Ynys Afal: The Island of Apples

by NyeLew

Summary

At the outbreak of a renewed war against Dark Lord Voldemort, Harry Potter and several of his associates disappeared, and in the wake of their disappearance, Voldemort claimed responsibility for their deaths. In their absence, Voldemort and his paramour, Valmira, shattered the British Wizarding World and implemented a new, Dark, order. The Department of Mysteries vanished, the Order of the Phoenix was forced underground and the fabric of Wizarding Britain changed forever. Now the Imperator Maximus, Voldemort rules Wizarding Britain with an iron fist and puppet Ministry. The Dark Lord and Lady rule Britain according to the vagaries of their foul ideology, and there are rumours of similar feelings all across Europe.

When Wizengamot votes to bring war to the Irish Court of Magic, Harry Potter and the Unspeakables announce their return. They have a plan to end Lord Voldemort forever.

That plan is revolution.

Notes

Mature rather than explicit because of a lack of graphic sexual content; some scenes may contain gore, torture and other things of that nature. Rating may change depending on how graphic some of those scenes get. Mistakes, errors and weird bits get edited when I notice there's something wrong or if somebody points them out to me. It's all a bit rough, but when I'm done I'm going to tidy it all up, so if that sort of thing bothers you maybe wait until I'm done to read! Although I can't say when that will be really. Thanks for your time. I'd really
appreciate any feedback.
Chapter 1

I don’t own Harry Potter. This is a fairly AU but hopefully not radically so telling of the story with some dark imagery and themes. It isn’t ‘a slash fic’, I’m not a shipper of any kind, and I don’t want to write sex scenes. This is going to be focused on the characters, on the plot, and the world (with all its differences and similarities to canon) those other things are part of. Some of the characters will be doing things you might not expect them to, and some of the setting might seem a little strange. I really think (hope) that if you stick with it, it will be worth it in the end. I’ve planned out all the way to the end of Ynys Afal, and I know concretely what happens after that, too.

I said that this isn’t a slash fic, and that I’m not writing sex. That doesn’t mean there won’t be any LGBT characters or that canon characters won’t find themselves in homosexual encounters, but it does mean that if Harry ends up with anyone at the end, that person will definitely be a woman. This isn’t going to be thinly-veiled porn and it’s not going to be focused on romance and romantic relationships. These things will be there but they aren’t the focus.

I’m interested in different cultures, and in ethics and morality and philosophy, and I also want to explore the nature of magic and prophecy and choice and agency and all that juicy stuff.

Everything changed has been changed for a reason, even if that reason doesn’t seem immediately obvious. Some of the scenes may be a bit gory, especially in future chapters. It starts off quite slowly. Thank you for taking the time to check this out, and I really hope you enjoy it. I can’t promise everything is perfectly edited, although I have been through it a bunch of times. I’d love to hear any feedback, even if it’s just to say ‘you spelled that wrong’.

16/07/2015 Update: I shuffled around some of the content of the first few chapters (all of the pre-2011 content). I think it’s better now. There’s been no change to the actual content of the story, there are just a few more chapters now and some information is learnt at a different time. Chapters should be shorter now and a bit more focussed.

11th August 2011 – The Forbidden Forest

Ten years ago Voldemort had announced his return from death and invaded Hogwarts, killing many Muggleborns and enslaving the rest. Harry hadn’t been there at the time. He’d been on holiday in Wales.

Albus Dumbledore, the greatest man Harry had ever known, had been murdered by a powerful Dark witch, an Albanian woman now known to be responsible for the return of the Dark Lord, and a powerful Dark Lady herself. The Ministry for Magic had been unable to mount any kind of competent response to the incursion, sending only a small team of Aurors to retake the school.

The team failed, and over the course of five long years the British Wizarding world fell to the Dark
Lord and his Death Eaters. Not that Harry had been part of the resistance: the Unspeakables had ‘kidnapped’ him early in 2002, along with several of his friends.

Since then, he and they had remained on the hidden island fortress of the Unspeakables, a heavily warded and guarded island off the coast of Wales. Now, almost ten years later, it was time to move against Voldemort again.

Far too long past it, if Harry had anything to say about it, but the Unspeakables had been firm. They had a timeline, and it was based upon solid evidence (or so they said), and all things would be done in their time.

Now was the time to infiltrate Hogwarts, the citadel of the Dark Lord even if still a school, and retrieve the List. The List tracked every magical child born in Britain, whether to magical parents or otherwise, and could be used to locate these children when the time came to invite them to Hogwarts.

Voldemort used it as a constant source of new slaves, conscripts and breeding stock for the future. The Unspeakables wanted it so that they could find these children and bring them instead to Avalon. Harry agreed with them on this, even if he had vocal disagreements on other things. This was important.

The Invisibility Cloak – which he now knew to be an ancient artefact, a so-called Deathly Hallow – would allow him entry to the castle where others would be detected. His intimate knowledge of the castle – complete with the Marauders’ Map – should allow him access to the room containing the List, high up in the Headmaster’s tower. Voldemort himself occupied another wing of the castle, one used in ancient times by the Founders.

He had befouled the castle, the Founders’ legacy, and all mankind besides. With his Cloak wrapped tightly around him, and his person covered by layers and layers of protective wards, Harry stepped out of the forest and onto the grounds of Hogwarts proper.

He covered the ground quickly, pausing only briefly to gaze at the spot where Hagrid’s hut had once been. A garden stood where his friend’s house had once been, a garden filled with exotic and dangerous magical organisms, half-plant and half-animal, or perhaps something else entirely. Harry couldn’t say.

Voldemort hadn’t mistreated Hogwarts. For all his faults he loved – as much as he could love – Hogwarts. But even so his occupation had cast a dark pallor upon the ancient building, a foul miasma which pervaded the air.

He couldn’t enter through the door, nor through any of the tunnels of passageways indicated on the Marauders’ Map. The Unspeakables provided another tunnel: in a courtyard, beneath a fountain, was a chamber in essence a kind of Vanishing Cabinet, which would exchange him for the contents of a similar chamber within the castle itself. It was a highly classified route into and out of the castle, unknown probably even to Dumbledore.

The Unspeakables wouldn’t tell him where the information came from. They usually never did, although they had been remarkably candid and free with other things. Hermione had had gone wild with the access she had been given, though it was nothing compared with the totality of the vast Unspeakable archives.

Soon enough Harry stood in front of the fountain in the courtyard, and spoke the old Scottish words – not Latin, which he thought was strange – which would open up the fountain and reveal the chamber beneath. Silently, of course – or else it would be a rather ineffective secret passageway.
Harry climbed inside and the fountain closed up around him, and he was tugged wildly to the side and spat out into a musty, abandoned room somewhere within Hogwarts. Inside Voldemort’s domain.

Time to find the List.

11th August 2011 – The Ministry for Magic

Hermione hadn’t left the hidden island of Avalon – honestly? Such a pretentious name the Unspeakables had given to their island fortress – in almost ten years. It had been galling at first, to be secreted away like an untried and untested child. Not that as a child she had been untried and untested, at least not since second year.

But they had explained their reasoning. Voldemort’s amassed army was three times larger than anything he had been able to muster in the First War. The ranks of the Aurors had been literally decimated during peacetime, such that even those who remained after the First War were soon retired. The murder of Albus Dumbledore by Valmira, the so-called Dark Lady of Britain, and the subsequent invasion of Hogwarts, had almost destroyed the will of the British wizarding people to resist.

She had wanted to be out there, fighting. But in time she had come to see the point of view of the Unspeakables, even if she thought they were too cautious and too mystic for their own good. More transparency would have been nice, but they had given her access to a fair amount of literature and arcane science. Not nearly enough, but some.

But now was the time to step out of the darkness, if she were to speak figuratively. She was very much still within the darkness, cloaked by a Disillusionment Charm and a wealth of other protections besides.

Unspeakable cells had travelled the length of Britain for this. Harry had been sent to Hogwarts. She was to infiltrate the Ministry – or, at the very least, the War Office. The puppet Minister for Magic – the odious Malfoy the elder – had declared war upon the Irish Court of Magic in order to cleanse the British Isles of the ‘heresies’ of pre-Norman French Pureblood culture. Her time amongst the Unspeakables had shown her that there was a lot to magical culture she hadn’t understood because the proponents of tradition and culture and history had devolved into rabid fanatics such as the Pureblood People’s Party and the Death Eaters, or the dreadful Mudblood Integrationists. The Norman conquest had brought a great deal of strife to British Wizarding society, and had had repercussions even to the present day. The particular doctrine of racial supremacy advocated by the Death Eaters and their ilk was dangerous and a corruption of ancient practises, supported by centuries of oppression.

This latest war was an extension of that. The Unspeakables had reason to believe that Voldemort had begun setting up disgusting breeding camps, places where Muggleborn men and women were forced to create new life, only to have it taken away and raised by proper Purebloods. Her mission was to find the location of these camps in the War Office.

A task easier set than completed, she was coming to understand.

Hermione Granger had been stood hidden in a disused stairwell deep within the Ministry Building for several hours. Since the Unspeakables had absconded, the puppet Ministry established after Voldemort’s victory had set up a new suite of offices in the repaired and redecorated former Department of Mysteries. Due to their being a current and active war of Britain’s choosing, the
War Office was understandably quite busy.

When it wasn’t filled by Lucius Malfoy and a number of other known Death Eaters of the Inner Circle it was staffed by – more or less – innocent civilians, people whose lives had been upended by the Dark Lord and Lady. She couldn’t hurt them. Some others wouldn’t be as scrupulous, but Hermione hadn’t abandoned her principles when she’d joined the Unspeakables in their mission.

There. An opportunity.

The War Office had quietened. emptied. She moved quickly and entered the room, bypassing the security wards using a spell she’d been taught by the Unspeakables’ chief ward architect. Inside she found a great map of the British Isles. A war simulator, a magical device similar to a muggle computer if Hermione were to make an analogy, which could be used to craft tactics and strategies.

She gazed upon it, committing what details she could to memory. Wizarding communities – some ancient, some new – dotted all across the island. Which of these were new communities, and which of these were the breeding camps? It didn’t matter. She memorised as much as she could, and then turned her attention to the cabinets and desks that occupied areas of the room.

“Who left the door open?” muttered a tired-looking woman in the doorway. Hermione froze.

Astoria Greengrass – no, Malfoy – stood in the doorway. As Undersecretary to the Minister, and his daughter in law besides, Astoria Malfoy was a powerful figure in the puppet Ministry, though not a confirmed Death Eater. It would still be bad news for Hermione to be caught by her, even if she could outmatch the woman in a direct fight. She wasn’t supposed to be caught.

Astoria Malfoy took out her wand and muttered an incantation, and a cabinet drawer opened rapidly. A sheaf of parchment whizzed out of the drawer and she flicked through them. Satisfied at something, she left the room and closed the door behind her.

Silently thanking the woman for providing her with somewhere to start, Hermione tapped at the cabinet with her wand, willing the drawers to open. She could override the locks. Alohomora was not the only unlocking spell she knew, nor was it the most useful or the best.

Soon enough she was left with far too many scrolls and dossiers to properly search, and set about finding the ones she was sent to retrieve.

11th August 2011 – The Shrieking Shack, Hogsmeade Village

Neville Longbottom had always been part of something bigger than himself. In school it had been Gryffindor at first, and then it had been his friendship with Harry Potter, whose life had been … eventful, to say the least, even without the threat of Voldemort. He’d become fire-forged friends with Harry, and Ron, and Hermione – and others besides. Then out of nowhere the Dark Lord, the man who had ordered his parents tortured into insanity, returned from the dead to invade Hogwarts.

Now, he was part of the Unspeakables. Not that he worked for the Ministry for Magic, or even the Department of Mysteries. The Unspeakables were something else entirely, a group whose primary interest – for the moment, at least – was the termination of Dark Lord Voldemort and Dark Lady Valmira.

To that end Unspeakable cells had been sent all over the country today, on the 11th of August,
exactly ten years after the murder of Albus Dumbledore and the Invasion of Hogwarts.

Harry to Hogwarts, the Dark Lord’s citadel, to save the Muggleborn children.

Neville, to Hogsmeade, to provide a distraction for Harry.

Hermione, to the Ministry, to retrieve vital information.

A dozen other cells, almost the full number of Unspeakables, doing something else, somewhere else. It was an announcement, a declaration of war. It had to be now, before Voldemort conquered Ireland and turned his gaze towards the continent, which had never been so fractious and almost ablaze.

Neville’s job had sounded easy at first. Get to Hogsmeade. Make a fuss. Give Harry time.

And it was that simple. Except that Hogsmeade contained the largest concentration of Death Eaters in Britain, at least outside of the new villages that had been set up outside of Muggle communities. Hogwarts stood as the primary magical school in Britain still, but also as the personal domain of the Dark Lord. Hogsmeade had been expanded greatly to house the many young men who swelled the ranks of the Death Eaters from all over Europe.

Two Unspeakables accompanied him. Good men, and with the Department since before the First War. Despite their age, Neville wouldn’t want to face either of them in a fair fight.

“Longbottom.”

It was Whitehall, the elder of the two Unspeakables, a man whose knowledge of obscure and ancient charms and hexes eclipsed most people’s knowledge of basic household magic.

“What?”

“Remember your Nullification Charm. We will split when we enter the town proper, and neither myself nor Unspeakable Thomas shall be there to remind you.”

Neville snorted.

“I can do a Nullification Charm.”

And he could. Properly, even. He hadn’t been a nervous wreck since he was at least fourteen. That Neville had been gone long before the Unspeakables had intervened, and in the years since had been all but banished as Neville had become someone else, someone he was proud of being.

“Restituo praesidium,” he said, carefully and slowly. The charm would dissolve most protective wards, although not all, and was a highly guarded Unspeakable secret.

“Good boy. We’ll make a proper Unspeakable of you yet, I’m sure.”

Neville nodded. He wasn’t sure being an Unspeakable was what he would have chosen, all other things being equal, but that was what he was, now.

“Let’s get going,” he said. “I bet Harry’s already inside by now.”

Together the three wizards moved through the town of Hogsmeade. Neville wasn’t really prepared for how much larger it had become – rows and rows of streets branched off from the Hogsmeade he remembered, and it seemed a populous place. The edifice of the Death Eater headquarters rose above the other buildings and dwarfed them, a great black tumour in what appeared to be an
otherwise normal town.

Then Neville veered off alone, in the direction of the Death Eater compound. The old Unspeakables were to do something else, something to do with an elderly Romanian inventor the Dark Lord had brought over from Europe. Not his mission. He was supposed to break the wards surrounding the Death Eater building.

Not with the Nullification Charm, although it would be useful. He’d spent nine years, near enough ten, with the Unspeakables. He hadn’t just sat on arse doing nothing in that time. They’d all trained. Neville was now something of a ward-breaker, although not of quite the same sort employed by the goblins of Gringotts.

Death Eaters patrolled the streets of Hogsmeade at night. Tonight, on the night marking the tenth anniversary of the Invasion of Hogwarts, almost every witch or wizard in Britain would be at Stonehenge to celebrate the occasion – and those who didn’t go would be safe inside their homes.

So only a token force of Death Eaters would patrol tonight, and the Dark Lord and Lady would not be at Hogwarts. Still, it wouldn’t do to be cocky or arrogant. He was one man. A well trained man, but still just one man.

Then again, he was Neville fucking Longbottom. How could anything go wrong?

* Hogwards *

Harry found himself inside a part of Hogwarts he had never seen before, which wasn’t even on the Marauders’ Map. That in itself didn’t really surprise him, since the Unspeakables had warned him that Hogwarts was not a building one could simply map; it was larger on the inside than on the outside, and its interior layout did not necessarily match what one would expect from the interior. Even weirder, or at least Harry found this the most odd thing, was that a whole section of the castle appeared to be under some sort of bizarre time-related spell.

Knowing that wasn’t exactly helpful in his current circumstances, though. He looked around.

This part of the castle had remained seemingly unchanged in centuries, although with Hogwarts it could always be difficult to tell. The portraits were older, more sluggish, and less realistic – some didn’t even move, and maybe never had.

What ghosts wandered this part of the castle? Harry wondered that, and a number of other things, before deciding that he was definitely not anywhere near to the Headmaster’s office. It made him sick to think that Voldemort alone controlled the castle now, him and his Dark Lady, the woman who had brought him back and unleashed him upon the world again.

What he would give to fly again, properly.

“But where the fuck am I?” he wondered aloud, hoping that his words would catch some long-forgotten ghost or portrait and produce some sort of useful response. With portraits, though, you could never really depend on anything.

The ghost of a small child drifted up through the floor in front of him.

“Hogwarts School,” it said helpfully. “How did you get in here if you didn’t know where you are?”

Harry took a closer look. The child was young – almost too young to discern its sex, since the poor
thing had apparently died many centuries ago in clothing Harry had no idea was meant for boys, girls, or both.

“What’s your name?”

The child drifted lazily up towards the ceiling.

“I don’t remember,” it said eventually.

“Are you a boy or a girl?” he decided to ask after a few moments of silence. He felt rude referring to the ghostly child as ‘it’, although he supposed he did have more important things to worry about. Such as where, exactly, they were.

“I don’t know.”

The child drifted back down towards the ground, although remained at about eye-level to Harry.

“Does it matter?”

“No, I don’t suppose it does,” conceded Harry. “Do you know where in Hogwarts, exactly, we are? Only, it’s just that I need to be somewhere else in Hogwarts.”

“I think this is where I used to live, a very long time ago.” The child seemed sad, but it was a distant sadness—half-remembered, mostly forgotten. Like the echoes of a memory.

A strange magic lingered in the air around him. Old magic. Time magic? What was it the old Unspeakable, Whitehall, had said about the taste of time magic?

Harry couldn’t remember, and suspected it wouldn’t very useful even if he could.

“I can show you a door I can’t go through,” said the child. “Follow me.”

So Harry did.

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He wasn’t quite sure what he had expected, but when Harry saw the door, the door was not it. It was a simple door, plainly built and undecorated. Except… something about it was strange, didn’t resemble a plain, simple door.

What was it?

And then he saw it.

All around the door, knotted into an intricate, complex weave, were powerful wards. Spells that linked the magic he could feel, the ancient and strange magic, together, and bounded it. Trapped the child, and perhaps other things, inside this part of the castle?

“I can’t go through the door,” said the child. “Can you go through the door?”

“I’m not sure that I can.”

He took out his wand and placed it upon the door.

“Revelatio praestidium,” he said, and the network of wards flared into sight – true sight, not the magical sight he had learned to use with the Unspeakables. Some of the wards he recognised, but
others didn’t even look like spells. Nothing that seemed like it might hurt him if he tried to open it, or even if he tried to break the wards…

“Restituo praesidium,” he said, and watched as none of the wards flickered out of existence.

“I was supposed to do magic,” said the child. “But then I died.”

Ghosts were always so morbid. Harry supposed it wasn’t their fault, not really, but it made him feel more than a little uncomfortable. What were you supposed to say to the ghost of a dead child who would never be able to do magic, but remembered that it was supposed to?

“I’m going to go through the door,” he said. “Goodbye. Maybe I’ll see you again one day?”

The child floated away. Harry wasn’t sure it would remember their meeting; very old ghosts sometimes didn’t. Gingerly, Harry turned the doorknob and opened the door.

Much to his chagrin, nothing at all happened. The wards didn’t flicker. None of the tell-tale signs of activation. Nothing. The door was just a convenient nexus point, then. He frowned. Hermione would know why it was a convenient nexus point, not only that it was. Maybe she would even know what some of the wards did.

It was only when Harry had left the strange, forgotten part of Hogwarts that he realised the ghost child had been able to see through his Invisibility Cloak, which he had not removed since entering the castle.

* The Ministry for Magic

Hermione had taken all that she could from the War Office, and had retreated to the Atrium. She wasn’t technically supposed to do what she was about to do, but she had been stuck on that god-damned island for a decade, trapped behind an Unspeakable time-locked fortress ward, and so she did not care.

The Unspeakables would get bent out of shape about it, but at the end of the day they would do nothing. She was one of them now, sort of, and insubordination was part of how the Unspeakables functioned as a group. Fiercely independent, yet staunchly collectivist, the Unspeakables would be angry at her but would expect her actions to have produced some useful consequence.

She only hoped Ronald would turn out to be helpful. Or at least connected to whatever kind of anti-Voldemort resistance remained in Britain. The Unspeakables had ways of watching certain things, certain places, and much of what they knew – or assumed – about the current situation in Britain came from those sources of information.

Hermione didn’t have a slavish devotion to the tools of the Unspeakables. For one thing, she had never gone through the Department of Mysteries and so had never had to rely on their traditions and training. On top of that she knew that the witches and wizards of the Britain she remembered had more spirit than the Unspeakables thought. There would be a resistance of some kind, and if Ron Weasley was not a part of it, Hermione would take back everything she had ever said about the Unified Magical Field Theory.

And if she had some personal motive for her actions, well, that was her prerogative as an Unspeakable, wasn’t it?

The Atrium, unlike the War Office, was busy. Busy for what tonight was, which was meant to be a
celebration of the death of Albus Dumbledore. The tenth. Ten years since Voldemort had come back to Britain. So why was the Atrium so full?

Hermione could see several reporters and a number of mid to low-ranking Ministry employees. She could see the benefits of not allowing the entire apparatus of state to disappear for the celebrations. Even Astoria Malfoy had remained at the Ministry, although Hermione assumed the other woman had left by now.

Except she hadn’t.

How to cross from where she stood to where she needed to be? She couldn’t apparate from where she was now, but the Disillusionment Charm was not as good as Harry’s Cloak. What Hermione would give for instructions on how to perform a proper Phase Shift Charm – not that anyone could give her those, as the spell was considered purely theoretical.

She absolutely couldn’t cause a scene at the Ministry. Not that a scene would be a bad thing per se, as the Unspeakables were announcing their ‘return’ tonight, but a scene wasn’t explicitly part of the plan. Not for the Ministry. For Hogsmeade and Stonehenge, certainly. For Harry to steal the List and for her to retrieve important information relating to the Irish War and the Muggleborn resettlement camps, yes.

But for a scene at the Ministry created by a lone operative? That was dangerous. Hermione was a Gryffindor, and prone to acts of rash bravery, but she wasn’t stupid. She could have been in Ravenclaw. Not that House affiliation seemed all that important, twenty years out from first year and in the middle – at the beginning? – of a brutal existential war.

During the time Hermione had taken to think over her problems the Atrium had cleared, leaving Hermione alone with Astoria Greengrass. Malfoy. A girl Hermione knew only by association, and from the Unspeakables’ scrying tools.

“I know that you’re hiding there. Do you think me a fool?”

Hermione went still, and stopped a breath in her chest. She knew that there was somebody hidden, but not where there was somebody hidden. Or so Hermione hoped.

_Caeco._ A minor blinding curse. She cast it silently, carefully, but it went to nothing as Astoria calmly deflected the spell.

_“Mulco.”_ A bludgeoning hex. Hermione rolled out of the way as the hex smashed into the wall behind her. Another quickfire spell saw her Disillusionment Charm shattered.

A scene had definitely been made.

_“Sercore tempestas!”_ she said, flinging the foulest, most disgusting hex she could think of at the woman – the shitstorm hex.

Waiting only a moment to ensure that Astoria Greengrass was indeed fighting her way out of a literal storm of faeces, Hermione bolted in the direction of the Apparition chambers. She stopped only because a new figure had entered the Atrium.

A figure she recognised.

_“Hermione?”_
Across the Atrium, standing where a hallway met the grand chamber, was Sirius Black.

Hogwarts

Harry had emerged somewhere on the fifth floor, and from there he made his way to the Headmaster’s office. The office of Severus Snape, a traitor, who had eagerly returned to serve at the Dark Lord’s feet. He had been made Headmaster of Hogwarts for his trouble, and under his reign the school had become the premier Dark Arts academy in Europe, even the world.

Harry would have liked nothing more than to simply end the man, but that wasn’t what he was here for. Snape wasn’t meant to be at Hogwarts tonight, anyway – only a token force would be left here. After all, who would dare attack the great and powerful Dark Lord in his personal domain?

His mission was simple: retrieve the List. Rendezvous with Neville and Whitehall and Thomas, and from there travel to Stonehenge to announce their return, and to issue a challenge to Voldemort. If everything went to plan the many operations conducted by the Unspeakables that night would deal a serious blow to his activities, and he wouldn’t even realise the true extent of the damage until too late. Or so the plan said, but Harry spoke with a wry kind of experience when he’d said that plans usually went to shit.

Maybe the Unspeakables were better at planning than he had ever been. They were more meticulous, certainly.

The Unspeakables had a rather large dossier compiled surrounding the man Harry knew as Professor Snape. A genealogy, a personal and professional history, everything. Their central focus was the man’s obsessive and long-lasting love for Harry’s mother, Lily. The password to the chamber with the List would be there, as it would be guarded by Snape against this very situation.

Or, perhaps not this exact situation because as far as the world was concerned, Harry Potter was either dead or a coward who had run away to the Americas. But a situation like it.

Merlin, he had been locked away on that island far too long.

Soon enough Harry found himself where he needed to be, and uttered their best guess at the room’s password. If it came to it he would break the ward – he’d been shown how to do that, even though ward breaking was more Neville's thing, and Hermione could get through nearly any magical lock – but he’d prefer not to.

Unlike Hermione or Neville, Harry couldn’t break the ward or trick the lock without tripping its alarm. He could probably do better than Ron, though. Ron, who he hadn’t seen in a decade, but who was mercifully still alive.

“Lily.”

It worked, and Harry didn’t have to ply his dubious skills to the system. He entered the room and looked around it for the List, which was not he had expected.

The largest piece of parchment Harry had ever seen hung between some sort of mechanism, and a green quill hovered in the air in front of it, waiting for the birth of a new magical child. He couldn’t steal the device, and nor could – would – he destroy its magic. They couldn’t afford to lose such an ancient magical spell, not when they would have no reliable way of recreating it. He was to steal the List only, and not the methods for producing the List.
It rankled to leave such a thing in enemy hands, but there wasn’t really another way. Part of him missed the Harry-Who-Was, the one before the Unspeakables, who would have destroyed the device and damned the consequences. He would have deprived Voldemort of his primary means of obtaining more Muggleborns and counted it as a win.

But the Unspeakables had taught him to think differently. Tactically. He wagered he could now beat Ron in a game of chess. Destroying the apparatus would only give Voldemort and his Dark Lady cause to seek another source of Muggleborns, and deprive future generations of a piece of living history. That was important, too – the world they would live in after they won. If he fought this war as if that world did not exist, then that world would be unlikely to form in the ashes of the old one.

Eventually, Harry extricated the List from the apparatus and placed it inside a Dimension Bag Hermione had charmed for him. He exited the tower swiftly and quietly, remembering for a moment the time he had done so during his fifth year, when the Court of Fools had infiltrated the school.

When Harry got to the base of the tower he came to face to face – or face with magically-clear air – with Severus Snape, Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and the highest ranking living Death Eater.

“There is no need to hide, Potter. I could smell your distinct stench of arrogance and lack of class in a Turkish whorehouse.”

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**Hogsmeade Town, Death Eater compound**

“*Mulco! Mulco! Mulco!*”

Neville shot off bludgeoning hex after bludgeoning hex. He’d come across a larger patrol than he’d expected – three men, all British by the sound of their voices – and had to dispatch them quickly. The mission was distract, not get killed by random Death Eaters. Unfortunately for him, these Death Eaters were well-trained and highly skilled opponents, probably even minor veterans of the so-called War of Pureblood Freedom.

He had no choice but to roll away from an unknown curse, a curse which careened into the house behind him and shattered the bricks and mortar, bypassing whatever wards had been placed on it. Probably a Dark curse.

Neville grimaced.

“*Abundo vomo,*” he said slowly, casting it with the inflection which would make the Death Eaters begin to uncontrollably vomit, resulting in their deaths if nobody cast the counterspell. Other variations of the spell would cause someone to inflate dangerously, or become grotesquely fat.

“*Incido.*”

Then he turned and ran, heading towards the fourth and final corner of the building. He had almost destroyed the outer wards. When that was done, he would set a wardbomb and meet up with Whitehall and Thomas.

When he arrived, he was almost relieved to see that finally, finally, the citizens had Hogsmeade had gotten curious about what was happening. Almost, because he was the enemy here. Even locals afraid of You-Know-Who wouldn’t stop to help him. He didn’t mind.
He just wanted them to see. There was a point in fighting.

“Longbottom?”

Neville whirled around in the direction of the voice. He recognised it. Who? When he saw the speaker, however, he knew instantly.


Neville didn’t waste time.

“Occumbo!” he said quickly, casting a rapid Falling Hex at the other man, the Death Eater he had known from school.

“Protego maxima,” said the tall, thin man lazily. “A Falling Hex, Longbottom? Fight like a proper Pureblood.”

“Lacero. Fluo sanguis.”

If Nott wanted some of the darker – not Darker, not really – things Neville could throw at him then Neville would give them to him. A ripping curse paired with a blood overflow curse would cause the other man to bleed out and die, at least if he didn’t rapidly repair the damage and allow Neville the opportunity to either kill him or escape.

That was the theory. Neville hadn’t had the chance to test it in the field, what with being stuck on a Merilin-damned rock for a decade.

Nott, however, proved too quick – the man moved like some sort of Dark creature, faster than Neville even thought was possible.

“Crucio.”

He rolled away, and the curse didn’t strike. The Cruciatus Curse. There was no spell in existence that made Neville angrier. He could deal with the Imperius Curse. He could even deal with the Killing Curse. He didn’t condone their use, would never use them himself, but he could see situations where they could have some practical use.

But the Cruciatus Curse was a torture spell. A spell designed solely to cause pain. His parents had been tortured into insanity under the Cruciatus Curse.

“Abundo cruore.” He intoned the curse carefully, through grit teeth. The Bloodletting Curse was the Darkest curse he would allow himself to learn: just on the edge of what the Ministry considered legal, if not particularly wholesome. The curse struck Nott dead in the chest, and Neville followed it with another ripping curse. “Lacero.”

This time Neville was too quick, and Nott succumbed. Without really caring if his former classmate lived or died – Nott’s crimes were well-attested – Neville broke the last of the wards on the Death Eater compound, set the wardbomb – a device carefully constructed by a number of Unspeakables for this very purpose – and fled.

The Ministry for Magic

Hermione froze. Fucking Sirius Black. She bore him no ill will – he always, always, always meant
well, at least when it came to those he considered friends and family. But the man had the worst timing possible, honestly, and shouting out her name? She’d just attacked the Minister’s daughter-in-law who was also the Undersecretary to the Minister.

“Somno maxima!” said Hermione forcefully, directing her spell towards Astoria Greengrass. It hit, and the woman fell to the ground, asleep. Or, more properly, in a deep comatose state. A skilled Healer could bring her out of it, Hermione supposed.

“Not now, Sirius,” she said quickly. “I have to go—there’s someone I need to—Harry’s fine,” she said. There wasn’t enough time to explain anything to Sirius. Almost no time at all, in fact, and that was assuming everything everywhere went exactly to plan – which it wouldn’t.

Nothing ever did.

“I think I get it,” said Sirius simply. “I’ll—contact you through the old channels, yeah? I think I’ll ‘rescue’ Mrs Malfoy, if you don’t mind?” He didn’t seem to really be asking. Sirius had made a place for himself in British magical society; they had seen that much from their scrying. The Order of the Phoenix hadn’t disbanded, merely gone underground. Hermione knew it to be true.

It was why she needed to get to the Burrow. To find the Weasleys. To see Ron. That reason, and another reason.

“Good. Something big is about to happen, Sirius,” she said, lingering just long enough to tell him that. She couldn’t tell him what, but he should know.

Then Hermione ran for the Apparition Chamber and pictured the Burrow in her head. With a loud crack Hermione disappeared and left the Ministry behind her.

The Burrow

“Arthur! Arthur! The wards are screaming! Get your wand!”

Mrs Weasley. Molly.

Hermione’s heart stopped in her chest. A decade. It had been a decade.

“It’s probably just a gnome,” she heard Mr Weasley—Arthur—say.

“We can’t take that chance!”

Hermione whispered a quick shield charm and stepped out into the light. She’d Apparated behind Arthur’s shed, and when she appeared, she held her wand in both hands in front of her.

“Arthur, Molly – please don’t attack me. It’s me, Hermione.”

“Hermione?” repeated Mr Weasley, wand held limply in hand.

“Hermione?” declared Molly, snatching Hermione’s wand from the air. “I don’t believe you. What if this is a trick, Arthur? You know what he… what he did the first time.”

“I promise you it’s me, Hermione Granger. I was kidnapped by the Unspeakables. Harry and Neville and Luna, too.”

“Everyone knows that!” snapped Molly. “How can we be sure it’s you?”

Hermione knew it wasn’t a case of the Weasleys being unfair. She had been gone ten years,
kidnapped very publicly—at least, as far as the Weasleys were concerned. Most of Britain thought her dead. Ron had even been there at the time, as had Ginny – but Harry forced them both to escape so that the Order would not lose too many at once. Still, she and Luna and Harry and Neville had been enough for the Unspeakables at the time.

“I had my first period in the summer between second and third year,” said Hermione flatly. “When I was here, visiting Ron with Harry. I didn’t know what witches did, and you told me.”

Arthur had turned red, bless him.

“May I have my wand back?”

Molly didn’t respond at first, but then drew her up into a tight hug. Immediately Hermione felt at ease. It wasn’t the same as her own mother, but Molly had been… Molly was supposed to have been her mother-in-law, one day.

Hermione felt her wand pressed into her hands after the elder woman withdrew from the hug.

“Do you know where Ron is?”

Molly’s face fell.

“Well, about Ron…” she said, and then continued quickly after seeing the look Hermione knew was plastered across her face. “He’s alive, heavens! No, he, I think we’d better go inside…”

Hermione shook her head.

“I can’t. There’s no time,” she said, stressing the important words. A nervous habit she’d never managed to break. “Tell me now, please.”

“He’s married,” said Arthur. “Three years, now.”

That wasn’t what she had expected. She felt crushed. Like her heart had withered and died in her chest, and all that remained was a dried husk.

But she couldn’t be angry. Ten years. Ten fucking years.

And then Hermione didn’t have to think about it any more because something more important was happening. Something real, something concrete, and something important. The coin in her pocket was glowing. A modified version of the Protean Charm allowed the Unspeakables one method of long-range contact. There were others, of course.

She withdrew the coin from her pocket. It glowed a bright, furious green. The colour of Harry’s eyes.

“Fuck.” She didn’t care that she was swearing in front of the elder Weasleys. After the decade she’d had, nobody’s opinion mattered anymore. “Harry’s in trouble. Listen,” she said, dropping into a tone they would find familiar, “this is very important. Gather the Order—the resistance, whatever—and tell them to Apparate at once to Hogsmeade. Harry is in trouble. We’re fighting the Death Eaters. We’re back.”

Hermione paused.

“Arthur. Molly. Promise me.” She couldn’t go until they did.

“I—“
“We promise,” said Arthur quickly. “Go.”

She nodded, and then Apparated away. Harry needed her. Needed all of the Unspeakables, if he’d sent the message using the coin.

Hogwarts

Voldemort was here. Fucking. Fuck. Shit. Harry couldn’t decide what to do: kill the traitorous Snape or run the fuck away from Voldemort (not that he was scared – he was erring on the side of caution here).

“The Dark Lord approaches, Potter,” said Snape, his voice low but forceful, cutting the space between them like a knife. “Do not be here when he arrives.” He looked Harry up and down. “You are not Albus. But perhaps you will do.”

Harry merely gaped, and suddenly felt like an eleven year old boy again, and not the thirty year old man that he had become. Snape, offering him a chance to escape? A betrayal of the Dark Lord, his Lord? Or… no, perhaps Snape hadn’t turned traitor at the last moment.

He felt something pressed into his palm. A vial containing silver liquid. A memory. Memories?

“What?”

“Go!” hissed the dour Potions Master, Headmaster, and apparent spy. “You foolish man!”

“I need to get to a window,” he said lamely, cursing himself for his sudden stupidity. The Harry he was being was the Harry he was more than a decade ago, not the Harry he actually was. Snape had unsettled him. Did Harry trust the man? No, he could not say that he did.

“I cannot provide a distraction. I will tell the Dark Lord where you have gone, and how he is to find you. You must escape anyway.”

“Right.”

Harry could do that. There was a Mission Protocol, after all. The Unspeakables were all very dutiful with their recordings, although for whom they were meant exactly Harry had never been able to guess. The Ministry was gone and there had been no Prime Unspeakable in nearly a thousand years.

Harry brushed past Snape and ran down the stairs, heading towards the nearest section of the castle with an actual window that went to the outside, and wasn’t enchanted or charmed or warded.

Simple enough, except that he was in Hogwarts, and Hogwarts had always been tightly warded… Now with it being the Dark Lord and Lady’s personal castle, too, it was packed in a wardnet tighter than Harry had ever seen. Probably the most heavily warded building in the world, Harry guessed. He fingered the coin in his pocket briefly, activating the magic which would send a call for help to the Unspeakables all across the island. They would come to Hogsmeade. This was where Voldemort was now, anyway, not Stonehenge.

All the while he could feel Voldemort drawing closer. The man had almost traversed the distance between Hogsmeade and Hogwarts by the time Harry managed to get himself along a corridor which eventually led to a window fit for his purposes.
Harry pushed it open and then, without a pause, flung himself from the window.

Hogsmeade

Something had changed. Something wasn’t right. Neville could feel it in the air. In the ground. In the cold, still silence that wasn’t normal, just couldn’t be normal.

Voldemort was here. A feeling almost like a Dementor washed over him, so foul was the presence of the Dark Lord and his magic. Was his Lady here, too? Dark Lady Valmira, the woman who murdered Dumbledore and claimed allegiance of the fabled Elder Wand – or so intelligence indicated.

As dangerous as Voldemort, that one was, thought Neville. He shouldn’t ever forget that.

He held his wand tight in his hand. Where the fuck were Whitehall and Thomas? They wouldn’t have been killed. He couldn’t believe that. He didn’t think Mad-Eye Moody in his prime could have taken down Whitehall and Thomas, even now when they’d both never see the nicer side of a hundred again.

So what had got them sidetracked?

He paced.

Hogsmeade had erupted into chaos. The Death Eater compound had exploded, killing the Death Eaters inside and setting half the town on fire. Hogsmeade was a … necessarily casualty, Neville reminded himself. Its people were mostly safe – by design, not coincidence, which he thought made their plan better, if not wholly ethical still.

His thoughts began to pile up, to twist and snarl and tangle. He shook his head.

He took a coin from his pocket. Green.

“Nice one, Harry,” he said. “Calling the cavalry.”

“Yes,” said Whitehall suddenly, “it is probably for the best that we confront He Who Must Not Be Named here, now.”

“It is fortuitous, in fact,” added Thomas, holding a large sack – no doubt charmed to be larger on the inside than on the outside. “The symbolism will not go unnoticed.”

“Indeed. The power of symbols,” said Whitehall, and paused, seemingly savouring the thought.

“And we do not have to get bound up in the tangle that is Stonehenge,” added Thomas. “Though Hogwarts is not much better.”

“Mm. The flow of magic is a complicating factor,” said Whitehall absently. “But in any case, we are not going to kill the Dark Lord today. But a message loaded with symbols. Yes, that is what we will do.”

“The She-Devil approaches, soft in her steps but quick of pace,” said Thomas, setting the sack down onto the floor. Neville frowned. That could only mean Valmira.

“We should leave,” he said. “Find some others, work out a plan. Support Harry. He should have the List by now.”
“That is what we will do,” said Whitehall. “When we have finished.”

He rolled up the sleeves of his robe and together with Thomas began tracing the outline of a circle around where they all stood. Some sort of runic magic, Neville assumed. What good it would do he couldn’t say – this wasn’t his area, and even if it were, both men had had at least six of Neville’s lives in which to study their craft.

He was a child here. A man over thirty and yet still a child next to these men, who were maybe even as old as Dumbledore had been when he died.

Whitehall began chanting in a strange, guttural language, and Thomas began a counterchant in, of all things, Welsh. Neville had picked up more than a little Welsh on Avalon, but this was something different, something older.

As far as he could tell nothing was happening. Had happened? The runic circle on the ground grew ever more complex as the two ancient wizards added more and more patterns, the ‘ink’ flowing as pure magic from the tips of their wands. This was Unspeakable magic. Neville couldn’t think of another name for it, not really. It was ritual magic. It was runic magic. But it was so much more than that – it was all those things, and the unique knowledge and understanding of the Unspeakables, wrapped up into a new kind of thing.

Fascinating, in a lot of ways. Boring in many others – Neville knew what it took to prepare a circle such as this. Although the two men appeared to have simply started this work ad-hoc, the magic would have been prepared some time during the last decade, and would have required months of painstaking mathematical and arithmantic calculations.

Too much prior planning for him. He didn’t say that out of laziness: he’d tried. Couldn’t wrap his head around the numbers, let alone some of the concepts. Of all of them, only Luna had really taken to this kind of magic. She seemed uniquely suited to it.

“I hope this is going to be useful,” he said, although didn’t expect either of the two chanting wizards to answer him. Instead, he cast his gaze around their vicinity. Valmira hadn’t arrived yet, and hopefully wouldn’t – despite what the two old wizards felt about a chance to try their spell. That’s all they wanted to do, and Neville would let them up to a point.

That point being their probable deaths at the hands of a Dark Lady wielding the world’s most powerful wand.

‡

Hermione hit the ground running. She appeared in Hogsmeade and wasted no time in pinpointing Harry, who was somewhere between Hogwarts and Hogsmeade, and moving rapidly.

“Good,” she muttered, and then tuned the coin to Neville. Alive and well, and also in Hogsmeade. She didn’t have a lot of time to feel relieved, though, because Hogsmeade was positively swarming with Death Eaters. The big black smoking building was no doubt Neville’s doing, she noticed.

Hermione fought her way through a group of Death Eaters – young recruits, by the look of it – to find her way to Neville. The Dark Lord and Lady were obviously here – Harry would not have called otherwise, but even without that Hermione would have known.

Early reports had suggested that witches could feel Dark Lady Valmira’s presence. All witches. Hermione had discovered why: Valmira was a practitioner of ancient magic, women’s magic, and Hermione could feel it. The revulsion, the sickening corruption of life, centred around her womb.
Dangerous magic, and old magic, and magic she didn’t fully understand.

And that left the Dark Lord, whose presence cast a shadow the size of London and dampened all things around him.

It was a good thing that Hermione didn’t plan to die today, then, wasn’t it? Because otherwise she was going to panic, and there wasn’t any time to panic. Voldemort had ruined the plan: Stonehenge would have offered them protection, with ancient magic, and not even Voldemort could have broken that most ancient of magical oaths.

But here, in Hogsmeade? On ground the Death Eaters had prepared for a decade? The Unspeakables had no such advantage.

“Neville!” she said, her mind snapping quickly back to the here and now. “What are they doing?”

Whitehall and Thomas were… chanting. She could pick out the pattern, and could understand the counterchant in Welsh – but what was the lead, the primary thread? She didn’t recognise the rune circle, which was a formation of concentric circles flanked by geometric patterns.

“Not a clue.” He seemed—frustrated, Hermione thought, but then again… if he’d been here for a while he might be itching to do something.

“Valmira is here,” said Hermione then. “Has anyone else Apparated in yet?”

Her question was answered not by Neville, Whitehall or Thomas, but by a loud crack to her left. Someone had Apparated in, someone with excellent timing.

“I hear Harry needs some help,” said the figure—Luna. “Oh, look,” she said, her gaze directed at the rune circle. “They finished the trap. How lovely.” She seemed happy at least as far as Hermione could tell; but then, Luna had more of an interest in that area than Hermione. No doubt she actually understood what spell they were working, and although that would have irked her once—that Luna understood and she didn’t—Hermione had trodden interesting paths of magic of her own, ones which Luna would struggle to even begin to comprehend.

It was irrelevant.

“We can leave them here,” said Luna, her voice airy and detached. “Neville, be a dear and pick up that bag. We should get going. I believe Harry will arrive at any time now.”

Neville picked up the sack near to where Thomas stood and tucked it into his belt.

“We should go provide a distraction,” said Hermione. “For Harry, and Whitehall and Thomas, whatever it is they hope to do.”

“They’re building a trap for the Dark Lady,” said Luna dreamily. “Only, it’s not exactly a trap. It’s really quite an elegant design.”

“I’m sure it is,” agreed Hermione, “but we don’t have time for that. Let’s go.”

She moved away from Thomas and Whitehall and started down the road to the more populous part of town. Strange, that Hogsmeade was no longer a sleepy little village. Now, Death Eaters and regime sympathisers roamed the streets, raised families, and venerated the Dark Lord and Lady.

She was yet again pulled from her thoughts by the tell-tale crack of Apparition. Death Eaters.
*Conturbo.* A more powerful, more dangerous, application of Confounding. The spell arced through the air and hit her target, who immediately dropped his wand.

“*Ignis flagellum!***”

A whip of eldritch witchfire sprouted from the wand of one of the other Death Eaters, a squat man as far as Hermione could tell.

“*Protego!***”

The whip smashed against her shield and shattered it, but in doing so fizzled out.

*Not enough time.*

“*Mulco! Reducto! Lacero!*” She cast the spells in quick succession, then whirled away to cast more at the others. Neville and Luna were doing the same, and looked to be holding up.

Three against six—five, considering the man she’d Confounded into an agony of indecision and inner turmoil. The probability of success was high.

“I contacted the Order,” she said in lull between curses. She sidestepped a killing curse. “*Mulco!*” The Death Eater fell. Six became five, which had now become—three, as Luna downed a Death Eater using an elegant charm Hermione was certain wasn’t an offensive spell.

It didn’t matter.

More and more Death Eaters Apparated in. Voldemort had called them home.

So where was the *fucking* Order, and what were the Unspeakables doing?

And then a great pillar of light exploded from the remains of the Death Eater headquarters—no, it wasn’t a pillar. The shape of infinity, the symbol of the Unspeakables, had been raised. A great shining pillar of light, proclaiming to anyone who saw it – and it would be seen all across Britain – that the Unspeakables had returned.

Hermione allowed herself a smirk. Anyone who knew that the infinity sign meant the Unspeakables, at least.

* *

Harry soared high above Hogsmeade, watching the battle below with the keen eyesight of the white-tailed eagle. It wouldn’t be too out of place, his Animagus form, not in Scotland – although they’d been extinct in Britain for years, Muggles had gone and put them back. Voldemort was below, along with his Dark Lady.

Neville, Hermione and Luna would need help soon, but he couldn’t help them. He had to *wait.* The waiting damn near killed him, but the importance of timing, of patience, of waiting until *the moment* had all been drilled into him on Avalon.

Fucking Avalon.

But then it didn’t matter because the symbol of infinity, interlinked circles with no end and no beginning, shot up into the sky. Now it was time.

Harry lazily circled down, and down, and down, until he was finally back on the ground. He transformed in the shadows, not wanting to reveal the Animagus form he had worked to produce.
He was unregistered, after all.

A series of loud cracks in the alley alerted him to the presence of others. He took out his wand and gripped it firmly.

“Harry?”

Oh, shit.

It was Ginny. And Ron, and no doubt half a dozen others he knew—but Ginny. Not now. Not here.

“We don’t have time,” he said curtly. “We’ll get to all that later.”

“Okay.”

“Follow me,” he said, “and watch for Death Eaters.”

Soon the air exploded with the loud, otherworldly cracks of Apparition as Unspeakables, Order members, and Death Eaters made Hogsmeade into a warzone.

“Stupefy!”

Ginny. She’d prevented a Death Eater landing a nasty curse on him, too—he smiled awkwardly. Not the time.

“Expelliarmus!” Ron, who now clutched a Death Eater’s wand. “Stupefy.”

Something was behind him.

Harry whirled.

“Mulco! Lacero! Cor ignis percutio!”

The Death Eater went down in a blaze of fire and blood, and Harry wondered when exactly his spells had become more lethal, more deadly, than his friends’.

Of course, he knew when and where, and why. But he didn’t understand how, after a decade of war, the Order hadn’t toughened up. War was war. People died. Magic could kill. Offensive magic wasn’t all Dark.

He didn’t look any of them in the eye, still. It was too early for the frank talk they would all have to have, after all, and Harry still had to confront Voldemort.

“We have to get to the square. Where the light’s coming from?” Harry didn’t stop to check they’d agreed. They would either come or they wouldn’t—but he thought that they would.

Almost as soon as he arrived in the square Harry applied the Sonorous Charm. He needed his voice to carry—through Hogsmeade, at least. His voice, and much more, would be carried to the rest of Wizarding Britain through the pillar of light. Or so he’d been assured. That was a large part of the Unspeakable operation tonight.

It was why, although it frustrated him still, the bulk of Unspeakables had yet to arrive to answer his call. They hadn’t finished the prep-work. It was basically not that important anyway, since Voldemort wouldn’t be able to keep them here. They’d Apparate out. Portkey out. There was an extraction plan.
He hadn’t learnt the extraction plan – but then, he hadn’t been supposed to learn it. Luna was supposed to handle that part of the operation. As the only proper, initiated Unspeakable among his friends, Harry supposed it was fair that she get that responsibility. It freed him up to do ‘recklessly foolish’ things like drawing the full attention of the Dark Lord and Lady upon himself. Which was all part of the plan, of course.

“Hello, Tom. Do you recognise this voice? It’s me, Harry. Harry Potter.” He’d actually been given a script. Hermione had designed it with Luna and some Unspeakables based on a psychological profile they’d constructed for Voldemort.

Harry thought it was bollocks, but he wasn’t going to deviate from the script unless something heretofore unforeseen should occur. He was allowed to do that much.

“Sorry about the Death Eater building. I’m sure you can understand why we broke all its wards and destroyed it. But don’t you think our pillar of light is much more appealing?”

Ah, there we go.

Voldemort was on his way. Flying, although without a broom. Harry did wonder how he did that; he had tried to figure it out, and Hermione had tried to research it, but the magic seemed to be, as far as anyone could tell, unique to Voldemort. More’s the pity, really.

He was supposed to be frightened. Harry, that is, not Voldemort – although maybe Voldemort was scared. Harry couldn’t tell. He’d never, technically, faced Voldemort—this Voldemort—before. Prior to the kidnapping he’d only faced Valmira, and that had been with Order support.

But he’d been stuck on that fucking island for ten years. Ten years on Avalon did things to the people who lived there. It had done things to him and his friends, at the very least, and that was ignoring everything weird about the other people who lived there.

He could hold his own, with Order support, and Unspeakable magic, until their point had been made and their mission accomplished.

“Transfundo viscera!” snarled a female voice, heavily accented. Valmira. Harry rolled out of the curse: there was no shield that could protect against the Entrails Expelling Curse, and Harry didn’t fancy his guts being spread all across the floor.

If for no other reason than he didn’t have time to spend a month recovering, if he didn’t die outright. Valmira wielded the Elder Wand, stolen from Dumbledore’s hand after his murder.

Harry didn’t think his phoenix feather and holly wand would really stand up, not even if he tried his most powerful healing spell, not next to that wand.

“Musculus ardens!”

“Stupefy!”

“Diffindo!”

“Lacero!”

“Sectumsempra!”

The curses all flew at once, although as far as Harry could tell, Valmira blocked them all.
Harry tried something else.

Wordlessly, Harry began to work on a transfiguration. The rubble of the Death Eater headquarters could be used for something. He just had to figure out what.

They’d managed to fight their way to the square, which Neville was glad for. Although it seemed like a classic case of moving from the acromantula pit into the goblin cave, he reckoned that on balance their situation had improved.

For one thing, they were all together again – those who had been kidnapped by the Unspeakables, and those who hadn’t. Great. And there were some others too, Order members Neville either hadn’t known or who had joined more recently. Good.

And Harry had done something interesting, which wasn’t altogether unexpected. Although…

In the middle of the square, fighting the Dark Lady Valmira, was a cobbled together golem. Harry had obviously constructed it from the remains of the Death Eater chapter house.

“Marceo lingula!” The tongue-shrivelling curse likely wouldn’t slip past Valmira’s shield, but Neville had to try anyway. He saw that Hermione and Luna had something of the same idea, so perhaps it would distract her long enough—and yes, it had.

Harry’s impromptu golem smashed into the Dark Lady with its gnarled, misshapen limbs. The beautiful, Dark woman was knocked back into a building, which collapsed upon impact.

The victory was short-lived as Death Eaters began to pour into the square. The Order peeled off and began fighting them, and Neville watched Hermione and Luna do the same. Neville didn’t—he moved to help Harry and the golem. No prophecy said that Harry had to fight Valmira: as far as Neville was concerned, the Dark Lady was fair game and could be brought down by anyone skilled or lucky enough to do it.

And nobody else seemed likely to offer Harry any help, so it fell to him.

“Need some help, mate?” he said jovially, flinging a blood-boiling hex at the woman before animating some rubble to block her Cruciatius Curse.

“Could be useful,” said Harry. It looked as if he were pouring all of his magic, all of his concentration, into the golem. How he wished he could take a look at the golem, see the threads of magic holding it together—it was powerful magic, even though Harry would be modest about it after the fact.

But there wasn’t any time.

“Lacero!” he said, and grinned when he saw a wide tear rip through the Dark Lady’s arm.

Then he frowned, because the battle had stopped.

A great beacon of light shined in the distance—Thomas and Whitehall.

Wordlessly, Valmira sped off in the direction of the light, and all eyes turned to Voldemort—and then to Harry.

“Hi, Tom,” he said, allowing the golem to relax. “What took you so long?”
Harry had been waiting for this. Tom. Tom Riddle. Lord Voldemort. He hadn’t ever seen the man in person, face to face. The pictures he’d seen were old, taken during the First War. This was a different man entirely, one who more resembled the Tom Riddle of his youth.

The resurrection ritual, whatever Dark thing he had done, had restored his beauty as well as his body and youth. This Voldemort was a handsome man, and appeared far younger than he should for a man his age.

Harry gripped his wand, almost to reassure himself it was still there.

How long was he supposed to keep Voldemort talking, exactly? *Heretofore unforeseen* circumstances had definitely occurred, but Harry wasn’t sure that everyone had answered his call yet.

Did it matter anymore?

“You are no longer a babe,” said Voldemort. What emotion was that, Harry wondered? Although his face was more human than Harry had ever associated with the persona of ‘Voldemort’, the man was even more inscrutable, even more *inhuman*, since his return. Or that’s what Harry thought, anyway, even if he didn’t have anything other than newspaper reports and so on to compare it to.

“And yet, I think I shall not be so unsuccessful in killing you now.”

“That’s not true. I’m not dying tonight, Tom.”

Harry had to believe that he wouldn’t. He hadn’t spent ten fucking years on Avalon only to die the first time he stepped foot of the island. This was dangerous, but war was dangerous. And this was still a war, even if most of the people involved had stopped fighting it.

The battle around them had stopped. Everyone was too caught up in listening to Harry and Voldemort talk, and while he appreciated it might be interesting to some people – it was being broadcast across Wizarding Britain, if the plan had gone right – neutralising Death Eaters was a more effective use of Order time.

“Such bravado. But then, you were a Gryffindor, were you not? And yet, and yet…” said Tom, pausing as if to consider something, something delicious and secret. “You could have been so much more, I believe. Oh, yes… but you turned it down, didn’t you? Fix your mistake, Harry Potter. You will have but one chance.”

Harry laughed. Despite himself, he laughed. He knew what Voldemort was talking about. He must have dragged the information out of the Sorting Hat.

“I will never join you, Tom Riddle, son of a Muggle.”

And then the Unspeakables moved. In the still of the battle, with all attention focused on Harry and Voldemort and with Valmira elsewhere, the Unspeakables had moved into position. And then they pounced, rounding on the bewildered Death Eaters and dispatching them in droves. The plan was a success, even if the Order members looked a bit sick.

Even Voldemort seemed confused at first, but then enraged. He jerked his head in the direction of Valmira and the pillar of light, however, instead of rounding on Harry. In the chaos and devastation
of the Unspeakables’ attack – most of the Death Eaters lay dead or captured, or had run away – Valmira had stumbled upon whatever thing it was Thomas and Whitehall had been working on for so many months.

“Oh, I forgot to mention – the Unspeakables are back.”

And then he Apparated away, as per the Plan.
11th August 2011 – The Unspeakable Fortress, Avalon

“All in all,” said Neville, “I think that was a success, don’t you?”

Harry shot a wry grin at him.

“Everyone accounted for?” asked Harry, shooting his gaze around the Apparition Chamber. Everyone was there, everyone except…

“Thomas and Whitehall.”

A loud crack sounded as Luna rejoined them.

“Thomas and Whitehall, they’re—they’re dead,” she said, and sobbed. She had been closer to the two men than he had, Harry knew; probably closer to them than anyone else on the island, actually, given the amount of time they spent together.

“Did they succeed?”

Luna nodded, between sobs.

“Oh, yes. Yes. They laid the—the foundations for the next phase of the trap. I—I can do the rest.”

“Morningstar,” said Harry, as the stern leader of the Unspeakables returned. She wasn’t the Prime Unspeakable, but she more-or-less controlled everyone else. “I have the List. Are we ready to move on the Muggleborns?”

The night wasn’t over. Now that they had the List the Unspeakables needed to retrieve the targets – the Muggleborn children and their families. They had done this once before, ten years ago, before locking everyone behind the damned fortress ward. They managed to save several whole cohorts of Muggleborns who would have otherwise been found by the Dark Lord.

Harry had been glad, then, that the Unspeakables hadn’t been so selfish as to only save him and his friends. Now he was pushing for more. This time he wanted to save all of the Muggleborns before Voldemort got to them.

They could be taught just as well on Avalon as they could at Hogwarts. Better, probably, without the threat of Voldemort looming overhead. Assuming they could keep the island secret and secure, but then – it had stood for centuries and no one but the Unspeakables had known.

“In a moment. We need to—to breathe,” she said. “When the others get back, we will send them out. You’re not to go anywhere,” she said sharply. “Your part in tonight’s done, Potter.” She paused. “But do stay on the island, at least until operations are over. Can you promise me that?”

Once, Harry would have told her to go fuck herself. Some time after that, he would have promised and then broken it. Now he merely nodded, and left the chamber to make room for those who were still returning. It was a staggered retreat designed to harry the Death Eaters and allow the Order time to escape.

Which was a good move on Hermione’s part, especially since that had been a non-essential part of her mission. Or, well, a personal mission. Not Unspeakable sanctioned, as it were, but not entirely
secret either, despite what she may have thought.

He was free, then, and there was somewhere he needed to see.

The road from the fortress was long and lonely, as the village – one of several on the island – was some distance away from the great castle on the rock that was the Unspeakable Fortress. Legend said that all the wizards on the island – and those included everyone, save the Muggles who had been brought here – were descended from nine sisters, and nine men who had wooed them.

Those nine men had given their names to the most prestigious families on the island. All nine survived to the present day, which Harry thought was interesting.

Caradoc, Lleyn, Llewelyn, Mathrafal, Mostyn, Rhos, Glas, Gwyn, and Ceredig.

The place Harry went to now, in the middle of the night, was the manor house (not that there was, precisely, a class system on the island) belonging to the Caradoc family.

He was admitted to the place immediately, as the warded gate opened to admit a trusted friend. He didn’t even see another person until he entered the house proper, where he was met by Carys, the youngest daughter of the current head of the family.

“Rhys is upstairs,” she said in Welsh.

“Thank you,” replied Harry, switching to her language. It had been difficult at first, but they’d all had to learn how to speak Welsh in order to interact with most of the locals.

After a while he’d learnt that some of them spoke English, but insisted that he learn to speak their language. He had broken eventually and agreed they had a point, and he had learned.

He reached the top of the grand staircase and proceeded at once to Rhys’s bedroom, which was more of a suite of rooms than a single room. He knocked on the door once, twice, and then entered.

A tall, impossibly thin, man rose from a plush armchair to greet him.

“Harry!” he said, but then he couldn’t say anything more as Harry kissed him fiercely. He responded in kind, and then broke away.

“So you didn’t die, then,” said Rhys, looking Harry up and down. “Good. Icewine?”

Icewine was as unlike Firewhiskey as ice was unlike fire. It was cold, but delicious. In the heat of Ty Caradoc, which was kept always warm by its many massive fires, it was also necessary.

“Yes, please,” said Harry. He took the place where Rhys had been sat, and sank into the armchair.

He waited until he’d been given a glass of icewine to speak.

“I saw her tonight, you know.”

There was no need to say who her was. Rhys would know who Harry meant.

“So.”

“So,” agreed Harry. “It doesn’t change anything.”
“Please,” said Rhys. “If it changed everything it still wouldn’t matter. This couldn’t last anyway: I’m marrying Rhiannon Llewelyn in three years. This is just sooner. We knew the fortress ward was the expiration date on this, Harry.”

Harry had expected that. They’d discussed it several times. Rhys was the only son, the only male, Caradoc in existence. His sisters were multitudinous, but there were no other men prestigious enough on the island – save Neville and Harry – who would consent to take the House of Caradoc as their own. Not that Neville or Harry would consent to do that, because as lovely as Avalon was, Harry’s interests lay firmly in the outside world.

Avalon had survived centuries of self-imposed isolation, with only trickles of immigration of any kind. That was their way. They had their own unique, interesting, and important culture and history which he would fight to keep free from Voldemort. But he didn’t want to settle here.

“It still hurts,” Harry said eventually.

“I know,” said Rhys. He shrugged. “Me, too. But look at it this way: we don’t, realistically speaking, have to stop until I get married or you—whatever you get.”

Harry brightened considerably.

“That’s true, and I think I have some time before I’m needed elsewhere… if you’re interested?”

Harry raised an eyebrow. It didn’t matter. Of course he’d be interested.

11th August 2011 – Sanctuary

The younger Weasleys had survived the war and its aftermath through something quite ingenious, Hermione decided. Their political views had been questionable, to say the least, and they would have been considered war criminals if they attempted to rejoin society. The only younger Weasley who escaped this fate was Percy, who had never openly associated with Harry Potter or the Order of the Phoenix.

The elder Weasleys escaped mostly through the good fortune of being Purebloods who had raised a family of Purebloods – even if those children had been blood traitors.

But the younger Weasleys had banded together to—to build something. It was a home. A Sanctuary. Hidden on an Unplottable bit of the Cornish coast, with layers and layers of defensive wards and hexes and curses that she could see, was what Hermione could only describe as a very tiny village. A village of Weasleys, but also some other members of the Order of the Phoenix who’d had to go completely underground.

“You built this?” she said, wondering at the sight. There were several distinct cottages, which she assumed were for married couples, and then some other buildings which looked almost communal. They had a garden, and animals.

“We all did,” said Ginny quickly, attempting to dispel the tension between Hermione and Ron, who hadn’t uttered a single word since he’d seen her. Honestly, he’d only gotten married. So what if she was upset? She was a big girl.

“We’re criminals of war, all of us. The only reason they stopped looking for us is because we don’t go to the outside world anymore. Not since the Ministry fell.”

“There’s a lot I still don’t know,” admitted Hermione. “Is there anywhere we can go to—talk?”
Ginny nodded.

“Bill, get everyone together. We’ve got a lot to talk about.” Then she turned to Hermione. “Follow me.”

Hermione followed her towards the largest of the communal buildings, no doubt the one used by the Order to discuss anything relating to the resistance. Once inside, she was disheartened to see that there were not as many chairs as she would have thought, and the table was smaller, too.

“Where have you been?” said Ginny suddenly, once they were both inside and the door had been closed. “Just—tell me, please. Why didn’t you come back?”

Hermione paused. On the one hand, the secret of Avalon needed to be kept. But on the other, she owed Ginny—Ron—an explanation.

“The Unspeakables kidnapped us. You remember that? Well, they took us to a fortress. There was a time-locked fortress ward in a place, an ancient defensive ward which will only break when the timer is spent, or under a specific – impossible – ritual circumstance.” There, she decided. That was the truth, and it kept secrets which weren’t hers to give, and it was hopefully enough.

“Oh, Hermione!” said Ginny, and she immediately embraced her. “You were kept as prisoners?”

She shook her head.

“No, not really. At first, it was a little bit like that. But after, when we understood what was at stake… Luna joined them. Properly, I mean. Harry and Neville and me, well, we’re not quite there. But we’ve learned a lot, and we think we can destroy Voldemort—“

“Don’t say his name here!” hissed Ginny. “He’s put a Taboo on it!”

Hermione frowned.

“We didn’t know.”

“I bet there’s a lot you don’t know,” said Ginny, suddenly angry. “You’ve been sat safe behind your fucking fortress ward when we’ve been here, fighting and dying. Do you know where Tonks is?” she demanded. “Do you even fucking have any idea?”

Hermione did not, in fact, know where Tonks was. But she had an idea, and it disgusted her right to the very core. Suddenly a concept which before had been horrible but abstract was now real and personal.

“I—“

“A fucking breeding camp, Hermione! Do you know how many confirmed Metamorphmagi there are within the families of the Death Eaters?” said Ginny, her voice sounding as if it were about to give out completely. “Seven.”

She felt sick.

“That’s why we’re here now. Ginny, there was nothing we could do. We were trapped.” But then she shook her head. “We weren’t safe. There are—things—on Avalon which would put fear into any Death Eater. People we know died, and it was—personal.”

It had been very personal. She had gone digging where nobody should have gone digging, and had
caused a magical accident. People had died, and she had angered something the Unspeakables had
only managed to placate in 1922.

“It’s too fucking late, Hermione!” said Ginny. “It’s over. He won.”

“We can fight him.”

Their argument was interrupted by the other Weasleys, and several other people Hermione
recognised. Hannah Abbott. Katie Bell. Remus Lupin, looking more aged than Hermione had ever

“It is most excellent to see you again,” said Minerva, drawing Hermione into a hug. “It has been so
long. I assume you had a good reason?”

“I, yes—“ Hermione started to say, but was interrupted by Remus requesting that everyone sit
down.

“Sirius is engaged in an emergency session of Wizengamot,” said Remus. “He apologises, but he
must be there to be our eyes and ears. Now,” he said, looking about the room. “Unless anyone
objects, I think it would be appropriate to inform Hermione of everything that has gone on in her
absence, so that she knows where we are. Then she can tell us her story, and we will both know
everything. Agreed?” He didn’t wait for anyone to agree. “Agreed.”

“Shortly after your disappearance the Dark Lord claimed responsibility for the death of Harry
Potter and several of his friends – yourself, Luna, and Neville. The Ministry fought against
Voldemort for four and half more years, but in the end, his forces overwhelmed us. Those of us
who didn’t die were forced underground. Some of us—“ he looked around the room awkwardly –
“have been able to regain a measure of standing in society. Sirius is our eyes and ears in
Wizengamot, as a member of the Mudblood Integrationists.” He sighed. “Don’t look at me like
that, Hermione. This is the reality of now. You must accept that.”

It rankled, but she did accept that. Ten years was a long time to be gone, with only scattered
glances afforded them by the scrying pools.

“Pureblood ideology is everywhere. It permeates Hogwarts, the media, everything. There are
rumours of breeding camps, but the official line is that these are ‘new communities’ for the ‘new
Purebloods’ of the future. What little the Order can do, we do – but that amounts to stealing
Muggleborns and sending them to France, or Canada. We’ve launched a few raids on the ‘new
communities’ but… we don’t have the numbers to do much.”

He laughed, but it was hollow.

“It doesn’t help that the regime sympathisers who now staff the Aurors regard us as terrorists. This
is the problem we’re facing, Hermione: we’re now the terrorists. We’re on the outside. The Death
Eaters have replaced the Aurors, now, but they’re more. They’re like an army. Lucius Malfoy
declared war on the Irish Court of Magic. But it wasn’t a unilateral decision: Wizengamot voted to
allow the war. This is a dangerous time, Hermione.”

Some of that Hermione already knew. Some she didn’t.

“I was kidnapped by the Unspeakables and trapped in their fortress for ten years,” she said simply.
“Under Unspeakable wards which only break when the timer ends. They were my enemies at first,
but now we’re friends.” She thought that covered most of it. “We’ve come back because we
believe we can defeat Voldemort now. We understand the threat he poses, and how to neutralise
The Unspeakables had another plan, a larger plan, which Hermione didn’t fully understand. She didn’t have enough information, but she suspected their plan was older than the threat of Voldemort and almost entirely unrelated—except insofar as Voldemort was an obstacle in its path.

“Why now?”

“There are some things I don’t know,” she said. “Then there are some things I know, but can’t tell you. That said, it’s because Voldemort is weakest now.”

“Are you barmy?” Ron. He spoke for the first time since Hermione had seen him.

“He has lost control over the Death Eaters,” Hermione said sharply. “They are too many, and the pursuits of occupation no longer interest them. They see Ireland, they see the ‘tyranny’ of Mudbloods and Muggle lovers, and Voldemort is using it to distract them.”

“That doesn’t change the fact that we’re vastly outnumbered,” said Katie Bell. “Horrible so, Granger.”

“The Dark Lord brought a monstrous army with him from Europe,” said Minerva, “and it has only grown since.”

“Most of the population is sympathetic to the regime,” spat Fred.

“That’s not fair,” insisted George. “Most of the population—the Muggleborns and loads of the Halfbloods—are enslaved, or imprisoned, or just gone. Everyone who’s left is scared, or supportive.”

“There are fifty-two Unspeakables at their fortress,” said Hermione. “All highly skilled. Then there are—there are about three hundred more wizards and witches sympathetic to our cause willing to fight. I’m sure between us we can match—the Dark Lord, and inspire confidence in the remaining population.” In the end, it would all come down to a fight between Harry and Voldemort. The regime would collapse, as the Dark Lord and Lady were the only things holding Britain together.

“We’re working on a method of neutralising the Dark Lady,” said Hermione. “The first steps were put in place tonight, in Hogsmeade.” She didn’t mention that had been more of an accident than anything else.

“We agreed no more fighting,” said Susan tiredly. “We can resist in other ways, but—we agreed,” she said. “Does nobody else remember?”

Ron squeezed her hand, and Hermione looked away. Let them have their happiness. Merlin only knew how hard that was to come by, these days.

“It’s different now,” suggested Ron, seeming almost unsure of himself. “Harry’s back. Neville and Luna and—Hermione. The Unspeakables must have something up their robes, right?”

“That’s right,” said Hermione quickly. “We’re stealing the Muggleborns. We took the List from Hogwarts. We did it ten years ago, and we’re doing it again now. We’ll keep doing it. We can hide them somewhere safe.”

“The place that you were?” said Bill Weasley. That was fair enough, Hermione supposed.

“Yes. It’s—safer there than anywhere else in Britain, I think.”
“You keep saying ‘we’,” said Ron. “Does that mean you’re—are you, I mean…”

“I’m not an Unspeakable. Luna is, but the rest of us aren’t.”

“Can we send a representative to the Unspeakables?” asked Charlie. “Someone we trust, who can see where you’ve been? You’ve been to Sanctuary.”

“I think… I could arrange that. Who would you want to send?”

“I will go,” said Minerva. “I haven’t been anywhere else in near enough five years,” she said. “You all have.”

Hermione agreed quickly, because honestly, it was better than Ginny or Ron or any of the Weasleys, and Hermione understood how Minerva felt.

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11th August 2011 – Cirencester

Luna had wanted to go welcome the Muggleborns, even before she had been given the task to do so by Unspeakable Morningstar. Some of the others were less understanding, less patient, but Luna understood how it felt from the other side.

Someone – a madman – comes bursting into your home claiming your entire family has to pack up and move somewhere else? It was tantamount to an act of violence, as far as she was concerned. She would be much nicer about the whole thing, even if she was turning up at a rather late hour.

She knocked on the door firmly, but slowly.

After a few moments a wary-looking man answered the door.

“Can I help you?”

“Hello, Mr Greaves, my name is Luna Lovegood and I’m afraid I have some interesting news for you. May we come in?”

His gaze shifted from her to her two Unspeakable companions – Oatley and Brown.

“Are you with the government?”

“Not exactly,” she said, and shook her head. “May we come in? It really would be better to do this inside.”

“I, well… if you must,” said the man, and he allowed them inside.

He shut the door behind them and ushered them in to a spacious living room, where a woman – presumably his wife – stood anxiously, a Muggle device held in her hand.

“Shall I phone the police, Edward?” she inquired.

“Mrs Greaves, I have something that I need to tell you. It’s about Alice, your daughter.”

“What about Alice?”

Luna considered it.
“I think a demonstration would be appropriate, first.”

Luna withdrew her wand and pointed it at the table. She Transfigured the glass table into a beautiful crystal swan, upon which rode a delicate fairy. She smiled.

“There is such a thing as magic, as I have just demonstrated, and your daughter is gifted with the ability to use it. She could make something as beautiful as this, one day.”

“That’s preposterous,” said Mr Greaves, staring directly at the results of that preposterous thing.

“I—did you really need to come tell us this so late at night?” said Mrs Greaves, glancing at the clock. “Only, the news is on at ten, and there should be more information about the strange lights that appeared in Scotland. It could be terrorists again.”

“That’s actually part of my news, I’m afraid,” said Luna. “There are other people with magic who think that your daughter shouldn’t be allowed to have magic, and they will come and take her away from you. They might even kill you.” She paused. “Don’t be afraid. We want your daughter to learn how to use magic. And we want to protect all of you. We have a safe place we can take you, where you can be with other families like yours, and we can teach your daughter magic.”

“If we believed you,” said Mr Greaves, “and I am not quite sure that we do, it’s all a bit sudden, isn’t it?”

“I do believe him, Edward,” said Mrs Greaves absently, still watching the clock. “You remember my cousin William, the one who died?”

“Yes,” said Mr Greaves slowly.

“Well, I think he might have been a—wizard, that is the word, yes? There was that school he went to, very hush-hush.”

“The one who died in a … terrorist … attack…” said Mr Greaves, his sentence dying almost as soon as he’d said it and realised the implications of that.

“His parents didn’t have to leave,” said Mrs Greaves. The next thing she almost whispered. “What has changed?”

“Everything,” said Luna. “I am really very sorry that you have to be part of this,” she said, “but there is no other way. There is a very dangerous man, and a very dangerous woman. They will come for you if you don’t come with us. I don’t want to frighten you, but I want you to understand that I am frightened of these people.”

Honesty. It was important. There was a kind of magic in honesty.

“We don’t have a lot of time. If you could gather anything you consider very important, we shall need to leave soon. Muggle—I’m sorry, your technology won’t work where we’re going. Please consider that before you leave – no telephones, no computers.”

“Now? In the middle of the night?”

“I think it must really be so bad as they say, Edward,” said Mrs Greaves. She had stopped watching the clock. “Essentials only, then. Can we bring the dogs?”

“Dogs?” said Luna, considering it. “I don’t suppose that would be a problem, no. I can help with the packing, if you like?” she said, glancing at her wand, and then at the table.
“Ah, no,” said Mrs Greaves, evidently not yet prepared for another display of magic. “Edward shall wake Alice, and I will pack the necessaries—you say there are others like us, Muggles, where we are going?”

Luna nodded.

“Then I’m sure we’ll find some way of coping,” she decided.

Luna smiled.

* *

11th August 2011 – Glasgow

Neville hadn’t been anywhere quite so sad before. He didn’t know what was going on in Muggle Britain, or how they had perceived the return of Voldemort, but something about this whole area seemed, simply, sad.

The people were poor, as far as he could tell – the houses were poorly maintained, and many looked as if multiple families dwelled within one house, which had become two. His Unspeakable companions knew where they were going, so he had simply followed them, and that had given him time to merely observe.

Sometimes the choices made by few individuals could have effects on the many, even those who had no idea of the choices being made, and who had never met those making the choices. Such a thing had happened with Voldemort, and his war, and his return. Muggle Britain must have been devastated, but without any real knowledge of what had occurred. Terrible.

They arrived at their destination – although Neville couldn’t tell how the Unspeakables knew, as every house looked exactly like every other house.

They rapped loudly on the door.

A woman screamed loudly at a child. The door opened, and a child stood in the doorway.

“Hello,” said Neville quickly, before Whitetail could open his mouth. “Are your parents home?”

The child considered it, and then shook his head.

“I think at least one of them might be,” said Neville. “Could you get her for me please? Only, it’s quite important.”

The boy closed the door, and Neville frowned.

Whitetail pointed his wand at the door, but Neville waved him off.

“There’s no need for that,” said Neville, and then he knocked the door again. And then again, when nobody answered it.

Eventually the door opened again, but this time a tired-looking woman stood in the doorway.

“What do you want?” she said. “Who are you?”

“I’m Neville Longbottom,” he said, “and I’d like to talk to you about something very important.”

“It’s not about God, is it?” she said. “Only, we’ve got no need of him in this house, and it’s a bit
late, isn’t it?

“No, it isn’t about that,” he said. “Can we come inside?”

She narrowed her eyes at him, but then nodded.

Once inside, she ushered them through a small living room – the floor strewn with a multitude of children’s toys, and the children themselves scattered around them – and into a smaller kitchen.

“All right, what’s this about then? What’s he done this time?”

Neville frowned. ‘He’ surely meant the elder child, the first name on their list. Was he a difficult child, then?

“Ah, no. It isn’t about anything anyone has done,” he said, firmly taking over from Whitetail, whom he didn’t believe would be able to handle this delicately enough. The man had literally kidnapped Neville, after all. “Magic is real, and your son – actually, all three of your children – have it.”

The woman – whose name Neville still didn’t know – sighed.

“Do you know him? My good for nothing husband?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Kingsley Shacklebolt,” she said. “Said he was a wizard once, but I thought he was just having me on. Turned out he wasn’t. All three of the kids are his,” she added, “but the bastard disappeared six years ago. I was pregnant. Now he sends you here to, what?”

Neville wasn’t sure he wanted to deal with this situation. If the names written down on the List had been Shacklebolt, he doubted the Unspeakables would have even targeted the family. They were only after Muggleborns – names nobody recognised.

“There’s a war, Mrs…?”

“Miss Green,” she said. “We never officially married, said he didn’t believe in it.”

“He’s dead, Miss Green. I assume the reason for his disappearance was the resurgence of the war.”

“What’s this got to do with us then?” she said.

“We need you to come with us. You’re not safe.”

“I believe you. Where are we going to go?”

“We’re taking you somewhere safe,” said Neville. “There’s a school there – we can teach your children magic, when they’re ready for it.”

“How much is it going to cost?”

“I—nothing,” he said. “Nothing. No cost. There’s—it’s fine,” he said, not wanting to explain the particulars.

“Get your things. We have one last stop here, to pick up someone else.”

“There’s another wizard here?”
“A witch, actually,” said Whitetail. “We don’t have a lot of time, Longbottom – Death Eaters.”

Neville nodded.

“Quickly, Miss Green. Shall we distract the children?”

“No – they’re playing, it’s fine. Let me just… get some stuff together.”

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11th August 2011 – The Unspeakable Fortress, Avalon

“Welcome to Avalon, Professor,” Hermione said to a woman she hadn’t seen in nearly a decade. “This is the Unspeakable fortress on the island. The locals call it ‘Caer Tawel.’”

The problem with Caer Tawel, Hermione thought, was that it wasn’t especially grand. It was a reasonable size, and parts of it were older than Hogwarts, but it was most certainly not a grand building. It was a military fort, an outpost, and the Apparition Chamber had been an interrogation room at one point.

It was intensely magical, though, which Hermione supposed lent it a sort of gravitas.

“I see,” said Minerva, looking about the room. “There’s more, I assume?”

“Quite right, Professor,” Morningstar abruptly, nodding to the elder woman in deference.

“Minerva, please, Miss Morningstar; it has been a long time since I was a professor,” she said.

“I—of course, Minerva,” said Morningstar. “If you would follow me through, we can discuss how your Order and the Unspeakables can work together to defeat the Dark Lord.”

“We have some questions,” said Minerva. “We understand you have answers?”

“We do,” said Morningstar.

Hermione followed after Morningstar, who took the small group – herself, Minerva and Hermione – through a rather more circuitous route to the War Room than was strictly necessary. Along the way, they passed through several narrow corridors cut only with doors into wizardspace, which extended the floorspace available by a significant amount. The War Room was located in such a wizardspace atop the tallest tower of the fortress.

“So,” said Minerva once they had all sat down inside the War Room, “is this the legendary island of Avalon, or a pretension?”

“Both. Neither. At this point, nobody can say for sure,” said Morningstar cautiously. “There’s a barrow the locals say belongs to Arthur Pendragon, and there’s evidence of sidhe presence elsewhere on the island.”

Evidence of sidhe presence indeed, thought Hermione.

“I see.” Minerva paused then, but only for the smallest of moments. “And how exactly to you intend to atone for your actions in allowing the Dark Lord his victory? Miss Granger – Hermione – suggested that you had what you believed to be compelling reasons for your actions. That does not absolve you of your sins, as I am sure you understand.”

“There was no other way.”
Morningstar had never wavered, not once in the decade Hermione had known her. She wouldn’t start now, although Hermione supposed that if anyone had a chance at breaking her, Minerva McGonagall was that person.

“We proposed a staggering number of approaches to the problem,” she continued, “and of those, we calculated that this path would result in the best possible outcome, accounting for the long-term survival of our society.” Then she sighed. “And there is the matter of prophecy, which I believe you know something about.”

Minerva inclined her head.

“I understand there are more prophecies concerning the current situation?”

Hermione had told her something about those, although she had left the details out. Not everybody needed to know everything, as much as the truth pained her to admit.

“Yes, there are. We are actively working on the fulfilment of several; we do not require assistance in those matters. But now that the fortress ward has expired we need information, contacts and capital. We need to inspire a resistance in the minds and hearts of the people. We will require the assistance of the Order in this, and some other things – we have stolen the List from Hogwarts, and we intend to bring all of the Muggleborns on it to Avalon, where they will be taught at the local school.”

“There’s a school?” said Minerva. “As much as I am reluctant to say, I am too old to fight in this war. If I could teach?”

“Yes, of course,” said Morningstar. “I’m sure the school board would agree to it!”

“What is your plan for bringing the fight to the Dark Lord? I’m afraid we have to be blunt in this: there’s not much of a resistance left.”

Morningstar nodded.

“We have a sizeable force, but we believe it shouldn’t come to open war yet. I understand the legal status of the Death Eaters has changed? That may be difficult, if we are now fighting an arm of the Ministry state apparatus. And there is the war in Ireland to consider. We had some contacts in Ireland; we will call upon them soon enough.”

There was a commotion at the door, and a young Unspeakable – an Avalon local, rather than a refugee – appeared as the door opened.

“The Voldemort – I mean – his Death Eaters have attacked one of groups in York. And the others I think.”

He spoke in Welsh, which meant that Minerva hadn’t understood the words – but she could understand the tone, since she had lived with it for years herself. And the name of the Dark Lord meant that was almost no ambiguity.

“We’re going to have to go help the others,” said Hermione. “Death Eaters are moving on the Muggleborns.”

“One last fight, I think,” said Minerva in a tone which suggested Hermione this was a bargain she’d made with herself numerous times.
“Amdiffynnai!” said Luna, casting an ancient Welsh defensive spell over her Muggle – and Muggleborn – charges. A soft halo of light descended upon them, and then faded. “Cwsg!” she said, casting a sleep hex at the attacking Death Eater. He fell instantly, the spell bypassing shield charms designed to protect against newer spells.

She had collected the families of three Muggleborns, and she would have to protect them all until some help arrived. Her companions were already fighting – they were outnumbered by the Death Eaters by a ratio of three to one.

“Os dissolutio,” she muttered calmly, dissolving the femur of one of the attacking Death Eaters. Blood curses and ripping hexes were not the sort of introduction she should like to give to the Wizarding world, even if those spells would be more effective.

She had a duty of care, after all.

“Stupefy!” she said, ending the threat from that particular Death Eater.

Where was back up?

Luna danced out of the way of a particularly nasty Dark curse – an evisceration spell – and dissolved the wand hand of the offending Death Eater. A series of loud cracks gave her reason to relax somewhat, as she saw several familiar Unspeakables, Hermione and – oh, wasn’t that lovely? – Professor McGonagall.

“If it isn’t Looney Lovegood,” sang one of the Death Eaters – more skilled than the others, and older, if he was using that particular insult. She knew him from Hogwarts, then. Who was he? He hid behind a hastily-Transfigured barricade he’d created out of the Muggle cars.

“Ddatgelu wyneb!” she said, using an old Welsh charm used to remove facial disguises – which should work on the Death Eater hood. The hood whipped off his face and disappeared in a bright flash of eldritch light, only to reveal an older and nastier Adrian Pucey.

“I’m not a little girl anymore, Pucey,” she said calmly. “Galon llosgi,” she said, casting the Burning Heart Hex at the vile man.

But then it didn’t matter because McGonagall had Transfigured his barricade into a rain of glass shards, and he rolled away, out of range of the shards and her hex.

“Concussio magna!” shouted Hermione, fighting toe-to-toe with two much larger Death Eaters. “Lacero cordis!”

Luna checked in on her charges. Still safe, hidden from sight and protected from stray spells.

“Renideo,” she whispered, casting a quick Resplendence Charm on them. It should bolster their spirits. The night was already won – it was just a matter of loose ends, as far as Luna was concerned.

Hermione wished she didn’t have to resort to such a nasty curse as the Heart Laceration Curse, but that was the reality of war. She spun and shot off a stunner at Pucey, who was having a great deal of trouble dealing with Minerva’s brand of battle Transfiguration.
Hermione kept the older woman in her periphery, although she knew Minerva didn’t really need protection. It made Hermione feel better, at the very least.

“So the Queen of the Mudbloods didn’t die,” drawled a familiar voice, a voice belonging to a foul man who had just Apparated in. Draco Malfoy.

“Percello!” she said, flinging a morale-damaging hex at him and dodging his Cruciatus. Malfoy had gone far in the Death Eaters – his wife was Undersecretary to the Minister, and his father the Minister, but Malfoy the Younger was active within the Death Eater hierarchy. “Concussio terra!” she intoned, casting at the ground beneath Malfoy, which began to shake and tremble.

Luna peeled off then and began to erect temporary wards and enchantments around the battle area, ones designed to keep the surrounding Muggles safe – and hopefully, block them from seeing the details of what was occurring.

Sensing a trap – which the wards would be, with Luna erecting them – Malfoy called the Death Eaters off, leaving Hermione and the Unspeakables to deal with the mess they’d made.

Morningstar barked a set of orders to the Unspeakables still in the field, and then turned to Hermione and Minerva, who appeared shaken but still firm.

“We’re not done for the night. Granger, Apparate to the location indicated by your coin. Prepare for the worst.”

Hermione nodded, and grasped the coin within her pocket firmly, then Apparated.

* 

New Farm, Somerset

Harry shot a stunner, a cutting curse, and bludgeoning hex in quick succession, then whirled to erect an old Welsh shield charm to soak up the Dark spells thrown at him.

A loud crack alerted him to Hermione, who had arrived to provide back up – a good thing, since he and Neville alone didn’t make the best defence against nine Death Eaters. Three against nine was —a bit better.

The Death Eaters had already killed the other two members of the extraction team, but Neville had been able to prevent the deaths of Kingsley Shacklebolt’s secret children before Harry had arrived.

“Hermione, these Death Eaters are First War stock,” he hissed as soon as she came into earshot. “Be careful!”

She gave him a look which said, Honestly Harry, I’ve got this, before spinning away to lock one of the more dangerous of the lot – a Death Eater by the name of Evan Rosier. Harry grinned and shot off a series of linked ripping curses in the direction of a Rowle (he didn’t know which, but they all had the same nose).

The Rowle – a youngish man, but still too old for Harry to have known at Hogwarts – ducked behind the defensive line they’d established and grabbed one of the Muggles. A long tendril of poisonous violet light connected Rowle’s wand to the Muggle’s head. Harry froze.

“Your move, Potter.”

Harry ran through a number of scenarios immediately, but each time failed to come to a suitable
answer. He didn’t know what the spell did, how it connected the two of them, or what would happen if he tried to break it. With Rowle in the middle of the targets they were in a dangerous position.

And then the children started to writhe. Only those related to the woman Rowle held, but those were many – the woman had nine children, four of whom were magical. All of them soon began to shake and scream, and Harry was racked with indecision.

Then, just before he could attempt the Disarming spell on Rowle, Hermione acted.

“Adsulto cordis,” she said stonily, aiming her wand not at Rowle but at the Muggle woman instead. Her heart leapt from her chest and ruptured. She convulsed, then fell to the ground, dead. Immediately her children stopped screaming, and Rowle Apparated away.

He looked at Hermione, then whirled away again to face off against another of the Death Eaters. No fucking time.

So the War was back on in earnest, then.
Chapter 3

11th August 2011 – New Farm, Somerset

The last vestiges of innocence that Hermione had carried within her died the moment she used the Leaping Heart Curse on the poor Muggle woman. Rowle had used a particularly evil and vile Dark spell, one which could only be broken by the death of its victim, and never by the death or disarmament of its caster – were Rowle to fall dead or be disarmed, the woman and all nine of her children would die, too.

The only method of breaking the spell and saving the life of its intended victims – the relatives of the spell’s focus – was to use the Leaping Heart Curse, itself a questionable spell, or to allow its caster to end the torment.

So Hermione had made the decision in a split second, and had acted before Harry could. The Rowles were known for using spells such as these, spells which would force their enemies to do questionable things. Hermione was the only person with the requisite knowledge: she had to do what she had done.

It didn’t make listening to the anguished cries of the children any easier, though, and Hermione expected that she would have more than a few nightmares.

A ripping curse tore open a wound into her left thigh, and she almost fell to the ground. She tightened up her protective charms, adding a low-intensity Regeneration Charm to her wardnet. It wouldn’t heal her wounds quickly, but then, she didn’t have time for a more complex or powerful spell. This would have to do.

There were too many, too skilled, Death Eaters fighting here today. She, Harry and Neville were all magically powerful, and skilled – but unlike the Death Eaters they had to protect themselves and their charges.

The next time Harry got within hissing distance – because she didn’t want the Death Eaters to pick up on her plan – she spoke quickly.

“Harry, I’m going to blow up the gas line under the road,” she said. “There should be a line running under where the road meets the track for the farm,” she continued.

“Got it,” he said, and Hermione really hoped he understood that she wanted he and Neville to corral the Death Eaters to the appropriate place whilst she located the pipe. She didn’t have to worry as he let loose a torrent of curses and spells designed at knocking the Death Eaters back. Neville soon followed, and Hermione cast a modified version of a dowsing spell – not that she was, precisely, a xylomancer – to look for an appropriate place.

At least here, in the middle of the countryside, she could do such a thing without collateral damage.

With her mind projected into the ground, using the curious xylomancy charm, Hermione located the sweet spot, the place where her spell would do the greatest amount of damage.

Enough of the Death Eaters were caught within the blast radius, so Hermione acted quickly.

“Aduro,” she said, and the subterranean pipe erupted into flames. “Protego flamma!” she said, erecting a shield that would protect from the burning conflagration she had caused.
“We’re leaving,” ordered Neville. “I’ve got Portkeys for the Muggles.”

Hermione was ready to leave, but she couldn’t – she had to wait until Neville got the targets out via Portkey, she since doubted all the Death Eaters had been killed in the explosion.

12th August 2011 – Caer Tawel, War Room

Although it had only been several hours since the night had made way for the day, Harry already wished today was over. The sheer scale of the night’s operations, however, meant that debriefings of an equally colossal scale had to take place after the fact.

Of the fifty-three Unspeakables, nine had fallen to Death Eaters over the course of the night’s operations. Of the Muggles, four had died – one child lost both her parents, whilst two others lost a mother and a father each. They hadn’t lost any of the Muggleborns, thank Merlin, but Harry wasn’t sure that that made the losses they had incurred any more acceptable, either.

Everything had been going along smoothly until the time came for Hermione’s personal briefing, which he sat through because he’d sat through every other Unspeakable’s briefing, as had Hermione and Neville and Luna.

Word had reached everyone else about Hermione’s actions regarding the Muggle woman – whose name Harry now knew had been Kerry James – fairly early on, as the arrival of children (and one very concerned spouse) shouting ‘she killed my mum’ had been somewhat alarming, especially when they pointed at Hermione.

Adam James, the husband of the dead Muggle woman, hadn’t been at the debriefing, of course. It would have been too raw for him, and most of it would have gone flying above his head, but Harry felt sympathy for the man. Everyone else would, too – but this was war, even if poor Mr James hadn’t understood that yet.

“An unidentified Rowle cast an extremely Dark curse on Kerry James after sneaking past the defensive line we had established,” Hermione said flatly, her voice betraying no emotion. “I was able to identify the curse as being a member of a class of spells using familial blood ties to bind a number of sub-victims to the primary victim of the curse. In all cases with these spells the only method of ending the curse without killing every last one of its victims is to use the Leaping Heart Curse upon the primary victim.”

She paused.

“If Harry hadn’t been about to cast a Disarming spell on him I would have attempted to force Rowle to end the spell himself, which can be done in some specific scenarios, but there wasn’t enough time for that. I believe my actions saved the lives of at least nine children last night.”

The Council of Seven, the seven Unspeakables who coordinated the efforts of the entire group, accepted her narrative without word or question. Morningstar sat at their centre, the leader in most senses of the word. Stonefoot sat to her right, and both Whitehall and Thomas had been replaced already by Vickers and Chamberly, the next most senior Unspeakables. Veritably ancient Unspeakables whose names Harry had never been told filled the rest of the spaces, interrupted from their—whatever it was they did only for occasions such as this one. They hadn’t conferred among themselves once, as far as Harry could tell.

“No wrongdoing is considered to have occurred,” ruled Morningstar. “If you would, though, do try
to avoid the James family in its entirety.”

And then, for the first time in literally (well, almost) a decade, Harry heard one of the ancient Unspeakables speak.

“’The Lioness will be three in her Glories and three in her Sorrow’,” they – he, Harry realised for the first time – said.

Hermione sighed. She wasn’t surprised this had come up again, especially not now, but it was a bit of a bother. The Lioness could refer to practically any female Gryffindor, but then the prophecy itself predated Hogwarts by nearly five centuries. Still, despite the ‘contextual information’ she had been given by the Unspeakables, Hermione was not quite yet committed to herself as the Lioness of prophecy.

“And this is the first of my Sorrow, is it?” she said indignantly. “I refuse to allow you to reduce the events of tonight into a dictation of Fate. I killed an innocent Muggle woman tonight so that I could save her nine children. I made a morally questionable decision based on the information available to me at the time.”

“And in doing so placed a foot upon the path to fulfilment of the prophecy,” continued the aged Unspeakable. “Lady Fate is not the cosmic puppeteer.”

Hermione nodded her head. That was true, assuming that one believed in the central assumptions made by the Unspeakables regarding the nature of prophecy. She supposed that the Unspeakables were the authority on such matters, being the only group with the resources and inclination to study things most witches hadn’t even considered.

It was all about choices, in the end, wasn’t it? If Hermione hadn’t understood anything else about prophecy (but she wouldn’t be Hermione if she hadn’t, so she had) she at least understood that everything was bound up in the choices made by powerful actors – people who could feasibly fit into the role required of them by Fate, Destiny, God. The choices a person made throughout their life were usually insignificant, but some people were uniquely placed to make large, powerful choices.

Those choices would sometimes fulfil the terms set out by Fate, and if the person also fulfilled other terms of the prophecy then that was that. Hermione didn’t want to become the Lioness, but she had no practicable way of avoiding the prophecy and taking an active role in the defeat of the most vile Dark magic practitioners in centuries.

The Unspeakables had decided to make Hermione into the Lioness. She hadn’t agreed to it, but one didn’t simply ‘agree’ to participate in a prophecy. She had two choices: fight, and perhaps fulfil the terms of a two-thousand year old prophecy as a consequence; or run away and avoid the war entirely. One path offered near-certain death and involvement in an ancient and vague prophecy. The other led to relative safety. Other people would have made a different choice than Hermione, but Hermione was a Gryffindor.

She was practically doing the Unspeakables’ work for them.

“When I was nine years old my kitten was run over by a car. Is that also one of my Sorrow?”

Not that she would actually equate what she had done tonight with that, emotionally or morally, but she needed to make a sharp, clear point. The distinction between a sorrow and a Sorrow had always
seemed a little murky to her, even if her particular example had been absurd. The war would likely drag on for a long time if prophecies had to be fulfilled before it could end, and there would be many more questionable and abhorrent choices to be made for everyone involved.

“No,” said Stonefoot.

Hermione had expected that, but the dour woman continued.

“What you allude to is true, of course. But we must consider the matter of the Stone Circle once more.”

“That’s not a good idea,” said Neville before he was interrupted by Hermione.

“Not after last time,” Hermione hissed. “Four people died.”

Shortly after their arrival on Avalon Hermione had been tasked with sorting through the Unspeakable archives related to the ring of standing stones on the north-western side of the island. Unspeakable presence on the island prior to the First War had been minimal, but records indicated that a disembodied sidhe soul had been trapped within the Stone Circle in 1926. The archives hadn’t suggested why, and the locals didn’t know because they hadn’t been told.

Hermione and several of the Unspeakables had decided to let it out. It killed four local children before they had been able to bind it once more to the Stone Circle, the ancient sidhe artefact whose purpose nobody understood.

“What we learnt from that encounter will prevent its reoccurrence,” said Morningstar confidently.

“Look,” said Harry suddenly, “what do you think you’ll find out about it if you go digging again now? Maybe it’s just, you know, an ancient stone circle.”

“When Morag Muir betrayed the Seelie Court and banished them to the Otherworld it was seen as a great betrayal by others of the sidhe, and soon after they left the world in a great exodus,” said Luna. “We think that their door to the Otherworld was here, on Avalon.”

What Luna said was just history, of course. Morag Muir, an immensely powerful witch active in the late Dark Ages, made a pact with the Seelie Court, representing those of the Otherworld sympathetic to mankind, to eliminate the Unseelie Court and bring stability to the Otherworld and to Britain. In what would become the preferred method to wizards for centuries to come she betrayed the Seelie Court and banished them, too. What was lesser known is that not all of the Otherworld paid allegiance to the Courts, but that they had seen this betrayal and simply left, taking their wonderful magic and beautiful artefacts with them – along with their chaos and wildness, which most wizards agreed was a fair exchange.

“Why do we think this now and not ten bloody years ago then?” she said.

“We thought it might have been a little hill in south Wales,” said Luna, and then she shrugged. “It still might be there. It’s lovely enough.”

Hermione realised then that her debriefing had turned into a general information session, and that the Unspeakables had already made decisions on what was about to occur.

“All right then,” said Harry, “but what does a door to the Otherworld have to do with Voldemort?”

Morningstar shifted uncomfortably in her seat, and then realisation grew in Hermione like a tumour.
“Absolutely not. I refuse,” she said.

“Refuse what?” said Harry and Neville in unison.

“Forged in the fires of a half-forgotten dream. She will walk through the Land of Always Winter and be tempered at the Altar of Queens,” said the ancient Unspeakable.

12th August 2011 – Ty Caradoc (Pensieve Room)

?? – Severus Snape’s quarters

“If you are the person for whom these memories are intended then you shall have received them in person from me, whether because I have been given the chance to do so peacefully or because something undesirable has happened and I have died in the attempt to do so,” said Snape, standing alone in his quarters talking to nobody.

Harry looked about the room, giving it a close and careful scrutiny. It didn’t really tell him anything at all, especially nothing of Snape. He supposed that in itself told him a lot.

“This index memory was created July 31st, 2011. Happy Birthday, Potter.” Snape smirked, although it was clearly something done as part of the memory—the message—he had given Harry. “To use the index you must approach each memory within this memory, this message, I am giving you.”

Snape gestured towards the sole piece of furniture in the room – a dungeon, probably some adjoining room to his personal quarters – where several silver pools of memories sat in delicate crystal bowls.

“What you will find within these memories is intensely personal and is to be considered given under the strictest of confidences,” continued Snape. “Nonetheless, it is necessary for you to view them. I have no desire to see the Dark Lord’s victory continue – it has been almost a decade since the murder of Albus Dumbledore and the subjugation of much of the Wizarding World. A decade, almost, since you disappeared. The Dark Lord did not kill you as he claimed, and the Weasley children attest that you were kidnapped by Unspeakables.”

Snape paused again.

“But you have been gone almost ten years. The Order is diminished, reduced to nothing more than a network connecting Muggleborns with safe havens abroad. The Dark Lord and Lady rule from Hogwarts now, with Lucius Malfoy acting as their puppet Minister. But do not assume this means that British Wizarding public is in any state of uproar: it is not, and it is largely complicit in the regime. Change will not be so simple as a duel, prophecy notwithstanding. It must come from within and without, and be directed so as to finally heal the scars of this world.”

He sighed.

“Albus was not able to achieve this goal. It is my hope that you, and the Unspeakables, will be able to make great strides. The memories to my left,” said Snape, clearly indicating the crystal bowls he meant, “contain memories which will help you understand my loyalty. Some are personal for what will become obvious reasons, and some are personal because I simply do not wish anyone else to know what is mine and mine alone. The memories to my right (the first of which will be most interesting) contain useful pieces of information, scenes of the First War, and the Second; in short,
I am providing you with insight into the years you have been away, and into the Death Eaters. Do not be wasteful with what I have given you, because I shall be giving you nothing else.”

“My role is, necessarily, deep-cover. You must be prepared to fight me when the time comes, because I shall not hold back; you must be capable of defending.”

Snape lingered there without saying anything more, and then the memory looped.

Harry considered everything he had seen even whilst the memory played out again around him. Intelligence into past Death Eater activities would be interesting, especially if it contained things he hadn’t seen before. Snape had provided much information to the Order but rarely memories. Harry would be seeing events without a filter, or at least through Snape’s filter; Harry wasn’t sure how much he trusted the man, yet.

But that was what the memories were for, wasn’t it?

The index memory was useful, Harry decided, because it simply looped until he decided to do something with it. He’d been taught how to use Pensieves properly, but the index wasn’t something he’d encountered before.

He assumed it meant that it was possible to store many, disconnected, memories within a single container. Who’d invented that, he wondered? Maybe even Snape; it could be a potions-related thing.

He wanted to look at the personal memories last because Snape sounded fairly displeased that he had to share this information with Harry in the first place, and the least Harry could do was wait until he’d viewed the others – but pragmatism won out over feelings of unease and he viewed the personal memories first, because he needed to decide whether Snape was genuine or not.

It was hard to tell when literally everything he was about to see with filtered through Snape’s brain, even if he hadn’t been a master Occlumens, but you could only work with the tools you had.

What followed was that Harry viewed several personal memories involving his mother and Snape as young children, as teenagers, and then at Hogwarts. Harry understand that the implications of the memories were more than the memories themselves – Snape had loved Lily, a mudblood; his love for her was a powerful piece of evidence showing that he clearly didn’t believe in the pureblood ideology. For someone to love in the way Snape had – and Harry had felt the emotions, weakened as they were by the Pensieve magic – the subject of that love couldn’t have been anything less than perfect.

But that still wasn’t why Snape continued to fight against Voldemort, because it would have been easy for Snape to live in the new world and cut ties with the Order. From what Hermione had said to him, Harry thought they would probably accept that. They did live as outlaws somewhere in Cornwall now, he supposed. Snape might find such a thing difficult emotionally, but he could hide that.

Harry viewed the last of the personal memories, and this time saw Dumbledore and Snape in the former’s old office. It must have been decades ago, he thought, because not only was Snape far, far younger, Dumbledore’s eyes were sad and tired. The First War, he assumed, although it could have been after. Voldemort’s demise hadn’t translated entirely smoothly to peace for Wizarding Britain, after all.

“How was the funeral, dear boy?” asked Albus lightly after offering Severus a lemon drop, which he had declined. Harry could feel the exasperation Snape felt at how Albus would always offer him
sweets, echoed faintly through the mind magic.

“As expected,” said Severus shortly. “Muggles expressing Muggle sentiments about death, sorely lacking in the correct metaphysical grounding to profess any such thoughts.”

Harry frowned. He supposed Snape didn’t have to be nice to be good.

“I do not think you are quite so disgusted by Muggles as you would have us believe, Severus,” said Albus, “but I will forgive you for it today of all days.”

Severus grimaced. Harry understand the impulse – he’d thought for a long time that most Muggles had been like the Dursleys deep down, but he’d had first-hand experience with Muggles who weren’t. Some Muggles, when exposed to magic, were fascinated and expressed quite interesting thoughts. They couldn’t use magic but they could understand it (at least as well as anybody could).

“I do not hate Muggles,” agreed Severus, although Harry knew that he’d forced the words out painfully. “For most of my life I have associated Muggles with Tobias Snape. Now that man is gone, and Muggles have become irrelevant to me.”

“But no less worthy of love and respect than wizards, surely,” said the headmaster.

Harry got that Dumbledore was pushing for something in particular. He knew that Snape understood that too, and would have even without the deepening of Snape’s frown because he could feel more or less what Snape had felt then.

He wanted Snape to verbalise it in the presence of somebody else. Dumbledore had been big on sharing, Harry remembered somewhat fondly (and with the benefit of years to temper the feelings).

“Yes, yes, yes,” said Snape finally. “I believe that Muggles – in the abstract – are equal to wizards. I concede that Muggles experience joy, and pain, and hope, and love, and sadness. I am even of the opinion that specific Muggles may in some certain circumstances perfectly agreeable people, and capable of many great things. They are not inferior to, merely different from wizards,” he said, clearly quoting something Dumbledore had said previously.

“It is self-evident,” he added after a few moments.

“If only more wizards had thought to look,” said Dumbledore, “then we perhaps might have avoided much sadness…”

The memory ended and Harry pulled himself out of the Pensieve before he could be taken back to the index memory. There was a lot more to go through, but he needed to think, and he could do that better after he’d had some sleep.

He knew he’d gained a lot of insight tonight, but then - it was more than that. Voldemort was a stain on the world, something any right thinking wizard would pause before supporting. Maybe not once, but he had become that – and Harry thought that even in spite of Tom’s new (old) face. Snape showed that. Harry imagined there were other wizards and witches in Britain who had felt the same way, or who had thought what Voldemort offered was something other than what it had become. Unspeakable intelligence had indicated that some purebloods felt rather shafted by Voldemort’s regime, which didn’t reinforce ancient traditions and cultural practices so much as enforce as rigid dogma based on the delusional and grandiose ramblings of a disaffected young man steeped in too much and too powerful Dark magic.

Harry wasn’t even sure Voldemort believed half the stuff he said he did, sometimes.
But the memories also meant something more to Harry, and the some of the insights had been more personal. The memories offered a glimpse of his mother a very long time ago, a time before anyone really feared the name Voldemort. They were children, playing, as children should be able to do.

He shook himself out of his head and took in his surroundings – he was alone in the Pensieve Room of Ty Caradoc. Safe.

Wearily, Harry stumbled into the guest suite – usually kept open for him, at least more recently – and slept.

12th August 2011 – Ysgol Ddewiniaeth Ynys Afal (Avalon School of Magic)

There was nothing Hermione wanted to do more right now than to sleep, but there were potions for that and she had things to do, so instead of sleeping Hermione had taken Minerva to see the school. It was a few miles away from Caer Tawel, but the walk was pleasant because the island was beautiful.

Or so Minerva had said, filling in the dead silence left behind because Hermione didn’t quite feel like idle chatter after recent events and talking about the war would only make things worse.

But eventually the rocky path leading away from Caer Tawel and the Unspeakable village below it gave way to a gentle but hilly valley on a river. The group of buildings comprising Ysgol Ddewiniaeth Ynys Afal, the Avalon School of Magic, occupied a favoured position in the small valley.

Dormitories and common areas had been separated from the school proper, situated in their own, three floor tall, buildings. The school proper had been expanded greatly, and resembled something more like a grand Tudor estate than the simple village hall it had appeared before. She’d thought the architecture on Avalon strange at first, since it seemed entirely anachronistic – but then she’d learnt that although the outside world knew nothing of Avalon, its people weren’t nearly so ignorant of the outside world.

She’d met one elderly wizard whose favourite book was Darwin’s On the Origin of Species, and that had said it all, really.

Minerva seemed to be expressing a similar sentiment, so Hermione forced something out of her mouth. This was Morningstar’s purpose in sending her here with the woman, Hermione assumed – to force her not to dwell on what had essentially been the murder of a poor woman. But how could she not?

“The islanders enjoy almost unfettered access to the outside world,” she said, “but they’ve kept the secret of Avalon for nearly one thousand years. Most have them have never set foot off the island because everything they need, they have. But things from the outside world get brought here all the time anyway. Harry’s friend has a gramophone, and he uses it to play modern Muggle music some of the Muggleborns brought with them.”

“No, they’ll start up again in September. But some of the staff are here today, and they’ve agreed to meet with you.”

“Do they speak English?” she asked.

Hermione considered it. They did, but they’d expect Minerva to teach in the medium of Welsh regardless; she’d found a spell which could teach someone else a language already known by the caster, but it wasn’t without its particular problems. And she would have to learn to read the regular way.

“They do, but you’ll need to learn Welsh anyway. I think I can teach it to you with a spell – I had to learn it myself, but then I found this old spell in the Unspeakable archives…”

Hermione took out her wand and rehearsed the spell – the wand movements were far more important to this spell than the incantation, which wasn’t so much of an incantation as a verb phrase designed to shape the magic. It used a flourish usually seen in mental transfigurations – which she supposed this spell was – and a swish-and-flick more common to charms.

“Siaradwch cymraeg!” she said, and although there was no obvious external sign anything had happened, Hermione knew that she had performed the spell correctly.

“And now I can speak Welsh?” said Minerva dubiously.

“Sort of,” said Hermione. “By the end of next month you’ll be fluent, but right now you should be able to hold a conversation. Once they see you’re trying they’ll switch to English, but they’re a little bit … protective about their language and culture. They can come off a bit rude sometimes,” she said.

They hadn’t had any problem with accepting the Muggles and Muggleborns into their communities. They had welcomed them with open arms. But they had remained firm on one central, crucial point: they would all have to learn Welsh and integrate wholly into their new communities. Part of the reason the ancient wizards had sealed off Avalon had been because of the large-scale eradications of their culture that had happened all across Britain in the preceding centuries, first by Saxon migrants and then by Vikings and Normans, after all.

It was still the reason why a not insignificant proportion of old Welsh purebloods refused to send their children to Hogwarts, and homeschooled them instead – or in some cases sent them to Avalon.

“Do they have everyone learn it using spells, then?” Minerva asked.

Hermione shook her head.

“No, that’s an older spell. Most people don’t use it – you may have noticed it was part mental transfiguration and part charm, but it also requires that the caster and the target of the spell share a mother tongue, and lots of the people here simply don’t speak English.” She paused. “And I don’t think you could use the spell to teach anybody else Welsh either, although you could teach somebody English.”

She wasn’t actually sure how the spell worked, really.

With the language problem sorted out, at least partially, Hermione started to walk towards the school again. Once there they would be met by the school’s executive committee – there wasn’t a headmaster or mistress per se, because the islanders didn’t really believe in one person being
wholly in charge of everything. Instead the school was administered by a committee of its staff in conjunction with the school board, made up of parents and concerned individuals from the wider Avalon community.

This committee and the school board would ultimately decide whether Minerva would be appropriate for the school, but Hermione thought they would actually recognise this as an opportunity to learn from one of the pre-eminent transfigurers of the modern era. Especially since they wouldn’t have to go to Hogwarts to get the teaching, and could still teach older, forgotten, magic alongside.

Once they had crossed the picturesque valley and made it to the school compound proper they were greeted by several of its full-time, local staff members.

“Croeso i Ysgol Ddewiniaeth Ynys Afal, Athrawes!” boomed Cynfawr ap Dyddgu, whom Hermione understood to be the most out-going of the teaching staff. He was certainly the largest, and the loudest, but privately Hermione felt the others might be rather more vocal if that giant of a man didn’t talk so much.

Hermione stepped in to make introductions, because Minerva would need time to adjust before she could even attempt to speak.

“Minerva, this is Cynfawr who teaches potions and herbology, and also here today are Rhiannon Mostyn, who teaches ritual magic; and Seren Rhos, who teaches charms.”

Minerva struggled for a few moments with forming a sentence – Hermione had experienced the effects of the spell herself, when she’d asked Thomas to teach her Pictish, and forming novel sentences had been the most difficult thing at first – but eventually found the words.

“I am Minerva McGonagall, formerly of Hogwarts School,” she said. “I am happy to meet you.”

“We’re happy to meet you, too!” declared Cynfawr. “Your Welsh is good!”

Hermione changed the subject because she knew Cynfawr would think her spell ‘cheating’ when used on adults, albeit good-naturedly, and she didn’t want to get sidetracked. She’d taken the appropriate potions so she wasn’t falling asleep where she stood, but they were still no substitute for proper sleep, and the sooner she got Minerva acquainted with the school the sooner she could be taught how to Apparate onto the island and the sooner Hermione could go to sleep.

“I once read an article of yours in an old copy of Transfiguration Today,” commented Rhiannon. “From the sixties, I think it was. Our curriculum would benefit from your insight.”

Hermione began to slowly corral the group towards the inside. She had watched Rhiannon stand on one foot during a three-day rain storm to ensure a good harvest that year, and knew that the others would similarly be perfectly happy to stand around all day outside chatting about magic.

“Shall we go inside?” she said, and gestured towards the school building. “It is after all where the magic happens.” It wasn’t the sort of joke she would usually make, but it was the sort of joke Cynfawr appreciated.

Her efforts didn’t go to nothing because the big man laughed and agreed, and they were soon approaching the doorway. She left the group then, Apparating away when the others had gone inside, because Hermione Granger needed to sleep before she could even begin to properly think about anything that had recently happened.
The Muggles had called their little enclave on Avalon ‘Little England’, which hadn’t gone down well with the non-English residents – but as they were in the minority, the name had stuck. Neville supposed it basically summed up the area anyway, as it was the only place on the island – apart from Caer Tawel – where English was in any kind of regular use. Not that the inhabitants weren’t integrated into local life – they participated in communal activities, spoke with the teachers and obviously sent their children to the school.

Still, they found it easier to cope with all the magic around them by grouping together somewhere minimally magical (although that was quite hard on Avalon), and Neville wouldn’t want to take that away from them.

A fairly large number of cottages and dwellings gathered on an area of flat land, and the hills were used to graze the communal herd of sheep raised by the Muggles. Everyone on Avalon was self-sufficient with regards to food, so in addition to the sheep the Muggles tended several vegetable gardens and a small crop field.

Wizards would help build the incoming families new homes, but Neville was glad he wouldn’t be among them, not now that there was finally a war to fight again. He was only here to act as a point of familiarity to some of the newcomers – Luna was already in the village, as were several other Unspeakables present for the Muggleborn extractions.

“So are you finally going to tell me where we are?” said Miss Green angrily, coming at him from out of nowhere – stepping out of somebody’s house, he realised, and following him as he walked away.

“Has nobody told you?” he wondered aloud, but obviously nobody had – she wouldn’t have asked otherwise. “We’re somewhere called Ynys Afal. It’s a Welsh island that’s been hidden since the Norman Conquest.”

“Someone said it was Avalon, but then I thought, that’s the place with all the fairies isn’t it?” she said at rapid speed. “Then again, my kids are wizards and my life is gone, so maybe this is some changeling story.”

They were stood in the street (as far as the road could be called a street), and Neville did have a job to do.

“Well, that’s some of the stuff I was coming to talk with you about. If you’d come with me to the meeting hall?”

The local wizards had insisted on the Muggles having a local meeting place to discuss issues relating to their small community on the island. There was a much larger meeting hall in the biggest town on the island, but all the smaller communities had them, too. The locals were way into democracy and co-operation.

It was a handy custom, he thought, because there was always somewhere to take a big group of people that wasn’t somebody’s house.

Once inside, he directed Miss Green – he supposed he should learn her name – to sit with the others. He was going to give a talk to them about How Things Were.

“This is going to be a difficult adjustment,” he said. “I’m sorry. We’re going to do everything we can to make it easier for you. This was the only safe way.”
“Somebody killed my wife,” said one man. “That’s not safe,” he spat.

“Your wife was the victim of an extremely Dark curse,” said Neville. “Some magic is extremely dangerous, and some magic is practised only by people who want to hurt and cause suffering. Our world is at war. Your children are gifted with the ability to do magic. That means that the current leader of our world, who is a warlord and a malevolent Dark wizard, sees them as a target. We intervened because we wish to save you and your families, and teach your children how to use magic somewhere safe.”

“And this place is safe?” said another man whose wife quickly tried to quieten him.

“It’s safer than anywhere else,” said Neville, “if you follow some very important rules. The posts marking the boundary of the village area aren’t decorations. Because most of you can’t see or feel magic you don’t instinctively know when you’re outside of the protective wards. Most of the time that isn’t a problem, but Avalon is plagued by Dark spirits periodically. You’re all safe inside the wards.”

They were safe, so long as they didn’t step outside of the wards, because the Unspeakables and some of the locals were outside them fighting. He’d asked Huw, Luna’s friend, why the locals lived here even with the constant Dark creature attacks.

He’d asked why Neville hadn’t moved to ‘the Colonies’ to escape Voldemort, and then Neville understood. The problems facing Avalon were smaller than that posed by Voldemort, after all, and not insurmountable.

“This is safe, and there’s still bloody evil monsters here?” continued the man who had asked the question. “Can’t we just go back home and not teach our children magic? How will they go to school if we’re here?”

“We have a school here,” said Luna warmly. “We won’t be teaching all of the subjects you’d be used to, but we will be teaching magic. Your children all have a wonderful opportunity here, but we’re also afraid it is impossible to let you go back home. The Dark wizard we fight against will find you, kill you, and take your children from you. This place is hidden from him, and there is nobody alive who knows its secret who would ever tell it. But you absolutely cannot go back home, not once. He knows where you live.”

Neville relaxed. Luna had given the hard news, and from her it would be softer. Not by much, but anything better than what he would have managed.

“You’re absolutely safe and there’s no reason to worry unless you step outside of the wards. Don’t test them – some of the others who’ve been here longer than you will tell you what will happen if you do, if you don’t believe a word we’ve said. You’re stuck here until we’ve won this war, just like we are. Nowhere else in Britain is safe.”

“What if we go away?” asked one woman. “Leave the UK, I mean – I have family in Paris, we could just go there…”

“You could do that, yes,” agreed Neville, “but the Dark Lord’s going to go there, too. He isn’t going to stop at Britain. He’s going after the Irish now, and when he’s done – and he’ll be done faster than ever this time – he’ll move against the French, then Flanders, then Luxembourg… He’s literally worse than Hitler,” said Neville, using an historical figure they would recognise. ‘Grindelwald’ wouldn’t shock them at all. “He believes your children are impure, but that they could provide good breeding stock for his armies. He will take your children, prevent them from learning magic, and use them to raise an army. We think he intends to grow a vast army of wizards
to take over as much of the world as he can, and unless we do something fast, he’s going to do it.”

“How can we help?” said Miss Green. “Can we even help?”

“You can help us by allowing your children to learn magic. When this war is done they’ll be the future of our world. They’re all too young to fight. We don’t need them to do that. We just need them to live their lives, and we want to keep you safe, too – that’s why we can’t keep them and send you back. It’s radical, but that’s the point we’re at I’m afraid.”

He paused.

“How can we help?”

Luna smiled. There would be a cacophony of questions, all rooted in fear and concern and love. It would be chaos, but eventually the more vocal parents would get their voices heard, and a frank, open discussion would be had. It would be helpful for everyone involved, because it would allow the Muggles to air their concerns, and would allow the Unspeakables to take the best care possible of their guests.

She knew that Neville hated this particular part, because although he was just comfortable speaking in front of large groups of people, he didn’t think he was particularly good at dealing with people.

Luna knew that Neville was wrong about that, though. She thought he was, in fact, very good at dealing with people – some people listened, and then still didn’t soothe concerns. Neville listened to a problem and thought about why it was a problem, and considered how to answer. Most people would just dismiss the issue with its actual answer, which was often not the true concern.

And when he floundered, well – she was there to help, wasn’t she? She was good at helping.

“What’s your world like?” said Mrs Edwards. “I understand we’re not getting a proper representation of it, on a hidden island in the middle of a horrible war, but what world will our children grow into?”

“We have some huge, gaping structural problems with our society and culture,” remarked Songflower, an Unspeakable who had been at Hogwarts just before Luna had arrived. “Your children will face some prejudice in the world we seek to build, but we hope that such prejudice will no long be exercised by institutions and power structures.”

“You said this man who rules you is worse than Hitler,” said one man suddenly. “It seems like he’s been in power for a while – the other families said they’ve been here ten years… how did it get this bad? Does nobody else in your world care?”

“The Dark Lord is a very powerful wizard,” said Neville. “He’s made himself immortal, and even if he hadn’t, there’s a prophecy. Only one person in the world can kill him, and then only after lots of other things have happened. He ordered the murder of a man who fought against Hitler, and Hitler’s Dark wizard ally, a man we know as Grindelwald. That man was the most powerful wizard of an era, and he was murdered by Dark Lady Valmira, who is a powerful Dark witch in her own right. They conquered our world with an army larger than we could have ever hoped to fight, and we lost.”

“Our splinter group has been here for the last ten years devising a strategy to fight the Dark Lord and Lady,” continued Luna, “and we’ve now started to take the fight to them. We believe we can
fulfil the terms of prophecy and bring light to the world again, and when we do…” She smiled. “When we do it will be beautiful again. There are unicorns, and fairies, and so many beautiful, wonderful things. Magic is a gift, and a blessing, but wizards and witches are still people, and people are people.”

“It seems a bit outrageous,” complained one man, whose wife again tried to stop him. “Not to mention, dangerous. Our children will be facing a lifetime of prejudice, and we’ve had enough of that already, thank you. We’re Jewish, and now my children have a gift, and there’s some mad man out there – exactly like Hitler, if that wasn’t some fucking joke – who wants to hurt them? For what, exactly? Nobody has explained that yet, and I’m looking for an answer.”

Luna was missing some nuance, something important about the mood of the room that the Muggles felt but she couldn’t.

“I’m what’s called a pureblood,” said Neville. “One of the Sacred Twenty-Eight actually, the twenty eight families who have been entirely magical for generations and generations, as far back as we can remember. Songflower is a member of the Exalted One Hundred and Nine, the families who are pureblood but have some degree of mixed ancestry. To some people in our world this kind of thing is extremely important.”

“There are rules,” supplied Songflower. “A child with four magical grand-parents can be regarded as pureblood, but of a much lesser social standing than someone like myself, or like Longbottom, or Lovegood. The further back your magical ancestry the more acceptable you become, to those who follow this particular ideology. Once, there was a belief that ‘mudbloods’, which is what they refer to your children as, would dilute and destroy magical power. Even they now understand this is not true, but instead they have twisted the ideology such that their magic is unstable, weaker, but that with the proper breeding ‘new’ purebloods can one day be born. In three generations there will be an array of new purebloods, under the current regime’s ideology, if we do not act. The system in place is warping the minds of the young and vulnerable, and our society will never recover if we allow them to continue on this path.”

“And this issue of not being magical for generations is very important? I still don’t understand why,” queried another of the concerned parents. Luna hated not knowing names.

“That’s the thing,” said Neville. “It isn’t important, not to anyone sensible. But this wizard, he’s… he was… he was charismatic, and he seized an opportunity a long, long time ago when our world wasn’t in the best of states. He was defeated once, but he came back, and then he was worse than ever. For some people it isn’t really about the blood exactly, it’s more about culture…”

“And that one is harder, because they do have a point,” said Luna softly. “Their issue is that your children know nothing of our culture and ways, and our history – but that is because nobody ever thinks to teach them the important things. We’re going to teach your children all the things they’ll need to navigate our world, I can promise you that. We’re building a new world, and we want you to be part of it. This is your chance to give a voice to the parents of Muggleborn children, because our world usually ignores you.”

“My wife was murdered over this shit?” said the bereaved man suddenly, his anger readily apparent.

“I’m thirty-one years old,” replied Neville, “and I’ve never met my parents. I’ve met what they became after the Dark Lord’s forces tortured them into insanity during his first rise. My friend Harry has never met his parents at all, because the Dark Lord killed both of them himself. My friend Ron has never met his uncles because they were killed in battle against Voldemort’s Death Eaters. I could go on and on and on – I guarantee you that every one of the fifty thousand wizards
in Britain and Ireland has lost someone they loved to Voldemort, this time or last.”

“This is war,” said Luna. “This is a brutal and vicious ideological conflict yes, but it’s also about so much more than that – this is about the survival of our whole society. We can’t keep going like this.”

“And you want us to stay here in spite of all this?” asked Mrs Edwards. “Why?”

“Because we can keep you safe here, and give your children a chance at something like normality,” said Neville. “When I was younger, I went to a different school. Hogwarts. Most wizards in Britain go there as children, and your children probably would have too. It was a safe place, excepting some incidents, but those were some of the best years of my life. We want that for your children, and they’ll be safe and happy here. We think you could be, too – and when the war is over you can go back to your lives.”

“With all due respect,” said one woman, “we can’t. We have jobs, obligations, responsibilities. We can’t just take off for an unspecified amount of time and then come back like nothing has happened.”

“We will take care of all that,” said Songflower. “We can forge anything necessary – documents showing entitlements to paid leave, sabbaticals, that sort of thing. You can send letters from here, and we can explain away any absences. We are fairly adept at dealing with certain aspects of your world,” she said.

“What about the computers? Can you magic the computers? Not everything is even on paper these days,” continued the woman. “Can you do anything about that?” she demanded.

“Ah, I’m not sure what a computer is,” said Songflower awkwardly.

“Doesn’t even know what a computer is,” muttered one woman at the back of the room, although Luna could hear her because she’d cast a charm that would carry voices through the air and into her ears. “And she thinks she could make everything okay…”

“I’m sure everything will be perfectly fine,” said Luna. “We have methods and contacts. We have made contact with your Prime Minister actually,” she said, because that was a true thing and would probably do much to calm them down. “She is aware of your world now, even though our current government has been lax in its duties in that regard. She understands there are some things that need to be smoothed over with the Muggle authorities, and where we can’t do something it is likely that she can. Is that acceptable?”

That seemed to be, and although there were many more questions, they seemed to be more about practical, immediate concerns than anything larger relating to the war effort or the myriad problems facing modern magical culture.

Sometimes simplicity was nice.
Chapter Summary

This chapter is all of the flashbacks from chapters 1-3. If this is your first time reading this story ignore this note.

22nd January 2002 – Avalon

For kidnappers the Unspeakables had been more than polite, providing he and his friends with all the necessary things – food, shelter, polite chit-chat – but that still hadn’t made Harry like them. They had kidnapped him, after all.

But what was the point in fighting them, when Voldemort was out there? Dumbledore hadn’t been dead five months, and they’d decided to kidnap him and run away?

“You have to let us go. Give us a Portkey, or something—we have to get back to the Order,” he tried again.

A new Unspeakable spoke this time. A younger Unspeakable. A woman. She’d given her name as Morningstar.

“You don’t understand,” she said. “When we told you that we can’t let you out, we didn’t mean that we do not wish to let you out.” She paused. “We mean that we can’t let you out. I told you: the island is under a time-locked fortress ward. Nobody is getting out or in until the ward breaks.”

“How long is the time-lock?” asked Hermione, far more politely than Harry would have done.

At least Morningstar had the decency to look uncomfortable.

“The ward will break on the 11th of August, 2011.”

Harry didn’t quite know what to say to that.

“Fuck,” he said eventually. Rage. He had to contain it: they were stuck here for near enough to ten years. If he exploded now, what would that do? Dumbledore had trained him to use Occlumency to soothe his emotions, to put aside anger for when it could be vented elsewhere.

He was trying, damn it. Nobody could say he wasn’t trying.

“You fucking idiots,” he said, failing.

“Is there no way of breaking the ward?” asked Hermione. “Surely, the person who cast the ward can also bring it down, in case of emergency?”

Morningstar looked as if she were about to reply, but Luna interrupted her.

“They cannot break the fortress ward,” Luna said, “because doing so would require a threefold sacrifice: the blood of a child, forcibly taken; flesh of a mother, knowingly given; and hair of the sidhe, taken under the light of the moon.”
Hermione appeared disgusted. Harry didn’t blame her: that sounded like Dark magic to him, even if he wasn’t a particular expert in arcane Dark rituals. He’d never even heard of a time-locked fortress ward.

“That sounds like Dark magic,” he growled.

Morningstar looked pained.

“I assure you, Potter, the fortress ward is not Dark magic. It is old magic. The protection provided is second to none, and so is the cost of breaking the terms of the ritual pact. It was necessary.”

“Would you care to explain,” he said icily, willing himself not to explode, “why the fuck it was necessary to imprison me and my friends for a fucking decade?”

He didn’t manage it. He was basically shouting.

“We haven’t let them explain yet,” said Neville, speaking for the first time. Harry glared at him. “Let them talk. We have to live here for the next decade. Let’s at least hear why before we decide to get even more pissed off.”

“This war can’t be won now,” said Morningstar. “We know that. We will show you why, if you let us. But believe me when I say, we cannot defeat Voldemort now. If you fight in this war, Harry Potter, you will die. The Dark Lord won’t, and then he will have won.”

“But he’ll win if we’re not there to fight him!” protested Harry. He’d heard the prophecy. Dumbledore had shared it with him when rumours of a Dark Lord and Lady began flowing through from eastern Europe. Harry knew the stakes. He knew his role.

What did the Unspeakables know, he wondered? Their Hall of Destiny held many prophecies, many secrets.

“It will be a temporary victory.” The Unspeakable behind her – Oately, or something like that – shuffled awkwardly. “We have seen some of what would come to pass if we had not done what we did.”

“How?” asked Hermione.

“Ah, it is… it is a device we call the Reality Mirror. It shows us what is happening, what has happened, in realities close to our own. It has allowed us to see worlds where Voldemort came sooner, you fought, and died.”

“So you took that to mean that in this reality, in this context, Harry would be killed by Voldemort?” said Hermione, aghast.

“The Dark Lord has an army three times larger than that which he fielded during the First War. The Aurors are barely able to provide enough bodies for regular domestic security. Britain will fall. You cannot fall also. If you are not already aware, Potter, there is a prophecy concerning yourself and the Dark Lord.”

“I’m aware, thanks,” said Harry. “Which is why I want to be out there. You know, to help fulfil the prophecy.”

“The Horcruxes will prevent the Dark Lord’s death!” snapped Morningstar. “There is magic at play here which not even we understand properly, you idiot boy!”
“How are you going to get the understanding you need holed up here?” said Hermione crossly.
“How?”
“You don’t even know where we are,” said Morningstar coolly.
“You haven’t told us!” barked Hermione.
“Avalon. We’re on Avalon,” said Luna.
“I—how did you know that?” said Morningstar, peering at Luna.
“The sidhe told me.”
The Unspeakables in the room shared a glance.
“You can hear them?”
Morningstar asked the question, but then hastened to explain herself before Luna could answer it.
“There is an artefact of the sidhe here, on Avalon. We have guarded it for centuries. For a more 
satisfying answer, Avalon is a hidden island in the sea between Ireland and Wales. The 
Unspeakables, with the help of the local population, hid it from the rest of the world in 1092.”
“And we’re stuck here for ten years,” said Neville.
“Fantastic,” Harry said flatly. “While people outside get tortured and die. Bloody fucking 
brilliant.”

24th January 2002 – Avalon

Luna had been the first of her friends to be allowed outside of the fortress itself. She didn’t understand why the others were being so stubborn: Harry refused to promise not to test the fortress ward by whatever means necessary, and Neville had agreed.

Some people just didn’t understand the old magic. That was okay. It was understandable for most of them. But Luna did. The fortress ward couldn’t be broken, except under a very specific scenario, and even if she were willing to take blood from a child and flesh from a mother, she didn’t know where one would begin to look for the hair of the sidhe.

So it was moot. They were here now, and not elsewhere. She could be angry about their change in circumstance or she could enjoy the ancient beauty of the island of Avalon. Which had been larger than she’d thought, easily larger than the Isle of Man or Anglesey. It was a testament to the wonder of magic that it had remained hidden and secret for so long, especially as it housed probably the largest and oldest all-wizarding community in Britain.

A remarkably insular community, Luna thought. She didn’t recognise any of their names, when she had asked the Unspeakables about them, and then when she had spoken to one of the villagers, he had responded in an archaic form of Welsh.

How enchanting.

It didn’t make up for being kidnapped against one’s will and forced to sit out the existential war being faced by one’s friends, but in this thing Luna was different from her friends. She accepted
reality as it was; they would consider every other option but reality until they had run out of alternatives. Which was silly, because unless you were of the sidhe reality was as it was, no ifs ands or buts.

“Hello there,” she said. There had been a man watching her – an older man, although not so old as to be considered elderly – for close to an hour now. He was not an Unspeakable but he didn’t avoid her like the rest of the villagers did. “My name is Luna Lovegood. I’m a prisoner here.”

The man laughed.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Luna Lovegood,” said the man, his English heavily accented. “I’m Huw ap Seferus Lleyn.”

The Lleyns. She hadn’t heard of them, but they were Purebloods – she’d asked Morningstar, who had said everyone on Avalon would be considered a Pureblood elsewhere, but that they didn’t consider themselves so. A cultural difference stemming from a consideration of magic, rather than blood purity, as the property of value. A Muggleborn was as magical as a Pureblood. Luna agreed with that basic assumption because she had observed it herself. So then, the people of Avalon defined themselves according to their culture, which was bound up in magical ability, but not related to the purity of their blood per se. Apparently they had all been Muggles at one anyway: the lack of immigration had just meant eventually there were no more Muggles on the island.

She found it an interesting difference from ideology believed by many in Pureblood circles back in England. She didn’t ascribe to it of course, because it was plainly absurd, but many people did. Luna though saw the value in culture, and tradition, and history in a much deeper way than she suspected any Death Eater did.

And that was very sad.

“Lovegood,” said Huw. “Mm. My family remembers yours, girl. We were here, on this island, before your family came over with the Saxons. There’s a song we sing, in Welsh of course.” He took in a breath. “Remove the Saxon! String him up! Rend his limbs!” His accent became almost a caricature of itself, and then he burst into a great, big laugh.

Luna decided she liked the man.

“I’m afraid my family doesn’t remember yours, or anything about the island of Avalon – save the legends and myths, of course.”

Huw looked her right in the eyes.

“The true history of Avalon is much more frightening, girl, as is its present.”

“Would you care to tell me of it?”

Luna valued knowledge for its own sake. But she also could use the distraction, and it would be useful to know the history of the place in which they were trapped. Sheltered. This place was her home now, at least until the fortress ward broke.

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26th January 2002 – Avalon

“You want something useful to do, Potter?” said Morningstar abruptly one morning after breakfast. “I can give you something useful to do.”
“What is it?” He dared to look up from his breakfast – porridge – and at the inscrutable woman.

“You aren’t the only people we rescued,” she said. “We managed to save some of the Muggleborns, the ones on the List, and some of the ones already at Hogwarts. We got their families, too.”

“Bully for you,” he said, but inside, he was happy.

Morningstar sighed.

“Look, Potter – we get that you’re pissed off with us. But do you know what?” She placed both her hands on the table and stood, leaning towards him. “We don’t fucking care. You need to deal with it. Those kids we rescued? We want you to help teach them. The locals have teachers, but you have recent combat experience. And the Hogwarts kids know you.”

“I’d like to hear what the other prophecies say,” Harry decided to say instead. “Then I’ll decide.”

Morningstar shook her head, although Harry hadn’t expected another answer. The stern Unspeakable had steadfastly refused to recite the words of the other prophecies in his hearing.

“Those prophecies don’t concern you directly,” she said. “Take it up with Granger and Lovegood – I’ve said the same to Longbottom.”

Harry grimaced. Hermione and Luna wouldn’t tell him until he agreed to ‘stop pouting’, and the Unspeakables acted as if it were secret knowledge – which he supposed it was, except now Hermione and Luna knew and he and Neville didn’t.

It didn’t matter that Hermione and Luna knew because they had accepted that there was no way out of the ward, and had then politely asked to hear the other prophecies. But Harry couldn’t believe that there wasn’t some other way of breaking the ward.

“Look,” he said. “I’m sure you can understand why I am fucking furious at what you’ve done.” He managed to keep a mostly civil tone because honestly, this argument had played out already. Harry could even admit that to himself. He’d lost. He’d look for another way to break the ward, but he wouldn’t physically test it – Morningstar had demonstrated exactly what would happen if he tried using a live sheep appropriated from one of the villagers – but he would eventually agree.

It’s just that their actions had consequences not just to the war, but to people and lives outside of even the Wizarding world. They had to understand that, and Harry wasn’t sure they did yet. Maybe he was just wrong, maybe they had acted properly and carefully. But he was still a kidnapping victim, and that burned. He was stuck here for ten years.

“I think that we understand the situation more properly and accurately than you would care to admit,” said Morningstar, “but I have conceded before that you have a right to be angry. Will you teach the children, or would you like some other task?”

“What else is there?” he said, and then, “Yes, I’ll do it.”

“You’ll see what else there is to do soon enough,” said Morningstar darkly. “But this is a start. I’ll escort you to the school – you’re to start building half an hour ago.”

Harry had been told that some of the students would recognise him from Hogwarts, and somewhat naively he had assumed that would mean he would recognise them, too – but he didn’t. Most of
them were still very young, although he thought he could see what looked like a seventh year dotted about. Of course, he didn’t know any of them were, but they all knew who he was.

Everyone knew who he was.

He was relieved to find, upon his arrival in the small meadow, that he didn’t have to build a school so much as help to expand and renovate the existing structures. The existing school building was nice, although looked far different from Hogwarts. More like a grand sort of village hall than a castle, the building looked fit to house at most a hundred students, with those students being housed with their families on the island.

According to Morningstar, the Unspeakables had managed to secure – kidnap – sixteen of the Muggleborn students already in attendance at Hogwarts. That cohort, along with the nineteen Muggleborns yet to receive a letter, would need housing for the duration of their stay. Their parents – Muggles, all of them – and some of their siblings would need housing elsewhere, but that was being built by the residents of Avalon elsewhere.

To complicate matters a bit more, the locals had decided that if their school was to become a boarding school (a novelty, when you remembered that the entire island housed only a few thousand people at its height and couldn’t have been very large at all, although Harry had yet to see an accurate map) then it should have enough space to house all the children of the island.

A reasonable request, but one he was sure would give him a headache. At least he’d been given a book of builder’s spells to help muddle through, and there were several older students milling about who could help with the heavy lifting – hopefully they were up to first year charms.

“All right,” he said. “I’m Harry Potter, I’m sure you’ve heard of me before. This isn’t the time for that. We’re here to build new dormitories for the school you’ll be studying at for the duration of your stay here.” ‘Duration of your stay’. He supposed it was fair, since a lot of them had actually been given the choice of coming – although some of those who hadn’t been informed of the magical world had simply been kidnapped.

“Isn’t anyone going to help us?” said one of the Muggleborns, one of the older ones – a girl wearing a Hufflepuff scarf. “Only, I don’t think it’s fair that we have to do all the work.”

“You could say it’s the most fair thing really,” suggested a tall, thin boy. “Since we’re the ones causing upheaval.” He paused, and then pulled the zipper up on his Muggle hoodie. “Where are they even?”

Harry shrugged.

“I know about as much as you do,” he said. “How about we get started?”

He picked up the book of spells again. He’d only flicked through it the first time and he’d never been like Hermione, able to just look at a spell once and be able to cast it perfectly, without fail, the first time she tried.

23rd January 2002 – Avalon Chamber of Fate

“You accepted your new circumstances far more easily than we had expected, Miss Granger,” said Morningstar with a note of surprise.

Hermione didn’t have the slightest clue why, because she was an eminently reasonable woman –
presented with enough of the right evidence, Hermione would change her mind based on the information she had been given. The problem with most wizards and witches is that they just jumped right past the most important bit – the bit with the evidence – to the conclusion. An interesting hypothesis does not an explanation make, thank you very much.

But the Unspeakables had outlined their reasoning. She had been informed of the existence of several prophecies pertaining to Voldemort, the war period, and to his Dark Lady, Valmira. One prophecy related directly to her – or so the Unspeakables thought. Hermione had never put much stock in Divination, but Dumbledore had believed in the power of prophecy.

The Unspeakables appeared to believe in the power of prophecy. The Wizarding world at large did, too. That didn’t mean they were necessarily right – it was wrong-headed to assume that just because everyone thought the same thing that that thing was actually true.

But Hermione did have to admit that prophecy seemed to have a real power, even if it was a power she didn’t understand yet. Divination was mostly useless – Dumbledore had admitted that. But Divination and prophecy weren’t the same thing, although they had been conflated in the past. It was understandable.

“I think Luna said it best when she said that she accepted the reality of the situation,” Hermione said eventually. Talking with the Unspeakables was actually more of a pleasant experience for Hermione than she expected, since they didn’t mind when she spoke quickly about esoteric pieces of magical lore nor when she fell into silence to think something over.

In another time, in different circumstances, perhaps Hermione could have joined a different group of Unspeakables. One in a universe where Voldemort didn’t exist, where other concerns were not so pressing, so life-changing.

“I want to hear what this prophecy says about me. Luna seemed more convinced that you believed what you were doing is the only way of success after hearing the other prophecy.”

“That is why we have brought you here, to the Chamber of Fate. The locals believe that once, the sidhe consorted with the primal force of Destiny here.”

Hermione could believe that. The chamber was an oddity, secreted deep beneath the Unspeakable fortress and constructed of what appeared to be lithified trees grown into formation. It appeared at once natural and organic, but magical and artificial. A jarring experience. The entire place reeked of magic in a way that Hogwarts had, although magic of a much different and wilder nature.

An ancient table comprised of local stone had been set in the chamber centuries ago and apparently had never been moved again, and it was there that Hermione had been sat since her entrance to the room. Thankfully on a more modern chair.

“We shall spare you a reading. The contents of the prophecy are written on this parchment. I’m only sorry that it still won’t be very clear after you’re done.”

Morningstar pushed the parchment towards her, and Hermione gazed down at it, committing its words to memory before she attempted to understand them.

*The Mother of Monsters will birth thrice.*

*Three great labours*

*Three great evils.*
She will be rewarded once,
  And once,
  And once again.
No man shall conquer her
For she is the Mother of Evil
  And his Wife.
She will not be slain
It is written in the stars
In the fabric of all that is.
She has done this.
The old one has been wound,
Coiled, woven, and knotted.
But what is tied can be untied,
  And what cannot,
  Can be cut.

Morningstar pushed another piece of parchment across the table.

“The first prophecy was for context; it’s the only prophecy directly concerning Dark Lady Valmira. We believe several other contextual factors render this prophecy important. The emphasis reflects a change in the tone of the delivery of the prophecy. This next one we believe references you directly, although there are—other candidates.”

The Lioness will be
Three in her Glories
And three in her Sorrows,
Forged in the fires
Of a half-forgotten dream.
She will walk through the
Land of Always Winter
  And be tempered
At the Altar of Queens
  Or she will die.
She will be loved,

But alone.

She will endure

Threefold trials of worth

And be judged worthy.

She will love,

And love,

And love again.

You will know her well

Because a lioness does not speak

She roars.

“And that’s it?” said Hermione, rather dumb-founded. “The best you could come up with, given your unique knowledge, was to assume that I am the Lioness and that my ‘three glories’ are somehow related to the ‘three labours’ of the Mother of Evil, who you have linked with Voldemort?”

“We are dealing with an unprecedented level of clarity,” said one of the older Unspeakables, an ancient woman by the name of Stonefoot. “There has not been another time with so many active prophecies in centuries, and never in Europe – nine prophecies once descended upon China, but thankfully we are not there yet.”

Hermione regarded the other woman carefully. Stonefoot had never spoken in Hermione’s presence before, which wasn’t especially unusual since most of the Unspeakables remained silent. It made them difficult to gauge.

“I think I might need to understand more about what you know of prophecy before we continue,” she said.

Stonefoot looked pained.

“That’s very difficult,” she said. “But I can tell you what you need to know. The future is not written in the stars, as the prophecy would have you believe. That is metaphorical. The future is mapped by the choices we make today, and by the choices people have made in the past. It is by and large unpredictable because it is impossible to know the totality of the component parts. We believe prophecies are the method which Fate, or Destiny, or whichever force produces prophecy, intervenes to eradicate the effects of choice upon her vision for the course of history, or to prevent the choices of powerful people from exerting too great an effect.”

Hermione didn’t really know what to say to that. Not because she couldn’t think of anything to say (she could think of many very intelligent things to say), but because she didn’t know where exactly to begin.

“Why do you say we have an unprecedented level of clarity with this current situation?”

Hermione hadn’t really had time to sit down and think the contents of the prophecies out. Before
she could begin to understand why the Unspeakables had acted the way they’d acted she would need to understand how they thought about the problem. Before considering the nature of prophecy she should like to know why this situation was more clear than other, similar, situations.

Stonefoot shifted in her seat.

“There was the prophecy concerning Mr Potter,” she said. “We didn’t know the contents of that one for a very long time – too long,” she said, though it sounded like an old complaint. “The only people who knew it, well… Dumbledore and the Potters. But we gained access to the first of the prophecies you have seen today almost as soon as it was made, in 1993. The prophecy we discussed with Miss Lovegood came to us because I uttered it. A mad Muggle uttered another, and we uncovered it in 1998. The prophecies concern important choices which must be made, and clearly form part of a larger pattern of prophecies connected to a specific time period. There may yet be more prophecies. The second prophecy you saw today, the one we believe to concern you, was inscribed upon the wall of this chamber two thousand years ago.”

It was almost too much to process all at once, really, but Hermione had never been scared of a challenge.

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22nd January 2002 – Caer Tawel Chamber of Fate

Luna could feel the ancient and wild magic deep in her bones. Old places – like Avalon, or Hogwarts – never failed to make her feel so utterly small and insignificant next to them. She revelled in the feeling, in the knowledge that she was a speck of sand against the untold generations who had lived and enjoyed magic in those places.

There was magic in that, magic in the connection built between people and places and magic. House-elves understood that better than any wizard Luna had ever met, and understood it so well that people thought they were bound to families and service – but that wasn’t true. House-elves had bound themselves to their home, which was why it was such a great dishonour for them to be asked to leave that home.

Someone had loved this place more than anything else, once.

“A prophecy concerning me?” she said, finally thinking about the thing the Unspeakables actually wanted her to think about. She didn’t mind that they were impatient: they didn’t have the distractions Luna did, not with the echoes of memories she could feel in the tingle of the magic all around her.

Luna had heard the prophecy about Harry and the Dark Lord. It could have also meant Neville, but the Dark Lord had unequivocally chosen Harry. The prophecy was also clear, and did not include her. But then, neither did it include a Dark and beautiful queen to rule at the Dark Lord’s side.

She glanced down at the parchment. The Unspeakables hadn’t recited any of the prophecies, merely offered them for her to read. She had read Harry’s again, and then another concerning the Dark Lady, and another referring to a Lioness.

One was chosen,

One was not.

One will be forged,
And one always was.

One will never love,

And another’s love will be misplaced.

But not every role has been ordained,

And nor shall they be.

Choices matter most when made

in light of lessons long forgotten.

Choices made cannot usually be unmade.

Except when they can.

Luna considered it. This prophecy seemed of a different kind to the others, something more akin to a general comment on the larger set of prophecies she had read. This prophecy linked the others – she could see the connections between the prophecies easily, although she supposed it wouldn’t be too difficult to do so.

It was all there in the text, after all.

“That’s very interesting,” she said, because it was. “This prophecy suggests that the conflict is larger than that indicated from reading the other prophecies. I am the one who always was, aren’t I?”

Luna wondered what that meant, exactly. Harry had been chosen by the Dark Lord. Neville hadn’t been. The Lioness would be forged as the text of the prophecy indicated, which left the one who always was. She knew that the Unspeakables didn’t consider her to be the Lioness because she hadn’t been given that prophecy to read last. The one who always was had been mentioned only in this last prophecy.

“There are more roles, more parts,” said Stonefoot, the Unspeakable Luna had met only minutes before. “Which suggests that the conflict will not be so simple as a duel between Mr Potter and the Dark Lord. His choice to take a Lady to his side is novel. We have seen a similar thing before in the Reality Mirror, but in a reality so far from our own we had not considered it relevant. From what we are able to ascertain, our reality has experienced the gravest threat from the Dark Lord, and there is the matter of prophecy, of course.”

The Unspeakables had more information than anyone could know what to do with, as far as Luna was concerned. To mine through alternate realities for information relevant to their own reality would generate an absurd amount of data, data which perhaps had meaningful insights if only one could understand why it was important. To see alternate versions of your own world, to know things about events which have occurred there… the magic involved must be ancient, and complex, and wonderful. But it would also make the Unspeakables act in peculiar ways, at least from the perspective of someone who didn’t have information gleaned from other worlds.

Luna hadn’t been confident that alternate realities, universes where history had played out differently, actually existed. As a theoretical construct it was useful – there had been many debates in the Ravenclaw common room about the subject, but nobody had ever valued her contributions there – but there had never been any real evidence for it either. It was considered an unsolvable problem, because how did one act outside of the boundaries of existence?
Someone had apparently solved it, if the Reality Mirror was any indication.

“I understand why you decided to bring us here, now,” said Luna. “Only, I don’t think you got everyone you wanted to get, did you?”

“No, we didn’t,” agreed Morningstar. “We had wanted to safeguard Ronald and Ginevra Weasley, and neutralise any future threat from Severus Snape, who is a wildcard in this conflict.”

Luna was sure then that most of what the Unspeakables knew had been gleaned from their experiments with the Reality Mirror, although nobody had said or explicitly suggested such a thing. Except bits and pieces of their story didn’t entirely match what she would have expected – Severus Snape, as far as she knew, worked for the Order of the Phoenix as a spy. Perhaps the Unspeakables didn’t know this or – and Luna had to consider it – they had seen realities in which Snape had betrayed the Order or never joined it at all.

“You’re planning on actively fulfilling the prophecies, I suppose?” she asked, although she didn’t really need an answer. Of course the Unspeakables were attempting to fulfil the prophecies: the kidnapping was certainly just one element of that plan.

Morningstar smiled, and Luna thought it was a genuine smile – she hadn’t seen any genuine smiles from her before now, but she had seen many forced smiles, and this was not that.

“We have already started,” she said. “We will take you through it, Miss Lovegood. Intelligence had indicated you would be open to co-operation. I’m glad to see it borne out.”

Luna smiled then too, because this was something quite like progress.

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1st February 2002 – Caer Tawel Hall of Mirrors

Because every one of them had finally relented and agreed to at least stop resisting, Harry and the others had been taken into the Hall of Mirrors to view the Reality Mirror, the object which the Unspeakables claimed allowed them to see into other realities.

They had a whole room dedicated to mirrors, but most of them were circular and horizontal, and occupied set intervals in the room. One of the mirrors was larger than the others, and took pride of place in the centre of the room.

“Is that the Reality Mirror?” asked Hermione, clearly talking about the biggest mirror in the room.

“It is,” confirmed Morningstar. “At first we had a lot of difficulty locating an appropriate reality to study. We kept getting realities related to the person casting the modified scrying spell, and not what we wanted to find. Eventually we wound what we wanted, but we believe it will be easier to locate a world with you here, Potter.”

“We’re going to look through it now?” said Hermione, sounding exactly as she’d sounded when they’d been at Hogwarts together.

“We are,” said Morningstar. “But first, an explanation of the Reality Mirror, and what we are able to do with it. We have been working on this magic for decades, and we finally managed to complete it in 1998. It is a modified scrying pool, and we are now able to view past events which have occurred in alternate realities. At first, we could only view the present, but because of our experience with time and the magic of time we have been able to surpass those limitations.”
“This is innovative magic,” said Hermione. “This is—it’s just decades ahead of even the Luxembourgish.”

“Thank you very much,” said Unspeakable Thomas, the elderly Unspeakable who had, Harry admitted, been very kind to him. “It was literally the greatest achievement I have ever made.”

“How do you focus the connection to another reality, and not just somewhere in this reality?” asked Luna, peering intently at the mirror.

“It would take me almost as long as the timer on the fortress ward to explain, but I think we have the time if you are interested,” said Thomas, his tone suggesting to Harry that he wasn’t joking.

“I’d like that,” said Luna, and then Harry had to suppose that she probably would.

“Thomas, if you could tune the Mirror to when we discussed?” suggested Morningstar, and at once Thomas moved to the great circular mirror and began to chant.

He placed his hands at the mirror’s rim, and began to move slowly around the circle, all the while chanting. The surface of the mirror began to distort and ripple, and it wasn’t a mirror anymore but a pool – a pool of swirling silver magic not unlike the memories in a Pensieve.

“The reality we attune to,” said Morningstar, her voice raised over the din created by Thomas’s chanting, “is the closest reality to our own. It is the only reality in which there is a variant of Lady Valmira, although she is not as important there as in this. In that reality, as in this one, Voldemort arrived with a vast army. He came in 1999, in time for us to document his entire rise.”

Harry became distracted from what Morningstar said because Whithall, the other elderly Unspeakable never seen without Thomas, joined in the chant, although he moved about in a circle counterclockwise around the mirror, waving his wand instead of running his hands over the mirror.

Slowly, the surface of the pool began to calm, and Harry thought he could faintly see an image. Morningstar continued, unfazed by the workings of the mirror or the distraction of her audience.

“In 1999 Harry Potter was kidnapped by Valmira and a group of European Death Eaters and used in a ritual to restore Voldemort to his corporeal form. With this magic he obtained protection against the sacrificial magic invoked by Lily Potter nearly twenty years ago. You did not die in that conflict due to Priori Incantatem, an obscure consequence of wandlore, but you were killed shortly after the duel with the Dark Lord by Valmira.” She paused for what Harry could only assume was dramatic effect and then continued. “We attune to the Battle for Hogwarts, the last battle against Voldemort in this world, and the day Albus Dumbledore of that reality died. Actually, it was the day you all died, except for Harry, whose death we covered already.”

Harry grimaced. Being shown a very similar reality where things had gone badly was obviously designed to get them to accept whatever the Unspeakables suggested, but he wasn’t entirely sure they weren’t just making it all up. Or, he was sure that wasn’t the case, but he didn’t think he was ready to be sure.

After he’d seen it, maybe.

He looked into the pool again, which now showed scenes of battle although no sound came from the pool. Thomas and Whitehall had stopped chanting, although each moved his wand in a series of elegant and arcane movements Harry had never seen combined before.

“No sound?” said Neville.
“We don’t want sound for this,” said Morningstar. “We just need to watch and see what happens.”

So Harry watched, and what he saw made him feel sick. Hermione slain by Bellatrix Lestrange, more than half-mad after decades locked away in Azkaban. Luna torn into pieces by a rampaging centaur, of all creatures. Voldemort killed Neville himself, sticking him through with the Sword of Gryffindor which Neville had wielded in an attempt to kill him.

He watched, helplessly, as Ron was taken down by Valmira in a flurry of lethal Dark curses. It seemed as if everyone he knew – although some people had been notably absent, such as Ginny and Fred, Remus and Hagrid – was fated to die in this battle.

He’d died already, and this Voldemort – disfigured and snakelike, unlike what everyone had said about their Voldemort – seemed more powerful for it. No spell touched the monster of a man as he stalked the battlefield, sometimes flying and sometimes walking, never running.

Even Dumbledore fell in the end, and his death hadn’t come quickly with the light of the Killing Curse. Voldemort had drawn it out, made it last long. Harry didn’t doubt that Dumbledore had experienced a never before seen level of pain and torment after what Voldemort had done.

He turned away.

“Look, you’ve made your point. That was the worst case scenario, surely?”

Harry knew that he was attempting to cling to the world that had been, not the world that existed now.

“We believe our situation is if anything worse, Potter,” said Morningstar sharply. “The Dark Lord used some unknown magic in this reality to bring himself back to life,” she said, “and that is not including the matter of the Horcruxes. We do not know where they are, what they number, or how to extract them. There are terms of prophecies left unfilled, and we are no closer to their fulfilment than we were upon hearing them. We need to take careful and considered steps.”

“And let the world fall to shit all around us?” said Neville, still watching the pool with what Harry thought was a morbid fascination. Harry glanced at it.

The vista had changed now, and showed a different reality.

“This reality does not have a comparable figure to Valmira,” said Morningstar, “but it is illustrative all the same. In this reality, the Dark Lord conquered Wizarding Britain – which includes Ireland in this reality – in 1996, after killing its Harry Potter during the Triwizard Tournament. Everything we have seen tells us this one thing, Potter: if you die nothing else matters.”

The scenes of devastation Harry had been promised played out in the pool, so Harry didn’t doubt her sincerity. He knew that she was right. Everyone had always been right about this kind of thing – the whispers had followed him forever.

In his first year it had been because he was Harry Potter and nobody had seen him in a decade. When Nicholas Flamel had come to the school to teach the students the rudiments of alchemy – something which hadn’t been taught in centuries due to lack of anyone alive who knew even the basics and was willing to teach others – they decided it was only obvious that Harry and his friends should have been involved when someone had attempted to steal Flamel’s notes on the Philosopher’s Stone (which he never travelled without, trusting nobody but himself to guard that secret).

In his second year when the Hogwarts Basilisk had escaped its chamber beneath the school and he
had been outed as a Parselmouth, people had said ‘of course he’s a Parselmouth, Harry Potter attracts that sort of thing’. Then when he and Ron had killed it with help from a phoenix and a magic sword word had spread all over.

And when Sirius Black had escaped Azkaban in third year, Harry hadn’t really been surprised to find that even the newspapers declared that he attracted this sort of attention. They’d painted him as a latent Dark wizard this time though, and not the hero of near-mythic proportions he was usually portrayed as.

Then in his fourth year when the Court of Fools arrived at Hogwarts to challenge the young wizards and witches of Britain Harry had actually been the first to joke about how he always attracted the strangest things. They hadn’t left until the end of fifth year, and the less said about that the better, Harry had always thought.

Even in his sixth year he’d been at the centre of a scandal, since Sirius Black had managed to find Peter Pettigrew – who had been posing as Ron’s rat for over a decade – and had been acquitted by Wizengamot.

Then there had been the Triwizard Tournament in seventh year, and Harry had actually won it – that had been great even if some people suggested it was only because he was ‘Harry Potter’ that he’d won.

Then of course he found out that actually, he was important. Not just to his parents or Wizarding Britain for whatever reasons, but important in the grand scheme of things. Dumbledore had told him of the prophecy when he’d graduated from Hogwarts, and fairly soon after that reports of the Dark Lord’s activities came streaming in.

Instead of saying everything he’d thought about, though, Harry continued to watch the myriad events unfold within the Reality Mirror.

If he was actually going to step up and be the one marked the Dark Lord’s equal he needed to know what the Dark Lord, what any of the Dark Lords, were truly capable of doing in his absence. He wanted to see realities where he’d won too, because surely those existed.

He had rather a lot of things to get through.
I tidied some things up that weren't right in chapter 3, but it's nothing too major (fixed some sentences, finished some paragraphs off). If you notice anything in this chapter I'd appreciate some feedback on it, but I will be checking it through again myself to see the things I've missed.

12th August 2011 – Sanctuary

Harry hadn’t really wanted to visit the Order at their Sanctuary, except Harry had really wanted to visit the Order at Sanctuary, so when Hermione had suggested it – well, she hadn’t suggested it so much as said it would happen – Harry had agreed.

He wanted to see Ron again. To speak with Remus, and Sirius, and half a dozen others. He even wanted to see Ginny again because, Merlin, it had been so long and he still loved her.

Yesterday had been her birthday, he remembered. Her birthday had been forever marred by the murder of Albus Dumbledore, and now again by the return of the Unspeakables.

He’d expected to feel guilty because a heavy layer of guilt followed him everywhere these days, but he hadn’t expected to feel more guilty when he saw – and felt – just how small their Sanctuary was. Situated on the Cornish coast Harry thought it a picturesque sort of place. Pleasant enough for a family home, he supposed. But unlike Avalon, which was at least two hundred miles long and contained over a thousand people, Sanctuary was more like the mid-sized estate. As war criminals and blood traitors Harry didn’t suppose most of the Order got a chance to leave very often.

“I know exactly how you feel,” said Hermione softly. “I told you Ron’s married Susan Bones, didn’t I?”

Harry nodded. She had, and he couldn’t see it himself – but then, he had been gone for nearly a decade. Lots of things had happened he wouldn’t have foreseen, including things he himself had chosen to do.

Professor McGonagall met them, and Harry was glad it was her and not somebody – anybody, really – else because he could deal with Professor McGonagall. He’d already dealt with Professor McGonagall on Avalon.

“This way, please,” said the elderly woman uncomfortably. “We have all—well,” she said, pursing her lips. “This way, please.”

So Harry followed her, and so did everyone else, and far too soon for Harry’s liking they had all been seated in a communal meeting space with the rest of the Order – and he supposed, any non-Order adults who lived at Sanctuary. Harry wasn’t exactly up to date regarding anything, really, but especially not the intricacies of domestic terror organisations.

They had called ahead to let everyone know they planned on coming, at least. Didn’t help much with the way he felt totally, completely exposed though. Was Ginny staring at him? Could he really
see Ron frowning? Hannah Abbott looked nervous, and Susan Bones – well, Susan Bones had never been a particularly bubbly or charming witch, but she sat between Ron and Katie Bell with a face like a Crup’s arse.

That wasn’t fair, he knew. They weren’t the ones in the dog-house here. That privilege went to him, Hermione, Neville and Luna – the only four of them who had been ‘lucky’ enough to escape the war. He supposed it had been an escape, on balance, but that still didn’t turn Avalon into a holiday. It hadn’t been and never would be – the damned place was cursed, first by Morgana, then by Merlin, and finally by the sidhe. Avalon was beautiful and wild and powerful and lovely, but it was dangerous and cursed, too. Still, he knew that his time on Avalon would have been safer, better, than the same amount of time spent outside.

After all, the magic of five prophecies swirled around Britain, watching and waiting. At least three of which directly referenced him, Harry Potter, and suggested that this war couldn’t be won until something drastic happened.

Which was a fucking terrible excuse.

“Mate,” said Ron carefully after an extended and awkward silence. “I think you should explain. Hermione said some of it, but… frankly, Harry, we need more.”

A chorus of nods and other signs of assent rippled through the room.

“All right,” said Harry. He’d rehearsed what he was going to say. Once he wouldn’t have, and he would have said the wrong things, or the right things in the wrong way, or done something similar which would have fucked up everything. Being stuck behind a fortress ward for nearly a decade had allowed him to develop something akin to patience, although Harry didn’t quite feel comfortable calling it that because he didn’t think it was proper patience.

After all, he only had to wait until the ward broke, right?

“Exactly ten years ago yesterday evening Dark Lady Valmira murdered Albus Dumbledore. Some of us weren’t there at the time,” he continued. “We were on holiday in Wales. For Ginny’s… for your birthday,” he said, turning to Ginny. “Happy birthday,” he said, and he meant it, but then he pushed on having said it, even if he wished he hadn’t. “The Unspeakables hadn’t calculated that,” he said bitterly. “They knew Dumbledore was going to die – they’ve got this thing called a Reality Mirror,” he explained poorly, “but they thought they had more time.”

“The Reality Mirror is a device created by Unspeakable Thomas,” added Luna softly. “It allows us to see into other realities and extrapolate back to our own. It is possible to control the degree of closeness to our own reality in the observed reality, but the Unspeakables realised fairly quickly that our reality is experiencing a vastly more complex problem than most other realities in our sphere.”

“We’re a bit of an outlier in that regard,” said Hermione. “There are more outlandish, more unusual, realities of course – but the Unspeakables have a concept they call ‘the parsimonious cosmic plurality’, which basically means that there is are infinite subsections of infinity, of reality, wherein there is a high degree of similarity between a given number of realities. Only within our larger sphere can we make useful extrapolations or hypothesise based on events.”

“What she means,” said Neville, “is that there’s a universe out there where I’m the Boy Who Lived, and that one is relevant to us a bit. But there’s a universe out there where there’s never been a Boy Who Lives, and that’s still slightly relevant to us. But the universe where everyone’s a dragon probably isn’t useful to us.” He paused. “Sorry, Hermione, but if I hadn’t interrupted you
you’d have started talking about ‘twelfth-dimensional thought constructs’ and we’d be here until
the cosmos turns to dust.”

“So there’s, like, another me out there?” asked Ron, frowning. “Where?”

Harry couldn’t answer that, but Hermione looked as if she were about to try – except Luna
answered first.

“The premise of your question is meaningless, Ronald,” she said. “It is a continuum of reality, a
spectrum of Ron Weasleys. You are you and you are here, but Ron Weasley is Ron Weasley
somewhere else.” She paused. “I always thought the cosmos was shaped like a dirigible plum, but
now I think it’s more like a ball made out of thin wooden sticks.”

“Right,” said Ron, echoing what Harry felt. He’d never been able to wrap his head around Luna’s
‘the shape of infinity’ idea, and he expected he never would be able to. Why was the multiverse
shaped like a ball made out of sticks?

“Yeah, anyway,” said Harry. “I spent a lot of time looking in the Reality Mirror. I saw this one
reality where V—the Dark Lord came back in 1994, and we’d defeated him by 1997.”

“What was different?” whispered Minerva.

“He was insane,” said Harry. “Completely, utterly, insane. He didn’t have an army like he did here,
just about twenty or so Death Eaters. No Valmira, not even a figure comparable to her.
Dumbledore still died – in 1996 – but was killed by Snape on Dumbledore’s orders.” He didn’t
wait for them to respond or even affirm they’d heard him. “Professor Dumbledore dies in almost
every reality we’ve been able to access, especially in those closest to our own. That’s why the
Unspeakables acted so quickly after Dumbledore’s death – within six months they acted to prevent
an escalation of the war, which always happens after Dumbledore dies. It’s like he’s the tipping
point.”

“For every reality where we won,” said Neville, “there are at least two where we didn’t.”

“The war escalated regardless,” responded Remus, “and we live in its consequences.”

Harry shook his head.

“I’m sorry, I was using escalated the way the Unspeakables use it… I meant that after Dumbledore
dies, the war becomes charged with the magic of prophecy. I think there weren’t as many
prophecies in the other realities.”

“It would certainly make sense,” interjected Hermione. “There are five prophecies regarding this
current conflict.”

“There are only really two, if you see two of them as a single prophecy and three of them as
another,” disagreed Luna.

“My point was that there are rather a lot of things being dictated or suggested by Fate,” said
Hermione, “not that it is difficult to tell whether we’re dealing with five separate prophecies or two
superprophecies.”

“And that’s why you all got to sit behind your fortress ward, is that it?” said Ginny, speaking for
the first time. “Because the Unspeakables were worried you might break, and their prophecies
would mean nothing?”
Harry shrugged.

“Honestly, that’s why they did it. I don’t think what they did was okay, really I don’t,” said Harry, because he didn’t. He really, really didn’t. What the Unspeakables had done was cruel and horrible and absolutely not their choice to make, but it was what they had done. He couldn’t change the past, and the Unspeakables had confirmed it would be impossible even to slightly change their actions through Time-Turners because they’d set the operation in motions months before even the most powerful Time-Turner could manage.

“I just don’t know what I can do about that now. I was angry at them for so long. I refused to help them. Then I helped them, but only because it wasn’t just for me, it was for the Muggleborns they’d kidnapped too.”

He paused, sure of what to say but unsure whether he should actually say it.

“We were kidnapped and we made the best of it,” said Neville. “There really isn’t any way to break a time-locked fortress ward. It’s really old magic. It’s what Morag Muir used to defend Diagon Alley against the Unseelie Court, because the ritual can only break it from inside the ward.”

“I know about time-locked fortress wards,” said Hannah Abbott. “My mother’s mother was a Muir, and she passed down a really old diary,” she said slowly. “One of the things it mentions are time-locked fortress wards.” She said it warily, as if she didn’t really want to give credence to the idea but had to, because she knew it could be true.

Harry didn’t blame her, or any of the others, for their standoffishness. He’d be standoffish with him too.

“But you want us to start fighting again, don’t you?” said Susan. “When he’s won, the world is different now…”

“You can’t be happy with this,” snapped Hermione. “We’re sorry, but none of this is our fault!”

“It’s not ours either!” snapped Susan in return. “Of course we’re not fucking happy, I mean, Circe’s festering cunt, Hermione! Look around you.”

“I think what Susan meant to say is that we’ve adapted to our situation,” said Remus diplomatically.

“I meant what I said, thanks,” said Susan dully, but Harry saw Ron grasp her hand firmly.

“She’s right,” said Harry, and then everyone turned to stare at him. “Both of them, I mean. Hermione’s right that this isn’t our fault, and Susan’s right it isn’t yours. We don’t have any right to ask you to start fighting again. The war is over and we lost, even if some of us didn’t get to fight in it.” He sounded a bit defeatist here, which wasn’t really what he wanted to achieve, but he pushed on regardless. “None of you have to fight. We’re not even here to ask you to do that anyway, we’re here because there are people here we consider family.”

He looked each and every member of the Order in the room directly in the eyes. All the Weasleys, including Ginny, and even Molly and Arthur, who’d remained silent the entire time, merely watching. The remnants of the Order’s old guard, and then the new guard. Every single person in the room, except for Neville, Luna and Hermione.

“But I have to fight. I literally can’t not fight him. Everyone here knows the prophecy. Except it’s not as simple as that. Neville and Luna and Hermione – they all need to fight too, because like we
said, there’s more than one prophecy. It’s all about choices, in the end.”

“You remember what we said when Dumbledore told you that he might come back?” said Ron. “Because I meant it then, and I still mean it now.” He turned to look at Susan. “I made a promise. I made a promise ages ago, but I was always taught to remember my promises.”

“That’s the man I raised,” said Arthur quietly from the back of the room, just loud enough for the sound to carry.

“Thanks, mate,” said Harry. “I really mean it. I—look, we have a plan. The four of us, and the Unspeakables, and we think we can do it. We…” he floundered.

Luckily for him, Luna picked up where couldn’t finish, opening her mouth to sing words etched upon Harry’s mind.

“Out of the darkness comes a light and a song.
A song to be sung, a choice to be chosen.

In the ashes of what has gone before
You can build something better.

The Mother of All Evil has come unrelenting.
The World-Snake will devour all that is good.

When everything has been lost, and hope has gone,
It will be time. The one with the power will rise.

The Lioness will be forged.
The Singer of Songs will sing.

The Warrior and the Maiden will fight again,
Harder and stronger than ever before.

Forces best left sleeping will be woken,
And a price will be paid.
A place will be made for the Breaker of Chains,

Should He choose to fill it.

From a song will come revolution,

And from revolution, peace.’’

Luna smiled, and Hermione rolled her eyes.

“So dramatic, honestly,” muttered Hermione. “That’s the Prophecy of a Mad Muggle – although I think he was actually an uncontacted, untrained Muggleborn Seer. That’s the prophecy the Unspeakables based their decision making on, largely. ‘When everything has been lost, and hope has gone, it will be time.’” she quoted. “But that can only happen after the World-Snake – the Dark Lord – has devoured ‘all that is good’. I’m not saying I agree with what the Unspeakables did, but that prophecy is a large part of the reason why they did it.”

The small room exploded into the most sedate and contained form of chaos Harry had ever seen. Nobody moved, and everyone spoke only in comically loud whispers.

“What’s the ‘price’?” Harry heard Fred say.

“Has to be death,” replied George. “That’s always the price.”

‘The one with the power’ is obviously Harry,” said Katie Bell.

“But who is ‘the Breaker of Chains’?” said Susan, frowning and then looking at Ron carefully.

“In the ashes of what has gone before you can build something better,’” muttered Arthur. “Certainly sounds uplifting, doesn’t it?”

Harry realised then that he didn’t really care what anyone else was thinking. No, that was unfair – he did, but not that much. Cautiously he looked at Molly, who hadn’t said anything at all thus far, and that was unusual.

She seemed to be aware of his thoughts, however, because she cleared her throat to speak and suddenly, everyone stopped talking to listen to her.

“Family stands by family,” said Molly. “Family doesn’t step away when things get difficult. Family doesn’t stop being family just because somebody’s done something we don’t like or made choices we think aren’t the right ones. And family certainly doesn’t blame family for circumstances outside of a person’s control.” She peered at Harry then. “We’ve had a tough time of it, on the outside,” she said. “We’ve seen our friends and family members die fighting him. Merlin only knows how many people I’ve seen go down fighting that monster of a man.” Arthur placed his hand firmly around Molly’s. “But that’s why I still believe he needs to be stopped. Not one, not two, but three generations of wizards and witches have lost family to that man.”

“You might not be mine by blood and birth and magic, Harry Potter, but I’ll cut down anyone who says you’re not my son just as much as Ron or any of them.”
Her fierce look told Harry that she meant it, and Harry believed she could do it, too.

That dissipated a lot of the tension in the room, although not all of it.

“I can’t speak for the whole of the Order,” continued Molly, “but you’ve – you’ve all – got my support,” she said firmly. “

“And mine,” said Arthur.

“Well I already said, didn’t I?” said Ron.

The mood of the room had changed. Harry could feel that. Most people in the room were Weasleys or married to Weasleys, after all, and the others, well – they each had their own motives for joining the Order in the first place, but those generally aligned.

“Well I never thought we should have stopped fighting in the first place,” asserted Professor McGonagall.

“What’s actually changed?” said Susan. “Nothing’s changed, as far as I can see, except fifty-odd people and Harry fucking Potter have come out of hiding. What’s fifty Unspeakables compared with hundreds of Death Eaters? We aren’t talking First War levels here, Potter. We’re not even talking War for Pureblood Freedom levels of Death Eater, and that was fucking enough. The ranks have swollen. When we were at school, just after the First War, the Ministry conducted a census. There were twenty thousand witches and wizards in Britain, not including the ten in Ireland, when we were all at school. Before him, before this started all, the last Ministry census counted fifty-thousand, two hundred and nine wizards or witches in Britain and Ireland. Between when we graduated and when he came back, a lot of the people who weren’t killed but fled Britain came back to it and brought their families with them.”

Harry was vaguely aware that yes, that was how many witches and wizards there were in Britain and Ireland, and that a significant proportion of these at least sympathised with Voldemort. But what did that have to do with the cost of a Chocolate Frog?

“We’re not sure how many wizards there are anymore,” said Fred, “Lots of people died, but then the Ministry mandated four courses of fertility potion treatment to all married women. He brought over at least five hundred Death Eater and their families. Now he has ten thousand Death Eaters.”

“That’s ridiculous,” said Hermione. “That’s one-fifth of the population. One in five people in the British Isles is a Death Eater…”

“But quite,” said Remus. “There has been, ah, significant population growth – what the Dark Lord has done here, he and his Lady did in parts of Europe before they came here. The deaths our community has experienced have been mitigated, in terms of population growth, by the waves of immigration brought about by Death Eaters and sympathisers from all over Europe. We’ve become a breeding ground of radicalisation, where young men and women from all across the continent can come. Some of them are starting to go back home, and the foreign Ministries are starting to get rather cross.”

“So nothing has changed except to get worse,” said Susan. “His armies are bigger than ever before. More of the population supports the regime than ever before. The rest of the world has given up on us fixing this problem. The problem is so big that we’re fucking exporting it to Europe.”

“And everyone sits in Wizengamot and congratulates each other,” said George bitterly. “Remember when the birth-rate was at its highest in three centuries? From their reaction you’d
think being dosed up on fertility potions popping out Death Eater kids is better than Christmas.”

“We’ve got hope,” said Luna. “This time, we have hope. We have a plan. We know the contents of
the prophecies. They don’t. We can do this. The universe literally gave us a framework for a plan.”

“We’re not just blindly stumbling around in the dark,” said Hermione. “We’ve worked with
the Unspeakables with this. We won’t force you to do anything you don’t agree to do.”

“But we will accept any help,” said Harry, grinning. Despite Sorrowful Susan and her gloomy
outlook – which Harry understood, and he supposed if Ron married her she couldn’t be too bad –
he was happy. He felt like he was home again, and wasn’t that weird, since he’d never even been to
Cornwall before?

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The conference had broken up into smaller groups after a little while, as Ron dragged Susan aside
to explain his reasoning to her, and Fred and Katie moved off to talk. Even Neville left to catch up
with Hannah, who he had been waiting for for nearly a decade. Luna found something to distract
her, and Hermione was speaking with Professor McGonagall.

Harry just stood around awkwardly until he was enveloped into a massive hug by Molly.

“I can’t… we don’t want you to think we’re happy with you all being somewhere else for so long,”
said Molly when the hug was over. “But the Unspeakables were always—there have always been
so many stories,” she said. “So we do understand.”

“Of course we do,” said Arthur.

Harry relaxed a bit.

“It’s… the only way we could have broken the ward is to take blood from a child, forcefully; flesh
from a mother, knowingly given; and hair from a sidhe, taken under the light of the moon.” He
knew the terms of the fortress ward as well as he knew his own name. “That’s the only way. I
spent so long looking for another way out. It took me three years to give up, in the end. It’s not
even Dark magic,” he said. “It’s ancient Light magic. I checked.”

Molly frowned, but Harry wasn’t entirely sure why.

“Sometimes that’s worse,” said Arthur darkly. “Dark magic and Dark wizards aren’t inherently
evil,” he said. “We know that. Weasleys have never been big on Dark magic, don’t get me wrong,
but there’s more to it than good and evil. But sometimes the ancient Light wizards were even worse
– Dark can mean wildness, which can be beautiful and not at all evil. Light can mean order, which
is necessary and good, but… some of the ancient Light spells used to promote order would be
classified Dark if they were created today.”

Harry knew that, more or less. Magic was magic, and wizards had crafted a series of classifications
around that magic. There were many and overlapping categories and classifications applied to
magic, but probably the largest and broadest categories were ‘Light’ or ‘Dark’ – and a category
formed through exclusivity, ‘Neutral’. Dark magic often involved emotion, whether positive or
negative. Magic embodying an aspect of Darkness – wildness, chaos, domination, emotion – could
usually be called Dark magic, although a lot of more common spells which should be called Dark
weren’t, largely due to prejudice against Dark magic and Dark magic users.

The fortress ward was definitely not Dark magic. It required no emotion – not even love, which
Harry thought was a component necessary for such a powerful protective effect – and could be
considered a most ancient kind of Light magic. Lightness – order, freedom, choice, rationality –
had been interpreted to mean many different things, but the fortress ward was definitely ancient
Light magic.

The process of its creation fulfilled the aspect of choice, because it required a willing sacrifice. It
embodied the aspect of order, which also sometimes meant safety or protection, but also unity of
the group. It even embodied the aspect of freedom and choice together, since the decision to favour
protection and safety over freedom represented a sacrifice of liberty.

He still didn’t like it. He’d given up caring whether magic was Light or Dark magic several years
ago, when he’d realised that Dark magic was only more dangerous because intention mattered.
You needed to want to hurt, to kill, to maim for a lot of the spells to work – but the reason why you
wanted to was also a factor. Dark magic was easy to use often because of magical feedback that
happened through its common use of emotion in magic.

Something similar to Dark magic addiction happened to people who overused Cheering Charms,
but it was called something else because ‘Cheering Charms aren’t Dark magic’.

“Yeah, the fortress ward is probably one of those. It’s extremely powerful because it requires a
willing human sacrifice. Truly willing, and not coerced in any kind of way. Hermione said it was
interesting.”

“Well, she would say that, wouldn’t she?” said Molly, and then quickly changed the subject.
“Arthur, we should go check on the little ones… Don’t you dare go anywhere, Harry Potter!” she
said sternly. “You are all staying for dinner this evening.”

And then both of the elder Weasleys left, and Harry was again alone.

Except not really alone, because Ginny had been watching him the whole time, hadn’t she? Not
that she’d got up from where she sat until… until now.

Fuck. He was going to have to talk to her, wasn’t he? For a Gryffindor, a reckless fool, Harry Potter
was a coward.

“I didn’t wait for you, you know,” said Ginny quietly, too quiet for the noise to carry.

“I didn’t either,” he decided to say, because that was the truth and—well. He hadn’t expected her to
just jump right out and say it.

“Hannah waited for Neville, but… I didn’t think you’d mind,” said Ginny. “I wouldn’t have.”

“No, you’re right. It’s not that I stopped loving you, it’s that…”

“I was ten years away. You could have waited, you know. I don’t expect you to have done, but…
you could have.” She left unspoken that, if he could have waited, so could she. It wasn’t as if she
thought he was dead. Although… the Unspeakables hadn’t exactly proclaimed their allegiances
from the rooftops, had they? He could have been killed by them, even as the people of Britain
thought it had been Voldemort.

“Yeah.”

“It was Dean Thomas,” she said. Harry wasn’t too surprised by that. “He’s dead.”

“I’m sorry.”
He was. He was always fucking sorry. She didn’t say it wasn’t his fault. That was half the problem, wasn’t it?

“So what do you plan to do now?”

“I’m going to bring him down, Gin,” he said. “Him and his wife, and then we’re going to gut the Ministry and build a new one. You heard the prophecy. We’re going to do that. Build something better.”

“I thought you didn’t like Divinations,” she said.

“I don’t. It’s bullshit. But prophecy is real, and I’ve seen what the Dark Lord has done in other realities. I’ve seen how they’ve won, too. One reality faced a much more powerful, but much more mad, version of him. The Harry in that reality was a Slytherin, if you can believe that. He managed to build a great world out of his fight with—the Dark Lord. It’s been twelve years since they won, and sometimes I just—I watch to see what happens next.”

“You really do believe in the prophecies. All of them. What do the others say?”

“My whole life is a prophecy, Gin. All of it. Since before I was born, even,” he said. “And the Unspeakables have been working with these prophecies for a while. One of them is two thousand years old, older even than Hogwarts. It’s still about now. This war is important.”

No doubt sensing that Harry didn’t want to talk about the other prophecies – they weren’t all about him anyway, and one new prophecy was enough to talk about for now – Ginny changed the topic slightly.

“Where exactly were you? Hermione didn’t say.”

“The locals call it Ynys Afal, which means ‘apple island’. You’d know it as Avalon.”

“The Avalon? But it’s been gone for centuries, everyone thought the sidhe took it back to the Otherworld!”

“Nope. After the Tylwyth Teg used it to flee Morag Muir the humans – the daughters of Morgana, if you believe the legend – sealed off the island and kept it hidden ever since. Hermione said the daughters of Morgana couldn’t have done it because Morgana died at least five hundred years before it happened, but I don’t think it’s that important, really.”

That wasn’t a legend on Avalon, of course. It was local history. But they hadn’t really written any of it down at the time, so Harry wasn’t sure they were exactly right.

“It’s quite dangerous,” he added. “When the sidhe left Britain for the Otherworld they took all their wildness and beauty and stuff with them, leaving the banshees and boggarts and stuff behind. They left some Darker, sturdier stuff too – but it all got trapped on Avalon. The locals believe they’re meant to keep the creatures on Avalon, but I think they’re just rationalising so they don’t feel so bad about it.”

“What sort of Darker stuff?”

Harry wrinkled his nose.

“They don’t really have names, they’re not specific kinds of thing. Some of them are really old, older than Stonehenge even. They’re evil, just… evil. It’s why we all use Dark curses so much,” Harry said. Dark curses were the only things capable of stalling some of the creatures on Avalon,
and often the only things capable of hurting skilled, sane, Death Eaters, too. Harry had made something of a study of war, in the last decade. This particular conflict especially. “Nothing else even hits them.”

“And people have just lived there for a thousand years?” said Ginny incredulously.

“It’s not all the time,” said Harry. “Usually only at defined intervals, when the space between our world and the Otherworld – they’re stuck in the gap, I think – gets closer.”

“Hallowe’en?” guessed Ginny.

He nodded.

“That’s a big one.”

Their appearance generally coincided with important celestial events and magical occurrences of the old pagan calendars. One could literally plan a calendar around it.

Harry supposed talking with Ginny again wasn’t so bad after all.

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Neville could have explained to her how difficult it had been to wait for her, because it had been. It had been incredibly difficult. He’d flirted and danced, even kissed, some girls on Avalon, but none of them had been Hannah.

He’d been prepared for the eventuality that Hannah wouldn’t wait for him. He’d seen Harry not wait for Ginny, Hermione not wait for Ron – and he wasn’t stupid, not even then. Just a bit naïve.

Hannah had waited for him though, just like he’d waited for her, and it just felt right. She understand how difficult it had been because she had done it too. They hadn’t even said much of anything to each other anyway, just sat and held each other’s hands and stared. Not a whole lot of conversation going on, really.

Which wasn’t to say they hadn’t communicated because they had. He understood that Hannah still loved him – or at least, the Neville he had been – and Neville still loved her, or the Hannah she had been. Even if they were different people now, they were different people who still loved each other. Or at least a version of each other, and that was a start.

It was more than a lot of people had, he supposed.

“Everything is different now, isn’t it?” said Hannah suddenly. “I know you’ve got your plans, and I’m willing to listen to them, but you all need to know things about what the world is like now. What’s different and what’s the same, what’s possible and what isn’t possible. Society changed while you were away,” she said.

Neville thought that was a bit of an understatement, but then – Hannah had never been one to shy away from a bit of hard work, and if understating the problem made it seem easier to tackle, who was Neville to judge? He’d spent years in Hogwarts assuming everything was much more difficult than it actually was and he’d got nowhere because it seemed too big to even start.

Then Hannah kissed him, and didn’t stop until he kissed her back.

“I love you, Neville Longbottom. But don’t you ever do that to me again, do you hear? If you’re not staying here with me, I’m coming wherever it is the Unspeakables have had you.”
Neville could have said it was too dangerous, or that it was meant to be secret, or one of any number of things, really.

But he didn’t want to, so instead he kissed her again, and again, and again, and then agreed.

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Of course it had been Hermione who had made the decision to speak with Ron and Susan, and not the other way around, because Hermione had always been the adult in her relationship with Ron, and despite a decade of growth, old habits were hard to kick when confronted with figures from the past.

So she had gone to speak with them after she was sure enough time had passed for them to sort out – at least a little bit – whatever it was that was going on between them. Hermione supposed it might be rather a lot, given the circumstances, but given the circumstances she had rather a lot she wanted to say, too.

“I wanted to congratulate you on your wedding,” she said as sincerely as she possibly could. She did mean it, even if it hurt her to. She’d loved Ron – she was happy he was happy, that he hadn’t been alone for ten years. Merlin only knew how lonely Hermione had felt at times – the other half of the time she’d felt guilty for not being lonely.

She understood. She wanted them to know that she understood, even if she didn’t see why in the world Ron would end up with Susan Bones. That was another side of war, she supposed.

“Thank you,” said Susan primly.

“There isn’t any hard feeling,” she continued. “I didn’t—well, I didn’t get married of course, but I didn’t wait for you, either.”

She watched Ron carefully and saw that the fact hurt him, and it hurt him even though he knew it was unfair.

Good, she thought.

“That’s only fair,” said Ron weakly. “I’m—we’re happy, and that’s what matters, right?” he said, and looked to Susan for confirmation. “We’re happy, and we weren’t before.”

“We have to fight for happiness these days,” said Susan. “That’s about all I have energy to fight for, now. We’ve got kids.”

“Someone did mention,” Hermione decided to say. Weirdly, that made it better for her – she didn’t want children, not yet. There was still work to be done, and Merlin – she was only thirty years old! The Ministry of Divine Health had published recent statistics on fertility – they’d got that from the scrying pool centred on the Daily Prophet press office – which suggested witches remained fertile even up to the age of seventy, depending on magical strength.

She had time for babies. What she needed now was to finish the war and not end up dead, and then she could think about babies.

“How many?” she asked.

“There’s Edgar and Fabian,” said Ron, “the twins. They’re five now, I think.”

“Nearly six, Ron. I had Amelia two years ago, but that’s it for now,” said Susan, sounding warmer
and happier than Hermione had heard her yet.

Maybe there was something in babies, although she wasn’t about to test that hypothesis quite yet.

12th August 2011 – Emergency Wizengamot Legislative Chamber, Ministry of Magic

Sirius Black had never, not once in all his years alive, thought he’d ever see the inside of the Wizengamot chambers again, at least not as a free man. But then the War for Pureblood Freedom was over and lost, and unlike certain blood traitors – most notably, the Weasley family – he could at least claim amnesty due to his breeding, social standing, and Dark pedigree.

He hadn’t wanted to. He’d wanted to soldier on and continue the war, this time staging attacks against Voldemort and the Death Eaters as terrorists, freedom fighters. At first the others had agreed, but as they became increasingly pushed out of society – whilst he was courted by the newly legitimised Death Eaters on the basis of his blood.

He supposed it made a queer sort of sense. Pureblood ideology was focused so much on blood that it was to its own detriment, as Sirius’s blood status and Dark pedigree mattered more than his individual actions in fighting against the Death Eaters.

After all, the war was over now. The Purebloods (capital P, which meant ‘the worthy’) had won. Blood-status and magical history mattered now, and mattered in all of the old ways again.

Sirius Black could not be denied a seat in the legislative chamber of Wizengamot – not the court, but then, he had a seat on that, too – because he headed the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black. The system of magical inheritance which determined that would not allow any female member of the house to inherit over a living, male direct heir. Sirius lived, and although he thought that Voldemort could kill him if he so desired, the Dark Lord didn’t much care about Pureblood politics.

Not now that he’d won, at any rate. He’d been remarkably quiet for the last decade, and that scared Sirius.

In Voldemort’s negligence the people of Britain had stepped in to provide what he could not, and a series of ghastly reforms had been voted through Wizengamot each time. Much of the population had been more or less enslaved, reduced to second-class citizenship – not even allowed wands, in many cases.

Unmarried Muggleborns were rounded up and shipped off to so-called ‘new communities’, and everyone knew what those actually were. Everyone with half a brain of course, which discounted half of Wizengamot right off the bat.

Wizengamot had convened an emergency legislative session.

‘Colour me surprised’, Sirius had remarked to Astoria Greengrass when she had told him. He’d played his rescue of her brilliantly, he thought. Swooping in like a dashing, Pureblood hero to defend her against the vile mudblood.

All complete bollocks, but then, Sirius always had had a way of charming ladies.

He wondered exactly how Lucius Malfoy would spin this. The man hadn’t arrived yet. He’d wait until the chamber was filled – and unlike regular sessions, the chamber would overflow into standing room only – until he arrived.
No doubt fresh from a briefing with Voldemort, who’d gone and set himself up as ‘King of Wizarding Britain’. As if wizards believed in monarchy! It had been accepted by many Dark Purebloods though precisely because it allowed them to occupy the place of the aristocracy, the rightful stewards and wardens of the King’s realm.

Not that anyone in public actually referred to a King or a Queen – it was distasteful, and not really official to boot, so could even be lethal if overheard by the right people.

And the right people were everywhere these days. Most of the work he did for the Order was extremely deep cover, and largely only concerned politicking and trafficking gossip. Hardly the fight he remembered, but then – they lived in a different world now, a world his great-grandfather would have been proud to live in.

And prepared to live in, too. Old cultural rules had been reinstated. The ‘creeping Christianisation’ of Wizarding Britain had been halted, with Christmas banned in Hogwarts in favour of older, more ‘magical’ celebrations. Some nutters had even attempted to change from a Christian-based calendar to an older form, and that was nuts in and of itself. Half the world used Muggle Christian dates, even other wizards. Sirius didn’t even care for the idea that there had been a ‘creeping Christianisation’ of wizards in the first place, since it wasn’t like wizards had suddenly started believing in the Muggle God.

Why would they, when Jesus had been a documented and well-attested powerful wizard in the vein of Merlin? Bloke probably smoked some things he shouldn’t have, but that didn’t make him the ‘Son of God’, or whatever it was Muggles thought.

‘There is no God but magic’, wasn’t that was his grandmother used to say? Of course, she’d also said that Muggle hunting should be legal and the only good mudblood was a dead mudblood.

Eventually Malfoy entered the chamber, and the low buzz of the idiots filling the benches stopped immediately.

“Britain has last night been the subject of a most brutal and vicious terrorist attack,” he began. “Late yesterday evening a series of raids were carried out by an as-yet unknown terrorist organisation claiming to represent the Unspeakables. I have drafted emergency legislation which aims to prevent domestic travel to Ireland, which is a current warzone. We shall erect wards preventing portkey, Floo and Apparition to the island. Intelligence has indicated that the threat comes from the Irish Court, no doubt a response to our recent declaration of war.”

That was rich. The Irish Court were pissing themselves. They’d asked the French to help them, but the French refused to get involved. The Germans were staying out of it all, since a similar sort of feeling existed in Germany to the one in Britain. At least in some circles… which were admittedly mostly in Britain at the moment, learning how to best aide the movements in their own countries.

He was scared, and he was a half-mad Gryffindor with basically nothing to lose, not anymore. Everything that could be taken had been, up to and including his good conscience. He did what he could, now, but that amounted to bailing water out of a sinking rowboat in the middle of the ocean.

“Moves have been made to destabilise the Centenary Ward protecting Tara from direct assault,” continued Malfoy. “We expect to bring down the ward within weeks. In the meanwhile we shall focus our attention on the outlying towns and settlements.”

Voldemort hadn’t even had to work hard to raise positive sentiments about the war in Britain. Ever since 1707, when the Irish Court voted against unification with the British Ministry, relations between the two countries had been strained. Not hostile, but strained. With the wave of support
Dark Pureblood ideology had received in Britain – and other ideologies besides – war was almost inevitable. If it hadn’t been a government sanctioned war it would have been a youth war, an unofficial war waged that would have eventually resulted in the collapse of the Irish Court.

The Ministry would have swooped in to pick up the pieces, of course.

But the mood in Britain had been angling towards war for a while, since there were too many new additions to society (in the form of the Death Eaters), and too many changes. If not Ireland, where? Civil war in Britain would have been just as bad, but quickly stamped out by the Dark Lord and Lady. Sirius understood why they had been keen to move the Death Eaters to war again, since so many of them were primarily warriors now, not the elite group Voldemort had crafted in his early days.

Too many people to rule, that was the problem, especially without a distraction from everything horrible going on. Most people in Britain who mattered – the more prestigious half-bloods, the Purebloods not considered blood traitors, and even some talented Muggleborns – didn’t have a difficult life, didn’t have anything particularly bad to worry about. There were stories, and of course Voldemort was an evil man, but they were safe, too.

Only the people on the margins of society really cared and worried about the things they heard.

“Are we sure it wasn’t the Unspeakables?” dared one brave Wizengamot member. Sirius recognised her as Charity Burbage, former Hogwarts professor and now member of the Mudblood Integrationist wing of Wizengamot voters. She walked a dangerous line most days, although the Dark Lord preferred – now that he was the highest authority – to work within the laws he had said.

Sirius though he got a perverse kind of pleasure from playing along with rules he knew he could break at any time. Dissent was tolerated, but probably only because the mainstream position was so secure.

Burbage and others like her, even Sirius really, were fringe politicians. People who could say whatever they liked – within reason – because they were Pureblood, rich, and willing to say it. Voldemort had nothing to fear and so, feared nothing.

“A fringe group, perhaps,” offered Malfoy, “no doubt using some foul necromancy to produce a simulacrum of the late Potter boy. But certainly with no connection to the Ministry.”

Sirius wondered when someone would bring that up. He couldn’t, not with his position being as it was. He would have to assert, of course, that his godson was dead – he had mourned, but accepted the loss, publicly. Thankfully it had been Malfoy himself.

Questions would be asked all over Britain soon enough about whether Harry Potter had really died, and exactly what last night had meant. That was obviously an intended consequence of whatever it was the Unspeakables had planned.

He’d hoped for years Harry would come back, with or without the Unspeakables, and not because he wanted him to fight in some damned war. He could live with the new regime – he’d proven that by doing it – but he wanted his godson back.

“The damage in Hogsmeade alone will require compensation to the victims of course,” said Melodia Honeyduke, “not to mention the cost of Obliviations, if rumours regarding the Muggle disturbances last night prove true. How does the Ministry intend to pay for this?”

“The Business Faction will not agree to any tax increases during this session!” interrupted
Apollonius Dredge, owner of Dredge Plumbing Solutions, the premier provider of magical plumbing in Britain. Sirius snorted.

Of course he wouldn’t support a tax rise, since those tended to overwhelmingly affect business and mercantile rather than Pureblood dynastic wealth.

And of course that was the important thing right now, not the return of a dead man or a rogue government department, or the many victories they had won over the regime the night before. Not those things.

Never those things.

“The affair does raise the question of allowing some upstanding mudbloods in the new communities the use of wands, of course,” Sirius drawled, deciding that if the Business Faction could bring up taxes, he could bring up the issue of wand access again. “For protection against terrorists.”

“Absolutely out of the question!” roared Elphinstone MacNair, almost foaming at the mouth at the very prospect of such a wildly outlandish thing that would have been commonplace only six years ago. “To do so would undermine the very stability of this government and society!”

Sirius thought that was rather the point, but conceded not everyone shared his opinion that that would, in fact, be a good thing. Which said a lot about the company he kept these days, and a lot about the company that was even there to be kept in the first place.

He glanced down at Malfoy, still stood at the centre of the circular chamber. He never displayed much of a reaction to anything that was said in the chamber. It would be poor form. But Sirius knew what he thought anyway, since he knew how the man thought. It was how Sirius had been taught to think, once, and how half of the less whiny and petulant Dark Purebloods in Britain thought.

Non Talbot stood up and said something no doubt intelligent and articulate, and of extreme relevance to the matter at hand, but she did so in Welsh, and so nobody in the chamber understood a word that she had said. Sirius hadn’t, anyway, but that was par for the course with Non – she did this every single time she attended a session, and seemed well enough able to understand English.

Sirius thought she was making some sort of political point, but nobody from society interacted with the Talbot family generally, and so nobody knew what she wanted or even stood for. But they were Purebloods and held an ancestral seat at Wizengamot, and that was the important thing.

The chamber moved on from her interruption, as it always did, and back to more mundane – but still fairly nuts – matters.

“What my Noble and Most Ancient Friend has suggested is impossible, given the legislative powers of this session to alter the Mudblood Wand Act of 2006. If my Noble Friend would like to address this matter again he should do so at the 2026 session.”

The wand issue was locked in law until 2026, the session after next. Sirius knew that, and Malfoy knew that Sirius knew that, but Sirius had to try anyway. It was all part of the game – he was a Pureblood, but believed some mudbloods could be integrated. Some had been already, although it wasn’t talked about much.

Some mudbloods were even rescued from their family homes and given to good wizarding parents, and almost nobody spoke about that. Those children didn’t exist, thank you very much.
“We will be voting on the matter of cessation of travel to Ireland until the conflict has ended,” said Malfoy, gaining control over the room. “We will discuss, after the vote, methods to curb the rise of domestic terrorism.”

Lovely agenda, thought Sirius. Introduction of authoritarian and draconian measures – which the Purebloods had hated coming from the Ministry not a decade before – followed by a swift curtailment of domestic freedoms and rights. But only for the riff-raff, of course.

He wasn’t even surprised when the vote passed through with only four against, and nineteen abstentions.

12th August 2011 - Hogwarts

Severus Snape danced a dance so delicate and intricate most who danced it would die due to their own missteps. He had been a spy for more of his life than he hadn’t been. He had been a spy longer than he had been a Death Eater, and he suspected even if this affair ended, he would still not truly belong to any one side.

He had no side but his own, in many ways. In many others he was on Dumbledore’s side, or he had been when that had been possible. Was he on Potter’s side?

Severus really couldn’t say, not yet.

He was most assuredly not on the Dark Lord’s side, despite what his master may have thought. Severus had committed to his course of action a long time ago, first out of foolish love and then out of a desire to survive. That had changed into something else, because the Dark Lord was not a positive force in the world.

Despite saying and professing to believe in things dear to Severus – history, culture, magic – he did not believe in any of those things, and felt no sense of the sanctity of life. Severus wasn’t a sentimental man. He didn’t bleed love and rainbows and puppies out the arse like Dumbledore had, but each and every life was unique.

He saw that, at least. Did that mean he would hesitate to kill? No. But he killed out of pragmatism, not out of bloodlust or ideology. One killed, or was killed. That is how the Death Eaters had worked, during the Rise. It was how they had worked during the Return, although now that was changing, slowly.

Severus knew the steps of his dance perfectly. He knew how to please the Dark Lord and protect the children of Hogwarts. He knew which information should be passed on to the Order, and he knew which information should not be. He had even prepared for the return of Potter, and felt lucky he had the presence of mind to force the boy to take his memories.

But he hadn’t quite prepared for the way in which Potter would make his return, not with the entire cohort of missing Unspeakables and raids all across Britain. The steps of Severus’s dance had been irrevocably altered by Potter and the Unspeakables, and he wasn’t sure how to compensate for that.

The Dark Lord had been furious. He had swollen with an anger and fury Severus hadn’t seen in over a decade, and not even his Lady Wife could soothe him – because she had been damaged by a rune-trap of some kind, something which Severus had never seen before.

It appeared likely the Dark Lord hadn’t seen it before either, since he hadn’t yet been able to repair
the damage to the Dark Lady. Although Severus didn’t think she would need the help – he had never seen Valmira take a wound from which she didn’t heal, and she had taken many wounds and curses. A corrupted kind of fertility magic was assumed to be the reason for this, although Severus had never enquired directly.

That would be too dangerous.

With nothing else to do, Severus had taken to stalking the battlements angrily, waiting for a summons from the Dark Lord. He could not leave Hogwarts because the Dark Lord would almost certainly require him at some point soon; how soon was soon?

He’d thought more than once that Potter and the others were never going to come back. He wouldn’t have blamed them if they hadn’t. With each passing year he thought it unlikely to occur, and wondered whether they had killed Potter – and then they hadn’t.

But near enough a decade was a long time to wait, a very long time. Did they understand the world which they left behind? It had moved on, progressed, changed. Arguably for the worse, but then… aspects had improved. That had been the method used by the regime, of course. Some changes would be distasteful at first, but in the end, they would be passed through because they included within them things which most wizards, even those not sympathetic to Pureblood ideology, wanted.

It had been a slow, creeping change. A directed change. The Dark Lady had changed the way the Dark Lord thought. Severus saw it in his every action, in the plans they made, and in the changes to his ideology. His Rise was not the same as the First War, and the War for Pureblood Freedom not the same as either. His reign had been different still.

Breeding camps hadn’t been considered during the First War. Not once. It had been an abhorrent idea, since children born of rape would usually be Squibs regardless of any other factors. But the Dark Lady had been insistent, and had overseen the programme… and it had worked.

Hecate’s frozen tits, it had worked. Death Eaters were given mudblood concubines, at first. Then it progressed to forced marriages between unmarried mudbloods. Then the new communities had developed. Magical birth rates were increasing year on year, although that had stalled somewhat in recent days.

And yet the Dark Lord still didn’t feel as if his work was done. Severus saw that, too. He worked on projects constantly, hypotheses and theories on esoteric and obscure magical phenomena. Severus understood all that, saw how they fitted into his dance.

But he didn’t know what they were. He didn’t know how to adapt to the emergent force of the Unspeakables, for surely they would only grow in significance. He hoped so, at least, because they shouldn’t have come back unless they were prepared to make important choices.

His Dark Mark flared into searing pain, and he knew the Dark Lord required him. He descended from the battlements quickly, returning to the interior of the castle, and moved at once to Voldemort’s location in his personal library.

Severus Snape feared the Dark Lord, but he was perhaps the only person alive who did not fear the Dark Lord’s Legilimency. Master Legilimens though he was – perhaps the best in the world – the Dark Lord was no match for Severus Snape’s tightly honed Occlumency.

Severus was the premier Occlumens in the world, not that anyone really knew that. It would be useless if they did. The Dark Lord looked no further than his third layer of Occlumency constructs and mindscapes, which he believed to be the inner mass of Severus Snape’s mind.
Nine more layers of constructs waited behind that, should the Dark Lord ever penetrate his shields.

“My Lord,” he said, and dropped to one knee. The Dark Lord required obeisance from his followers even when they would see multiple times over the course of a normal day. It was a tiring charade, but one Severus had to put up with.

“Rise, Severus,” he said, and so Severus rose.

“We knew that the Potter boy would show up again,” said the Dark Lord. “We did not kill him as we claimed, after all. This is not a defeat as such. Nonetheless, we must distract from it. Lucius is at Wizengamot as we speak stirring support for the Irish War, and we shall pass through some effective legislation by the end of it.”

Nothing pleased the Dark Lord more than effective legislation. He had delighted in twisting and coiling the laws of Britain around himself, corrupting them, and using them to his own ends. He had received a dispensation for use of ‘Most Extreme and Dark magic’. He had used them to institute himself as Imperator Maximus, the highest authority in Wizarding Britain. He’d essentially invoked ancient Roman authority, something which magical Britain was in theory still beholden to in some ways (though, Severus thought that bond rather weaker than the one tying them to the Muggle Queen, and nobody ever talked about that).

Severus thought that the pleasure came more from the fact that the wizards of Britain were doing his work for him than any great love of institution. Much Ministry law was diktat, but much of it had been created by Wizengamot and voting. The British public – or their representatives in Wizengamot, which wasn’t even halfway democratic – kept designing laws which would make their Lord happy, and happy he became indeed.

“We will be attacking Ireland tonight, I should think. There is a wizarding town just on the Muggle border, where they have partitioned the island,” said the Dark Lord. Severus knew which one he was talking about – during the First War fighting there had been masked as Muggle terrorism, although there had actually been a high degree of Muggle terrorism going on at the time.

Death Eaters had been shot by Muggle guns.

“I know the location, my Lord. Shall I be in attendance?”

Severus didn’t often have to go out on raids. His position of Headmaster forbade it, although one never left the Death Eater hierarchy. Despite its refashioning as an intelligence agency cum army, the Inner Circle of Death Eaters still advised the Dark Lord directly, and performed ‘errands’ and ‘tasks’ for him.

Rarely did those involve domestic suppression or raiding, because that was Auror work – or Death Eater rank-and-file training.

“I desire it.”

Severus hadn’t truly expected that. It would be… necessary, he supposed.

“Of course, my Lord.”

“You will conceal your identity. It would not do for the Headmaster of Hogwarts to be involved in an attack on Irish soil, war or no war,” said the Dark Lord. All traces of his former anger had disappeared; Severus wondered why.

“As you wish, my Lord.”
“Lucius will be present also. The Inner Circle will participate in this task fully,” he said. “You have forgotten what it means to be a Death Eater, I should think, these past years.”

“As you say, my Lord.”

It was true enough, he supposed. Adaptation had been difficult at first – the Dark Lord had won and secured the freedom of and for Purebloods everywhere in Britain. The struggle was over.

Or so the thought had been, but then the Purebloods had realised – or, would come to realise in time, for those who hadn’t – that the Dark Lord cared largely for himself and his own goals. Often those aligned with the goals of Dark Purebloods in particular, but often they didn’t.

Some had grown increasingly lazy and disobedient. Such was the way of things. But for all of them to be required to participate in battle… that was a punishment, certainly. A reminder, also.

Dark happenings would go on that night, Severus was sure. These Death Eaters revelled in forbidden, dangerous, and Dark magic. These Death Eaters had carried out the Children’s Massacre, the Rape of Bristol, and many more atrocities besides.

All in the name of ‘Pureblood freedom’.

Ireland would see that as it never had, during the First War.

Severus could only hope its people were ready.
12th August 2011 – Belleek, Northern Ireland (United Kingdom)

Severus Snape was not a man people would say had any sort of moral problem with the act of killing another human being. He had been such a person once, briefly, as a boy – but even that had not lasted.

Severus had killed before. He had killed dozens of times personally, that he knew, and he bore the responsibility for many other deaths. He did not even regret causing them, precisely; once he had been young and charged with foolish ideology, and then he had killed to survive.

But he would regret any deaths he caused tonight, and he understand perfectly well the reason why. The other times had been against suitable opponents – in the main. As far as Severus knew Britain alone in the wizarding world maintained any kind of standing army.

Armies had been unthinkable since the Statute of Secrecy, but even before then wizards simply hadn’t needed armies. The wizards of Britain nominally owed allegiance to the Muggle Queen regardless of any practical separation between their worlds, and then the Statute of Secrecy meant that war between wizarding realms would be extremely impractical.

It would inevitably lead to a breach in the Statute, but aside from that concern – even if Severus thought that the most important concern – what organised nation of wizards would want to wage a bloody and dangerous war against other wizards? What use was land and territory – meaningless with the existence of wizardspace – if acquiring it cost wizard lives?

Wars for centuries had been largely civil wars, wars of domestic terrorism or the odd Goblin Rebellion. Those could be better contained by the nation involved than a war between two nations, and the international community would overlook a nation’s internal problems for quite some time.

The Dark Lord had proven that again and again: in Albania no fuss had been made until the problem spilled over to the surrounding polities, and it had disappeared when the Dark Lord returned with his horde to Britain to wage war against his own Ministry.

It was not a secret that Severus Snape thought wizarding governments in general useless, but that was a view shared by many: they had been forced upon the populace as a reaction to Muggles and Muggle science and prejudice, and had gradually but continuously grown in power – yet not in efficiency or fairness - ever since.

“I am reminded of another night, long ago now, when we stood in this very place, old friend,” said a masked and hooded figure from behind Severus. Lucius. Masks would be worn this night – a unique mask for every Death Eater, moulded around the face but stripped of all major identifying features. Some masks had ornamentation, decorative runes and the like, but Lucius wore a crisp, unblemished white mask, as did Severus.

“I should think this will end differently,” he replied smoothly.

That last affair had been an unmitigated disaster – the Dark Lord had eventually given up his ambitions for Ireland, at least during the First War. A unified British Isles would not result from
his victory over Britain, no matter how hard he had tried.

In Ireland he fought not only the Order of the Phoenix, Britain’s Aurors and the Irish security forces but the entirety of the Irish wizarding population as well. It hadn’t been prudent then – or even during his Second Rise – to invade Ireland.

Then they did not have the advantage of numbers, and their Lord had not been so ruthless and focused in his strategy. He had preferred to kill wizards only rarely, when they had directly defied him, but he had killed the mudbloods indiscriminately.

The small Muggle town of Belleek – which straddled the moronic border the Muggles had created on the island – contained within it a small enclave of Irish wizards. They had built their little village into a folded wizardspace around the Muggle town, and the Muggles had simply built around and on top of it. Irish wizards had done something similar with the Hill of Tara and built a city there, surrounding it with a powerful Centenary Ward which had never been broken.

Augur Alley had no such powerful protection and housed mainly mudbloods and mudblood lineages. The Dark Lord had identified it as a suitable target for extraction to a new community, and as a place which could serve as a lesson to the frightened purebloods hidden in Tara.

As always the Muggles would bear the brunt of the attack. They would be used to draw out the braver, more defiant, wizards. The remainder of the population would be divided and left where they were, under occupation, or moved to a new community, after the Death Eater teams had completed the night’s action.

An old style raid, except this time carried out under the auspices of the British Ministry of Magic. Any Muggle involvement would be left out of the next morning’s papers, of course, and the civilians defending the wizarding village would be recast as enemy soldiers sent from Tara.

The whole affair left rather a bad taste in Severus’s mouth, although he would deny it should anyone ever think to ask him.

“Oh, most certainly,” said Lucius.

No doubt the man relished the opportunity to exercise his more specialist knowledge. Although… Lucius was Minister for Magic now: he could very well enjoy his new role, and envision a future in which he was not beholden to the Dark Lord, should such a future find a means to occur. An interesting thought.

Interesting in the abstract as a hypothetical but useless, as Severus considered Lucius to be one of the more irredeemable Death Eaters. He had gleefully orchestrated the Children’s Massacre with Thorfin Rowle, and had carried out the Glasgow Flayings alone.

Severus fought the urge to curl his lip in distaste. Even when he had been a Death Eater in truth as well as in name he hadn’t any appetite for anything involving children or defenceless Muggle women: he had fought and killed skilled and talented opponents. He killed people who tried to match him, and few people had tried to match him who didn’t stand a good chance of winning.

He’d had that sort of reputation, by mask if not by name.

Perhaps the presence of Draco would improve Malfoy the Elder’s comportment over the course of the raid, but Severus doubted that it would. Draco had excelled in the Death Eaters, once Dumbledore had died and the Potter boy had been proclaimed dead. He had stood on a precipice once, his future able to go in one of two directions.
And then one of those had disappeared, and he had made his peace with that. The same thing had happened all across Britain. The Unspeakables held responsibility for the current situation, but Severus could see no other faction able to resolve the entire affair. They had orchestrated events so that this would be so, using the power of prophecy and the turmoil in the wizarding world to gain the allegiance of Harry Potter in addition to the furtherance of their own aims and survival past the war.

Dumbledore had done much the same thing, although he had done it with much more love, and although Severus had never been a sentimental man he understood the power and the magic of love. Love did not and could not absolve one of one’s sins, but it did and could influence how one’s sins were perceived.

“The others are late,” said Severus after the silence had gone on too long. He didn’t find it uncomfortable but to let the conversation lapse would be remiss of him, given the nature of his and Lucius’s relationship as friends—which they were even though Severus felt disgusted at much of what the other man was and did.

“Pressing business, I’m sure,” said Lucius, although the tone indicated he felt otherwise.

He would be right, of course – any kind of business Bellatrix had could never be called pressing, as the woman had gone mad after decades in Azkaban and nothing much remained save the vicious, bloodthirsty shell of the witch she once was.

The Carrows would no doubt be engaged in some foul sort of incest, if one believed the rumours. Severus wasn’t sure that he did, but then… some rumours did have substance, and these were not so difficult to believe.

Soon enough however the other Death Eaters of the Inner Circle – new and old, veterans of the First War and the Second – Apparated into the area.

He had wavered in one decision this night, and one only: that he should not tell the Order of the raid. Not through loyalty to the Dark Lord but through preservation of his position and role as a spy. Until now he had not known whether those present would be only the Marked Death Eaters, those of the Inner Circle. In such a situation it would be impossible to forewarn anyone, given that none save Severus could be linked with such a group.

Severus gripped his wand.

“We must be swift,” he snapped at the new arrivals. “We use the Muggles as bait to draw out the mudbloods, and even then we kill only those who resist. No exceptions. The Dark Lord made it clear.”

Then he Apparated down into the Muggle town proper.

* *

12th August 2011 – Belleek

The Muggle town of Belleek had erupted into chaos. Severus had Stunned several of the Muggle Aurors who had, in a display of tremendous ignorance and stupidity, arrived to restore order to the town.

Futile, ultimately – Severus had saved them from death at the hands of the more extreme and bloodthirsty of the Death Eaters in attendance however, and so at least they would not die a
pointless death tonight.

Severus hadn’t done much fighting at all, though he made sure to appear as though he had done – he had participated in the wanton destruction and vandalism, had masked his stunners with a curse of his own invention – but he had not killed.

He would kill, though. There was no other choice when fighting against wizards, and although none of the denizens of Augur Alley had emerged to fight yet, they would do so soon enough. Some of them would attempt to fight him, and if they did not flee upon the realisation that they were outmatched he would be required to kill them.

Such was war and the life of a spy.

The Death Eaters had occupied one small section of the Muggle town, and had unleashed the full force of their destructive and vicious capabilities upon it. The streets were strewn with fire and rubble as blasting curses and bludgeoning hexes had brought down many of the residences, revealing the screaming and fearful Muggles inside. Severus had watched dispassionately as Lucius Malfoy flayed one Muggle woman in front of her children and made her tear herself limb from limb.

He had watched without expression as Caractacus Rowle commanded a group of Muggle children to beat their own parents to death, and again as the mad bitch Lestrange cavorted in a sickening pool of blood and viscera.

Perhaps the only Death Eater who hadn’t yet killed, other than Snape, was Evan Rosier, and even then not through any kind of ethical or moral choice. Rosier preferred psychological torture, and that Severus hadn’t seen him in quite some time was more than somewhat concerning.

The man had inflicted terrors and trauma upon masses of the population during the First War, and had only escaped Azkaban by leaping madly to his death. The bastard hadn’t died of course, instead turning up again to serve the Dark Lord in Albania. Severus still didn’t know how he had done that.

He noted that Draco had killed with a ruthless efficiency, not stopping to torture or maim or taunt, but moving swiftly. He had caused more than his share of commotion.

But death and destruction were very much the tone of the evening. Even as a Death Eater Severus had never revelled in this.

It was base, animalistic, and ultimately pointless. There was honour and glory and power in combat with a worthy opponent – raping Muggles and crucifixion of children had never been interests of his.

None of the night’s chaos would make the morning papers. The Obliviators likely stood in waiting, ready to move at Lucius’s first word.

But perhaps the wizards of Ireland would talk, if they ever left the illusory safety of their homes. If the bait did not work an assault on the town proper would begin. As much as he looked forward to anything he did in his role as a Death Eater, Severus did at least look forward to fighting a skilled opponent that night.

The wizards of Ireland were brutal, and the witches like furious sidhe from old days. It had been so ever since the Irish Court had voted against unification with the British Ministry all those years ago. That in addition to the Irish propensity to squeeze out infant after infant – it was almost as if
the whole island teemed with forgotten Weasleys – meant the probability of encountering a worthy opponent would be vastly higher in Ireland than on the big island.

After all, in Britain the worthy opponents had been driven underground, killed, or operated within the Death Eater hierarchy.

Threads and strings and scraps of magic infused the air all around him. Even the feeblest first-year would be able to feel the brute force of the magic, if not its cadence and nuances.

Severus Snape was not a feeble first-year, however, and nor was he an average, middling wizard. He could account for the presences of each and every Death Eater – not all could be identified by name in such a way, but he could identify most.

Lesser wizards would have never noticed the quiet addition to the chaotic magical environment around the town, but Severus Snape had noticed.

So the wizards – one of them at least – had at last emerged from their retreat. He would make this swift, if they let him.

If they didn’t his position could not be compromised. Not now, not after decades of careful, desperate survival.

He snarled, and moved to meet this new arrival with a swirl of his robes.

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12th August 2011 – Sanctuary, Large Meeting Room

“You know what’s ironic?” said Ron over a fork full of mashed potatoes which he jabbed towards Harry enthusiastically to drive home his point, “You’re basically a textbook Dark Lord now. It’s brilliant!” he exclaimed to the general discomfort of most in the room.

Everyone resident in Sanctuary was at the dinner, even though many of them hadn’t attended the briefings of the Order before it. That meant Harry had met even the children, who were also in attendance.

“I can appreciate irony as much as the next wizard,” said Ron defensively as Susan fretted and whispered something to him.

Harry decided to laugh.

“Nice one, mate.” It wasn’t even untrue – textbooks defined Dark Lords as being those wizards or witches with powerful magic, unafraid to use Dark magic, who wished to bring down existing political structures and impose a new order.

Harry wasn’t attempting to do it to put himself in power – he would have preferred to deal with the whole Voldemort thing before he’d been ruling Britain for a decade and thus constituted the political orthodoxy – but he could also see where Ron was coming from.

It was also sort of funny, if one shared Harry’s sense of humour. He’d been worried he’d turn out to be a Dark Lord a few times, and then it seemed he’d become one accidentally whilst not doing anything particularly Dark or Lordly.

“He is right,” supplied Luna, sat at the end of the table near a man Harry could swear had been a Gryffindor in his year but whose name totally escaped him, and Harry could tell that she wanted to
“Pass the chicken please,” interjected Molly sternly. “Charlotte, don’t eat with your mouth open!”

Charlotte, one of the newer Weasley children whose parentage Harry couldn’t quite work out and didn’t remember from before, immediately grimaced and closed her mouth.

“You mentioned you were teaching again Minerva?” asked Remus in the momentary silence that followed.

“Indeed, the … School Board has agreed that I can teach the students Transfiguration magic when their school term resumes,” replied the elderly Scottish witch, her tone slightly wistful.

Harry didn’t blame her – the school on Avalon wasn’t Hogwarts, but it would be a fine change from Sanctuary, and a return to something which the older woman had loved. Harry didn’t think she’d have spent so long teaching at Hogwarts if she didn’t simply love teaching.

“Will you be teaching at Hogwarts, Ms McGonagall?” asked one of the older children – a brown-haired, brown eyed child Harry couldn’t reasonably link to anyone particular.

“No, I shall be teaching at the Avalon School of Magic,” corrected Minerva. “It is a delightful place, though not so large or grand as Hogwarts.”

“You’ve wounded me, Professor,” said Harry lightly. “I built half of it!”

“You built a school?” said Fred.

“I built the other half,” added Neville.

Hermione rolled her eyes.

“No you didn’t, you made the seventh years do it!”

Neville grinned.

“I organised the seventh years and delegated tasks to them,” said Neville.

“They only built the new bits,” insisted Luna. “There was a school on Avalon for ages.”

“We made it bigger,” said Harry. “Put in the rooms and stuff like that.”

“It’s where the Muggleborns we saved will go to school,” explained Hermione. “If… if the war drags on and you have any children who need to go,” she said, looking awkwardly up and down the long table, “they can attend, too.”

Harry had a thought.

“If you wanted to come to Avalon anyway I think we could swing that.”

“Er, yeah, thanks mate,” said Ron. “Oi, Kingsley, that’s not what you do with potatoes!” he said, distracted by a furiously ginger four-year old whose potatoes were all down his front.

That idea hadn’t gone down well, Harry gathered.

Sensing that the conversation would go on regardless, Harry turned back to his dinner.
12th August 2011 – Belleek, Augur Alley

Severus had all but abandoned the Muggle part of the town. The entrance to Augur Alley was nestled between two nondescript Muggle houses which were anything but mundane – as Severus approached he could feel ancient magic attempting to open the way for him, a wizard.

It wouldn’t work, since the locals had no doubt activated the scant protective wards Severus felt coiled around the whole area. He could not enter until the wards fell, or until he forced his way in.

It would possible if he had the time and inclination to do so, but he didn’t. In truth he wished this ill-advised raid hadn’t ever been carried out, at least not by him. This was not work for the Inner Circle, and yet… and yet that was precisely why the Inner Circle had been given this task.

It was a reminder that no matter how far the Dark Lord carried them – any of them, including Lucius Malfoy – he could at his own discretion merely stop. They were his servants, his followers, and not the other way around. There were no allowances. No compromises. The Dark Lord occasionally granted favours or gifts, but the price was as it had always been: the Death Eaters were his until the day that they died…. If even that would truly free them.

Some amongst the Death Eaters had no doubt forgotten that. Even those who had been Marked could stand to learn the lesson again and again, for far too few of them truly remembered it.

A split second before the spell hit him Severus called up a Shield Charm, and then whirled around in a billow of robes to meet his opponent.

In momentary shock – because surely the woman in front of him was not and could not be Lily Evans – Severus was caught with a cutting hex across his left arm. He snarled.

"Reducto!" he said, aiming the curse just past her head. It missed of course, but then, that had been the point.

He sidestepped another of her curses and flung several of his own back at her, circling around the young woman to catch a better look. She was not Lily Evans, of course – merely a woman of similar appearance, and far younger than Lily would have been.

A trick of magic, fatigue and battle-frenzy, Severus decided.

"Pyro maxima!" declared the Irish witch. A torrent of flame erupted from her wand and lit up the air itself, consuming everything in a ten foot radius. Severus quickly applied a Flame-Freezing Charm and rolled out of the way, grimacing at how the detritus that had once been a Muggle dwelling clung to his robes.

"Mulco!" he said, aiming for the building behind the witch. If he’d calculated right it would fall atop her and she would need to leave herself open to attack in order to escape.

She didn’t bother with a defence, instead flinging herself bodily at him and dropping him to the ground. She sat atop him, wand pointed at his face.

“Don’t fucken’ move,” she snarled at him. “I should kill you right now…”

Severus sneered, and took the opportunity her moment’s indecision left him.

“Legilimens!” he said, and flung a cascade of pointed, barbed memories at her. He invaded her
mind and pushed her off him.

Severus got to his feed and banished himself from the poor young woman’s now-fragile mind.

“Incarcer—” he began, but found himself downed by a swift and powerful kick to the temple.

12th August 2011 – Sanctuary

Hermione had never been able to shake that feeling that she didn’t belong. She hadn’t been able to feel at home in the Muggle world, and then she’d found out she was a witch, but she didn’t quite feel like she’d belonged. How could she when a not insignificant proportion of the population did not agree that she should be allowed to learn magic, and others insisted that she was actively attempting to destroy an entire people’s ancient culture?

Tonight, at dinner with the Order of the Phoenix – not that it was the Order she remembered, not exactly – Hermione didn’t feel as if she belonged.

She understood fully and completely why she didn’t belong here at this moment. She had been gone for close to a decade enconced within what had been, if she were to be truly honest, the safe haven of Avalon. She had been traumatised at times, but everyone not on the island had no doubt experienced worse. She was an interloper now, truly, and not because of her blood status, or because she was too clever and vocal about her opinions. These people had fought together. Some of them had died. They had lived and loved and died and married, and the first of a new generation had been born.

All while she’d been sat on Avalon, nose in a book, fruitlessly attempting to avoid a prophecy she knew would come true, one way or another. What did she have, exactly? ‘Wit beyond measure’, perhaps, if by wit one meant knowledge painstakingly gleaned from centuries-old parchment.

Did she even want children? She’d always assumed she would eventually, and would have them with Ron – Hermione glanced at his oldest, one of the twins, and then grabbed the salt to deflect attention from her staring – but that was no longer an option.

She had far too much left to do for children to happen any time soon, of course, but it would be something she wanted some day…

Feeling rather antisocial Hermione decided to tune back in to whatever conversation happening around her sounded most interesting.

“So Hermione, what interesting Unspeakable magic have you learned in your time away?” asked Remus, taking note of her change in attention. She knew of course what she wanted to say, but she stopped moments before saying it to consider what sort of answer would please him.

Much of it was supposed to be secret, after all, and then there were the things she’d learnt but hadn’t wanted to, and then again the things she’d learnt but had hated herself for learning. Knowledge was power, and the power of knowledge against an enemy like Voldemort was worth ten powerful witches.

“Well,” she said, wrinkling her nose and adopting a tone most present were familiar with, “most of it is Unspeakable, of course.” She paused only to acknowledge the nods from those following the conversation – Ron included. “I can fold wizardspace inside wizardspace; I’ve got it up to four layers now, but Unspeakable Thistlespur says that any more than that would be impossible because
of Knifetongue’s Second Law.”

“Knifetongue was a goblin,” she continued. “She calculated the layering pattern required for folding wizardspaces inside wizardspaces, but concluded that five would be impossible because of how the planes of the magic intersect.”

“Fascinating,” said Remus in a tone which suggested he did in fact find her trivia fascinating. Always so polite, Remus – he would pretend that she was the most interesting dinner guest in the world when she was even boring herself. “I imagine the arithmantic approximation of the conceptual space is quite complex, but more necessary than ever,” he continued. “I was never all that good with planes, myself.”

“They are difficult,” agreed Hermione.

“That big brute of a man mentioned you knew a great deal of the Dark Lady’s foul magic,” said Minerva casually. It wasn’t a question, obviously. Hermione assumed she was meant to expound upon the nature of Valmira’s corrupted women’s magic, but she hardly felt as if that made an appropriate dinner topic… even in such dubious company as a band of war criminal terrorists.

“It’s ancient women’s magic,” she said simply. “The same sort of thing your mother would have taught you – charms to ease the aches and pains of pregnancy, potions to quicken the womb, the typical sort of thing we usually call ‘women’s magic’. Except she’s corrupted and twisted it, turned it into something else, and she’s discovered deeper, probably older, forms of the magic. The islanders have a more developed form of it than I’ve been able to find in books and literature, so I was able to learn the principles from them. I think I understand the ways in which the Dark Lady has corrupted and twisted the magic, but I don’t feel like they’re an appropriate dinner topic.” She frowned.

“I quite agree,” said Minerva softly, no doubt possessing some piece of family knowledge Hermione didn’t have. Not that she needed it – Hermione thought she understood how to go about the kind of foul magic Valmira practised, enough that she could recreate the other woman’s steps if she ever wanted to.

“It is rather difficult to find something to talk about at dinner when one is a member of a subversive terrorist organisation, isn’t it?” said Remus cheerfully. “We could talk about how tomorrow night I will turn into a dangerous, slavering beast!” he declared.

“How—can anyone here brew Wolfsbane?” asked Hermione, glancing up and down the table. Even if someone could, the ingredients would be difficult to procure and expensive…

“Susan is a more than satisfactory potioneer,” said Remus.

“To Susan!” came a toast from down the table. One of the twins had gotten a little bit drunk and had started rounds of toasts some time ago. They rarely involved the majority of dinner participants – although now that Hermione was paying attention again she saw that Molly had Switched the main out for dessert – but did cause occasional spots of noise and exuberance.

Everything almost felt normal again and Hermione felt as if she belonged, almost.

* *

12th August 2011 – Augur Alley

Severus came to groggily, and painfully – he hadn’t really thought to protect himself from simple
Muggle brawling, after all. He’d been whisked away somewhere probably considered secret and safe by the defending wizards. It was a sensible move to make, all things considered, if the man they had apprehended was someone other than Severus Snape.

He assumed he didn’t have his wand. He wouldn’t have allowed himself to retain his wand, and it would not do to assume these wizards were complete morons.

A small, dark room. The cellar of a house, perhaps. He cast his gaze about the small room although could discern nothing of any value from it. It had been decorated so as to bear nothing in the way of distinctive features or markings, its walls all painted the same dull off-white. A dim magical light filled the room.

He could hear a vague, half-whispered argument from behind the far wall. Severus assumed that meant it served as a portal, an entryway, into his holding cell, and that his captors were arguing about what precisely they should do with him. His lip curled.

It was a waste of time. The longer they delayed evacuation the greater the possibility of their capture. Indeed, at this point Severus thought it more an inevitability that they be captured eventually.

“You should’ve let me kill the fucker!” half-shouted the woman from before, the one he had duelled.

“Not that one. He isn’t a real Death Eater.”

Curious, thought Severus, but disappointing. Sad, almost.

He would have to kill every person in the building. His cover had to be maintained—except… he had recognised that voice, hadn’t he? Where from?

“He’s wearing a mask and has a fucking Dark Mark! He lives with the mad fucker in his castle!”

“If this man had wanted you dead, Moira, you would be dead. He’s a spelldancer. So calm down and let me see him.”

Severus steeled himself. Wandless magic was not a casual art, and it was something he found difficult at the best of times. His position had been compromised, however, which meant he needed to neutralise the threat before it became a threat.

Soon enough a doorway materialised out of the wall opposite him and in stepped Moira, wand pointed between his eyes. He sneered at her and then frowned at the next figure through the door.

Greengrass the elder, not the younger – Daphne, he remembered. She looked much different than she had last he saw her, but then she had been a schoolgirl still, not… not whatever it was she currently did. He felt a wildness from all around her, a swirling miasma that promised freedom, pleasure and pain. It was a wildness he knew and respected, a wildness of the Dark and of ancient and primal magic.

Miss Greengrass had certainly dabbled in some interesting arts since they had last met. Severus couldn’t say he was surprised, not after the monumentally Gryffindorish stunt she had pulled with the Court of Fools and then again training with bloody Potter for the Triwizard Tournament.

“How, Professor,” she said. “Or should I say Headmaster? Don’t try to kill us,” she added as if it were an afterthought. “You won’t be able to. It isn’t necessary in any case. We’re not here to hurt you. I know all about you and what you do. I think I’m one of only a handful of people who truly
know – and that’s okay. I’m on your side.”

“How can you know that?” she continued. “You can’t. I don’t mean to say I’ve joined your Order – could you imagine that, a Dark witch like myself? But I’m not my sister – I’ll tell you now, she’s a major source of disappointment in my life. I’ve been Watching you for a while now. Moira joined me recently.”

The elder Greengrass girl had never joined the Death Eaters but had also never openly defied the Dark Lord by refusing to do so – she had simply never been available to ask, not through family connections or otherwise. She would be working to achieve her own goals regardless whose allegiance she claimed, that much Severus knew. Slytherins all did that, and Daphne Greengrass was nothing if not an exemplary Slytherin.

Her connections to the Court of Fools alone made her dangerous, and that was discounting the magical oddities Severus could detect. Young Daphne had become a powerful, dangerous witch. It would not do for Severus to forget that, to misremember her as a young student with great potential.

She had more than reached it, in his estimations.

“What do you want?” he demanded, though he knew he wasn’t in any sort of situation to demand a thing.

“I need you to pass along a message to the Order of the Phoenix.”

“What sort, and for what reason?” he asked, intrigued. It would be dangerous but he could pass the information along, assuming he made it out of the current situation safely and with an effective explanation of his activities, and it was interesting enough to take on the risk.

“I need to set up a meeting with Harry Potter.”

* * *

12th August 2011 – Sanctuary

Most of the children had gone to bed by the late hour, but Luna had actually disappointed at that rather than relieved. She liked children. Their minds were so open to wonder and mystery, and to magic – children really were the easiest people to teach some of the less intuitive magics. And they usually said the most delightful things.

But the children had all gone to bed now, and the only people left in the room were the adults, and not even all of those had remained. Luna knew they could have gone back to Avalon a while ago, but she also knew that none of them really wanted to. It was more home than Sanctuary ever could be, but they hadn’t left it in so long, and most of these people were friends and family.

Luna had been sat next to Daniel Roberts, a Gryffindor Muggleborn in the same year as Harry and the others. She didn’t think Harry had ever really spoken to the boy – there had been fifteen Gryffindor boys in Harry’s year, but Luna had never seen Harry interact with anyone not in his own smaller dorm. He’d been rather myopic in that regard, but then – he had always been rather busy, with one thing or another. He had his friends and his problems, so it was understandable. But Luna’s only friends had been among the overlooked and forgotten, the students whose families weren’t famous or even magical at all; the students who didn’t care that some of the Purebloods looked down on her family because of her father’s eccentricity… Daniel had been one of those, since he had been a wonderfully average Muggle-born student whose name barely any of the
purebloods or halfbloods remembered. Hermione’s experience of Hogwarts hadn’t been every Muggleborn’s – she was exceptional, and friends with Weasleys, Potters and Longbottoms. That mattered even if it shouldn’t.

“I was worried you’d been killed,” admitted Dan. It had taken four tankards of moonshine to get him to say it, but Luna wasn’t surprised he’d gotten there eventually. Dan had joined the Order just before Dumbledore’s death and the resultant downwards spiral of Britain. They’d been friends before then, though – Luna had vouched for him. He’d believed her about Wrackspurts and Nargles, even when most people hadn’t. She had been wrong of course, although so had everyone else.

That had been satisfying to discover.

“I worried the same thing about you,” Luna replied honestly. She hadn’t allowed her anxiety to cripple her, or for it to impede her goals, but it had been there. She’d been sad. She’d cried twice before she could truly internalise her philosophy.

“So you’re an Unspeakable now.” It wasn’t a question but Luna nodded anyway. “How does that… work? The Ministry doesn’t even have a Department of Mysteries anymore.”

Luna smiled.

“The Unspeakables predate the Ministry of Magic,” she said. She was erring close to Speaking that which should be Unspeakable, but the oathpact would prevent her from saying anything too revealing. She just needed to trust it. “I can’t say a lot about it. It’s Unspeakable. We were aligned with the Ministry for a very long time.”

“Until You-Know-Who came back,” finished Dan. “Now you’re…”

“Aligned with any who oppose the current regime.” That answer was the simplest answer, but also the best answer as far as Luna was concerned. The Unspeakables had no preference for Light or Dark wizards, purebloods or muggleborns, even in times of peace. Now the criteria for alliance had been greatly reduced – a desire to overthrow Voldemort was now the major deciding factor. Perhaps that was too loose.

“I found out the truth about Nargles and Wrackspurts,” she said, smiling. “You’re not going to believe me when I tell you!”

It was easy enough to fall into old patterns, even after so long. It was comforting, but also comfortable – she wasn’t Looney Lovegood anymore. Not completely. She was someone even better.

But sometimes old hats felt nicer than new ones.

12th August 2011 – Augur Alley

Severus couldn’t really say he was surprised at Greengrass’s demand to see Potter. Their alliance had been interesting enough at Hogwarts – Greengrass had effectively staged a coup in Slytherin House, building up support from a significant proportion of its students before aligning herself very publicly to Potter.

It had all been political posturing at the time, games played by children about to become adults. No doubt games that would have set the stage for years to come – Hogwarts was practically a
microcosm of wider Wizarding Britain, even if only half of all its students came through there.

What was that old adage, again? ‘Some women weep for handsome princes. Others raise armies and win them kingdoms.’ His mother had been full of wisdom such as that. Severus had always assumed she’d taught such wisbons to him through lack of a daughter, though he had never fully accepted her words.

They had been largely irrelevant.

However, the Dark Lord had returned and the entire country was set on a new path. The games of children had fallen to the wayside.

“How did you ascertain my role as a spy?” he dared, sidestepping the question for now. There were more pressing concerns.

“Your Occlumency is still unrivalled, Headmaster,” said Daphne. “Don’t worry about that. I’m a proficient Leglimens, true, but I’m not that good. I told you. I’ve been Watching you. Since just after Potter disappeared.”

A non-answer. Severus tried again.

“This information is contained within my head, and the heads of three others. There has been minimal interaction between myself and any member of the Order of the Phoenix since the War. How did you come by it?”

Greengrass rolled her eyes.

“Will you get my message to Potter or won’t you? I don’t need you for this. I wanted you for this. I have other options available to me. I was prepared to give you back your wand,” said the young woman, “but maybe now I shan’t.”

“I will get your message to Potter. Are we still in Belleek? We must evacuate quickly, and you must give me my wand.”

Severus did not have time to argue with a woman twenty years his junior. Nor the energy, really – he wasn’t only by any stretch, though closer to a century than not, but he had expended a great deal of energy already that night.

He would need that which remained to successfully curb Rosier, the elder Malfoy, and the Rowles when he returned to the fray. There would no doubt be a second Children’s Massacre as a result of the night’s activities, but Severus would see that it did not become more than that. It so easily could, given the proclivities of those mad Death Eaters who had been released from Azkaban… and whatever dark force was responsible for Evan Rosier.

“Do you have a time or a place? A message, perhaps, to entice our delayed hero?”

Severus couldn’t very well risk passing a message to the Order if it merely read ‘Daphne Greengrass desires a meeting with Harry Potter’, after all.

“For a man without a wand you’re giving us a lot of lip,” warned Moira menacingly, her wand still levelled between his eyes. The woman hadn’t attended Hogwarts – he would have remembered her – but surely would have Sorted Gryffindor or Hufflepuff if she had. She had clearly failed to understand the nature of the interaction playing out in front of her.

Daphne held the power here. This was a power play, a reminder that Severus didn’t have his wand
and that he had only one piece of leverage – the ability to fulfil the younger woman’s request, and that wasn’t enough. It was part posturing, part threat. But Severus was in no real kind of danger. They could trade barbs easily.

“Tell them I know where something Potter wants might be hidden. I want to help him, and the Unspeakables. We’ll meet at Carousel August 16th.” Vague and cryptic, but then it was a message intended to make sense to Potter and not anyone else. Severus only hoped the girl’s trust in the boy was fairly placed, if her message relied on interactions they had had long ago. Severus doubted he would remember.

But then… Carousel. Both Greengrass and Potter had completed every single challenge set out for them by the Court of Fools. Both had been named Harlequins, both had been showered in glory. Carousel was obviously a place of the Court, perhaps the place of the Court, despite the travelling circus they presented to the world as the Court of Fools.

It was no such thing as a mere circus.

“I will see it done. If you would return my wand and banish my chains?”

Daphne waved her wand easily, and then lazily offered Severus’s own wand back to him. He clutched it eagerly, and immediately Moira tensed.

Foolish woman. He wouldn’t move against her now, not unless to preserve his cover. She should realise that.

“I would advise you both to leave. The Dark Lord will not respond well to failure tonight. Thus, there shall be no failure.”

Understanding the facts of the matter, Daphne nodded.

“This house is rigged to collapse after I Apparate out. Pretend you killed the dead wizards they’ll find.”

With that, Severus Apparated away.

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Chapter End Notes

Fixed a minor continuity issue. Ron’s eldest child is not in fact Kingsley, because Ron does not have a child named Kingsley. Kingsley is one of his nephews. (I have a huge list tracking this sort of thing, I really have no excuse!)
13th August 2011 – Sanctuary

Harry cast his gaze around the room, grinning to himself quietly. The roaring fire had calmed down, some candles had burnt out, and the food had disappeared hours before. Almost everyone had gone to bed by that point, given the late hour. Minerva dozed loudly in her chair, drunk hours before and too tired to keep herself awake.

Ron had no doubt used up a great deal of marital bargaining power in order to stay up with the more-than-a-little drunk guests, whilst Fred and Katie had been the ones to keep the party going on in the first place. Remus too had gone to bed, given that the state of the moon made him somewhat tetchy, and the large communal space was almost empty.

“We should probably head back to Avalon soon,” said Hermione quietly, leaning into him. “It’s been lovely, but…”

“Mm,” said Harry in agreement. It had been lovely, but he had a bed of his own back on Avalon, and the night was over. Neville and Hannah had disappeared some hours before, not that Harry could really blame them; that did however mean Neville likely wouldn’t be returning to Avalon until the next day.

“Is a bit late, isn’t it?” mumbled Ron tiredly.

Just then, a Patronus sailed through the open window and moved immediately towards Minerva, who snored at it.

“Wake up!” demanded the silver creature, a gentle and elegant doe which spoke with the less gentle and less elegant voice of Severus Snape. “There is important news and I do not have the time to wait around for knackered old nags!”

Immediately Harry reached into his robes for the vial of Clarity Draught he always kept with him, downed it, and caught the attention of the Patronus.

“Snape,” he said. “It’s me, Harry. What’s the news?”

The Patronus turned towards him then, and spoke again – which was downright unnerving, considering that Snape’s voice came out of it and that the doe probably represented his mother.

“Good. This will be far more efficient.” There was a pause which Harry took to mean Snape was considering what to say next. “There was a raid on the Irish wizarding enclave of Augur Alley tonight, carried out by the senior Death Eaters of the Inner Circle.”

“Is it still happening?” asked Hermione, reaching inside of her own robs to pull out her own stock
of the detoxification potion.

“It is over,” said the Patronus. “It was not possible to provide forewarning for this raid; my position would have been compromised. Only the Marked, trusted agents were sent on the mission tonight. I have a message for you, Potter,” it continued. “Daphne Greengrass requires a meeting on August 16th at Carousel. She believes she knows the location of something you desperately want to find.”

Horcruxes. It had to be those, Harry decided. Or one of them, anyway. The Court of Fools had operatives all over Europe and rarely lacked access to sensitive or secret information.

“Thanks,” he said simply. He wasn’t sure if Snape really knew about the Horcruxes, or what he knew if he did, but now wasn’t the time to ask.

“How many deaths?” asked Hermione quietly. “What was the purpose of the raid?”

“Occupation and forced resettlements,” answered Snape immediately. “I acted to minimise deaths and traumas where possible, but for much of the night’s festivities I was detained by Miss Greengrass and her companion.”

“The Unspeakables are planning a raid on the new communities,” said Luna. “You should be prepared for that eventuality.”

“My thanks,” said Snape. “I will send more information later through the regular channels,” he continued quickly, “but you should know now that several atrocities have been committed. They will never make the papers of course, but I will provide memories at my earliest convenience.”

The Patronus flickered out of existence.

“I hate this,” said Ron wearily. “It’s the same every time. ‘I can’t compromise my position’, ‘the raid was unavoidable’.”

“He’s a greasy git,” said Katie, “but we can’t afford to lose him, you know that.”

“She’s right,” said Fred, accepting the vial of Clarity Draught offered to him by Luna. “If Snape leaked information only given to the most trusted Death Eaters he’d be fucked, you know that. Can you imagine Draco Malfoy defecting to the Order?”

“I know,” said Ron, sighing.

“We’ll make Voldemort pay,” promised Harry. “We’re moving on the camps within the fortnight.”

“So soon after coming back?” said Ron, clearly surprised. Harry supposed the view of the Unspeakables would be that they were slow and cautious, afraid of making moves too quickly lest they be the wrong moves. That was true in many ways but the time for caution and slowness was past, according to the Unspeakables.

Their plan was swift, calculated, and designed to take advantage of their long waiting period. Now that they had options the Unspeakables would take those options.

“Their plan was always to act immediately after the fortress ward fell,” said Hermione. “It’s a plan we didn’t agree with, but it was the only plan available to us.”

It was just repetition now, Harry knew. If they said it enough maybe it would sink in.
“I personally retrieved the locations of the new communities,” continued Hermione, “including those not known to the public. I’m going to put an end to them all,” she said, eyes blazing with righteous fire.

She would do it, Harry knew. Hermione could do anything she wanted to do, and she did.

“Anyone fancy a post-party, extremely risky and dangerous recon mission to a Death Eater controlled zone?” said Harry cheerfully, looking around the room.

* 

13th August 2011 – Belleek

Harry had been fully prepared for what he would find in Belleek. He’d studied this conflict in great detail, in this world and in others, and so he knew what Voldemort and his Death Eaters were and what they could be capable of.

He still didn’t like seeing it in his world.

The small group of them – him, Hermione, Fred and Katie Weasley – had Apparated swathed in many protective layers of concealing enchantments and spells. Belleek – or more properly, Augur Alley, the wizarding enclave – was now occupied by the Death Eaters. Occupied by the British Ministry, in effect.

He doubted most in Britain would accept the stark reality of what had truly occurred that night, the first proper night of war.

The Muggle town centre had been completely destroyed. Bodies littered the streets – bodies of men, women, and children. All Muggles.

He heard someone – Katie, he thought – retch at the sight of a pair of skinless Muggle children impaled upon a spike. He grimaced.

Around them, weaving in and out of the Muggle and wizard areas, were the Death Eater cleanup teams. Occasionally Harry spotted an exhausted Obliviator – there were many of them, all faceless and nameless – as they worked to ensure complete and utter secrecy.

It made Harry more than a little sick to see, and definitely angry. He wanted nothing more than to hex the offending Death Eaters into the Otherworld and back, just so he could do it again and again and again. He had seen realities where the veteran Death Eaters had defected to him. He had seen a reality where Lucius Malfoy bent the knee and swore himself to a Gryffindor Lord Potter, for Merlin’s sake.

But that reality would never be this reality, and Harry wanted nothing more than to assassinate the man and be done with it. He wouldn’t do that, though. He would make the man a Squib. He knew it had to be possible. If nobody had figured out how to do it then Harry would figure it out and he would do it.

He could honestly think of no more fitting end for Lucius Malfoy. Death was too kind, too—transient. Squibhood would be forever, and to a man like Lucius Malfoy it would be worse than Muggle Hell. It would literally be Muggle Hell, he supposed.

“The Muggles aren’t going to have a clue what’s happened,” muttered Fred. “There’ll be riots.”

“I’m more concerned with what’s next,” said Hermione. “Has nobody considered the real
consequences of a war between wizarding realms?” She appeared positively scandalised by the whole concept, and Harry agreed with her.

Voldemort had never been a shining example of rational thought, true, but it also couldn’t be said that he was an unintelligent man, either. That was part of the problem: his massive intellect, coupled with his capacity for obsession and superstition and his complete disregard of anything approaching human decency, made for a very dangerous man. He knew how to manipulate and charm, and how to effectively dominate others. He had probably dismissed the consequences of a wizarding war, and that in itself was nuts, simply because it would be the best way of effectively controlling his Death Eaters.

“Wizengamot voted for war,” said Katie bitterly, “so I’d think not.”

“Astoria Malfoy is here,” hissed Hermione suddenly through closed teeth. “Look!”

At the edge of town, at the border between the Muggle and magical worlds, stood a tall, elegant woman in sleek robes. Astoria Malfoy. She was not that far away, thought Harry, although too far to hear. She was speaking quickly, too quickly for him to read her lips.

Harry screwed up his face.

“She was never like this at school,” he said. “Daphne would have hexed her into the Otherworld before she let it get this far.”

*Daphne Greengrass has been missing for the last three years,” said Katie.

“Nah,” said Harry easily, “she’s been exactly where she’s wanted to be.”

She’d been at Carousel, most likely. At least for some of that time.

Hermione muttered something about ‘bumbling jesters in garish motley’ but Harry just grinned at her.

“Give me a minute,” said Fred, sneaking off quietly but deliberately in the direction of Astoria Malfoy. Within moments he dropped behind an upturned car and pulled out a long, thin device. Harry watched as Fred peered intently at Astoria, then beckoned for one of them to follow. Harry took up his offer and soon enough found himself kneeling next to Fred, with the sudden ability to clearly and accurately hear every word out of Astoria’s mouth.

“There will be a population exchange shortly,” she said. “You must be prepared.” Her tone suggested she thought the man would not be prepared even with her warning, but she continued on regardless. “The Muggles will pose no problem.”

“How do you mean?” asked the man. “We’ve got to be careful, the Statute and everything…”

“Over the next few years the Muggles will begin moving away from this area. We will see to that. You needn’t worry.”

“And, well, it’s not just the Muggles is it?” he offered, unsure.

“There are enough Aurors here to provide a formidable defence against the Irish, Auror Crup,” insisted Astoria. “As soon as the protections around the Alley are re-established there shall be no danger here.”

Harry glanced around. Night was swiftly giving way to day, and all the Disillusionment in the
They’d heard enough, though, and seen enough of the devastation. He looked to Fred, who nodded, reeled in his listening device – which Harry thought resembled the old Extendible Ears, but better – and stood quietly.

They crossed the small distance between them and the others easily, and then stood to confer for a few moments.

“We’ll head back to Avalon. You go back to the Order,” said Harry. “I want a meeting with Sirius as soon as he can possibly do that. Can you arrange it?”

Fred nodded.

“Great. We’ll have to arrange a visit to Avalon for you,” he said, and then Apparated away.

13th August 2011 – Caer Tawel (Large Meeting Room)

“A Death Eater raid took place last night on the wizarding enclave of Augur Alley, in Ireland,” said Harry. “I received this intelligence from Severus Snape, just a little bit after the completion of the raid.”

The entire Council of Seven had convened for the briefing. Hermione didn’t think the elderly Unspeakables had seen this much activity in decades. She wondered if they enjoyed it, or if it was a bother. They had probably engineered the long-term plan of the Unspeakables, so Hermione assumed they were at least prepared for it even if it wasn’t something they’d class as enjoyable.

The problem was that all three of them were utterly inscrutable. They betrayed almost nothing of what they thought or felt at any given time.

“The Muggles suffered significant casualties,” added Hermione. “Snape says he’ll provide us with memories of the events when he’s able.”

“We have been making overtures to the Irish Court,” said Morningstar, her mouth twisted into a slight frown, “but thus far we have not met with success. Potter, we believe that if you were to make the next contact it would be more productive.”

Harry nodded.

“All right. Tell me where and when, and we’ll see what I can do.”

“Good. As preparation, you’ll make contact with the Muggle Taoiseach later on today. Lovegood can brief you en route. She will be accompanying you.”

To be the eyes and ears of the Unspeakables. It was difficult sometimes to differentiate between Luna their friend and Unspeakable Lovegood, although Luna had managed thus far to prevent any major distancing between herself and the others. Hermione didn’t think she would have been able to do that, herself.

Of course, Luna seemed more able than most Unspeakables to break the oathpact, so perhaps it was more that she was a bad Unspeakable than anything else.

“Granger, there is still the matter of the Otherworld portal to discuss. The matter of Ireland and the Irish War has complicated matters greatly, and we should like to make concrete gains in that
regard. To that end there is a man living in Newcastle we should like you to visit. He is not
dangerous but he is unable to respond to anyone else.”

“Why?”

“He is a former Unspeakable. For reasons I will not discuss with you, it is not possible to send one
of our own agents to receive this information.”

They had done something Unspeakable to his mind, then, Hermione decided.

“When should I go?” She wanted nothing more than to sleep. She’d snatched some scattered bits
and pieces, but nothing so substantial as a proper eight hours of restive sleep.

“When we are finished here. You can sleep through Sunday and Monday; that’s not a problem.
Take a stimulating potion to tide you over.”

Hermione hadn’t been surprised to discover the Unspeakables didn’t know spells which could
simulate a full night’s sleep, or potions to do the same. She had been disappointed, mostly, to find
that their response to the problem was merely to throw drugs and potions at it until the need had
passed.

So, essentially what everyone else did. Too long on some of the available potions was actually
worse than going without them, and no substitute for a proper sleep. Still, Hermione hadn’t been
that sleep-deprived to begin with. She nodded her consent.

It wasn’t as if she wanted to go to the Otherworld – at least, not to be tempered at some Altar of
Queens in the Land of Always fucking Winter – but it seemed like one way or another, that’s what
would happen. The Unspeakables had been training her for this purpose, after all. Prophecy could
choose another, but why would it range far when a perfectly crafted instrument existed already?

“Of course.”

“Longbottom, you’re to join up with the Muggleborn extraction teams. There are some names we
didn’t get to.”

“All right,” said Neville. “Also – my fiancée is coming to live with me.”

He wasn’t asking. They’d long ago stopped asking the Unspeakables for permission to do things.
Some things, obviously, they did – matters relating to security, prophecy, those sorts of things – but
not in issues relating to their personal lives.

Which Hermione hadn’t thought would be a problem, except that it had been.

At first. It wasn’t anymore.

“What’s the revised timeline?” she asked, since nobody else had thought to.

“Unstable,” said Morningstar. “It is impossible to know at this stage; so many things still need to
occur. But if Potter makes headway with the Irish Court we’d like to work on the distraction phase
by the end of August.”

“And for the prophecies?” clarified Hermione. She wanted to know when she could expect to visit
the Otherworld. Harry had taken his place in the prophecy. Luna was assumed to have taken hers,
although Morgana only knew why. ‘The one who always was’. What did that even mean?
“We have several leads. Your mission will help us advance the timeline on your particular prophecy,” confirmed Morningstar. “We must gain access to the Otherworld, and you must be tempered at the Altar of Queens.”

“Or I’ll die, yes, I know,” said Hermione, and rolled her eyes. They had considered that sending her to the Otherworld might be the reason she would die, of course. It had just been calculated as an acceptable risk, and Hermione couldn’t argue with that.

The arithmantic and mathematical calculation had shown her that. She had calculated it according to a formula she had derived herself based on decades of Unspeakable research. To lose faith in the formula would be to admit that it didn’t represent anything meaningful, and she rather thought that it did.

“I have a meeting with Daphne Greengrass on the 16th,” said Harry. “We’re to meet at Carousel. I think it’s about Horcruxes. Do we have news or a message for the Fools?”

“A general request for assistance should do nicely for now, I think,” said Morningstar, glancing only briefly to her companions. None of them did anything as far as Hermione could tell, so she supposed it was an acceptable suggestion.

“We’re done, then,” said Morningstar. “Granger, if you’d stay for the details of your next assignment…”

Hermione nodded and watched as the others left the room, no doubt to sleep, even if just for a little while. She dug inside her robes for her stash of Endless Waking potion and downed it.

“The relevant details are contained upon this parchment,” said Morningstar, levitating a small square of parchment over to Hermione. She scanned it, committing the details to memory, and then burnt it. Standard operating procedure, even within Caer Tawel.

It’s not as if she would forget what had been on the page, after all.

“Avoid direct references to any living or dead Unspeakables when you speak with Horatio. He will be unable to account for why he knows what he knows. We think you’re best suited to extracting the useful information without—well, without ripping apart his mind.”

Hermione frowned.

“But if that’s the only way to get it I won’t shy away from the task, is that it?” she responded. Luna probably would have done it too, since she understood the particulars of the Unspeakable oathpact better than Hermione. But Hermione would have more motivation to not tear the man’s mind into pieces, at least if she could prevent it.

Mostly because she hadn’t made any silly oathpact and so didn’t think it was fair to essentially kill someone because they had wanted to retire but still possessed important information. Why hadn’t they just made him write it down? Operational security, of course, but memories in a pensieve… although, the Unspeakables hadn’t been able to remove everything important from the Department of Mysteries were Hermione to be totally fair she would suggest that perhaps this information had been lost then – but she doubted it somewhat.

More likely it had been locked inside Bulstrode’s head, and the man sent away to live quietly until – if it ever happened – the Unspeakables needed what he knew.

“I’ll get going,” she continued, and Apparated into the street where one Horatio Bulstrode – retired
Newcastle

Hermione hadn’t expected a member of the Bulstrode family to live in a brand new Muggle development in the middle of the city of Newcastle, but that was where she had Apparated to, and it was where the parchment had indicated she should go. She didn’t bother transforming her robes: it was barely a decent time of day yet, so anyone who did see her would probably assume she wore some kind of strange dressing gown.

The man had to bear some relation to the Millicent Bulstrode she had known at school, though probably not so close as a father – a great-uncle, perhaps, or cousin, or some other more distant relation.

Hermione navigated her way inside the Muggle building – which didn’t have anything in the way of security – easily, and rode the lift up to the seventh floor. When she had arrived outside of number 722 she rapped her knuckles against the door forcefully and waited.

After a few moments of nothing, Hermione tried again. It was still early; Bulstrode likely wasn’t awake yet.

Eventually a fairly robust-looking elderly man answered the door and, upon seeing her robes, invited her inside immediately. Grey Unspeakable robes shouldn’t trigger whatever dreadful things the Unspeakables had done to his mind – many wizards and witches wore grey.

It didn’t do for wizards to stand around outside in Muggle areas, after all.

“I assume you already know who I am,” said Bulstrode, “so I shall leave you to introduce yourself.”

“My name is Hermione Granger. I’ve come to ask you some questions. I’m not from the Ministry or… otherwise affiliated.”

“A Muggleborn, then,” said Bulstrode. He relaxed and lowered a wand Hermione hadn’t realised he’d been holding. “I assume you wish to discuss my former research projects?”

Just what exactly did Bulstrode remember? He obviously wasn’t poorly disposed to Muggleborns given that one had turned up at his door, and he didn’t seem to want to alert the Aurors… though, Hermione supposed that as a retired Unspeakable he would have been opposed to Voldemort regardless. Perhaps he had retired because he didn’t feel able to fight – Hermione couldn’t really blame him if that were the case.

Sometimes she wished she could retire, but if she did that the Unspeakables would simply find another to fill the role of the Lioness, one who hadn’t been trained the way she had, perhaps even one less likely to survive the ordeal.

“That’s right.”

“You’d better come in and sit down, then,” he said, leading her through a narrow hallway into a spacious room which had no doubt made liberal use of wizardspace. She assumed his mind would be whirring, picking apart the pieces of information he had been given to judge the strange woman before him. Muggleborns with wands generally meant foreigners (rarely – Hermione had been led to believe foreign Muggleborns avoided Britain in its entirety; funny that) or terrorists… or,
perhaps, to a former Unspeakable, *Unspeakables*.

Hermione took a seat on a plush armchair opposite a much more worn seat which stank of the older man’s magic. He’d probably never sat anywhere else in the room. He sat opposite her in his favoured chair and simply waited.

“I have recently become interested in the concept of ancient sidhe artefacts’ putative function,” she decided to say, because that was essentially true and the sort of thing an interested academic would want to know. It was also the thing that she wanted to know, so it would be best to start there regardless. “Specifically, when the sidhe fled to the Otherworld, from what place did they go, and how?”

Horatio leaned back into the chair and stroked at his marvellous grey beard.

“That is a difficult question. The Otherworld is roughly analogous to the British Isles, you understand? It is these islands, yes, but shaped by the powers and will of the sidhe. It is a construct. In the old days nearly every place in these islands was a doorway to the Otherworld: sacred groves, pools of water, streams, and places in the hills and in the mountains. No so after the betrayal of Morag Muir!”

The Otherworld as a construct created by the sidhe was something she hadn’t encountered before. The Otherworld was a different magical plane, a reality positioned at an angle to their own such that they intersected only rarely. Except… that view didn’t actually preclude what the former Unspeakable had told her, did it?

“How was it created?”

“That’s between the sidhe and their gods, I suppose,” said Bulstrode jovially. “I couldn’t possibly comment. Still, how they fled this world was different in essence and in nature to how they had left for the Otherworld before that time. Muir of course sealed off the Otherworld, and the only mode of access remaining were the scattered portals, henges and rings left behind.”

“So the megaliths, the ancient artefacts of the sidhe, may be portals to the Otherworld?”

The information seemed to confirm what the Unspeakables already knew, which worried Hermione because the artefacts on Avalon all contained some disembodied but ultimately malevolent Otherworld entity.

“Some of them, yes.”

“How would one go about activating them?” she dared ask. She was skirting dangerously close to making him betray the oathpact, she feared. Most things she had asked so far had revealed non-sensitive information. The Unspeakables would have prevented their former comrade from revealing anything specific, if indeed he had ever known that – sometimes, she wanted to hex the Unspeakable who had decided against writing *everything* down. So much unpleasantness could be avoided if the Unspeakables took more expansive records. Such as the *whys* and *hows* as well as the *whats*. It would make the archives less secure in the event of an attack but it *would* stop the threat of knowledge being lost purely because someone had *died*.

That was what writing *was for*.

“I’m not sure one would. You see, I am quite sure that the gateways will only open during an equinox or solstice period, and even then I am quite sure that of all the verified sidhe artefacts, none are intact.”
Except, perhaps, those on Avalon… Everything led back to Avalon, of course. She’d been silly to assume that it wouldn’t, really. The Unspeakables of old had chosen the island for their headquarters for a reason, even if that reason had been lost to the mists of time. Avalon was ancient and intensely magical, and secret, and isolated – perfect for the Unspeakables. Its people revered the ancient sidhe places and monuments like the Greeks revered the Parthenon. If any of their portals remained intact it would be located on Avalon.

“Hypothetically, if one were intact?” she pressed.

“Then you would need to speak the ancient words of activation as day fades into night on the equinox or solstice. Failing that, a large enough sacrifice at the appropriate time should suffice. I thought I remembered… ah, but it doesn’t matter; this is all theoretical, no?” he said, eyes twinkling. “Would you like a cup of tea? Herty should have popped in with some tea by now…”

Suddenly, a petite house-elf popped into the room with a tray holding a kettle, two mugs, and a stack of yellow, buttered toast. She vanished without a word.

“The silly thing disapproves of my work on the sidhe. Can’t for the life of me figure out why; she won’t say a thing about it. She just refuses and then tries to punish herself – which I won’t allow, of course.” said Horatio after pouring Hermione a mug of hot tea. “I hope you take your tea with milk.”

“It’s fine, thank you,” said Hermione, sniffing at the mug surreptitiously before drinking. It might be poisoned.

“What did you say was your interest in this subject?” continued Horatio.

“Academic, mostly,” she said. “Some friends and I are somewhat interested in this topic…”

Horatio would remember that he had once been an Unspeakable. He would remember the words and content of the oathpact, and what it meant. He knew to avoid triggering its negative consequences also, if Hermione gave him the right hints. The problem was that she couldn’t simply come out and say ‘I’m working with the Unspeakables’ because that would trigger a series of associations which could end with Horatio’s death.

Not just from talking about the Unspeakables, of course. But that’s where it would begin. Better to skirt, better to hint and suggest, because at least then there would be reasonable doubt.

“I see,” he said simply. “Sidhe magic is quite dangerous. I’m sure I don’t need to tell you not to go playing around with things better left alone.” He said it anyway, of course. Because it wasn’t the sort of thing anyone left unsaid, just in case.

“Of course not,” she said. “The world is a dangerous enough place as it is. I’m not the sort to go looking for more danger, I can assure you.”

Well, now, wasn’t that a bare-faced lie and something more besides?

“Oh, I’m sure,” said Bulstrode. “It is an interesting hypothetical, isn’t it? If one were to locate an intact sidhe circle, and if one were to know the ancient words or be prepared for a sacrifice… then one could enter the Otherworld, the first in one thousand years to achieve such a thing. A captivating thought, isn’t it?”

Hermione made a non-committal sort of noise, one she thought would be appropriate. She was probably going to go to the Otherworld. She would likely be the first human to enter its eldritch borders in almost a thousand years. It would be exciting if it weren’t so ineffable a scenario.
“Did you know Stonehenge is a fully human construction?” said Horatio. “Yes, it’s really quite brilliant…”

The elderly man then went on to tell Hermione just why he believed this, and just why it was brilliant, and despite the more pressing concerns she had, Hermione gladly accepted another mug of tea, and even nibbled at a piece of toast.

13th August 2011 – Tithe an Rialtais (Dublin)

Harry had never been to Ireland before. Not even Northern Ireland, the Muggle bit that was still part of Britain. The Dursleys hadn’t ever gone there of course – that had been during the Troubles, so Harry had heard all about how the Irish were all terrorists and dirty layabouts, not even proper Christians really. He’d just assumed all Irish people must be interesting and friendly if the Dursleys hated them so much.

Still, he had never been to Ireland before. There were no international controls on Apparation and portkeying, even floo, between the two wizarding nations, but Harry had never had any reason to go. Apparently the whole island had calmed down a lot since he’d been away, which was especially nice considering he was about to visit the Irish Prime Minister in his office.

The government buildings had been rather nice to look at, in a sort of early 20th century way; large and official-looking, if not grand like Hogwarts or ancient like Caer Tawel.

Their contact mission was made rather more complicated by the fact that the Taoiseach had only recently come to office – Luna had said something about March – and the Irish Court hadn’t seen fit to brief him on much of anything, not even the existence of magic. His predecessor should have done that, but then… well, since speaking to the man, Harry was coming to see that the Irish Court had been neglecting the Muggles for decades.

“You’re telling me that magic, wands and witches and broomsticks and all that, is real?” said Mr Enda Kenny, leaning back away from his desk. “And what you’ve shown me isn’t just lasers and holograms? This is one of those camera shows, isn’t it?”

“It’s definitely not one of those, Mr Kenny. Taoiseach, sir,” said Harry, unsure of the proper form of address.

“We really are witches. Or, a witch and a wizard,” said Luna. “We actually thought you would already know this information before we got here: you were supposed to have been told.”

“By the Irish Court of Magic,” explained Harry. “They’re the wizards who run magical Ireland. We’re from Britain.”


“No, not that. Merlin, not that.”

“You’ve made everything we’re about to say a lot more complicated,” said Luna. “Our government has declared war on the Irish magical government. This is a bad thing for everyone involved, but it is a very bad thing for you and your people.”

“Our government’s sort of gone a bit haywire,” said Harry. “Sorry about that. We’ve got a bit of a Hitler situation at the moment. I’m—we’re—part of a group working to overthrow the current
government to prevent any further atrocities from occurring.”

“That mess up near the border was your lot, wasn’t it?” said the Muggle darkly. “What do you want from us, exactly?”

“Nothing. You can’t really help us with this. We just wanted to be assured you knew everything that was going on. If you could circulate some pictures… you know, of people you should avoid? Put them on television, in the papers, everywhere you can think. Be subtle about it,” said Harry.

The Unspeakables had prepared a dossier. It contained pictures of known and dangerous Death Eaters, criminals and British Ministry officials who should be avoided by Muggles at all costs. It contained other things too, but most of it had been boring to Harry (who knew the information because he was living it) so he hadn’t bothered reading through it all.

It was for Muggles, anyway.

“I don’t really understand,” said Enda Kenny. “What’s this war about?”

“Control,” said Luna simply. “The Dark Lord doesn’t need land. Wizards have all the land we could ever need. He wants bodies. He has a need to dominate and control, to bend and twist the world around him to his own needs and devices.”

“The Irish voted against joining up with us a few hundred years ago,” said Harry, “so when he came to power in our world, he failed to claim Ireland and the Irish. But there are a lot of wizards in Ireland – more than in Britain, even proportionally – and he wants them now.”

“What’s this Court doing about it?”

“That’s the problem,” said Harry. “Not a lot. The wizards in Tara have this powerful magic spell which will protect them against any attack, but there’s hundreds who don’t live in Tara but who live scattered amongst your people. The Dark Lord will go after them, and hurt your people in the process. The town in the north is just the first example.”

“But we don’t… how can we defend against wizards? Our army’s not the best, we’d have to notify NATO…”

“Don’t do that!” Harry said, immediately alarmed. He wasn’t aware on the particulars of Muggle diplomacy – and this thing he didn’t blame on the Unspeakables, since he’d probably know even less about Muggle affairs without them – but he did know that NATO was the Muggle world’s largest military alliance.

If there was something all wizards could agree on it was that under no circumstances should Muggles be allowed to turn their weapons against wizards. Not even enemy wizards. It set too dangerous a precedent.

“There’s no need for that just yet,” said Luna calmly. “In any case, I doubt the alliance would respond. Muggle leaders all over the world know about magic, Mr Kenny. Mr Cameron has already been alerted to the current situation.”

“Muggle weapons would do more harm than good, I think,” said Harry. “Considering that the majority of magical settlements are inside Muggle towns.”

“Why weren’t we told?” said Kenny. The poor man had turned completely white. Harry supposed it was a bit much to just turn up and tell him about magic, tell him about the war, and then expect him to play nicely about it all.
Just then, a portrait in the room began to stir. Harry didn’t notice it at first, having been too concentrated on the Muggle Taoiseach, but Luna drew it to his attention after it had begun silently flapping its arms at them. It was ostensibly a painting of a Muggle, but that couldn’t be right because there it sat, waving at them to be quiet.

“Mr Kenny, the painting behind you is in fact a wizard painting. Right now it’s telling us to be quiet. I think it’s meant to be keeping tabs on you,” said Harry. As soon as Enda Kenny turned around the portrait went still again.

“I’ll have the damned thing taken out of the room immediately!” promised Kenny.

“No, don’t do that,” said Luna absently, “he is supposed to be here after all. It’s the wizards who are at fault here. Why don’t you go tell them that?” she said, speaking to the portrait. The man inside the frame huffed loudly, provoking a small jump from Mr Kenny, before disappearing from the portrait.

“Well, we’ve sorted out that problem,” muttered Harry. No doubt a representative from the Irish Court would turn up within moments. That wasn’t exactly part of the plan – contact was going to be made tomorrow, or at least attempted – but he supposed it was actually an improvement rather than anything else.

“I don’t understand,” said Mr Kenny. “Where’s he gone? How can he move? I suppose magic…”

An irate-looking wizard in bright yellow robes popped into the room.

“How dare you! This is most peculiar, what remit do you even have to come barging in here like this?” said the wizard, and then Harry pushed aside his messy hair to reveal his scar.

“Hi,” said Harry. “I’m Harry Potter. Mr Kenny here tells me that he’s never been introduced to the existence of magic, and that his predecessor neglected to inform him as well.”

“I’m sure it was just a mistake because he was only recently elected,” said Luna, smiling.

Harry fished around his robes – the pockets of which had been extended using a charm of Hermione’s – for the dossier, then dropped it onto Kenny’s desk.

“This is the information we can give you in a more digestible form,” said Harry. “I think we have another appointment now, though?”

He glanced at the Irish wizard who nodded.

“I’ll Side-Along you both; can’t pass through the Centenary Ward otherwise,” he said, and then sighed.

“We’ll send someone by in a few days’ time,” said Luna warmly, “just to check in.”

“Mr Potter, if you’d like to come first?”

Newcastle – Horatio Bulstrode’s Flat (Flat 722)

The retired Unspeakable was, in Hermione’s opinion, a thoroughly interesting and congenial man. Despite the Unspeakable things done to his mind the man retained much of his knowledge – if sometimes he was a bit fuzzy at the edges – and had provided Hermione with a veritable hoard of
information of a wide range of topics.

They had discussed the nature of house-elves and the magic which bound them to service (although Hermione still didn’t fully understand it; she would need to do some of her own research in that area), the origin of hags, and a lot of other things besides. If Hermione had her own way she’d stay sat in the man’s flat for the rest of the day, discussing esoteric and obscure fields of magic with him.

But a quick tempus charm had alerted her to the fact that she had already stayed too long. If she spent the better part of the next week with the man she still didn’t think she’d be able to tease out everything from his mind that the Unspeakables had locked away.

There was simply too much stashed away inside. She wondered if the Unspeakables knew more or less about magic than Dumbledore; in aggregate, probably much, much more. If any single living Unspeakable held as much knowledge, though, Hermione decided that it would have to be Horatio Bulstrode.

After all, one did not simply retire from the Unspeakables. That the Unspeakables let him go, but protected the information within his mind, said rather a lot about the man. It would be tantamount to a crime against humanity to allow the knowledge to pass from his mind without being written down for future generations. To that end, Hermione had attempted to extract everything she could from the man, going so far as to set up a Dictaquill to transcribe the entirety of their conversation.

She couldn’t abide the thought of missing some important piece of information, delivered only off-hand as an aside, merely because she hadn’t thought to or hadn’t had the time to write the words down.

“I really should be going now,” she said, glancing just one more time at the third tray of tea (this time with some light cakes) Herty had brought them. She was tempted to stay just for another round of cakes, but if she couldn’t justify staying to learn rare pieces of knowledge then she certainly couldn’t justify staying for some cakes.

Or could she? No, Hermione decided. She really had better leave. Horatio had given her a lot of information, information it would take quite some time to sort through and analyse. At least she would have helpers and assistants with that task; some years ago Morningstar had assigned two junior Unspeakables to her service, and they had never been given another assignment.

Hermione actually felt rather sorry for them. Cataloguing her notes and analysing her scattered thoughts couldn’t be the most exciting assignment for a new Unspeakable, at least not in the middle of the largest existential conflict their society had ever seen.

“Before you go, Miss Granger, I think I have remembered something pertaining to our earlier discussion,” said Bulstrode, pausing only to nibble at one of the cakes. “I hesitate to actually say it because I can’t for the life of me remember where I read it, and you seem like the sort of woman who values evidence and primary sources, but I shall tell you anyway.”

“Please, any information you have would be an excellent starting point,” she replied. No doubt he remembered exactly where he had learnt the information: as an Unspeakable. The problem was that he wouldn’t be able to remember who had told him, where he read it, or why. Much of his knowledge lacked context, which meant that he would rarely access the memories because he had forgotten their experiential component.

Hermione had reminded him, though. At least in part, which was why he kept offering her scattered pieces of information, knowledge which she had come here to obtain but couldn’t ask outright.
“Calan Awst, a pagan festival at the beginning of this month, has been suggested as the date of departure of the remaining sidhe,” he said. “But I think the best time for wizards to open the portals would be during the autumnal equinox, or at a push, Hallowe’en. The nature of sacrifice, harvest, and so on, you understand?” It was a question and also not a question. She understood what he was getting at in the main, if not in detail. It gave her something to work with, however, something very real and tangible…

They had 41 days to prepare, if they were able to open the portal in time for the autumnal equinox. A festival occurred on Avalon during that time: a harvest festival, a festival of sacrifice…

“Thank you very much for your time this morning, Mr Bulstrode,” said Hermione. Then she stood. “Would you mind if I Apparate out from here?”

“Of course not, my dear. I wish you the very best of luck in your endeavours,” he said. “I am certain we will see great things from you, in the future. If ever you find yourself in the area please do not be afraid to call in unannounced.”

If everything went to plan, thought Hermione, you’ll be seeing great things from me before year’s end.

“I should like the opportunity,” she said sincerely. “Thank you for everything you have told me today. I hope to see you again.”

If of course she didn’t die. With that as her final, morbid thought, Hermione Apparated back to Caer Tawel.
10 Years Ago (2)

1st February 2002 – Caer Tawel, Small Meeting Room

After having spent some time in the weird fortress of the Unspeakables Harry had thought he’d managed to at least vaguely know about all of the rooms within the poky little ancient castle. Of course, he hadn’t accounted for the ridiculous use of wizardspace throughout the entire structure, and after being taken to the ‘Small Meeting Room’ (proclaimed in gleaming golden letters on its solid oak door) he had realised the Unspeakables had folded wizardspaces inside of other wizardspaces.

He hadn’t thought that was possible, but then, what did he really know about magic and how it worked?

The small room contained enough space for a small circular table with five chairs around it. Despite the apparent equality of the seating arrangement, neither Harry nor his friends occupied anything close to the power held by Unspeakable Morningstar.

“Tonight you are to defend the island,” stated Morningstar. “At regularly defined intervals the island is subject to attacks from … well, we aren’t entirely sure on the whats, whys, or hows. Tonight is one of those nights.”

“They’re the remnants of the sidhe,” said Luna softly. “And I think some other things, old magic…”

“That’s as much as we know, yes,” continued Morningstar. “No doubt they are related to the sealing of the island and the disappearance of the sidhe, but—that is not what we’re to discuss today.”

“It really gets better and better, doesn’t it?” Harry said. “Why did you choose this island to hide on? Nobody speaks English, they haven’t interacted with the rest of the world in a thousand years, and Dark creatures attack it regularly! Then there’s old magic you don’t understand…”

Morningstar frowned.

“It is the least dangerous place, Potter, not the safest place in Britain. In any case, the attacks are not so severe. You will need to use powerful offensive magic to combat these creatures and entities, and they do not and cannot die by our spells. Our objective is to corral them to the designated areas, where an ancient rune trap will destroy them come morning.”

“Why tonight?” asked Hermione curiously. “What I mean is, when do they come, and can these times be related to any important magical events in the calendar?”

“They keep to the old pagan calendars,” said Morningstar. She shrugged. “We’re not sure whether the appearance and timing of these creatures predates – and thus influenced – the creation of the calendars, or whether they came after. Tonight’s what the Irish call Imbolc. The locals call it the Festival of Candles. Traditionally a spring festival, the timing of the attacks has meant celebrations of a rather different nature.”

She paused.

“Nothing will enamour the locals to you more than participation in the night’s festivities, but even so, we would appreciate the assistance. Records show the population of the island has dwindled
from its peak, but the severity of the attacks has not changed. We must protect our Muggle and Muggleborn guests, and help the islanders.”

“So you’re willing to risk our lives for you and yours, but not for us and ours?” said Neville. “That sounds fair.”

Harry rather agreed with him.

“You will not be in that kind of danger here,” said Morningstar. “Some of the locals operate dangerously, taking many risks and incurring significant wounds. It is tradition. Others perform a largely ceremonial and ritualistic response. The Unspeakables do neither. Do you think us fools? We have prepared our ground sufficiently, and you four will be in no danger. As you have no doubt seen in the Reality Mirror you are the wardstone of all the prophecies. Without you, none can come to pass.”

To the woman’s credit Harry couldn’t detect an ounce of frustration or anger towards him. He supposed the Unspeakables didn’t need to be angry or frustrated because from their perspective, everything had gone according to plan. They’d probably accounted for this push-and-pull from him and the others.

It hadn’t even been a fortnight yet, and what was it the Muggles said? Stockholm Syndrome hadn’t set in yet.

“You don’t have anything else to do,” pointed out Morningstar. “Think of it as a learning experience.”

Hermione and Luna might relish the opportunity, thought Harry glumly, but he wasn’t sure that he would. Although… he did have rather a lot of pent up rage and aggression, didn’t he? If he couldn’t fling it at Death Eaters and Dark Lords he supposed that Dark and evil remnants of weird ancient magical beings were the next best thing.

“I’ll do it,” he said tersely. “If we need to learn new spells, show us and we’ll learn them.”

He hadn’t met a combat or defence related spell he couldn’t cast yet, after all.

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1st February 2002 – Dinas Lleyn, Avalon (Outskirts)

Luna hadn’t needed to be told that something large and magical would happen that night. Even aside from her upbringing, which had been at least somewhat traditional when considered against the backdrop of the Lovegood family,

she could hear the angered voices of the currently disembodied sidhe remnants.

They wanted blood, and chaos, and darkness. It would sate them for a time, and then they would return. They promised safety for an exchange of blood and chaos.

From what Luna had been told by the Unspeakables – and then again by her friend, Huw, in far more jubilant tones – the creatures would get blood and chaos tonight, but it wouldn’t be that blood and chaos they wanted.

Despite centuries, literally centuries, of the same thing happening over and over again, the creatures bound to attack Avalon hadn’t learnt. Luna thought them rather like people in that regard, which didn’t entirely surprise her. Sidhe predated the classification system in use by the Ministry
and so were not Beings, but Luna knew that didn’t make them not people.

These remnants were shadows of what they were and could be again – the whispers told her that – but they retained vestiges of personhood still. A vile and hateful sort of personhood, but then, some people were vile and hateful people.

“This village is named after me,” said Huw proudly.

Luna turned to look at him, and then smiled.

Hermione had frowned and turned away upon seeing Huw when he had arrived to greet them. Luna hadn’t bothered, because a naked man covered in runic wards was nothing to get shy about. She’d read about how ancient Celtic wizards had fought like this. Surely Hermione would have, but the sight of Huw naked had embarrassed her enough she had to turn away, so Luna thought maybe she hadn’t.

It was her own loss, of course, since Luna thought Huw looked rather dashing. He certainly had nothing to be ashamed of, and he wasn’t even the only naked person around them.

“Dinas Lleyn,” said Luna. “Your many-greats grandmother and her husband, the Lleyn man, built their home here when Queen Morgana died.” Huw had told her the story already. He appeared pleased she remembered.

Luna looked idly back at the village, which was some distance away and tucked safely behind ancient and powerful wards. The village occupied a soft, gentle area of flatland nestled between two hills upon a river.

The gathered group of wizards and witches – Avalon locals and Unspeakables, as well as Luna herself and Hermione – occupied a small rocky meadow close to the edge of a delightful little woodland. Luna had felt the runewards woven into the area surrounding the village and the woods.

When the Dark creatures came they would be drawn to the runewards, and corralled towards the waiting wizards. Together they would ensnare the entities and keep them locked in combat until dawn, when the Festival of Candles would begin. Gwyl y Candhwylau, Huw had said.

“My family has never been very good at the kind of Dark magic we’re supposed to use tonight,” she said, confiding that small truth to her new friend. The Lovegoods had dabbled in the Dark Arts, of course – in magics of love and joy, and wildness, and chaos – but never in the kinds of Dark magic requiring harmful intent or desire to maim.

Huw shrugged.

“You’ll either use the spells or you won’t,” he said. “Try, and if you can’t, watch what I’m doing.”

Luna nodded. Likely Huw knew some other Dark magic – and they had been warned that only Dark magic could harm these beings, that term encompassing the vastness of the Dark Arts – capable of helping her achieve her goals that night.

Huw was right, in any case. She either would cast the spells or she wouldn’t. She couldn’t know until she knew, so there was no sense worrying about it really.

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1st February 2002 – Caer Tawel (Surrounds)
“Tempus,” muttered Harry, checking how close it was to sunset. When the sun went down Dark creatures would drag themselves up through the ground, materialise from the air, and come lurching out of the waters all over and around the island.

He had ten minutes until that happened. Ten minutes until he had to unleash a torrent of Dark spells upon the creatures in order to help defend Avalon – and participate in some sort of ancient festival. He wasn’t worried about casting Dark spells even though he knew the others were.

He could cast them. He’d proven time and time again that he could cast Dark spells – he had something of an affinity for them, even if he hated using them.

Harry worried where his head went when he did use them. That was the problem. The Court of Fools had forced him, in the completion of their challenges, to examine parts of his soul he hadn’t ever wanted to see.

The only reason he had beaten Daphne Greengrass in the last rounds of the duelling tournament had been the inexplicable cascade of obscure and Dark spells he’d launched at the very last moment.

So Harry knew that he could perform Dark spells. He knew that there was a place inside of him, a part of his soul, a feeling he could slip into, where Dark spells would fly easily from his wand.

That was the problem.

“You all right, Harry?” asked Neville quizzically.

“Just nerves,” he replied, although he knew it was a hollow excuse. He’d been proclaimed a Harlequin of the Court of Fools, he’d won the Triwizard Tournament and done a bunch of other crazy things besides.

It seemed Neville knew better than to probe deeper, however, because he changed the subject.

“Cadwal told me all the beasties we catch tonight will be used in fertility magic tomorrow morning.”

Harry wrinkled his nose.

“What, we’re going to fight all night to capture Dark creatures and tomorrow morning all the locals have an orgy?”

Neville shook his head but then frowned.

“Actually, I don’t know… I thought he meant agricultural magic, you know, that kind of fertility? Who knows with the Welsh.”

Harry grinned.

“In that case it’s a pity Hannah’s not here,” said Neville, wiggling his eyebrows obscenely. Harry knew it was meant in a light-hearted way, but all it did was remind him of Ginny and how he wouldn’t see her again for a decade. He grimaced.

He knew that Hannah would wait for Neville, and Neville would wait for Hannah – they had been about to get married, after all, but even if they hadn’t been Harry thought she would wait. He knew that Neville would.
Neville always had been the most gentlemanly of all the Gryffindor boys, at least those in Harry’s general awareness.

Hermione and Luna had been sent to a place called Dinas Lleyn, a place whose name Harry couldn’t actually pronounce. He and Neville were back with the Unspeakables to protect Caer Tawel and its surrounding area.

Harry didn’t think they really needed the help. Odd apparatuses and strange magical devices littered the area, and Harry thought he could see all sorts of runes etched into them. Even without those, and Harry assumed they provided some kind of vital function, almost all of the Unspeakables would participate in the night’s activities. Some had brought their families behind the fortress ward (and Harry couldn’t blame them exactly, but it made him angry all the same) and some of the adults in those families helped, too.

“It’s weird being around Dark wizards who aren’t slimy and evil like most of the Slytherins in our year,” said Neville.

“I don’t think it’s really fair to call the people here Light or Dark,” mused Harry. “They’re just magic.”

“It’s right weird,” continued Neville. “They’ve just been sat here for a thousand years doing their own thing, safe from Goblin Rebellions, wizard wars and Muggles.”

“And a peaceful, happy life they’ve had,” said Unspeakable Bonchance cheerily. “They’re in wide agreement that sealing off the island is the best thing they’ve ever done as a community.”

“Bit selfish,” Harry said, and shrugged. He wasn’t committed one way or another to whether the ancient wizards had been selfish when they did what they did. He could understand the motivation behind it.

“All of human history is a story of selfish people doing selfish things, at the core. Even altruism can be selfish,” continued the young Englishman. “Besides, they’ve had nearly ten centuries of peace and happiness. Generations of witches and wizards have lived and died here, happy and safe. That’s got to be worth something, right?”

“I suppose is it when you got to make the choice about it,” Harry muttered.

“Do you remember the correct wand movements for the new spells we taught you?” said Bonchance, changing the topic.

Harry nodded. He’d known some of the spells already, having had to learn and cast them during his testing with the Court of Fools. Dumbledore hadn’t been pleased, but then – the Court of Fools hadn’t cared and didn’t have to care.

“Good,” he said. “It wouldn’t do for you to forget them and become injured. The wards around the fortress keep the worst of the bunch away, but you never know what could happen.”

Harry thought that if they were so worried about his safety they wouldn’t have asked him to fight weird demonic apparitions from the Otherworld, but he wasn’t about to give up doing something for the safety of an Unspeakable castle.

1st February 2002 – Caer Tawel (Surrounds)
Longbottoms had never been particularly good at most kinds of Dark magic. Fire spells came somewhat easily, as did spells requiring love or other positive emotions. Neville’s gran had given him a really old Longbottom family book the summer after sixth year, the one he’d always wanted to read but had never been old enough, and it had confirmed that Longbottoms had generally always been Light wizards casting Light or neutral spells, with occasional forays into the more positive side of Dark magic.

But those were all general sorts of things. ‘Longbottoms can’ or ‘Longbottoms do’ didn’t actually mean that all members of the family showed those behaviours. The book had suggested that Longbottoms possessed a particular affinity for potions, but Neville consistently melted through his cauldrons.

Maybe that was Snape’s fault and he wasn’t actually a dud Longbottom, but it wasn’t like Neville had retained much of what his former teacher had failed to teach him, so he didn’t feel comfortable practising.

It didn’t help that he’d actually been able to cast the Dark spells required of him, he thought idly, moving his wand from one wandform to another, letting fly a ripping curse after the downwards arc of the bloodletting curse. He had an inkling that his sudden proficiency had something to do with the magic around Avalon, but as far as Neville could tell the half-incorporeal thing he was fighting wasn’t harmed at all by the spells so he wasn’t sure it really mattered in the end.

Every spell he cast seemed absorbed into its thick, fur-speckled scaly hide. He chanced a glance over at Harry, who hadn’t stopped moving like a bloody spelldancer since the sun had gone down. He moved from one Dark spell to the next coldly and efficiently, one wandform blending into another. It was downright scary, actually, or would be if Neville didn’t have some foul ghostly dog-like apparition bearing down on him.

“*Lacerō carnem!* *Eviscero!*” cast Unspeakable Bonchance, beating the beast ever closer to one of the arcane runetraps dotted about the area.

Neville took the opportunity to let loose a flurry of ripping curses at the beast, unable to muster up the desire to maim required for some of the more effective spells. He stumbled out the way of a retreatting dog-bear-like burning apparition and only just managed to get up a Shield Charm to deflect some accidental friendly fire.

When the bloody fuck had Harry gotten so good at this sort of thing? Neville wondered that and half a dozen other things in the brief moment’s respite. The creatures had stopped coming – for now. It wouldn’t last, since Neville had already sat through two of these minor breaks.

“How can we fit so many inside one runetrap?” he asked to the group generally after watching yet another set of Otherworld apparitions get beaten back into the strange boxes.

“*Wizardspace!*” shouted a grinning Unspeakable. “*Runic wizardspaces!*”

“I invented them!” said Unspeakable Whitehall cheerily, leading a docile Otherworld hellhound by a thin, silver chain of magic attached to his wand. It walked with him directly into the box, and then the elderly Unspeakable cleaned off his robes with a quick spell.

“You all right, Harry?” dared Neville. Harry had been a bit distant since sundown, but he supposed people reacted differently to Dark magic. That was one of the reasons it was so dangerous – it was too individualised. You couldn’t reasonable expect Dark magic to affect one person the same way as another.
“Er—yeah,” said Harry after a brief pause. “It’s just a bit intense.”

Neville was about to agree but caught sight of a creeping materialisation from the corner of the eye. The first ones to come were the ones which materialised out of the air – a thin magic-steeped mist appeared in the air, and slowly but surely the creatures of the Otherworld formed.

Some of them could fly, although Neville would hesitate to call them birds. He shot off a blood-boiling hex at one of the scaled fliers, one of the few creatures which could be outright killed, before hitting another with a ripping curse.

The Unspeakables – and the locals – were right that tonight was … something close to fun, even if it was pretty dangerous.

If nothing else Neville had never felt quite so alive, so there was that, at least.

2nd February 2002 – Dinas Lleyn

Hermione had just witnessed possibly the most beautiful sunrise she had ever and would ever see, as night gave way to morning over the ancient and primeval land of Avalon. It was an abstract kind of thing, though, something that had happened around her rather than something she had experienced. Even the way the early morning fog clung to the feet of the trees, and the way that the grass glistened with dew and magic, failed to really move her.

There had been something much more interesting happening, after all.

She had spent the long stretch of time between sunset and sunrise forcing out a stream of Dark curses from her wand in order to fight foul creatures and magical entities which should never have existed in the first place. Hermione understood the theory behind many of the spells she had cast that night perfectly, but with much Dark magic that just didn’t matter. Still, the spells had come from her wand in the end – she hadn’t honestly thought they wouldn’t, not really – and Hermione had been a full participant in the night’s celebration. She had thought celebration the wrong word for what they had been doing, at first. It seemed rather a lot more like an existential battle for one’s life and home to Hermione, but she supposed that was the interesting thing about unique cultural contexts.

The Festival of Candles had been a gruelling, bloody and altogether dangerous way to spend her night. She’d cast magic she’d never thought she’d cast – she was very much a fan of Light magic – whilst all around her naked Welshmen cavorted and danced in the chaos. She had never felt so utterly out of place anywhere (except maybe, under careful consideration, in the Muggle world).

It had been worth it for the morning.

As the sun rose over the island and the morning fog cleared, the arcane traps which had collected the sidhe creatures burst open, spilling out their bounty of eldritch entities. Hellhounds and creatures too impossible to name poured out of the folded wizardspaces.

A shiver ran up her spine – surely they could not mean to fight again, in the light of day?

A great cheer rose up through the gathered crowd – the entire population of the town – as every single creature burst into an intense pillar of luminous green fire.

A great cacophony roared out of the crowd, who had started singing something loud and fast in Welsh. They started to move again, this time in moves that were more predictable and practised –
ritualised, she supposed. All the while the Dark creatures continued to burn, bright pillars of green fire against the pale morning sun.

The sense of magic was indescribable. An ancient magic, magic older than anything she had ever felt before, seemed to seep up from the ground below her. It permeated the air around her. She knew that if she were closer to the coast it would be in the sea. Her skin tingled and she knew, just knew, it was weaving itself all around her, seeping into her skin and bones and Merlin only knew what else.

Hermione joined in the song, and her feet took up the dance, and even though she didn’t understand a word she said, she revelled in the wildness of it all. Soon enough the whirling dance around the pillars of flame grew less frenetic, less frenzied, and many of the revellers peeled away. Hermione allowed herself to be pulled away by Huw and Luna, watching as a much smaller group caroused around the captive and still-burning Otherworld creatures.

It was only when she stopped singing and dancing that Hermione realised she was out of breath. She sank down to the ground, suddenly a lot more tired than she had been. Luna – and Huw, still completely naked and covered in paint as well as other less savoury things – joined her on the wet grass.

“So how did you enjoy your first Dark magic celebration, Hermione?” asked Huw jovially.

She didn’t quite know what to say.

“It was very wild.”

“Aye, it is that,” he agreed. “Tonight’s was a good one,” he continued. “Best I’ve seen in years, thinking of it.”

“What made it good?” she asked, curious. A kind of restless energy infused her, causing her to experience small, subtle surges in energy at odd moments. “Or, better than others, I mean.”

Huw leaned back on his palms and looked over at the Candles.

“Everything,” he said, and shrugged. “You felt it, too.”

“I did,” she said, and began to compose the rest of her thought – but I have no prior experience to contrast it with – and then let it go. It had felt rather satisfying, she supposed. And the magic at the end – well, she would certainly need to find a book about that sort of thing.

Huw scratched at his beard.

“I’m supposed to get you two back to the Unspeakables now,” he said. “Only, I think I’d rather sit in the sun a bit longer, if you ladies don’t mind?”

Hermione supposed that she didn’t really mind at all.

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2nd February 2002 – Caer Tawel (Small Meeting Room)

Harry’s leg twitched again, this time jumping high enough to make a loud noise against the bottom of the wooden table at which he was sat. Third time that had happened, he noted absently, trying with everything that he had to concentrate on what Unspeakable Morningstar was trying to say.
It had been the same ever since the end of that Dark celebration a few hours ago, the Festival of Candles, when a veritable typhoon of ancient and primeval magic had welled up and danced inside of him, released back to the land and its people. He’d been left filled with this frenetic, chaotic energy that made his legs jump and his fingers want to tap.

The celebration had been—something, all right. It had done everything he’d been told it would – he’d been deeply touched by the magic, he’d proven himself to the locals, he’d even managed to work out most of his deep-seated anger at the Unspeakables.

He wondered if that had been the point. Probably. The Unspeakables were too Slytherin for Harry to properly figure out what exactly they were doing and what they wanted from those actions. What they said was one thing.

What they meant was another.

“As I was saying before Potter interrupted us again,” said Morningstar smoothly, “no doubt you have all recognised the opportunity for training provided by this island and the people who live here. Even with prophecy on our side none of you would provide any sort of match for a Dark wizard of Voldemort’s power. We hope to remedy that somewhat in the intervening years. Last night was one such opportunity for training. The next decade shall be another.”

“This was the point, wasn’t it?” asked Hermione. “Not keeping us safe, not just because of prophecy, but because you wanted to shape us. Mould us into the people you need us to be.”

“I wouldn’t have put it quite like that,” muttered Morningstar, “but that is one part of it, yes. But make no mistakes here: we don’t intend to subsume you to our cause. We are, until the end of these troubles, fully and wholly behind your cause, Potter.”

Harry knew which arguments he should use – if they were for his cause then why weren’t they letting him fight it? Why didn’t they capture his other friends, too? Those and many more would have been valid questions.

Harry didn’t ask them because he knew what the answer would be. The Unspeakables were behind his cause their way. Probably even for their own goals too.

“We have just lost the most powerful wizard in three generations,” said Morningstar. “There is but one man in all of Britain who could teach you what you need to know, Potter, and that man wants you dead.”

Harry grimaced, then placed his left hand over his right to stop the incessant tapping of his fingers.

“With Dumbledore gone, and with Lord Voldemort your destined nemesis, it falls to the Unspeakables to train you. It is an honour, you know. We have rarely intervened in such a way throughout history, not since the Prime Unspeakable died.”

“Do you think Dumbledore lacked goals and motives of his own? We have a dossier on Dumbledore. He was a great man.” She paused, probably just for effect. “Great men have secrets.”

“Dumbledore has the Elder Wand,” said Luna. “My father told me.”

“That is correct,” confirmed Morningstar. “Now it belongs to Lady Valmira, and the Dark Lord lacks only one of the fabled Deathly Hallows.”

“The Resurrection Stone as well?” said Luna, frowning. “That is bad news.”
Deathly Hallows? Resurrection Stones? He’d heard about the Elder Wand before, of course. What wizard hadn’t?

“Children’s stories,” said Hermione dismissively. “Deathly Hallows indeed! Powerful magical artefacts created by man, perhaps.”

“Whatever their origin, Miss Granger, the Deathly Hallows are certainly real, and the Dark Lord possesses two of them. All is not lost, however, because we believe Potter is in possession of the third.”

“My Cloak?” he asked, thinking of the only rare and possibly unique magical object he owned. He didn’t think his motley would be it, since everyone in the Court had a set, so that left only his Invisibility Cloak. “What do these Hallows do?”

“They’re supposed to make their owner the master of Death,” said Hermione quietly.

“It is actually from a children’s story,” said Neville. “Three brothers were being chased by Death. In the end, they beat him, so he gave one of them his wand, one of them a stone binding the dead, and the final brother his cloak. The ones who took the stone and wand ended badly, but the brother who took the cloak hid from Death his entire life and took off the cloak as an old man, passing the cloak down to his son before Death finally found him.”

“That man was your many-greats grandfather,” said Morningstar. “A marvellous coincidence, as I am sure you can appreciate.”

“What does this mean?” he asked, unable to get his head clear for long enough to form any real opinion on the matter. He was still too magically charged. Did nobody else feel it?

“At its most basic you should not let Voldemort get his hands on your Cloak,” said Morningstar. “We intend to retrieve the remaining Hallows. Our mission for the next decade is you four,” she said.

“When we’re done you’ll be able to fight Voldemort, I’d wager. We’re going to make you into instruments of Fate.”

*
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

A bit shorter than other chapters but it has everything it needs to have, I think. If you're still reading, thanks a ton.

13th August 2011 – The Hill of Tara

Harry hadn’t ever been to the Irish wizards’ city of Tara and so had no idea what to expect when they arrived – and upon arrival, still didn’t have the slightest idea what the wizard city actually looked like because they’d been Apparated into some kind of official underground chamber.

Brilliant. Not that he was surprised, exactly, because it was just standard opsec to prevent outsiders from gaining a knowledge advantage of any sort, but he still would have liked to have seen some of Tara. It was the only wizarding city in Britain, and it wasn’t even a secret – people visited all the time, if they were wizards.

But the Centenary Ward prevented most travel into and out of the city, so he supposed it wasn’t unfair that they had been secreted away in some Irish Court underground chamber. Had they transported some Irish officials to Avalon it would have been directly inside of Caer Tawel. Of course, that was a clear-cut case of the hag calling the vampire Dark, so Harry didn’t have a leg to stand on with that particular complaint.

“Wait a minute,” said the Irish wizard, disappearing from the small chamber with a loud crack! Just moments later he reappeared, Luna clutching his arm.

“Have a seat, both of you,” he said, gesturing towards the two stools set before the tall – too tall – table. The Irish wizard took the single chair facing them, a chair both taller and more comfortable-looking than either of the two stools.

As he sat, Harry noted – with some degree of amusement – that the tables and stools were designed so that anyone, even the tallest wizard (excepting those with giant blood), would be at least a head shorter than the man on the other side of the table. A basic move designed to instil the victim with a sense of powerlessness, and to increase the authority of the wizard on the other side of the table.

Harry of course wasn’t bothered at all by the set up since he’d spent the better part of a decade being trained in all sorts of practical things, and he doubted that Luna had ever encountered a situation where she didn’t feel confident about herself, so the Irish Court’s attempt at psychological manipulation had fallen rather flat.

The Irish wizard hadn’t spoken yet, but neither had Harry or Luna: Harry, of course, wasn’t about to speak first because that’s what the Irish wizard wanted to happen so that he could inflate his sense of superiority and exercise a kind of authority over the situation, and he knew that Luna would indulge him in that.

So an increasingly awkward silence fell upon the small chamber, broken up by nothing other than the slow, measured breathing of all the wizards in the room. There came a point of course, thought Harry absently, where this kind of powerplay simply became ridiculous and farcical, but through
sheer stubbornness and innate obstinacy Harry was prepared to let that happen.

He’d spent the better part of three years making sarcastic comments at the Unspeakables, after all, so he knew that he could at least manage to turn the Irish wizard’s tactics against him. It might even be a little bit fun.

13th August 2011 – Caer Tawel (Avalon)

Ignoring the feeling of intense pressure and alertness – it was a kind of frenetic, hyperactive need to do something – that came with the particular stimulants she’d been told to use, Hermione upon her return from Newcastle headed directly to Morningstar’s office. She’d used a quick tracking charm beforehand so that she didn’t waste any of her time heading somewhere the other woman wasn’t, and found that she was alone in her office.

Hermione didn’t bother to knock. She pushed open the thick oak door and strode into the room. She reached inside her robes and fished out the stack of notes she’d made that morning based on what the retired Unspeakable had told her.

“I got some answers,” she said flatly. “I’m not sure you’ll like them.”

Morningstar didn’t reply, nor did she tell Hermione to take a seat (which Hermione did anyway, because she knew she wouldn’t be able to escape yet); she simply flicked through the parchment quickly.

“Looks like you’ll have to go see Billy, Granger,” she said finally, placing the parchment back down on her desk.

Hermione frowned.

“There’s no one else who could help this go faster,” continued Morningstar, “even if I do share your … distaste at the prospect.”

Hermione didn’t bother to say that Billy was a cantankerous old letch, and a host of other things besides, because Morningstar knew that just as well as Hermione did, so it was completely useless to object in that way.

“Will he even consent to help us? From what I remember, and I don’t forget a lot, the last time we spoke to him didn’t go very well.”

That was an understatement, thought Hermione, although it was one she had made on purpose. He’d transfigured Unspeakable Bonchance into a goat, and it had taken three weeks for a team of experts to change him back. He’d leered at Hermione’s chest and suggested Luna might like to join him for a bath, and had charmed Neville to speak only in ancient Celtic riddles.

“That’s the sticking point, yes,” agreed Morningstar. “But short of reading every single historical document, book, or piece of writing extant on the island, Billy is the only person who might have an answer as to… any of this,” she said, and then she shrugged. “If he won’t help, or if he can’t help, then that’s what we’ll have to do.”

Hermione could hear the unsaid piece: “But we don’t really have the time for it.”

“September isn’t very far away,” she agreed. “If Billy knows the words to say that’s excellent,” she continued, “but what if he doesn’t? The idea of sacrifice isn’t one I enjoy, I must admit.”
“Yes… it’s a very vague definition, isn’t it?” agreed Morningstar, glancing down at the stack of parchment on her desk. “The Welsh were the worst for it, of course; to them, a sacrifice can mean burning all your grain, giving up the ability to say or think a certain word… to a life. The sidhe were even worse: it could literally be a sacrifice of anything.”

“I rather like the ability to see the colour blue,” said Hermione carefully, “but if that were what they took, I don’t think I’d mind.”

“You’re going to get a broad agreement from me on that one, Granger. I shouldn’t mind to lose the ability to compose limericks ad hoc, but then what if they should take iambic pentameter? The trouble is it could be anything they take… your memories of childhood, your capacity for fondness, your ability to turn left… So you understand at least why we need to see Billy? Perhaps he can offer something a bit more concrete.”

“No, I do,” said Hermione. “I just don’t like it. He’s more dangerous than he seems.”

“You won’t find any argument from me on that one.”

“Shall I go today?”

Morningstar considered it.

“That depends on Potter,” she said at last. “He’ll have to accompany you; he’s the only one Billy hasn’t jinxed, cursed or magicked in some way.”

“Are they still not back?”

“I believe they’ve gone on to Tara,” replied the older woman smugly. “We knew there was a wizard portrait hanging in the Muggle leader’s office,” she said carefully, “so when Potter and Lovegood failed to return promptly – the whole affair shouldn’t have taken that long, even with Potter leading it – we sent someone on to check. The Irish wizards have made contact after we informed their Muggles of the goings-on. Fancy that!”

“Fancy that indeed,” said Hermione. “Is there anything else I need to do, or can I go sit quietly with my eyes closed for an hour or so?”

Sometimes, when the stimulants made it so you couldn’t sleep (which was their explicit purpose, after all) that was the next best thing.

“I don’t suppose that would be a problem,” said Morningstar, “but do be prepared to move on once Potter returns. Billy’s hard to find, even somewhere like Avalon.”

13th August 2011 – Tara

“Out with it then,” said the Irish wizard – who still hadn’t told them his name – eventually, breaking the overly long silence that had occupied the room. “You obviously have a message intended for the Irish Court.”

Harry nodded at him.

“We do, actually, although we weren’t expecting to make contact until tomorrow, at least…”

“Yes, well – your little stunt with the Muggles forced the issue a bit, didn’t it?” said the Irish Court
official glumly.

“I am Luna Lovegood,” said Luna cheerily, “and obviously, that is Harry Potter. We didn’t catch your name.”

“Agent O’Malley,” said O’Malley curtly. “Our nations are at war,” he said.

“We’re not affiliated with the British Ministry,” replied Harry easily. “In fact, we’re working to tear it down. That’s what we want to talk with you about.”

“The Centenary Ward will not breached. The wizards of Tara are safe; the Dark Lord shall shatter his forces against it to no success, I assure you.”

Harry shrugged.

“I doubt that – if anyone can breach that ward it’s him,” he said, “but that’s not the point anyway, is it?”

“The people outside of the ward – a not insignificant proportion of the Irish wizarding population, not to mention anything of the millions of Muggles – aren’t so fortunate,” said Luna. “We have a solid plan to combat the Dark Lord’s forces, but we require assistance.”

“So we’d like to speak with someone capable of making promises for the Court,” finished Harry.

O’Malley leaned back in his chair.

“I am such a person.”

“Well,” said Harry, deciding that he should be blunt about it, “what we need is wizards. There are under fifty Unspeakables, and some of them can’t fight. We’ve got what’s left of the resistance, and we’re confident we can stir up domestic support… but what we really need, Agent O’Malley, is what you Irish have in abundance: qualified wizards.”

“You ask us to not only defend ourselves,” said O’Malley slowly, “but to liberate your nation.”

“To help liberate our nation,” corrected Luna. “It is a sensible decision. You-Know-Who can’t be stopped unless we all work together.” She pulled a thick dossier seemingly from nowhere and pushed it across the too-tall table towards O’Malley. “This is the information we have for the Court.”

O’Malley flicked through it idly, not showing too much interest. The whole charade was really going a bit far, Harry thought, since clearly the Irish would be actively interested in neutralising Voldemort’s threat. Or perhaps they really weren’t, since they believed the wizards of Tara would endure. Just how did the Centenary Ward function?

“We would not be opposed to such an association, I think,” he said finally. “The details would require discussion and negotiation with the leader of the Unspeakables, of course.”

“Of course!” said Luna. “And, also of course, provisions must be made for the protection of the outlying settlements, and for the Muggles, or else we shall just be doing the Dark Lord’s work for him.”

Harry fought back a laugh. The Irish wizards had no intention of protecting anything other than Tara, at least not properly – but it was an ironclad condition of any arrangement with the Unspeakables, and more than that it was a moral imperative which the Unspeakables wouldn’t
hesitate to push upon the Court.

“Yes, of course,” agreed O’Malley, frowning. “There must be something else you want. What is it?”

“Supplies. We want – no, need – access to a more diverse stock of wands, broomsticks, all sorts of things really,” said Harry, perhaps a bit unhelpfully. “I don’t know what they all are.”

“There should be a list of things in the dossier,” offered Luna, “but some of the details are still negotiable.”

“How exactly do you intend to fight him? Why haven’t you managed it in the last decade? For that matter, Potter, it is a well-known fact that you’re dead.”

Fair play to the man for not bringing it up sooner, thought Harry.

“Well, I’m not, obviously. I was… there were reasons we couldn’t act, then; not that we didn’t want to, that we literally couldn’t. There was some ancient magic. It’s complicated.”

“But we spent the time planning instead, and training, and devising a method which should ensure a lasting peace,” said Luna. “So that’s what we’re trying to do now that we can.”

“So are you willing to help us, Agent O’Malley? Because the Dark Lord and Lady will overwhelm Ireland, and when they’re done here, it’s likely they’ll move to enslave the Muggles. You should know better than we do the state of things on the Continent,” said Harry.

O’Malley turned rather green at that, so Harry thought he’d scored a point there. Britain was now exporting its ‘little problem’ abroad; it would be a matter of time before similar revolutions occurred all across Europe, and the whole world would be poorer for it.

“Yes, yes, all right. The Minister shall meet with your leader as soon as it can be arranged,” he said.

13th August 2011 – Hermione Granger’s Office (Caer Tawel)

Although Hermione had intended merely to sit quietly in a state of almost-relaxation for several hours to – well, to stop the incessant, frenetic buzzing in her head – she had been unable to do so, and had instead started to furiously scribble a possible corollary, a correction of sorts, to the proof suggesting a maximum limit on the number of times one could fold wizardspace.

It was all wrong, of course, but she needed to do something with the energy – the dead energy, really – provided by the stimulant potions. Perhaps all wrong was a bit unfair, she decided, gazing down at her table.

The work she had been doing – if she could even call it work, since it was mostly a distraction from herself – had no pressing real-world use, so it could be argued that it constituted a waste of her precious time. She didn’t think so, personally – she had nothing to do at present save the tasks given to her, so what she did during her free time was her own concern. And the implications of an additional layer of wizardspace were fascinating, even if she struggled to even conceptualise the
theoretical arrangement of such a shape.

Deciding to quit while she was ahead, at least for today, Hermione waved her wand absently and the parchments gathered themselves up, soaring neatly and quickly into their allotted place in her filing system. Another stack of parchment lazily floated over to the table and presented itself to her, followed quickly by an inkpot and quill.

She sat down (after a chair helpfully scooted over towards her) and wrote, in large script, ‘**41 days to**’ at the top of the parchment, and then began to write a list.

They had forty-one days to figure out how to active a door to the Otherworld, an ethereal plane sealed away centuries ago, and filled with all sorts of magical things the world had forgotten. Forty-one days in which to discover either the ancient words, or the manner of sacrifice required for entry.

Forty-one days to further the prophecy of the Lioness, the prophecy which she had been moulded to fulfil. Forty-one days until, if everything went to plan, Hermione Granger would be ‘tempered at the Altar of Queens’ or she would die.

And that was ignoring all the other things they had planned to do in that time, too. She added them to her list. In the end, she’d come up with what she thought was the meat of the thing, and contained every important milestone which needed to be reached (that she knew of, of course) in the next forty-one days.

**41 days to**

- **Open a door to the Otherworld**
- **Discover the nature of sacrifice / find the ancient words**
  - **Altar of Queens**
  - **Destroy the ‘new communities’**
  - **Secure every British muggleborn**
  - **Convince the Irish Court to fight**
  - **Break the Death Eaters**
  - **Find Horcruxes**
- **Destroy Horcruxes**
  - **Inspire revolution**

Almost as an afterthought she scribbled over the back of the list her rationale, and some explanatory notes. Satisfied that she had done *something* (even if it was nothing at all save getting it all ordered in her mind), Hermione sat back in her chair.

It didn’t seem insurmountable, but then, she hadn’t exactly broken each part down into its constituent pieces. Merely locating Billy this afternoon could potentially take several days, since although Avalon was not so large as Britain proper, it wasn’t exactly a poky rock in the middle of the Irish Sea either, and Billy had no fixed abode, merely places he enjoyed to visit.

Convincing him to help them would be a task in and of itself, and that was assuming he even knew what they wanted. Was there even a price for the information?

The destruction of the breeding camps could be difficult to execute in reality, although in theory they had a solid approach. They were simply outnumbered, which was an obvious consequence of
what the Unspeakables had done in delaying the true war a whole decade. If the Irish Court wouldn’t fight, and if they couldn’t inspire enough of a resistance for it to matter… then the prophecies wouldn’t matter, because there would be no challenging Voldemort or Valmira, not with the Ministry behind them.

The people of Britain were the true wardstone of the plan, not Harry. She frowned. No, that wasn’t quite true, she thought – in addition to Harry. Without the rejection of the Ministry by the people nothing could really change, and the Ministry existed as a vehicle for the domination of its people, now more than ever before.

What was that annoying buzzing sound? It couldn’t just be the sound of her thoughts in her head; it was coming from her pockets.

“Well aren’t we stupid today!” she muttered, reaching inside her robes to bring out the Unspeakable coin. She was being pinged.

She frowned, seeing that Harry was back, which meant they would have to go out in search of Billy. She took another long look at her notes, then sighed. She left her office quickly and used the coin to direct her towards Harry, who met her in the corridor.

“Secured the Irish wizards,” said Harry, grinning. “How’d your thing go?”

“Our as well as can be expected, I suppose,” she said. “We know the information we need exists, and that what we want to do is at least possible, so there is that.” It wasn’t much, but it was something, and something was always better than nothing.

“So – Billy,” said Harry. “Any leads on where he’s hiding?”

“I thought we might check Llyn Alarch, first of all,” she replied. “He’s usually there. If he isn’t…”

“Gets a bit harder,” finished Harry. “Well, it’s not bad weather for a hike.”

“I’d rather we found him at the lake,” she grumbled. “Let me get my boots and things and we’ll go.”

Llyn Alarch (Avalon)

“Well,” Harry said, looking around the deserted lake, “I guess he’s not here.”

Llyn Alarch was the island’s largest permanent lake, a feature Harry thought was perhaps somewhat magical in nature, since it was fed by no rivers and rainwater couldn’t account for all of it, and it usually housed a population of endangered magical creatures akin to selkies. There were no settlements near to the lake, and so it occupied one of the many spaces of true wilderness present on Avalon.

It had been home to the Elyrch, the swan people, for thousands of years before Avalon had been sealed away, and they maintained it would be home to them for thousands of years after that, too. They, and their frequent guest Billy, were nowhere to be seen, and the hauntingly beautiful lake was quiet and still.

“No, I don’t suppose he is. And he’s taken the Elyrch with him, too,” said Hermione.

Harry nodded along to her. He’d been hoping that, if Billy weren’t around, the Elyrch would be so
they could ask where he’d gone, but they’d received no such luck. Still, it was a nice day, they’d packed food, so he wasn’t too put out by the whole thing.

“Where d’you reckon he’d go from here?”

“I assume the Elyrch are with him,” said Hermione, “so I suppose it’s also a question of where they would want to go, isn’t it?”

“At least they left their chairs and things,” said Harry, flopping down onto a strange sofa-like growth protruding out of the ground.

“When your chairs are literally plants and fungi you can’t exactly take them with you when you leave,” muttered Hermione, setting herself down on an oversized, but otherwise quite pleasant and not at all fungal-feeling, toadstool stool.

Hermione pulled out her map of the island – such that one was possible, given that the island seemed to modify itself every so often – and studied the marked rivers carefully.

“I think they’ll stick to the rivers, but avoid places where people live.”

“They won’t go near the dragons, either,” said Harry. “Seren may have mentioned the Elyrch don’t like going near the dragon reserve.”

“Was that before or after she offered you a feather for the wand of your firstborn child together?” quipped Hermione, and Harry felt himself going a little red. It had been tempting – the swan maidens had a certain allure, not unlike that of a Veela, to whom they were apparently distant cousins – but in the end he had turned down her offer of a feather and offspring, though not her offer of some other, less permanent (culturally speaking) things.

That would have been rude.

He changed the subject.

“I’ll bet it was Billy who suggested they take up somewhere new,” said Harry. “The old bastard does have a knack for these things…”

“Don’t they like to visit Arthur’s Barrow?” suggested Hermione. “We should check there next.”

“We’ll have to Apparate,” he protested feebly. He’d been hoping to check one of the closer places first, just so that they could have walked there in the afternoon sun and it would have been nice. But it did make more sense to check the most probable locations first, even if they were some hundred-odd miles apart, because both of them knew how to Apparate.

“We could walk to Morgana’s Tomb from the Barrow, if you like,” said Hermione, her tone suggesting that what he liked would have to be what was offered.

“All right,” he agreed. “Er, if they aren’t there, could we stop a bit anyway and eat some apples? The really nice ones only grow around the Barrow.” The apples in question also lost what made them so appealing once taken away from a small area around the Barrow itself, so one could only ever eat them if one took the effort to visit the Barrow.

“That’s at least part of why I wanted to go there next,” admitted Hermione, standing. “Shall we go?”
The Tomb of Arthur Pendragon (King Arthur’s Barrow)

Not unsurprisingly, or at least it was that way to Harry, neither the Elyrch nor Billy were to be found at the small river snaking past the ancient tomb of Arthur, King of the Britons; nor were they to be found in the wild orchard surrounding it, and Harry felt he could say that with certainty because they had lingered quite some time in the orchard eating the apples for which the whole island had been named; and nor were they inside the Barrow itself (Hermione had checked it, reluctantly, whilst Harry promised to find her an ever-elusive golden apple).

“How was the Barrow?” asked Harry innocently, glancing down at the golden apple in his hand. The golden apples were the best of the best, and tasted like nothing Harry could adequately describe. The best description he’d ever heard was when Neville suggested they tasted like good music sounded; or perhaps when Luna had declared the taste of golden apples to be love.

“Bizarre,” she replied. “Where’s my apple?”

Harry tossed the apple her way.

“It’s still entirely too big inside,” she continued after a few bites of the apple (Harry was honestly more interested in the apple than in another of Hermione’s theories about Arthur), “in a way that’s definitely not a wizardspace. I feel almost like the Tylwyth Teg indulged in a cheeky spot of reality warping when they built it.”

“So you think Arthur’s Barrow could be a door to the Otherworld?” said Harry, extrapolating wildly from what Hermione had said (which was usually how he dealt with anything she said, in an attempt to keep up which sometimes worked and sometimes made him look stupid).

Hermione paused, teeth barely millimetres away from her apple.

“It was probably a stupid thing to say anyway,” said Harry. He shrugged.

“No, no, I think it’s actually a logical extension of what I thought about. What sort of door, though? Inside it’s definitely not a wizardspace, so I think… oh, well, it has to be some kind of fairyspace, I suppose. Does that even make sense?”

Harry shrugged again.

“If wizards have wizardspace why shouldn’t fairies have fairyspace? Isn’t that what the Otherworld basically is anyway?” Harry dared ask.

“Er, sort of,” said Hermione. “It’s hard to explain.” She frowned. “Maybe it’s a static pocket of the Otherworld, a space kept unchanging in a sort of—no, that’s just impossible in that manner…”

“We should probably start on towards the Dark and Dreadful Tomb of Dark Lady Morgana,” Harry said. “Queen of Avalon and of Magic, May her Reign be Dreadful and Long.”

“Her apples aren’t as nice as these,” said Hermione, a wistful look upon her face. She’d finished her golden apple. “But they’ll do, I think.”

The Tomb of Queen Morgana the Dark
“It’s weird thinking there’s nobody actually buried inside this thing,” said Harry, staring at the marble and stone monstrosity which rose up and straddled both sides of a slow-moving river. “Like, where did they actually bury her body?”

“I don’t think they did,” said Hermione.

“What, you’re saying Morgana had Horcruxes and faked her own death, or something?” Harry could believe that of her.

“What? No! I’m saying that she probably didn’t stay here after the sidhe left,” said the woman in a tone which clearly suggested Harry had been smoking something altogether too fragrant to be legal. “That she went with them on their exodus, and was remembered with a grand tomb.”

“Oh.” Harry had to admit that her version made more sense than his. “It is an impressive tomb.”

Just then, he remembered something Rhys had told him once, and moved to look at a specific part of the tomb’s exterior (inside was a grand statue of Morgana herself sat upon a throne, but Harry had seen it a number of times already and so wasn’t interested in seeing it again). He found what he was looking for at the eastern entrance to the tomb.

“Hermione, look at this,” he said, pointing.

“Oh? I can’t quite make it out,” she said, peering down at the faded marks.

“Tap your wand on it.”

The curious woman did so, and the words flashed brighter. It was written in an archaic form of Welsh, but both he and Hermione knew more than enough of that particular dialect to make it out.

_I remember what you said, last we spoke, Morgana! We shall speak of it again - M_

“Rhys said it was written by Merlin, right at the end of his life. It was meant as a message to Morgana. Merlin disappeared after that, and ever since people have been leaving messages to Morgana inside the tomb.”

“That’s interesting,” said Hermione. “I think it’s lovely how little cultural things like this can still surprise you, even after living somewhere for so long, isn’t it?”

“But the Elyrch aren’t here so we should keep looking?” said Harry jovially. Hermione turned just a bit red at that, so he grinned at her.

“Well, yes. As interesting as this old thing is, we have another old thing to worry about. You know how Billy is! The longer we take in each place the more likely it is he’ll lead them back to places we’ve already checked, and then we’ll have to start over again!”

Harry frowned.

“True,” he agreed. “The Elyrch love that sort of game, and Billy can predict what we’ll do before we do it...” He frowned even deeper. “So that means we won’t find him until he wants us to, anyway.”

“Not quite,” said Hermione. “Billy isn’t a Seer, he just... Well.”

“Shall we check back at the lake?”

“No,” said Hermione suddenly. “We walk back to Arthur’s Barrow, then Apparate to the lake. If
I’m right, we’ll find Billy there.”

_That_ caught Harry’s interest.

“How do you know?”

“It’s something to do with patterns, I think.”

“What does that mean?”

“It has to do with retracing the steps of a journey already made, but from the opposite perspective,” said Hermione carefully. “We could keep going on and on today, until we’d searched every spot on the island at least once. And then we would check each and every place again, but in the same order as before, and we would still not find him. But if we go back on ourselves, if we relive the journey but from the opposite perspective, we will find him at the end, in the place where we looked at the beginning.”

“If you say so,” said Harry easily. “It doesn’t sound very logical.”

“That’s because it isn’t,” said Hermione. “I _told_ you,” she said with just a hint of annoyance, “it’s something to do with patterns.”

“So you think if we walk back to Arthur’s Barrow, then Apparate to Llyn Alarch, Billy will be there?”

“Yes,” confirmed Hermione.

“But if we checked some other places first, then went to Llyn Alarch, Billy wouldn’t be there? Couldn’t we just Apparate to Llyn Alarch?”

“Yes, exactly. We couldn’t just Apparate, you were right with the first thing. We have to go backwards now the same way that we arrived here. We’re lucky we figured it out in only three steps: imagine if we’d covered the whole island!”

“Hang on a minute,” he said, because he wanted to pause and understand properly what Hermione had suggested. “If we Apparate from point A to B, then walk from B to C, and then fly on broom from C to D, to find Billy we’d need to fly on broom from D to C, walk from C to B, then Apparate from B to A, and only then we find Billy?” He paused only for confirmation from Hermione. “But any other sequence of events wouldn’t result in finding Billy?”

“Actually, it would probably complicate finding Billy immensely. Imagine that we Apparated directly to Llyn Alarch from here. We would then have to include that second visit in our chain, so we would need to Apparate from there to here, then walk, and so on. Imagine we went there, then somewhere else, then somewhere else, and included a dozen modes of transport.”

“That is a fucking weird spell,” said Harry.

“It’s not exactly a spell,” said Hermione. “It is magic, though.”

“Do we literally have to do the same things, just backwards?”

“No, it’s not so literal as that. It’s essentially symbolic, it’s the going backwards to move forwards and find something somewhere new that’s actually somewhere old seen with different eyes. The chain of events creates a metaphysical Celtic knot which completes the flow of magic.”
“Oh, that kind of magic,” said Harry dismissively. “Why didn’t you say so?”

“I did, actually, I said ‘It’s something to do with patterns, I think’.”

“Er, you did, yeah. Sorry,” he said. “Shall we go and see if you’re right?”

“I think I am. It’s not something he’ll be doing on purpose, I don’t think…”

So the two of them retraced their steps, stopping only when Harry insisted that they stop and eat some of Morgana’s apples, too (the island was festooned with apple orchards, each one producing a unique and locally-restricted kind of apple), and eventually Apparated back to Llyn Alarch, the place they had started several hours before.

* *

**Llyn Alarch**

Hermione felt rightly vindicated when, upon emerging from the spacetime vortex created by Apparation, she found the ethereal lake populated by agonisingly beautiful swan women, piercingly handsome swan men, and the damnable old goat, Billy.

Old goat wasn’t pejorative in this sense, as Billy literally was an old goat(man): the last surviving member of a once proud race known as the geifryddyn, the goatmen. Related to satyrs, in essence if nothing else, the geifryddyn boasted a human torso, strange legs which were neither goat nor human, and heads which resembled neither a goat’s nor a human’s but still seemed fittingly like what would happen if a human successfully mated with a goat.

It made for a strange sight, at least on first viewing, and Billy himself would do much to sour even the most patient and understanding of people to his entire (extinct) species. Geifryddyn had no Ministry classification, but were some enterprising official to meet Billy, he would be apt to invent a new X rating for the entire species.

“Has the great Harry Potter come seeking a wife?” enquired a stunning young elyrch maiden, naked save for a cloak of shimmering white feathers draped about her shoulders.

“Or perhaps Hermione Granger should like a husband?” offered a similarly nude, painfully handsome, swan man, who had chosen just then to appear at Hermione’s side.

“Oh, but that’s not fair!” cried a pained voice from the lake shore. Hermione glanced over – one of the elyrch, a tall and elegant specimen to be sure, had transformed from her swan state to protest at the unjustness of her fellow’s offer at marriage. “That’s not fair! We should all make an offer, and then he should get to decide which of us he likes the best, if any of us!”

A chorus of voices added their agreement to such a proposition, and before Harry could accept – because she knew just how he got around the Elyrch – Hermione scuppered everyone’s plans for married bliss.

“No, thank you, we’re not here to marry anyone today!” she said firmly. “I’m sure you’ll all very nice, but today we’re here to talk with—“ she paused, having momentarily forgotten Billy’s preferred name, “Gwillim.”

Several of the women fainted theatrically, and more than one of the men appeared as if mortally wounded by her proclamation, but they soldiered on regardless and the crowd around them eventually dissipated enough that she could make for Billy.
The ancient – and he was ancient, thought Hermione, having been a man grown in the days of Hogwarts - dynafr reclined upon a plantwork divan eating apples from a bucket at his side. Several Elyrch maidens frolicked around him, seemingly oblivious to Harry and Hermione’s intrusion. One of them deposited a bundle of wildflowers into her hair, so perhaps they weren’t so oblivious after all.

“If it isn’t Perky Tits and – oh, His Majesty,” said Billy, which was better than his customary greeting. “I am much shamed by my wicked, wicked tongue, Your Majesty,” he said. “May my horns rot and fall off!” he declared.

Hermione avoided looking anywhere beneath his chin (such that it was, because he had a goatman’s head after all), since Billy didn’t wear clothes and looked rather more like a man than a goat where it mattered and would make lewd proposals if she showed the slightest bit of interest in his equipment.

“May your horns rot and fall off,” agreed Harry, taking a seat at a toadstool which had helpfully sprouted for that very purpose. Hermione sat down at her own, a garish orange mushroom which couldn’t be at all natural, and turned to face Billy once more.

“You were here when the sidhe left for the Otherworld,” she said. “Do you know the ancient words we need to speak to make the portal work again?”

“I know the ancient words,” said Billy slowly, and Hermione allowed herself to feel a little hope which was quickly smothered by what came next, “you can say to make any man come ribbons.”

“Those aren’t the words we were looking for,” said Harry. “Try again.”

“Oh, well, if His Majesty is asking!” said Billy, making a point of reaching down to scratch at his genitals. “No.”

“No, you don’t know, or no, you won’t try again?” pressed Harry. “Think carefully.”

Just then, one of the maidens paused from her frolicking to chastise Billy gently, reminding him to be always kind and gracious. He softened for a moment, at least until she had returned to her frolic, before snorting at the pair of them.

“It doesn’t matter at all,” said Billy smugly. “When you open the portal, the word don’t matter. You have to sacrifice something.”

“In every case?” questioned Hermione.

“That’s the toll, ain’t no way around that.”

“But can you help us open the portal?” pushed Hermione.

“I can help open your portal,” he said lewdly.

“I’ll take my wand and a few carefully applied charms any day if you’re the only alternative,” she replied calmly, refusing to rise to the bait. Choice of words was everything around Billy; she should have remembered that.

“Aye, you would at that,” said Billy easily. “I don’t know,” he said honestly. “I did once, or so I think.”

“How can you not know?” asked Harry.
“I’ve forgotten more than you’ll ever know, boy!” said Billy, offended for the first time that Hermione had ever seen.

“No, I didn’t mean like that,” said Harry, “I meant that it’s a very important thing to have forgotten. Why didn’t you write it down?”

“Weren’t no gumping letters when they said it, was there?” said Billy angrily. “I don’t know how they got through the last time they used it, but it weren’t the same as when they showed me how to work it.”

That was an interesting revelation, thought Hermione.

“They forgot how, too,” continued Billy. “Them young fairies had to make up new ways of doing everything, near enough.”

“What do you mean, young fairies?” she asked.

“Well the old ones was all dead, weren’t they?” said Billy, with the air of someone speaking to a adult asking questions about something even a child would know. Hermione supposed he was, really.

“So there are multiple ways of activating the door?” asked Hermione, more for clarification than anything else.

“Fairies don’t do nothing the same way twice,” he said. She’d noticed something odd that happened when he spoke about things in the far, far past – his syntax changed, and the cadence of his words. It was hard to tell, given that they were speaking half in Welsh and half in English (a more common occurrence than Hermione had ever thought it would be, which was never at one point), but it was there.

“Fell in with a fairy maid once,” he continued. “Weren’t happy with the standard fare, nor with the more exotic sort of thing… she was always magicking up new ways to fuck. I could teach you a few bit, Perky tits.”

“I’m sure Hermione would rather birth a full-grown porcupine,” cut in Harry. “I definitely would.”

“His Majesty delivers a mortal blow. I am ended by the sharpness of His wit, and the heft of His mighty tongue.”

A petite swan maiden paused there to scatter petals over the three of them and, after arranging the petals on Billy’s chest to spell out ‘PATIENCE’, joined her sisters again in their frolicking.

“There is prophecy in the air, thick and damp,” said Billy eventually, this time completely serious. “I can feel it. The ancient prophecy, and some others which I feel coiled about His Majesty, there, and you, Perky. For that, and that’s the only reason mind you because I still can’t stand those reckless Unspeakables, I’ll help you to the best of my abilities. I ain’t saying I remember the fairy cant, but there’s other ways than that.”

“That’s honestly more than we ever hoped for,” said Hermione truthfully. “Thank you.”

“It’s mostly that I’m shit-scared His Majesty there’ll eat my soul if I don’t,” Billy said. “You can never trust a soul-eater.”

“I’m not a soul-eater, Gwilim.”
“That’s what he says, see Perky Tits, but that’s what they all said! Can’t have folks go around telling people you eat souls, it’s bad for the business.”

“I think I would know if Harry ate souls,” said Hermione. “You might be thinking of dementors.”

“Oh? Maybe it was those. Catches on quick, she does,” said Billy to Harry in an overloud whisper. “Should probably start calling her Clever Tits.”

He stood, then, and brushed himself of the apple detritus that had accumulating during his time in repose.

“Let’s get going, then. Can’t wait to see that old nag again.”

Billy pulled a wand from nowhere Hermione could see (not that she’d looked hard) and brandished it menacingly. It was definitely illegal for him to carry a wand, but then, to a member the Elyrch did also, and it wasn’t as if British Ministry laws actually applied to Avalon. How would one even stop a being using wands if that being could literally create them from some wood and their own body parts?

Well, one couldn’t, and the Elyrch were a shining, glorious example of that. Elyrch favoured wands made from their own feathers, or the feather of a parent. The original source of Billy’s wand could be long, long dead, or could perhaps be found among his dancing swan maidens.

“You want to come to Caer Tawel?” asked Harry. His surprise echoed her own, Hermione felt.

“You should probably invest in a robe first,” said Hermione. “Will you bring your entourage?”

The goatman glanced back at the dancing, supernaturally beautiful and youthful, women and sighed.

“No, no. They’d come, but they’d want to be here, dancing… Just me.” He gestured with his wand and a robe appeared from whichever piece of nature served as wardrobe for Billy, and he pulled it on quickly. “Don’t see what you folks like about these things,” he muttered.

“ Mostly it’s that our nuts aren’t flopping around for the world to see,” said Harry. “But then, I usually wear pants under my robes anyway.”

“But that’s the worst part!” protested Billy. “What’s the point in having them if nobody ever sees?”

Hermione didn’t bother responding. Instead, she Apparated away.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

I tried to catch all the errors and mistakes in editing, but I’m a bit blind to it so if I’ve missed one please point it out! As always, I’d love to hear feedback. Thanks for reading!

13th August 2011 – South-east England

Thanks to Harry, the Unspeakables had gained access to Hogwarts’s List, the list of all magical children born in Britain, which meant that Neville could locate the muggleborns and convey them to the relative safety of Avalon. Despite the takeover, and the radical changes to Ministry legislation concerning muggleborns, little had changed in regard to the age at which the muggleborns were contacted (even if they were now kidnapped instead).

Voldemort apparently preferred to wait until children reached the age of eleven to take them for his camps, since that was the generally agreed upon age at which one could be certain a child wouldn’t ‘run to Squib’, as his own uncle had once phrased it.

No doubt he would be scrambling to correct his oversight, since the Unspeakables now had control over the List and (Neville was under no illusions that the Dark Lord was an unintelligent man) he would quite rightly assume they would move to cut off his access entirely. Despite the atrocity of what he had already done with his eugenics programme, Neville knew there were other, equally bad, things that could be done with magical children.

Black rituals designed to increase the power of the participants, at the cost of the lives and magic of the victims stood out in Neville’s mind, but there were other, more abhorrent, things too. For those reasons alone Neville would have wanted to be part of the muggleborn extraction teams, but he also knew that some of the other Unspeakables wouldn’t be as—well, patient, he supposed, as he would be.

He glanced down at the next name on the list. He and Unspeakable Songflower had made several trips already that day, ferrying four families to Avalon already that day. They had only a few trips left, if he hadn’t underestimated the amount of work they had to do.

“Hey, Songflower. This next one’s called Dursley, why is that name familiar?”

“Is it a line that went Squib? It does sound familiar…” came the easy reply.

“Hey, there’s two Dursleys down... at different locations, look!” said Neville, scanning the list again. Ellyn Dursley, 6, and Robert Dursley, 3, both in the same general area, but resident at a different address…

“Harry’s aunt and uncle. Cousin as well, I suppose,” remembered Neville. “They were Dursleys. Is that a common Muggle name?”

Songflower shot him a withering look.
“My blood is only a fraction less pure than yours, Longbottom. If you don’t know, I probably don’t, either.”

“Harry’s mother was a witch,” said Neville, continuing on without responding to her jibe, “so it’s not unheard of… Maybe his cousin divorced and remarried?”

“We shouldn’t linger too long,” said Songflower, glancing around the street. Neville ignored her: despite her protestation, all Unspeakables had some passing level of familiarity with Muggles and Muggle culture because of the nature of their work, and the pair of them blended in perfectly well with their surroundings.

He was wearing trousers, and a shirt, and what he knew to be a respectable light jacket. Nothing a Muggle would find distressing, at any rate.

“They’ll think we’re tourists, it’s fine,” he said. “I’m told Muggles spend rather a lot of money going to the strangest places just to look around and then go home again, not even interesting places. Hermione told me once there’s this famous painting that Muggles all around the world come to see, and it’s not even that good, it’s just this lady. She doesn’t even move!”

Songflower looked about to retort, but then shut her mouth suddenly.

“She doesn’t… move or talk? Is she naked? What’s so good about the painting?”

“Someone famous painted it, apparently. It’s meant to be right boring though, and you have to queue for hours to see it.”

“Muggles are strange.”

“They are a bit,” Neville agreed. “Shall we? I think that’s number twenty-six,” he said, and nodded towards the detached house two houses down. He knew it was number twenty-six, he should have said, but it didn’t really matter.

He gestured for Songflower to go first – he was a gentleman, or was supposed to be at any rate – and together they crossed up to the front door. Songflower left him to knock, which was typical really. She’d probably take all the good bits, like talking and explaining, and cock it up as well by saying something normal for purebloods but outlandish for Muggles. Like she’d mention dragons, or werewolves, or tell a story about the time she flew her grandfather’s illegal griffin across the Channel.

Fun story, to be sure, but probably not the best one to tell in this sort of situation.

A stout man of about Neville’s own age answered the door, and Neville peered at him to see if he looked anything like Harry. Maybe if Harry had got fat, then thin again, then fell face first into a wall, but there was something about the eyes that Neville recognised. The shape of them, the way they sat in the face…

Oh, right, he had a job to do.

“Hello, is that Mr Dursley?” he asked, glancing down again at the sheet. Robert Dursley lived at this address, not Ellyn. Then, “Dudley Dursley?”

“It is,” confirmed the man, “And you are?”

“I’m Neville Longbottom,” he said, “and this is my colleague Calliope Songflower. We have something to talk to you about which is probably better discussed inside. Would you mind?”
“Is it a police matter? Are you government? What agency sent you?”

“It’s none of those things. We’re not from any agency, we’re not trying to sell you Bibles or Jesus, we just have something very important we need to discuss with you. It’s, er, well you remember your cousin Harry?”

Dursley considered it, glancing from one end of the street to the other, and then at Neville and Songflower, before finally stepping aside and gesturing for them to come inside. He’d gone pale.

“Su, stick the telly on for Robert in the play room and come join me in the lounge,” he called, shutting the door and locking behind them. “We’ve got some… some guests,” he finished lamely.

“I’ll put on some tea,” called back a woman, presumably Su.

Neville and Songflower were led into a spacious – for a Muggle house, anyway – lounge, where Dursley took his usual seat and directed Neville or Songflower to sit at one end of a long sofa.

“Su sits there,” he said, shrugging apologetically when Songflower tried to sit at the opposite end of the sofa and had been cautioned against it.

Soon enough Su, Dursley’s wife (Neville assumed) came back into the room with four mugs, a teapot, and some other things on a tray. She seemed a pleasant enough woman, if a bit on the thin side for Neville, and was pretty enough, he supposed, with fair skin and hair.

“Hi,” she said, “I’m Susan. You are?”

“Neville Longbottom and Calliope Songflower,” said Neville quickly. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.” He stood to shake her hand – if he remembered right, kissing of hands had fallen out of fashion among Muggles.

“This is going to be easier than usual,” he continued, “because you already know some of it, Dudley.”

“Why isn’t—I mean, shouldn’t Harry—he’s not dead, is he?” said Dursley, the last bit almost whispered. “We haven’t heard anything in nearly ten years, not since that Mr Weasley came and said he’d been kidnapped, put some spells on the house and…”

“Spells? I don’t understand,” said Su. “What’s this about, Dud?”

“My cousin Harry is a wizard,” said Dudley slowly and quietly. “You know, wands and magic and all that stuff, but… it’s real, Su, it’s really real. I had to get—there was an accident once, this monster came looking for Harry in the summer and—and it nearly ate my soul. Magic is real. Harry’s important in their world.”

“The most important person alive, I think,” said Songflower. “He’s been unavailable for a long time. It’s related to what we’ve come to talk to you about. Your son Robert is a wizard, too.”

“Not mine!” said Dudley. “You’ll not be having him.”

“It doesn’t work like that, I’m really sorry,” said Neville. He was sorry, too. Not about the child’s magic – that was something to be celebrated – but he was always a bit sorry to uproot these people’s lives. It wasn’t their fault, after all. “The madman who killed your aunt and uncle? He took over our whole world. I don’t want to trust the old wards on the house to hold up when he comes looking for you,” he said. He could feel the remnants of a Fidelius on the house, although it had been broken years and years before.
“All you wizards bring is death,” said Dursley. “I never met my grandparents because of wizards, I never got to meet my aunt Lily, and the less said about its effect of my childhood the better, frankly. Magic messed up my mum. I don’t want it for Robert.”

“I can’t deny anything you’ve said,” said Neville, because he couldn’t. That was war. “But this isn’t normal for our world. We’re in a big war, Dudley. The worst of all our wars in a long, long time. This thing is something big, something… it’s hard to explain,” he ended lamely. Harry could probably do it better.

“Our legitimate government was replaced five years ago by a puppet government controlled by the Dark Lord,” interrupted Songflower. “After a protracted civil war. Our faction, which is a bit like your intelligence agency I suppose, went underground at the beginning of the war, protected by an ancient magic which let no intruders into our fortress, but which wouldn’t let us out either. In that time we have worked to fulfil ancient prophecies and devise a plan to bring the Dark Lord down. We would have contacted you anyway, Mr Dursley, because of your blood connection to Harry Potter. That your son is a wizard makes the situation even more dire, if I am to be frank. A magical child with such a close relation to Potter is … it could be devastating for reasons I don’t understand properly; if I understood the rituals involved I would attempt to explain them to you, but your son is in much danger. More danger, even, than he would be if he wasn’t a wizard.”

She paused.

“This will not enamour you to magic any more than prior experiences have. I do understand that, Mr Dursley, I really do. The thing is, though, that is how it is. Can’t change it. That’s the reality of the situation. Your son is a wizard, and you and your wife will have to relocate to our hidden island for the remainder of this war. It would be morally criminal of us to allow you to be captured by the Dark Lord, not to mention the significant practical risk to Potter and the whole of the war effort.”

Neville felt like saying something to ease the tension a bit, since Dursley had gone red and his wife had become increasingly confused with every passing sentence, but Songflower had started, and once started, was very difficult to stop.

“You can think we’re monsters, that we’re just as bad as the Dark Lord, and maybe you’d be right. But answer this for me, if you please: would you rather we whisk you away to our fairy island where you can watch your son grow and mature, or would you rather he murdered you right where you stood, and then used your son in unspeakably Dark rituals to harm your cousin and ensure the slavery of Muggles and wizards everywhere in the world?”

“Those aren’t very good options,” snarled Dursleys. “Where’s the one where you protect our house and let us live here in peace?”

“They are the options we realistically have, Mr Dursley. It isn’t nice. It isn’t fair. It’s about the resources we have, and the resources we are willing to allocate, to protecting you. We need you safe but can’t spare guards. You’ll have to pack up. It’s war.”

“We can go to Australia, then. Su’s parents still live there, I’ve got a degree…”

“There is no place on Earth where you will be safe from him,” said Neville, deciding enough was enough and Songflower had overstepped slightly, “except on our island with us. He’ll track you through Robert.”

“This is crazy,” said Su. “This is just crazy. You’re all nuts, the lot of you.”

Songflower took out her wand and charmed an ugly wooden statue tapdance across the lounge.
“We are not crazy. We are merely fighting an existential war against a genocidal maniac who has almost the full backing of our country, and your son, completely unexpectedly I should add, has suddenly become a major weakness.”

Neville hadn’t really thought of it like that. The Unspeakables hadn’t exactly planned for Harry’s Muggle cousin to have a muggleborn son. The kinds of blood wards which could be erected based on the boy’s blood were intriguing, but Neville knew there were Darker and more dangerous things which could be done with such a close relation to Harry.

“There’s another Dursley on our list too,” he said softly. “Ellyn Dursley. Is she a relation?”

If at all possible, and Neville thought it must be because it had just happened, Dursley grew even paler with his announcement.

“My sister,” he said eventually. Neville raised an eyebrow. To have a six year old sister at their age… that had been a fairly late pregnancy, for a Muggle. “She was a bit of a surprise,” confirmed Dursley.

“I think we should go see your mum,” said Neville. “Pack up quickly, then join as at your parents’ house. Are they in?”

“I—yes, they should be,” said Dursley.

“I meant quickly, too,” said Neville. “We made a move against the Dark Lord recently, and we are acting quickly to prevent him contacting any of the families like your own.”


“We can deal with that,” said Songflower. “I’ll stay here, Longbottom. You get the other one. This situation takes priority now, I should think.”

“Right. Mr and Mrs Dursley, Senior,” he said, calling up the nearest Apparition point in the area, and disappearing with a loud crack.

*  

4 Privet Drive

Neville had actually been here once before, and had he bothered to check the location of Ellyn Dursley he would have known for a fact that it was Harry’s Dursleys before ever meeting Dudley Dursley. The first thing he did before actually approaching the house was check its wards thoroughly. The old blood ward of Dumbledore’s still flared bright, charged for a considerable amount of time by an old magic ritual just days before Dumbledore’s death, and a dozen or so minor enchantments.

Satisfied that, at the very least, Marked Death Eaters couldn’t enter the house itself, Neville strode up to the door and knocked at it confidently. It was early on Saturday afternoon, so he didn’t think the Dursleys would be out (and Dudley hadn’t thought so), and it didn’t seem too unsociable a time to call.

And, he thought, casting his eyes over his nondescript Muggle clothing, at least he wasn’t dressed like a wizard. That would have to help.

Mrs Dursley, or a woman Neville assumed was Mrs Dursley since she looked a bit like he remembered if a decade or so older, answered the door. She didn’t appear to recognise him; he
didn’t blame her, since he hadn’t been as handsome then as he was now.

“I’m Neville Longbottom. I’m a friend of your nephew Harry.”

“Vernon! Put Ellyn in her bedroom, we have a … visitor.”

Dudley had certainly been raised by this woman, thought Neville. They had essentially the same reaction to magical visitors: get the children put away and set in for bad news.

“May I come in?”

“If you must,” said Mrs Dursley, ushering him inside.

He was directed to the sitting room and shown to an old-fashioned (not that Neville was au fair with Muggle fashions; it just looked old) sofa, where he sat and waited for Mr Dursley to return.

“Neville Longbottom,” he said when Dursley returned, and stood to shake the man’s hand. “It’s a few things, really. You’ve been told our government has fallen, yes?”

“There was word of that,” said Vernon cautiously. “That Weasley man came and told us the war was over, they’d lost.”

“Yes, good, that’s essentially what happened,” said Neville. “Except, you were told that Harry had disappeared?”

“Yes, good, that’s essentially what happened,” said Neville. “Except, you were told that Harry had disappeared?”

“You did,” murmured Petunia quietly, although from the look on her face (to which Vernon was oblivious) she rather disagreed with that assessment.

“Yeah, well, he didn’t run away, he was kidnapped by a rogue Department of the previous government. Long story short, we made a plan to fight the Dark Lord, but we were trapped for nearly ten years. We’re back now. We had planned to get you to safety – we believe now that Harry is active again, the Dark Lord will renew his search for his relatives – but there was a, well, It’s difficult to just…”

“He’s alive, then?” asked Petunia, her tone decidedly less sharp than Neville would have expected. “Harry, I mean.”

“Yes. Very alive. Kicking himself about how much time they’ve, we’ve, wasted, but we all are.”

“You never did say why Harry was so important to them, did you?” asked Vernon suddenly, turning towards Petunia. “I never wanted to know the full story, before,” he said slowly, “but I think I might, now.”

Petunia sighed.

“There was the letter from Dumbledore, which you read,” she said, and sniffed. “But there were the letters from Lily which I never showed anyone, not even you, Vernon.”

“Well? What did they say?!” demanded the large man.

“Her husband, James, he had been approached by the Dark Lord and had refused his invitation… and so Lily had been offered a position as well, something unheard of, she made specific mention, because of her … status,” continued Petunia, each word sounding as if it caused her real physical
pain to speak. “She refused, of course, but when he went to meet with them, they fought him long enough to escape. She said it invoked a prophecy, and that Harry would forever be in danger from him.”

“Well, he wasn’t, was he? What sort of a Dark wizard gets blown up by a toddler?” said Vernon.

“But that’s the point, isn’t it?” said Neville. “He didn’t stay blow up and there was a prophecy. Harry killed him once. Harry is the only person who is able to kill him.”

“Give me a gun and enough brandy and see how far we get,” suggested Vernon.

Neville shook his head.

“Won’t work. Once, during the first war, someone got a gun near him. Bullets won’t touch him, I’m afraid. Every last one bounced off him.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“It is a bit,” said Neville amiably. “That’s magic for you. But we think we can kill him, or Harry can anyway, but you’re going to be in danger. And that brings me to the other thing.”

“What other thing?” demanded Vernon again, and Neville glanced at Petunia just in time to see her sigh in defeat.

“Ellyn is a witch, isn’t she?” asked Petunia, although it didn’t sound like a question, not really. “I knew she’d painted all over the wall going up the stairs!”

“Was it just that?” asked Neville curiously, and knew he’d hit a nerve because Petunia cringed.

“Not just that,” she admitted. “I knew the signs,” she said cryptically, “from with Lily, then again with Harry. I checked Ellyn just like Dudley, and saw her floating her toys a few years ago.”

“Yes, well, with the war being as it is, you’re not going to be able to stay here. Not with the Dark Lord in control of the wizarding world, and Harry Potter an active threat.”

Neville really didn’t enjoy being the bearer of so much bad news.

“Leave! What does he mean leave?” complained Vernon to Petunia. “Not with house prices like this, you’d be daft to sell up! Barely back where we were three years ago…”

“Yourselves and your daughter will come to live on Avalon with us. It’s where Harry is, and where lots of other families like yours live.”

“Now, wait a minute! We’ve worked hard to provide for us and ours, and you’d have us pack up and leave at a moment’s notice? For what? So my no-good nephew can be safe?”

“No,” said Neville seriously, “so that your daughter isn’t stolen from you in the night by murderous rapist xenophobes.”

“Why are magical children born to people like us?” asked Petunia, although Neville knew she wasn’t asking anyone in particular. He had to laugh, not at her, but because that was a question wizards had been asking for centuries, in much the same tones, but for very different reasons.

“You know,” he said, “wizards have been asking that for centuries. It’s basically the Dark Lord’s battle chant. They don’t like it either. But the real answer is getting into philosophy of magic stuff, stuff no one can really prove. In your case we think there might be Squibs present in the Evans line,
but there’s the theory that muggleborns are what happens when magic makes a choice to go somewhere new.”

“Your grandson Robert is a wizard, too,” he continued. “Your son should be over very soon, actually.”

As if on cue, Neville’s pocket started vibrating. He wondered at why Songflower would buzz him for help for a moment until a crash at the front door alerted him to the fact that, unsurprisingly, all was not well and trouble had turned up.

“I’ll be right back. Stay inside the house. The wards will hold. It’s probably Death Eaters. You’ll be safe if you just stay inside.”

Leaving the Dursleys to panic in what Neville hoped would be the safety of their blood-warded home, Neville threw up a quick shield charm and stepped into the hallway to see just what damage had been done to the front door.

As it was, there wasn’t a door there anymore. He’d fix that later – the Death Eater that had been thrown into it had been bounced back off the wards (Neville assumed this because he didn’t see it, but he knew a thing or two about wards), but there was still a fight going on outside (in broad daylight in a Muggle area too) and the younger Dursleys did need to be ushered into the safety of the house.

He went cold when he saw just who had turned up to ‘meet with’ the Dursleys. The Lestranges, all three of them. They had surrounded the car, inside which the Muggles were trapped. Songflower circled them widely, making liberal use of the Muggle street’s many parked cars as physical shields.

Wordlessly he transfigured the ground beneath Bellatrix into ice, then sent a ripping curse at the mad witch’s neck. Songflower jumped back into action with a set of Bone-Breakers levelled at Rabastan.

“Go home, Bella,” called Neville in between ripping curses. “You won’t win.”

The mad witch cackled at him, and cartwheeled around the icy road as if it were no hindrance at all. Instead, the ice cracked and broke, and flew towards him like a rain of shattered glass. He grimaced and Banished the ice shards, scattering them harmlessly.

He tried a different approach.

“Your Lord can’t be happy with this sort of exposure,” he said, silently sending a Bone-Breaker her way. Songflower was managing to keep the brothers busy, at least, so he could spare time to distract the more dangerous Lestrange from her goal (the Muggles in the car). If he could distract the three of them long enough to set up an impromptu Tunnel Ward the Dursleys could escape to safety, and the Lestranges drawn into a wild and pointless chase.

Neville ducked behind the (elder) Dursleys’ car to avoid a Hellfire Jinx. He doubted they’d appreciate it, but what else was one to do in this sort of situation?

Grimacing even as he started to make the first wand motion, Neville cast an obscure area-effect charm on the street.

“Despero,” he whispered, pushing every last bit of negative emotion he could muster into the charm. If he’d done it right, and he thought he had because he’d suddenly come over all melancholic, Privet Drive should resemble something more akin to Azkaban prison than a well-to-
do Muggle suburb.

In most realities viewed through the Reality Mirror (or, realities in which Bellatrix had gone to prison), reminding her in such a visceral manner of her stint in Azkaban was a sure-fire way to catch her off guard.

He pushed his head above the car to see if it had worked and, surprisingly, it had. Although it had perhaps worked a little too well, since although none of the Lestrangers looked capable of advancing on the terrified Dursleys, Songflower wept and the Dursleys had gone into hysterics in the car.

Neville alone was unaffected since it was after all his emotion powering the spell, but he used that to his advantage to bludgeon Rodolphus out of his way. He spelled the car door open (it had been locked), and yanked all three Dursleys out of the car.

He probably didn’t have too long until the Lestranges broke through his charm – he saw that Songlower had already overcome her sudden bout of depression enough to advance slowly upon Rabastan who was, unfortunately, resisting the spell also.

Heedless of that, if just for the moment, Neville ushered the Dursleys firmly inside Number 4, told them that they should absolutely not emerge from this house until he personally told them they could (no matter what the other Muggles are doing or saying), and then went back outside to see that Bellatrix had set fire to their car.

“I promised you once I would kill you,” said Neville lightly. “I didn’t forget that, Bella.”

“Lacero cordis,” he said calmly, not at all expecting the spell to actually land. They were both too good for that; neither of them was likely to be caught by anything less than an Unforgivable, but that didn’t mean they weren’t trying. Neville thought it rather more likely he’d get her with some creative transfiguration or charms work than a Dark spell meant for ripping flesh, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t more satisfying to try with the ripping curses first.

The lunatic bitch had had more of an impact on his childhood than his own parents had. He would end her, and her husband, and his brother.

He shielded then rolled out of the way of a vivid purple curse sent from Rabastan.

“Your parents begged, Longbottom!” crooned Bellatrix gleefully. “’Please, we have a son!’ As if I didn’t know that! Suppuratio vulna!”

Neville animated a particularly ugly garden gnome to take that particular curse for him (he didn’t want to be stuck with a gaping, festering wound if at all possible) and glanced over at Songflower, who was still managing perfectly well to fight off the Lestrange brothers.

Could he manage another Desperation Charm? He didn’t think so, not after the strength of emotion he’d pushed into the last one. He’d been trying to capture the precise feeling of a Dementor, but maybe he’d gone a little overboard and exerted himself.

What he really needed to do was get the Death Eaters somewhere less publicly Muggle, not attempt another border-line Dark spell, but how to do that exactly? He knew of a few ways of forcibly transporting someone somewhere else, but none of them were especially practical in this situation except the one he really, really didn’t want to do…

He sighed, and sidestepped another violent curse from Bellatrix, and then readied himself.
Apparition Tag was a dangerous, stupid and absolutely insane game played by certain young wizards (and witches) after receiving their Apparition License. Neville had never indulged in the game per se, although Hermione had made it clear to them all that it was a potentially useful skill. Harry and the Weasley twins had played it all across the south of England, of course, but Neville was brave, not stupid, and so he hadn’t joined in.

Splinching himself across six separate counties was not something he wanted to try. Still, he could do it. With a loud crack Neville disappeared, but instead of forcing himself out of the magicspacetime vortex miles and miles away, he collapsed into a high-velocity streak of magic and careened into Bellatrix Lestrange.

Apparition Tag differed from regular Side-Along in about a hundred different ways Neville couldn’t remember, but the most interesting one was that someone could be forcibly taken up in your slipstream. Once caught up, it was a battle of wills between who gained control.

Neville didn’t intend to lose. With another crack and a dispersal of wizardsmoke through the street, Neville and Bellatrix Lestrange condensed into the spacetime gap and disappeared.

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Although they’d reached their destination, Neville didn’t let go off Bellatrix quite then. He pulled her close – metaphysically speaking, since they resembled nothing more than a high velocity cloud of dust streaming through the air – and pulled out just moments before he hit a rather conveniently placed rock outcropping.

He left Bellatrix crumple into the rock, then Apparated a short distance away to bind her. He’d chosen the hilltop in Wales constantly watched by a bored Unspeakable responsible for the scrying pools. With luck, someone would arrive to help transport the mad bitch. He snarled when she collapsed into dust and came barrelling at him instead of dying against the stones. He spun into the Apparition vortex and pulled.

They narrowly missed a tree, fading out only at the last possible moment, before Bellatrix wrestled control from him and sent them whirling towards the water.

Frantic, Neville pushed and pulled and wriggled until Bellatrix spun away into the skies, leaving Neville to rapidly corporealise or face splinching himself out of existence. He managed not to splinch himself, but he did hit the water hard.

Whilst at the bottom of the pool he stuck a hand in his pocket, buzzed Songflower with his coin, then pointed his wand down at the pool bottom. He shot out of the water and into the air, then came falling gracefully back to the ground.

He could hear Bellatrix noisily buzzing around the sky, then cast a nonverbal Anti-Apparition Ward. It wouldn’t hold against Voldemort, and it would let others in. That wasn’t really the point of it – if he’d timed it right, he’d catch Lestrange mid-shift and she’d splinch her wand arm.

He hadn’t, but Bellatrix fell from the air with a pleasing enough scream that he didn’t really mind. Instead of falling, Bellatrix merely floated to the hard ground and flung a blood-boiling hex at him for his troubles. They traded spells for a while before Bellatrix grew bored, stopped responding, and danced around his spells instead.

“I don’t have time for this, Lestrange,” growled Neville eventually, ripping a small rock formation
out of the ground to act as a physical shield. “You don’t have time for this.”

She cackled at him.

“Little baby Longbottom grew up!” she said, cartwheeling away from his stunner. “When I bring you back I’m going to ask Him to make you mine. You’ll beg for it.”

Neville had to admire her, in a twisted way, because at sixty years of age Bellatrix still looked – and fought – like a witch thirty years younger. It meant she had powerful magic at the very least, be then, so did he. He knew that now.

“If I get you put in a cell, Lestrange,” he said calmly, “if you leave it’ll be because you’re dead.”

A loud crack alerted him to the presence of another wizard, but he couldn’t see who it was because he’d stuck rocks in the way.

“They’ve got Rodolphus!”

He didn’t need any more context to figure it was Rabastan, so he blasted the rocks out of his way and cast a flurry of stunners and ripping curses at the pair of them. Rabastan deflected the curses, and Bellatrix simply sneered at him before grabbing Rabastan close.

Then, as if it were barely any effort, Bellatrix shattered his ward and disappeared.

“Fuck!”

Then, completely and utterly too late to provide any kind of actual assistance, two grey-robed Unspeakables popped into the battle-scarred clearing.

“Oh, she got away,” one of them said.

“You’ve ruined the cadence of magical flow, Longbottom!” said the other.

Neville sighed.

“Okay, well, you guys fix that I guess, and I’ll go check on the Dursleys.” He readied his wand for a standard Apparition – he didn’t think he could manage anything fancy, not after the day’s exertions – but the taller of the two Unspeakables stopped him.

“You needn’t bother,” she said. “We extracted them. They’re back on Avalon. If you go quick, you can catch Potter’s reaction when we show him Rodolphus and his relatives. They’re all in the LMR. He and Granger brought Billy back; it should be a riot.”

To Avalon, then.

* *

**Caer Tawel Large Meeting Room (Avalon)**

‘Clusterfuck’ was an understatement, thought Neville as he squeezed out of the Apparition and into the – somewhat crowded – Large Meeting Room, but he didn’t think there was another word that would fit. At one end of the room Rabastan Lestrange violently pulled against his restraints – magewrought iron shackles, crafted not conjured – and spat insults at anyone and everything, flanked by Agent Songflower, Luna and a burly new recruit who looked like an islander.

At the opposite end, and creating almost as much noise and furore, were Harry, Hermione and
Billy the Goatman. He at least wore a wizard’s robe, but it wasn’t tied shut and effectively hid nothing. He appeared to be alternating between flinging insults at everyone in the room and mockingly appearing subordinate to Harry.

At the centre of everything were the Dursleys, who… well, and Neville couldn’t blame them for this because it was a bizarre situation, looked as if they were about to faint (or explode, if one only meant Vernon).

Neville suddenly felt a stiff breeze around his ankles, which moved rapidly up his legs until it reached his testicles, which is when he decided to look down. He’d been wearing trousers, but to his abject horror he looked down to see himself ‘wearing’ an insubstantial skirt made out of leaves tossed by an ethereal wind. He looked around the room to see he wasn’t the only one so affected – about half the people in the room were now in the same state.

“Change them back, Gwilim,” said Harry firmly. “We’ll have none of that.”

That, even over the general cacophony, was enough to rouse Petunia Dursley from her shock-induced silence. She pointed, dumbstruck, but at Harry and not at Billy.

“We’d thought… they said you were…” she said.

“Well, they were wrong. Sorry about that,” said Harry easily.

“Filthy, dirty, stupid Muggles!” roared Rodolphus over the din.

“Damn it! I want some fucking order!” screamed Morningstar, her voice augmented by magic. “Someone silence that animal – no offence intended, Gwilim, I meant Lestrange – and get him to a cell!”

“He keeps slipping out of it,” complained Songflower.

Luna merely smiled serenely, now the proud owner of an enchanted hat in the shape of a toad.

“Is that man a goat?” asked Susan Dursley suddenly, pointing at Billy, who made a menacing motion with his fingers before Harry stopped him.

“You will not do magic on my … family,” he said somewhat awkwardly, but firmly enough that Billy considered it. “And change everyone’s clothes back.”

“It is as you command, your Infernal Majesty,” he said, and bowed. Neville frowned when Harry nearly got his eye poked out, but at the least he had trousers again, so he wasn’t about to complain. Even if his shirt had turned a non-existent colour.

Rodolphus had gone silent, which presumably meant someone had cast the spell on him again, but he didn’t succumb to any of the stunners or sleeping charms sent his way. Neville suspected Billy, personally, but didn’t voice his concerns because he didn’t want to be charmed to speak in ancient riddles again. He wasn’t afraid exactly, but he didn’t really want to spend a week literally speaking in riddles if he could help it. And he could.

It seemed likely everyone else was suffering from the same issue, because nobody suggested Billy might be responsible for what everyone knew was exactly his usual activity.

“You’re alive,” said Dudley Dursley eventually, although his skin still looked several shades lighter than a vampire’s, so Neville wasn’t sure he was actually present yet.
“Yes,” confirmed Harry. “These nice wizards in grey robes kidnapped me and trapped me here for eight or so years.”

“Right,” said Dudley. “My son’s a wizard,” he continued, as if he were merely imparting some piece of family news in utterly ordinary circumstances.

“Oh, er…” said Harry. “Right. Well. Congratulations,” he finished lamely, clearly not having been expecting such a thing to ever come out of his cousin’s mouth.

“A fucking disgrace!” crowed Lestrange, apparently no longer under any kind of silencing spell.

“Why hasn’t anybody removed him?” said Morningstar. Immediately she became flustered, but Neville couldn’t really figure why until he realised she’d usually stomp her foot emphatically, but hadn’t.

“We can’t move,” said Songflower tersely. “Every time this fucker,” and she paused only to jab Lestrange in the back with her wand, “slips his silencing spell, it ends up on us.”

To his credit, and Neville wouldn’t credit Vernon Dursley with much of anything, the man had remained silent up to that point. His skin had spanned a range between deathly white, unbelievably red, and luridly purple (and some colours in between which Neville didn’t think had existed before), but he hadn’t said anything (probably because he knew better than to say something incendiary in such an environment) until it became clear he was, actually, stuck to the floor.

“This is just an outrage! Taken from my home on a bloody Saturday, my daughter is a—is one of! And then my grandson… and that man is a bloody goat! You will release me at once! I will not stand for this! I am a respectable man, I pay my taxes and did my bloody time! We are going home.”

For a bare moment Neville thought Vernon Dursley’s sheer indignation and utter outrage would shatter the ancient goatman’s magic (if any Muggle could negate such magic with pure outrage Neville thought it would be Vernon Dursley), but it didn’t go that way and Dursley remained (in a state of outrage) rooted to the spot.

He kept shouting, but no sound came out, so Neville assumed Billy had silenced him.

Harry crossed to put himself between Billy and the Dursleys.

“All right, Gwilim, you’ve had your fun. Now let everyone go,” he said. Neville attempted – surreptitiously of course – to move his foot. No luck. He supposed only Harry had been left out of the spell.

The old goatman snapped his fingers and Harry, too, became rooted to the spot.

Billy walked briskly past Harry and began to circle the Dursley family. The children had been remarkably quiet throughout the whole ordeal, and remained so even upon close scrutiny by the last living goatman.

“Muggle,” he said, dismissing Susan Dursley after the briefest of moments. He turned his gaze to Dudley. “Wasted potential. Too Muggle for its expression…”

He turned to their son, Robert, held in his mother’s arms.

“Ah! Yes, that is interesting, isn’t it?” he said, turning from Robert and towards Harry, who glared at him. He placed a long finger upon the child’s head, said something unintelligible, and a pale
golden glow diffused out of the boy’s head.

Harry looked about to protest, but (as with everyone else, Neville realised) he had been silenced.

Billy then moved to regard Petunia Dursley, and he did this very carefully. He seemed uninterested in anything physically related to Petunia Dursley, but he did spend an inordinate amount of time observing the spaces *around* her. After a while, Neville assumed he’d found what he had been looking for because he stood up straight and scratched behind one of his horns.

He looked down at Ellyn, who at six was far more verbal than her nephew, and she opened her mouth to speak.

“Why are you a goat?” she asked. Neville supposed she’d been left out of the silencing spell on purpose, since everyone else seemed unavoidably affected. He couldn’t even break it, and he’d tried half a dozen times already, because its construction was… unique.

Billy seemed to consider this question far more seriously than anything Neville had ever seen him asked before, before kneeling down to speak with her.

“It’s magic,” he said, and placed a finger on her forehead. The same pale golden light diffused out from under it.

“Can everyone do magic?”

“No,” said Billy. “But you will be able to learn. Quiet now,” he said, and rose to his feet.

Then he turned towards Vernon Dursley and looked him up and down, then sighed.

“You are the most Muggle Muggle I have ever seen,” he declared eventually. “You literally repel magic. It is a testament to the—the fact that you were able to not only—I cannot even begin to explain why it is ludicrous that… Your grandson is implausible, but not absurd given the circumstances. The existence of your daughter is something akin to a magical impossibility. And she *is* your daughter,” he continued, apparently unconcerned with the effects of his words, “because I checked. Your daughter represents either the confirmation or the refutation of an extremely ancient philosophical position to an important question, and I cannot decide which of these it is.”

Harry had apparently broken through the silencing spell because he registered his complaints in a very vocal manner.

“You’ve had your fun,” he said. “Now let us go. We’ve got too much to do and no time as it is without playing silly games!”

Billy snapped his fingers, and Neville tried to move his legs again to no avail. Billy snapped his fingers again.

“It’s not your conscious magic!” snapped Hermione after Billy tried and failed another six times to set them all free. “You can’t behave around humans like you do the elyrch! Pull your magic in.”

Billy scratched at his chin.

“We might be here a while, then,” he decided.

“You’re only warping reality on a local scale,” said Hermione. “If you left the castle – no, don’t go back to the lake,” she said quickly, “go to just outside the main entrance.”
“I get your point, Clever Tits,” said Billy. Instead of Apparating – or whatever the goatman equivalent was – out, Billy decided to walk out, which entailed moving through sets of staircases, folded wizardspace, and corridors until he reached the castle’s main entrance. Because of this it was nine minutes until Neville was able to move his legs again, but he only realised this because Vernon Dursley had (metaphorically) exploded again, Lestrange had started shouting, and Unspeakable Morningstar stomped her foot.

“Potter, calm your relatives down! Granger, you go corral Billy; can’t have him leave in all this chaos, can we? Lovegood and Songflower if you do not remove Lestrange this instant there will be repercussions! We will regain some kind of order if it’s the last thing I do!”

Luna looked almost sad that her hat had disappeared, but moved to complete the orders as commanded.

Neville tried to slip out in the chaos, but Morningstar rounded on him before he managed it.

“Briefing room! Someone needs to debrief, and it’s going to have to you, Longbottom!”

He groaned.

“I was going to see Hannah—you know she’s here now?” he said, but he knew it was a feeble protest.

“Now, Longbottom!”

He acquiesced.

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