragnar,” said Brandon. “Hold on.” He felt his mobile buzz. Opening it, three words filled the small screen: ATLANTIS HAS FALLEN. And, Harry could see it in his eyes.

Brandon reached to his belt, and drew his side-arm.

“Harry, we need Fawkes to get us all back to the Ragnar immediately. Carpenter, Jarisson, form up. We’re stage orange.”

“What’s happened now?” Justin wanted to know, as everyone got back to their feet.

“Hold off your questions for now, sir.”

Now Justin looked horribly confused, not having been addressed that way before. Harry, meanwhile, had a very good idea why.

Mazhe saw the look, but Harry shook his head, as the group got organized. Fawkes was already offering his tail feathers. And, in a flash of golden flames, the large group vanished.

They reappeared in Harry’s suite aboard the ship. Both Aaron and Ludvig had also produced their side-arms. Seeing the defensive posture, those who were non-magical and armed also produced weapons.

“We don’t expect trouble, but just be ready,” said Aaron, as they headed for the door.

“Where we going?” questioned Bryce.

“The hanger. Orb of Magnus should be there already. Just, everyone hold your questions.” Brandon thought for a moment before asking, “Who’s got the staff?”

“Staff of Magnus?” Harry clarified.

“Yeah.”
“I’ve got it,” said Bryce.

Brandon only hummed a moment, while they hurried through the corridors.

“Why don’t we just... flash there?” Mazhe wanted to know, seeing Fawkes had settled onto Harry’s shoulder. Both Dobby and Kreacher had also followed, and were following close behind.

“Think we can answer that already. Don’t you feel it?” questioned Harry. “Shor’s bones, magic’s almost oppressive. Feels exactly like the Magnus Chamber back in Trevelyan.”

“Which is good, means at least one member of the Order is present. It puts us in a much better position than earlier... Ragnar’s able to tap into the Orb directly. If we need to jump quickly, or use her weapon in rapid succession, we’ll be able to do it,” Brandon explained.

As they hurried through the corridors, the group noticed they were picking up a following, as a number of the ship’s crew fell in line behind them. Of course, Harry realized, being the Promagistrate, he was about to quite literally crown a new King or Queen—well, maybe not literally. He was pretty sure whichever crown jewels there may have been were all incinerated with the destruction of Trevelyan. Just about every state symbol the country had was likely gone, the exception being the Orb of Magnus. How had that survived anyway? A question he’d have to ask later, as they’d then arrived at one of the numerous entrances to the massive hangar, the largest space on the ship.

All the massive doors had been sealed, and the deck had been cleared, making the space appear all the larger. And, at its centre, rested the Orb of Magnus, which seemed to alternate between the blue-green shade it normally radiated, and a fiery orange shade.

A large crowd of people had already gathered, including a small press contingent—present on the ship due to an ongoing invite from the government. Sure, Commodore O’Toole didn’t like it that much, that the press have access to the ship at all, but the Ministry of Defence wanted things to be at least partially open and above board, hence the media presence.

As of late, the team had been most useful, releasing footage of the disaster relief operations on the west coast not only back to the Commonwealth, but to non-magical media in both the United States and Canada. It had been the start of a working relationship between them. After all, magical or not, they were in the same business at the end of the day.

The scattered crowd separated as they entered, clearing a path to the Orb, where Commodore O’Toole and Commander Dawson waited. Along with them stood a wizard in white robes with crimson trim. He looked dishevelled, the bottom of his robes being scorched in several places.

“Promagistrate. I am Master Guardian Evander. Glad you are here.”

“Master Guardian,” said Harry, with an incline of the head. “I am aware of the necessity for my presence, but not of what is actually required.”

“You need not be worried. I do believe you have felt the guidance of the Ancestors of Magic on several occasions, no?”

Harry had to think a minute, but... oh, yes. Now he remembered. How did the Guardians know of that? Never mind, there were far more important issues in front of him for now.

“Did... you are well?”

“I have been looked after well enough that we can proceed,” answered Evander. “If the Designated
Survivor will step forward.”

“I thought they were already here,” said Harry, looking confused.

“Actually, he is,” said Brandon. “Justin—”

Justin felt a stone drop into the pit of his stomach, as every eye on the room fell on him. He felt Zoey grip his arm a little tighter, as his knees grew weak.

“I... it has to be a mistake,” he croaked out. “I... I’m just... I’m just a... I’m no politician. I’m no leader! Harry... Harry’s the leader, not me.”

“Justin...” Harry said, softly, putting a hand on the guy’s shoulder. “Queen Susan chose you. Not me. She chose you... and we know... all of us know, she would never make a mistake.

“Valicadia needs you, Dr. Fraser.”

For several moments, he stood, deathly still, as he waged a mental war in his head.

“Sir. The Commonwealth needs a head,” said Dawson, “Every moment we waste, is more time the enemy has to inflict damage.”

“This is scaring the hell out of me too,” Harry confessed, “C’mon, we gotta be strong. No matter what, I have your back... like you’ve always had mine.”

“I... what do I do?” Justin still looked bewildered.

“Come to stand in front of me,” said Evander. “Dr. Bartlet, I’ll ask you remain separate as not to contaminate the bond.”

“The bond? Oh,” Justin remembered. Of course, the bond between the monarch and the Orb. He’d seen archive footage of Queen Susan’s ascension ritual, held in the Magnus Chamber. The new monarch had to be physically separate from everyone else.

He stood in front of Evander.

“Promagistrate, if you will stand in front of him. Who are your four supporters?”

“None of them survive. Crixus and Dardanos were killed in an accident in Dubai,” Harry answered. “I therefore name my mate Mazhe, Mr. Hunter, Ragnar, and...”

Harry seemed to think for several moments. Did strength matter here? No. Ragnar and Bryce were non-magicals.

“Mr. Barebone will be my final supporter.”

“Harry...” Aaron cautioned.

But Evander only gave a nod.

“The named supporters will take up positions. Uh... Mr. Barebone, to my right. Ragnar, to my left. Mr. Hunter, to the Promagistrate’s left, and finally, Mr. Stormcrown, to his right.”

“Bryce... the Staff of Magnus. Harry will find it helpful,” said Brandon, as the others began to take up positions as Evander had indicated.
“Oh. Right.”

Bryce reached into his pouch, and produced the fabled staff. Brought into the open, it began to pulse with energy to match the Orb of Magnus.

“This is normal?”

“The Orb has been exposed to a massive magical disturbance, Mr. Hunter,” Evander explained, “It was only due to my proximity at the time of the event, that I survived.”

“It’s almost like it’s angry,” Credence commented. “My... the Obscurius... it’s...”

Harry looked concerned. “It’s not hurting you?”

“No, not at all. It’s as if it’s remembering... remembering the similarity of our adventure in restarting this ship’s magical core.”

Harry now held the staff, as the three SOU also took up positions behind him, having produced their rifles. They were rested at their feet, as the three men took a vigil stance. Harry could feel the energy shifting, it already being heavy, almost physically tangible, twisting and swirling about. But it was shifting, settling down, just like the great Orb in their midst. The orange pulses were becoming less, it remaining mostly turquoise in colour, the strange symbols shifting, shimmering gold.

Evander hummed a moment, appearing satisfied with the configuration, and began, “What name do you carry?”

Harry was confused, but Justin responded, “Justin Daniel Fraser.”

“Promagistrate. If you will please conduct the Ascension.”

Harry was once again confused, but felt a soft presence touch his mind. He’d felt this before, over a year prior... when he’d dispatched with Voldemort. The Ancestors of Magic, then? No matter, it was calming, and was providing him with the information needed to proceed.

“We stand here before the Orb of Magus, the symbol of the Commonwealth's power, with Justin, so called upon to bear the crown. Who among those gathered here will speak for him?”

It remained silent for a moment, before a voice spoke from the back, answering, “I will.”

Harry recognized it belonged to Captain Rowland.

Then, yet another spoke, “I do.”

The Orb pulsed a brilliant green a moment.

“I will,” spoke yet another, closer to the group, causing the Orb to flash again.

“As do I,” spoke Commodore O’Toole, with his Executive Officer immediately following.

That seemed to open the floodgates, as dozens of voices joined in, giving assent to the young wizard.

Harry finally held up a hand, bringing silence to the room.

“As the promagistrate, I deem you worthy of ascent. Justin, do you stand before this circle of your own free will?”
Justin took a deep breath, before answering, “I do.”

“Are you ready and willing to transact the oath?”

“I am willing.”

Harry dipped the Staff so it was at chest level, as Evander stepped to the side, and a thin sliver of magical energy connected the staff and the Orb.

“Place your hands on the Staff.”

Justin did as instructed, and felt a great surge of energy race through him, seeming to poke and prod his deepest recesses, before dimming to a dull hum. The supporters, too, felt the great surge of energy, as four slivers spawned from the staff to touch each of them, linking back to the Orb itself.

“And now, repeat my words,” said Harry. “I, Justin...”

“I, Justin.”

“Do swear to the Orb of Magnus and the circle gathered before me...”

“Do swear to the Orb of Magnus and the circle gathered before me.”

“That I take the crown...”

“That I take the crown.”

“As the King of Valicadia...”

“As the King of Valicadia.”

“And that I will defend its laws and its sovereignty...”

“And that I will defend its laws and its sovereignty.”

“With every fibre of my being...”

“With... with every fibre of my being,” Justin finished. He looked up, tears in his eyes, as a great surge of magic raced through his person. The supporters, too, felt it, as the energy arced back to the Orb, causing it to once again pulse a brilliant turquoise before at last settling down. As each line of the oath was recited, the orange pulses had diminished, and now it had ceased altogether.

Harry felt himself released from the force which had guided him through the ritual, but placed both hands on Justin’s shoulders, speaking, “May Talos protect him with a ready sword...”

Mazhe quickly joined in as they continued, “Plant the seeds of doubt and defeat in the hearts of his enemies. Bring strength and courage to his allies.. and may there be a place held for him in Arkay's realm should he part this day.”

“Is it Justin, or Daniel?” Evander questioned.

“Justin.”

Evander spoke, “Ancestors of magic, help and guide your servant Justin, as he carries out the great work he has been assigned; help those who serve him that they may carry out their duties to the best of their ability; help those of us who may doubt him and his abilities, that they may see the flaw in
their reasoning; finally, watch over your faithful servant Susan, as she passes on to her next great adventure. In the name of the All-maker, we pray.”

Evander fell silent for a moment, before then proclaiming, “Friends and witnesses, I present Justin the Third, King of Valicadia.”

Now, Brandon shouted, “Gods save the King!”

“All hail the King!” came another shout, and in short order, the room was filled with joyous shouts.

Harry smiled at his friend as he passed the staff back to Bryce. “Mate, I couldn’t see a more appropriate man to stand in your place.”

“I just feel...”

“Take it in. Just breathe,” said Aaron. “Don’t sweat the tough stuff, we’re gonna be with you every step of the way.”

“As will I, sir,” said O’Toole. He got to his knees with help from Dawson—all, the Commodore wasn’t exactly a spry young man anymore. He then bowed his head speaking, “I, Stephen Allen O’Toole, do solemnly affirm that I will bear true allegiance to his majesty King Justin the third, his heirs and successors, and that I will perform my duties as I am so bound, to protect his majesty and the realm which he now commands against all enemies, and will observe and obey all orders given by his majesty, his heirs and successors, and all those in command above me, with every fibre of my being.”

“And you respond, ‘So mote it be’, ” Evander explained. “You seal his oath given you’re magical.”

“So mote it be,” said Justin. He then offered a hand, and helped the Commodore back to his feet. However, just as quickly, Dawson dropped to his knees to give the same oath.

“So mote it be,” Justin spoke again, to then help Dawson back to his feet. He then held up a hand to stop anyone else from following suit. “Friends, there will be time for such procedures and rituals in the coming days. For now... just... for now, if we could... observe a few moments’ silence. Our great friend, a mother in many ways, a virtual grandmother to others, but to all of us, our Queen. To our departed Queen Susan, may we always remember.”

The room fell silent, with only the hum from the Orb of Magnus, and the occasional shift of fabric, as the gathering honoured the new King’s request. There were more than a few tear-stained faces after nearly a minute passed.

“To Queen Susan,” Harry finally spoke. “The Queen is dead; Long live the King.”

Justin felt his throat hitch at Harry’s remark, but stood stoically a moment, unsure of what to do next. It was almost eerie, the near silence with so many people gathered. And then he knew, as Zoey again took his arm. He began to sing the opening lines to ‘I Vow to Thee’, the National Anthem always marking the conclusion of a public ceremony of such magnitude. However, he was unable to make it through the second line, before he hit the emotional wall, collapsing in grief.

Others quickly picked up singing as both Harry and Zoey continued to console Justin, the entire hangar singing by the end of the verse. But, the second verse seemed to confuse a few people, though Harry quickly understood its meaning:

*I heard my country calling, away across the sea,*
*Across the waste of waters she calls and calls to me.*
Her sword is girded at her side, her helmet on her head,
And round her feet are lying the dying and the dead.
I hear the noise of battle, the thunder of her guns,
I haste to thee my mother, a son among thy sons. (1)

Chapter End Notes

UP NEXT: The newly crowned King and his entourage ascertain the scope of the event; the Ragnar ends up hosting several high-profile foreign visitors; and the behaviour of one of the Ragnar’s sisters reveals a frightening prospect, wherein there may only be one solution...

CHAPTER NOTES: So, a question: how many of you saw this coming? I did leave a few subtle hints at something truly disastrous. I’ll give you an example: If you think back to chapter 10, wherein there was a discussion near the end about the Designated Survivor. Justin had scoffed at the idea saying, “I pity the poor bastard”. Now here he is, eating crow.

This event, Justin becoming the King of Valicadia, is an event eight literal years in the making (at time this was posted, the fall of 2019). It was actually one of the first scenes I framed in back in 2011, though the supporting cast has changed greatly as the story progressed. But the sacking of the Commonwealth, and emergency ascension... it was written from the beginning.

Now, this ‘episode’ of Chronicles is coming to a close, with only three chapters to go, all of which are complete. I’m already working on episode 3, tenatively named “Prisoners of Fate”, though I can’t say when that will be out. Got some fresh ideas on where to go with things, though the dark plot points will certainly continue. As for the ending of this episode, it’s not gonna be a happy ending.

(1) According to Wikipedia, this is sometimes referred to as the ‘rarely sung middle verse’. I’ll direct you to Wikipedia for the full story on why. I thought it would be a thing that Valicadia would sing this verse in wartime, instead of the regular third verse, which is heavily peace-oriented.
The newly crowned King and his entourage ascertain the scope of the event; the Ragnar ends up hosting several high-profile foreign visitors; and the behaviour of one of the Ragnar’s sisters reveals a frightening prospect, wherein there may only be one solution...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

41. EXTERMINATION

May - June, 2008 / Second Seed - Mid-Year, 4E203

“History has shown us, that you just can't allow the mass extermination of people, and just sit by and watch it happen.”

- Former U.S. President Bill Clinton

After a brief bout of silence, scattered chatter began to break out. That was the cue for the small press contingent to unleash a barrage of questions, all speaking at once.

“Your majesty! A statement?!”

“We have reports—”

Brandon held up a hand. “We’ll have an official statement shortly.” He turned to Justin. “Let’s get back up to AIC.”

Justin only gave a nod, still very much in a fog. Everything was coming at him so fast… parents, sister, gone. Nearly everyone he knew, gone. Now, thrust into position as a leader, something he’d never really wanted.

“Sir?”

“Just… let’s… let’s get back upstairs,” Justin answered.

“We’ll fill you in on what we know when we get there,” said O’Toole, as they started walking, the gathered crowd parting to make room for their departure. Harry looked down to the two elves at his side. “You pair return to our suite on board and wait there.”

“As you wish,” said Kreacher, bowing low. He popped away.

“Harry and his friends be safe,” said Dobby, looking worried, before he too popped away.

“If your cities are being destroyed… it will result in massive damage on the surface, am I right?”
Ragnar questioned.

“Yes,” Justin answered, “Commodore, do we have people covering that? If Infraroma’s been destroyed…”

“We don’t have confirmation, but we do have people working on it. Communications has already notified the Canadian Prime Minister and Minister of Magic,” answered Dawson. “The destruction of Trevelyan likely created a sinkhole and swallowed Great Slave Lake.”

That earned a nod and a scowl from the new King.

“Shit that big, some people are gonna think world war three’s started,” Lugo muttered.

“Concurred, Sergeant,” Dawson agreed, “But as I said, communications is working on it, making sure our allies know what’s going on.”

“A massive work of subterfuge,” said Harry, softly, “Shor’s bones… such elaborate Grahmindol — strategy. This had to be in the works for months.”

Dawson scowled. “Oh, we agree on that. We know Trevelyan was destroyed first, with Erwin going mere seconds after.”

“They knew Erwin was the fallback command centre,” said Justin, “It being our original capital city.”

“When did command redirect to the Ragnar?” Mazhe questioned.

“When Erwin was destroyed,” Dawson answered, “3:14 am our time. The computers spit out an EAM, and you guys are seeing the result.”

Harry looked confused. “A what?”


“Gentlemen, we’ve drilled for this,” said O’Toole, calmly. “We still have a chain of command, and as long as that remains true, that people do as they’re supposed to, we’ll be fine.”

Justin could only nod along, as they hurried through the maze of corridors that led back up to the Action Information Centre. Sure, he was now the King, but in reality, the military was effectively running the show. He’d have to give assent, but ultimately, most of the actions about to come would be presented and carried out by the military. Quite literally, Valicadia was in a de-facto state of war with the Order of the New Dawn. He snorted in his head. They’d been in a state of war with these morons since this shit started back in September!

“Sir? We’re here.”

Justin looked up, having not really been paying attention to where his feet were carrying him.

“’ten hut!’ a junior officer called out, as the group entered, causing those seated at their stations to scramble to their feet.

“As... as you were,” said Justin, quietly, as the group were led over to the table near the forward end of the room.

“Hunfrith’s just been destroyed, sir,” said an officer, “So far that’s three quarters of our cities.”
“Kattegat?” questioned Ludvig.

“A couple of minutes ago,” the officer answered.

“We’re being exterminated,” said Justin, glancing at the map which then took up the inlay display on the table. “Bthalft’s still in communication?”

“We’re routing ground command there, sir. Floo and network controls are also being rerouted there, but you know that may take several hours. The link was severed briefly when the… when the Magnus Chamber was destroyed... we reopened the connection soon as we were able.”

“Put the floo network on emergency access only,” Justin decided, “Same goes for port keys. Official business only ‘till we get a handle on things.”

“Sir.”

Another officer was already picking up a telephone handset.

“Sir, your majesty. Need to see this,” said another officer, as the map inlay zoomed in to show northern Europe, the United Kingdom, and surrounding the Canary Islands.

“What is that?” Ragnar began to question, but very quickly realized what he was seeing. “Waves. Coastal places will be swamped.”

“Entire Atlantic basin. Gods above,” Justin exclaimed, “That’s gonna cause catastrophic damage!”

“We’re alerting NOAA,” spoke another officer.

“They likely already know about it,” said Walker.

“That wave’s likely gonna be a hundred feet high,” said Lugo, “Jesus... entire eastern seaboard’s gonna be wrecked.”

Now, Zoey looked alarmed. “Dad…”

Justin glanced at O’Toole. “Has the White House been evacuated?”

Dawson gave a short nod. “Soon as we got the first warning, but Dr. Bartlet is right to be concerned, the wave will likely inundate the eastern seaboard, as Sergeant Lugo just said. Given the speed a wave can travel—”

“Five hours, give or take,” Justin finished. “Coordinate with MACUSA, secure the American President and his staff. Ensure MACUSA’s President is also taking precautions—offer secure location here.”

It was then the table’s glass inlay changed to show a news feed. There was no sound, but the image looked like the aftermath of a bomb.

“Where is that?”

“Toronto, sir. And look.” The officer drew a finger around a shape in the background, and the image instantly zoomed.

“Is that...”

“Looks like one of the Ragnar’s sisters,” said O’Toole. He pressed a button at the edge of the table.
“Comm., have a sitrep from our sister ships and a trace of the past six hours’ movements. Someone’s turned traitor.”

“One ship couldn’t do all that, though...” said Bryce. He’d remained quiet up to this point.

“No. But they can certainly cause a lot of problems.”

“Non-magical world’s gonna think we turned evil or something,” said Mazhe.

“Sounds like exactly what OND would want. Make sure communications is stressing that point,” said Harry. “Last thing we need is for the non-magical world to come at us.”

“And we wholly agree,” said O’Toole.

“AIC, Comm., Lotharius has squawked back with valid authentication. They’re reporting condition one set and battle-ready. Six-hour flight path matches traditional flight pattern until EAM event. Admiral Butler sends congratulations and well-wishes along to the young King, and promises he will have his oath at the earliest convenience.”

“Roger that, Comm.”

“AIC, Comm., Arminius also squawks back with valid authentication, now reporting they’ve engaged the Gideon... vessel appeared on their six and opened fire, they’re taking heavy damage.”

“Roger that.”

Justin furrowed his brow. “Can she make an emergency jump?”

“Likely,” said O’Toole. “It would leave her more vulnerable given all her birds would have to be secured first.”

“Two of your ships combined would be more effective,” said Ragnar. That earned nods of agreement from others.

“Have the Arminius jump to our location,” Justin decided.

“Comm., AIC. Instruct the Arminius to make a jump to our location, on King’s order.”

“Copy that.”

It was then the map on the central monitor zoomed to a location not far from Istanbul.

“We just lost Constantine,” an officer reported, indicating the dust cloud. “Outskirts of Istanbul took damage, we’re warning the Turkish government.”

“One of our oldest cities,” said Justin, softly.

“So they’re using both one of your ships and some kind of bomb,” said Credence.

“It looks exactly like that, Mr. Barebone,” answered Dawson.

“Every time they’ve used whatever it is, the power’s gotten... I might say exponentially greater,” Harry summarized. “Wonder if that book Jezebel got her hands on was the source.”

“It’s a possibility, sir.”
“AIC, Comm., Arminius reports the Gideon’s disengaged and jumped.”

“Roger that, Comm.” The officer glanced at O’Toole. “They should proceed with a jump to our location.”

“Acknowledged. Wait... Lotharius reports...”

There was a lengthy pause.

“Comm.?”

“AIC... we’ve lost the Lotharius.”

At the same time, the map switched to a location in the South Pacific, where a blip and a momentary flash played in a loop.

Ludvig remained stone-faced and expressionless, but Harry could easily guess what was going through his mind.

“How is it the Gideon knew where the other ships were?” questioned Ragnar.

“We broadcast our location to the rest of the fleet,” Dawson explained, “Though I’m guessing the Gideon’s disabled her own transmitter. Comm., need a sitrep from every vessel in the fleet and force depletion.”

“Copy that, AIC. Hold on... protection detail for POTUS reporting area compromised.”

Zoey looked immediately alarmed. “Dad...”

Harry glanced at the phoenix still perched on his shoulder. “Fawkes, care to help out?”

“No, sir.”

“Not here,” said O’Toole.

“Yes, here,” Harry decided, seeing the panicked look on Zoey’s face. “If Ragnar can protect Justin, it sure as hell can protect the President of the United States. Beside the fact, I’m thinking we’ll likely need their support.”

“Make it so,” Justin ordered. “That also goes for the immediate line of succession... speak to the President and his staff to get details. If they sack the American government... it’s not a picture I need to draw out in excruciating detail.”

“No, sir.”

Harry glanced at Fawkes again. “Go collect our friends.”

Brandon was already composing a quick message on his mobile, but Aaron had produced his wand, and with a flick, produced his Patronus. “POTUS SOU Detail, urgent. HM and PM ordered extraction. Fawkes is bringing the lot of you to Ragnar, expedited. US COG mechanisms at risk, taking precautions.” Then, “To POTUS SOU detail, urgent.”

“I’m still sending the text,” said Brandon, as the ghostly panther bounded out of the room, “The mobiles should still work.”

“In theory,” said Justin, “The system’s not been tested against this wide an interruption. Never in my wildest dreams did I see this kind of thing ever happening.”
“I don’t think any of us imagined this level of destruction, sir,” spoke another officer at the table, as Fawkes finally flamed away.

“Dad’s gonna be alarmed at that message,” said Zoey.

“It’s direct, and bluntly honest, Dr. Bartlet,” said Aaron, “We have no time for sugar-coating anything.”

“They’ll be dropped in the reception chamber, set them up in the library for now,” Dawson directed.

An officer at the table was already picking up another telephone handset, but O’Toole held up a hand. “If his military advisors are present, invite them up, we can use their support.”

The officer gave a nod, as he punched in a number on the console.

“He likely has the joint chiefs with him, and likely the national security advisor,” Brandon guessed.

“Nancy McNally, if memory serves me correct,” said O’Toole. “We’re still patched into their computer systems?”

“We were out for about ten minutes immediately following the EAM, sir,” answered another officer from a nearby station. “We’ve been able to patch everything back in again. The mobile network’s still a bit sketchy, but we’re working on boosting the signal.”

“AIC, Comm., starting to get sitreps from our other boats. Most still intact... we think we may have lost five to the tsunamis in the Atlantic basin... others taking evasive manoeuvres.”

“OND’s likely not aware of our smaller ships,” Justin guessed.

“AIC, Comm., just getting word MACUSA’s evacuated the Woolworth Building, relocated to a facility in Chicago for now.”

“Roger that,” said Dawson.

“If OND attacked Toronto, they may attack other places,” said Harry.

“I’m sure they factored that in,” said Justin. “Least they had some sort of warning.”

The room fell nearly silent for the next minute or so. Harry was still fixated on the world map which took up the largest monitor at the front of the room, marked with a dozen red circles, each of them representing a Commonwealth city—or what had been. Nearly a hundred million people had been murdered in a matter of hours... nothing in human history came anywhere close to the butcher’s bill being served up that morning. Nothing.

“So many dead.”

“We’ve become very good at killing each other, Harry,” said Mazhe, softly, as he gently wrapped his arms around his mate and pulled him close. “Even in my own world, you know this is true.”

He thought for a moment.

“There will be survivors outside, refugees. They will need somewhere to go.”

Dawson and O’Toole shared a look.

“We’ll have to open up the VPR for now,” O’Toole decided, “Anyone brought aboard will have to
be quarantined. Logistics, organize a detail. They should be port keyed direct, no travelling through the corridors.”

“By your order,” said an officer at a nearby station.

“AIC, Comm. POTUS and staff safely aboard. Senior staff being set up in the library, POTUS and his military advisors being escorted your way.”

“Roger that,” said O’Toole.

Bryce could only shake his head. “God, this is just nuts.”

“What?”

“No expert on protocol or whatever, but lots of people probably gonna lose their shit, y’know. The President doing any kind of business on a foreign military ship...”

That drew a snort and a scowl from O’Toole.

“Violating protocol’s probably saving a whole lot of lives right now,” said Justin, “Anything they might come up with security-wise will be inadequate. If they’re here, MACUSA’s Auror detail must agree.”

It was then the doors opened, and a group of people pressed in, with a pair of SOU in the lead.

“Dad!” Zoey exclaimed, and hurried over to her father.

“I have to again object to us being brought here,” said one of the men in suits.

“Better here than dead, Director,” said another in uniform.

“Set up a place where these guys can work,” said Dawson.

An officer simply pressed a button near the edge of the overlay, and another table instantly appeared closer to the front of the room. It looked nearly identical to the table the Commodore and his staff were gathered around.

The President broke away from his daughter, recognizing Harry and his group.

“Mr. Stormcrown,” he said, simply.

“Mr. President,” Harry returned. “Apologies for the chaos we’ve pulled you into.”

“Our intel’s all over the place; what the hell happened?” one of the generals demanded, as they took places around the offered table.

“We’re being exterminated, Mr. President,” Justin answered. “Trevelyan was destroyed a couple of hours ago, along with all but three of our cities.”

He indicated the map still on the largest screen.

“So who’s in charge? We’re talking a decapitation strike,” said one of the few women joining the President.

“It’s exactly that, Dr. McNally,” answered Justin. “As to who’s in charge... that would be me.”
A pained expression crossed his face.

“And your military?”

“Most of our ground forces are gone, but most of our navy’s still intact.”

“Sir, we must have an escort,” said another general.

Dawson shared a look with O’Toole, and O’Toole gave a nod.

“We’re expecting Arminius to come alongside at any moment. Meantime, let’s get the birds in the air. Have Rowland and Air Wing suit up.”

“Plot a course south by southwest, we can have an escort meet us on an intercept vector,” one of the generals suggested.

O’Toole glanced at Justin, who gave a nod.

“Helm, come around to one-six-zero southeast. Climb to eight-thousand and make revolutions for one hundred-seventy knots.”

“Making course one-six-zero southeast, climb to eight-thousand and making revolutions for one seven zero knots, aye sir,” the helmsman repeated.

“So you you all fly around up here willy-nilly, or do you talk to the ground?” questioned another general, not appearing impressed.

“We’re warning Oakland Centre of our movements,” answered an officer, as the officers at helm began to carry out the order.

“I think they have it well in hand, general,” said the President.

It was then there came a noisy crack from outside.

“AIC, Comm. Arminius is coming alongside. Orders?”

“They stick with us,” said Justin.

“Comm., relay our course and speed. They are to follow,” said Dawson. “Have them deploy their Air Wing as escort. Wait… Comm., patch us through.”

“Roger that.”

“Scabbard, Firebrand, reading loud and clear. Sitrep?” came the question.

“Making a track southeast to pick up American fighter escort. POTUS on board and secured, but protocol requires escort,” said Dawson. “Get your birds in the air.”

“Roger, Scabbard. Commodore?”

“Yes?”

“As a matter of record, you are senior ranking officer.”

“He’s right, sir,” said Dawson, “You’re both Commodore, but you’ve held the rank longer.”

“With the death of Admiral Butler, you’re next in line, sir,” said another officer.
Now, Justin understood what his men were telling him.

“Then it’s ordered that...” he fumbled a moment for the words. “I then promote Commodore Stephen O’Toole to Admiral, and declare him to be Admiral-in-chief of Our Royal Navy.”

O’Toole stood a little straighter, and saluted. “By your command.”

His uniform instantly changed to reflect the new rank.

“This wave’s gonna wreck the east coast,” said one of the generals, gesturing to the smaller map on one of the screens at the front of the room.

“Make sure FEMA personnel are evacuated to high ground,” the President directed, “Evacuate essential government personnel and let’s make sure the Governors in affected States are aware.”

“We’ll offer assistance where possible,” Justin promised, “Our world created this nightmare—”

The President held up a hand. “Not your fault. Your government has warned us plainly what your enemy—and now our enemy—is capable of. Now it’s up to us to return the favour.”

It was then another red blip lit up on the larger map.

“And we just lost Balthazar. Population thirteen million,” an officer reported.

“Indonesia will be up in arms,” said a General. “That location’s not far from Jakarta.”

“We’re getting word to both the magical and non-magical government.”

“Does the Commonwealth have cities within our borders?”

“No. We had our research facility in San Francisco, but that was closed after the quake,” Justin answered. “Trevelyan was the only Commonwealth city in North America.”

“Sir, the Gideon’s appeared over Chicago,” an officer warned, indicating another screen at the front of the room, now showing the ominous shape over the city’s downtown.

“Here’s a thought. How they getting around royal authorization deploying the weapon?” Harry questioned.

“The scary thing is, we don’t know,” an aide answered. “Most likely, the authorization codes were compromised.”

“Can we invalidate them?” Justin questioned.

“It’ll take several minutes, sir.”

“Then invalidate the authorization codes and issue new ones.”

“By your order.”

“What sort of weaponry does this ship have?” questioned one of the generals.

“Our strongest weapon’s not quite the strength of a present day nuke, but you’ve likely got pictures of what happened to Toronto. Normally, only the King can authorize its use,” an aide explained.

“Except that, for over an hour, that authorization was deferred,” said Dawson, “Something like the
UK’s *Orders of Last Resort*. It's a fail-safe in place so our ships can defend themselves to the last full measure.”

“And it appears though your enemy exploited that,” said the General.

“Agreed on that, General,” said Justin, ruefully, “OND’s exploited a number of Our political and military weaknesses both in the past, and present.”

“Oh God...” one of the officers at another station muttered, as a red glow began to form under the Gideon. There came a flash, and the picture turned to snow as the feed cut.

The American contingent all looked furious, but so did just about everyone else.

“They’re trying to start a war,” said Mazhe, “They want the non-magical world to go to war with each other.”

“And they’re doing a damned good job of it,” Brandon agreed.

“Can we nuke it?” came a question from one of the Generals.

“No,” O’Toole answered, “The ship’s wards would deflect the blast. You'd only do damage to the space around it, possibly risk people and assets on the ground.”

“Unless we disable the wards,” said Aaron, “She'd be just as vulnerable as any other non-magical vessel.”

“The thing is getting it done,” said Dawson, pressing a button in front of him. The screens at the front of the room changed to show a cut-away drawing of the Gideon. “Wards prevent port keys and Apparition, and it’s not like we could approach in flight. We’ll end up exactly like the Lotharius.”

“She’s destroyed one of your ships like this one,” the President guessed.

“Exactly so, sir. Minutes before you were brought aboard,” said Dawson. “We’ve switched off our location transponder, so she won’t be able to track us.”

He glanced up at the picture a moment.

“Arminius, your location transponder active?”

“Affirmative.”

“Switch it off.”

“Roger that.”

Harry, meanwhile, was deep in thought, looking at the image on the display at the front of the room. Clearly, OND had seized the Gideon with intentions of using it as their mobile base. It would be quite literally entering the hornets’ nest, but... something Guardian Octavius had said. Their only chance.

“We port key aboard. Mazhe... Aaron, Brandon—”

“The wards...” Dawson began.

“—cannot stop the Promagistrate. Perhaps, this is the one occasion where I appreciate being an exception to the rules,” Harry finished.
“And I can’t go with you,” said Brandon, “You weren’t my only assignment, Harry.”

“Protect our King, Commander,” said Harry.

“With every fibre of my being,” Brandon promised.

“There’s still the issue in that you’ve not been aboard the Gideon,” said Dawson.

“But you have, sir,” said another aide, “You can share the location with him.”

“Of... of course. His ability to see someone’s thoughts,” Dawson remembered.

“I will be going along, so leave that to me,” said O’Toole, resolve in his voice. “There are some things best done in person, and there’s a possibility the ship’s compliment may still be alive.”

Harry gave a nod. “An additional contingent of Marines and a squad of SOU if possible.”

“SOU are occupied with the ship’s security, Harry,” said Aaron, “We’re all you’ll get.”

“Let’s take ten minutes and regroup in the hangar,” said O’Toole.

Bryce was already digging in his pouch for his armour, but Harry put a hand on his shoulder.

“Don’t tell me I can’t come along,” said Bryce, defiant.

“Wasn’t about to. Just hold off, let’s get back to the suite for a few minutes. Guys, gather around.”

Seconds later, a slightly smaller group landed in Harry’s suite. Brandon had remained with Justin in the AIC, as had Zoey. Last look, the President’s youngest daughter was torn between standing with her boyfriend, or being beside her father.

“We all going?” Walker questioned.

“In another lifetime, I would’ve said no. Now? Every rifle and every wand I can get, I’ll take,” Harry answered. “But everyone. This is gonna be the fight of our lives. Their stronghold, even if it was ours at one point, it’s theirs now.”

“Telling us nothing we’ve not heard before,” said Lugo. “You saved our asses in January, time for us to repay the favour. Some of us may get killed, but... it’s the price of doing business. Simple as that.”

“The Sergeant speaks well,” said Haknir. “All of us are alive because of you, Mr. Stormcrown. This is perhaps fate calling in a few debts.”

“Then it is time to suit up,” said Ragnar, “Valhalla awaits.”

“As Sovngarde also awaits,” Haknir agreed, as he began to pull his armour from his pouch.

That was the cue for others to do the same, though Harry was dressed in an instant with a wave of the hand. He then set about helping his partners. Partners? That was an odd way of thinking about it. But... there would be plenty of time after the more pressing issue at hand.

“Is everyone ready?” Ludvig questioned. Getting nods of agreement, he produced his mobile. “Gather around.”

The bookmark dropped them in the hangar, where the Orb of Magnus still pulsed a brilliant
turquoise. Now, three Guardians of the Magnus were tending to it. Behind it, Harry could see the familiar purple-shaded portal connecting to Skyrim. A pair of SOU stood watch on either side, both looking severe.

Their attention, however, was drawn to the group of marines gathered with the newly-promoted Admiral O’Toole.

“Admiral. Is everyone here?”

“Everyone is here,” O’Toole answered. “All right. Let’s walk through the game plan.”

A marine had produced her mobile, and enlarged it so everyone could see it.

“Three locations have to be secured if at all possible: Information Tech, AIC, and Weaps. Priority being IT. We get control of her computers, everything else should come a little easier. A fourth target would be the engine room and her core. Disabling her core would bring everything to a screeching halt.”

Harry made a sour face. “As we found out not that long ago.”

“Not that any of this will be at all easy,” spoke another, “None of the back-channel communications with the Gideon work. So either all of her crew are dead, or they’re completely under control of the enemy.”

“Gut says they’re dead. OND’s not one for keeping prisoners,” said Harry. “We make our shots count. They don’t get up to join their buddies for a second go at us. Haknir, when we land on board, d’you mind summoning your crew?”

“I planned on doing so as it stood,” answered the former pirate captain.

“Likewise, Credence. We’ll need you to tap into your, uh, alternate form,” said O’Toole.

“Can do.”

“Where we bein’ dropped?” Walker questioned.

“Gonna try and drop us near IT,” said O’Toole. “It’s the priority and I’ve got override codes that should lock out their access.”

“Those of you with mobiles... there. Just sent the most up-to-date map of the ship,” said the marine with her mobile out. That coincided with a series of pings as the messages arrived on everyone elses’.

“Last thing. Radios on. Reminder, our ops callsign is Claymore,” said Aaron.

O’Toole touched his ear. “Scabbard, Claymore is ready and waiting for a go on Operation Drain-Stopper.”

Harry furrowed his brows. “Drain-Stopper?”

“Claymore, roger, Drain-Stopper is a go. Stay safe and good hunting, sirs,” came the reply. “Air Wing caution of traffic from southeast, Presidential escort coming alongside.”

“Roger that, Scabbard,” came Captain Rowland’s voice.

O’Toole, meanwhile, had produced a length of rope. “Harry...”
“Right. Sir, if you’ll make eye contact, let me see the location you want us to arrive at. Let me know when you’re ready.”

“Ready.”

Harry and the Admiral held eye contact for about ten seconds, before Harry touched a finger to the rope. “Portus, invoking privilege.”

This time, rather than shimmering a brilliant green for a moment, it shimmered a turquoise colour, reflecting the Orb of Magnus.

“Everyone get close.”

Moments later, the large group vanished in a blur of limbs.

Chapter End Notes

UP NEXT: Harry and his circle storm the Gideon. Warning: character death.
CHAPTER NOTES: Two chapters to go. Already well into framing episode three, with 8 chapters lined up already. Goes fast when the ideas are flowing.
Harry knew immediately they had made a lethal mistake, as the room lit up with spell fire. Still in a fog from the Port Key, his shots were wide, while defenders held deadly accuracy. Admiral O’Toole was quickly felled by a green bolt of magic, while Aaron had crumpled to the floor, the victim of a bone-breaking curse. Worse, though Harry could feel it, there was little he could do to brace for it, as the Gideon initiated a teleport. The distraction cost him, and his world went dark.

He came to in a dimly lit room, having no idea how much time had passed. He knew he was bound, and as his vision cleared, he realized he’d been taken to the ship’s brig. The next cell over contained a pile of corpses, including that of Admiral O’Toole.

“Harry?”

Harry turned to his left, to find Bryce was beside him, also bound tightly with heavy cords.

“You all right?”

“Yeah, think so. You?”

“Other than… no, it’s… I’m all right. Where’s—“

He didn’t finish, seeing Mazhe was bound on Bryce’s left. Aaron was laying prone but bound in the cell across from them, as was Haknir, Ragnar, Ludvig, and Miraak. He glanced around, finding Credence was in their cell, as was Walker and Lugo. Credence was still very much out of it, while both Walker and Lugo were slowly coming to.

“Harry…” Aaron began.

“Shhh. Just… keep your strength.”

“Harry… They fucked me up bad,” said Aaron, his voice barely above a whisper. Harry could see it
was actually hurting him to speak. “Whole midsection… hurts. Hurts to breathe. Listen… there’s… there’s something I gotta tell you.”

“Aaron—”

“Harry, I’m dying. Just… you deserve to know. Back in the spring… the leak… it was me.”

Ludvig looked furious. “Why the hell for?”

“Had to keep Harry honest… Being Promagistrate… he still has to keep his head.”

Harry could only give a short nod. “You did what you thought was right. Guess I can accept that.”

“Like… I said… you… you deserved to know, Harry.”

He let out a gasp, and convulsed, the stabbing pain of his injuries momentarily overwhelming him. Being tied up complicated matters. For nearly a minute, he shifted around, before at last falling still.

“Aaron?”

“Just… God, this hurts… Not much time left…” he sucked in a breath, but trembled again from the pain.

“I was your assignment, but know you’re one of my best friends. Don’t ever doubt that.”

“It… means a lot. Ludvig… look after these guys. Keep Harry out of t-trouble. I… gonna rest now.”

“I promise,” said Ludvig.

Aaron convulsed again, then fell still. Harry knew he was gone.

“Kynereth watch over him as he passes through your realm,” said Harry, softly, fighting the wave of sadness threatening to run away with him. There would be time for tears later. He was almost free of the binds… just a little more, then maybe—

There came the sound of a door being unlocked, and a number of OND operatives entered the compartment.

“Oh dear, it seems we have a death in the family,” one of them sneered, noticing Aaron’s body. “Dumbledore’s ready for us. Stun them.”

When Harry next came to, he found they had been taken to the ship’s core room. If only Credence would wake up… or Mazhe—he inwardly snarled in rage. They had muzzled him. But of course they did, aware his voice was dangerous. One more potential avenue for escape, cut off.

“My dear boy, so glad you could join us,” said Dumbledore. He looked every bit as eccentric as the last time Harry had seen him, that god-forsaken twinkle still blazing in his eyes. He had to once again mentally ask, ‘was this man ever on the light side?’

The rest of the group had been awakened as well, all held at the perimeter of the room. What for?

Dumbledore seemed to anticipate the question. “For one of you, Diedre is very much interested in how you managed to survive that which only one other has survived on record. The Department of Mysteries will take its time conducting a study. Perhaps we shall learn of what magic prevented fate from following its natural course.”
“Perhaps it was fate’s intervention, Dumbledore,” Harry muttered.

“Perhaps. None of that matters. For the rest of you, your very essence will help us to further our mission. Absorbed by the Gideon’s core. Even the lowly Muggles among you do have some use. A secondary project conducted by another group of operatives has produced rather intriguing results.”

“More murder, Dumbledore? Your dark mistress murdered millions of people this morning. Many of those people were magical. What does that make you? What will other magical nations think of you and the Order, once they know?” Harry snarled.

“Not even Hitler managed the body count you fucking morons managed this morning,” Lugo spat. “You can’t kill us all.”

“Oh, but I think we can try, filthy Muggle,” spoke another to Dumbledore’s right. He glanced at Dumbledore, who gave a nod.

“Since he volunteers...” the OND operative simply flicked his wand at Lugo, and the bound man found himself flung at the painfully bright core. His scream was cut short as he was instantly vaporized on contact.

Walker struggled against the binds, his face contorted in rage, but found he could not speak, silenced by a second OND operative.

“Core, AIC, about to make our jump, target should be within firing range on arrival.”

One of the crew members picked up the PA microphone at his station. “Copy that, AIC. Core standing by at full charge.”

The crew was cooperating?

Dumbledore again seemed to anticipate the question. “Some were easier to convince than others. We knew we would need at least some of them, knowing the size of this contraption. Many others were the victims of most unfortunate accidents... though their bodies will later follow Mr. Lugo, helping in a small way to further our objective.”

“You’re crazy, old man,” Bryce ground out.

Further conversation was interrupted, as the ship’s core flashed bright as the sun for a moment, forcing everyone to shut their eyes. It seemed like the entire room flashed painfully bright for a fraction of a second, before Harry felt the familiar giant hook about the naval, the telltale trait of Port Key travel.

As the seconds ticked by, Harry couldn’t help but compare it to when the Commonwealth moved the Fox Theatre not long before. They were effectively inside the Port Key, and so the sensation was different, no flashing lights or howling wind, just... that weird sensation about the naval.

Quickly as it started, it was over.

“How long until recharge?”

The crew member at the controls glanced at the meter and the timer directly above it. “Two minutes,
fourteen seconds.”

“Inform when at full charge.”

“Copy, core.”

“Weaps, prep quarter discharge, firing solution on its way.”

“Weaps, copy.”

Dumbledore stepped over to the controls and snatched the microphone from the operator. “Why only a quarter discharge?”

“You want to be able to fire again on short order, do you not?” came the answer. “Our shot needs only penetrate, Professor, not obliterate. If the firing solution is true, the power of our shot will be enough.”

“I will hold you to that,” said Dumbledore, irritated.

Harry smirked. “Looks like you don’t know it all, Dumbledore.”

“And when did I say I did, Harry? No man can ever know it all, much as we might wish it. Asking the right questions, however, can mean all the difference, don’t you think?

“Your Muggle friends and allies know this, do they not? Though their efforts will ultimately be in vain. We will tear down the world as it exists, replacing it with a new order. Wizardkind will rise as the apex, ruling race, and Muggles... they will know their place.”

“You sound exactly like Grindelwald,” said Ludvig, “He said something very similar ninety or so years ago. Was it you learning from him, or him learning from you?”

“Two men arriving at similar conclusions,” Dumbledore answered, dismissively.

“Because of your sister. I have to wonder, what would Ariana think of you, the monster you have become.”

“Do not speak of my sister,” said Dumbledore, dangerously.

“And why not,” Harry sneered, “What of your mother? What would Kendra think, what would she say? ‘course, dear old dad... proud, maybe? I mean, he was locked up in Azkaban—for good reason of course. But no, actually, I think he would be ashamed. This madness... you brought shame on your family, nothing more.”

The clock above the meter had just ran out, with the meter indicating a full charge. The crew member at the controls picked up the microphone.

“AIC, Core, now at full charge.”

“Copy that, Core. Weaps, lock in firing solution.”

“AIC, Weaps. Firing solution locked, awaiting your order.”

“Fire on target.”

“HOLD FIRE!” Harry shouted, hoping he’d be heard through the microphone.
“On whose order?” came the question.

“PROMAGISTRATE!” Harry again shouted, glad the operator had kept the microphone open, and equally glad someone hadn’t decided to silence him.

“Weaps! Your order is to fire!” came the shouted order.

“The Promagistrate's authority is above the King’s, sir,” came the firm reply.

Harry couldn’t help but smirk, seeing the OND operatives in the room all looking around, unsure of what to do at this point. Dumbledore, meanwhile, remained quiet, thinking of how to solve the unexpected problem.

“Core, do something, the window's closing! Helm, come five degrees port and accelerate to one hundred and seventy knots.”

It was then there came a noisy thud from the left side of the ship.

“Core, Americans firing on us, no damage. Weaps?”

“AIC, Weaps. We can return fire on your order, Commander.”

Harry now understood more of the chain of command. The Commodore had likely been murdered, the XO now stood as acting Captain. Of course, the crew were all under the Imperius—though it looked like some could be swayed.

“Weaps, weapons free. Hold firing solution on main battery.”

“Roger that.”

Dumbledore glanced around the room, as though looking for something. His eyes fell on Mazhe; he gestured to an operative, then to Mazhe. Harry felt a stone drop into the pit of his stomach, already having a good idea of what was about to happen.

Mazhe was magically hauled in front of Dumbledore.

“Perhaps the Promagistrate might reverse his decision should he be made to understand the futility of resisting,” the old wizard purred, again indicating his assistant continue.

“Crucio,” the operative hissed, and Mazhe seized up, feeling every nerve in his body light up. Harry felt a little piece of him die inside, seeing his mate under the terrible curse.

Focused on Dumbledore’s torture session, no one really noticed what was happening to Credence, most notably, him shaking like a leaf, the emotional strain leaving him with only a hair’s width of control. The oppressive magic inside him was already starting to interact with both the capacitors and the core itself, and had the room not already been so magically charged, it would have been noticed.

“Dumbledore, stop,” Harry spoke, trying not to sound like he was begging.

Dumbledore indicated the operative stop, and the curse was lifted.

“That's a good lad. Now command them carry out their order, so we may proceed with our plan.”

Another operative had put his wand at the temple of the crew member at the controls. Reluctantly, he pressed the key on the microphone. Harry was manhandled over to the controls, and the microphone put up to his mouth.
“Weaps, Promagistrate.”

“Weaps, go ahead.”

“F—fire on target.”

The entire room once again went painfully bright with the massive discharge of energy, and there came a noticeable shudder. The meter almost instantly dropped to the seventy-five percent mark.

HMS Ragnar

“Sir, we just lost the Arminius,” an officer reported, indicating one of the large monitors at the front of the room. It displayed the massive flash captured only moments earlier.

“And we just lost one of our birds, Mr. President,” one of the generals reported.

“Arminius' unit has joined ours, we're down a quarter of our birds, they're at our 3 o'clock asking permission to engage,” said another officer.

“Permission to engage,” Dawson ordered, “Let’s hear damage reports.”

“AIC, medical emergency in the library,” came the warning.

“What happened?” questioned another officer.

“Mr. McGarry's suffered a heart attack.(1)”

The President looked alarmed. “Leo,” he whispered.

“Get us a firing solution on the Gideon,” Dawson ordered, “Adjust course for pursuit.”

“We’re still out of contact with Drain Stopper, sir,” another aide reported.

“As I’m well aware, Lieutenant.”

“We’ll wait for the last possible moment,” said Justin.

HMS Gideon

The ship once again shuddered, as a series of impacts were felt along the side.

“Taking fire, both Commonwealth and American forces engaging. No damage,” came the report.

“Copy that, AIC. Core at eighty-five percent, full charge in two minutes.”

Dumbledore faced Harry, his eyes once again twinkling madly. “Perhaps we'll have the Promagistrate direct our next attack. To see him die inside just a little, watching the last vestige of his dying empire crash around his ears. You see, Harry, your defeat, and the defeat of the Commonwealth is inevitable. We know your King is aboard, as is the Muggle American President.

“We're also well aware of their Continuity of Government procedures, know whatever means they have in motion will be futile in the end. Ah, but I digress—”

Dumbledore had no chance to finish, as a dark cloud erupted violently from where Credence was standing. As OND operatives launched curses, Dumbledore found himself lifted violently off the
floor, to slam into the ceiling, then slammed back down to the floor. He was dead, unblinking blue eyes staring up at the dark shape now in their midst.

Harry found he was able to move. “Credence, come back to us.”

The dark shape let out a horrible shriek as it again slammed against the left side of the vessel, to then impact with a series of pipes and conduits running the length of the ceiling, causing the lights in the room to flicker. A bank of computer cabinets were ripped from their mounts, and hurled across the room, to impact with one of the capacitors; a series of alarms and bells instantly sounded.

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“He, shit, look out—” Bryce hit the deck, as more wreckage and debris sailed overhead, as the dark form again hugged the ceiling.

“Credence, no!!”

But there was no stopping the Obscurius, as it seemed to form a needle-like point, which then slammed into the near white-bright core of the ship.

There came the sound of shattering glass, and Harry could hear a tremendous roar in his ears, almost like an ocean wave cresting, as everything went completely white.

HMS Ragnar

The Orb of Magnus pulsed purple for a moment. It only did so during the creation of a portal.

“Master Guardian...”

“I saw it,” said Evander. “Get a trace going, let’s figure out what triggered it and where it went.” He picked up a telephone from the temporary console station set up, and punched in a number.

“AIC,” came the response on the other end.

“Magnus Chamber. Orb just created a portal. We’re tracing origin.”

There was a lengthy pause. “Thank you. King’s been made aware.”

Chapter End Notes

UP NEXT: The final chapter of this episode, the butcher’s bill is tallied, and a few decisions are made for the immediate future. Justin addresses the nation, and the terrorist group responsible.

CHAPTER NOTES: So. Dumbles bought the farm. A bit ironic, in a way, considering that in canon, Credence is Dumbledore’s half-brother. Now, will there be consequences? Remember, Harry did promise Dumbledore to Hermeaus Mora. Thing is, I did want to deal with him before this episode of Chronicles wraps. Perhaps not the most satisfying end, but in battle... no plan ever survives contact with the enemy. This episode is definitely drawing to a close now, although lots of questions remain open... I do hope to resolve at least some of it in the next episode—I do keep notes, including reminders of things that I’ve not dealt with. Of course, if you guys have questions, wondering about something, by all means, mention it in the comments. I
receive notifications by e-mail when someone posts a comment. (1) This happens to Leo in episode 2 of the West Wing’s 6th season, and another heart attack is fatal in season 7.
Chapter Summary

The final chapter of this episode, the butcher’s bill is tallied, and a few decisions are made for the immediate future. Justin addresses the nation, and the terrorist group responsible.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

43. DO NOT GO GENTLE

May - June, 2008 / Second Seed - Mid-Year, 4E203

“Do not go gentle into that good night, Old age should burn and rave at close of day; Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”

- Dylan Thomas, "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night"

Harry found himself standing at the edge of a dirt road, the sun high in the sky. He could feel the warmth… he felt light, the burdens somehow, at least temporarily lifted from his shoulders. In the distance, he could make out an encampment—army encampment… with a large wall erected behind it, made up of many naked timbers.

Approaching footsteps had him turn around, to find a group of men hurrying up the road. Even though they were looking right at him, it was more like they were looking straight through him. They were dressed in grey outfits, though many were more of a makeshift combination, looking more of a tan colour than grey. Their shoes—Harry did a double-take. Some of them had no shoes at all. All of them carried long, antique rifles.

“Ah, friend of my Champion.”

Harry turned around, to find both Hermaeus Mora and Miraak a short distance away, as the group of men—soldiers—kept right on walking, paying no mind to the… the entity now in their presence.

“They cannot see you, Harry,” said Miraak.

“Why are...”

“Your young friend lost control. Do not fault him, you know who is responsible,” said Miraak.

“But that means… Hermaeus Mora. Surly, I can make request, that my friend be allowed to pass on, that his debt be cleared. Have I not gained enough favours, your grace?”

“You did promise me the old man, friend of my Champion.”
“I didn't anticipate complications. And I do still promise both the book from that wretched witch, and a second rather viable target in the witch who followed me into the present. Quite honestly, I eagerly looked forward to turning the old man over to you, sir. Our relationship has been complicated, but in many cases, also beneficial.”

“Harry, do not lament my fate, I accept it willingly,” said Miraak, gripping Harry by the shoulder. “And, we must honour a debt when it is made.”

The conversation was interrupted by the beating of wings, as a great dragon touched down softly nearby. At first, Harry thought he was seeing Alduin. But, no. This was another.

“Indeed, Dragonborn, you have more than atoned for the foolish choices of your youth.”

“He is MINE, Akatosh!!!” Hermaeus Mora thundered.

“Yol…. TOOR SHUL!!” The Shout threatened to set the nearby woods on fire, as Hermaeus Mora was engulfed in flames. He let out a roar of anger, to then near instantly vanish.

Harry bowed deeply, now knowing the identity of the dragon avatar. “Your Grace,” he said, softly.

Akatosh let out a hearty laugh. “Marked by destiny, young mage. I daresay, your journey is far from complete.”

“I wish it were, sir. Just... so... tired.”

“You have done well, surrounded by a remarkable group of people. Trust them. Trust yourself. All will work itself out in the end.”

He turned to Miraak. “Come, Miraak, eternity awaits.”

“Harry. You know Akatosh is right. You have brought me back to a righteous path. Keep on it, show our enemies there is a better way.”

“I will.”

The pair embraced, before the Dragonborn and deity began to walk away, to vanish only seconds later.(1)

The scene slowly began to fade, but as it did, Harry spotted a single man a ways down the road. He was dressed in dark blue in contrast to the outfits worn by the soldiers he’d seen a minute earlier. He was filthy, but seemed to wave at Harry, giving him a broad smile before the scene at last disintegrated.(2)

Harry slowly began to wake, and found himself partially covering his eyes. The white walls and appointments told him all he needed to know: hospital ward of some sort. He licked his lips.

“Could… someone dim the light a bit?”

A healer was at his bedside at once, beginning an examination, while the room’s lights were dimmed at his request.

“Thanks.”

“Any pain, Promagistrate?”

“N—no. Just flash blindness, it’s getting better.” He raised his head and looked around, relief
instantly filling him as he spotted Mazhe, Bryce, and Ragnar. Ragnar looked to be in terrible shape, with healers still casting healing charms.

“Ragnar?”

“I will live, Harry. You are well?”

“I think so. Mazhe?”

“I’ll be here for a while. Healers need to regrow some bones.”

Harry reached a hand over, and they clasped hands across the gap.

“Miraak, Walker, Lugo, Haknir, all dead. Credence is MIA,” said Ludvig, seated in a chair nearby. He had both his laptop and his clipboard out. Likely making the after-action report, Harry guessed. “Admiral O’Toole and Lieutenant Commander Carpenter, you know about already.”

“I know about Miraak, I’ll show you later,” Harry promised. “But Credence… it’s not fair. He deserved a better life.”

“Harry, we gave him a better life,” said Mazhe. He winced, feeling the potions kicking in.

“It’s still not fair.”

“It is what it is,” said Bryce, “Life doesn’t exactly give us a choice, now, does it?”

“The old man is gone,” said Ragnar, “One of our most dangerous foes, removed as a threat. The day is not a complete loss.”

“This is true. Though, I will show you later a complication which arose because of it.” Harry seemed to think a moment. “How is it we survived?”

“It’s unknown. The lot of you appeared roughly in the hanger, Master Evander summoned healers soon as you were spotted,” said an officer nearby.

It was then Dawson stepped into the room. Harry immediately noticed the change of uniform.

“Admiral,” he said, softly.

It was hard not to miss the pained expression which crossed the man's face, though he took on a stoic expression. “He... knew the risks, Harry.” He looked around. “How long before the Promagistrate is allowed on his feet?”

“I'd like to keep him for observation, Admiral,” a healer answered.

“We're conducting the debrief now, sir,” says Ludvig. “How's his majesty?”

“In a state of shock, and frankly, I don't blame him.”

“No shit, this whole affair's been nothing but one giant cluster-fuck.”

That got another sour face out of the admiral. “Listen, as much as I would agree to keep Mr. Stormcrown in bed, he's needed in AIC. Official function.”

“An hour then?”
“One hour.”

“Amiral, what's going on?”

“We need to come to a couple of decisions and your input is needed.”

Action Information Centre

Mazhe was still confined to a bed, with his left leg bones being regrown, and so it was only Bryce who followed Harry into the ship’s nerve centre. They found Justin conferring with President Bartlet.

“Justin...”

“Harry!” The pair embraced tightly. “You all right?”

“Getting there. You?”

“N—no. But... improving,” Justin admitted. “Listen, we... we're going to Skyrim. Taking the Ragnar. We've got too many people in need of safety.”

“Better to get them all on the ground in a much more secure location.”

“And we can't be aboard when you do,” said the President.

“Dad...”

“It may be a one-way trip, Dr. Bartlet,” said an officer.

“Leo...” an aide began.

“He'll have to stay here,” said the President. “Take good care of him for us.”

“We promise, sir,” said Dawson.

Harry could see the pain in Justin's face. The idea of leaving Zoey behind was terrifying, and Harry could very easily put himself in an identical pair of shoes. Justin sucked in a breath. “Zoey... I can't ask you—I won't ask you to decide between me and your father. Once we reopen the portal, we'll bring all of you through.”

“We're already collecting the line of succession,” said one of the aides at the President’s table, “We're not taking any chances if what Dumbledore said is true.”

Harry was about to ask how they are aware of this, but quickly realized Ludvig likely shared as much information as he could, soon as he was able.

“It's the best choice,” Harry agreed.

“We'll leave a 'breadcrumb' so the reconnect should be made relatively quickly hopefully in minutes,” said another officer. She was about Harry’s height, with brown eyes and sandy blonde hair.

“Harry, my new Executive officer, Commander Julie Cullen. Commander Cullen, Harry Stormcrown and Bryce Hunter.”

“Promagistrate,” Cullen greeted, as the three of them shook hands.
Harry looked around the room a moment. “I hate the notion of fleeing these monsters. But... Justin's right. The day is lost, let us find safety and regroup.”

Justin glanced at Harry, about to correct him but decided not to.

Harry caught his glance. “Sorry, I meant—“

“You've always been Harry to me. And I'll always be Justin to you. Fuck protocol, you're my best friend.”

The pair again embraced tightly.

“Careful, Mazhe might get jealous,” Bryce teased.

They broke apart.

“Admiral...” Justin prompted.

“Sir. Logistics, prepare a jump solution to Bthalft.”

“Sir,” answered an officer working at another table.

“Mr. President, let's get you back down to the ground,” spoke another aide.

“Godspeed, your majesty,” said the President, as his entourage were guided to the doorway.

“And to you, Mr. President,” said Justin, as he retrieved his laptop from his satchel. He received a hug from Zoey, before she hurried after her father.

The room became rather quiet for the next few minutes, while Justin hunched over his laptop, feverishly typing.

He stopped. “Can... I... I need to address our... what's left of the nation.”

“We'll use the conference room,” says Dawson, “Broadcast equipment is built in. Logistics, see to it.”

“Harry, could I borrow your armour?”

“The King should be dressed—“ Cullen began, but Dawson waved her off.

“Harry should be in the shot, too. They're making a statement, Commander. We're at war save for official Parliamentary action.”

“Borrow mine,” Bryce offered.

“We'll preempt all broadcasts, both radio and televison, though it's likely the media's already in full coverage mode. Networks just need a few minutes' warning,” said one of the aides at logistics.

“Then do it now,” said Justin, “My remarks will be mostly off the cuff, I've only made a few notes on points I wish to cover. Admiral Dawson has framed it exactly as it is. We are at war with a multi-national enemy. The time for sugar-coating things is at an end. Our subjects must... they must be made aware of exactly where things stand, and what WE are doing in response.”

“How long do you plan to speak, sir?” the aide questioned.
“Not long. Logistics, how long will your plot take?”

“Nearly there, your Majesty.”

“Admiral, begin jump procedures when I begin my remarks.”

“Sir.”

“AIC, Com.”

“Go ahead.”

“President’s party returned to ground, secure location. Coords should be with the Order now.”

“Copy that.”

“Your Majesty, now’s the time to get ready, you have a few minutes before the networks are ready.”

“Thank you.”

Harry and Justin stood before a single camera, the commonwealth flag at their back. Brandon stood at his right, while Harry’s at his left. Breaking protocol, Brandon was dressed in his black combat uniform instead of his dress red, or officers’ uniform.

The camera crew fumbled, before one of them began the count. “Five seconds, sirs. Four... three...two... one...”

“My subjects... my friends. Citizens. Today has been the... blackest of days, for Our Commonwealth, Our Realm. Our enemy has struck out with unimaginable, terrible power, the results of which continue to be felt in just about every place on our planet; the consequences likely to be felt for years, decades, possibly centuries. An extermination, a genocide of unfathomable proportions, a butcher’s bill never to this point seen in all of human history.

“For what reason? Because we are different. Because we see equality in all people, no matter who they may be, whether they are gifted with magic or not. We embrace all, and that, friends, terrifies Our enemies. They are terrified by Our friendly, working relationship with so many non-magical Nations, all of whom welcomed us with open arms when We revealed Our existence back in the spring.

“Instead of learning from Us, perhaps adopting a progressive stance on matters, they instead continue to sew the seeds of discord, division, unleash terrible destruction against innocent people, against Our allies. What do you hope to accomplish? All out war? The final, utter destruction of the fragile world we call home? Your actions give credence to that dark path, from which there can be no return.

“My subjects, know that your government will work around the clock to ensure the safety and security of the realm, as a number of Proclamations and orders have already been put into place since this dark event began this morning. Please follow the directions of the Aurors and the military, they are acting in the interest of your safety. I have asked Gringotts to remain closed for the next seventy-two hours, given the unsettling nature of events. All military leave has been cancelled effective as of 8 o’clock this morning, and all members are hereby commanded to report for duty immediately.”

Justin took a drink from a glass of water on a nearby stand.

“To the Order of the New Dawn, I now directly address you and your dark mistress. This cowardly,
ghastly act of terrorism against Our realm has accomplished nothing. Our government still functions. And, I stand before you, newly crowned Valicadia's King. Our Promagistrate stands also at the ready, just as prepared to defend with his all—something you know already from past experience. No, you have accomplished nothing, other than earn my—I was about to say displeasure, as my Predecessor might have said, but no, it goes deeper than that. You have earned Our fury, and Our rage. Just as you have very likely earned the fury and rage from many other places in our world, whether they agree with Our society and its principles or not. You murdered one hundred million plus people in the span of a few hours. The world will not look upon you favourably.”

He glanced at Harry, but Harry remained silent, only giving a gesture to continue.

“Fifteen seconds to jump,” came a warning from the door. With that, both Harry and Justin could hear the bells and klaxons sounding as the ship went to action stations.

“Do not go gentle into that good night, wrote Dylan Thomas. Rage, rage, against the dying of the light.”

He stared directly into the camera, eyes ablaze with fury. “We will NOT go quietly into that good night. We will Rage against its dying light, with every fiber of Our being. OND, if you want absolute victory, you will have to kill. EVERY. GOD. DAMNED. ONE OF US. May the ancestors preserve us.”

He didn’t signal to end the transmission, but rather continued to stare defiantly into the camera, as the clock ran out. Harry could feel it, the energy building up.

“Five seconds... four... three... two... one...”

It felt like a giant hook about the naval, as the great ship was once again hurtled through space and time.

FINITE INCANTATUM

Chapter End Notes

UP NEXT: Episode Three, tenatively titled “Prisoners of Fate”, ETA to be determined. Make sure to like and subscribe so you stay notified of new uploads. Gods, I sound like a YouTuber.

FINAL NOTES: This episode went into a dark place, me thinks. But this was indeed the plan. As mentioned in the notes from the previous chapter, still lots of open threads to deal with, largely the aftermath of this massive cataclysmic event. Those waves are gonna do massive damage themselves alone. Never mind the holes, the dust thrown into the atmosphere... no question, the world has been forever changed. I’ll explore that in episode three. And Credence... don’t worry, he’s not gone far. We’ll see him, and at least to others.

(1) There is much debate as to who would actually have final say on the Dragonborn’s afterlife. I’m in the camp wherein since dragons are the creation of Akatosh, and likewise the Dragonborn, Akatosh would have first claim. Everyone else has to get in line. Though I think Mazhe might be a little disappointed, given his devotion to Nocturnal. Now, of course, it could also be up to Mazhe where he wishes to spend eternity. But, we’ll burn that bridge when we get there.

(2) I’ve baked some fresh virtual cookies for anyone who can guess where this is, and
‘when’ this is. We’ll be seeing it rather quickly in episode three as we will pretty much hit the ground running courtesy of a plot bunny named Tim. E. Turner… sorry, saw that somewhere but it describes this perfectly. Maybe I might serve up some virtual rabbit stew. ...or maybe Nagini might like a snack...

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