Harry Potter and the Super Bowl Breach

by acgoldis (orphan_account)

Summary

Ever wonder what would happen if the Muggles found out about the Harry Potter world? If so, this is for you.

In the movie version of Order of the Phoenix, Harry is filmed flying right next to a boat filled with Muggles when he is being escorted to 12 Grimmauld Place. Unknown to any of the wizards, an American soft drink company is filming a commercial for the 1996 Super Bowl from the boat at the time Harry is flying past. It's a pity the wizards never knew that Disillusionment Charms would not work against electronic video equipment.

- A translation of Hogwarts Exposed Timeline by acgoldis
PROLOGUE: 4 Privet Drive, Surrey, England
August 7, 1995

Harry Potter still couldn't believe that there were dementors all the way out here. Had Lord Voldemort's power grown so quickly in the months which had gone by since Peter Pettigrew had revived his old master? If so, the Wizarding community had a lot to worry about.

What was even more disturbing was the fact that the dementors been brazen enough to attack not only Harry but Dudley as well. Dudley was a Muggle and the product of a family which didn't want anything to do with witches and wizards. Dudley was no threat to Voldemort or any other wizard -- with the possible exception of his old punching bag, Harry Potter. The only explanation Harry could think of was that Voldemort had taken control of the dementors and was confident enough to have them start attacking Muggles in the open.

Most disturbing of all, however, was the fact that the Ministry seemed to be doing anything possible to interfere with the protection of the Muggles. When Harry had shown the spirit of Gryffindor and cast the Patronus Charm to dispel the dementor attack Dudley, the Ministry had responded with a Howler citing him for inappropriate use of magic by a minor. Instead of the expected award for bravery, he had gotten a provisional expulsion from Hogwarts and a summons to a disciplinary hearing.

This was not fair. Could Voldemort had already taken over the Ministry as well as the dementors? He hoped not, as that could cause a cataclysm worse than the one which had killed his parents and left him with the Dursleys.

The Order of the Phoenix was still on his side, however. He watched as they lined up outside his aunt and uncle's house ready to whisk him to safety at a secret safe house in London. They were led by Alastair Moody, the famous Auror. Judging from the man's reactions to him, it clearly WAS Alastair Moody and not some impostor hiding under the Polyjuice Potion.

Sparks flew in the air, and Moody launched his broomstick into the skies. The rest of the Order followed him, including Harry. Soon, they were in the clouds and away from the eyes of prying Muggles.

A short while later, they approached London. Flying into the capital was going to be tricky because of the possibility that Muggles might see them. Thankfully the moon wasn't visible: had it been lighting up the sky, there could have been trouble.

The convoy flew down over the Thames and started heading towards their destination. At Harry's side was Nymphadora Tonks, a young witch who had an uncanny ability to change her appearance. Together, in silence, the convey skimmed over the water, leaving virtually no wake in their path.

The boat came at them, around the curve of the river, so quickly that the wizards didn't have much time to react. Moody barked an order, and the convoy increased its speed to the point where any Muggles watching from the ship would see just a blur and attribute it to a bird.

Harry veered over to the port side of the ship. Tonks bore left and passed by the starboard side. Harry watched running lights go by in a blur as he flew by. He was surprised to find several unusually bright lights illuminating a section near the stern of the ship. Those weren't running lights, he thought. Someone was either making a video or a Muggle movie. Probably some couple on their
honeymoon, he thought.

He wondered whether he should alert the others to the possibility that the Muggles might have caught the wizards on film. He dismissed the threat, however. Trained Aurors like Moody and Lupin presumably understood the possibility and were casting charms to dispel the Muggles' attention. Harry knew that it took years of training to become an Auror. With all that extra experience, they could probably do things which Harry couldn't even conceive of.

He dismissed the possibility of Muggle detection and concentrated on the task at hand: getting himself away from the dementors. He glanced briefly at Lupin, who nodded to him. His hypothesis had been correct: Lupin had been blocking the view from the Muggles. Reassured at last, he continued on towards 12 Grimmauld Place wondering what would await him there.

Had Harry understood that Lupin's nod was simply a comment saying that Harry was now safe from Voldemort, things would have been a whole lot different. For the Disillusionment Charm which everything relied on would be good at preventing Muggles from seeing him...but not video cameras.

To be continued...

Update #1

August 7, 1995
Thames River
London, England

David Stern had no idea that filming a Super Bowl commercial would be so difficult. Granted, Blast Cola had had an excellent quarter and more stores were selling Blast than ever before. However, the ability to sell soft drinks didn't translate well to making fancy commercials.

The CEO had paid over $3 million to acquire a 30-second slot for Blast. Now it was up to Stern, whom the CEO had tapped to actually make the commercial. The CEO had told him that he could spend up to $2 million on this commercial, and that his job would be on the line if it didn't live up to expectations.

He had given the advertisement a lot of thought and had decided that he'd have a young couple drinking Blast in several countries on a round-the-world honeymoon tour. They had already filmed segments in Rome, Shanghai, Moscow, Honolulu, and San Francisco. Now, it was time for London.

Stern had decided immediately that the scene would be shot from the Thames on a luxury cruise liner. The couple would be drinking Blast in their cabin's private balcony with the city skyline lit up at night. It would make a beautiful scene, and it would set the stage for the final shot in Tempe, where the game would actually be played.

The stars in the commercial were actually two gorgeous employees who worked for Blast. The man's name was Jake Myerson. He was 26 and was a quality control specialist. The woman, Rebecca Marshall, was 24 and worked in accounting. Not only were they attractive, but rumor has it they had the hots for each other. That made the commercial even easier. They wouldn't have to put on any false airs to flirt with each other.

Getting the actors to memorize the scripts was one thing. Getting all the cameras, lights, and so forth in the cabin was something entirely different, however. Beds had to be moved a few feet to make room for lights. The TV had to be taken off the wall, and the film had to be placed in the minifridge to keep it from spoiling -- after all, cold film tended to work better than warm film.
Eventually, however, everything was ready. Stern told the actors to take their positions on the balcony. Big Ben was coming up on the starboard -- behind the couple when seen through the camera -- and Stern really wanted Big Ben in the shot. What else truly exemplified England?

He hoped that this shot would work out. If not, they'd have to rent the boat AGAIN and it would take time. Money wouldn't be a problem. However, several crew members were getting a bit antsy. They hadn't been home for several weeks and were getting homesick. London was their last stop, and many people were praying that this shot would pass muster.

Stern watched as Big Ben drifted closer and closer. He lifted up his hand and raised all five fingers in the air. The thumb went down. 5, 4...

At 3, he saw something out of the corner of his eye. All he could see was a distortion of some sort, an area where the view of the other side of the river seemed to be twisted in some way. It seemed to be flying in the air towards them, very quickly. It was too small to be a helicopter and flying too slowly.

The countdown continued. 2, 1, 0. The lights turned on and the actors began their script.

HER: "Jake, look at this! Big Ben! Just like in the books!"

HIM: "I see, Becky! It's beautiful! Look at all the history there!"

HER: "Can you take a picture of me with it in the background?"

HIM: "I'm afraid I can't right now, honey."

HER: "Why not?"

The camera turned to show Jake with a video camera at his feet and a bottle of Blast Cola in his hand. Behind him, out over the river, the bird grew larger and larger. Oddly enough, it wasn't flapping its wings. Must be a kite, Stern thought.

The commercial continued as Jake pointed at the bottle of Blast. "Because of my Blast Cola. The tangy, fruity flavor cheers me up and make all of our problems just pass us by like phantoms in the night."

The line came out perfectly for a change. What was even more impressive is that the distortion flew right behind Jake from the perspective of the cameraman. He couldn't tell what it was in real time, but whatever it was had added immeasurably to the shot by symbolizing the "problems" that were passing the speaker by.

Rebecca, who couldn't see the distortion, continued as if nothing had happened. "All right, Jake. I understand now. Go ahead, indulge yourself in Blast. We can always take the boat again if you want the Big Ben shot."

Perfect, Stern thought. Just perfect! With a fist pump, he said: "CUT! That's a wrap, boys! PERFECT!"

Everyone cheered and began cleaning up the set.

To be continued...

---------------------

Update #2
------------
The technician played the segment of the commercial shot in London and stopped right in the middle, where the anomaly had appeared. He pointed at the screen.

"There. Take a look at the thing flying past the boat in the background."

Stern looked at the object and frowned. "It's a bird. What else could it possibly be?"

The technician groaned. "I think we've been hacked."

"Hacked? What do you mean? You think Coke or Pepsi is aware that Blast Cola is probably going to be on their level in a few years and are executing a pre-emptive strike to make sure we don't get off the ground?"

"No, Dave. I think some kid tried to screw around with us. Take a good look at this image. I don't know about you, but it looks a hell of a lot like a kid flying on a broomstick. If that ain't a practical joke, I don't know what it is."

Stern looked at the image. The object wasn't very well illuminated, so it's unlikely that they'd ever figure out what exactly it was. However, from the little he did see, he could not rule out the possibility that it was a bird. And in a world where there was no magic outside of fantasy stories, a bird flying by was far more likely than the Wicked Witch of the west.

Granted, it was a rather large bird. It had a long neck -- presumably Sanders's "broom handle" -- and a big triangular tail masquerading as a broom's the sweeping section. It had large wings which had been filmed rising over its body in mid-flap. Judging from the size of the wings, they were large enough to appear almost the size of a child or teenager when seen from this perspective.

Stern couldn't think of any birds that size flying so close to the mainland. There were albatrosses and creatures like that with large wingspans, but those tended to stay out at sea. Perhaps this was a new, undiscovered creature or -- far more likely -- something which had escaped from the London Zoo.

The London newspapers hadn't reported a breakout from the Zoo the day after the filming had concluded. He would know -- he'd read through most of the paper while waiting at the gate in Heathrow. However, what was more likely, a bird breaking free from its cage or the Wicked Witch of the West trying to bombard Blast Cola's luxury liner with flying monkeys?

He had to admit that strange things had been happening in England of late. People had died for no apparent reason and bridges had collapsed in puffs of black smoke. The government had eventually concluded that it was a freak weather phenomenon. However, if it WAS a freak weather phenomenon, that only bolstered the claim that this was an exotic bird. The bird had obviously been blown up to England in the air mass that brought the strange weather.

He had a friend who was an ornithologist -- perhaps he'd be able to identify the bird. However, that wasn't important right now.

He turned back to the technician. "It's a bird. Trust me. Exotic birds exist with a very large wingspan. If you don't like it, erase it using PhotoShop."

Sanders shook his head. "Any attempt to get rid of it will reduce the quality of the image. You'll see seams cutting through Big Ben. We don't want the NFL fans to think that we skimp on quality."
Stern frowned. "And we can't refilm the segment because Becky has since left the company. We'd have to refilm the entire commercial with new actors, and we don't have time for that. We're going to have to keep it as is."

The technician frowned. "But..."

Stern's temper finally let loose. "Darn it, Sanders! It's a BIRD! There's nothing ELSE it can be! Had it been daylight it would have been obvious! Now let's finalize this commercial so we can make our deadline!"

The technician sputtered but did as he was told.

To be continued...

---

Update #3

January 7, 1996
Quabbin Academy of Sorcery
Dana, Massachusetts
United States of America

A Brief Description of the Academy
Presented by Professor Arthur Nagle
School Headmaster since 1992
Prescott House '44

FOUNDING

The Quabbin Academy of Sorcery, or QAS, was founded in 1695 as a response to prolonged persecution of witches and warlocks during the years 1692 and 1693 in Salem, Massachusetts. The attacks began after a small breach of the Statute of Secrecy triggered a general scare. Eventually, the Statute of Secrecy was restored and the appropriate people Obliviated. Unfortunately, many innocent members of the Wizarding community lost their lives as they withheld using their power to save themselves from the Muggle persecutors. Although each of them could have used magic to protect themselves from the various means of interrogation and torture, doing so would have ruptured the Statute of Secrecy further and all of them knew that any further breakdown of the Statute could have dire consequences for both Muggles and wizards.

Our founder, Josiah Hampton, realized that the only way the wizards would be able to keep their community going would be to have everyone Apparate out of the Salem into a new community further west, far beyond the reach of the Puritan authorities. They eventually called their new community Dana, after Professor Hampton's late wife.

Free from the Puritans, the Wizarding community flourished and developed large populations in three adjacent Swift River Valley towns: Enfield, Prescott, and Greenwich. The centerpiece of the community was the Academy, in Dana proper. At the Academy, young men and women from all over New England would be able to study wizardry without any interference from the Muggle authorities.

As time went by, the population of the area increased. Although the wizards had taken extensive precautions to make sure that a repeat of the Salem Witch hysteria could no longer happen, the increasing numbers of Muggles gave them cause for concern. Eventually, in 1930, Horace Hopwell,
a closet wizard who had been living in Boston for a time, recommended that the Swift River Valley be dammed to create a reservoir which would provide drinking water for the Boston area.

The plan was enacted, and the Quabbin Reservoir was born. Muggles watched as the four Wizarding towns were flooded and erased from the map. Meanwhile, Wizard Hopwell was doctoring the records of the towns to ensure that no references to the wizards survived: for instance, the date of the founding of Dana was switched to 1801. What the Muggles didn't realize, however, was that the wizards were able to return to the towns once the reservoir had filled. The Dana wizards had perfected the Repellaqua spell, a powerful incantation which would surround a large area with a waterproof dome.

Protected by Muggle eyes by the impassable shield of water, the wizards resumed their secret lives. In 1946, QAS was honored to be selected as a founding member of the American Sorcerer Academic League, or ASAL. The ASAL comprised a federation of regional Wizarding schools spread throughout the country. The annual Quidditch tournament between the eight schools is one of the highlights of the school year. QAS has jurisdiction over the six New England states as well as part of upstate New York.

The total enrollment at the Academy, as of the 1995-1996 school year, was 826, spread more or less evenly across all seven grades.

ACADEMIC STRUCTURE

Wizards who are accepted to QAS enter the Academy at sixth grade, at the beginning of junior high. They spent Grades 1-5 with Muggles, learning the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic.

The Academy has two campuses, one for men and one for women. The men meet in Dana and the women in Enfield. Both campus use state of the art magic and are designed to help the students learn as well as they can.

The curriculum follows the standardized class schedule popularized by Albus Dumbledore at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in England. Any prospective parent will be reassured that his or her child will get the appropriate Defense against the Dark Arts, History of Magic, Divination, and other standard lessons. There is also a special program for gifted students.

SOCIAL LIFE

The school is divided into four houses: Dana, Prescott, Greenwich, and Enfield. In days gone by, they corresponded more or less to which city the candidate had grown up in. Nowadays, however, people all over New England get distributed throughout the houses. The old rule still applies -- for instance, everyone from Prescott is assigned to Prescott House -- but the Four Towns only provide 21% of the class of '96.

The Academy hosts several academic and recreational competitions. The four houses compete in Quiddich, Quodpot and spellcraft on a regular basis. The Academy's women's Quodpot team, the Mermaids, have won the ASAL championship three of the past five years, and we are expecting that trend to continue under our new coach.

FINANCIAL AID

We at the Academy understand that a good education does not come cheaply. As a result, we have a financial aid package for those wizards who find admission too expensive. Please contact the headmaster for more information.
Thank you for your attention.

To be continued..

Update #4

January 15, 1996
Quabbin Academy of Sorcery
Dana, Massachusetts
United States of America

"Mr. Reynolds?"

The Muggle Studies teacher turned around. It was one of the ninth graders, David Anderson. David was one of his best students, and the reason for obvious: both of the boy's parents were Muggles. Reynolds was learning about as much from David as the rest of the class was learning from Reynolds himself.

Reynolds wondered if David realized how lucky he as living in the United States. Had David been living in England and attending Hogwarts, he would likely be persecuted by Voldemort's minions -- and by the students of Slytherin House -- as a "Mudblood". Reynolds recalled his experiences during the war against Voldemort and shuddered to think what would have happened to little David if he fell into Voldemort's clutches.

Although the English Ministry of Magic was trying to cover it up, word had started to leak out. Voldemort had returned and was starting to marshal his forces of Death Eaters. Supposedly a Death Eater who had infiltrated Hogwarts had fixed the latest incarnation of the Triwizard Tournament -- a competition between the three major Wizarding schools in Europe -- so that Harry Potter would win, be Portkeyed over to Voldemort's father's grave, and play an important, albeit unwanted, role in the Dark wizard's revival.

From what Reynolds had heard, virtually everything that could have gone wrong had done so. Voldemort's accomplice at Hogwarts had managed to fool the Goblet of Fire into thinking that Harry Potter belonged to a fourth school, which had forced the Goblet into nominating the boy as a fourth champion even though Dumbledore had placed an age line around the Goblet. The announcement of the "fourth champion" had thrown all three schools into apoplexy, but there was nothing they could do as the champions were bound to the tournament by a magical contract which could not be broken.

As if that were not bad enough, Voldemort's plan had gone awry when the two Hogwarts competitors, Potter and Cedric Diggory, had decided to tie for first place and touch the Triwizard Cup -- the Portkey -- at the same time. Both boys had been whisked to Voldemort's father's grave, where the stowaway Diggory had been killed by a supposedly dead Peter Pettigrew. The death of the popular Hufflepuff had horrified the community.

Hopefully Dumbledore would take care of Voldemort's revival in England before everything got out of hand. David here didn't know yet, and hopefully he would never have to know.

Reynolds turned to David. "Yes, David? What's going on?"

In response, David showed him a Muggle information parchment -- a newspaper, Reynolds believe it was called. As a Muggle Studies teacher, Reynolds was more familiar with Muggle artifacts than most wizards. However, that didn't amount to much. It was hard for information to flow between cultures in a world subject to the Statute of Secrecy.
The parchment seemed to be discussing sports. Reynolds didn't understand much about the sports mentioned: basketball, football, and so forth. He knew they existed, but that was more about it. The pictures, as usual, didn't move. This time, they seemed to be showing men in unusual helmets.

David pointed at the parchment. "Mr. Reynolds, I have a good idea for a class project for Muggle Studies which I think everyone will like. A week from this coming Sunday, the 28th, is the Super Bowl."

Reynolds looked at him, baffled. "The what?"

"The Super Bowl, Mr. Reynolds. It's the championship football game and a very popular sporting event. People all over the country, and possibly the world, will be watching it."

"So? I don't think any wizards other than you pay attention to Muggle sports."

David smiled. "Exactly, Mr. Reynolds. I recommend that we all watch the game together and learn about Muggle culture that way. Muggles have devices which can record programs on the television - -"

"The what?"

"Television, Mr. Reynolds. It's a Muggle device which allows people to receive programs from all over the world. At any rate, my family will be watching the game, recording it, and sending the record to Hogwarts so I can watch it in my spare time. There's a matter of powering the device which is required to play back to program, but I've been speaking with Professor Nagle and he thinks the problem can be overcome with magic. I must say, Mr. Reynolds, he's intrigued by the idea."

Reynolds stared at him. "You think that this sporting event will be a good way to learn about Muggle culture? I don't see how. All we'll see is Muggles playing games."

David smiled. "The game itself is a sideshow for the most part -- unless you're a fan one of one of the competitors. You see, the Super Bowl is best known for advertisements. Muggle companies take advantage of the fact that the Super Bowl is a highly watched program and develop very good advertisements to be shown during the broadcast. We can learn a lot about Muggle culture simply by watching the advertisements. And when we're not watching advertisements, we can watch the game and learn about football. What's more, there is generally a show during halftime which will let us learn more."

Reynolds laughed. He was intrigued. This actually wasn't a bad idea. "You know, David, that's a very good idea! How long will this game last? Can we show it during classes?"

David shook his head. "No. I think it will take too long. Maybe three or four hours. We'd have to set aside an afternoon for it. If you can't, we can just do an evening. We'll all meet in the auditorium and watch it."

Reynolds frowned. "You're going to have to still do your homework, you know. I don't want people skimping on their lessons because of this Muggle sport."

David looked at him pleadingly. "Can you get Professor Nagle to let us out early and have a half day so we can watch the game and then do our homework?"


Both David and Reynolds turned as Professor Nagle walked into the room and smiled. Turning to Reynolds, he continued, "I must say, Steven, this is actually a rather clever idea. It will help cheer up
the winter doldrums."

The headmaster turned back to David. "When's the game again?"

"January 28th, sir. A Sunday. I suspect my duck is going to be able to deliver the recording of the game on the 29th or 30th. We've also got a small television we may be able to lend you which runs on batteries. Once we've got the image, we can just blow it up with Engorgio and everyone will be able to see it."

"Indeed you will, David. What about February 2nd? Imbolc, the Cross Quarters day? It's the Friday night after the game and you don't have class the next day. It's a good day for a celebration, right?"

Reynolds looked at the headmaster and smiled. "It is, Arthur. It is."

The headmaster nodded and turned back to David. "All right, David. We're on. Tell me if there's anything you need me to do to help out."

David beamed at him. "Thank you! Thank you!"

To be continued...

-------------
Update #5
-------------
January 17, 1996
Death Eater Safe House
Colombo, Sri Lanka
-------------
Damodharan Dilmi was fed up with waiting. He had been imprisoned in Azkaban for twenty years and had suffered terrible torture at the hands of the dementors. Yet he had stayed strong and true to the dreams of Lord Voldemort.

Many of his fellow Death Eaters in Azkaban had been disheartened when Voldemort had been vanquished by the infant Harry Potter. Dilmi considered them weak and spineless. The fact that a great man had been incapacitated did not end the need for the wizards to rule the Earth. Muggles were incompetent, from what he knew. They were not wise enough to be in positions of authority. Wizards, with access to magic, had access to the required knowledge. It was the wizards' duty to take back what was rightfully theirs.

Dilmi had stewed in his own frustration for many, many years. As if that weren't bad enough, the situation got worse two and a half years ago when the fearsome Light side wizard Sirius Black managed to break out of Azkaban in his Animagus form. He remembered gritting his teeth when the news came in. Not only did the Light side have another fearsome warrior on their side, the dementors had taken extra care to intimidate and terrify the remaining inmates to make sure that the desire to break out of the prison didn't become contagious.

Everything had changed a little over half a year ago, however. He had felt the Dark Mark burn on his arm and could hear the astonished cries of his fellow Death Eater prisoners. He remembered the ecstasy he had felt when he realized that Voldemort had managed to return, having shrugged off a curse that would have killed anyone else. He knew that the time would soon come when the Dark Lord would redeem his followers from Azkaban.

That time had come a couple of weeks ago, when a host of renegade dementors and Death Eaters managed to break the Death Eaters out of Azkaban. Several good men had been killed in the fighting, the arcane knowledge of Lord Voldemort on their lips. However, with the dementors
neutralized by their own kind, it all came down to who had the guts to use the Avada Kedavra curse on their opponents. The Light side forces preferred to not do that, which more or less sealed their fate.

Dilmi had played a pivotal role in the breakout. He had managed to Imperius one of the Aurors and convince him to call off some dementor reinforcements. As long as the dementor battle was a stalemate, the Death Eaters would win. It had been Dilmi's duty to ensure that the Dark dementors achieved no worse than a stalemate.

Once free from Azkaban, he returned home to Sri Lanka and spent the next two weeks recruiting allies from all over the Indian subcontinent. He now found himself in charge of a large group of Death Eaters who were itching to get back at the Muggles and Mudbloods.

He had not heard much from Voldemort since his release. However, he knew enough to know that the Dark Lord was pleased with Dilmi's progress. Dilmi had been surprised to learn that Voldemort's recruitment was progressing more slowly than Dilmis. Voldemort's problems could be summarized in two words: Albus Dumbledore. The Hogwarts headmaster had seen Cedric Diggory's body and had listened to Harry Potter's description of the bizarre fight in the graveyard. Dumbledore knew that Voldemort would be snooping around Britain and was doing his best to stop him.

The authorities in Sri Lanka, however, were not aware of the Death Eaters in their midst. Their information came from the British Ministry of Magic, and the Ministry was adamant that Voldemort had not returned.

This left Dilmi in a position to act where Voldemort couldn't. He considered it his duty to do something to show the world that the Death Eaters meant it business. If Voldemort couldn't, Dilmi would. He had mentioned the plan to his lord, and Voldemort had reluctantly agreed. Dilmi’s cell would have the opportunity to plan the first magical attack of the Second Wizarding War.

He had discussed the idea with his men and eventually came upon a plan. Two weeks from today, they were to cast a powerful curse on a crowd of people downtown. They would then take advantage of the Imperius curse to frame a Muggle group, allowing the Death Eaters to escape. Dilmi, however, insisted that he receive the honor of casting the Dark Mark into the sky. Sure, everyone would see it. But none of the Muggles would know what it meant. A cloud looking like a skull. Big deal. He'd seen clouds that looked like frogs, trees, and so forth.

Dilmi's reconnaissance had decided upon one of three targets. The primary target was the Central Bank, as an attack there would not only kill people but damage the economy as well. If the Bank was impregnable, the second choice was a sports facility, which allowed for high casualty rates. If all else failed, his cell would fall back on their third choice, a major shopping mall.

Voldemort had planned well. He had distracted Dumbledore and the powerful British authorities while his sleeper cells all over the globe had prepared themselves. Dilmi was ready and hoped that the upcoming attack would earn him a position as the Dark Lord's right-hand man.

He rubbed his hands together, adjusted the Death Eater mask on his face, and continued working on his plans.

To be continued...
Update #6 through Update #10

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Mislagnissa

Update #6
---------
January 20, 1996
University of Phoenix
Phoenix, Arizona
United States of America
---------

Professor Darrell McArthur shook his head in disbelief. Some people around here had absolutely no sense of fashion whatsoever. Granted, he'd seen several kids with thousands of piercings and tattoos in his ornithology lecture. But what would you call an outfit with a purple top and a green robe, especially when it was worn by a man who appeared to be in his mid-fifties?

Had the costumed weirdo been a kid, McArthur would have assumed that he would have been part of some Dungeons and Dragons group or a member of the Society for Creative Anachronism. But a mature adult? Beat the hell out of him.

Coffee break over, he turned back to the project at hand. A couple of weeks ago, he had been sent a copy of a recording taken during a Super Bowl commercial shooting in London. This recording had apparently picked up an unusual object flying down the Thames, presumably a bird. Someone on the photo shoot, a Blast Cola executive named Stern, had had the good sense to send the footage to an ornithologist in case the creature was a newly-discovered species. The recording had been bounced around the department for a few weeks and had eventually wound up on his desk.

The first thing McArthur had done was view the film. There was the bird, just as Stern had claimed. The creature had flown right past the boat, so it wasn't easy to miss. However, it was poorly illuminated so he couldn't tell exactly what it was. So, he'd sent the film over to a processing lab in Scottsdale which would help increase the contrast. Hopefully that would help clarify the image.

The film had been mailed back today and was lying on his desk, waiting for analysis. Pencil in hand, McArthur slid it into the projector and began playing it.

The lab had done its job. Everything was much clearer and sharper now. Whoever this Stern was had filmed the commercial using special film which would be run at 48 frames per second instead of the usual 24 in an attempt to produce an ad of the highest quality possible. This allowed him to see the object flying by in unprecedented detail.

McArthur took one look at the image and nearly cracked up.

It was a teenage boy on a broomstick. It looked like this kid was trying to try out for a role as the Wicked Witch of the West.

It was obvious -- this Stern had been subject to a prank. Obviously, someone on the deck above the commercial shoot had hung a picture of a witch out the window in an attempt to mess around with the commercial. He'd have to call Stern back and tell him to redo the shoot.

He looked more closely at the image to see if he can figure out how exactly the prank had been performed. Judging from the distance the kid had traveled between frames, the little boy was probably traveling at least 30 mph faster than the boat.
His eyes narrowed in puzzlement. How the hell would someone be able to run 30 mph on a boat? He'd been on a few cruise liners himself, and he'd never seen any evidence of cars on them.

The only explanation was that the prankster had come up underneath the boat in a motorboat of their own, placed the image on a pole, and towed the image through the shoot. However, that didn't make sense either. Had that been the case, the image would be bobbing up and down in the waves. This image was not doing so, as far as he could tell.

He analyzed the film further and suddenly saw three things that made his blood turn to ice.

First, he noticed absolutely no evidence of anything holding that broomstick up. No poles. No masts. No wings. No wires. Nothing. It was almost as if the thing had been floating in midair and traveling with no visible source of propulsion. However, that was nothing compared to the second surprise.

The boy had blinked midway through the scene. A cardboard cutout couldn't have done that. Furthermore, if the commercial was aired live, no one would have been able to see the boy blink given the speed he was traveling at and the low light.

The third surprise consisted of a pair of smaller objects in the field of view. They also appeared to be people on broomsticks seen at a distance. They had only become visible after the film had been treated.

They were maybe 30 feet from the boat. There was water beneath them. and air above them. No boats. No gliders. Nothing.

McArthur couldn't believe what he was seeing. He was a scientist and wracked his brain for other explanations. There were none.

He had Stern's number in front of him. It was time to tell the man something which would absolutely floor him.

-------------------

The phone rang in Stern's office, and he picked it up. "Stern."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Stern. This is Professor McArthur from the University of Phoenix. I've just finished looking at your film footage. It's quite...unusual."

Stern nodded. "I'd suspect so. What species is it? It's pretty big."

McArthur hesitated. "Mr. Stern, are you sitting down? You're going to be in for a surprise. As a teaser, I've made a copy of the film and sent it to our anthropology department, not the biology one. And I'm also recording this call for posterity."

Stern frowned. "I'd suspect so. What species is it? It's pretty big."

"Yes, Mr. Stern. What you have here is -- and I swear to God this is the case -- a teenage boy flying on a broomstick. There are two other people flying on broomsticks as well a little further away. None of them have any means of support or propulsion. And they're not cardboard cutouts because I saw the kid blink."

Stern's jaw dropped. "Are you telling me they're...witches?"

"Correct, Mr. Stern. Believe me, I'm a scientist. I couldn't think of any other explanation. I -- hold on a second, someone just came in..."

The line went quiet for a few seconds, after which a new voice shouted a word that sounded like...
"Obliviate" and he heard a zapping sound. He heard some muffled voices for a second. Eventually, McArthur came back on the line.

McArthur sounded a bit woozy. "Hello?"

"I'm still here, Professor."

"Who is this?"

Stern was puzzled. "David Stern, Professor. You were talking to me about my videotape. You think you saw evidence of people on broomsticks on my videotape."

"What videotape? What witches? Is this some crank call or something like that? Because if it is, I'm going to tell the dean about this and you're going to be in big trouble."

The conversation went on for a few more minutes. Eventually, Stern just hung up in confusion.

Obliviate? What did Obliviate mean?

He hoped that the Professor hadn't suffered a bout of amnesia or gone into shock because of the magnitude of his discovery. Perhaps that automated computer recording of the conversation would be able to remind him of what happened.

To be continued...

---------------
Update #7
---------------
January 22, 1996
Blast Cola Headquarters
Tempe, Arizona
United States of America

Isaac Sanders was startled when he felt someone poke him on the shoulder. Turning away from his computer, he found himself staring into the face of David Stern.

Stern's face was registering confusion and shock. Had something happened to him? Had there been a problem with the commercial. He'd find out soon enough, he supposed.

Stern spoke one sentence. "Izzy, I need to talk to you for a second. Something very...unusual has occurred which you may want to know about."

A worried Sanders followed Stern into an empty conference room. As Stern closed the door behind him, Sanders's concern got the best of him. "What happened, Dave? I haven't seen you like this since Misty was hit by that car."

Stern shook his head. "It's about the commercial. We may have a problem."

Sanders swore to himself. "A problem? What happened? Did the networks pull our ad for some reason? I thought we had confirmation that our ad would be shown midway through the second quarter."

Stern's voice lowered. "It's not the commercial itself. It's that bird that flew past the camera while we were shooting in London."

Sanders nodded. "What about it? I remember it well -- I thought it looked like some kid riding a
broomstick."

Stern drew a deep breath. "Izzy, I just got a call from a professor from the University of Phoenix. You may recall that I sent a copy of the tape to an ornithologist I knew to have him determine what type of bird it was. The professor did some work with it and performed some additional processing on the film. And he reached a conclusion which even he couldn't believe."

He paused for effect. "Izzy, you were right. It's a kid flying a broomstick."

Sanders swore. "Oh boy. Someone's hacked us. I bet Pepsi or Coke --"

Stern cut him off. "It's not a hack, Izzy. The professor was absolutely convinced that what we were seeing was an honest to goodness Wizard of Oz-style warlock flying on a broomstick. It was a real person, and not a cardboard cutout -- the kid was blinking. Second, there were two other anomalies...visible in the processed image, both of which looked like people on broomsticks. Furthermore, there was absolutely nothing supporting any of those brooms or propelling them. Those people were flying using...forces...unknown to science."

Sanders stared at him for a moment and laughed. "Damn, Dave, you almost had me there for a second. You've gotten very good at practical jokes --"

Sanders cut himself off when he took a good look at Stern's face. The man was terrified. Clearing his throat loudly, he apologized for the interruption and asked Stern to continue.

Stern looked at the floor. "There was one more thing, however, which really troubles me. The community of witches apparently wants to keep itself hidden and are trying to erase any evidence that outsiders know they exist."

Sanders stared at him. "What? I can understand the witches wanting to practice their customs in peace. However, I don't see any reason why they'd want to make us forget they were ever there, though. We didn't threaten them at all. What evidence do you have for this?"

Stern closed his eyes. "Midway through the conversation, the professor had to step away for a moment as someone else had entered his lab. A few seconds went by, and I heard some new guy utter a strange word: 'Obliviate'. A few seconds went by, and when the professor came back to the phone, he had no idea who I was or why I had called. What's more, he had absolutely no recollection of ever having handled a videotape or seen evidence of witches. It was as if his mind had been wiped."

Stern paused once more.

"That word 'Obliviate' seems to come from the same root as 'oblivious'. It's almost as if it were a magical spell designed to make people forget a certain event."

Sanders gaped at him. "You mean to tell me that this other guy cast a spell of some sort to make the professor forget what he had seen and then walked away with the evidence?"

"I think so, Izzy. However, I'm not sure whether he managed to come away with the videotape. Supposedly the professor had delivered the videotape to another department -- the anthropologists, so they could study the witches -- before calling me. I have no idea if this guy checked with them."

Sanders frowned. "Wait a minute. If this guy wants to cover up the evidence, why didn't he cast a spell on you to make you forget as well?"

"My guess is he didn't see me there and you have to be physically present to cast a spell on someone.
That's the way it works in the movies, after all. However, the obvious implication is that this guy is probably going to be looking for us. We could be in danger. We're going to need to get in touch with those witches somehow and tell them that we mean them no harm and are willing to keep this secret to ourselves."

Sanders looked at the floor and shuffled his feet. "Uh, Dave, if what you're saying is correct, the secret is probably going to be out in a week or so anyway. I'd suspect that those witches are going to have bigger problems to deal with."

Stern stared at him. "A week or so? What --"

Then it dawned on Stern, who put his head his hands. "Oh my God. Super Bowl commercial. That commercial is going to be seen by hundreds of millions of people all over the world. Within a week, the entire world will know that these witches exist. Judging from how seriously they take their privacy, I suspect they aren't going to be happy. And unhappy witches tend to cast spells on people."

Sanders looked out the window. "Is there any way we can cancel the commercial, reshoot it, and get it ready for Super Bowl XXXI?"

"No. The deadline for pulling out of the deal was last month. Besides, if we were to cancel it, the CEO would have my head."

Sanders whistled. "May God have mercy on our souls."

Stern nodded. "May He indeed."

To be continued...

--------------------

Update #8

--------------------

January 25, 1996
Dine Center for Shamanism and Sorcery
Fourth Mesa, Navajo Reservation, Arizona
United States of America

--------------------

DINE CENTER FOR SHAMANISM AND SORCERY
STATUTE OF SECRECY VIOLATION REPORT

Case File: US-SW-003266
Obliviation Agent: Alexander Strong Bear Parkman
Date Opened: 1/17/96
Risk Level: Low to Moderate

BRIEF SYNOPSIS OF VIOLATION AND STATUS

Fourth Mesa first became aware of the incident on Wednesday, January 17th. The Violation Detectors in the greater Phoenix area began picking up a large number of excited comments about witches and warlocks, all within a short period of time and within a very concentrated area. After a brief consultation, Shaman Strong Bear was sent to investigate.

Shaman Strong Bear is familiar with a great deal of modern Muggle technology, which proved to be crucial in helping contain this violation. He is also a full-blooded Dine shaman of the highest rank and has handled several Obliviations in the past (see case files US-SW-003132, US-SW-003200, and US-CA-010585).
Strong Bear was able to pinpoint the location of the comments relatively easily. They appeared centered on an image processing facility in Scottsdale. He donned his Invisibility Cloak and infiltrated the building.

The people in the facility had recently been mailed a videotape for additional video processing. This videotape had come from a Professor Darrell McArthur from the University of Phoenix. Professor McArthur is a biologist who specializes in ornithology and bird-aided epidemics.

Judging from the comments Strong Bear heard in the lab, the facility had recently processed a videotape which purported to show three wizards flying broomsticks in Greater London. A consultation with Cornelius Fudge, the British Minister of Magic, has revealed that these wizards are most likely Harry Potter, 15; Alastair Moody, 62; and Remus Lupin, 34.

Potter is currently a student at Hogwarts, living in Gryffindor House. He was recently acquitted on charges of underage magic. Moody and Lupin are both Aurors and members of the Order of the Phoenix. Both were hired to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts at Hogwarts but suffered ill fortune due to Lord Voldemort's curse against the Defense Against the Dark Arts teachers. Lupin was exposed as a werewolf and resigned. Moody was taken hostage by Bartholomew Crouch, Jr., a Death Eater. Crouch then took Moody’s place as the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher.

Strong Bear took immediate action, cordoning off the facility and Obliviating everyone in the building. He checked the telephone and computer records and believes that he managed to repair the Statute of Secrecy in this area. However, he was unable to retrieve the videotape, which had apparently been sent back to Professor McArthur.

The Obliviator next visited Professor McArthur's office at the University of Phoenix, only to find McArthur talking on the phone. Strong Bear then Obliviated McArthur, waited for the Professor to complete his call, and then checked the phone records and computer email logs. The phone records reported that the Professor's last call had been to a Mr. David Stern, an executive for the Blast Soft Drink Corporation of Tempe. He then erased the recording of the conversation and headed off to Obliviate Stern.

Strong Bear is currently in the process of trying to track down this man. Stern was not there when Strong Bear visited his house on the 22nd. However, Strong Bear took advantage of the opportunity to do a brief check of the premises for the incriminating videotape. It was not there. He is operating under the assumption that Stern must have sent the tape off to someone else.

[Here our poor Obliviator is barking up the wrong tree. He thinks that Stern sent it to someone, whereas it was actually McArthur who'd handed it off to the anthropology department. That's going to keep it out of his hands...long enough.]

That investigation is also still ongoing. Strong Bear plans to Obliviate everyone he can find who has come into contact with the videotape, as well as everyone with whom the suspects communicated. The magical wiretaps on the telephone lines are working quite well.

LATEST UPDATE
-------------
Strong Bear reports that he believes he will have this matter closed relatively quickly. He plans to Obliviate Stern as soon as he finds him. He is considering Obliviating all of Blast Soft Drink Corporation, as well as the entire community within a one-mile radius of the place where the videotape is eventually found.

The only thing Strong Bear is concerned about is the possibility that someone made a copy of the videotape. If that is the case, he may have some more work to do. Fortunately, he knows what the
next steps are and believes he will have the matter resolved by February 1st.

Strong Bear recommends that this incident be upgraded to Moderate Risk as of now. Once the possibility of multiple copies of the tape is dealt with, however, he expects that it will be able to be downgraded back to Low and eventually closed.

The next update on this case will be due on January 30th, 1996.

[Also known as two days after the Super Bowl. Too late, dude...]

To be continued...

-----------------
Update #9
------------
January 28, 1996
Sun Devil Stadium
Tempe, Arizona
United States of America

David Stern would have never guessed that he would eventually wind up in a luxury box for the Super Bowl. Yet here he was, high above the field, along with his son and several other Blast executives.

The box must have cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, if not more. However, when you're already spending $3 million on a Super Bowl commercial, what's another hundred thousand or so?

He could see several other boxes with advertisements beneath them. He suspected that they corresponded to the other companies which had sponsored the game: Budweiser, Fedex, Pizza Hut, and so forth. As far as he could tell, Blast was the only small company gambling on a Super Bowl ad to bolster its revenue.

Revenue, as it turned out, was not the only thing Blast was gambling with by filming the commercial. There was another as well. One which likely had far worse repercussions than a few million dollars.

Stern hadn't told anyone else about the witches yet. It was only appropriate given the situation. Besides, who would have believed him, anyway? Had he not received the report from McArthur and listened to the poor man being Obliviated over the phone, he wouldn't have believed it himself. He had shot the commercial himself and had been convinced it was a bird.

He looked around the luxury box. Three TV's were covering the pregame show. Another one was turned to ESPN. Two more were covering the teams' locker rooms. There was enough technology here to outdo a science lab.

Comfortable chairs and couches were strewn throughout the area. The room had its own bathroom. A coffee machine was sitting on a table next to bowls of pretzels, fine cheeses, and soft drinks (including, of course, Blast).

There was a full bar as well. Behind the bar was an attractive Native American man -- Navajo, it seemed like -- in an expensive cashmere suit. The bartender was wearing two medallions on his suit. The first sported an image of a fierce bear inside a circle. The second was simply a nameplate reading A. PARKMAN.

Stern jumped as the CEO tapped him on the shoulder. "You OK? You look like you've seen a
Stern had to think fast. "I'm fine, Mike. To be honest, I can't believe I'm actually here at the Super Bowl. Had the Cardinals actually been in the game, I'd have probably fainted."

The CEO laughed as well. "Well, enjoy this moment, Dave. You'll probably never get another chance at this. Want some champagne? You've earned it, and it should cheer you up."

Stern sighed. "I suppose. I definitely need being cheered up. I've got a lot on my mind right now."

"It's understandable, Dave. You're concerned no one will like the commercial. However, judging from what I've seen of it, you'll do fine. The London shoot was exceptional, timing the script to discuss phantoms just as the bird flew past. This ad should be a hit. To be honest, even an awful Super Bowl commercial will advertise Blast all over the world."

Stern caught a motion out the corner of his eye. The bartender, en route to Stern with the drinks platter, was staring at him intently, a thoughtful expression on his face. The Navajo's hand was slowly reaching into his pocket, as if he were trying to pull out a gun...or a wand. Eventually, the bartender changed his mind and continued walking towards him with the drinks.

Stern rolled his eyes. Damn it, Dave, he thought to himself. You're getting paranoid. If the witches were trying to Obliviate you, they'd want to do it in a place without any witnesses. After all, they don't want their world exposed.

The CEO slapped him on the back. "Believe me, we're going to recoup our investment easily. Don't be surprised if you get a promotion out of this."

This actually cheered Stern up enough to bring him back to his senses. Picking up a drink -- the bartender was still studying him -- he sank down into a recliner and began watching the pregame show.

After what appeared to be an eternity, the game began. Soon, the Cowboys and Steelers were forcing their way up and down the field. Fans cheered as the TV commercials were shown during breaks. Stern recognized most of them: the Budweiser frogs, Pizza Hut, Coke, and so forth. Some of them were good, some of them were mediocre, and some of them were downright awful. Judging from what he recalled of Blast's own commercial, he figured Blast's would probably rank in the mediocre range. But it would be good enough. After all, it was the Super Bowl.

By the end of the first quarter, Stern had finally relaxed. Turning to the CEO, he asked: "Hey, Mike! You've got a strong vocabulary, don't you?"

The CEO nodded. "Yeah, Dave. Why do you ask?"

"What does the word 'Obliviate' mean?"

The bartender turned to him, put down his drinks, and put his hand in his pocket once more. He brought out a long stick which looked like a laser pointer and pointed it at Stern.

"It means, Mr. Stern, that you're in a hell of a lot of trouble."

To be continued...

********
Update #10
********

January 28, 1996
For a few seconds, nobody moved. The bartender kept his laser pointer aimed at Stern, who was now convinced that it was some kind of magic wand. The CEO glanced back and forth from Stern to the bartender as the other Blast executives' eyes widened in confusion. Down below, on the field, the Cowboys made a first down. No one noticed.

Finally, the CEO broke the silence. "Uh...Dave, what's going on here? Who is this guy? And why is he pointing a laser pointer at us? Is he going to blast us with a ray gun or something like that and consign us into oblivion?"

The bartender shook his head. "God forbid, sir. It is against our code of conduct to kill for any reason. There are three crimes which are unforgivable and murder is one of them."

The CEO continued looking at Stern. "I'm glad to hear that, Mr...Parkman, is it?"

The bartender nodded. "Yes, sir. My name is Alexander Parkman. I go by my Dine name, Strong Bear."

The CEO was now looking at the bartender. "Dine?"

"You know us as the Navajo, sir. However, the proper term to use to refer to our people is the Dine."

The CEO grunted and turned back to Stern. "What did you do, Dave? Did you interrupt one of their sacred ceremonies or something like that?"

Strong Bear shook his head. "He did not, sir. However, he witnessed something which should be kept secret. He cannot be allowed to spread this knowledge further."

Stern finally managed to untie his tongue. "Guys, let me explain what happened, to the best of my knowledge. This man belongs to a secret society which we have been coexisting with peacefully for many, many years. I have reason to believe we accidentally recorded footage of one of its members in action while we were working on our commercial. They're trying to prevent the world from learning about their society."

The CEO frowned. "What type of society is this?"

Stern shook his head. "It would not be appropriate of me to say any more. I don't want to make the leak any worse than it is."

Strong Bear turned to Stern and nodded, though the wand/laser pointer was still pointed at him. "I appreciate that, Mr. Stern. Thank you."

The CEO braced himself. "Dave, did you know about this? What did you do?"

Stern sighed. "Like I said, we accidentally filmed one of their members in action. I noticed something unusual and hadn't thought much of it until someone who had seen the footage processed the film further and noticed something...even more unusual."

"What did he notice?"

"Again, Mike, it would not be appropriate for me to say. However, judging from this man's reaction, this footage may be enough to expose their society to the world. I have a suspicion that I know what
this society is, and I am fairly certain that the world as we know it will be in for a bit of a shock."

The CEO was now joined by several other executive. "What society is this?"

Stern shook his head and turned to the bartender. "I'm not saying. However, I suspect I know what
our Navajo -- sorry, Dine friend is here for. If my guess is right, I know what that thing in your hand
is. You're going to make it so we don't remember anything about your people, right?"

The bartender nodded. "I'm afraid so, Mr. Stern. In my trade, I am known as an Obliviator. Rest
assured, the procedure will be painless and humane. It will not cause you any harm. However, there's
something I need to know first. Who else has seen this footage? We're going to have to plug our
leaks there as well."

Stern tensed. "Two extra copies were made of the tape. One was sent to an ornithologist friend of
mine who is a student at the University of Phoenix."

Strong Bear nodded. "I've gotten that one. The tape wound up in the anthropology lab. The people
there have no recollection of our society. In fact, judging from your comments, you actually
witnessed an Obliviation over the telephone and managed to keep your memories. We'll need to add
telephone and email checks to our Obliviator training documents."

The CEO threw his hands up in the air. "Who are you? CIA? FBI? James Bond?"

Strong Bear shook his head. "I cannot confirm or deny any of those. At any rate, where are the two
other copies?"

Stern nodded. "I had one in my office in Tempe. As soon as I realized what had happened, I
destroyed it. Only one other person is aware of your existence, a technician named Isaac Sanders. If
you wish to Obliviate him, you may. He is also keeping his mouth shut. Trust me. I convinced him."

Strong Bear fiddled with his wand/laser pointer. "That's not enough, Mr. Stern. Standard policy
requires that he be Obliviated. I'm sorry. You are to be Obliviated as well, I'm afraid, though I must
confess you deserve knowing the truth as it's obvious you're trying to help us. If this gets out of
control, we'll need someone in society at large who's going to help us adapt once we are exposed.
However, back to the matter at hand. We've gotten two of the tapes. Where's the third?"

Stern winced. "Mr. Parkman, you're not going to like this."

The bartender grinned. "Mr. Stern, don't worry about it. My society has some rather unusual abilities,
as you have probably deduced. We can handle this. Where is the last copy?"

Stern paused. He had no idea how the man would react to this. Yet he deserved to know the truth.
He drew a deep breath.

"In the archives of NBC Studios. The footage was part of our company's Super Bowl commercial."

Strong Bear blanched at this. "Super Bowl commercial? Ancestors take me! Has the commercial
aired yet? Please, say no! NO!"

Stern looked out from luxury box into the field. There were seven minutes left in the second quarter
and one of the teams had just punted. This forced a television timeout, which in turn meant --

It didn't take long. One of the main monitors had been showing the commercials. The Budweiser
frogs showed up for a few moments, followed by a Dr. Pepper commercial.
Then came the first shots from Blast. He recognized Jake and Rebecca immediately with the Blast bottle in their hands.

Stern pointed a trembling finger at the monitor and sighed. "There it is."

Strong Bear spun to face the monitor. Sure enough, the shot turned to London. Jake and Rebecca were once again chatting at the railing of the boat. And once again, the bird known as Harry Potter flew through the field of view.

Stern couldn't catch a clear image of the boy in real time. However, apparently the wizard could. The Obliviator let out a shriek of horror. Brandishing his wand -- it was obviously a wand, Stern could tell at this point -- at the crowd, he howled two arcane words.

"Obliviatus maximus!"

A cone of white light issued from the end of the wand and sped off into the night. From Stern's perspective, in the box, it looked like a stream of fireworks. Which was just as well given what it was trying to do. The fireworks could be passed off as non-magical.

The CEO whistled. "What the hell was that?"

The Obliviator then spun and pointed the wand at Stern. Stern raised his hands in self-defense.

"You still need to get everyone who watched the broadcast! Simply erasing the memories of those in the stadium won't help! I --"

The white light flashed, and suddenly Stern had no idea what he had been talking about.

To be continued...
Update #11
------------
January 28, 1996
Dine Center for Shamanism and Sorcery
Fourth Mesa, Navajo Reservation, Arizona
United States of America
------------

DINE CENTER FOR SHAMANISM AND SORCERY
STATUTE OF SECRECY VIOLATION REPORT

Case File: US-SW-003266
Obliviation Agent: Alexander Strong Bear Parkman
Date Opened: 1/17/96
Risk Level: Critical

LATEST UPDATE -- 1/28/1996 1958 MST

We have just received an urgent report from Strong Bear. This breach has just come much more
serious. It appears that although he successfully managed to track down the two extra copies of the
incriminating footage and destroy them, one of them managed to last long enough to generate a much
more dangerous leak.

The footage showing Potter, Moody, and Lupin was used as part of a commercial for Blast Cola. It
was shown during Super Bowl XXX. Strong Bear claims he saw the ad air live on the TV monitors
in the stadium.

For those of you unfamiliar with Muggle sports, the Super Bowl is the championship match for the
American National Football League. This event is watched all over the United States and quite
possibly beyond. Current estimates for the number of people who are watching the game range from
70 million to 100 million. In the Wizarding world, it would be the equivalent of someone launching
an ad during the finals of the Quodpot Playoffs. Everyone in North America going to see it.

Strong Bear reports that Mr. Stern (see the previous report) realized what had happened and was
genuinely surprised and sorry for what had transpired -- the filming had been entirely accidental.
Stern appears to have been doing what he could to plug the leak on his end, going so far as to refer to
the Wizarding world as a "secret society" without giving any details. Several other Blast executives
seemed to be under the impression that the aforementioned society was the FBI or the CIA, which is
good to know.

The Obliviator reports that he was able to modify the memories of virtually everyone in the stadium,
including Stern and the rest of the Blast Soft Drink Corporation executives. He had to Apparate in
and out of various luxury boxes and places in the concourse, a difficult task, but he was up to it.
Strong Bear estimates that at least 95% of the people who were in the stadium now believe that the
image which flew by the boat in London was an exotic bird which happened to fly by during the
shoot.

This does not plug the breach entirely, however. Not by a long shot. A man named Isaac Sanders, a
coworker of Stern, is still convinced that the anomaly was a witch. He was not at the game, so he
was not Obliviated. There were likely reporters from ESPN, NBC, and other networks recording the game. Although the human operators themselves were Obliviated, their films very likely picked up the glow of the Obliviation cone and/or the monitors showing the commercial. The Obliviate spell does not work on inanimate objects, and professional TV reporters likely have film of high enough quality that an outsider would be able to use it to identify the "bird" as a wizard. The TV reporters would inevitably report on the disappearance of their films as a sign of a conspiracy -- after all, shock sells.

In order to modify the reporters' film, Strong Bear would have had to cast an Accio to summon all of the films to him. This spell would have either destroyed the films or at the very least would have caused them to start flying through the air. Both of those possibilities would have raised suspicion and triggered an investigation, so he was unable to do either.

These issues pale before the main issue, which is getting everyone who watched the game. Stern himself tried to warn us about this complication just before he was Obliviated. Judging from what he has seen, he estimates than 1% of the viewers will be able to identify the object as a wizard. In order to do so, they would have to be recording the commercials on some VCR or other device (20%), be curious about the anomaly (50%), have wherewithal to try to review what was seen on their VCR at 24 or 30 frames per second (50%) and find some way to process the film to improve contrast and visibility (20%). The procedure seems to be very similar to that used by Professor McArthur when he was able to conclusively identify the anomaly as a boy on a broomstick.

1% does not sound like a large number of people. However, that can be one million people, spread out all over the United States. It will take time for the Obliviators to get to them all, during which the suspects will inevitably start gossiping to other people and showing them the wizards on the video. There is a distinct possibility that this will not be able to be contained without federal support -- or possibly international support.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

The first thing we have to do is make sure this doesn't leave the United States. The Wizarding community is fortunate in that American football is not very popular outside the United States, so if we are on our toes we may limit the violation to one country. To this end, here is what Strong Bear recommends.

1. Make sure nothing gets on the Internet. If it gets on the Internet it is going to go international and nothing will be able to stop it. This can be accomplished by a virus on the Internet tagged to the words "wizard" and "Super Bowl".

   [Great idea, dude. Now how do you handle typos like SPUER BOWL and alternate languages like COPA DE SUPER?]

2. Send all Wizarding communities in the United States into lockdown for their own safety. If word does leak out, the Muggles may attack, or be too curious, about our community.

3. Start monitoring all telephone lines in the United States, especially those in large cities like Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago. The site of the Super Bowl (the Phoenix metropolitan area) and the cities represented by the two teams (Pittsburgh and Dallas) must also be monitored. Have teams of Obliviators ready to step in and interrogate anyone involved in a conversation.

4. Escalate this incident to Critical Risk and inform the Secretary of Magic in Greenwich. The Secretary of Magic may want to consider warning President Clinton.

5. Inspect all international mail. We cannot allow any information -- or worse, tapes -- of this incident
6. Tell all wizards and institutions to review their plans in case the Statute of Secrecy is breached. Strong Bear fears that there's at least a 30% chance that Statute of Secrecy will be permanently compromised by this incident. If the video gets onto the Internet, the risk of a permanent breach rises to about 60% as all a hacker needs is Photoshop and a keen eye. If film itself makes it out of the US, the risk goes up to 90% or higher, high enough that we may seriously consider speaking before the United Nations.

7. Keep an eye on Voldemort and Sirius Black. They may take advantage of the manpower diverted to plugging the breach to commit atrocities against Muggles or Muggle-borns.

More information will come in as it becomes available.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #12
-------------
January 28, 1996
Sanders Household
Prescott, Arizona
United States of America

Melissa Sanders screamed into her husband's study. "Izzy, hurry up! Your commercial is coming on! I can't believe you aren't watching!"

Isaac Sanders shook his head. "I've got stuff to think about right now, Melissa. I know what the commercial's going to show. I'll be by in a little while. Tell me if you see anything strange in the final production, however -- we're concerned something may have gone wrong and we're hoping most people won't notice it."

"All right, Izzy. We'll tell you."

Sanders had a lot on his mind. It was fairly obvious that the witches' secrecy would be compromised by the airing of the commercial. Everything would depend on how many of the viewers would be intrigued enough by the object flying past the boat in London to consider taking a closer look.

He and Stern were both convinced that they had to do something to help the witches in case their society was exposed. Both of them had agreed not to divulge any more information than was absolutely necessary. They had also agreed to stick to the party line: the anomaly was an exotic bird that had escaped from the zoo, at least as far as the people could tell on the set.

He wondered how Stern was reacting to the airing of the commercial. As a high-ranking Stern executive (and producer of the commercial), he had been invited to join the rest of the Blast brass in the luxury box to watch the game. Stern had told him that he'd be paying attention to the reactions of the people in the stands. If everything went as he had hoped, no one would notice the anomaly or, if anyone did, pass it off as a bird or a plane. Stern had agreed to call him during halftime and compare notes.

Thirty seconds went by, and the commercial had finished. He could hear the television in the living room switching to an ad for Pepsi. He took a deep breath. Was he worrying in vain?

His wife's voice floated in through the doorway. "Good job, Izzy! Well done! It's not the best commercial, but it's not the worst either. You're going to get a lot of business out of this, I suspect."
Even an awful commercial will have an impact when a hundred million people are watching it."

Don't remind me, Sanders thought. Aloud, he asked. "I hope so. I take it everything looked OK to you? You didn't notice anything wrong?"

''Not that I can tell, Izzy. The shots from the various countries were impressive. What was the thing that flew past the camera in London supposed to represent?"

\text{Damn, Sanders thought. Aloud: } ''I think it was a bird -- some exotic waterfowl, maybe a swan or a goose. We couldn't tell the species because it didn't stay illuminated long enough for us to find out. The presence of the bird was sheer coincidence. We left it in because it would represent the problems flying away when people drank Blast."

''Nice touch, Izzy. I don't see any problems. The only thing I'd have changed is add a few sound bites here and there, sort of like what Budweiser and Coke tend to do. It should suffice, however. It will be a credit to your company."

''Thanks, Melissa. Let's hope your predictions are right on. What's the score? Maybe I'll come in for the second half if things work out the way we hope."

''It's 13-7 Cowboys, late in the second quarter. Do you know who's doing the halftime show? Did they tell you when you submitted the commercial?"

''Not really. We'll find out soon enough, I guess."

With that, Melissa ended the conversation and switched back to watching the game. The results had been more or less as he had expected. Assuming Melissa represented a typical American viewer, people had liked the commercial, which was good for him and for Blast. The fans would notice the anomaly in London, but they would be easy to convince that it was something mundane like a bird. This would reduce the number of potential people aware of the wizards' world a great deal.

The question was: would it reduce it to zero? Everything would depend on that.

-----------

Half an hour later, the halftime show was in full swing. There were the typical music acts and over-the-top choreographed dancers. What was unusual, however, was the fact that Stern hadn't called him back.

Stern was usually very good with phone calls. He was prompt as well. If he had agreed to call someone at a certain time, you could count on the call arriving within five minutes of the scheduled time. It was most unlike Stern to be twenty minutes -- or more -- late for a call.

Had something happened to him? Desperate, he called Stern's cell phone. The phone rang a couple of times. Finally, someone picked up.

''Stern!"

Sanders breathed a sigh of relief. ''Dave, is that you?"

''Izzy? What's going on? You watching the game?"

''I was a bit preoccupied, but I'll probably get to it later on. You were supposed to call me shortly after halftime began, Dave. What happened? You usually aren't late with phone calls."

There was a pause. ''I was supposed to call you?"
"Yup, Dave. Did you forget?"

"I must have, Izzy. I apologize. What do you want to talk about?"

"How did people react to the commercial? Did they notice anything unusual about it?"

"Not that I can tell, Izzy. Most people liked it."

"That's good to hear, Dave. Is our secret still safe?"

The next two words sent shivers down Sanders's spine. "Secret? What secret?"

Carefully, in case the line was tapped: "The thing flying past the boat in London during the commercial. You do remember that?"

"I do indeed, Izzy. What's so secret about it? A bird is a bird. I don't know what species it was. Did you know what species it was? Why would that be secret?"

Sanders didn't like the sound of this at all. He thought for a second and asked a question. "Dave, what happened? Were you Obliviated?"

Stern paused on the other end. "Obliviated? What does that mean? I thought I was a smart person, but I must admit I've never heard that word before in my life."

Sanders swore to himself once more. This supported his theory. Aloud: "Obliviation is the process of having one's memories erased. A certain group we are familiar with has been erasing memories to maintain its privacy and integrity."

Stern laughed. "You know people who can erase people's memories? Who are you talking about? Vulcans? The FBI? Some nutty shrink or mad scientist who wants to make money off an Alzheimer's epidemic?"

Sanders thought a homonym would help. "You know which group I'm talking about, Dave. You know which."

"Actually, Dave, I don't. I can tell you it's not a group of witches either, if that's what you're thinking from the use of the homonym. If you think there are witches running around, you've probably been drinking too much beer or spent too much time watching Wizard of Oz. What have you got down there? Amstel? Bud? Save some for me when I get back, OK?"

This basically confirmed Sanders's worst fears. Stern had clearly been Obliviated, and Sanders himself was probably not far behind. He hoped the witches knew what they were doing: Obliviating everyone who was willing to help them adapt to their new circumstances didn't seem to be a very good idea. Now that the commercial had been aired, it was only a matter of time until the world found out about the witches, for good or for ill.

Resigned, Sanders forced a laugh and finished the conversation. "I must be the one who's confused, Dave. I apologize. I'll see you tomorrow, all right? And I'll bring the beer."

Stern laughed. "Good idea. We'll get drunk and think about what we'll do with all the money we'll make off this commercial. Stern out."

Sanders hung up the phone and stared into space in shock. A few doors away, in the living room, the third quarter was about to start. Melissa was calling him into the room to get him to watch the game.
A few beers didn't seem like a bad idea at this point...

To be continued...

---------------
Update #13
---------------
January 28, 1996
Alpha Chi Gamma Fraternity [which does not exist -- I'd know, I'm MIT '94]
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Cambridge, Massachusetts
United States of America

Harold Francis Chu grinned as he looked at the grid. Almost half of the men in his house had participated in the Super Bowl pool. One of the walls in the had covered with a 10x10 grid of squares, where each brother could spend $5 to put his name in a square. Multiple entries were permitted, so someone could spend $10 to take two squares. Once all 100 squares had been filled in, the rows and columns were marked with random permutations of the numbers 0 through 9.

The contest was simple. The last digit of the Steelers' final score marked out a column, and the last digit of the Cowboys' final score indicated a row. The man whose name appeared at the intersection of these two blocks of squares won the $500 prize.

Harold's two squares had worked out to be Dallas 4, Pittsburgh 4 and Dallas 3, Pittsburgh 7. The first square probably wouldn't work out all that well: after all, the game couldn't end 14-14 or 24-24. On the other hand, 3-7 was much more reasonable: 13-7, 7-3, and so forth were not uncommon football scores.

Regardless of who won, the pool, however, Harold would come out ahead. He was a hot-shot computer geek who owned programs which would allow people to convert film to digitized images. Once the game was over, he'd digitize the film and put it on his Web site. He found the Internet amazing, with the entire world at his fingertips. Most elite universities had Web access, as did a few big companies.

About two-thirds of MIT consisted of men. A 2:1 ratio of men to women made it difficult for guys to get dates. Harold's roommate had managed to pick up a girl, much to Harold's envy. When Harold asked him for help, the roommate had told him that he needed to try to think of ways which would make him different from all the other guys. Something which would make him appeal more to girls.

Most of the girls Harold knew weren't as interested in sports as the guys. However, they were interested in humor, technology, and to some extent pop culture. The Super Bowl would be a perfect excuse for him to attract women: he'd be showing off his computer know-how and would be using his skills to provide material which would allow the women to review the always-noteworthy TV commercials which accompanied the game.

Harold had offered to record the game so that the men of his fraternity would be able to watch it at a later date. There were a couple of guys from Dallas and one from Pittsburgh, and they'd been REALLY happy that the game was going to be recorded. Little did the guys know that he'd be taking advantage of the recording to help bolster his credentials as a dateable geek. And if the recording didn't serve him well at MIT...well, he always had Wellesley and Harvard.

He knew he'd find a girl at some point. The Athena computer system required that the students master UNIX. That was UNIX. Not EUNUCHS. For the time being, however, all he could do is record the game and hope for the best.
He pressed RECORD, settled back into the chair, and began watching the game with the rest of his house.

Sixty minutes of football later, the final score was 27-17 Dallas. Eric Muencher, who had filled in the winning square, started whooping it up as soon as the final whistle had sounded. One of the few men over 21, he offered to buy all 21+ students drinks at the Muddy Charles Pub. This set many of the seniors to cheering.

Harold took the videotape out of the VCR while everyone else was distracted. This would give him the chance to digitize the film before anyone else found out. Once he was done, he'd put the videotape back in the videocassette rack so no one would miss it. This was his chance, he thought. He'd better not miss it.

He would have been horrified to know that three of his brothers were all thinking the same thing.

To be continued...

Update #14
January 29, 1996
United States Department of Magic
Greenwich, Massachusetts
United States of America

***URGENT***

STATUTE OF SECRECY POTENTIALLY COMPROMISED FOR MOST UNITED STATES WIZARD COMMUNITIES

FOOTAGE OF WIZARDS IN FLIGHT ON BROOMSTICKS ACCIDENTALLY RECORDED DURING SUPER BOWL AD

It is the somber duty of the United States Department of Magic to report that a potentially serious breach of the Statute of Secrecy has just taken place. Blast Soft Drink Corporation, of Tempe, appears to have accidentally recorded footage of British wizards flying over London during the production of their recent Super Bowl advertisement. The clip with the wizards appears to have survived the editing process and made it into the final version of the commercial, which aired at approximately 2130 EST/1930 MST.

The violation appears midway through the commercial, at about the 19 second mark. It occurs when the actors are enjoying Blast Cola in London. Shortly after "Jake" -- the male star -- starts touting his product on the cruise liner, an object flies directly behind him from the vantage point of the camera. The object is poorly illuminated, lit only by the boat's running lights. However, additional processing of the film will show that it is in fact a teenage boy flying on a broomstick.

Due to the fact that the wizard in question is underage and well-known, the British Ministry of Magic is not releasing his name. However, it should be noted that the boy had actually been concerned that the Muggles might see him and had asked an exceptionally skilled adult wizard -- an Auror, in fact -- if the man was dealing with the problem. The Auror, having misunderstood the unspoken request, had thought that the boy had asked a completely different question and had nodded. As a result of this confusion, the Blast Cola employees were left with their memories and footage intact.

Most of the Blast employees originally thought that the object in question was a bird. However, two of them, curious about the bird's species, did additional processing and determined that it was a boy
on a broomstick. They did not believe it at first. However, one of them had the misfortune to be speaking with someone on the telephone when the person on the other end was Obliviated. This left the employee with knowledge both of the Wizarding community AND of the fact that Muggles could be Obliviated.

To their credit, these employees realized that they had stumbled across something they should not have known and did what they could to prevent the news from spreading, using vague words like "secret society". In fact, when confronted by an Obliviator, one of them told the agent that he would be more than willing to help our community adjust to a new way of life in case the secret was leaked to the point where it became common knowledge in the Muggle world.

The Obliviators went to work trying to repair the damage. As of this report, they had gotten all of the witnesses save one, who will likely be visited by an agent within 24 hours. Unfortunately, the Obliviators were unable to keep up with modern communication technology and found out about the advertisement too late to prevent it from being shown during the Super Bowl.

The Department of Magic would like to remind the Wizarding community of two things. First, the odds of any one individual mistaking the object for a wizard (as compared to a bird, the most likely explanation and the one being propagated by the Obliviators) are relatively low, maybe 1%. Unfortunately, there is a second issue: the sheer number of fans who watched the Super Bowl and saw the commercial. The Obliviator is estimating that up to a million people will realize that the object in question was a boy on a broomstick. These million people will be spread out, more or less randomly, all over the United States.

This is the first major Statute of Secrecy leak in over a hundred years. More importantly, however, it is the first major leak in the era of television, telephones, and computers. These new technologies will make containment much more difficult. Although the Obliviator himself is working long and hard on this case -- among other things, by Obliviating the vast majority of the spectators at the Super Bowl itself -- he has raised the distinct possibility that it may not be possible to prevent the leak from spreading out of control. The issue is no longer whether we can prevent it: it is how well we can limit the damage. If we are lucky, we may be able to limit it to certain cities or to the United States as a whole. The alternative is too horrible to consider.

For those of you who want more information, the case ID number is US-SW-003266.

What it means to ordinary men and women of the American Wizarding community:

1. Review your contingency plans in case the Statute of Secrecy is permanently breached. If you do not have plans for this, develop some as soon as you can.

2. Make all sensitive areas and sanctuaries Unplottable for Muggles. Muggles will not be able to enter these safe houses even if they do learn that the Wizarding world exists.

3. Although you may be somewhat afraid of the Muggle world, do not assume that the Muggles are malicious. Most Muggles are well-meaning, conscientious individuals, just like you. They are far more likely to help people than hurt them. Be nice to them and they will likely be nice to you. You should still not use magic in their presence, however, as the magic may scare them or surprise them. And it will confirm your existence to the Muggle world, spreading the leak further.

4. For those of you familiar with modern technology, be advised that there will be computer viruses combating all files mentioning the Super Bowl. No files concerning the Super Bowl will be able to be posted to the Internet. The reason is obvious: the Internet is visible worldwide, not just to the United States. If the leak does get out of hand, we do not want it spreading outside the United States.
5. Do not discuss the Super Bowl or any magical subject over the telephone or email.

6. Do not usage familiars such as owls to deliver messages unless the animals will be behaving in a way normal for their species.

7. If you need to travel from place to place, use Muggle transportation methods or Apparation. Do not fly broomsticks. If you are too young to receive an Apparation license, ask your parents to transport you using Side-Along Apparation. Whenever possible, Apparate into unpopulated areas or under cover of darkness.

8. If you see any evidence that the Muggles are aware of the Wizarding world, do not confront them. Contact your town’s local authorities and they will get in touch with an Obliviator or other trained professional.

9. Keep an eye on any Muggle outside the American Southwest who is drinking Blast Cola. This indicates that someone has paid attention to the advertisement and has bought the product; Blast had very few sales outside the Southwest before the Super Bowl. Ask them how they heard about Blast and steer them towards the commercial. If they don’t mention the anomaly in London, fine. If they do, however, try to convince them it was a bird. Odds are that they will believe you. However, if they have evidence to the contrary, contact your local town authorities.

10. If you’re unsure what to do, are scared, biased, or do not know how interact with Muggles, stay away from the Muggles.

11. Wear Muggle dress whenever you are in public. Your town authorities will instruct you on your area’s customs.

Rest assured that the Department of Magic is working extra hours to deal with this incident. More information will be provided as soon as it comes in.

The Wizarding community has dealt with several issues like this over the years. We have experience and we have the people. We at the Department of Magic believe that we will be able to resolve this incident without serious problems.

***END MESSAGE***

----------------

Update #15
------------

January 29, 1996
Potions Classroom
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
Great Britain

----------

Harry Potter suspected that the only person who liked double Potions was the instructor, primarily because said instructor took special pleasure in tormenting students who were not from Slytherin.

Right now, the instructor was staring down his prominent, aquiline nose at the green fluid which had materialized in Harry’s cauldron. Harry braced himself for the inevitable critique.

Severus Snape glared at him. "Potter, what is this?"

Harry cringed but managed to keep a straight face. "It was my attempt at a Shrinking Potion, Professor. I think something went wrong, but I'm not sure what."
"OBVIOUSLY something went wrong, Potter. Either that, or it's obvious that you don't know how to identify your colors. I specifically said that the potion was supposed to be yellow. Does this look yellow to you?"

He dipped a flask into Harry's cauldron, filled it with the green fluid, and showed it to the rest of the class. Hermione rolled her eyes. He could hear Draco Malfoy snicker on the other side of the room.

Harry sighed. "No, sir. I'll do better next time."

"I suspect you will, Potter. After all, you couldn't do any worse. Five points from Gryffindor."

The crowd grumbled as Snape Vanished the flask and headed to the front of the class again. Harry couldn't imagine the day getting any worse.

Snape was about to resume the lecture when Professor McGonagall's voice broke into the room. "Excuse me, Professor Snape, but may I speak with Potter for a few minutes?"

Snape hesitated a moment. Harry could imagine the gears churning in the Potion master's mind as the man tried to think of an appropriately biting rejoinder. Eventually, Snape shrugged and nodded. Breathing a sigh of relief, he got up and followed Professor McGonagall out of the room.

The woman looked extremely troubled. Had Voldemort done something nasty? He'd never seen her this nervous before. Harry needed to know more.

"Professor, what's going on? Has something happened?"

McGonagall nodded. "I'm afraid so, Mr. Potter. Something very serious. Dumbledore would like to see you."

It had to be Voldemort, Harry thought. On second thought, however, he changed his mind. Had it been Voldemort, Professor McGonagall would have told everyone. Could the Ministry have caught Sirius Black? That was the only other option he could think of.

He followed in silence as Professor McGonagall led him over to the headmaster's tower and opened the door for him. Harry stepped into the tower and allowed the spiral staircase to carry him up.

Dumbledore's study was packed. At least half of the Order of the Phoenix was there, as was Cornelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic. Harry recognized the Minister from Harry's ordeal last fall. Long faces filled the room.

Clearly, something terrible had happened. He couldn't tell if it involved Voldemort or his recent trial at the Ministry of Magic. He'd find out soon enough, however. McGonagall put her hand on his shoulder for reassurance and ushered him into the room.

Dumbledore seemed to have aged. His hair appeared to have gotten whiter, and the old body looked much more frail. It looked as if he hadn't slept for days.

Harry turned to Dumbledore. "You asked to see me, Professor? What's wrong?"

Dumbledore sighed and tried to cheer himself up. "Good morning, Harry. Please, be seated. Some butterbeer?"

Harry shook his head. "No thanks, sir. Right now, judging from my latest lesson with Snape, no liquids appear to be agreeing with me."
Dumbledore then turned very serious and looked at Harry. "Harry, a very serious incident has taken place in the United States. We have reason to believe that the Statute of Secrecy has been breached, possibly irreparably."

Harry didn't like this at all. Had someone seen him cast the Patronus at the dementor which had been attacking Dudley? He didn't think so. Besides, how would his use of magic in Little Whinging have caused the Statute of Secrecy to be breached in a country thousands of miles away?

He needed to know more. "The Statute of Secrecy? Breached? How so?"

Minister Fudge answered this question. "Six months ago, after the dementor attack in Little Whinging, members of the Order of the Phoenix flew you to our safe house on Grimmauld Place. Do you remember that, Harry?"

All too well, Harry thought. "Yes, Minister."

"I'd like you to think back to that experience, Harry. Do you remember flying down the Thames and passing a boat along the way?"

"Yes, Minister."

Dumbledore stared hard at him. "Harry, now this is important. Did you see unusual activity on the boat?"

Harry had a suspicion where this was going. NOW they were asking him? "Yes, Minister. I believe I saw some people filming a movie from a location near the back of the boat. I remember thinking that was odd at the time, flying so close to Muggles, but I had assumed that some of the people accompanying me were Obliviating the Muggles along the way. I looked at Professor Lupin for confirmation, and he nodded yes."

Professor Lupin stared at him. "Damn! I remember you looking at me. I thought you were asking me if we were hiding you from Voldemort! That's why I nodded! You thought that I was checking to see if the Muggles were being Obliviated?"

Harry turned to Lupin. "Yes, Professor. Once you nodded to me, I figured the issue had been dealt with so I didn't think much more about it. Who did the Obliviation?"

Lupin turned to Moody. "I thought you were doing it, Alastair."

Moody shook his head. "I was too busy thinking about our escape to deal with it. I figured someone else did!"

Harry turned to Moody. "Who did, Professor?"

There was a long silence, broken finally by Dumbledore. "No one, Harry. No one Obliviated the film crew. We were so busy dealing with you and the dementors that we completely forgot about Obliviating everyone."

Harry nodded. "I see. Can you track down who it was and Obliviate them now?"

Minister Fudge responded once more. "We did. Unfortunately, we did so too late. The footage filmed on the boat was made into an advertisement seen during a very popular American sporting event. It was likely seen by millions of Americans. The Obliviator in charge of the case isn't sure he'll
be able to keep this under wrap much longer, and he's starting to take more and more drastic measures."

The Minister paused. "It appears, Harry, that you're going to be pretty popular in the United States. Particularly given your ability to fly a broomstick."

Harry stared at the Minister in horror. He knew how aunt and uncle reacted to wizards. If the rest of the Muggle world was like that, the wizarding community was in deep trouble.

He turned to Dumbledore. "That's terrible, sir. What are we going to do?"

Dumbledore shook his head slowly. "I don't know, Harry. I honestly don't know."

To be continued...
Update #16 through Update #20

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Misagnissa

Update #16
----------

January 29, 1996
Gryffindor Common Room
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
Great Britain
----------

Hermione and Ron stared as the portrait door opened and Harry entered the room. They hadn't liked the look on Professor McGonagall's face when she had come to retrieve Harry from Potions. Granted, an angry McGonagall would likely be nicer to Harry than a neutral Snape. But they'd never seen McGonagall that troubled, even during the Chamber of Secrets crisis.

Harry had been crying. He had done what he could to cover his tears before entering the common room, but Hermione and Ron knew him well enough to know the truth. His eyes were glazed over, as if in shock. Clearly, something horrible had happened.

Harry turned his moist eyes to Ron and Hermione, and they followed them into an empty corridor. Apparently this information was for their eyes only. Hermione could only think of one thing: the Ministry had caught Sirius Black, very likely due to Professor Umbridge's help. Harry had lost the only father he had ever known. He would be forced to spend the next few years with the Dursleys.

Hermione asked him first. "Good grief, Harry! What's wrong? You look a mess!"

Harry told it to her straight and simple. "I've been suspended from Hogwarts by the order of Cornelius Fudge himself. I'm going to be taking the next train back to civilization, where I will be placed under house arrest at the Burrow for the foreseeable future."

Harry looked down at his wand. "At least I get to keep my wand and Hedwig. I may be imprisoned, but I'll still be a wizard. And the Burrow is significantly a better prison than the Dursleys'."

Hermione stared at him. "How could he arrest you? You were acquitted of all charges in the dementor incident!"

An angry looked flashed into Harry's face. "I was acquitted, all right. Fat good that does me, however. I'm being arrested because dear old Fudge is using me as a scapegoat so he can salvage his political career and make a statement. Dumbledore's been forced to resign as well, incidentally. He'll be leaving Hogwarts at the end of the year. Professor McGonagall will be the new headmistress."

Ron stared at him. "DUMBLEDORE'S been sacked?"

Harry shook his head. "Technically, he hasn't. He was just convinced to retire. However, everyone knows that Fudge is pulling the strings here."

He paused once again. "And believe it or not, that's not the worst of it. There will be ramifications to this which will go far beyond Vold-"
"HE WHO MUST NOT BE NAMED!"

Harry glared at him. "Ron, don't irritate me right now. I've got enough stuff to worry about."

Hermione summoned some chairs from the common room into the corridor. "All right, Harry. Tell us everything."

They all sat down and Harry took a deep breath. "You may recall that shortly after the dementor incident, the Order of the Phoenix whisked me off to 12 Grimmauld Place, the Order's headquarters. En route to Grimmauld Place, we flew down the Thames."

Hermione nodded. "Yes. I remember that."

Harry braced himself. "Well, it appeared that an American soft drink company was recording a television commercial from a boat on the Thames. The commercial recorded footage of me on my broomstick."

Ron stared at Hermione. "Television? What's that?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "A method Muggles use for mass communication through pictures communicate. Programs transmitted using this device often include advertisements, or commercials, in order to pay the costs of the transmissions. Some Muggles were making an advertisement on the boat and accidentally filmed Harry."

Ron stared at him. "You mean the Statute of Secrecy was breached after all, albeit for a completely separate reason?"

Harry nodded. "I'm afraid so, Ron. Needless to say, the American Obliviators got to work trying to contain the leak. Unfortunately, they found out too late to plug it completely. For a long time, it looked like the Obliviators would eventually gain the upper hand and suppress knowledge of the wizarding world."

He took a deep breath. "Everything changed, however, approximately 12 hours ago, when this advertisement was shown during the Super Bowl."

Ron didn't know what the Super Bowl was. Hermione, however, did. The blood drained from her face. "Oh my God. Oh my God..."

Ron turned to her. "What's the Super Bowl?"

Hermione put her head in her hands. "It is one of the biggest sporting events in the United States. It's the championship match of American football, and it's well known for having unusual commercials. These commercials are often watched by a hundred million people, if not more."

Ron stared at her and then at Harry. "You mean to tell me that a hundred million people just found out that wizards exist?"

Harry nodded. "That is quite possible. The only good news is that the Muggles couldn't see me all that well, and the official notices claim that I was actually an exotic bird. Unfortunately, latest estimates indicate that of those hundred million people, about one million people will eventually notice that this bird is actually a boy on a broomstick."
Hermione shook her head. "Please tell me that the American Obliviators will be able to contain this."

Harry shook his head. "They're not optimistic, Hermione. These million people are scattered all over the country. It's reached the point where the Obliviators are trying to minimize the damage: there's no way to stop the breach. However, right now they're predicting a 30-40% chance that there is going to be no way to stop it. The Statute of Secrecy may be gone for good, and the Wizarding community will be at the mercy of the Muggles all around the world."

Ron and Hermione couldn't believe what they were hearing. They were struck speechless as Harry continued.

"Right now they're trying to restrict the outbreak to certain American cities and towns. Everything is going to depend, however, on whether the leak is going to be able to get out of the country. In particular, the Obliviators are worried that information is going to leak out onto the Internet. Once it's on the Internet, it's in the public domain -- and it's on a machine. Obliviation won't work on a machine. Once it's on the Internet, we might as well introduce ourselves. Nothing will be able to prevent worldwide exposure at this point."

Ron stared at Harry again. "The Internet?"

"A linked network of computers -- powerful machines -- which connect to each other all over the world. Once information is put on one of them, virtually anyone with another computer in the network can read it, regardless of which country he or she is in."

Hermione stared at him. "This is terrible! Are you sure it isn't because of...You Know Who?"

Harry thought for a moment. "Something tells me it's not You Know Who. He doesn't seem to be interested in Muggles, especially outside of Britain. The soft drink company making the film is American. From what the Wizarding brass gather, the re-emergence of Voldemort and the Statute of Secrecy breach just happened to occur at the same time by sheer coincidence."

Neither Ron nor Hermione could say anything. "Here is how Dumbledore and I figure into this and why I'm getting punished. The American Secretary of Magic is furious at Fudge for not Obliviating the film crew on the moment. However, it is more than obvious that there was nothing the people accompanying me could have done. I had thought Lupin was taking care of it, Lupin thought Moody was taking care of it, and Moody thought Lupin was. Everything thought someone else would handle it, so it fell through the cracks. And I couldn't ask who was handling it because the Muggles might hear us."

"Fudge, as you know, isn't particularly fond of me and Dumbledore. He isn't a strong leader. He's also trying to convince himself -- and the rest of Britain -- that You Know Who has not returned. He needs to do something to appease the Americans and to show the people of Britain that he can still be trusted."

"What does he do? He takes advantage of the fact that I've been known to flaunt the Statute of Secrecy and blames me, even though I didn't do it. This buys off the Americans, and it will make him look like he's working on solving the problem if the breach spreads to this side of the pond. He basically throws me to the wolves in order to save his own skin. Typical politician."

Hermione stared at him. "He can't do that! Dumbledore will protect you!"

"He tried, Hermione. He tried. Unfortunately, Dumbledore's demands just pushed a panicking Fudge
to the breaking point. Fudge forced Dumbledore into retirement, threatening to send me to Azkaban if the headmaster persisted in his defiance of the lawfully elected leader of the British wizarding community. McGonagall will take over as headmistress. Dolores Umbridge will be promoted to deputy headmistress. We both know that Umbridge and McGonagall hate each other's guts. Life at Hogwarts will likely become a lot more interesting. It's a pity I won't be there to see it."

"How will the D.A. and the struggle against You Know Who -- and Umbridge, for that matter -- survive without your leadership?"

"I don't know, Hermione. I don't know. However, if there's anyone smart enough to figure out how to get out of this mess, it's you, Hermione. I'm putting you in charge, with Ron as your second. Do what you can. Hopefully, the breach will be contained and I will be allowed to return to school."

Hermione was about to respond when she saw a flash of pink out of the corner of her eye. An intimidating "Hmm...hmm..." filled the air. It didn't take a wizard to realize that Dolores Umbridge had walked into the hall.

The toadlike woman smiled at Harry. "Ready to go, Mr. Potter? You should hurry up and pack your things. The train to back to London leaves in half an hour. I'll be accompanying you back to the Burrow just to make sure you don't get lost along the way."

Harry closed his eyes and turned away from Umbridge. "In a moment, Professor. In a moment."

He shook Ron and Hermione's hands. "Keep everything going, my friends. And wait for the time when I'll be able to return and free you from all forms of injustice" -- he nodded slightly at Umbridge -- "forever."

Hermione tried to say something, but never got the chance as Umbridge shoved Harry back out into the common room, possibly never to be seen again.

To be continued...

-----------
Update #17
-----------
January 29, 1996
Sung's Tropical Bar
Outside Camp [classified]
US Army Base [classified]
South Korea

James L. stood at attention, absolutely speechless. What a wonder! For the first time, Colonel J. had actually DONE something to cheer up the troops. The man had a reputation of being an absolute martinet, maintaining military discipline at all times. The Colonel had earned several colorful nicknames, such as "King David", "J. The Barbarian", and "Davey Owns Lockdown".

However, apparently even the Colonel couldn't deny that the Super Bowl was an American tradition. When you were trying maintain morale all the way on the other side of the world, you needed to provide enough reminders of home to keep your men sane. Football was popular among the men at his base; James was actually a halfway decent wide receiver. As a result, it was only natural that the Colonel would allow the men to watch the game at night.

The game had started at roughly twelve hours ago, around 0830 local time. With access to the
Internet and telephones restricted in the unit, James had no idea who had won. Speculation was rampant, but the Colonel had planned well. As a result, the men were absolutely stunned when the Colonel called them into a meeting and told them that they were going to be watching a tape of the game tonight.

It was now 2100 hours, and Sung's Tropical Bar was packed. Men in uniform were everywhere. Mr. Sung was there as well, serving beer until halftime. Several of Miss Hao's women were there as well in case several of the men wanted to celebrate a victory...or wanted to get their mind off a defeat. Miss Hao knew that everyone liked a man in a uniform. Normally, the Colonel did not allow his men to enjoy "camaraderie" while on deployment. For one night, however, he figured he'd let everyone celebrate.

The bar was also filled with parrots, macaws, and other tropical birds. Some flew around the room freely, occasionally perching on patron's shoulders. Others strutted around in cages. The building had been equipped with a virtual airlock -- a pair of doors of which only one could be open at a time -- to prevent the birds from escaping. Apparently the proprietor, Mr. Sung, was a fan of unusual wildlife and had a respectable collection of tropical birds and beasts.

James had already tricked Eric into betting $50 on the Steelers. It was fairly obvious that the Cowboys were going to win -- even Las Vegas admitted it. However, Eric was from the Pittsburgh area and refused to admit defeat. James remembered smiling as he shook Eric's hand after the bet. He knew he'd be smiling much more once Eric handed over the $50.

He called over the bartender and asked for a local microbrew. Sung had several local favorites on the shelf, selected one at random, and handed it over. Unlike many of the people who ran bars for the soldiers, the bartender spoke a decent amount of English. It was slightly accented, but it could have been a hell of a lot worse.

James couldn't figure out how much he was permitted to relax. The Colonel was here, sitting in the back. He seemed stone-cold sober. This probably put a few limits on what James could do: he'd have to stay in uniform (not that he wouldn't have wanted to show off the uniform to attract girls) and not do anything that he would regret once the Colonel came back to his old self the next morning.

The crowd roared as the Colonel reached into his attache case and withdrew the precious tape. Smiling -- James hadn't realized that the Colonel even knew how to smile -- he presented the tape to Mr. Sung. Mr. Sung bowed in acknowledgement and headed over to the VCR.

The tape began with the Star Spangled Banner, the first few notes of which were drowned out by half-drunk soldiers jumping to their feet and saluting sharply. The first few commercials went by and the game began.

James was interested in both the commercials and the game. Granted, he'd have to keep an eye on the game as he had $50 riding on it. The commercials, however, served as a good humor break. Some of the commercials were actually funny. Others had well-known jingles and themes which allowed all of the men to join in.

"We're talkin' bout Budweiser..."

James had thought about joining in. However, he had to spend his time trying to plug his ears. The people who had recorded the commercial could sing. 200 drunk men, however, could not. Even worse was the fact that they couldn't sing on key, either. He caught a glimpse of the Colonel out of the corner of his eye and was amused to find that he was wincing and had fingers in his ears as well.
Apparently the Colonel had more brains in that bowling-ball bald head than James had expected.

Midway through the second quarter, he saw a commercial for a product he'd never seen before. Blast Cola? What the hell was Blast Cola? He'd have to look into trying it out when he got home. He doubted that they served Blast Cola all the way out here.

The Blast Cola commercial featured a hot couple traveling all over the world, drinking Blast wherever they went. James would sleep with the girl in a heartbeat. Judging from the reactions of the other men in the room, he wasn't alone. Several men hooted loudly, only to find their hoots muffled quickly by a resigned -- yet stern -- glance from the Colonel.

Halftime was punctuated by a rush of people heading to the bar asking for Blast Cola. Poor Sung, James thought. James watched as the bartender tried to explain that he'd never heard of the cola before and as a result couldn't offer any. Several men booed loudly, James included. The boos eventually turned to cheers as Mr. Sung promised to take a closer look at the new soft drink's commercial and figure out where to get it from. James giggled as Mr. Sung added that he wanted to take a better look at that bird which had flown by during the London segment: he hadn't recognized the species at first glance, and he was considering adding a specimen to his collection.

Mr. Sung might actually be able to do that, James thought. The Colonel wasn't stupid enough to allow the men to keep the Super Bowl tape -- they'd spend all their time replaying it instead of drilling. Instead, the Colonel had given the tape to Sung to whatever he wanted with it.

Grinning, James turned back to the game. He was determined to make the best of the one day the Colonel actually let boys be boys.

To be continued...

----------

Update #18

----------

January 29, 1996
Alpha Chi Gamma Fraternity
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Cambridge, Massachusetts
United States of America

[ P.S. Alternatehistorybuff5341 -- you've got Update #20, the Secretary of Magic briefing the President. #19 is going to be an exhausted Strong Bear acknowledging he's screwed and trying to get Sanders to help prepare the wizards for exposure]

Howard Chu was furious. He'd been able to digitize the commercials without a problem. That had been the hard part. He had been able to link the files to his Web page. Yet every single time he had tried to view the files after reloading the Web page, the files had disappeared!

What was going on here? The only thing he could think of was that NBC or the NFL didn't want footage from the Super Bowl running around on the Internet for some reason. Maybe they were trying to get people to buy tapes of the game and wanted a monopoly on Super Bowl videos, including those of its commercials. If that were the case, however, they could be outwitted. They hadn't counted on hotshot software engineers desperate to pick up a girl.

Howard liked studying linguistics as a hobby and had learned a lot of interesting trivia about languages and the way the mind processes words. He was already fluent in three languages: Korean,
Chinese, and English; he had compiled a long list of the similarities and differences between the three languages which, he hoped, could eventually be turned into a paper or thesis.

One of the more unusual quirks of the human mind was that more often than not, people fluent in English would be able to understand a written sentence if all of the words were replaced with their anagrams, provided that the first and last letter stayed in their proper place. For instance, most readers would be able to process sentences like "msot rdaeres wloud be albe to proceess sctneenes". He had a sneaky suspicion that computers did not have this ability.

He tried once more to store the video on the computer. This time, however, he changed the caption from "SUPER BOWL 1996 COMMERCIALS" to "SUEPR BOWL 1996 COMMERCIALS", deliberately introducing a typo which would confuse a computer but not a human. He held his breath, saved the page, and hit Reload.

Bingo. That did the job. He had successfully bypassed the NFL’s tricks and managed to post the video. It was now time to spread the news to the sororities.

He had friends in Alpha Phi, Alpha Chi Omega, and Sigma Kappa. He'd often wanted them to be more than friends, but for some reason they didn't seem to like the idea. He prepared an email telling them about the video and sent it off, copying himself.

Ten minutes later, he hadn't received his own email. What the hell? Curious, he zwrote [used the UNIX instant messaging service] one of the AXO girls, who happened to be online, and asked her if she'd received his email. She said he hadn't, so he tried sending it again. Same result.

This was getting ridiculous, he thought. He knew that the NFL didn't like people retransmitting video of the Super Bowl. However, preventing people from sending emails was a bit much. On the other hand, the NFL was wealthy enough to ensure that elite players earned millions of dollars per year. Howard had a suspicion that they had purchased technology which even he hadn't been aware of.

Exasperated, he examined his znol window [utility which showed which machine each online friend was using] and walked over to his roommate, who had happened to be a few aisles of computers away on the top floor of the Student Center.

He tried to not let his exasperation show. "Kevin, I've got a problem. You know the plan I had to post the Super Bowl commercials online to try to attract women? The NFL seems to have a lot of safeguards in place to prevent people from posting pirated copies of the game. I was able to work around them, however, by saving the file using an intentional typo. Now I'm having trouble emailing Anna, Michelle, and Marcie -- and myself -- reporting that I've managed to get the stuff online. I don't want to have to throw in random typos everywhere to circumvent the NFL’s viruses."

Kevin nodded. "I see. Here's what I suggest. I'll ask my girlfriend to post a written note on the bulletin boards in McCormick [the primary all-women's dorm]. The note will include the link, typos and all. If you want to attract girls, that's a good place to start. What's more, she told me she knows someone in Alpha Chi Omega. I'll see if I can get her to tell the AXO girl so she can forward the message off to the Panhellenic organization [the union of MIT sororities]. Hopefully that will get the message across. And don't forget Wellesley and Harvard, of course. You can just take the #1 bus to get to Harvard, and you can always hop on the shuttle to Wellesley. You can post notes everywhere you go."

Howard smiled. "That should work. Thanks for your help."
"No problem, Howie. How'd you make out during the game?"

"I won $50 from poor Eric. You?"

"I made out pretty well myself. However, I didn't win any money."

Howard frowned. "Then how -- "

Then it hit him, and he rolled his eyes in frustration. Kevin meant well, but it was obvious that he had to go to Charm School [a "seminar" at MIT teaches proper social etiquette to geeks who tend to be oblivious to it]

To be continued...

-------------
Update #19
-------------
January 29, 1996
International Confederation of Warlocks Headquarters
Atlantis
Aegean Sea
Greece

The situation room was packed. Virtually every staff member, Obliviator, and Auror had been called in on short notice to deal with the crisis. Most of the staff had come with their wands at the ready and spells on their lips, thinking that Voldemort's forces had tried to take over the ICW headquarters. They had been relieved to know that Voldemort was still keeping a low profile for the time being. Unfortunately, the relief lasted just as long as it took for the Grand Coven to brief the visitors as to what had happened.

The Super Bowl crisis was serious enough that several people had been pulled off Voldemort-related projects to deal with the the problem. Grand Mugwump Dialonis had been leading the International Confederation for a good fifty years, and even he couldn't think of a time when a crisis had been serious enough to warrant understaffing of departments dedicated to finding, and incarcerating, Dark wizards.

He doubted that there would be another crisis of this magnitude for a good two hundred years, if not more. Things already looked bad, and the incident had only taken place less than 24 hours ago.

The center of the room had been cleared out and replaced with a huge, three-dimensional illusion of the Earth's surface. Places which had reported Statute of Secrecy violations had been marked in yellow, and cases where Obliviators were having trouble contain the leak were marked in red. There were a few gray areas marking possible Death Eater safe houses but those were unimportant for the time being.

There were yellow dots up all the way up and down the American Eastern Seaboard. Dallas, San Antonio, Austin, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh were easily identifiable thanks to the large red coronas surrounding them. Denver had a few dots, as did St. Louis and Houston. Blocks of red and yellow were spilling out of the Phoenix area, undoubtedly people who had managed to evade Strong Bear's attempted Obliviation at the stadium itself.

Dialonis looked nervously at the clusters of dots in New York and Los Angeles. He didn't want breaches in the big cities. Eventually, the news broadcasts would find out and announce it to virtually
everyone in the neighborhood...and then some.

Someone behind him swore and turned to him. "Sir! We've got a breach in South Korea now! Someone's got a videotape and showing it to his friends!"

Dialonis stared at the technician. "South Korea? What? How?"

"I'm not sure, sir! We're working on it!"

This was bad news, Dialonis thought. If the breach went international there was virtually no hope of containing the leak. "Have the Obliviators there been notified?"

"Yes, sir! They've managed to pinpoint the source of the breach and are closing in on him now. It appears to be a bar near a US Army base."

Dialonis swore. The American soldiers had probably watched the Super Bowl in the bar. Now he had to deal the possibility of drunk soldiers as well as several excitable Koreans calling each other.

"Does Seoul think the Obliviators are going to be able to contain it? If this leaves the United States we're sunk."

The technician threw his hands up in the air. "They're not sure, sir. There's evidence of a great deal of telephone traffic. Some of it appears to be in Korean."

"How many copies of the tape does the bar have? Are they giving multiple copies out?"

"I don't know, sir!"

"Find out and get back to me!"

"Yes, sir!"

He turned his attention back to the globe just as the cluster of yellow lights appeared on the Korean peninsula. Wizards all around the room gasped in surprise and horror. The spread of the breach to Asia meant that it was looking less and less likely that the wizards would be able to contain it. The Wizarding communities in Asia were not as organized as they were in Europe and the Americas.

Another technician turned to him. "Sir! We've just gotten an update from Greenwich. There are several sources in Massachusetts, Virginia, and Texas which are attempting to download Super Bowl commercial data onto the Internet. Most of them are in Massachusetts, in the city of Cambridge."

Dialonis swore. "MIT and Harvard. Smart kids. I assume the virus is holding up?"

"Yes, sir. None of them have made it onto the Internet. I'll tell you if anything gets through."

Dialonis nodded. "Please do, Giovanni. To be honest though, at the rate things are going, keeping it off the Internet isn't going to save us in the long run. It will probably give us a few more hours. If we're lucky, days."

The technician departed and Dialonis turned back to the slowly rotating globe. Another yellow light popped up in Germany. Ramstein Air Base, probably. More soldiers watching the game. It dawned on him that American soldiers deployed abroad may be doing more damage than the citizens living at
home were.

The technician who had reported on the South Korea incident swore. "Damn! We've got something coming out of Taiwan! I think it's a news broadcast! Judging from what the translator is saying, apparently some Chu family in Taiwan just received an Internet link with the Super Bowl commercials on it from their son! I'm not sure how many of the Chinese believe it, though -- I hope they don't."

Dialonis wanted to scream. "I thought we were catching all the Internet leaks!"

"Well, it looks like we aren't. I don't know how it got through, but it did. The Obliviators in Beijing are already en route to Taiwan [yes, politics don't matter to these guys] but if it's on the Internet -- "

It was time for drastic measures. "Tell Taiwan that if they don't get that thing off the Internet in thirty minutes they're going to be Avada Kedavra'ed."

The technician stared at him. "Sir?!"

"DO IT!"

The technician hesitated and gulped. "Yes, sir."

Dialonis had no intention of actually executing the Taiwanese agents. However, he really needed to get them to focus on the problem and resolve it quickly. There wasn't much time left to salvage the issue. In fact, he had an awful suspicion that situation couldn't be salvaged.

He squared his shoulders and sighed. It was time to prepare the wizards for a brand new world. And thanks to the agents in Greenwich and Fourth Mesa, he knew exactly where to begin.

To be continued...

--------------
Update #20
--------------
January 30, 1996
Sanders Residence
Prescott, Arizona
United States of America
--------------
Isaac Sanders knew that it was only a matter of time until the wizards came for him. They'd gotten all of the other Blast employees who had figured out that the "bird" was actually a person. Perhaps he'd lucked because he'd been living in the suburbs.

The commercial had been a great success. Several new companies had begun ordering Blast, at least in small quantities. The Stop and Shop chain had decided to carry it as well. And in perhaps the most bizarre twist of fate, a bar in South Korea, of all places, had ordered 300 bottles of it!

Blast was now on the map. The company wasn't ready to compete with Coke or Pepsi just yet. However, they were probably going to be able to make some decent inroads into Sprite and Dr. Pepper's territory. The $3 million investment was likely going to produce a good $20-$30 million in profits, an amount which had surprised even the CEO.

What no one had anticipated, of course, was the fact that Blast would get a lot of publicity simply for
filming those wizards during the commercial. The company, at Sanders's urging, had repeatedly issued statements that the object flying past the actors in London had been a bird and that was that. Unfortunately, it had reached the point where the evidence was overwhelming. The receptionist had already fielded no fewer than 50 calls asking them to double-check their records to make sure that it was really a bird; judging from the tapes the callers had made of the game, it was clearly evident that under the right circumstances, the viewers could see that the object was in fact a boy on a broom. As if that were not bad enough, three people had called and had the audacity to ask if Blast was part of a conspiracy to pretend the wizards didn't exist!

Melissa still believed him, however. Unfortunately, her friends begged to differ. From what he'd heard, half of her knitting club had picked up and hightailed out north to Sedona to see if any of the witches were there. Everyone knew that there was SOMETHING going on there, what with all those vortices and stuff. Sanders suspected that those vortices were completely fictitious: the wizards wouldn't have done anything which would have allowed ordinary people to detect them.

Then again, how did he know? Maybe the vortices had been wizard work all along and they'd been Obliviating him every time he went there.

His coworkers had already been divided into two camps, those who believed that the object was a person and those who believed that it was a bird. He knew it was a wizard, of course. However, he couldn't actually say that. He knew how the wizards would be affected by exposure to the world. People would ask them to produce love potions and try to force them to rescue people out of burning buildings. He had no idea if the wizards even had those abilities, and even if they did have those abilities, whether they would even be willing to use them to help ordinary people like himself. He suspected that if a wizard saw someone in distress and was allowed to use magic in public, he would almost certainly help the victim. If he were forced to work for ordinary folk, however, he would probably get angry and start casting spells around.

He wondered what Obliviation was like. Would he suffer greatly? He could imagine the wizards being quite upset over the events of the past 24 hours. Especially since it was becoming increasingly obvious since Stern had been Obliviated that all of the attempts to stop the rumors from spreading had failed.

He had the horrifying notion that the entire Wizarding community would be lining up to punish him - and the rest of Blast -- for their accidental discovery. He headed into his bedroom to think about this and try to calm down.

It was only then that he noticed that someone had entered his bedroom.

The man appeared to be a full-blooded Navajo. He looked to be in his late thirties and was quite handsome. He was wearing an expensive cashmere suit and a watch of an unusual design.

He also looked extremely tired, as if he hadn't slept in 48 hours. There were circles under his eyes, and his suit appeared to have contracted a few wrinkles. The man looked like he was about to fall over, and he had to brace himself against the doorframe to keep himself up. However, his eyes betrayed an even stronger emotion: resignation and fear, as if something had happened which had ruined his life.

The visitor sighed and turned to face Sanders. "Good evening, sir. I apologize for the inconvenience, but are you Isaac Sanders?"

Sanders had a suspicion he knew who this was, especially since he hadn't seen the man enter the
"I am, sir. How can I help you?"

"My name is Alexander Parkman. You may refer to me as Strong Bear."

"Pleased to meet you, Strong Bear. Am I correct in thinking you belong to a certain society which
my group inadvertently exposed?"

Strong Bear nodded. "I am, Mr. Sanders. May we speak freely? Are there any recording devices
around or other people?"

Sanders nodded. "No, Strong Bear. My wife is en route to Sedona trying to get her knitting club to
come to their senses."

"Good. That will make things easier."

Strong Bear paused for a moment. "As you undoubtedly suspect, I am a wizard, Mr. Sanders, and a
fully trained Dine shaman. My specialty is Memory Charms, a spell which can be used to alter
someone’s memories so that they forget a certain event or events."

Sanders nodded slowly. "The Obliviation spell. Stern told me about it."

"That is correct, Mr. Sanders. Several days ago, before the Super Bowl advertisement was aired, my
supervisors received word of the fact that several employees at Blast Soft Drink Corporation may
have accidentally filmed wizards flying on broomsticks. I have been busy since then tracking down
everyone who has seen this footage and tampering with their memories so that they no longer have
any evidence of our existence. I take it that you witnessed an Obliviation and managed to keep your
memories. If I may ask, how can that be? That would be a serious oversight in our training."

Sanders paced around the room. "It was fairly obvious, Strong Bear. One day I spoke with Stern
about the wizards. It was he, in fact, who convinced me that the anomaly was in fact a boy on a
broomstick. When I called him back during halftime of the Super Bowl, he seemed to have no
recollection of any wizards. I take it you or someone else must have erased his memories at some
point in between."

Strong Bear nodded. "Indeed, Mr. Sanders. That is correct. I casted the Obliviation spell shortly after
the commercial was aired. I actually had to Obliviate the entire stadium that night, Mr. Sanders,
without being seen. It wasn't easy, and I think maybe 5% of the people got away. However, I had to
do my best."

Sanders frowned grimly. "And now you've come to Obliviate me."

The Obliviator hesitated for a moment, drew a deep breath, and replied. "Correct. I am under orders
to Obliviate you and anyone you know who has seen this video."

Strong Bear paused once more. Sanders wondered whether it would all be for the best. He'd
survived for almost thirty years without knowing about wizards. He wouldn't lose much. He was
surprised, however, when Strong Bear shook his head.

"These are orders, however, which I do not think it would be prudent to fulfill. When I received
these orders a few days ago, the goal was to prevent the knowledge of our community to reach the
outside world. It is clear at this point that we will be unsuccessful in this endeavor, now that
computers and television have become so prevalent. Consequently, I believe a new approach is
needed."

Sanders stared at the Obliviator. What was going on. He was then floored when the Obliviator paced around the room for a bit and then looked back at him with desperation on his face.

"Son, I need your help. We need your help."

Sanders blinked. "I'm more than willing to help you, Strong Bear. However, what can I do? I'm not a wizard."

"It is now fairly obvious that it is only a matter of time until the world of Muggles -- that is, nonmagical people like yourself -- will have to come to terms with a fact that there is a community of wizards living in their midst. We wizards will have to learn to deal with Muggles more openly. We cannot afford to have a confrontation between the two groups as inevitably that would lead to worldwide conflict and very likely the genocide of the Wizarding community. Many people are considering the exposure to be a fait accompli and are advocating that the Secretary of Magic contact President Clinton.

"It is obvious that both you and Stern were horrified by what you had done to our community and that both of you were dedicated to preventing the knowledge from spreading any further. I regretted Obliviating Stern as soon as I did it, and I fully admit that I may have overreacted there. I'm not going to make the same mistake with you, however."

The wizard came up to Sanders's side and put his hand on Sanders's shoulder. "I would like to offer you a position as special advisor to the Dine Center for Sorcery and Shamanism in Fourth Mesa, Arizona. It's in the Dine reservation."

Sanders frowned. "Fourth Mesa? There's no Fourth Mesa. I only know First, Second, and Third Mesa."

Strong Bear grinned. "I'm aware of that, Mr. Sanders. Fourth Mesa is not visible to Muggles. Most important Wizarding locations have spells cast upon them so that ordinary people cannot see them or know they exist."

Sanders whistled. "Impressive. You must be very powerful."

"We can do things most Muggles can't. That is definitely true. However, there are limitations as to what we can do. I can't get into them right now, but you'll learn over time. At any rate, back to the job. Your task will be to describe what life is like in the Muggle world and how the wizards can learn to adapt to such an environment. In return, the wizards will learn how to interact with you and by extension most other Muggles. Hopefully your lectures will be convince both Muggles and wizards that one side does not have anything to fear form the other."

Sanders nodded. "I'm flattered, Strong Bear. I'd love to do this. Unfortunately, I have a full-time job."

Strong Bear smiled. "Your salary will be $150,000 American dollars per year, paid in pieces of gold bullion known as Galleons. In addition, you will have the satisfaction of having helped a threatened minority adapt to a new way of life. Your work could very well save our people and our culture from destruction."

Sanders stared at him. "Wow! $150,000! I'll take that anytime! I'll have to discuss this with Melissa,
but I suspect she'll be happy. It's better than a dead end job designing soda cans."

"Melissa is your wife, is she?"

"Yes, she is."

"Is she employed?"

"Not at the moment."

Strong Bear nodded. "She is also welcome to lecture as well, particularly to the women. However, she must not reveal anything she discovers about our community without express consent of me or one of my superiors. You will be under the same restriction as well. Do you accept?"

Sanders smiled. "Absolutely, and I think she will as well. Will we have to relocate to Fourth Mesa in order to work for you?"

"No, Mr. Sanders. You won't. All you need is a fireplace."

Sanders stared at him. "A FIREPLACE?"

"That is correct, Mr. Sanders. A fireplace. And judging from what I see here, you have one, albeit an electric one. That should be good enough however."

"Great! I'll have to give my manager two weeks notice and think of an excuse for leaving. I won't need to think hard for one, however. I'll start three weeks from today."

Strong Bear looked at him, and it was impossible to miss the gratitude in the Navajo's face. "Thank you for your help, Mr. Sanders. Our community will be in your eternal debt. Now, if you would excuse me, I have business to attend to."

With that, the man left, and Sanders began wondering what life would be like among the wizards.

To be continued...
Update #21
-------------
January 30, 1996
Morgan Residence
Washington, DC
United States of America
-------------
This update comes courtesy of Alternatehistorybuff5341. Remember, anyone can provide updates.
-------------

Michael Anthony Morgan was sitting in his living room, his eyes glued to the television. He replayed the tape over and over again. For the first time in his life, the fifteen year old boy cursed himself for studying in his room instead of watch football with his dad and brothers.

Michael was, for lack of a better word, a geek. He played Dungeons and Dragons, had read and reread all the Lord of the Rings saga, had watched every episode of Star Trek, and had a collection of Tarot cards. He loved the idea of magic and fantasy, and wished that some day some wizard or alien would come and whisk him away from this miserably boring place.

During the game, he had been studying for a test. After the game, he got a call from his friend. Michael picked up the phone, and was asked to come over.

When Michael arrived, his friend, Zack, showed him a tape. Michael had no idea why Zack was showing him a recording of the Super Bowl…until Zack showed him the commercial.

Zack paused the tape suddenly during a commercial for some soda company. “See that!?” Zack asked as he jabbed his finger against the TV screen.

Michael leaned in and shrugged. “Looks like a bird.”

Zack shook his head and grabbed the remote. “Not exactly. See what happens when I clear up the picture.”

The image came into focus and Michael gasped in shock. “Is that…?”

Zack answered before the question was done. “Yes my friend. It is…”

Arnold, Michael’s father, walked into the room. He sighed as he saw his son sitting there watching that damn VHS over and over again. He had been watching it for all day!

Arnold was a large man, muscular. He had been on the high school and college football teams. His first son was everything he wanted. Star quarterback, ladies man, the works. Michael, however…

Arnold did not care that Michael had straight A’s. He did not care that he was home studying while his older brother was off getting high or drunk with some girl. He saw his younger son as a disappointment.
“Michael, enough of this.” He walked over and grabbed the remote control.

“NO DAD!” Michael jumped up and pried the remote from his father’s hands. “This is important! Everything we know…everything…is about to change.”

Arnold glared at him. “This is just a delusion brought on by your Dungeons and Dragons Magic bull!” He tried to grab the remote from his son’s hand. Michael held tight, and a tug a war began over the remote. Due to the hitting of buttons, the tape ejected itself and the television flipped through several channels.

Michael finally was able to pry the remote away from his father a second time. Michael shook his head. “You’re wrong, Dad. You’re wrong.”

Arnold was about to knock some sense into Michael (literally) when he heard a noise. A long and annoying beep. Michael and Arnold turned their heads to see that the screen had changed. Now it was blue, but with a white circle in the center. Inside the circle was a bald eagle grasping arrows and olive branches. Around the side read “Seal of the President of the United States of America”.

“We interrupt your scheduled program for an emergency announcement from the White House. Please stand by. We interrupt your scheduled program for an emergency announcement from the White House. Please stand by.” The message repeated itself over and over.

Arnold began to worry. Were the Russians attacking? Yeah sure they weren’t commies anymore, but they still had reasons to attack. “Julia! Devin! Get in here!” He called to his wife and elder son as he sat down. Within moments, Julia walked in. She was wearing an apron from cooking. Then Devin walked in. He wore his high school jacket. “What’s up, pops?”

“SHH!” Michael hushed as the Television said “Ladies and gentlemen, the President of the United States”

The screen cut to the Oval Office. William Jefferson Clinton sat there behind the desk where so many former Presidents have given addresses to the nation. However, this address would be unlike any other.

The President looked tired. He had been up most of the night. He had watched the game, seen the ad. Then he had been briefed by advisors and experts. One of their relatives had seen the ad and noticed something was wrong. They examined it themselves and decided to brief the President. As they spoke…he wasn’t that surprised. For you see, four years ago, on January 21st, 1992, the day after he took office…he was visited by a special guest.

Clinton had sat down in the Oval Office all those years ago. He had won the election against Bush, become leader of the free world, and spent most of the previous day attending inaugural balls. He smiled to himself and leaned back in his chair. He closed his eyes, willing himself to relax after a harsh campaign.

WHOOSH! Just then, the famous Oval Office Fireplace burst into flames. Clinton opened his eyes and peered at the flame. He didn’t know the Oval Office Fireplace was gas…or automated, for that matter. He shrugged his shoulders and was about to close his eyes again when he noticed something.

The flame was green. Yet that was nothing compared to what had happened next.

WHOOSH! WHOOSH! Clinton almost fell out of his chair as two men walked out of the flames
and into the office. Clinton immediately hollered, “SECURITY! SECURITY!” but no one answered. Little did the new president know that the room had been sealed off of sound coming in or going out by magic.

He looked at the visitors more closely. Standing before him was a man in a velvet blue robe, and next to him, a man in a black robe. Odd dress, to say for sure.

The man in the blue robe smiled and addressed. “Good Evening, Mr. President. Please sit down”. Clinton shook his head “I’ll stand, thank you. What the hell is going on here!??” The man in blue sat down in a chair and said “Mr. President, calm down, and we will explain everything.”

Over the next several minutes, the men introduced themselves. The man in blue was the Secretary of Magic, Travis Radner. The man in black was Radner's security guard. Clinton asked what they meant by “Secretary of Magic”. Radner explained to President Clinton of the existence of Magic and Sorcery.

At first Clinton was, well, skeptical…”You can’t honestly expect me to believe this.”

Radner sighed as he reached into his robe and pulled out a small wooden rod. Embedded into the rod was the hair of a coyote (not the normal coyote that Muggles know of, but the magic shape shifting Coyote of Navajo Legends). He examined the contents of the room, waved his wand, and muttered a transformation spell under his breath.

In that instant, Socks the cat became a lion.

Clinton almost had a heart attack. “AHH!” He jumped away from the lion as she roared and swiped her paw. Radner waved his wand and returned the cat to its true form.

Clinton looked back at his guests. He was amazed, shocked, and terrified all at once “You two are actually real wizards!?”

The Guard motioned to himself and the Secretary. “Yes, Mr. President.”

Clinton was then told of the Statute of Secrecy. They explained that if anything within Wizard America were to cause a threat to Muggle -- that is, nonmagical -- America, then Clinton would be notified. Also, one every six months, the Secretary of Magic would report to the President.

Clinton didn’t understand. “There is another American Government…run by wizards?”

"Yes, Mr. President. We cover wizard-related issues in a world effectively parallel to yours."

"Why do you report to me then?"

Radner shrugged. “We might not be Muggles, Mr. President, but we are all still Americans.”

So, several minutes of explaining, talking, and agreeing later, the two wizards stood up to leave. As they left, they kindly shook Clinton’s hand…and disappeared the way they had come, leaving the poor Head of State baffled and confused.

----------
Now the Secret was out. He had thought the anomaly a bird. However, then the advisors asked him
to come to the situation room. They showed him the irrefutable proof what was on the ad, and that this was without a doubt real. They also pointed out the fact that there was a strange firework-like explosion at the Super Bowl that was unplanned, followed by mass accounts of amnesia. Clinton simply nodded and occasionally said things like “Continue” and “I see”. However, his Vice President, Albert Gore, leaned over. He said “Bill…we might have to address the nation.” Clinton had been very uncomfortable with this. Yet Radner had been adamant that there was nothing that could be done at this point, at least in the US. The Secretary of Magic had stated quite bluntly that there was virtually no way to put the cat -- or lion -- back in the bag.

So now here he was. After hours of internal debate, he had come to his decision. He was about to introduce America to a new society which they'd been unaware of for centuries. He hoped that the two civilizations would get along OK and not have one attempt to discriminate against or attack the other.

He drew a deep breath and began.

“My Fellow Americans. Today...I must reveal to you a shocking discovery. A discovery that may very well change the world as we know it.”

Arnold heard his son’s voice say, “Told you so.”

-------------
Update #22
-------------
January 30, 1996
The White House
Washington, DC
United States of America
-------------
TEXT OF PRESIDENT CLINTON’S TELEVISED SPEECH, JANUARY 30, 1996

My fellow Americans.

Today, I must reveal to you a shocking discovery. A discovery that may very well change the world as we know it.

Five years ago, shortly after my inauguration, I found myself face to face with two strange men in the middle of the Oval Office. These men had not been invited, and I was initially quite disturbed when I found myself in their presence. Normally, the White House security staff and the Secret Service would prevent intruders like these from entering. However, no one in the Secret Service had even considered the means by which these two people entered the room.

I had been performing my duty as your President when the fireplace suddenly sprouted green flame. Yes, you heard me right, green flame. Needless to say, I was puzzled. Curiosity turned to absolute disbelief, however, when two men suddenly appeared amidst the green flames and stepped into the room.

The men introduced themselves as Travis Radner and Roderick Grissom. Both were members of a secret society which even I, as your president, had not been aware of. They belonged to a society of wizards. Radner held the position of the United States Secretary of Magic. Grissom was a bodyguard, armed only with a small wooden stick I came to recognize as a wand.

Needless to say, I was skeptical. However, Secretary Radner assured me that he was in fact an
honest-to-goodness wizard and not some charlatan. He performed a most astonishing feat in my presence, one which completely proved his claim beyond a shadow of a doubt.

My fellow Americans, you are probably thinking that I have lost my mind, and that the work I have done during my five years of service as your President have managed to unhinge me. This is not the case, however. My faculties are still intact, and I intend to prove this to you. And there is only one way to do so. It is my pleasure to introduce the American Secretary of Magic, Travis Harold Radner.

Secretary Radner was born in Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1918. He studied magic at the Smoky Mountain Institute of Magic, a secret magical school which I had no knowledge of until this man entered my life. He graduated in six years instead of the customary seven and did so with highest honors. Immediately upon graduation, he began working in the Department of Magic, which he currently supervises. He has a strong track record of diplomacy and understands a great deal about the Muggle, that is nonmagical, world. He served in the Allied Magical Corps during the Second World War and helped defend our nation from the threat of the evil wizard Grindelwald. Were it not for the Allied Magical Corps, the war could have concluded in a much more unpleasant manner.

So, without any further ado, I give you Secretary Radner.

----

Thank you, Mr. President, for that warm welcome. It is good to see you again. Now that the Super Bowl commercial with the wizard has been aired and America has discovered our community, I hope we will have more time to speak in the future. I believe we have a lot to learn from each other and that our cooperation will make America a much better place.

My fellow Americans, I am Wizard Travis Radner. Yes, I am a wizard, and I will prove it right here and now.

First things first. Take a look at this object in my hand. It is a magic wand. It is made out of ordinary wood, in this case maplewood. It is powered by a hair by of a magical animal, one which you likely either have never heard of or believe to be mythical: the Navajo Coyote. Most wizards carry wands like this.

Of course, you may be thinking that it is just an ordinary stick. However, this stick will allow me to do things which most of the magicians you know would not be able to do. Such as this.

Engorgio

You will notice that Socks has grown in size and has not suffered any bad side effects. According to the physics you are familiar with, this is supposedly impossible. The animal's mass has increased, something which cannot be done without consuming an impractical amount of energy. Furthermore, scaling an animal up by a factor of four in each dimension causes the stress on the animal's legs to increase by a factor of four. According to physics as you know it, this square-cube issue would make it so the cat's legs will break as its size increases. This has clearly not happened.

I will now allow people to take photographs of the enlarged Socks to prove that I have done what I have claimed and that I am a wizard.

All ready, now? Now, allow me to revert the cat to its original size. Reducio. There, you see. Now Socks is back to her normal size.

My fellow Americans, this should prove to you that wizards exist. We have been living among you quietly for centuries, protecting you from magical threats and helping you live in peace.
You may wonder why we have not announced our existence until now. The reason is simple. There are very few of us -- roughly one in every ten thousand humans is capable of being trained as a wizard -- and we feared that revealing ourselves will cause nonmagical people like yourselves to come flocking to us in droves to fix things, create love potions, and so forth. Although we would be more than willing to help you create these objects if they are for a good purpose, there simply are not enough of us to go around and make everyone's dreams come true. How can we choose some people and not others? All of your dreams are worthy of our assistance. We cannot allow ourselves to show favoritism. Furthermore, there are several feats which we are incapable of performing even with magic, and we don't want to get everyone's hopes up that magic can fix everything.

We have also hidden our community because people have often feared wizards and witches in the past and persecuted us because of the actions of a few, misguided wizards. You are probably aware of the Salem Witch fiasco. This occurred after someone made a mistake in colonial America and accidentally let slip that she was a witch. The authorities immediately started fearing and executing witches and wizards. We are only revealing ourselves now because it is only a matter of time until you find out now that the Super Bowl commercial with the wizard -- yes, the bird is in fact a British youth wizard on a broomstick -- has been aired.

I would like to emphasize that this filming was completely accidental. Normally, wizards try to make sure that they are not being recorded while they are casting spells. In some cases, we are forced to modify people's memories to think that they were actually birds, aircraft, and other nonmagical objects. In this case, however, we were overtasked with other duties and unaware of the Blast commercial until it was too late to stop the leak.

My fellow Americans, you have nothing to fear from us. We are ordinary human beings, just like you. We have our own lives, hopes, and dreams. We follow a strict code of ethics and have a correctional facility for dealing with wizards who hurt people. Yes, we have a few bad apples. However, doesn't every community? That's what jails are for.

Think of wizardry as a profession. We have software engineers to program computers, a feat which other people think is extremely difficult. There are professional athletes who perform feats no one else thinks possible. We wizards are like that as well. We use magic to do things no one else thinks possible, just different things from the software engineer and athlete.

Now, my fellow Americans, I will show you a magical creature. Let me get the cage out -- here it is. Can you give me a hand with this? Thank you, sir. What we have here, my friends, is a juvenile dwarf unicorn. This is a female about a couple of years old. Note the nub on the top of her head -- this will eventually become her horn. When fully grown, she will be about half the size of an adult horse. Her name is Deirdre. Isn't she cute? With your permission, Mr. President, I will take a sample of her DNA so that scientists can confirm that she is of a species unknown to Muggles. Thank you, Mr. President. All right, Deirdre, this won't hurt a bit. Anesthesia. See? All done. Mr. President, here it is. Take good care of it. You can keep Deirdre as a pet -- she's quite tame and will eat virtually every vegetable and leaf she'll get her hands on.

I think that's all for now, Mr. President. With your permission, I'll get out of here and get back to work. Thank you, Mr. President, and I hope to see you soon. Now, if you would turn that camera to the fireplace, you will be able to see me leave. Thank you, my fellow Americans, for your attention. If you need the service of a wizard, just ask for it. If we are around and believe your request is justified, we will try to help you. For the time being, farewell.

---

There, my fellow Americans you have it. A wizard vanishing from the Oval Office in a blast of
green fire. And a mythical animal sitting in a cage on my desk.

As your president, Secretary Radner reports to me. The president is very likely the only nonmagical person who was aware of the magical community's existence, at least until the airing of the Super Bowl ad. This will very likely change over the next few weeks as wizards slowly begin to come out of the closet.

I have met several wizards and assure you that they are decent people. They will not turn you into frogs or hit you with lightning bolts. Many people you know, including famous religious figures, were actually wizards and used their skills in magic to perform miracles. They want to live their lives in peace, just as you do.

As your president, it is incumbent upon me to ensure that they get a chance to do so. There will be no discrimination against wizards in the United States of America. They are Americans, and human beings, just like you and me. The wizards, as Secretary Radner says, comprise a tiny minority of the population. Attacks on them could be a sentence of genocide and would be covered under the Nuremberg war crimes code.

Most of you will never see a wizard or witch in your entire lives. They keep to themselves for the most part, and when they do come into our world they try to leave as little evidence as possible. You have been living with the wizards all these years and have felt no ill effects. They intend to continue this policy. The only difference is that you know they exist.

It is my hope that one day, we will be able to combine technology and magic in ways which will result in the improvement of the life of Americans and people all over the world.

And now, with no further ado, we will show the commercial which exposed the community, this time with enhanced video. In the commercial, a juvenile British wizard is flying behind the actors in the Blast commercial on a broomstick. The picture is clear and there is no mistake. There will be a lot of discussion on this, I'm sure, in the near future. However, one day at the time.

Thank you for your attention.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #23
-------------
January 30, 1996
Great Hall
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
Great Britain
-------------
The Statute of Secrecy had been breached beyond any chance of repair.

Rumors had been swirling throughout the school for hours now. Harry Potter had been expelled for causing the breach. Muggles were about to attack Hogwarts. Dumbledore had been expelled and had been succeeded by Professor Umbridge. The rumors got wilder and more sensational by the telling and had reached the point where all they were doing was getting the student body more frightened.

Professor Dumbledore had called the staff into his tower a few hours ago. There had been no word from the teachers since. At first the students were pleased at their unexpected free time. However, as the meeting dragged on and on, even students who didn't interact much with Harry knew that
something quite serious had occurred.

Hermione had gotten one glimpse of Professor Umbridge rushing out of Dumbledore's tower heading into the women's bathroom. The hated woman looked absolutely mortified. Hermione actually pitied her. Cornelius Fudge was probably going berserk over the Super Bowl ad, and as a result his agent at Hogwarts would likely be under the microscope as well.

Right now Hermione and all her schoolmates were crowded into the Great Hall for an emergency meeting. The nature of the emergency had not been communicated, which caused most of the school to speculate that the meeting was due to the breaching of the Statute. The meeting was considered mandatory for all students, something which had not happened ever since Cedric Diggory's death during the Triwizard Tournament.

The meeting had been called for 7:30. It was now 7:45 and there were still no teachers in sight. Harry Potter was not at the Gryffindor table, which occasioned worried comments from three Houses and sneers from Slytherin. It appeared, at least from what was visible to the students in general, that the rumors about Harry being expelled were true.

Finally, at about 7:55, the teachers filed into the room. There wasn't a happy face among them. Dumbledore's usually confident, calm face was actually ruffled. McGonagall was crying. Perhaps even more surprising, the Slytherin snickers about Harry Potter were squelched by none other than Severus Snape himself, "Saint Potter"'s worst enemy. The Potions master even went so far as to dock five points from his own House.

Whatever had occasioned this meeting went far beyond internal Hogwarts politics.

Finally, Dumbledore came to his feet and walked to the podium. All of the students cut off their conversations and stood to face the headmaster.

Dumbledore took a deep breath and slowly shook his head. "Good evening, students of Hogwarts. I apologize for the short notice, but I have important information to relay to you, information which will likely change life at Hogwarts -- and in all likelihood the entire Wizarding community -- forever."

The headmaster paused for emphasis. "The Statute of Secrecy has been broken beyond repair. Word of the existence of the Wizarding world is rapidly making its way throughout the Muggles. I have it on good authority that the President of the United States has issued a press release confirming the existence of wizards. This press release included a demonstration of magic by the American Secretary of Magic, Travis Radner. Secretary Radner is the American equivalent of our own Cornelius Fudge. This announcement was seen by millions of people all over that country. The Obliviators in the United States, and increasingly all over the world, are beginning to admit that there is nothing they can do to prevent the leak from spreading.

"A little under half a year ago, several members of the Order of the Phoenix were escorting our own Harry Potter from his safe house on Privet Drive to a secret location in London. The convoy's course took them over the Thames at night. By sheer chance, an American Muggle beverage company was recording footage for an advertisement from a boat on the Thames. The recording devices picked up images of Harry and two other wizards on their broomsticks. The various Order of the Phoenix members all thought someone else in the group was going to handle the Obliviation of the recording crew, so no one actually did it. This allowed the Muggles to keep their memories and the recorded images.
"By the time the Obliviators caught up with the people who had witnessed Harry flying by on the broom, the secret was out. The advertisement had been aired at an extremely popular American Muggle sporting event. It was as if the advertisement with Harry on the broomstick had been shown during the finals of the International World Cup. As a result, everyone saw him. Everyone."

People started muttering at this. Hermione watched the horror spread across the faces of her classmates -- including those of Draco Malfoy and the Slytherins -- as the scope of the breach became evident.

"This violation of the Statute of Secrecy -- now known as the Super Bowl Breach -- nearly triggered an international incident. The American wizards were furious that we in Britain didn't catch the leak before it spread across the pond. Cornelius Fudge was pestered to do something to save his image. What he did, unfortunately, will have ripple effects on our community here at Hogwarts."

The students stopped talking at once.

Dumbledore sighed. "First and foremost, Cornelius had to show that he was intent on punishing the people responsible for the leak. He has already shown animosity to me and to Harry Potter, so he took this opportunity to cast the two of us as scapegoats."

No one spoke.

"Cornelius demanded that Harry be punished for this crime even though Harry never did anything wrong. An innocent boy would be sacrificed just to make a political statement."

The students started screaming at this, even a few of the Slytherins. The teachers looked on with horror, with one exception: Umbridge. The Defense against the Dark Arts teacher just stared at Dumbledore with loathing in her face.

"Needless to say, I care about all my students, and as a result I argued with him vehemently about his proposal. He then took advantage of the situation to attack me. He said that I was also somewhat responsible, and that if I did not resign from Hogwarts he would have Harry sent to Azkaban even though he was underage and therefore not eligible for Azkaban."

Dumbledore paused. "I could not allow myself to stand by while one of my students suffered. So, I agreed. I will be retiring at the end of this school year. Professor McGonagall will be taking over as headmistress, with Professor Umbridge as her deputy. In response, Harry's sentence was commuted from Azkaban to house arrest."

The students erupted. Hermione, of course, let her bravado get in the way.

"Professor Dumbledore, you can't leave us! You've done wonders for our school!"

The students roared their approval, including many of the Slytherins.

Dumbledore stared sadly at her. "Miss Granger, I am flattered by your support. I have done my best to help my students, and if my resignation is necessary to help improve their lot in life, then so be it. Besides, I'm not resigning yet. We still have work to do."

The students cheered, as did most of the staff. The sole exception, of course, was the vulture in the pink blouse.
"We have to start preparing ourselves for exposure to the Muggle world. Effective immediately, Muggle Studies will become a mandatory part of our curriculum. Potions and Muggle Studies will swap places in the weekly schedule, so that Double Muggle Studies classes will take place every day. It is our hope that these additional classes will help train you to deal with Muggles once they come to visit us."

Dumbledore paused once more. "I expect you to be on your best behavior, my students. Our first guests will none other our Prime Minister, the Honorable John Major; and Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. These two people need to know us better to understand our needs, and we need to know them better as well if we are to interact with them.

"We will likely be visited by other dignitaries as well. I have it on good authority that the Grand Mugwump himself, His Excellency Iovannis Dialonis, will be coming here to speak with us."

Dumbledore leaned over the podium. "Students, this is quite possibly the gravest crisis the Wizarding world has faced in a millennium. Life will never be the same after the Super Bowl Breach, for either us or the Muggles. Regardless of what happens, I will ensure that you will be ready to face whatever our new world has to offer.

"That is all for now, my friends. Good night, and I will see you on the morrow."

To be continued...

-------------

Update #24
-------------

January 31, 1996
His Holiness Pope John Paul II's Balcony
St. Peter's Basilica
Vatican City
Rome

Good afternoon, my flock. I hope you are doing well today.

I am here to comment on the remarkable events which have recently taken place in the United States. As most of you know by now, or have suspected, footage of teenagers flying on broomsticks was aired during a commercial during the Super Bowl, the championship match of American football. President Clinton himself has acknowledged that these individuals are in fact wizards. Furthermore, he allowed a wizard to demonstrate his magical abilities on television.

My friends, I would like to inform you that we have known about these individuals for a long time. We all know that God gives out gifts to every single individual. The nature of His gifts may change from person to person. In some cases, it may be superior strength. In other cases, it may be great intellect. And in a few, exceedingly rare, cases, it may be magic.

Yes, I know the quote. Exodus 22:18 clearly states that God's chosen people must not suffer a witch to live. Indeed, there have been times where individuals with this ability have been persecuted ruthlessly. Whether or not persecution occurred often depended on who sat on the throne of St. Peter. This is what triggered the Statute of Secrecy to begin with, in all likelihood. Depending on the beliefs of my predecessors on the throne of St. Peter, these innocent men and women may have experience years of pain and suffering at the hands of the Church.

Here is my opinion on this matter. The witches God was concerned about were those who
deliberately use their abilities to hurt other people. I believe that the Almighty may have also intended the decree to include those beings who worship primitive idols.

With this in mind, let me telling you what we know about these wizards. These witches are God's creatures, just like us. They have lives, hopes, and dreams. God has endowed them with a gift and given them the judgment and courage to use it wisely. For the most part, these people have done so. I must acknowledge that there are a few Dark wizards here and there, people who are in fact a danger to the community. Rest assured, however, that the Holy See has a long tradition of working with international authorities to ferret out and capture these witches.

Some of you may argue that these witches are pagans, which in turn forces them to be persecuted under the Almighty's second interpretation. This is not true, however. The vast majority of these individuals worship the One God, not the Molech or Ba'al of the Canaanite traditions. Many of them have quotes from God's great works on their tombstones. Most of them are keenly aware that He provided them with this ability and thank Him routinely for this gift.

Does God seriously expect us to execute someone who used magic to help save a drowning man? Does He demand that we kill someone simply because he used unusual means to get a frightened cat out of a tree? I suspect that He would be most distressed if we allowed people to repay good with evil, especially in His name.

The branch of the Vatican studying witches and wizards has reason to believe that many of the people we revere today as religious heroes, prophets, and seers may have in fact be wizards. Not all of them, certainly, but many of them. God has providing people with these gifts ever since society began, and for the most part these fortunate individuals have used their gifts for good.

Consider the Biblical character Baalam. This man actually was a Canaanite wizard, one which normally would have subjected to God's decree that witches be exterminated. However, God had other plans for him. Baalam eventually used his ability to bless the nascent Israeliite community, even though he had been instructed to curse the Israeliites. Without Baalam's intervention, the Israeliites may not have made it to the Promised Land.

The key here is that even in cases where a pagan witch would nominally be covered by Exodus 22:18, God's people should not automatically assume that these individuals must be harmed. What would have happened to our community had Baalam been executed on the spot? If the pagan witches are doing good deeds, they are doing God's work and must be spared. If they are doing evil deeds, they should be seen as sinners and given a chance to redeem themselves in the eyes of the Lord. Remember that God always has His hand open as long as a sinner is alive. All the sinner has to do is take His hand.

I will now prove to you that wizards can be benevolent. There are forces of spiritual chaos and discontent in the world, as we all know. God is aware of this, however, and has given us these powers to help deal with this better. It is therefore not uncommon for wizards to be given priority over non-wizards for high religious office. If you think about it, who would you have face the Evil One, a wizard or someone with no magical powers?

With this in mind, I am about to divulge an amazing fact which has been hidden in the Church for centuries. In order to become Supreme Pontiff, you should be a practicing wizard who successfully graduated from a magical training academy somewhere on Earth. In order to be a cardinal, you should be at least capable of learning magic. Part of the rituals for nominating a candidate to the papacy involve asking for him to demonstrate that he can indeed control magic to the point where they can fight off evil creatures such as demons and dragons. This is the reason for the secrecy of the
Conclave -- doing this check out in the open would expose the existence of wizards.

The ideal requirement for the papacy is that the candidate be a Catholic male wizard. If there are no wizard candidates available in the Conclave, any Catholic male may be nominated.

In theory, a Catholic female wizard takes priority over a Catholic male non-wizard. However, the rarity of wizards and the longstanding custom that the candidate already be a leading Church official has made it virtually impossible for a woman to become pope. There has only been one female Pope, a Pope Joan. Her election surprised many people, and the Church overreacted and had her deposed. I am reminding people of this fact to make sure that this deposing does not happen again in case a future female pope is elected.

This requirement is not unique to the Catholic Church. Most other religious communities require the same ability for their supreme leaders. Again, not all, but most. I suspect that these spiritual leaders are busy explaining this surprising fact to their worshipers right now.

And as for your proof, I will give it to you right now. Right before me I have a dove, the universal symbol of peace. Now watch this.

Engorgio.

As this bird flies away, let this beautiful creature remind us all that wizards are peaceful people and should not be persecuted under any circumstances lest the persecutors defy the will of God.

May God bless you all and keep you. Thank you for your attention.

To be continued...

To sum up -- preferences for the papacy:

FIRST: Catholic male wizard. Maybe 10% of the popes in history.
SECOND: Catholic female wizard. Only one pope.
THIRD: Catholic male Muggle: 90% of the popes in history.
FOURTH (but realistically impossible as it would only happen if all Catholic men were dead): Catholic female Muggle.

Update #25

January 31, 1996
Death Eater Safe House
Colombo
Sri Lanka

Damodharan Dilmi was all set. Everything was in place for the attack. He'd managed to get his hands on a Tamil Tiger armored car and had filled it with fake explosives. If everything went as planned, he would execute his curse, Apparate away, and watch as the Central Bank blew up from a safe distance. The Tamil Tigers would naturally be blamed for the attack. The authorities would never realize that the strange, skull-looking cloud hovering over the crime scene would show who the culprit actually was.

He was about to get into the car and drive off to the bank when he caught a flicker of movement out
of the corner of his eye. That was more than disturbing as this people other than Death Eaters were supposedly unable to Apparate into the safe house. The few other Death Eaters who had been living in the building were away, and Dilmi had not been expecting them to return anytime soon.

He turned to look at the visitor, words to a curse on his lips. When he saw who it was, his eyes widened and he sank to his knees before the pale, noseless face.

Voldemort was putting on a confident outward appearance. However, he still seemed a bit disturbed, nervous, and confused. Dilmi could see his mentor fighting to maintain control. What on earth had happened? Could the Aurors have figured out where he was, forcing him to start running all over the world? Could that be why he was here, in this safe house? He'd find out soon enough, he supposed.

"My lord, welcome to Sri Lanka. How may I serve you?"

Voldemort looked at him for a moment and frowned. That didn't seem good, Dilmi thought. Finally, the great wizard spoke.

"Mr. Dilmi, if I remember correctly, you are about to perform an attack on Muggles as the Death Eaters' opening salvo in the Second Wizarding War. I see here that you have acquired a Tamil vehicle and will be attempting to frame the Tigers when you cast your curse."

Dilmi nodded. "I am, my lord. Would you like me to change the plans?"

Voldemort paused for a moment. "Circumstances have changed which will affect the Wizarding community all over the world. Due to these changes, I am ordering you to call off the attack. We are going to be biding our time, marshaling our forces until the time comes to strike."

This was most unexpected, Dilmi thought. Aloud: "As you wish, my lord. May I ask what has changed?"

Voldemort stared at him. "You don't know, Mr. Dilmi?"

"No, my lord. Should I have? I've been spending most of my time here in the safe house finalizing my plans. What happened?"

Voldemort put it bluntly. "Last Sunday night, the Statute of Secrecy was breached in a way which the Obliviators could not handle. The pope, the president of the United States, and several other Muggle leaders have all acknowledged the existence of the Wizarding community. Several wizards have since advertised their powers on public media. There is no way the Obliviators will be able to recover from this, Mr. Dilmi. The Statute of Secrecy has been permanently breached. Within a matter of weeks, if not days, six billion Muggles all over the world will be aware that they are sharing this planet with wizards."

Dilmi couldn't believe this. "What? How could this be? What happened?"

"An advertisement shown during a very popular American football game inadvertently picked up footage of a boy flying on a broom. A boy which I have had...several encounters with."

Dilmi gaped at him. "You mean...Harry Potter?"

"Yes, Mr. Dilmi. Our dear friend Harry Potter. I should have killed him when I had the chance, maybe using another Death Eater's wand once my weapon triggered the Priori Incantatem. There's
nothing we can do about that now, though. This advertisement was aired all over the United States before the American Obliviators could eliminate everyone's memories. Once that happened, the Statute of Secrecy was dead."

Dilmi nearly fell over in shock. This was impossible! How could the Americans have screwed up so badly? It must have something to do with Harry Potter. He must have some strange abilities which not only allowed him to survive Voldemort's Avada Kedavra but to interfere with other wizards' work as well. He steadied himself, however. It would not be appropriate to show signs of weakness before his lord.

Turning back to Voldemort, he asked, "How does this change our plans? The Muggles will not know that wizards attacked them. And even if they did, they wouldn't be able to do much about this."

Voldemort looked down at the floor. "With the Muggles aware of the Wizarding community, the authorities conducting the investigation will very likely pore over the debris from your attack with a fine-toothed comb. If they see stuff which doesn't make sense, they will likely suspect wizards. Pureblooded wizards all over planet will be persecuted and hunted down. If there were a way to frame Mudbloods and half-breeds, them it would have been worth it. Otherwise, it would be too risky."

The Dark Lord clenched his fists. "The only thing we can do is perform an attack which will take out the power base of both the Muggles and the undesirable wizards, leaving the purebloods in command. This attack will take a long time to organize, however. We cannot tip our hands beforehand with small attacks like this one."

Dilmi couldn't believe what he was hearing. "My lord, I can understand getting rid of the Mudbloods, and I fully agree with you that the Muggles should be ruled by their superiors, the wizards. But how would you perform an attack powerful enough to incapacitate the Muggle forces? There are so many Muggles on this planet that it would have to be extraordinary powerful, not to mention dangerous in case we fail. Furthermore, if we kill all the Muggles, whom will we rule?"

Voldemort shrugged. "We just kill enough Muggles to make them swear loyalty to us and enforce it with an Unbreakable Vow. I suspect that it won't take any more than a few hundred million people to get the job done. That's less than ten percent of the population of the world."

Dilmi shook his head. "That's good to hear, my lord. However, a few hundred million people is still a lot of people. I don't recall anyone in history killing that many people in one blow. Even Hitler and Stalin didn't reach that casualty total with the weight of a powerful regime at their back."

Voldemort glared at him. "You forget that I am probably the most powerful wizard who has ever lived, Mr. Dilmi. Furthermore, the damned IQ tests they gave me at the orphanage came back with a score of 173, indicating that I was extremely smart even before I became aware of my magical abilities. If there is a way to do this, Mr. Dilmi, I will find it. That I swear to you. The fact that the Muggles and wizards will start interacting more may give us access to Muggle technology, which will help a great deal, especially if we enhance some of the Muggle technology with magic."

Dilmi nodded. Voldemort had a point. "I understand, my lord."

"Good. Now give back the Muggle vehicle and stand by until I've got more information on how we're going to pull this off."
"I will, my lord."

Voldemort smiled grimly. With that, he disappeared in a flash of Apparation, leaving behind a troubled, yet confident, Dilmi.

To be continued...
Update #26 through Update #30

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Misagnissa

Update #26

-------------
January 31, 1996
Daily Prophet Publication Headquarters
London, England
-------------

Daily Prophet Extra Edition
Wednesday, 31 January 1996

STATUTE OF SECRECY BREACHED!

Super Bowl Commercial Captures UK Wizard on Broomstick

Blast Cola Ad Shown to Millions Before Obliviators Could Complete Job

President Clinton, Pope Admit Existence of Wizards to World

HRH Queen Elizabeth II To Speak at Hogwarts with PM Major

[OOC -- Note who's writing this article. It's naturally going to have a Fudge bias]

MINISTRY OF MAGIC, LONDON -- It all began half a year ago with a simple flight of wizards through a dark London night. These trained men and women were escorting the young Harry Potter to a Ministry-sponsored safe house after what appears to have been a misguided dementor attack in the village of Little Whinging. The wizards flew under the cover of darkness over the Thames, far away from any prying eyes.

Unknown to them, some Muggles filming a commercial for the championship match of the American National Football League from a boat on the Thames. For some reason, Harry Potter, a child with the flair for the dramatic and a tendency to flaunt the Statute of Secrecy, flew too close to the boat and was caught on film. Whether it was intentional or accidental is unknown. Regardless of how it happened, however, footage of the Chosen One made it across the pond to the United States despite the valiant efforts of our Obliviators.

The American Obliviators did their best to stop the leak. However, additional copies of the footage began propagating through the country. Although the Obliviators managed to get most of the copies, the original footage eventually made it to the headquarters of the National Broadcasting Corporation in time for the Super Bowl. The commercial was then aired to millions of Americans with Harry Potter and his broomstick clearly visible on the screen.

Once the commercial was aired, stopping the leak became impossible. The Obliviators would have had to travel all over the country, erasing the memories of virtually everyone they saw. To make matters worse, US Army soldiers watching the match outside the country spread the leak outside the United States. These two incidents, combined with the posting of the Potter footage on an international network, forced the Ministry to shift its focus from preventing the leak to minimizing the damage and preparing the wizards for inevitable discovery by the Muggle world.
Rest assured that we at the Ministry of Magic are doing everything possible to prepare the magical community of Britain for its introduction to the Muggle world. The Queen and Prime Minister will be speaking at Hogwarts, explaining what life is like in the Muggle world and quite possibly how the two communities can benefit from interacting with each other. I would like to emphasize that the Muggles are NOT all out to kill every single witch they see. Far from it. The anti-witch Muggles are few and far between. The vast majority are ordinary human people like you and me who are very likely curious about this odd new community in their midst.

We at the Ministry are also making sure that a breach of this magnitude never happens again. The perpetrator, Harry Potter, has been sentenced to house arrest. His mentor and accomplice, Albus Dumbledore, has decided to retire at the end of the year, leaving Hogwarts in the able hands of Minerva McGonagall and Dolores Umbridge.

Hogwarts has already modified the curriculum to prepare our young witches and wizards for interaction with the Muggles. Muggles Studies courses have become compulsory, with two lessons occurring per day. Various Muggle speakers, starting with the Queen and Prime Minister, will be coming in to visit Hogwarts several times over the next few weeks. The schedule will be posted to all Wizarding homes by Ministry owls. Anyone who wishes to attend may do so. Remember that it is not possible to Apparate into Hogwarts.

In return, several Hogwarts students will be accompanying older wizards into Muggle London to see some of the important Muggle sites. All of you are welcome to join up on these expeditions. We expect that this introduction to the Muggle world will help you immensely in the weeks and months to come.

Thank you for your cooperation, and we will update you when any new information becomes available.

-------------
February 1, 1996
New York Times Publication Headquarters
New York, New York
United States of America
-------------

WIZARDS AMONG US

ASSOCIATED PRESS -- Son of a gun. "IT" was a wizard after all.

In a pair of astonishing announcements over the last couple of days, President Clinton, Pope John Paul II, and several other influential figures confirmed the rumors that wizards have been living among humans as we know them since time immemorial. Furthermore, His Holiness demonstrated unequivocally that he himself is a wizard, magically increasing the size of a dove before setting it forth to freedom.

The announcements elicited reactions from people all over the world. Stephen Hawking, the famous scientist, stated that "the discovery of magic will likely transform science and lead to future revolutions in physics and technology". Carl Sagan waxed eloquently about "a new way to imagine and view the universe". Even Vice President Gore praised magic as possibly providing a means to provide humanity with an unlimited supply of energy, one which could be tapped without using fossil fuels and ruining the environment.
The Secretary of Magic, Travis H. Radner, explained that the wizards have traditionally hidden themselves because in the old days, uninformed villagers and peasants were afraid of magic and persecuted those with the gift. Furthermore, Radner had been concerned that Muggles -- nonmagical people like you and me -- would begin overwhelming the wizards for requests to do fantastic things, some of which were impossible even for wizards. There have been times, Radner reports, where ordinary people attacked wizards for refusing to do something, not realizing that the wizards physically could not do it.

Take, for example, raising the dead. Secretary Radner recently reported that the dead cannot be raised through magic any more easily than they can be raised through medicine. Food cannot be created from nothing, nor can money. Radner explained that although magic is good at making difficult tasks easier, it does not allow the caster to perform tasks which are inherently impossible.

Radner claims that the wizards live among us in secret communities known only to the members of the Wizarding community. To prove his claim, he is willing to take a television crew into one of these Wizarding sanctuaries to show how the wizards work and live.

At the request of several members of a secret Wizarding community in Arizona, a Blast Cola representative who had been involved in filming the wizards in the first place has been allowed to serve as the community's first Muggle-Wizard ambassador. Mr. Isaac Sanders, 29, of Prescott, has offered to help the wizards acclimate themselves to the outside world. Mr. Sanders was horrified when he realized what he had done, and he [continued, p. 2]

To be continued...

-------------
Update #27
-------------
February 2, 1996
Sanders Household
Prescott, Arizona
United States of America
-------------
Melissa Sanders stared at the odd-looking powder and then back at Strong Bear. "You want us to do WHAT?"

"Throw the powder into the fireplace and wait for the green fire to appear. Once it's there, walk into the flames and speak the words "Fourth Mesa" quite precisely. The spell will then transport you to Fourth Mesa."

"You want us to walk into a patch of green fire? Is this powder going to explode?"

"It won't explode, Mrs. Sanders. The fire is magical and will not harm you. It is designed to make transportation easier."

Isaac "Izzy" Sanders put a hand on his wife's shoulder. "Don't worry, Melissa. He's told me about this means of transport."

Turning back to Strong Bear, he asked, "Are you sure that this method can be used to transport Muggles?"

Strong Bear nodded. "Yes, Mr. Sanders. Once the Floo powder has been created, anyone can use it,
even Muggles. If you think about it, it's just a tool. You don't need to know how to create a tool in order to use it."

Izzy whistled and looked at the powder again. "This could be very useful in the Muggle world -- a cheap and instantaneous means of transportation. Can I show some to the people at the University of Phoenix? Can you go anywhere you want?"

"Certainly, take some over to the university. As for the other question, the Floo powder connects you to what is, in effect, a magical highway system. It gets you onto the highway, but it won't do you much good unless there is an exit ramp where you want to go. Fireplaces and caves make good exit ramp locations; if you want to connect your fireplace to the system, contact me or another wizard. We'll hook you up and give you an ample supply of powder."

Izzy nodded, spilled some of the Floo powder into one of his wife's old lipstick tubes, and pocketed it. "All right. Now let's see how we do this. I need something to look forward to after a long day at work."

Strong Bear nodded and poured a handful of the powder into his hand. He then tossed it nonchalantly into the fireplace.

The fireplace filled with green flames. Both Muggles gasped, and Izzy told Strong Bear to hold off so he could get a video camera. Once the film was rolling, Strong Bear walked into the field of view, showed the viewer the Floo powder, and explained what was going to happen.

He then turned back to the Muggles. "Remember. Enter the flames, state your destination precisely -- Fourth Mesa -- and the magic will send you there. I'll see you on the other side". With that, Strong Bear walked into the flames, spoke the words "Fourth Mesa", and vanished.

Melissa stared at her husband. "Uh...that's different."

Izzy laughed. "Indeed it is, Melissa. Go ahead, go on through. I'll videotape you."

Trying to convince Melissa to appear on a videotape was about as difficult as convincing water to run downhill. Drawing a deep breath, she walked into the flames, said the words "Fourth Mesa" and vanished. Making sure the camera was still running, he followed her into the flames and spoke the words.

He yelped as he was wrenched off his feet and felt himself flying in various strange directions. Strange lights whizzed by him in a scene reminiscent of the stargate scene at the end 2001: A Space Odyssey. A brief look at the camera indicated that it was still operational. He couldn't wait to show this film to his friends -- and to the people at the university who'd be working with the Floo powder.

The "wormhole" ended abruptly, and Izzy suddenly found himself sliding out of a fireplace in a building he'd never seen before. One glance around the room made him whistle in surprise.

He most definitely was NOT in Kansas anymore.

The room was filled with strangely dressed men and women. Some were in purple robes, some were in blue robes, and some were dressed in hues which looked like they had been developed in by someone on an LSD high. Strange symbols lined the walls, which were covered with Native American decorations. Paper airplanes flew throughout the room, moving apparently by themselves. He barely had the wherewithal to bring up the video camera and start recording. His wife was
looking around as well, also completely stunned.

He was about to say something when a hand suddenly grabbed him and pulled him out of the fireplace. Glaring at Strong Bear, he was about to complain when a short, stout woman materialized in the fireplace. That would have been messy, he thought. Good thing Strong Bear pulled me out of the way.

He brushed off his pants as several people surrounded him, his wife, and Strong Bear. They were all dressed in matching robes and had wands in their hands. The leader, a tall man who appeared to be Zuni, stepped forward and shook his hand.

"Welcome, Mr. and Mrs. Sanders. I'm Two Bear Lance, head of this facility. We at the Dine Center for Shamanism and Sorcery are more than grateful for your assistance in helping acclimate the Wizarding to its new circumstances. One thing that I do request is that although you may use your video camera during this visit, please follow our instructions as to what areas of the facility you can film. There are sections of this facility which are considered classified, even to several ranks of wizards, and we would prefer that you not film those.

"In return for your help, we'd like to provide you with a few gifts. First, allow me to present you a case of Green Eagle Butterbeer, a drink popular in the Wizarding world. It is mildly alcoholic, so please don't drive after drinking it. Mrs. Sanders, as you are two months along, we don't want you drinking it either."

Melissa stared at him. "You realized I was pregnant?"

"Yes, Mrs. Sanders. Magic can do amazing things. At any rate, here's our second gift: an old broomstick. It is in perfect working order, though I highly discourage you from experimenting with it. Magical items which require active manipulation will not work when used by Muggles. You will not be able to fly a broom unless it is being piloted by a wizard."

Izzy smiled and accepted the gifts. "Thank you, Two Bear. In return, I've got some gifts for you. First, I've got a case of Blast Cola for you, courtesy of my current employer. It's a typical example of soft drinks used by Muggles. Second, I've got a digital wristwatch, complete with countdown and stopwatch routines. Muggles use it to tell time. What do you use?"

Two Bear nodded. "Thank you, Mr. Sanders. The more Muggle artifacts we have to work with, the better. Now, if you'd please follow me, we can begin the tour."

To be continued...

-------------
Update #28
-------------
February 3, 1996
Collective Farm PX-311
Outside of Pyongyang
Democrat People's Republic of Korea

Choi Yeon Mi couldn't believe what had happened. The Statute of Secrecy had been breached. The North Korean government hadn't mentioned anything about her country's wizards, which made sense to some extent. After all, the Dear Leader was the only real source of power in the land. He probably wouldn't like to advertise the possibility that there may be other means by which people could exercise power.
Yet the news had spread. She had received several owls from wizards in South Korea. The Dear Leader thought he had the government under control, which he did, for all practical purposes. However, he was a Muggle, and Muggles never realized that owls could be used to send messages.

Supposedly the leak had begun when an British wizard had appeared on a commercial filmed for an American sporting event. A tape of this event had made it into the hands of a South Korean bartender, a Mr. Sung, and the bartender had nearly had a heart attack when he realized that the footage had managed to record a boy flying a broom. Bartenders like to tell stories, of course, so inevitably copies of the film (along with increasingly exaggerated descriptions of the wizard) started spreading throughout the area.

The South Korean Ministry of Magic had eventually managed to Obliviate all of the leaks in the country. Unfortunately, the leaks continued to worsen all over the world, and eventually the footage began to reappear in Seoul. The Ministry, forced to admit that this leak wouldn't go away, had eventually come out to the Chief of State. The Chief of State had made a speech to the people, explaining that wizards existed and they were to be treated with respect, like honored ancestors and wise men. Pyongyang, of course, boasted that the South Koreans were so nervous about the North Koreans' military strength that they were relying on fantasy figures to keep up with the DPRK.

Choi Yeon knew the truth, however. She was in fact a witch, though no one outside the Wizarding community knew. She had toiled for years in the fields, working in the rice paddies with her bare hands, knowing that all of this could be done with magic. Unfortunately, due to the Statute of Secrecy, she could not use her gifts to help make work easier for her and the rest of the women in her paddy. She had been forced to watch as several old women died of exhaustion and malnutrition in the fields.

Things would change now that the Statute was obsolete. Every single injury, cry of fatigue, and death in the paddies had torn at her heartstrings. She had prayed to see the day when the Statute of Secrecy had been removed and she would be able to magic to help people. She would do whatever she could to improve the typical North Korean peasant's way of life.

Reaching into a pocket of her robe, she pulled out an object which looked to the Muggles to be an ordinary piece of wood. It wasn't, however. Supposedly the wand had been made at Ollivander's hundreds of years ago and was still in good working order. It had held up to years of toiling in the fields. Now it was time to bring that toiling to an end.

Whom would she help first? Certainly she can't help herself while others were suffering. That would have been morally reprehensible and more suited to the Dear Leader than a normal person.

The decision was made for her a few minutes later, when she heard a scream followed by a splash. Brandishing her wand in front of her like a weapon, she raced towards the sound. An old woman had been carrying some baskets and tripped on a root. Several bowls of rice were floating away down a river, where the old woman was crying in pain.

She knelt down next to the old woman. "Madame, are you OK? Do you need help?"

The woman just howled and pointed at her leg. The leg was clearly broken, and water festering with parasites was in the process of infiltrating her system. This could be a serious injury.

Choi Yeun took a deep breath and took the plunge. "Madame, hold still. I think I'll be able to help you. However, I'm going to have to do something a bit unusual. Is that all right with you?"
The woman managed to stop sobbing long enough to nod. "Please, young woman! Anything to stop
the pain! It hurts! Ancestors, it hurts!"

"All right. Hold still and let me work my magic."

"Please! Help me!"

Choi Yeun put one hand on the injured woman's shoulder and brought out her wand with the other
hand. It was now or never. Focusing on her patient, she muttered the incantation.

The old woman let out a shriek of surprise and looked at her leg. "Ancestors take me! The pain is
dissipating! It looks healthy! What did you do? How did you do it?"

"Madame, I can tell you, but it's going to be a bit of a shock."

"Tell me! I am in your debt!"

Choi Yeun took another deep breath before she continued. "I am a magician, madame. I belong to a
society of magicians who can actually cast spells to help people. We have kept ourselves secret for
most the most part because people are often frightened of us, even though we mean you no harm."

The old woman stared at her. "You actually cast a spell to help me? I find it hard to believe!"

"Yes, madame. I can understand your skepticism. If you want more proof of my good intentions,
here it is."

Choi Yeun waved her wand, and several rows of rice plants suddenly shucked their precious grains
and deposited them in a bowl. She then cast another spell to carry the bowl back to the old woman.

She handed the bowl to the old woman. "Here is some more rice to make up for what you lost. If
there is anything you or anyone else who knows me need help with, just ask. Now that I will be able
to use my magic in public, I will be able to do much more for you."

The old woman looked at the bowl in disbelief. "I can't believe this! My prayers have been
answered! Are you a spirit?"

"No, madame. I am just another human being, like yourself. However, I have a gift which allows me
to help people in unusual ways, and it is incumbent upon me to use this gift wisely."

The old woman got to her feet and gingerly put her weight on her formerly hurt foot. It held her
weight easily and she let out an excited laugh. "I am indeed in your debt! I apologize that I made you
reveal your secret."

Choi Yeun shook her head. "It's not a secret anymore. The existence of magicians has been revealed
to the world. We will now be able to help people without worrying about anything."

The old woman gave her a hug and started running towards another part of the paddy. "Thank you
so much, madame! Now, if you could come with me, I've got a sister who's got arthritis and a
husband who can't lift rocks anymore!"

To be continued...
Mark Willis winced and glared at the half-empty can of Blast Cola. "They call THIS a soft drink?"

Strong Bear nodded. "They do indeed, Mark. What do you think of it?"

"I can't stand it. It has no taste. I like butterbeer a lot better. Do all Muggle soft drinks taste like this?"

"No, Mark. This is just one brand of soft drink, Blast Cola. There are others as well: Coca-Cola, Pepsi, Sprite, and so forth. Each of those has their own taste. Would you like to try some of those? Next time we see the Sanderses, I'll ask them to bring some."

Little Cloud shook his sparkling white head. "I don't think that's a good idea, Strong Bear. They might be offended. After all, Isaac works for Blast Cola. This Coke or whatever it is must be a competitor. I think you should let him send you more Blast even though you don't like it all that much. Maybe some other people in the building may like it."

Mark grimaced. "You're a ghost, Little Cloud. You don't need to worry about being forced to drink it."

Little Cloud nodded. "True. I do have a bit of an advantage there. Do they have any other products which you can sample?"

Strong Bear thought for a moment. "They've got Diet Blast, Caffeine Blast, Spice Blast, Passion Fruit Blast -- "

Little Cloud stared at him. "Passion Fruit Blast? The Muggles have developed the equivalent of a fruit drink that induces passion in people? They've invented a love potion?"

All heads turned in unison as a laughing Two Bear walked into the room. "No, Little Cloud. There is actually a fruit known as a passion fruit. It's found in tropical climates in Central and South America. Despite its name, it is not capable of inducing passion in humans. Rest assured, my sparkling friend, that the secret of love potions remains safely part of our domain."

Little Cloud smiled. "That's good to hear, Two Bear. How was the rest of the Sanderses' tour of the facility? They seemed completely stunned at half the stuff they saw. Mrs. Sanders nearly fell over when she saw me."

Strong Bear chuckled. "I remember that, Little Cloud. Muggles tend to do that whenever they see ghosts. I suspect that when this video becomes public, you are going to become a rather popular topic."

Little Cloud frowned. "How so?"

Mark Willis explained. "Muggles, from what I learned in Muggle Studies, have never had documented proof of an afterlife before. Sure, they've had legends of haunted houses, but you're the
first ghost they have ever actually recorded a conversation with. Believe me, they're going to be floored. Religious leaders all over the planet are going to have to do some fast thinking."

Two Bear laughed even harder. "They will indeed. At any rate, back to the Sanders's tour. We basically gave them the tour we usually give to top-secret government officials and other wizards. They saw the school, the potion-making facility, the peyote garden, and conducted some interviews with the staff. They tried to get into a Dine-only powwow, but we blocked access before they could reveal any of the tribe's secrets. We finally showed them a few magical items and let them go with a broom and some butterbeer."

Little Cloud was incredulous. "You gave them a BROOM? They can't fly brooms!"

Two Bear nodded. "That's what I'm suspecting, Little Cloud. Had our theorists believed that they would actually be able to use the broom, we wouldn't have given it to them because it would have been extremely dangerous. They don't want to fall off at 5000 feet. They'd make a really big mess. Ancestors take me, I still don't like it when my nephew flies around and he's had a broom for a year already."

"I see. Did they like the butterbeer?"

"They did indeed, they did indeed. Maybe this will be our contribution to Muggle society -- something that people can actually drink. Which reminds me -- I believe the Sandersons' other contribution from the Muggle world is actually of some use to us."

Strong Bear was intrigued. "The wristwatch?"

"Yes. If you'd follow us, we can show you what we've been doing with it."

Strong Bear, Little Cloud, and Willis headed down the corridors after Two Bear. Little Cloud amused himself en route by flying through people, much to their chagrin. He'd been a bit of a practical joker in real life, and nothing much appeared to have changed.

The four men headed into a small laboratory and walked over to an examination table. There was the wristwatch, sitting on the table. Next to the watch was a wand and an area which appeared to have been burnt slightly. The rest of the table was empty.

Two Bear pointed at the watch. "This device has a countdown feature as well as an alarm. When the countdown reaches zero, it starts beeping. We've managed to concoct a magical field which will keep a spell in suspended animation until triggered by a sound. Link it to the beeping from the watch, set the timer or alarm, and you can have the spell cast whenever you want, even if you're not there. Watch, no pun intended."

Everyone watched as he cast a couple of spells in preparation. When everything was ready, he picked up the watch and set it for a one-minute countdown. He started the countdown, put down the watch, and picked up the wand.

He waved it at the table. "Incendio minimus."

Nothing happened, and he picked up the wand. Normally, a small flame would have burst from the end of the wand. However, due to the stasis field, the spell was placed in suspension.

Strong Bear whistled. "I can sense the magic in the air. The field definitely seems to have recorded
the spell. Impressive. Can the same field shoot off multiple spells at different times?"

Two Bear frowned. "In theory, yes. In practice, however, it's not that easy. The spells are activated by the sound, not the time. As a result, all the spells will go off when the alarm goes off. Now, look. The countdown is about to end."

Everyone was silent as the countdown reached zero. The watch started beeping. A fraction of a second later, a burst of flame appeared over the table. It seemed to have originated from where the wand had been before the wand had been removed from the stasis field.

Willis whistled. "Impressive. Very impressive."

Two Bear beamed. "I thought you'd like it. Give us a little more time, and little gadgets like this will be able to work wonders for our society. You'd be amazed at what functionality these new digital devices has that our traditional pocket watches don't."

To be continued...

-----------

Update #30

-----------

February 4, 1996
Outside H-Entry
MacGregor House
450 Memorial Drive
Cambridge, Massachusetts
United States of America

The dorm's central courtyard was filled with reporters, students, parents helping undergrads move back on campus after intersession, and various people associated with the Society for Creative Anachronism and Assassin's Guild. For the first time the history of the MIT, I-Entry was going to be shown to the Muggles.

MacGregor House consisted of a sixteen-floor tower attached a an L-shaped low-rise building. The dormitory consisted of nine major living areas, better known as "entries" as each area shared a common entry. Entries A, B, C, D, and E were in the tower. Entries F, G, H, and J comprised the low-rise. Each entry had its own personality and intramural sports teams, such as the E-Entry Executioners and F-Entry Vigilantes. Originally an all-male dorm, eight of the nine entries had gone co-ed over the past few years. When C-Entry went co-ed in the fall of 1994, F-Entry found itself as the only entry left which did not include women.

The fact that I-Entry was missing from the list was obvious to even the most casual observer. The only reference to an I-Entry stood in an internal corridor connecting H and J entries. It consisted of a brick wall with a big capital letter "I" painted on it. Many people believed that the letter "I" had been omitted from the list because it could have been confused with J.

That explanation, however, had gone out the window less than 48 hours ago, when a shocking announcement echoed through the Institute. I-Entry existed, just like the other ones. It even had its own sports team, the I-Entry Incantations. The only reason it didn't compete with the other nine entries was simple: no one else at MIT played Quodpot or even Quidditch.

I-Entry housed the magical technology division of the United States Department of Magic. The place was chock-full of wizards which had been operating under the Muggles' noses since time
immemorial. The entry had a special portal linking it to the headquarters of the Department of Magic in Greenwich.

Since Greenwich was hidden under the waters of the Quabbin, ordinary wizards and witches living outside the Four Towns often found it difficult to access the Ministry headquarters. Employees could Apparate into it. Visitors, however, could not, which necessitated a visitor entrance. I-Entry lived up to its name, dutifully allowing Wizarding visitors access to the Ministry through the experimental technology section.

I-Entry had handled its affairs quietly and in secrecy for years on end. That period of tranquility had ended, however, a few days ago, when the President had revealed the existence of the wizards to the world following the Super Bowl Breach.

Requests had been coming in from all over the country to send a camera crew into a wizard stronghold to show the Muggles how the wizards lived. After a brief hesitation, Secretary Radner had agreed. After a hasty consultation with Professor Nagle of the Quabbin Academy for Sorcery, arrangements were made to allow a news crew into wizard territory -- at the very least, I-Entry and one of the submerged towns. Radner had refused to allow them into the department headquarters itself for security reasons. However, the civilian areas were fair game.

The authorities had tried to keep the visit secret. However, a whole bunch of Alpha Chi Gamma hackers had joined forces, led by the kid who had introduced the leak to the Internet to begin with, to break into a government Web site and the secret was soon out. Needless to say, MIT was furious at being hoodwinked. Harvard, with its powerful alumni and large endowment, complained that all the schools in Cambridge should have known about this. As if that were not bad enough, various octogenarians who had been evicted from the Four Towns back in 1938 started shouting at everyone strange-looking that they wanted their houses back.

At precisely 12:00, Travis Radner and his bodyguard Apparated onto the walkway leading to the entrance to G-Entry, above the former cafeteria. His arrival was noticed immediately by the crowd, who started clapping, chattering, cheering excitedly. Several students started making Star Trek jokes and transporter noises. Radner, however, had been expecting this. He waved to the crowd and told them to join them. This resulted in a stampede out of the courtyard, past the entrance to the high-rise, and around the 180 degree turn up the staircase. The television floodlights reflected off the bald Secretary's head as he proceeded down the hall to the entrance to H-Entry.

Two people, a man and woman, met him at the door. The man looked to be a graduate student, maybe in his mid to late twenties. The woman, a striking blonde, appeared a few years younger than him, perhaps only a year or two older than the seniors.

Radner bowed to the two people. "Good afternoon. I take it one of you is the master for H-Entry?"

The man nodded. "I'm the graduate residence tutor, if that's what you mean. I take it you're involved with the Department of Magic and are going to be conducting the tour of I-Entry?"

Radner nodded. "We are, sir. You two are more than welcome to come along."

He then looked a bit closer at the woman. He had a knack for finding veela features in people, and the woman's features screamed veela to him. Sure enough, the features were there -- faint, but there. She was probably only 1/32 veela or less -- to the point where it was quite possible she didn't know her veela ancestors -- but veela traits tended to be dominant and as a result took a long time to die out completely. Very interesting, he thought. Here was a descendant of a veela who probably didn't even
know what a veela even was. A pity, he thought. Hopefully the mingling of the wizard and Muggle societies would help correct this mistake. However, it made him wonder if there was a continuum between wizard and Muggle -- or in general, between any magical species such as veela and Muggle. Judging from what he knew of evolution, it was quite possible, especially since most wizard families were not purebreeds.

A comment from the GRT interrupted his musings. "Sure, we'll come along. We've seen that I painted on the bricks for all these years. I am kind of curious what's back there."

"You'll find out soon enough, young man. Now, follow me, and we'll head over to I-Entry."

The grad student and his consort joined the crowd as Radner led them through the halls towards I-Entry. Or at least tried to. The halls were narrow, as was often the case with dormitories. Crates and boxes from people moving in were littering the way. Radner cast some Hovering Charms to make them hover temporarily in midair so that the crowd could walk by. This effected a huge cheer from the crowd, followed by a bunch of photographs.

The reporters and Radner caught sight of the painted "I" on the wall about the time the last few members of the mob had made it through the door leading to H-Entry. The line snaked all the way through the living group, trapping several students in their dorm rooms. As if that were not bad enough, several of the students had started racing in through J-Entry and were closing in from the other side. The entire west side of the low-rise was paralyzed.

Travis raised his hand and the crowd fell silent. Slowly, respectfully, he walked up to the painted "I". He pulled out his wand. Cameras went off everywhere as all the reporters turned their cameras in his direction.

He reached out with the wand, tapped the four corners of the "I", and then traced his wand down the central spine. For a few seconds, nothing happened. People began to mutter.

Then the two halves of the "I" began to pivot back into the brick wall. What had been the central spine of the I was widening into a passageway beyond what was an obvious double door. More cameras flashed as the students roared.

Radner turned back to the crowd and beamed. "I-Entry. Shall we?"

The students cheered as he began leading the crowd down the corridor. This lucky group of 500 Muggles would be boldly going where no one had gone before.

It took about five minutes for everyone to make their way through the corridors and into the passage. Ten seconds after the last Muggle entered, the double doors pivoted closed and the painted "I" was an "I" once more.

To be continued...
It was only a matter of time now, thought Daniel Meeks. Sorcerer First Class Meeks was the head of the Department of Magical Technology, often known by its Muggle name I-Entry. It would be he who would be leading Secretary Radner and the reporters on a tour of the facility, showing the Muggles wizards at work and what exactly they did for a living. He would then hand the tourists off to Professor Nagle, who would take them on a tour of the QAS. Finally, the Muggles would be allowed to wander into the community, speak with a few people who had volunteered to talk to them, and watch an intercity Quodpot match between Prescott and Enfield.

He hoped that this first contact -- or at least very early contact -- would be relatively straightforward and peaceful. Secretary Radner had done his best to make the tour low-key. Ideally, only five or six reporters would be taking the tour. If other Muggles found out, they would be allowed to come along. However, Sorcerer Meeks didn't think they would find out until it was too late. It was a good thing, however. The more Muggles on the tour, the more likely things were to get out of control. There were things here Muggles shouldn't mess around with, especially wands, which REALLY did not like being handled by nonmagical beings.

The aforementioned Secretary, meanwhile, had his hands full. He hadn't expected all these people, to say the least. His hopes for a small audience had been dashed, and he'd probably have faced a riot had he told them they couldn't go. A riot during a first contact situation was never a good idea, particularly where most of the people were young men with a penchant for mischief. The fact that there was evidence of a possible veela descendant in the group didn't help, either.

He closed his eyes and shook his head. There wasn't much he could do about it now. All he could do is hope for the best.

Meeks focused his attention on the door as he heard voices on the other side of the door. He recognized Radner's voice, as well as a general background hum which he assumed was the reporters talking to each other.

Radner was giving final instructions. "All right, everyone. This is the main entrance, right here. It's wizard-locked, so stand back while I open the door. Remember, DO NOT TOUCH ANYTHING, particularly wands. Several of our magical items can be dangerous if used improperly. You are free to interview anyone or record anything unless we say otherwise. However, do not touch anything. Got it?"

A chorus of "Rights!" echoed into the room. Meeks frowned: there were at least 15-20 people in there. A bit more than he had hoped, but probably still manageable.

Radner's voice then returned. The Secretary cast a spell, and the door slid open to reveal Radner
surrounded by what appeared to be television cameras.

Alarm bells went off in Meeks's head. The Secretary seemed a little frazzled. It was understandable, however. Controlling a group of 20 excited tourists would probably be more difficult than controlling a group of 5 or 6. He didn't let anything show, however, as he walked up to Radner with the television cameras rolling. He shook the Secretary's hands, followed by those of a few of the Muggles in the first rank. He had a strange suspicion that this set of handshakes would be shown all over the world in the months to come.

"Good afternoon, Secretary Radner and our new Muggle friends. Welcome to the Magical Technology Division of the American Department of Magic. My name is Sorcerer First Class Daniel Jonathan Meeks. I'm the head of this facility and I'll be taking you on your tour. Whatever you do, don't touch anything and don't wander away from the group. If you need to use the restroom, tell us and we will find someone to accompany you. As the Secretary said, there are several objects here which don't work well with Muggles. Now, if you reporters could come in, you can start looking around the room so the rest of the tourists can come in."

There was a loud cheer from the corridor, and Meeks's alarm bells began clanging more loudly. That sounded like a lot more than 20 people. He'd know for certain soon, however.

A few seconds later, the last television camera and spotlight moved out of the way, allowing Meeks to look into the corridor. For the first time, he could see how many people were going to be taking the tour.

Uh-oh, he thought.

----------

The group was just too large for one person to lead properly. There were Muggles everywhere, gaping at all of the flying letters and moving photographs. There were at least a hundred people in the first three rooms already, and a glance down the corridor heading back to MacGregor seemed to show no end in sight to the stream.

Meeks had to do something, and do it fast. He grabbed several low-level workers and drafted them into service as tour guides. This done, he shoved his way over to the door and started waving off the people. That didn't work very well, so he found himself forced to cast an anti-Muggle shield across the door, much to the guests' chagrin.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I'm sorry, but we can't handle any more visitors right now. We were only expecting 10-20 people and so far we've got maybe 150. The rest of you will have to come back later."

The Muggles grumbled for a while. However, Meeks wasn't worried as he had a backup plan which would be a very good booby prize. "If you would be so good to return to MacGregor House, you will find that I have sent my house-elf Thomas to the far end of the corridor, just inside the door leading to the dormitory. He will give each of you a magical token allowing you to enter I-Entry one week from now. You'll like Thomas -- I doubt you've ever seen a real life elf before."

He then gave them the bad news. "Once I've gotten all of you out of the corridor and back into MacGregor House, the I-Entry door will be closed. I'm sorry, but we just can't handle anyone else right now. To use your colloquialism, we're sold out until next week."

The Muggles murmuring turned to excitement, littered with comments about Santa Claus, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Dungeons and Dragons. Meeks groaned. Muggle stereotypes about elves were not
particularly realistic. They probably were expecting cute creatures like in movies and were going to be disappointed when confronted with reality.

This last set of comments did the trick, and the Muggles began to head back up the corridor towards the dormitory. He could hear a rather surprised Thomas trying to explain what was going on in the distance while simultaneously trying to fend off probes from at least six biology majors.

----------

Meanwhile, Radner was leading one of the various smaller tour groups through the compound. Some of them guides were accompanied by video cameras and some weren't. The Secretary and his bodyguard, of course, warranted a camera.

There was nearly an incident when the Muggles almost broke out laughing when a potion manufacturer couldn't identify the mysterious Muggle object as a television camera. One of the Muggles -- a blonde woman who looked like a half-veela, of all things -- told them to be more polite, and they did. Meeks turned to her and thanked her for her assistance. Of course, he never saw the mischievous hacker dip a test tube into a cauldron and pocket something which would eventually prove to be a Hair Restoration Potion. He did, however, manage to catch someone trying to make off with a broom.

His tour was fairly comprehensive. He showed the Muggles the potion development cauldrons and several magic items (seen from a distance). He transformed teacups into mice, much to the crowd's amazement. He demonstrated a few basic spells, such as Lumos and Wingardium Leviosa. The reporters, of course, took it all in. They interviewed him, Weeks, and several other people extensively.

Finally, it was over. He led his charges out of the building and towards the school, where Professor Nagle awaited them. The headmaster seemed a bit concerned at the size of the group, but Nagle assured him that he'd manage.

The mob had been remarkably well-behaved. When the damage report came in, all the Muggles seem to have run away with were a Remembrall and a self-cleaning plate. Not surprisingly, the biology students had taken a DNA sample from Thomas. Thankfully, no wands or brooms. It could have been worse. A lot worse.

All in all, a not unreasonable first contact.

To be continued...

----------

Update #32
-------------

February 4, 1996
Quabbin Academy of Sorcery
Dana, Massachusetts
United States of America
-------------

Steven Reynolds watched as the mob approached the school gates. He considered himself to an expert on Muggles. He had been serving as the Muggle Studies teacher for eight years now and was admired by most of his students. He described Muggle customs to him the best he could. Some of them, such as the airplane, were rather surprising. Many of the boys, including the 11th and 12th graders, couldn't imagine what life would be like if you couldn't Apparate or fly a broom.
Everything had changed over the past week. Everything. For the first time in his life, his students would be able to grade him on his lessons much like he had graded theirs. He would be in big trouble if the Muggles approaching the gate with the headmaster didn't act the way he was expecting them to.

The QAS had found out about the Super Bowl commercial relatively quickly. To his credit, Professor Nagle had responded quickly and decisively, explaining to the students what had happened and quarantining the school from possible exposure to the Muggles. The three hours which had been cleared for watching the Super Bowl tape instead hosted a mandatory Muggle Studies class focusing on the history of interaction between Muggles and wizards.

By now, of course, the Obliviators had given up. There was no way to stop the leak at this point. The Muggle and Wizarding worlds were about to collide and the important thing now was to make sure that the collision didn't destroy one, or both, of those cultures.

Reaction among the boys was mixed. Some of them had heard frightening rumors about the Muggles. The fact that Dana had originally been founded by refugees from the Salem witch trials didn't help. On the other hand, the school included several students with Muggle parents. These kids seemed just like their Wizarding counterparts. Furthermore, several Wizarding students who had visited these children at their parents' homes out in Greenfield and Northampton had reported that the family seemed just like any Wizarding family. The only exception, of course, was that they never used magic, replacing it with technology.

The headmaster and staff had prepared for this moment as soon as the commercial had hit the air and double-checked them as soon as word came down that the Muggles would be having a tour of the school. Reynolds just hope that they would be enough.

Drawing a deep breath, he walked down to the gates, reaching them just as they opened to admit Secretary Radner, Professor Nagle and the reporters. Several brave students followed him. Reynolds noted that the vast majority of the mob consisted of college age students, only a few years older than the seniors. There were also young women among them, something which the QAS students noticed almost immediately. He'd have to keep an eye on this.

He reached out and shook the Secretary's hand. "Welcome to the men's campus of the Quabbin Institute of Sorcery. I'm the Muggle Studies teacher, Professor Reynolds. I'll be taking you on a tour of our facility today so you can see what a Wizarding school looks like.

"Before we begin the tour, there are some things I should say. Many of the students have never met Muggles before, so they may be a little shy or awkward around you. Then again, I suppose you're going to be feeling us out as well. Now, with that out of the way, I should warn you that you should not touch anything without permission of myself, Professor Nagle, or Secretary Radner. There are several things here, such as wands and brooms, which can hurt people if they are used improperly.

"First, some background. The Quabbin Institute of Sorcery was founded in 1695 in the wake of the Salem witch trials, when a breach of the Statute of Secrecy -- a temporary one, unlike this -- turned the Muggles against the wizards and resulted in the death of many wizards. The survivors were forced to move west into the towns now known as Dana, Enfield, Greenwich, and Prescott. This building is in Dana. To further protect the Wizarding community from prying eyes, a wizard convinced a Boston magistrate to create the Quabbin Reservoir so it could not only slake Bostonians' thirst but also to make it impossible for visitors to the area to find our homes without extensive scuba gear. You may be interested to know that you are currently standing in a magical air bubble under about 300 feet of water."
The Muggles started murmuring in surprise an admiration. Reynolds did, however, hear a few old people complaining that they'd been evicted from their homes just to pacify some crazy lunatics.

He continued. "This school goes from 6th grade to 12th grade. The seven-year curriculum follows the standard set down in Britain by the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, one of the most ancient institutions on the planet. Students take a wide variety of classes, including Potions, Divination, Muggle Studies (my class), Arithmancy, Astronomy, Transfiguration -- "

One of the Muggles smirked. "What's the point of astronomy if you're underwater and never see the sky?"

Reynolds smiled. "Simple. The astronomy is used in conjunction with astrology lessons. I believe you are familiar with astrology, the ability to foretell events based on the positions of the stars and planets."

The Muggle shook his head. "That doesn't work. I'm an engineer, and I know it doesn't work."

"That's because your signs are all off, my friend. Do you know your sign? What's your birthday?"

"I'm a Libra. October 9."

Reynolds shook his head. "I'm afraid not, sir. You are a Virgo. That's why your astrology doesn't work -- your signs are all off by one due to the Earth's precession. You'll need to pay more attention to the actual constellation boundaries and invoke more stars and planets to get an accurate reading. You'd be surprised to know that many people in this crowd likely fall under the sign of Ophiuchus, the Serpent Bearer."

The Muggles stared at him. Several of the young men -- presumably astronomers -- nodded, though. At least he'd gotten through to a few of them. It was a good start. He then pointed down the corridor towards the Great Hall.

"Now, if you'll follow me, we'll head into the Great Hall, where we have prepared a meal for you. I apologize that we don't have enough food to feed this many tourists -- we'd only been expecting 20 or so -- but we'll do whatever we can."

Needless to say, the Muggles were awed by the sight. Floating candles littered the air, and the tables of the four Houses were laden with gold and silver plates. All of the students were there, dressed in robes. Reynolds had the distinct impression that several of those plates would disappear before the tour ended.

Staring up at the ceiling was like looking into an aquarium. Fish swam around peacefully. The Muggles were floored when they were told that they were looking up at the waters of the Quabbin. At least two ocean engineering students started barking at each other about the impossibility of such a feat.

It didn't take long for the presence of the MIT co-eds to break the ice between the two groups of students, especially the QAS seniors. The food didn't hurt, either. Here and there, the word "veela" appeared, capturing all of the adults' attention. Judging from the locations where the word was being spoken, there were at least four veela descendants in there.

After the meal, the now-mingling groups of students took a tour of the building. As it was a Sunday
afternoon, most of the classrooms were empty. However, Reynolds was able to point out several utensils and magical items.

The group was about to leave the school when one of the Muggles screamed. The staff turned to find the crowd milling around in confusion -- and excitement. The Muggles were repeating one word. Ghost. A few of the college students were talking about Jed Eyes and Obee Ones. What the hell were they?

Nagle looked at Radner and shrugged. They were going to find out at some point. Might as well get it over with.

Within maybe thirty seconds, the Muggles had cleared maybe a ten-foot-diameter circle around a shimmering white figure. The figure appeared to be a woman in her sixties or seventies wearing a demure Puritan-style frock and bonnet. What was even more unusual was the fact that she was floating maybe a foot above the ground, something the reporters could not fail to miss.

One of the Muggles found his voice. "Who are you? Are you a ghost?"

The figure spoke. "Yes, Goodman. In life, I was Goody Rebecca Nurse, of Salem, Massachusetts. I was convicted on a charge of evil witchcraft in the year of Our Lord 1692, even though I was a good Christian and made no pact with the devil. All the magic I performed was in the name of the Lord to help people. I have returned to make sure that such a tragedy never happens again."

The Muggles stared at her and at each other. Anyone familiar with The Crucible would recognize the name. Especially students who had been forced to read the book for summer reading.

The rush of reporters heading towards the figure nearly masked a brief clatter as a gold plate fell from the hand of a stunned Muggle.

To be continued...

-------------

Update #33
-------------

February 4, 1996
Quabbin Academy of Sorcery
Dana, Massachusetts
United States of America
-------------

[NOTE -- Remember that this is an interview of very pious Puritan woman. As a result she will be seeing things from a very religious point of view. I hope this comes across as dignified and respectful. I will delete it if it is not]

Rebecca Nurse didn't think she'd seen this many people staring at her before in her entire life, either as a ghost or as a human. She also found it hard to believe that they didn't realize she was a ghost. Everyone in the Four Towns knew she existed. Granted, the Muggles didn't know she had survived the execution, but she didn't think Muggles would be allowed into the school regardless of this so-called Super Bowl Breach (what in Christ's name was the Super Bowl?)

These people were wearing most unusual -- and provocative -- clothing. Several women were wearing trousers and form-fitting clothing. Had they worn that in her day, they would very likely have been burned as rebels or witches regardless of their magical ability.
Had she done something wrong? She didn't think so. She'd just been going about her business when she'd heard lots of people in the Great Hall. Curious, she'd come over and become the center of attention. It was as if they'd never seen a ghost before.

She looked around at all the people. "God's wounds, ladies and gentlemen. What is the matter? Have I done something wrong? Why are you all looking at me? I swear by our Lord Jesus that I did not perform any evil magic. And what exactly are those odd metal contraptions those people are holding?"

Professor Nagle explained. "These people, Goody Nurse, are Muggles. You are the first ghost they have ever seen. They're curious about you."

She stared at him. "Muggles? In here? We have been discovered and betrayed! We are lost! By Our Lord Jesus Christ --"

Professor Reynolds chimed in. "Goody Nurse, you need not fear. The Muggles have found out about our world and the Statute of Secrecy has been breached to the point where it cannot be repaired."

The Muggle Studies teacher raised a hand to forestall her panicked scream. "However, times have changed. The witch trials are over, and we believe that these Muggles have come because they want to learn about our people. If we are to co-exist peacefully, we will each need to learn about each other's customs. Right now the Muggles are touring our world. Once we finish the tour, we will be sending some of the wizards into the Muggle world, into Boston and Cambridge."

She didn't know if this was good or bad. "Have the Muggles tried to execute any of our people yet?"

"No, Goody Nurse. They have not, and they will not. Like I said, times have changed. If you wish, you can come with us on our tour. When was the last time you were outside the Four Towns? Hundreds of years ago, I suspect. You probably want a change of scenery."

Secretary Radner stared at Reynolds. "Is that wise? They've never seen ghosts before. I don't want them overreacting. Remember this is a first contact situation here."

She really wanted to see what the world was like outside the Four Towns. However, better to be safe than sorry. She'd been betrayed by Muggles once before. She was concerned some things never changed, however. Shaking her head, she replied. "I will stay here for the time being, Master Reynolds. I do not want to cause anyone to suffer because of something I did. Like Our Savior, I am willing to undergo difficulties for the sake of others."

Reynolds shrugged. "As you wish, Goody Nurse. Now, let me explain what I suspect is going to happen next. Like I said, you are the first ghost they have ever seen. These contraptions you mentioned are Muggle recording devices. They will allow other Muggles to witness these events. Muggles will very likely be interested in your experience as a ghost. They will likely ask you questions about religion and the afterlife. Would you be willing to answer them? Remember that they have never had proof of an afterlife before."

She looked at the Muggles, puzzled. "They doubt the Bible? The Bible clearly mentions an afterlife."

"There are several ways to interpret that passage, Goody Nurse. And the Bible isn't as well read as it once was."
She stared at him, surprised. "Indeed, times have changed. Well, I will do what I can to answer their
questions."

With that, Reynolds bowed to her courteously and backed off somewhat. Several of the people with
the metal contraptions walked over as the Muggles began talking excitedly among themselves. After
a few moments, one of them spoke up.

"How do you become a ghost? Are ghosts common? Do you have to be a wizard to become a
ghost?"

She shrugged as the man pointed some kind of metal object at her. "To be honest, I cannot
remember. What I do remember is being executed for a sin I would have never committed. As my
spirit was floating away, I felt a Presence asking me if I had anything else to do in this world. If I so
chose, I could stay behind as a ghost to continue my mission. I would be able to leave at a future time
if I so chose. I would not be able to return to a corporeal body, but I would be able to manifest
myself as a ghost."

"You spoke with God? You have seen God?"

She thought for a moment. "I do not know, good sir. I pray that it was God. However, this Presence
seemed very caring yet powerful."

The man with the machine pressed her further. "Can you say God exists?"

She looked at him sharply. "I have always believed He exists, good sir. I did not need this experience
to support my beliefs."

"But did this experience give you conclusive evidence that God exists? That is, would it something
that a scientist would have accepted as proof of God's existence? Something that would convince
everyone?"

She considered this and sighed. "It shames me to admit this, but I would say no. If I were a heretic or
a heathen, I would not be convinced that God contacted me. From the little I know of science, I
would believe that my experience would not be enough prove God's existence to an unbeliever."

The reporter nodded. "Sounds like a powerful spiritual experience, Goody Nurse. You felt a sense of
peace, yet one of urgency, and you couldn't figure out where it came from. As a religious person,
you believed it was God. However, you couldn't prove it, just like most of our other experiences
when it comes to the existence of God."

She flared at him. "Where else would it have come from?"

One of the other reporters broke in. "Goody Nurse, do you believe yourself to be in heaven? Have
you seen heaven?"

She shook her head. "I never witnessed the pearly gates or the fires of hell. From what I have been
told, ghosts like myself abide in Sheol, the underworld. All ghosts reside in Sheol regardless of how
good or bad they were in life. Even the great prophet Samuel was sent to Sheol, and not to heaven,
when he spent time as a ghost before he was summoned by Saul and the witch of Endor. When they
choose to move on, they then go to heaven or hell."
"But have you seen proof of heaven or hell?"

"No. However, is there any doubt they exist?"

Reynolds, who had apparently been expecting this, nodded and turned to the Muggles. "Keep in mind that this woman was very pious during her life. She lived during the time of the Puritans, remember."

Another reporter raised her hand. "How do you reconcile your belief in magic with your religious traditions?"

"Simple, milady. God gives various people various talents and gifts according to His divine plan. He decided to give me magic as a gift, and it is not up to me to question His decision. It is our duty to use His gifts to help improve the world."

The first reporter spoke up again. "Are ghosts common? Can people who are not wizards become ghosts?"

She shook her head. "I know a few other ghosts, good sir. There aren't many, but they exist. They were all wizards."

"Must you be a Christian, or at least a worshiper of the God of Abraham, to become a ghost?"

"No. There are several Indians in the ghost realm, victims of the terrible diseases which spread through the Indian communities shortly after our arrival in 1620. They, like I, have stayed behind to try to help their communities. This leads me to believe that God, in His infinite mercy, has provided the ghost realm as a last chance for people to atone for their sins and accept the Savior before God judges them."

Some of the Muggles not holding contraptions began speaking. "Madame, if you've come back as a ghost, why couldn't you come back to life completely? Can wizards raise the dead?"

"No. They cannot. Only God and Our Savior could."

"How about providing eternal youth?"

"Not easily. There is an Elixir of Life which can prolong life, but it must be drunk consistently to prevent aging. Furthermore, this Elixir will not prevent the drinker from being injured or killed."

The Muggles sounded excited as the reporter continued. "Do you have any of this Elixir? Do you know how to make it?"

"No, good sir."

Another reporter broke in. "You have been a ghost for the past three hundred years. How does our world seem to someone who was born almost four hundred years ago?"

"Very different, milady. Very different. The women's clothing would have caused them to be burned as witches or prostitutes in my day. However, I am optimistic. It is clear that nowadays people are much more tolerant. These women can wear trousers and not be burned, and they can keep their hair
uncovered and not be stoned. Muggles have reached the point where they are willing to be tolerant of wizards. From the little I know, I'd be optimistic about the future. I suspect I would have not been accused of evil magic nowadays."

She thought a little longer. "Had this era not been so secular, I would say that we were close to entering God's Kingdom. We may not be there yet, but I would suspect that we are much closer than I first thought possible. I suspect that we need no longer fear His Final Judgment."

To be continued...

Update #34

February 4, 1996
H-Entry/J-Entry Corridor
MacGregor House
450 Memorial Drive
Cambridge, Massachusetts
United States of America

The corridor was deserted by the time the I-Entry doors swung open. It was now almost 6:00, and most of the students were either heading to the Student Center or the convenience store to eat dinner. As a result, no one immediately noticed the most unusual precession which suddenly began trooping out of what was supposed to have been a brick wall.

But it didn't take the remaining H-Entry and J-Entry students long to figure out something was up. It wasn't often that 500 people suddenly appeared out of nowhere, blocking the corridors. Inevitably, word leaked out that these were the tourists who had entered the wizard realm. People made phone calls, and by the time the last students had made it out of the I-Entry doors there were representatives from the Tech, Tech Talk, and Technology Review. Harvard students were on their way as well. A woman with a Russian accent led a large group of Wiccans over to the building from the dormitory next door.

Curiously, a large wizard's hat had appeared on the 77 Massachusetts Avenue dome, complete with lighting so it could be seen at night. The students loved it, of course. No one knew where it had come from. The authorities looked at it nervously, however. For all they knew, real witches did not wear hats like this and could find it offensive. A heated debate ensued as to whether the new decoration should be removed.

The witnesses's eyes shot up as the parade of students was followed by several people in very strange dress. Most of them were wearing robes of odd colors. Ominously, none of them were wearing hats. A Campus Police officer barked into his communicator and turned to the dome just in time to see the lights turned off. The students groaned. Most of the cops understood the playful nature of the hacks, but in this case diplomacy was involved and it wasn't a laughing matter.

Maxwell Finch blinked as he emerged from the corridor. He found himself in an environment unlike anything he'd seen before. He was in a hallway of some sort. There were odd lights in the ceiling, wall-to-wall carpeting on the floor, and several doors with placards on them consisting of the letter "H" followed by a number. This must be an office of some sort, perhaps an area the Muggles had set up to welcome the wizards to their realm.

All of the wizards were moving forward down the corridor. The corridor continued in the opposite direction, however. Craning his neck to look behind him, he saw a door with a "J" placard and some
men in uniforms who looked nothing like the Muggles he had seen. The men in uniforms seemed to be trying to keep other Muggles -- dressed like the people he had met -- under control.

He brought out his camera to take a picture of the corridor. Muggles gestured excitedly. He pushed the button, and there was a brief flash as the photograph started recording. So far, so good.

Half a second later, the lights adjacent to him in the corridor went out.

He winced. What did he do? He didn't mean to wreck the lights. He was just trying to take a picture. The Muggles in the uniforms suddenly started staring at him.

He had to say something. "I'm sorry, sirs! I don't know what I did! I took a picture with my camera and the lights went out around me! The camera seems to be working fine, though. Here, I'll help you out. Lumos."

The wand light turned on, but it didn't do anything to bring the lights back. He hoped he wasn't in trouble. He continued on until he was back into the lighted area of the corridor and pulled out his wand again. "Nox."

The wand light went out -- as did a few more lights.

Several of the wizards muttered nervously at this. Were these lights designed to detect magic? How had the Muggles developed such technology without knowing about the wizards? His thoughts were interrupted by a swear from beyond no fewer than three of the H-marked doors, followed by irritated comments that various somethings weren't working.

Oh dear, he thought. It appeared that his spells were wrecking the Muggles' equipment. He'd need to check his wand out. Discretion was the best part of valor, so he put his wand in his pocket, deactivated his camera, and followed the rest of the wizards down the corridor. He passed through another area of broken lights -- apparently someone else had tried to cast a spell. Odd, he thought. It wasn't his wand then. It sounded like something about magic broke Muggles' technology.

Wait a minute, he thought. The Muggles' recording equipment had worked during their half of the tour, and everyone had been casting spells there. Shouldn't their equipment have broken there as well? Maybe the wizards knew how to prevent the Muggle's machinery from breaking.

The corridor twisted and turned, passing many more H-marked doors. Progress was slow with all the people passing through the narrow space. Eventually, though, they came to a door leading outside.

He walked through the door. It was evening. He was on what appeared to be a platform or walkway attached to a building surrounding a central courtyard. The building was four stories high near him. However, there appeared to be a much taller, box-shaped tower, across the courtyard from him. He whistled. He didn't think he'd ever seen a tower that tall before. The Muggles seemed to have very impressive technology.

The central courtyard was filled with Muggles chatting excitedly and clapping as the wizards emerged from the building. He wanted to look around more but there were people still coming out behind him. He stepped aside so that the rest of the wizards could come out. Several of them had pieces of parchment in their hands. Others had recording devices.

The wizards walked down the corridor and down some stairs, where they were greeted by some impressive-looking Muggles in suits. One of the Muggles shook Secretary Radner's hand.
"Welcome, Mr. Secretary. I'm the mayor of Cambridge, and this fellow here is the president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. It's been an honor to meet your acquaintance, and I hope we will be able to work together and learn from each other in the future."

Everyone cheered as Radner nodded. "Thank you, Mr. Mayor. The feeling is mutual."

"How many people do you have on the tour?"

"About fifty, sir. They're all excited -- I've seen evidence that a few have tried to cast spells. Muggle technology tend to not work well when wizards are casting spells. I'm going to have to tell everyone not to cast spells while near Muggle technology."

The Mayor scratched his head. "But didn't our television cameras work? I was able to watch the tour from my office. Most fascinating, especially the interview with Mrs. Nurse."

"They did, Mr. Mayor. And yes, there is a way Muggle equipment can be protected from magic. However, it requires that we release a colorless, harmless gas into the air surrounding the equipment to be protected."

The mayor was intrigued. "Intriguing. Is the gas magical?"

"No. It is normally part of air, but at too low a concentration to help your equipment. We extracted some and spread it throughout the Four Towns in preparation for your arrival. I believe the term you use for it is argon-38."

The Muggles chattered excitedly at this. Apparently they knew what this gas was. This was a good sign. He'd be able to cast spells again soon.

The Mayor nodded. "Argon-38? That's a noble gas, isn't it? Intriguing. I'll see what can be done. In the meantime, here's the plan.

"You are on the campus of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, a Muggle center for the study of science and technology. We're going to walk down to the Student Center, where we have prepared a meal for you. After that, we're going to head down into the school itself and I'll show you some of the laboratories and so forth. We'll then take you over to a hotel, the Cambridge Marriott, where you can relax. Tomorrow, we're going to take you on a tour of Cambridge and Boston and show you some of the sights. I hope you'll like it. Our party will be much smaller, though, as most of the people you see around you are students at the Institute."

One of the other wizards smiled. "Interesting. Is Harvard College still in business? It was a great center of Muggle learning at the time our community was founded."

The Mayor nodded. "It's still here, sir, maybe three miles away or so. It's probably the most prestigious school in the United States. They are already expecting you tomorrow."

Several of the younger Muggles grumbled at this. Apparently these young Muggles did not like Harvard very much. Maxwell frowned. If these people were students, wouldn't they revere Harvard as much as this school?

Radner nodded. "Sounds fine with us. Lead the way."
The Mayor nodded. "As you wish, Mr. Secretary. Follow me. And please do not use magic for the time being."

With that, the men started walking around the corner and down the street, past the high tower. Maxwell was a bit sad he couldn't record everything he was seeing. Look at these towers! Look at all these strangely-dressed people!

Up ahead, the Secretary of Magic narrowed his eyes and started. "Ha! Am I imagining something, or is that a wizard's hat on that fine building over there? It is difficult to see."

The president of the Institute paused for a moment. He sighed and put his head in his hands. Finally, he nodded. "Yes. That is what we Muggles believe a wizard's hat looks like. We did it to welcome you to our world. Is it accurate?"

Radner looked at it more carefully. "Actually, no. It doesn't look at all like a wizard's hat. However, that's understandable, Mr. President. At the time you made the display, you hadn't taken the tour and as a result didn't know what a wizard's hat truly looked like. We appreciate the gesture, though. It shows that you are sincere about your desire to blend our communities."

The President stared at Radner and breathed a sigh of relief. "That's good to hear. Now, let's go. This building here is the Delta Psi fraternity, also known as the Number Six Club."

Maxwell smiled. A place with no fewer than six clubs? A place which tried to welcome wizards with a hat on one of their buildings? The Muggles seemed very friendly. The wizards had nothing to worry about.

To be continued...

------------
Update #35
------------
February 5, 1996
Dursley-Burgess Household
Westboro, Kansas
United States of America

Patrick Dursley-Burgess stared at the monitor in disbelief. The wizards were about to take over the world and no one knew it. Why else would they have conveniently "exposed" themselves at this point? Had he been one of the wizards, he would have waited until they had developed a foolproof plan for world domination before announcing their existence to the world.

The Bible clearly stated that the faithful were not allowed to let a witch live. God had decreed that the witches be destroyed, and one did not question His words. They were right in front of him, in black and white. They weren't going to fool someone who read the Bible a lot.

He had watched as President Clinton and the minion of the Antichrist appeared on live TV and tried to convince America that these witches could be trusted. Most of the people believed him. However, Nigel didn't. In a debate between God and a secular leader, whom was he supposed to trust?

The explanation for the President's behavior was simple: this so-called Secretary of Magic had ensorcelled him before the interview. Although he had personally not voted for Clinton in 1992, and planned to vote against him in November, he was still the president and had to be obeyed and respected as such. Yet how was he supposed to obey a president who was no longer acting in the
best interest of his people? How was he supposed to follow the laws of someone who was but a front for a wizard army?

The signs pointing to the wizards being agents of the devil were everywhere. For Christ's sake, the Pope had come out as a wizard! He had never been particularly fond of Catholics. Now he had good reason to be even less fond of them. How many Catholics could be wizards in disguise, waiting to unleash their spells on an unsuspecting population?

He had thought the president's original speech had been problematic. It paled, however, in comparison to the footage currently being shown on the prime-time news. Not only were schools supposedly dedicated to science linked to the witches, but secret witch enclaves were hidden all over the place. One of them had been situated under Boston's primary water supply. It was perfectly positioned to poison the city's drinking water or cast a spell on it which would turn all of the residents into zombies.

Patrick had been troubled by the interview with the ghost most of all. Not only was it possible for the wizards to stop aging -- this Elixir of Life she had referred to -- but once you killed them they wouldn't stay dead! What were mortals supposed to do against a threat like what? The only person who'd be able to deal with people who could rise from the dead would be the Lord Jesus Christ, who had done so himself. This meant that the world would be in deep trouble until that happened.

The Bible had several clear passages referring to the Mark of the Beast. Wizarding ability seemed to fit the bill pretty well. It was easy to identify and, in theory, could have been used for good. Sure. And the Antichrist was supposed to be a very popular and charismatic figure before he turned on the world.

He made a mental note to start watching the missing persons lists. If lots of people disappeared all at once, the Rapture had taken place. He was a righteous man, and therefore he believed that the Rapture would take him. However, he could not rely on miracles. As a result, he had to consider the possibility that he would be left behind and be forced to deal with the Tribulation. Although someone like him would almost certainly make it through the Tribulation and be present at the Second Coming, he at least wanted to be prepared so he wouldn't suffer all that much. Perhaps Christ would ease his burden if he joined the fight against the agents of darkness.

He had tried to warn several people. However, very few people had believed him. They had argued that the wizards had shown no indication that they harbored ill will towards their fellow Americans. Poor souls, he thought. Perhaps they had been ensorcelled as well. They were not strong enough in Jesus to be able to survive the devil's brainwashing.

His cousin Vernon had described several of the horrors wizards could do. Vernon was still in England, raising his precious son Dudley -- along with that cuckoo egg Harry Potter. Vernon had explained that Harry had always been a bit strange and had hoped that Harry would never be trained as a wizard. The wizards had found him, however, and begun training him four years ago.

The results, of course, had been ghastly. Vernon's sister Marge had been inflated like a balloon and floated out the window. Birthday cakes had gone flying on magical propulsion. And worst of all, Harry had repaid Dudley's brotherhood by using magic to seal him in a zoo exhibit with a snake.

Later on, after Harry had learned how to use his wand, the budding warlock had tortured Dudley with some horrible sight under a bridge in England. Patrick didn't know what it was, but what ever it had been had scared the hell out of Dudley. There had been weird lights flying around and an awful chill in the air. The infraction had been serious enough for the Antichrist's officers themselves to tell
Harry to cool it for the time being -- the time had not yet come for them to spring their trap.

That had been in August or thereabouts. Fast forward to last week, when a commercial featuring none other than Harry Potter aired during the Super Bowl. The time had come for the wizards to act. They had finally released Harry Potter and his agents upon the world of normal people.

Patrick could understand why everyone had been so easily fooled. He probably would have been fooled himself ten years ago, when he had moved from England to the Gulf Coast to be closer to his girlfriend, who had been a teacher there at the time. Shortly after his arrival, Yolanda, now his wife, had discovered Reverend Pitmoss and been saved. She had immediately tried to convince him of God's word -- after all, his soul had been at stake. Caught off guard, the devil had managed to fend off the messenger's first few attempts. Eventually, though, Jesus came to him and allowed him to hear his wife's good news. Patrick was now saved and aware of the truth. He would not be fooled again, for God was with him.

Tomorrow, he would get in touch with the other people who knew the truth and found the inaugural chapter of America for Muggles, or AFM. God had chosen him to get the word out, and he would do so.

To be continued...
Update #36 through Update #40

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Mislagnissa

Update #36
---------
February 6, 1996
The White House
Washington, DC
United States of America
---------
It was fairly obvious now that the unicorn was pretty. Pretty good at getting the gardner into trouble, that was.

Secretary Radner had been correct saying that Deirdre was vegetarian and would eat everything with leaves. Unfortunately, the White House garden was filled with trees and bushes. These plants had shed many leaves during the winter, covering the ground with a carpet of brown. The ground was now missing many of those leaves, and at the rate things were going there President Clinton's successor would likely inherit a garden with maybe 2/3 of the trees it had had only a few weeks ago.

As if that were not bad enough, the cute little animal had just discovered that the dry grass under her feet was almost as tasty as the bushes. A large section of the garden looked as if it had been mown by a professional gardening operation, with the grass a good inch or two shorter than it was on the rest of the grounds.

The arrival of Deirdre had pushed Socks into the background, something the poor cat was not particularly thrilled about. Virtually all of the foreign dignitaries visiting the White House had wanted to be photographed with the unicorn.

The Secret Service hadn't been particularly fond of the idea. Deirdre seemed to be relatively tame, at least at the moment. How long she would remain so, however, was anyone's guess. No one on the White House staff knew anything about unicorns. For all they knew, the animal would go through a more aggressive phase as she got older. Radner had refused to spay the animal, arguing that the species was endangered and that fixing animals was cruel. All she had to do was ram her rapidly-growing horn into the guts of the ambassador from Japan and the United States would have an international incident on its hands.

Deirdre's blood sample had been forwarded to scientists at Johns Hopkins University. Although the testing was still incomplete, it appeared that unicorn was indeed an equine, part of the horse family. However, there unicorn had several traits which didn't seem remotely equine. The single large horn wasn't at all horse-like. Neither was the bluish-white blood -- no one could make any sense out of that. And who would have thought that the animal would be evolving what appeared to be a pure gold coat? There weren't any gold horses!

Preliminary DNA testing had revealed that there were parts of the animal's genetic sequence which involved nucleotides other than A, T, C, and G. The scientists had no idea what to make of them and began calling them Q and Z. Biologists suspected that they had to do with magic ability but they had no way to prove it. After all, Muggles had no way to cast magic spells at Q an Z cultures to see how they reacted.
Right now, the owner of the aforementioned Q and Z complexes was busy munching away on an apple tree which had been there for over a hundred years. The gardener threw his hands up in the air. That animal had to go. This was the White House, not a zoo. He could understand keeping the cat in the building. That made sense, and it didn't wreck the garden --

The zoo.

The gardener smiled as an idea came to him. The National Zoo probably knew how to take care of animals like this. They had lions, bears, and more than enough kinds of horses. Granted, Chelsea would probably have a fit -- she had grown quite attached to the unicorn. He suspected, however, that the president would agree with him and have the zoo adopt the animal. First, the zoo could take care of her more than the White House staff. Second, she would likely be placed with other horses, who would likely be able to relate to her better than humans.

Excited, he hurried back into the White House and called the Oval Office. It took a while, but he eventually got through to the president.

The gardener cleared his throat and explained. "Mr. President, I was wondering if I could make a suggestion concerning the unicorn. Is now a good time, sir?"

The president laughed. "Mr. Rourke, there's never a good time when you're president. I'm swamped most of the time. However, I think I can take a few minutes. What's wrong with her?"

"I don't think we're going to able to take care of her much longer, sir. She's a growing animal and is very hungry. She's already made it through most of the fallen leaves and is starting to work on the grass. At the rate things are going, you're going to wind up with a barren wasteland back here by the time your term is over. Dole, or whoever your successor is, won't be happy."

The president thought for a moment. "Can't you import some hay or something like that? What did our predecessors do in the age of horses and buggies?"

"We could, sir. However, that's just part of the problem. I don't know how to take care of animals, and the White House doesn't have stables anymore. I'm the gardener, not a zookeeper. And I doubt even a zookeeper would know exactly what to do with this animal. Is he supposed to treat her like a horse? Is he supposed to put her with the rest of the horses?"

The president paused for a moment. "I see your point. What are you thinking?"

The gardener took a deep breath. "This animal is a gift to the American people, sir. It belongs in the National Zoo. They've got people who know how to take care of all difference sorts of horses, so she'll have a decent shot there. Furthermore, everyone will be able to see her there and relish in her beauty. The people will be happy, you'll be seen as doing a good thing for the country in an election year, and Deirdre will have a better chance at survival than she would have if we cared for her."

He continued. "There's more, sir. Unless I'm mistaken, the wizards have many other animals running around which we find mythical. How much would you be willing to bet, Mr. President, that fairies, the Loch Ness Monster, dinosaurs, dragons, Bigfoot, and various other cryptozoological specimens actually exist but have been hidden up to this point by the wizards' Statute of Secrecy?"

The president conceded that. "Judging from what I've heard from Secretary Radner, that is a distinct possibility."
"My thoughts exactly, sir. My recommendation is that we have someone talk to the National Zoo and have them set up a wing devoted to magical creatures. The unicorn could be the first exhibit in this wing. Next time you see Secretary Radner, ask him for more creatures. If the purpose of the zoo is to show the guest the wonders of the animal kingdom, there isn't a better place for her or any other magical creature."

The president thought about it. "You know, Mr. Rourke, that's a damn good idea. My daughter won't be happy about it, but I think I'll be able to convince her. As far as the Zoo goes, I doubt they'd be willing to house dragons. But cute little animals like Deirdre should be a big draw. What's more, I've been told that several magical schools have Care of Magical Creatures courses which train wizards on the handling of magical creatures. The zoo could hire one of their wizards."

The gardener smiled. "A wizard trained in dealing with magical creatures? That would be even better than an ordinary zookeeper, sir. He may have creatures of his own to put on display."

The president laughed. "I can't agree more, Mr. Rourke. Furthermore, from what Secretary Radner has told me, the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in England has a Care of Magical Creatures instructor who will fit quite well."

"Really? How so?"

"He's a half-giant. Now, if you'll excuse me, duty calls. I'll forward your suggestion off to the appropriate people."

The president hung up, leaving the gardener wondering if Clinton was joking or not about the half-giant. It was plausible, however. Those half-giants could have been a species of Bigfoot. Very interesting.

A soft crunch next to him betrayed Deirdre the unicorn munching on a tree root.

To be continued...
heard it yourself. What's more, how good can this Elixir be if the person who's advertising it is DEAD?"

"She was hanged, Michaels. She admitted that it won't prevent people from being killed. All it will do is prevent aging."

The president stared him down. "And if that's the case, how come she looked like she was in her seventies? If she really had access to the Elixir of Life, would she have allowed herself to look an old crone? If women in the 1690's were like the women of today, they'd be going berserk the moment they saw a single gray hair."

The chairman shrugged. "Perhaps she knew about it but couldn't afford the treatment. Another thing to keep in mind is that Goody Nurse was a member of a small British colony in what is now Massachusetts. How many people were there, a few hundred maybe? It's not like they had major research laboratories in the colonies at the time."

"They had Harvard."

"Whoopee-do, Mr. Green. Do you honestly think that a Puritan colony would allow magical subjects to be taught at Harvard? You heard her as well as I did. The witches accidentally revealed their magical abilities and were persecuted. Trust me, sir. Harvard wasn't making any of the stuff."

The chairman folded his hands across his chest. "Then I suppose she heard about it from someone who had seen the substance in England before 1620."

"That's possible, of course. Then again, she could be completely barking up the wrong tree. This whole Elixir of Life thing could be a myth. She may be simply talking about it because she was misled to believe that it exists. They believed lots of strange things in those days."

The chairman smiled. "I still think it's worth our while to check it out given the stakes -- and the fact that Pfizer, Merck, or someone like that will beat us to the punch. So, here is what I'm thinking. We will operate under the assumption that someone in England has managed to not only create this Elixir but prove that it works as designed. In order for that to happen, the scientist must have lived to an old age. A VERY old age."

The president's eyebrows shot up. "Hmm. You're thinking of going through the obituaries to find someone who lived to, say 150? That may actually work. However, there's something you'll want to consider. What happens if the person is still ALIVE? If the guy is 500 years old but looks like he's 30, he won't stand out at all unless you start probing his memories."

"Not if we go through the city records and see if one person keeps on showing up in the town meetings and news reports for, say, 200 years. If the person's personality and description hasn't changed for 200 years, then I'm pretty certain we've got our guy."

The president shook his head again. "And how are you going to convince him to tell you how to make it?"

"Money talks. We tell him we'll give him 20% of the profits if he gives us exclusive access to the Elixir."

"That's not going to work if he's already trying to make a business out of selling the stuff for himself."
The chairman laughed. "If he's selling the stuff, not many people know about it outside the magical community. I'd say he's got a public relations and advertising problem. This guy's probably operating out of some house or castle somewhere. We're a decent-sized corporation with sales all over the world. Trust me. The world will hear about our product more than it hears about his."

The president then delivered the coup de grace. "And what happens if you have to be a wizard in order to make the stuff?"

The chairman frowned and looked at the wall for a moment. He hadn't thought of that. Perhaps the ingredients required for the Elixir of Life were common medical compounds which would only stop aging if a spell were cast on them. Fortunately, a solution presented itself.

He turned back to the president. "Simple. We hire a wizard as a consultant. Once this man finds someone who can create the Elixir, we hire this second guy for good and get rid of the first one. A wizard would work well in that it would probably take magic to sort through centuries' worth of English documents."

"I see. You're going to lay off a guy who will want to cast spells on you when he's fired."

"Not if we promise him a pension in gold coins and free access to the Elixir for as long as he wants it."

The rest of the board of directors began muttering to themselves. Some people liked the ideas. Others, however, didn't. The president began by mentioning one of the most obvious problems. "That may work, I must admit. However, one more question. Where do we find a wizard?"

In response, the chairman pointed at the television screen. "Just go up to Boston and take one of the kids once they graduate from that underwater school. They'll be more than happy to stop their aging in their 20's, and they'll need to find a job. I suggest hiring a woman as having a 20-year-old bombshell advertising an anti-aging product can't hurt. We can also pass this off as a public relations coup in that we're going out of our way to hire our new Wizarding friends."

Silence ensued for a few moments. Then, slowly, people began nodding around the table. It sounded like the company was coming to an agreement here.

Eventually, it was decided. The company would shell out $50 million over the next two years to try to find a wizard who could create the Elixir of Life. If the search came up try or the company became convinced that the Elixir could not be created (or never existed to begin with), they'd eat the money. However, if the Elixir did in fact exist they secured a monopoly, they'd all be able to live forever and STILL not run out of funds after thousands of years.

The chairman had a very good feeling about this.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #38
-------------
February 7, 1996
Collective Farm PX-311
Outside of Pyongyang
Democrat People's Republic of Korea
A week ago Choi Yeon Mi couldn't have gotten a date to save her life. She didn't think she was all that attractive, and all of the time working in the fields had sapped at the little beauty she had left. She was almost thirty-one and was already starting to grow prematurely gray.

Now, however, she had to fend off suitors with everything short of an Avada Kedavra. The entire farm had fallen in love with her once she had demonstrated the ability to harvest the rice paddies with minimal menial labor. Two of the three major greenhouses had already been harvested, and she had told everyone that she'd get around to the third tomorrow.

Thanks to her magic, the collective suddenly found itself with more free time than it knew what to do with. Many of the younger workers, who had grown up under Communism, hadn't even considered the possibility of prolonged freedom from work. Several of them sat around, confused and in disbelief. Others joked around and started up an impromptu soccer match.

The older residents couldn't decide what made them happier: their renewed health and vigor or their first true vacation since the 50's or 60's. Hugs and jokes were spreading through the farm for the first time in God knew when.

Several of the farmhands had come to her and asked her if they could use magic as well. Choi Yeon had then performed a few experiments which would help her determine if there were any other wizards in the group. At the rate things were going, other farms would likely learn about her and start asking her for help. She was going to need apprentices to serve all these people.

The search had uncovered something most remarkable. There was one man in his early- to mid-twenties who did not experience a mild electric shock when she had asked him to touch her wand. This indicated that he had the potential to become a wizard even though he had been raised as a Muggle. However, that had not been the surprise. The surprise had come during the next experiment, when she had conjured something visible only to wizards and asked him to identify it. He had told her that he didn't see anything.

Puzzled, she asked him to touch the wand again. When he didn't respond, she asked him to hold it. Neither he, nor the wand, reacted.

This didn't make sense. This man was a wizard who couldn't see magical entities? What on earth was this?

[OOC -- this man is the first known half-wizard: remember the concept from the earlier discussions. Half-wizards are effectively people in between a Muggle and wizard. They are more common (1% of the population) than full wizards (0.01%). There are enough people on the farm to probably get a half-wizard but not likely another full wizard. From the DNA perspective, he has Q active but not Z. Each of these genes has a 1% probability of activating]

Mr. Wong had been absolutely floored when she had informed him that there were signs, albeit inconclusive ones, indicating that he could be trained as a wizard. He had told her that he had no idea, and she believed him. Who would have thought there were people who had more magical aptitude than Muggles but less of it than wizards? Could there be a whole continuum of magic ability ranging from pure Muggle to Merlin the Wise? It was an amazing hypothesis, and it explained the existence of Squibs and Muggle-borns to some extent.

Now that she had more free time, she knew what she had to do. She decided to take Mr. Wong as her apprentice and began teaching him basic wandless magic. Ideally, she'd have taught her some of
the more powerful spells, most of which required a wand to cast. Unfortunately, Mr. Wong would have to get his hands on a wand first; more accurately, a wand would have to choose him. Her wand hadn't reacted strongly enough when he had touched it for her to conclude that it liked him enough to let him use it, and there weren't any other magic wands in the general vicinity to test out.

Right now, the farmers were all sitting around in a circle singing songs and eating their lunch. The weather was beautiful, and people kept on insisting that Choi Yeon must have cast something to change the weather. She insisted that she hadn't and suggested that the unusually good weather was a psychological effect as happy people tend to see things in a better light.

For the first time in a long while, people thought that it might be possible to make the best out of a despotic dictatorship. People had always joked that fulfilling the Dear Leader's plans for the harvest and for economy would have required a whole cadre of magicians. Little had they realized that magicians actually existed among them, and that one of them had actually worked wonders for PX-311.

All of the workers had one hope that they dared not voice out loud. If all wizards were like Choi Yeon, they would be able to rule North Korea as benevolent rulers, using magic to fix everything. Could people like Choi Yeon actually organize enough to overthrow Kim Jong-Il and become leaders whom everyone in the country would actually CONSIDER to be dear?

After lunch, Choi Yeon cleared the plates away with a wave of her hand (astonishing the crowd once again) as several musicians brought out some instruments. The folk songs had just started up when the overseer came into the room.

The overseer stared at the people in shock. "What are you doing down there? Get to work! The country needs to be fed!"

Choi Yeon answered. "The work is done, overseer. We've already harvested two of the three greenhouses. You may check for yourself."

The overseer looked at her suspiciously. "You've harvested two greenhouses in less than a week? Why do I find that hard to believe, considering that it's taken you weeks in the past to do even one of them?"

Choi Yeon shrugged. "I'm aware it's hard to believe, overseer. However, we stand by our claim and will swear to it upon the Dear Leader."

The overseer grunted and started heading in the direction of the greenhouses. Fifteen minutes later, he returned with an astonished look on his face.

"I stand corrected! You HAVE harvested everything! Well done! How did you do it so quickly? You should tell me so I can relay your procedures to the Dear Leader. Your method will likely become widespread throughout the land, bringing us all to prosperity!"

Choi Yeon hesitated -- she wasn't sure how to explain this. "The method is difficult to believe, overseer. Furthermore, there are only very few people who are capable of learning it."

The overseer shook his head. "People will learn it if encouraged enough."

"No, overseer. Encouragement won't help. You see, I am a wizard. I am able to cast magical spells. I helped harvest those plants with magic."
The overseer rolled his eyes. "Likely story. Fine. If you're a wizard, prove it."

Choi Yeon nodded. "I have already done so, overseer. The greenhouses are done."

"No, Choi Yeon. Prove it to me right here and now. Cast a spell for me."

Choi Yeon bowed. "As you wish, overseer. Allow me to demonstrate."

She brought out her wand and pointed it at the soccer ball, resting on the ground after the game. She had wanted to demonstrate this on the overseer himself but had been concerned that she would just scare him and get herself shot. The ball, however, would do as well. She took a deep breath and uttered the incantation.

"Wingardium Leviosa"

Both workers and overseer gaped as the soccer ball began hovering five feet off the ground. Directing the ball's movement with the wand, she pushed the ball over to the overseer, who picked it up.

She kept the spell on the ball as he held it. "You may now examine the ball. You will see that I was able to move it without any obvious means of support. Furthermore, note that I am still pointing this wand at the ball. Can you feel it trying to lift out of your hands?"

The overseer's eyes widened. "Yes. It does feel like the ball is trying to fly away! What a wonder!"

She nodded. "I will now remove the spell from the ball. You will feel the ball's weight return to normal."

She pocketed the wand, and the overseer nodded. "The ball has regained its normal weight."

With that, Choi Yeon bowed. "That is my demonstration, overseer. Does it meet with your satisfaction?"

The overseer grinned. "It certainly does. Now I have a question for you. Are there any other wizards in the country?"

"I do not know, overseer. However, it is very likely."

"Would you be able to train these wizards in the use of arts such as this?"

Choi Yeon frowned. "I do not have formal training as a teacher, overseer. However, if it would benefit the people to have me train wizards, I will do so. I've actually found a man here who may benefit from the training as well, Mr. Wong over here". She pointed at her new apprentice, who stared at the overseer awkwardly.

The overseer clapped his hands. "By all means, Choi Yeon. I'll speak with my superiors, but I suspect the Dear Leader will find that you will be much more useful as a magic teacher than a farmer. Now that most of our work is done, I have some free time as well, so I'll take advantage of it to go to Pyongyang and suggest that a magic school be established."

Choi Yeon smiled. "A wise move, overseer. The people can benefit so much from these abilities."
The overseer laughed. "All right. For the time being, you can spend as much time as you want training Mr. Wong. I would be truly shocked if the Dear Leader doesn't summon you at some point ask you to set up the magic school personally."

She beamed. "It would be my honor and duty, overseer."

The overseer smiled. "Thank you for your assistance, Choi Yeon. You are a true patriot."

The overseer smiled and walked away. Just before he was out of earshot, Choi Yeon picked up an excited comment.

"We'll be in Seoul within a year! Those capitalists don't have a chance!"

Uh-oh, she thought.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #39
-------------
February 10, 1996
4 Privet Drive
Surrey, England

-------------
Vernon and Petunia Dursley were both ecstatic and worried. It appeared that there would be many people coming over tonight to listen to their ideas. Unfortunately, it also meant that they'd have to cook and clean things up in a hurry.

They had gone so far to force Dudley into chores. The boy had complained bitterly about it, but Vernon had told him that if their plan was successful, he would never have to worry about Harry or the dementors ever again. Normally, Harry would have been forced to do all the dirty work while Dudley indulged himself in chocolates and sweets. Harry was gone, however.

The family was happy that Harry was out of their lives for good. From what Vernon had heard, the brat had been placed under house arrest in a wizard's safe house. He didn't understand why this Ministry of Magic hadn't executed him or handed him over to Lord What's-His-Name. It didn't matter, however. Harry was no longer his problem, wherever he was. And it pointed to some very stupid running the Ministry. Both of these would work to his advantage.

He thought back to the phone call with his cousin in the States. He hadn't thought Patrick had been particularly bright, having left a secure life in England to go after some graduate student. However, this plan reeked of genius. Patrick had argued that the wizards were going to take over the world -- that was the only reason they had allowed themselves to be seen by the Muggles. He had insisted that the Muggles had to destroy the magical population, doing to the wizards what the wizards had planned to do to them. They would take the wizards by surprise and defeat them before Harry's "friends" knew what was going on.

Patrick had gone on to say that the wizards were tools of the devil and minions of the Antichrist. Vernon didn't buy that, however. Patrick had gotten bloody strange once he had met Reverend Pitmoss and been "saved". Both Patrick and Yolanda claimed to spend more time communicating with God than with their fellow man now. Vernon had no idea why God would single out Patrick for any reason, or why He would even communicate directly with humans to begin with.
Bloody hell, Vernon was still iffy on whether or not He actually existed. His intellect told him that God didn't exist. However, with all these wizards and myths running around in real life, it wasn't out of the realm of possibility that He was running around out there as well.

Regardless of Patrick's bizarre religious beliefs, he had brought up a good point. Someone had to warn the world that the wizards were coming. The Dursleys had suffered torment at the hand of a young -- and barely trained -- wizard. Vernon could just imagine what a fully trained wizard could do to people he didn't like.

He had spoken with Petunia and Dursley and they had both agreed. So, he had asked his relatives to start spreading the news. Meanwhile, he had posted a discreet sign in the supermarket:

**Attention, Britons!**

Are you worried about these wizards?  
Do you think that these people are going to wreak havoc on our world?  
Are you convinced that it is only a matter of time until they betray us?

If so, you are not alone. There are others out there who know the truth.  
We of Britain for Muggles are among them.  
We have seen children ensorcelled and terrified against their will.  
And we have decided that something has to be done to save us from their schemes.

Are YOU willing to help with our noble cause?  
If so, contact us at 555-MUGGLES.

Join us for our inaugural meeting this Friday night, at 7:00 PM,  
at a location disclosed over the telephone.

Do your part to save our country.

Thank you for your attention.

God save the Queen.

The first phone calls had come in a few hours after he had posted the sign. By the end of the day, fifteen people had signed up. His relatives, especially poor old Marge -- now deflated to normal size, though that itself was still rather inflated -- had done their best to advertise the meeting as well. He expected fifty people tonight. That was maybe forty more than he had planned for. Oh well, he thought. Success didn't come without a price.

The food had just come out of the oven when the doorbell rang. Admonishing Dudley to be on his best behavior, he straightened his tie and opened the door to admit a short, red-haired woman.

He bowed to her. "Good evening, ma'am. Welcome to 4 Privet Drive. How may I help you?"

He and Petunia had argued over how exactly to greet the guests. The government probably didn't want people organizing groups against the wizards, so the Dursleys had to be rather circumspect about things. They also had to make sure that everyone who stopped by had actually contacted one of the organizers directly. Living with a budding wizard had taught them the value of paranoia.
The woman shook her hand. "I'm here for the Britain for Muggles meeting."

Vernon nodded and turned to the list of guests. So far so good. "Your name, madame?"

"I'm Isabel Miller, sir."

Vernon checked on the list. "Miller...yup, there you are. Welcome, Ms. Miller. I'm Vernon Dursley. I'm your host for tonight. How did you find out about us?"

"We got in touch with a woman named Marge who supposedly was hexed by a wizard and inflated like a balloon."

Vernon winced. "That was my sister, Ms. Miller. The culprit was a young sorcerer named Harry Potter, my nephew. We had tried to raise him like a normal person and wean him from any ties to magic, but the wizards tracked him down and brainwashed him anyway. He then repaid us by hexing Marge. Quite an ingrate, if I must say so myself."

The woman stared at him. "He attacked his own aunt?"

"Indeed he did, Ms. Miller. Needless to say, she was more than surprised."

She whistled. "These wizards are worse than even I imagined. Is there anything I can do to help?"

Vernon smiled. "That's what this meeting is for, Ms. Miller. We'll discuss strategies and ways to attract other people. And we'll figure out how to end the scourge of the sorcerers once and for all."

Isabel frowned. "You plan to kill them?"

Vernon shook his head. "Ideally, not. We just want them out of our lives as they had been for the past few hundred years. They don't bother us, and we don't bother them. Everything would have been fine had that idiotic nephew of mine flaunted his broom on that American football commercial."

Isabel stared at him. "That was your nephew?"

"Indeed, it was. He's quite a troublemaker. At any rate, we have no plans to kill anyone. However, if the wizards DO attack us, we reserve the right to defend ourselves, our country, and our queen. We won't do anything unless it's in self-defense. We're also considering trying to train the wizards in better manners and redeem them from their evil ways."

Isabel breathed a sigh of relief. "That makes me feel a little better. What can I do now?"

Vernon smiled and pointed at the food. "What you can do now, Ms. Miller, is relax and eat some of my wife's delicious food. And while we're at it, sample some of those canapes my son Dudley is bringing over. They're delicious."

Isabel tried a bite. "They are indeed. Thank you. Give my compliments to the chef."

The doorbell rang once more. "I'll do so, Ms. Miller. Now, if you will excuse me, I have other guests to greet."

To be continued...
The scientist checked the air sample again. "I think we're getting close now, Professor. Judging by the mass of the sample, the average mass of the argon in the atmosphere is definitely going down by about 2 AMU."

The Professor nodded. "That means the argon-40 is being replaced with the argon-38. Good work. Where are you getting all the 38 from?"

"I-Entry. Where else? They've got loads of it down there now that some of our people are starting to visit them more often. I must say, Professor, I'm a bit surprised that we didn't have this talk down there. It would have been a hell of a lot more convenient."

"There's a good reason, Charles. This discovery is more for the Muggles than for the wizards. Thomas is a new creature to us, so we're going to need to do the presentation in a place easily accessible to Muggles. I take it Thomas is going to teleport in and surprise the guests?"

"That's what he's planning on doing, Professor. He always wanted to come in with a bang."

The Professor chuckled. "Given what I've heard about this form of transportation, he's definitely going to come in with a bang. Judging from my watch, he'll be arriving in about 15 minutes. Keep the space around the destination clear -- we don't want any transporter accidents with him teleporting into an object. Those make a mess on Star Trek, and in this case it would make for a diplomatic nightmare."

Both men fell silent and watched the meters as the guests filed into the room. There were several reporters, of course, anxious to hear about the latest findings from the Wizarding world. Most, however, were biology students and various MIT/Harvard geeks.

Three minutes prior to the expected arrival of Thomas, the Professor walked up to the podium. A quick glance at the scientist indicated that the argon-38 concentration was now high enough to permit technology to work. Everything was all set. It was time for the speech.

The Professor cleared his throat. "Good evening, and welcome to this meeting of the Genome Project Division. I'm Professor Eric Studebaker, and I'm from Course 7 -- or, as the rest of the world knows us, the biology department.

"On January 28th, the world was treated to a most remarkable discovery. Wizards, right out of legend, live among us. They have been doing so for time immemorial in peace and tranquility, protecting us from magical threats so that the rest of us could live our lives.

"These wizards are wonderful and amazing people, as we now know. They are capable of great
feats. However, there is something which very few people have studied before. Namely, the cryptozoological animals which we now know as magical creatures. Most of you are aware that President Clinton was given a unicorn as a gift by Secretary of Magic Travis Radner. This unicorn is now on display in the National Zoo and is drawing crowds from all over. She looks like something just out of a fairy tale.

"Although the unicorn is cute and cuddly, at least for now, we have come to discuss an even more fascinating creature, the elf. We have called a meeting to present some information on the elf's genetic sequence. Now it would be only be appropriate to have an elf with us to answer questions. So, it would -- "

There was a snapping sound and a flash of light. When it had faded away, Thomas the elf was standing in the room, staring at all the people. Damn, the Professor thought to himself. I was off by a few seconds. Oh well.

The crowd started chattering excitedly and taking pictures. Thomas stared at the audience in genuine curiosity. "Muggles! Even more Muggles! This time, I may be able to get a chance to talk to them! Have you ever seen a house-elf before?"

A resounding "NO" echoed from the audience. The remark was followed by several overlapping attempts at questions which neither Thomas nor the Professor could make out.

The Professor banged his fist on the podium. "Hold on a minute, guys. You can talk to Thomas later. First, we need to present our report."

He turned on a video projector and started displaying slides on the screen. "We obtained a sample of Thomas's DNA during our tour of I-Entry. We've got preliminary results here, results which you find most fascinating and thought-provoking.

"The house-elf appears to be a newly-discovered member of the Homo genus. Its genes are 99% identical to those of Homo sapiens. It's clear that the house-elf and human shared a common ancestor not too long ago. Were it not for the magic ability, I would have seriously considered the possibility that the house-elf is a pygmy version of an existing Homo. species. However, there's only one problem."

The Professor pointed at the elf's head. "As you can tell, the elf's face has rather distinctive features. Take, for example, the doglike ears. To the best of our knowledge, there are no known species of primates with doglike ears. Even if there were, they wouldn't be close enough to Homo sapiens to share 99% of their genes. To be honest with you, we've been doing something thinking and have no idea how he came to be."

One of the audience members raised his hand for a question. The Professor nodded. "Yes?"

The audience member stood up. "Could one of our ancestors have mated with a member of the canine family?"

Thomas blanched and had to answer that. "Absolutely not, good sir! We do not mate with animals! I am quite familiar with our history and we do not have ancestors which were not like gorillas!"

[OOC -- elves are from a parallel universe where evolution was different. Humans as we know them do not exist in the elves' home universe. Humans and elves had a common ancestor VERY far back, but there is no way humans could breed with elves. Sorry, Tanis Half-Elven.]
The Professor didn't like where this was going. "Ladies and gentlemen, please don't offend him. He is an intelligent, civilized being, just like you. Judging from what I've read up on the Geneva Protocol, he easily qualifies as close enough to human to be allowed basic human rights. Would you like it if someone asked you if your mother was a dog?"

That silenced the crowd pretty quickly.

The Professor nodded. "Thank you. At any rate, the only thing I can think of is that there is a whole branch of mammalian evolution which we've never seen before. For all we know, it's quite possible that magic can tinker with evolution to create species which would not necessarily be possible."

Thomas nodded and turned to the Professor. "That is indeed correct, sir. The basilisk can be created by hatching a chicken egg beneath a toad."

The Muggles got excited about that. An audience member said. "With or without magic?"

"With magic, sir."

"Intriguing, Thomas. Can you demonstrate if we get a chicken egg and a toad from the labs?"

Thomas shook his head. "No, sir. The basilisk is a dangerous creature. A specimen terrorized a Wizarding school in Britain three years ago to the point that it nearly forced the closure of the school. I cannot allow it to wreak havoc on an unsuspecting Muggle world. The consequences would be disastrous. I will not do it. We elves have code of moral conduct similar to other advanced civilizations."

The Muggles were intrigued by this as well. The Professor had the distinct impression that the anthropologists would be all over the poor elf.

He had to bang the podium again to resume the talk. "Ladies and gentlemen, please. We can talk with Thomas when this is over."

Decorum restored, he continued the lecture. "Most of the differences between Thomas's DNA and ours lie in coding for ear shape and height. Brain capacity and intellectual ability seem to be equal to, or exceeding, human values. I'd expect that this elf has an IQ of 150 or higher. He'd probably get into this school pretty easily. And he certainly has the moral conduct befitting a civilized species. He certainly deserves all rights reserved for humans."

The people cheered at that. Thomas bowed.

"No discrimination. No heckling. No slavery."

Thomas's eyes widened. "No slavery?"

The Professor nodded. "Yes. Have you found evil wizards who enslave your people?"

Thomas nodded. "I'm afraid so. Normally we are associated with a human and fiercely defend our masters. I take pride in my service to Sorcerer Meeks. However, there are a few unkind masters who enslave us and forces to do things we don't like."

The Professor didn't like that. "Slavery was outlawed in the United States in 1861."
Thomas shrugged. "Tell that to my comrades."

The Muggles started grumbling again in disgust and fury, and the Professor had to bang his podium to resume the lecture. Finally, the room silenced. "Thank you. One of the more curious features of the elf's DNA is several copies of the nucleotide chains known as Q and Z, shown here in the image. We don't know what they do, but they are as of interest in that they were also present in Deirdre the unicorn's DNA -- and nowhere else. More research is ongoing at this time, but we suspect they will have something to do with magic."

He tried to resume his lecture but gave up as the Muggles began inundating the poor elf with questions.

To be continued...
Martin Schmitt looked at the powder placed in the vial before him. "This is it?"

The dean nodded. "That's it. Izzy Sanders delivered it to me himself. He claims that it is capable of transporting people long distances. Sanders claims he used to visit a Wizarding hideout in the northeast corner of the state. He's got videotape to back him up. It seems that he saw the same type of stuff the people at MIT saw."


The dead shook his head. "Somewhere in the Navajo reservation. He didn't identify an exact location, however: only a name. Fourth Mesa."

Schmitt thought a moment. "I've heard of First, Second, and Third Mesa. But a Fourth Mesa? Never heard of it."

"That is intentional, Martin. Fourth Mesa is a secret hideout. Sanders refused to offer any other details, however, citing the wizards' need for privacy. What he did say, however, is that there is no way the Muggles can access it without the wizards' permission. Sanders got special dispensation because he will soon be working for the wizards as a Muggle liaison. He thinks it's all his fault that the wizards were exposed and is doing everything he can to help."

Schmitt grinned. "I bet he's feeding them Blast Cola to beat the band."

The dead chuckled. "He tried. They didn't like it. I kind of like it, though. We've got it in the cafeteria now -- the less the wizards drink, the more we get."

Schmitt laughed. "You can say that again. What have you found out so far about this stuff?"

The dean looked back at the vial. "It's got four components in equal proportion: a metal I've never seen before, silver, iodine, and carbon."

Schmitt's eyebrows shot up. "A metal you've never seen before? What is it?"

"No one knows. The people in the spectroscopy lab couldn't identify it. All we can tell is that it's a silvery-white solid at room temperature and quite heavy."

"What's its atomic weight?"
The dean stared at him. "Somewhere in the 340's."

Schmitt couldn't believe what he was hearing. "340's? Jesus Christ, that's off the end of the table! Even uranium has a mass of 238, and beyond that you're into radioactive stuff. Are you sure it's not radioactive?"

The dean nodded. "Positive. It's stable, and very heavy."

Schmitt shook his head. "It's got to be a compound then. That would explain its mass and the fact that the spectroscopy lab couldn't identify it."

The dean nodded. "I'm thinking that as well, Martin. Unfortunately, we can't seem to do anything which can break it up into its constituent atoms. We'll keep on working on it with our sample, though. In the meantime, here's your sample. See what you can make out of it."

Schmitt nodded and shook the dean's hand. "I'll get to it right away, sir. I was planning to focus on how people can use it for transportation. Have you been able to create the green fire with it yet?"

The dean shook his head. "Not yet. However, I'm confident that we'll be able to figure it out. Listen, I've got a meeting pretty soon -- I've got to go. Tell me if you've found something, OK?"

"I will, sir."

With that, the dean left the room, leaving the vial of Floo powder sitting on Schmitt's desk.

Schmitt sat down, opened the vial, and spread some of it out on his desk. The powder was fine shone with a brilliant silver-purple hue. The purple had to be the iodine, he thought. The color made sense, in some respects, given that it had silver, iodine, and another heavy metal or compound in it.

He turned to his computer and started running through his checklists of experiments. First, he tried reacting it with fluorine and chlorine. It didn't explode with a bang, much to his relief. What surprised him, however, was that it didn't do ANYTHING. Certainly the iodine would have been displaced by the chlorine and fluorine.

It obviously didn't react with oxygen or nitrogen -- otherwise, it would have gone bonkers reacting with the air and stored some of those elements involved in the formula. Rubidium and cesium didn't do much good either.

He started working on the acids. The material didn't seem to react with any of the common acids: sulfuric, nitric, acetic, and so forth. It just sat there as if nothing had happened. This seemed to be one inert compound. Nothing seemed to affect it. Even aqua regia didn't help.

He made a note to ask his colleagues how he was able to figure out that there was iodine, carbon, and silver in it. He certainly wasn't getting anywhere.

He tried dissolving it in water. Finally, something useful -- the substance was soluble in water and turned it a neon pink. He jotted that down in his notes.

He tried determining its melting and boiling points. He placed the substance in a vacuum chamber and began to heat it up the contents. Nothing happened until it got past 2000 K, at which point the silver, iodine, and carbon just disassociated away and promptly flashed to vapor. This must have been how the other labs figured out what the other components were.
This left the mysterious metal compound, just sitting there. The metal eventually melted into a silver sludge around 3500 K. He jotted down the temperature. He admitted to himself that he didn't know of any substance which had a melting point that high.

Suddenly, something occurred to him. He'd tried reacting it with oxygen, to no avail. He'd tried heating it up in vacuum, also to no avail. But what if he tried speeding up the reactive element reactions by performing them at a higher temperature?

Burn it, he thought.

He headed over to a cabinet and pulled out a Bunsen burner. He placed it under a small quantity of the sample. What happened next caught him completely off guard.

The powder burst into green flame seconds after the Bunsen burner was placed beneath it. What had surprised him was the fact that it had ignited without even him igniting the burner. Perhaps it had something to do with the light bulb nearby going out at about the time the flame appeared.

[What has happened is that the Floo powder sensed the burner approaching and interpreted that it was being thrown into a fireplace -- that is, something which could start a fire. The vacuum chamber didn't qualify because a fire cannot ignite without oxygen -- hence it could not be a fireplace]

Damn, he thought. This thing can ignite spontaneously. He'd better be careful with it and ask Sanders or a wizard for instruction here.

The green flame was very odd-looking. It didn't seem to produce much heat even though it looked quite lethal. He began wondering if the substance burned green in air. Lithium burned red in air -- perhaps this compound burned green.

He gingerly reached towards the flames and touched the powder. It was still at room temperature, though it was being consumed very slowly.

He hadn't expected to actually get the fire lit. However, now that it was lit, it was time to go to the next step. He placed a coin in the flame and closed his eyes, and said "I want the coin to go to the table next to me."

He opened his eyes. The coin was still there.

[That's because the lab isn't on the Floo network. Duh ]

Puzzled, he moved the Bunsen burner out of the way so he could get a better luck at the bottom of the coin. Was the fire doing something to the bottom of the coin? Melting it? Burning it?

As he did so, he got his second surprise. The fire died away as soon as the Bunsen burner was removed. This left a seemingly undamaged coin with a mostly-consumed pinch of Floo powder.

Schmitt picked up the burner and look at it closely. What the hell was going on with this burner?

It sounded like he had a lot more work to do.

To be continued...
Michael Osgood walked in with a big grin on his face and his hands behind his back. "You're right, Howard. That girl from Russian House is in fact a witch. I've got hard evidence."

Howard smiled. "Really? Let's see."

In response, Michael revealed what he had been hiding behind his back. It was an honest-to-goodness broom. It didn't seem as sophisticated as the one which had been captured in the Super Bowl footage. But it was a broom nonetheless.

The broom seemed simple enough. There were three Greek (or possibly Cyrillic) letters on it which he recognized as the name of a sorority. Apparently the witch was in one of the sororities. Most intriguing -- for all he knew, everyone in that sorority was a witch. It certainly sounded like the type of thing a sorority would want to keep as one of its secrets.

Howard frowned as a thought occurred to him. "Michael, I'm not sure this is a good idea. You can't just go and take her broom like this. We're going to be trying to see if Muggles like us will be able to fly it. What if we do something wrong and break or misplace it? She isn't going to be happy. And you DON'T want witches mad at you."

Michael looked at the broom. "But..."

Howard put his foot down. "Give her back the broom. It's not yours, and for all we know she doesn't want people finding out she's a witch. Something tells me she doesn't know you have it, either, which it makes it even worse. Guys have been kicked out of this frat for stuff like this. Besides, we have one we can experiment with. Steve managed to get his hands on one of the brooms we picked up during our tour of I-Entry. We'll work with that."

Michael thought for a moment. "I wonder if this sorority consists entirely of witches. Perhaps they have sabbats and covens after dark where they run around naked."

Howard rolled his eyes. "I highly doubt they do that. I actually know a couple of those girls and they don't sound like the type of people who would go for that stuff. Furthermore, all of the legends about nighttime gatherings and covens seem to have been inaccurate -- that Meeks fellow spent a good five to ten minutes debunking all of them."

"But are all the sisters witches or not?"

"It's possible. However, I find it highly unlikely. The odds of a person being able to summon magic are roughly one in ten thousand, according to Meeks. How many girls are there on campus? 1250? 1500? Do the math. If you got into this school, you're good at math. You'd need to have a group of girls seven times the size of MIT's before you had any reasonable shot of running into one witch. Hence there's at most one witch on campus, and that would be if you're lucky. Ergo, the odds of enough witches running around to necessitate the forming of a sorority are extremely low."
Howard groaned. "Michael, give her back the broom. You're not going to be part of the experimentation team until you do that. Do you understand me?"

Michael sputtered a little but cut his remarks short when he saw the look on Howard's face. Grabbing the broom with both hands, he turned around and headed out the door, back towards Russian House.

Once Michael was gone, Howard headed up towards the roof deck, where several of his brothers had gathered around another broom. This one seemed much more sophisticated than the Russian House girl's. Its handle was covered with runes which seemed to have been a cross between ancient Phoenician and Tolkien. He had no idea what they said. However, he didn't care. The goal here was to check if Muggles would be able to fly the brooms.

There was a big debate over whether or not magic was necessary to fly on a broom. Some people believed that the broom was a magical tool anyone would be able to use. One didn't need to know how a car worked in order to use it. On the other hand, it was possible that those runes on the shaft had to be spoken in a certain way to get them off the ground. If that were the case, Muggles would not be able to fly without the assistance of wizards.

Howard looked down at the broom and then at one of the brothers. "This looks like a pretty fancy broom, Steve. How'd you get it?"

Steve grinned. "I had been planning on using it for my physics lab project this semester. The course 8 [physics department] staff had been looking at it and I happened to walk by when they were discussing it. We all have to take at least one lab, so I went for the physics lab. I had originally decided to investigate chaotic turbulence in flowing water. Who'd have thought that I'd wind up trying to figure out what makes a broom fly?"

Howard sighed. "We can't do your work for you, Steve. You know that."

"No, but you can help. Besides, admit it. You want to ride this thing as much as I do."

"I admit it. I do. However, I'm not particularly fond of falling off at high altitude. And I get the distinct impression that the teachers aren't going to be happy if we lose control of it and it wrecks itself crashing into a building."

"Don't worry, Howard. I'll be careful. Now, stand around. I'll show you how all this stuff works."

Steve placed the broom between his legs. "Judging from what we saw in I-Entry, the rider straddles the broom like this. All I need to do is kick off from the ground and I'll start flying."

Howard frowned. "It can't be that easy. What's making it fly? Don't you need to turn it on first?"

Steve shrugged. "Possibly. However, we won't know for certain unless we try."

One of the other men shook his head. "Steve, you're going to get yourself killed if you try this without further investigation. I foresee one of three things: you crashing into a building at relativistic velocities, you falling off and crashing into the ground at relativistic velocities, or you being turned into a toad by whoever that broom's rightful owner is."
Steve smiled. "I'm prepared for that. You know I'm in ROTC Air Force, right? Well, I managed to get myself a backpack with a parachute." He pointed. "If I lose control, I'll activate the chute and let the broom fly away. No problem."

Howard winced. "Great. Now how are you going to get the broom back?"

Steve pointed at an oddly-shaped piece of fabric on top of the shaft. "It's got its own chute, one which will go off seconds after mine. It's not going to be able to fly very far if it's got a parachute holding it back. One of us will just follow it and pick it up."

A fourth brother chimed in. "I don't like this. I think we should get the Russian girl to show us how to use this."

Howard shook his head. "Don't bother. From what I've been told, she can have a bit of a temper, and good old Michael just took her broom not knowing we have one of our own."

Several men chuckled. "We should probably warn people not to step on any bugs or toads after this. They could be Michael."

Howard smiled. "I wouldn't be surprised. I told him to return the broom posthaste, which will probably mean he's being transformed as we speak."

Steve laughed. "Probably. All right, guys. Stand back and let me try to take off. I've already done all the preflight checks and should be good to go."

Howard, still uncertain as to whether Steve was out of his mind, backed off. Steve put on some sports goggles and grinned. "This is Wizard Airlines, Flight 101. I'm your captain. Our flying time will be hopefully less than 30 seconds. Due to the short nature of the trip, there will be no snacks, movies, or bathroom breaks. We're No. 1 for takeoff, so here we go!"

He kicked off the ground. And went absolutely nowhere.

Steve frowned as several of the other brothers nodded as if sharing an inside joke. "Looks like we have some technical problems. There's going to be a slight delay."

Steve looked at the shaft. Some of the runes were glowing, others weren't. Odd, he thought. He wondered what the glowing runes meant. He reached out to touch one.

The broom suddenly burst out from under him, dropping him unceremoniously on his parachute pack. Howard watched as it flew off, unmanned, into the sky in the general direction of the Great Dome.

Steve gawked at it and started swearing. He pressed a button on his parachute pack and the chute deployed, covering him with fabric. Seconds later, a second chute appeared over the Green Building. Howard watched as the parachute slowly lowered the broom to the roof. The broom landed safely, and everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

Then the half-deflated parachute caught some air, took off again, and managed to drape itself around the geodesic dome that housed one of the weather stations. Howard could see the broom dangling over the side of the building, sixteen floors up.

Oops.
Laurence Montoya shook his head as he pushed his six-month-old daughter through the corridors. Those MIT students thought they were so smart, they could try fiddling with stuff which didn't follow all of their vaunted scientific principles. Judging from the rumors coming out of Massachusetts, some mischievous students had managed to get their hands on an authentic wizard's broomstick and had actually tried to fly it. Needless to say, it hadn't worked out all that well. The broom had taken off, all right. Unfortunately for the hackers, it had taken off immediately after dislodging its rider.

The students had attached a parachute to the broom to make sure that it wouldn't fly away. All the parachute managed to do was catch the top of a skyscraper on campus and dangle the broom sixteen feet above the ground, much to the amusement of the students. Boston's Channel 4 had a field day covering the dangling broom.

Not everyone had been amused, however. The Department of Magic found out about the incident within a matter of minutes, as an appalled graduate student had headed down through the now-open portal to I-Entry and reported it to the Secretary of Magic.

Travis Radner had been absolutely furious. He demanded that all Muggles return their brooms at once. Brooms were not toys, he said. They were vehicles, just like cars and trucks. If they were used improperly, they could kill a human.

Radner had promptly promulgated two new laws, which were immediately approved by the President. First, anyone who wanted a broom had to submit a request to the Department of Magic stating exactly what they would be doing with the broom. Second, no Muggle would be permitted to operate a broom. They would only be able to fly if they rode behind a trained operator, one who would almost certainly be a wizard. Violators would be punished by a 150 Galleon fine. Considering the price of gold in the Muggle world, that was a very high price to pay for a few minutes of excitement.

Radner had also reported that he had cast a spell which would be keeping track of the locations of all brooms given to the Muggles. Laurence had no idea if it was possible for him to actually do such a thing. Then again, who knew how powerful these wizards were? Hell, there were stories of biblical characters who had stopped the sun. Since it was now known that several characters were wizards, some of them must have had immense power.

On the flip side, Radner had taken the opportunity to report a possible medical breakthrough. The student who had reported the incident had toured I-Entry earlier with his significant other, and the wizards had noted that the aforementioned significant other had a parting resemblance to a magical humanoid female known as a veela. After issuing the orders to confiscate the brooms, Radner had sent the man to bring the woman down to I-Entry, where they took a blood sample. His next step would be to go to France to get in touch with some full-blooded veela and get a blood sample from
one of those women.

Once that was done, both blood samples would be sent to a biology lab to determine if there was much of an overlap in the DNA sequences. Radner suspected that the significant other was maybe 1/32 veela. That didn't sound like much. However, the implications of such a discovery would be quite profound. After all, the significant other (known only as "Subject H") was a Muggle. Could veela and other magical creatures have been breeding with Muggles all these years and no one known about it? The wizards certainly wouldn't have tested the Muggles for veela genes, and the Muggles certainly wouldn't have known what to test for since they didn't know what veela were.

Several people had asked to interview Subject H and her consort. Radner had foreseen this, however, and Obliviated both halves of the couple. As with any medical experimentation, particularly one as potentially groundbreaking as this one, everything had to be done impartially and confidentially. The media had to respect the couple's right to privacy, and the wizards had ensured this by not releasing the identity of the couple and ensuring that the couple wouldn't be able to spill the beans themselves.

Shaking his head at the hubris of the MIT students, Laurence headed towards the cafeteria to get dinner. Little Kayla slept peacefully in the stroller as she drew funny faces and cute comments from the onlookers. About three people asked him how old she was in a span of five minutes.

Laurence smiled as he recalled Goldish's First Rule: Babies Make You Popular. He was thankful that she was asleep: given the amount she tended to cry and throw things around, he'd have become popular for all the wrong reasons had Kayla actually been awake.

He and his wife were living in married student housing on campus. She was working on a doctorate in astrophysics and was hoping to get a chance to use one of the powerful telescopes in the southeast corner of the state. She hadn't gotten much luck yet, however, as her first observing run had taken her down to Chile. She had completely forgotten that the Large Magellanic Cloud couldn't be seen from Phoenix.

He entered the cafeteria and grabbed some pizza for him and a salad for his wife. He had just entered the checkout line when he saw something unusual. A man dressed in a suit and tie was sitting behind a table covered with small cups of a golden-brown liquid. The sign behind him read, "Get Two Free Bottles Of Blast Cola! Must Be 21 Or Older."

Laurence’s eyebrows shot up. He liked Blast, and so did his wife. This was too good an opportunity to pass up. He stepped out of line and headed over to the table.

The man looked at him and smiled. "Good evening, sir. How can I help you?"

Laurence smiled. "I saw the ad for Blast Cola and was wondering if I could try my luck."

"Certainly. All you need to do is try a glass of one of our new products. You can see it right in front of you."

Laurence looked down at the cups. "What is it?"

"It's a possible new product of ours. We call it Project B. We've gotten to the point where we're beta testing it and are trying to see what customers think of it. Are you game? All testers get two free bottles of Blast Cola."
Laurence nodded and began reaching for a glass. "All right, I'll check it out."

The salesman laughed and shook his head. "Hold your horses, fella. This stuff is mildly alcoholic. Got an ID on you?"

Laurence rummaged around in his wallet, withdrew his driver's license, and handed it to the salesman. "There you go."

The salesman looked it over for a few moments. "Looks OK to me. Did you drive here?"

Laurence shook his head. "Nope. We walked. Well, I walked and she slept. We live nearby."

"Good. Go ahead, take a drink. Tell me what you think about it."

Finally, Laurence picked up one of the cups and drank it. It tasted magnificent. He could have sworn he tasted both butter and alcohol. He'd never even conceived of something like this before. He smiled and wiped his lips. "Tastes really good! What is it?"

"Project B. If it gets popular enough and gets good enough reviews, we'll start selling it all over the country. You know anyone else who'd want to give it a try?"

Laurence shrugged. "A couple of people. My wife will probably want to try it out."

The salesman frowned. "It's alcoholic. Is she nursing the baby? If so, I can't let her have it."

Drat, Laurence thought. His wife would kill him. However, if everyone else liked it as much as he did, it would probably be in the stores by the time Kayla was weaned. He nodded gravely. "Yup, she's nursing. And you have a good point. We don't want this little girl to grow up hooked on alcohol."

"Don't worry. At the rate things are going, it will be in the stores by the time she's done nursing. At any rate, let me jot down some notes. What do you like about this product? Is there anything you don't like? Comments? Suggestions?"

Laurence rattled off a few comments. The taste was pretty good. In all fairness, he couldn't think of anything bad about it. Maybe it was a bit warm, but that was to be expected given the fact that it had been sitting out in the open.

The salesman jotted down the notes. "Very good. Thank you for your time, sir. And, as promised, here are your two bottles of Blast Cola."

The salesman reached behind him and produced two one-liter bottles of Blast, which Laurence accepted eagerly. "Thank you so much, sir. We'll look for this in the supermarket the next time we shop."

The salseman nodded. "Don't mention it. Have a nice evening!"

"You too."

With that, Laurence pushed Kayla away from the table and back into line. He placed the two bottles of cola in a pouch in the stroller behind the baby.
The vibrations from bottles being placed in the pouch shook the baby enough to wake her. Five seconds later, she was crying.

Laurence groaned. There went Mr. Popularity.

To be continued...

--------------

Update #44
-------------

February 11, 1996
Church of the Right Wing
Westboro, Kansas
United States of America

Patrick Dursley-Burgess waited with excitement in the front pew of the church. He'd spoken to Reverend Pitmoss before the sermon and told him about America for Mugles. The minister had thought it was a great idea and would advertise it during this week's sermon.

Stephen Pitmoss saw himself only as a messenger, sent by God to help America be the best it can be. Part of his mission was to rid the country of undesirable elements, which he believed were only going to get the United States into trouble later.

Pitmoss had a large following, thanks to charisma and fiery sermons. He was well known. Unfortunately, fame carried a price. Many countries disagreed with his policies and considered him a terrorist, criminal, or worse. Several would not let him enter, turning him away at the border or forcing him to fly back home. He endured this, however, as he knew that the inconveniences would only be temporary. God had selected him for this mission, and Pitmoss knew that He would make things work out in the end. After all, how could humans compete with the Almighty?

Abraham had been tested by God and had worked out all right in the end. Moses had been tested as well and failed only once. Jesus had suffered crucifixion with His name on his lips, only to be rewarded with resurrection and reverence throughout most of the Western world. As long as Pitmoss stayed the course, God would make sure everything would turn around.

The church was packed today. This congregation was one of the largest in the area, and virtually everyone had shown up. Patrick Dursley-Burgess had apparently been spreading America for Muggles pamphlets throughout the community, along with more recent ones indicating that the good reverend would be discussing the wizards in his upcoming sermon. This speech would have a lasting impact, Pitmoss suspected. It was another test, however. With God's help, he would be able to pass it.

Pitmoss raised his hand, and all of the side conversations faded away. Every single worshiper was now looking at him expectantly. Down in the front row, Patrick Dursley-Burgess had a big grin on his face.

Pitmoss took a deep breath. He'd been a pastor for thirty years and still got stagefright before each sermon. He squelched it firmly and began to speak.

"My fellow Americans, it is my duty to inform you that our country is under attack by an enemy more insidious than anything it has seen before. We're not dealing with the Russians here, guys. We're not dealing with foreigners or people from minority ethnic groups. We're not even dealing with Democrats. We are dealing, of course, with the scourge of the devil himself."
He paused.

"We are dealing with witches."

The congregants began talking to each other in worried tones. Pitmoss had to wait a moment for the conversations to subside before continuing.

"You know the quote from the Bible as well as I do. Exodus 22:18 states quite unequivocally that "thou shalt not suffer a witch to live". Some of you may feel that killing people is distasteful, and it is understandable. After all, the Ten Commandments tell us that we aren't allowed to kill. How can God contradict Himself? It makes no sense.

"Well, He's not contradicting Himself. There are several cases in the Bible where God promulgates a general law and then mentions exceptions to it later on. Take, for example, the case of the daughters of Zelophehad. According to the Bible, ancient Israelite inheritance laws required that the eldest son inherit the land. The daughters of Zelophehad, however, found themselves with a problem in that Zelophehad had fathered only daughters. Who gets the land then? Moses asked God for help, and He responded that daughters can serve as caretakers for the land until they marry someone within their tribe. Once they marry, ownership reverts to the husband. As you can see, God explained that there are certain exceptions to the rules, only to be used in unusual circumstances.

"The demand that we kill witches is quite reasonable given the circumstances. God knows everything, as we all realize. He knew that the witches were extremely powerful, seduced by Satan himself. The faithful punished the witches a long time ago, forcing them underground. Yes, they claim that there was a Statute of Secrecy. However, we all know that's a lie. They've just been biding their time, waiting for America to forget they existed. Nowadays, with the soldiers of God being persecuted and ridiculed by the government and the populace in general, they've figured the resistance will be weak enough for them to re-emerge and wreak the havoc of the Apocalypse on an unsuspecting America. Will we let them do that?"

He raised his hands as the crowd shouted, "No!"

Pitmoss continued. "Let me tell you the story of Simon Magus. Let me read from Acts, Chapter 8, verse 9. 'But there was a certain man called Simon, who previously practiced sorcery in the city and astonished the people of Samaria, claiming that he was someone great, to whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, “This man is the great power of God.”' And they heeded him because he had astonished them with his sorceries for a long time. But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized. Then Simon himself also believed; and when he was baptized he continued with Philip, and was amazed, seeing the miracles and signs which were done.'

"What do we learn from this? Witches are extremely powerful and charismatic. They can use their hideous abilities to win over converts. However, the power and the words of Jesus Christ can help not only save the people ensorcelled but possibly cause the witch himself to mend his ways and forsake magic.

"Fast forward from the time of the Savior to today. Just last week, President Clinton made joint announcement with this so-called Secretary of Magic, Travis Radner. I don't know about you, but I didn't realize the United States even had a Secretary of Magic. Did you?"

The congregation roared. "No!"
Pitmoss smiled slyly. "It seems like a bit of an oversight for the American people to not be told about a whole branch of their government, wouldn't it?"

The congregation laughed at that.

Pitmoss chuckled. "I must say, though, that it explains where all of those extra government funds are going to. Who'd have ever thought that we'd be paying all those taxes to support wizards in the government?"

There were angry mutterings at this.

Pitmoss raised his hands and shrugged. "The only possibility that I can think of is that this Secretary Radner and his band of Houdinis have been embezzling money from the government since time immemorial. They're not content with that anymore, it seems. This time, the want real power.

"I personally didn't vote for President Clinton, and I doubt many of you did. However, he is still the leader of our country and we have to respect him. It's not his fault that his brains have taken leave of his body. After all, it's obvious Secretary Radner has ensorcelled him and is now running the show with the president as a pawn."

Pitmoss continued. "A pawn he is, my friends. From what we've been told, there are three spells which can land a wizard in jail. One of them is the Imperius Curse, which allows the wizard to take control of other people and force them to do his bidding. It's obvious that this Radner has cast this Imperius Curse on the president. Yes, he says that this type of spell is forbidden. But why should we be taking his word for it? I doubt he's the type of person who's all that trustworthy."

The crowd roared at this.

Pitmoss smiled as he brought up the coup de grace. "I assume you have watched, or at least heard of, that tour the misguided students of MIT took of that 'wizarding headquarters' in Massachusetts. I think the forces of evil made a mistake there, my friends. They showed everyone evidence of their true forms -- ghosts and goblins. You remember the goblin, right? His name was Thomas. He was the ugliest thing I'd ever seen before. God wouldn't create creatures that ugly. Guess who must have then?"

The crowd roared again.

"How much would you be willing to bet that's what's left of Doubting Thomas? Look what God did to him for doubting the Savior!"

The crowd shouted lots of things simultaneously. Pitmoss couldn't make out what they were saying, but the tone was obvious.

Pitmoss raised his voice. "My fellow Americans, it is our duty as citizens of this country to help America be the best it can be. I tell you today, ladies and gentlemen, that we must begin working for the overthrow or conversion to Christianity of all of these evil wizards. You are to not attack Clinton or any other government official, however. Overthrowing the president won't do any good because the wizard will just ensorcel his successor. Besides, overthrowing the president would be high treason and most un-American.

"I encourage you to spread the word about these evil witches. You now know the truth, something
the government has been trying to cover up. I've got the Bible to back me up. What does Clinton have? Radner?"

The crowd roared.

Pitmoss looked down at Patrick Dursley-Burgess, who was glowing with pride. "Allow me to introduce one of our flock, Mr. Patrick Dursley-Burgess. He's got some news for you which you might find interesting. Please give him your undivided attention."

The crowd applauded as Pitmoss sat down and Patrick ascended to the podium. Patrick looked around at the crowd, his eyes a bit wide. He hadn't expected it to come so soon. But God worked in mysterious ways.

Patrick nodded to the minister. "Thank you, Reverend Pitmoss, for allowing myself to spread my message."

Pitmoss shook his head gravely. "It's not your news. It's God's news and God's help. Give credit to Whom it is due."

Patrick smiled, looked up to the heavens, and turned to the crowd.

"Good afternoon, fellow believers. My name is Patrick Dursley-Burgess. I believe that God has chosen me for a great and noble mission: leading a movement that will take America away from the wizards and return it to us normal people where it belongs."

Everyone cheered at that.

"I have actually personally heard of several cases where wizards have attacked hardworking people in England. My cousin, Vernon Dursley, was appalled to find out that he has a nephew who has fallen to wizardry. The child had been a brat before he'd picked up that nefarious wand. With magic, however, everything got worse. By the age of fifteen, the child had inflated his aunt like a balloon and floated her out the window, terrorized his own cousin with a light show, and tried to kill that same cousin by sealing him in a cage with a venomous snake. Imagine that -- by the age of 15, he has begun attacking a family which has raised him since infancy. The tools of the devil, indeed."

Patrick paused and shuddered. "I hate to think what will happen when this kid gets fully trained as a wizard. Right now he's just an apprentice, a teenager."

Frightened titters began echoing through the crowd.

"We need to do something to stop these monsters pronto. I've done some work to get a resistance movement off the ground. My wife and I have founded a new group, America for Muggles, which will resist the wizards and hopefully kick them out of positions of authority. You now know what's at stake. Who's with us?"

The crowd screamed as one. "We are!"

Patrick beamed. "Thank you, ladies and gentlemen for your support. We'll be handing out pamphlets later on this week in the town common. In the meantime, Reverend Pitmoss will be passing around the collection plate for anything you'd be willing to donate to support our cause. Normally it would be reserved for charity, but since this is also a mission ordained by God it would be appropriate to handle this in church."
The first parishioners snatched the plate out of Pitmoss's hand as soon as it got within arm's reach of the congregation. By the time it had gotten to the end of the first pew, there was $35. By the end of the second pew, there was $60.

Patrick and Pitmoss looked at each other. This was a very good start. With God's help, it would continue.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #45 (warning, another religious nut job is speaking, this time of a different faith. I hope I don't offend anyone)
-------------
February 12, 1996
Al-Jazeera Offices
Doha, Qatar
-------------
The blood drained from Ali's face when he saw the package on the chair. Once again, You-Know-Who had spoken.

The station had received several packages like this before. All of them had contained videotaped recordings from the evil mastermind. The station had once tried to figure out where they had been coming from, but its efforts were of no avail. The bad guys covered their tracks very well, and many people backed off lest they be killed for discovering something they should not know about.

Ali wanted the man dead and buried. He'd like to see the reaction on the guy's face when the man found himself face to face with seventy demons instead of seventy virgins. Because of this man's message, the world had come to believe that a peaceful religious tradition condoned violence and hate crimes. The repercussions of this man's actions would echo for years to come.

There was nothing Ali could do about it now. All he could do was play the tape and deliver the message to his boss.

--------------
Good afternoon, and may Allah grace you with His blessing. Once again, I, Osama bin Laden, have recorded a message to be broadcast on al-Jazeera. Allah willing, this message will be received and analyzed before the six o'clock news.

We of al-Qaeda have received disturbing news over the past few weeks. It appears that many countries in the West have allied themselves with witches, in direct violation of Allah's directives. I urge all devout Muslims to take action against these individuals before the Great Satan becomes even greater.

Some of you may fear that you will not be able to stand up to these so-called wizards. You may be afraid that they will cast spells on you and ruin your lives. This is not the case, however, as we have Allah on our side. You may rest assured that He does not care for these people whatsoever. Not only that, He has decreed that we do what we can to eliminate these individuals. In a battle between our troops, sanctioned by Allah, and these evildoers, it is obvious who is going to emerge victorious.

We of al-Qaeda are currently in the process of planning operations which will, Allah willing, eliminate these wizards before they can strengthen the West too much. As usual, any volunteers or donations will be more than welcome. If you want more information on volunteering, don't hesitate to contact us through the usual channels.
Reports of wizards in high places are appearing all over the world. Not surprisingly, the Pope is a wizard. What would you expect? He's the head of a community which has been crusading against our people for many years. Satan could not have picked a better place to put one of his minions. We'll deal with him eventually. However, we'll deal with the West first.

While we're in the area, we shouldn't forget West Palestine, commonly referred to as the illegal state of Israel. I will bet any of my listeners $100 US that at least one member of the Knesset, the Israeli cabinet, is a wizard. Like all wizards, they are intent on taking over the world. I suspect that he will soon reveal himself to the world along with his accomplices.

Why would he reveal himself now? It's obvious. Because of the work of groups like ours, Israel now realizes that its purported nuclear deterrent is no longer enough to save it from the rising might of our people. As a result, the Lesser Satan made a deal with Satan himself to get reinforcements before the final battle.

In the battle between Satan and the godly, you are on one side or on the other. If you are not with us, you are against us. Those of you who side with us and Allah will be rewarded. Those of you who side against us will, Allah willing, face our wrath. We will be His destroying angel and ensure that His word shall prevail on earth.

I call upon all of the "wizards" in the United States and the other Western countries to submit to the will of Allah. Unlike most people, who have been tricked into believing there was a Statute of Secrecy, Allah has shown us the truth in a vision. You may have fooled them, but you won't fool us. We know you came from hell, and we demand that you go back there. If you do not do so, you and anyone who shelters you will be subject to future terrorist attacks.

We will recognize four levels of submission to Allah for wizards. The first, lowest level will require that the wizard cease all paranormal activities and either return to hell or live out his life like the rest of us, without magic. People have lived without magic for many years and have lived happy, meaningful lives. Wizards who reach this level will be treated with as much dignity as any other members of their country.

The second level will require that the wizard stop all magic use and adopt the teachings of the Prophet and become a Muslim, adopting the Qu'ran as the Law and word of Allah. We will welcome such individuals like any other converts to the True Faith.

The third level will require that the wizard use his powers for good and not for ill, using the powers of hell on behalf of Allah. In order to do so, he must become a Muslim and then use his abilities to help other people. He must use his magic to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick, and do other good deeds. These individuals can be the bedrock for the Pillars of Islam. We will be eternally grateful to such individuals and reward them financially.

The fourth level is an extension of the third in which the wizard not only becomes a Muslim and does good deeds, but he also joins us in our struggle to evict the rest of these demons. Satan will find the struggle much more daunting if half of his soldiers return to Allah and start fighting their former allies. We will be more than willing to provide them with training and equipment, and we will be more than happy to listen to any new battle tactics which can take advantage of their unusual powers.

I now have a request for President Clinton and Prime Minister Major. Word has reached me that movements are arising in your lands which are based on the destruction of these wizards. Your people want the wizards out. If you truly wish to follow the dictates of your citizens, you should
follow their lead and help us eradicate this threat. Do not ally with these wizards. If you were to issue decrees that turned the country against the wizards, we would all be better off. It is up to you, however.

May Allah have mercy on you all. May He give you the wisdom to follow the advice I have set out for you.

Thank you for your attention.

To be continued...
Update #46 through Update #50

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Mislagnissa

Update #46

--------

February 11, 1996
Anthony's Pier 4 Restaurant
Boston, Massachusetts
United States of America

--------

Jason Morgenstern grinned. For the first time in many years, luck had been with him for an extended period of time.

He had been one of the last people admitted to I-Entry before the overwhelmed Sorcerer Meeks had ordered the door sealed shut. It was good thing he hadn't waited to use the bathroom before heading over to MacGregor. Had he arrived a couple of minutes later, he wouldn't have made it in.

The fact that he had held off going to the bathroom had proven to be a blessing in more ways than one. The urge to empty his bladder overcame him about a few minutes into the tour, and he had told Sorcerer Weeks that he needed to use the men's room. Weeks had told him that he would require an escort, which had initially irritated him as he wanted to look around. However, everything had changed when the escort walked into the room.

Her name was Guinevere de Mornay. She was twenty-one, only a year older than he was. She had graduated from the Salem Witches' Academy -- the women's section of the Quabbin Academy of Sorcery -- a few years ago with high honors. These qualifications had been strong enough to get her a plum position in the Department of Magic right out of the Academy.

Jason remembered what his thoughts had been at the time. Cute girl. Has lots of interesting abilities. Is going to be escorting me to the bathroom. Is probably interested in Muggles -- otherwise she wouldn't have volunteered for escort duty. This means she's probably going to be interested in the tour of Muggle Cambridge and Boston. Hell, yeah. I think I've got myself a date. One of the disadvantages of living in Zeta Beta Tau is that I've only guys in my house and said house is in the middle of nowhere. This should help liven things up.

Then his rational mind took over. Stop fantasizing, Jason. She'll never be interested in you. And if she gets mad at you she'll probably turn you into a frog.

Guinevere, however, proved to be interested in Muggles and was indeed going on the trip. This had given him a lot of time to talk to her. She was intrigued about life as a Muggle and wanted to learn more. After all, if the two worlds were going to mingle, she would have to learn to deal with Muggles at some point.

Jason was surprised to find that she was in fact related to the Guinevere of the King Arthur stories. She explained that Arthur had in fact been a wizard-king and had spent a long time apprenticed to the famous Merlin. The Sword in the Stone legend had been an old test to check to see if the candidate was a wizard; the sword had been embedded so tightly that only magic would be able to free it.
They had several common interests. Both were very curious about new things, which gave them a perfect opportunity to learn about each other. She had an amazing sense of humor, though many of the jokes had involved Wizarding punchlines ("What device can be used to make a guard stupider? A dementor dementor!"). She had to explain most of the Wizarding references to him: for instance, a dementor was a dangerous creature used as a security guard in Wizarding prisons.

As if that weren't enough, she was a big sports fan -- but not of any sports he'd heard of before. She hadn't heard of the Bruins, though she had heard of the Celtics from her history lessons (huh? And why did she correct his pronunciation?). She was big on Quodpot though. This was some kind of game with an exploding ball, judging from the little he understood. Jason grinned when he heard that. Wait until his brother learned that the Hot Potato game had probably been developed by wizards.

He spent so much time talking to, and thinking about, Guinevere that he missed a lot of the tour. When he was separated from Guinevere during his visit to the QAS (unmarried women under 30 were not permitted in the building, and the corresponding restriction held for the Salem Witches' Academy), he became so distracted that he nearly walked right into a cauldron brewing some kind of green potion which looked like something out of a toxic-waste dump. The teacher and student both glared at him, telling him that if had fallen into that he'd have grown scales all over his body. He remembered Headmaster Nagle rolling his eyes.

Guinevere had rejoined him after the tour emerged from the QAS. She'd come out the I-Entry corridor with him and had taken part of the tour of the MIT campus. Whenever she saw a machine, she gawked at it and wondered how it worked. He remembered her trying to fiddle with an Athena computer workstation, though she never managed to get past the login screen.

Jason whistled to himself. Cute girl who's a wizard AND a nerd? Ooh yeah!

A tour of Boston and Cambridge later, the wizards were escorted back to the brick wall with the painted letter I. Travis Radner had made some final statements and had started leading everyone back into the corridor. Bracing himself, he asked Guinevere if she would want to meet him again later on. She said yes. She told him to be at the entrance to I-Entry Sunday evening, February 11th, at 8:00. He made it a point to get there early -- 7:30. Several of the people had wondered what he was doing there. When he told them he had a date with a wizardess, they'd laughed at him. The laughs had melted off their faces at 7:50, when the panels of the I opened to admit Guinevere.

Jason shook his head in disbelief. He'd had been expecting to see her in some kind of slinky dress or something like that. If she wasn't comfortable in a slinky dress, she'd have probably worn a nice blouse or something. What he hadn't expected, however, was some kind of robe with a strange insignia on it. She had explained that it the formal Wizarding robe worn by students at the Salem Witches' Academy and it was only used on special occasions.

Special occasion, he thought. This was getting better and better.

He had told her that he had cobbled together a lot of his loose money and managed to secure a table for them at the famous Anthony's Pier 4 restaurant on the waterfront. He figured that she'd remember the place -- she had told him that she had liked the ambiance. She had indeed remembered the restaurant and had offered to take him there.

Jason had stared at her. How was she going to take him there? Did she have a car? Did wizards even
HAVE cars? Did she have a broom on her somewhere?

In response, Guinevere had held onto his hand and told him not to let go. Before he had a chance to open his mouth, everything went black for a moment and he felt himself being squeezed through a small opening. What the hell --

Suddenly light reappeared, and he found himself in the middle of the sidewalk outside Anthony's Pier 4. He stared at her. Several passersby looked at them momentarily before convincing themselves that they hadn't appeared out of nowhere. Jason knew better, however.

He started jumping up and down in excitement. "You teleported us! Wow!"

Guinevere nodded. "Close enough. The correct term is Apparation. It is a method of transportation wizards often use to go from place to place. It's faster than brooms, but you need to be of age in order to use it. And it lets you bring people with you."

Jason whooped it up. "Beam me up, Scotty!"

Guinevere frowned. "Scotty? Who's he?"

Jason rolled his eyes. She may be a nerd to some extent, but there was at least one thing she HAD to learn about in order to be a true nerd.

Grinning, he led her to the entrance, opened the door and ushered her into the restaurant. "He's a character on a television show called Star Trek. He's good at...Apparating people."

Guinevere stared at him. "He's a wizard?"

Jason stammered. "Uh...not exactly. He's an engineer."

An opening, he thought. "I'm going to be an engineer when I grow up. I'm in the electrical engineering program."

Guinevere nodded. "Interesting. We'll have plenty of stuff to talk about. Oh, by the way, the meal's on me."

Jason stared at her. "What? No, you don't have to --"

In response, she reached into her pocket and pulled out a piece of gold. Jason's eyes bulged. "Is that...GOLD?"

She nodded. "It's called a Galleon. Judging by its gold content, it should fetch a couple of hundred dollars at least in the Muggle market. Will that be sufficient?"

Jason shook his head. "Guinevere, they don't take gold coins here."

She shrugged. "Here, you take it then. You can bring it to the bank and exchange it for more acceptable currency. Next time, the meal's on me."

This was looking very promising. He was now going out with a rich nerd who happened to be a wizard with common interests. What's more, she wanted to see him yet again.
Trying to keep his emotions under control, he went up to the greeter and told him about his reservation.

To be continued...

-------------

Update #47
-------------

February 12, 1996
5 Canada Square
Canary Wharf District
London, England
-------------

Nigel Marcellus was already tired, and it was only 3:26 according to his watch. It must have been the four hours of sleep he got last night. Either that, or he wasn't really up to facing another week of work after the wonderful weekend he'd just had.

He had to take a break. At the rate things were going, he'd tell the customer to sell a billion shares instead of a million and only find out about it when the lawsuit notice appeared in the mailbox.

He put on his jacket and marched over to the elevator. A few minutes later, he was outside -- thankfully it was above zero degrees Centigrade -- and walking around the building, trying to clear his mind. Hopefully the cold air would wake him up a little.

It woke him up a little, but not much. He tried kicking snow around to no avail. At the rate things were going, he wouldn't be able to think coherently until he got ten hours or sleep or more. He doubted he'd be able to do anything useful the rest of the day and began thinking about going home. Somewhere, off in the distance, a clock began chiming 3:30. The little bells didn't help, either.

The tremendously powerful explosion did, however.

There was a huge flash of light next to the building. His old SAS training kicked in instinctively and he hit the deck, planting himself face down in the snow as the deafening noise of the blast tore through the air. Debris flew over his head. Something nicked his leg, causing it to sting.

Sound traveled one mile in five seconds. Judging from the direction he'd seen the flash and the amount of time it took for the sound to reach him, the explosion had occurred somewhere in the parking lot next to the main entrance. Probably a truck bomb, he thought. He'd seen a big moving van in the lot a few hours earlier. Curiously enough, it had had Irish plates on it. It made him wonder if the IRA had been behind it. He doubted it was bin Laden -- the terrorist had just issued an order to attack wizards, and there weren't any wizards around here.

He doubted it was a wizard. For one thing, the attacker would have likely used magic and not a truck bomb. For another, the wizards had not shown any ill will towards the rest of Britain's citizens. They didn't seem the kind to go about attacking people.

A creaking sound above his head caught his attention. He clambered out of the snow and looked up just in time to see the top few floors start crumbling. Bloody hell, he thought. The damn building was about to fall on top of him. He had barely tucked himself into a fetal position when something hit the ground with a metallic clank and toppled onto his back. He was trapped. More rubble fell around him, pinning him further. Fortunately, he seemed to have escaped without any serious injuries.

Had he still been in his 20's and in prime physical condition, he'd have been able to push off the rod
and get out of this. He was 52, however, and he'd been out of the SAS for a while. He looked
around at the snow and began wondering if he'd be able to dig himself out. At least he had snow to
drink if he became trapped.

He began working on his tunnel as panicked screams began emanating from inside the collapsed
building. He started hollering at the top of his lungs as well. Not that it would do any bloody good
with all these other people shouting.

Arthur Weasley was startled as Cornelius Fudge's voice boomed throughout the Ministry. "Attention,
please. Attention please. There has been a terrorist attack in the Canary Wharf district, centered on 5
Canada Square. At least one building has partially collapsed and there are people trapped
everywhere. There is at least one casualty and dozens of injured Muggles.

"In the old days, I wouldn't have alerted you to this fact lest you start heading over there on stubborn
moralistic crusades and rescuing people, in violation of the Statute of Secrecy. However, the Statute
of Secrecy is no more. We can now use magic among Muggles. These Muggles need help, and we're
the only people who will be able to deliver it.

"I want all of you to pair up and Apparate over to the Canary Wharf district, no closer than 100
meters from 5 Canada Square. You are to stay with your partner at all times, rescuing survivors and
healing people who are injured. The Wingardium Leviosa charm will be good for lifting objects off
of trapped people, and the Arresto Momentum spell will prevent falling pieces of debris from hitting
the ground. Evanesco can be used to make pieces of debris go away completely.

"You should ask the Muggle authorities if the situation is such that it will be safe to cast your spells.
Casting a Vanishing Charm on something which is underneath another piece of debris will just cause
the thing on top of it to fall onto the victim, making the situation even more serious. If the Muggles
do n't want you to cast spells simply because they're not comfortable with magic, do it anyway if it's
obvious that Muggle technology will not work. Saving lives is much more important than offending
other people. With luck, the aggrieved Muggles will realize that we're only there to help.

"That's all, everyone. Hurry up, please!"

Arthur's momentary disorientation was pierced by a blaring honk. Spinning in place, he saw that he
had Apparated into the middle of a road and a vehicle with flashing blue lights was heading at him at
a high rate of speed. He barely had time to jump out of the way as it went by.

The entire area was in a panic. Several people were running away from the building. Others were
hurrying to help. He followed some of these individuals towards the collapsed building. People
looked at his unusual clothing for a couple of seconds but that was it -- rescuing the survivors was
much more important.

The rescuers spread out as they approached the rubble. Arthur and his buddy, Reginald Cattermole,
headed towards the sound of a man's voice. The sound appeared to be coming from a large mound of
debris in a deep snowbank.

Arthur nodded to Cattermole and nodded. Both men brought out their wands and pointed them at the
pile of debris. Cattermole cast a spell which made sure that the second-highest piece of rubble in the
pile didn't move. This gave Arthur the opportunity to cast the Wingardium Leviosa spell without
worrying about collapsing the rest of the debris pile.

The crowd gaped as the first piece of debris rose into the air. By the time Arthur had lain it gently on
the ground, the two wizards had drawn a bit of an audience.

Arthur just had time to stabilize another beam when Cattermole cast his own Levitation spell, this time on the beam he had stabilized earlier.

---------

Nigel had dug maybe three feet of his tunnel when he heard some strange words nearby.

"Wingardium Leviosa!"

What the hell was THAT? Whatever it was, it wasn't the Queen's English. It certainly didn't sound Welsh or Gaelic or anything like that. Hell, that Wingardium sounded Latin. The language was irrelevant, however. The important thing was to keep on digging.

Suddenly, he felt the weight lift off his back. Surprised, he looked up and saw a most amazing sight: the metal beam which had pinned him floating up into the air with nothing to support it!

Nigel's jaw dropped. He must be hallucinating. This probably meant he was more injured than he thought he was. He'd better sit tight and ask for help. Something about that didn't make sense, however. If he were that injured, how come he'd been able to dig at least a small section of tunnel? And how come he'd been only hit in one place, the leg, and that had been but a flesh wound as Monty Python would have liked to say?

There was one way to find out. He tried standing up and, much to his surprise, was able to do so. He was free! People all around him were cheering and staring at two strangely dressed men. He didn't recognize the men's uniforms, even from his time in the SAS. They must be from some kind of secret division which dealt with terrorists.

The two men walked up to him. One of them, a man with fading red hair, spoke. "You're free, sir. Do you need any help? Are you injured? Do you know if other people are still trapped?"

Nigel shook the speaker's hand. "I think I'm OK, Mr...

The speaker nodded. "Weasley. Arthur Weasley. I'm with the British Ministry of Magic. This is Reginald Cattermole, my colleague. We were using Levitation charms to get those beams off of you."

Nigel's eyes went wide as saucers. "Ministry of Magic, eh? Never heard of you chaps before, but you sure seem to know what you're doing. Impressive trick, by the way. I'm Nigel Marcellus, and I work in this building. I'm also a former SAS man, and thanks to my army background I have a suspicion as to where the explosion came from."

Cattermole looked puzzled for a second. Apparently the wizards didn't know what the SAS was.

Weasley explained. "Reg, the SAS is a unit of elite British soldiers, highly skilled and highly trained. This man may be able to help us."

Cattermole nodded. "I see. Well, Mr. Marcellus, what do you think happened?"

Nigel pointed at what was left of the parking lot. "Judging from the direction the blast wave came from and the amount of time it took for the sound to reach me, I suspect that the explosion was delivered by a truck bomb with Irish plates. I remember seeing it in the parking lot roughly where the center of the explosion should have been. I think the IRA was behind it."
Weasley explained for Cattermole. "The IRA is a terrorist group operating out of Ireland. They call themselves the Irish Republican Army."

Arthur told Cattermole to summon a police officer to take Nigel's testimony. He turned back to Nigel as the other wizard ran away.

"You're sure that it wasn't Voldemort or a Death Eater?"

Nigel stared at him. "Who?"

Arthur have himself a face palm. "Oh, right. You're a Muggle. You don't know who Voldemort is."

Nigel shook his head. "I don't know WHAT a Voldemort is. Are they something you chaps are more familiar with?"

Arthur nodded bleakly. "I'm afraid so. Voldemort, also known as Tom Marvolo Riddle, is an evil wizard. He's very powerful, and he has just apparently returned after a long hiatus. He and his followers have been known to attack Muggles."

Nigel stared back at the wrecked building. "Sounds like the type of thing an evil wizard would do. However, I doubt it was this Voldemort person. This has all the hallmarks of a classic truck bomb plot. Now that I'm out of my hole, I can even smell the residue of the explosives in the air. Trust me, Mr. Weasley. It was a truck bomb. I can show you roughly where it went off."

Arthur nodded as Cattermole returned with one of the cops. "That would be most helpful, Mr. Marcellus. Once we've rescued all these people, we'll handle the evil wizard and you'll handle Muggle matters. Don't worry about the wizard, sir. I'm part of a group which is trying to chase him down."

Nigel nodded. "We appreciate that. Thank you."

Arthur smiled. "Don't mention it. I see you're injured slightly. Do you want me to heal you with magic?"

Nigel stared at him. "You can heal people with magic? Sure, why not. If you're good at making things fly, I figure you can probably heal people."

Arthur nodded, pointed something which looked like a wand at Nigel's leg, and said some strange words. There was a flash of light, and the leg suddenly stopped hurting. The crowd cheered once more.

Nigel reached for his leg and felt no injury. "Damn, you're good. I want one of those wand thingies."

Arthur shook his head. "I'm afraid that's impossible -- wands and Muggles don't mix."

"Oh well. At any rate, follow me, and I'll take you to the epicenter of the blast."

After a brief discussion, Nigel led the cop to the epicenter while the two wizards hurried deeper into the rubble to rescue more people.

To be continued...
From the London Times, Extra Edition:

IRISH REPUBLICAN ARMY DETONATES TRUCK BOMB IN LONDON

1, 5 CANADA SQUARE SERIOUSLY DAMAGED

8 KILLED, 224 INJURED, 73 MISSING

WIZARDS, MINISTRY OF MAGIC PERFORM HEROIC RESCUES

The ceasefire with the Irish Republican Army was disrupted abruptly at 3:30 this afternoon, when a van filled with high explosives detonated in the Canary Wharf district. Half of 5 Canada Square collapsed, trapping hundreds of people in the rubble. 1 Canada Square suffered serious damage, and all of its occupants were evacuated for their own safety.

Eight people were confirmed dead, with well over two hundred injured. Seventy-three people are still unaccounted for, and the search is still ongoing at the time of publication.

Nigel Marcellus, a former SAS operative who had left the service and been employed at 5 Canada Square, witnessed the explosion. "I had been walking around outside, hoping to take a break and wake myself up with in the cold air. There was a big flash and my SAS training instinctively kicked in. I hit deck as debris flew over my head. When I saw the building collapsing, I folded up into a fetal position and was barely missed by a falling beam. Unfortunately, the beam bounced and landed in a position where I was trapped underneath it. I found myself in a position where I had to dig myself out with my own hands, something which reminded me of my old SAS days.

"I had traveled about four feet when someone started speaking in a language I'd never heard before. I was then shocked to see the beam rise up into the air of its own volition, with nothing supporting it. Then these two blokes in strange uniforms came over to me, told me they were wizards, and asked me what had happened. Those two men rescued me, and had it not been for them I would likely still be lying under those beams.

"The two wizards made sure I was OK. They asked me if some bloke named Volde-Something could have done it. Volde-Something supposedly is an evil wizard who's been known to attack Muggles like us. I have no idea who this person is, but I argued that if it were a wizard, he wouldn't have used a truck bomb.

"My SAS training had allowed me to pinpoint the center of the explosion. Once the wizards freed me and began rescuing other people, I led the police over to where I believe the explosion had taken place. It was in the middle of the main 5 Canada Square parking lot. I recalled seeing a moving van with Irish plates in there, one I'd never seen before. I had told the wizards that it had all the hallmarks of an IRA truck bomb, and by Jove I was right. Pieces of the van were everywhere, and I could smell the explosives. The cops eventually found the license plate and took it from there."
Mr. Marcellus made a suggestion in closing. "These wizards seem to be pretty powerful. I wouldn't mind having some of THEM in the SAS with us!"

The Prime Minister cut short his vacation and hurried back to town, where he surveyed the damage. "This attack is a national tragedy. My heartfelt condolences go out to people who lost their loved ones, and our prayers go out for those whose loved ones are injured or have gone missing. Rest assured that finding the perpetrators will become our utmost priority. Although preliminary investigation seems to agree with the SAS chap's assessment of the situation, we will not jump to any conclusions. My office will update you with more information as it becomes available."

Several of wizards were present at the scene. One of the wizards who had rescued Mr. Marcellus, a man named Arthur Weasley, described his experiences. "I had been working in the Ministry of Magic when Minister Cornelius Fudge announced that the city had been attacked. All of us headed out to the site of the explosion to see what we could do. My colleague and I used Levitation spells to free victims from the debris.

"We first thought that the attack could have been orchestrated by an evil wizard known as Voldemort, who has recently returned after a long time in limbo. After further investigation, however, we decided against it. This seemed like an ordinary Muggle-on-Muggle terrorist attack, and

From the Daily Prophet:
EXTRA! EXTRA! EXTRA!
LONDON ATTACKED!

WIZARDS HELP MUGGLES RESCUE TRAPPED VICTIMS AFTER EXPLOSION

PERPETRATOR BELIEVED TO BE MUGGLE TERRORIST GROUP, NOT BLACK OR A DEATH EATER

MINISTRY OF MAGIC DENIES EMPLOYEE RUMOR THAT YOU-KNOW-WHO HAS RETURNED

In an unprecedented act of kindness and mercy made possible for the first time by the accidental exposure of the Wizarding world to the Muggles, the employees of the Ministry of Magic assisted the Muggle authorities in helping rescue people after a terrible explosion shook downtown London and damaged several Muggle buildings.

Reginald Cattermole, an employee in the Magical Maintenance Office, described what he saw when he arrived on the scene. "It was horrible. There was rubble everywhere and people crying out for help. It looked as if a dragon had attacked the building. I wish I could have done more to help those poor people. As it was, my colleague and I were only able to rescue five or six of them."

Knowing that Sirius Black, an escaped prisoner from Azkaban, is on the loose, the Ministry looked for signs indicating that the Death Eaters were behind the attack. Sirius had been imprisoned for Death Eater activities, and the Death Eaters had ravaged the Quidditch World Cup less than a year ago. It soon became obvious, however, that wizards were not behind this attack. There were no Dark Marks in the sky, and a Muggle special forces agent rescued by Cattermole suspected that an Irish Muggle terrorist group was responsible for the attack.
Cornelius Fudge issued a statement after the successful rescues. "The Wizarding community of
Britain would like to issue its most sincere condolences to everyone who lost their loved ones and
was injured in the attack. Had it not been for the help of the Ministry employees, the situation could
have been much worse.

"Wizards may rest assured, however, that it is unlikely that these terrorists will attack us. We have
not done anything to harm Ireland and its people. As the Quidditch World Cup showed -- at least
before the Death Eaters attacked the final -- wizards all over the world have been living peacefully
together for many years. The Irish wizards won't harm us, and the Irish Muggles have no reason to.
Don't worry about the terrorists -- they won't bother us.

"When word of the attack came in, most of us suspected that Sirius Black, Bellatrix Lestrange, or
one of the other escapees from Azkaban was at it again. Fortunately, that was not the case. Had it
been a Death Eater, he or she would likely have left behind a Dark Mark as a calling card. No Dark
Marks appeared. This appears to have been a Muggle-on-Muggle attack.

"This reminds me. There is one thing I must make clear. There are rumors circulating in both the
Muggle and Wizarding communities that the Dark wizard we know as You-Know-Who has
returned. That is not the case. Rest assured, wizards of Britain. Had You-Know-Who returned, we'd
be the first to know about it. He hasn't. End of story. If you hear the rumors, don't pass them on. We
don't want to scare people for no reason. Anyone who is caught spreading this rumor will be
reprimanded severely and possibly fined.

"At any rate, back to the attack. We were able to rescue several people and heal several serious
injuries. We got a lot of good Muggle television and newspaper coverage. This should help Muggles
and wizards get along better in the future and show that neither group has anything to fear from the
other.

"Perhaps one of the most interesting developments is the fact that one of the men rescued was a
former member of the SAS, an elite Muggle military special operations unit. These men are highly
skilled and highly trained and are extremely good at secret missions designed to eliminate enemies.
This man recommended that the SAS begin accepting wizards into its ranks.

"I believe that is actually a very good idea and would recommend a further step: combining the SAS
and the Aurors into a joint special operations unit. The SAS's tactics could catch Sirius Black and the
other Death Eaters off guard, and the Aurors could take out Muggle terrorists who have no defense
against magic. These [continued, Page 3]

To be continued...

-------------
Update #49
-------------
February 15, 1996
Office of the President
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Cambridge, Massachusetts
United States of America
-------------

TENTATIVE COURSE CATALOG FOR COURSE XIX, MAGICAL TECHNOLOGY
---------------------------------------------------------------------------------
NOTE: Unless stated otherwise, all classes will be held in locations accessed through MacGregor I-
Entry. Lettered codes will refer to locations in the Four Towns: D - Dana Town Hall, E - Enfield Town Hall, G - Greenwich Town Hall, H - Department of Magic Headquarters, P - Prescott Town Hall, and QS - Quabbin Academy of Sorcery/Salem Witches' Academy (segregated by gender, two instructors).

Classes will be offered starting in the 1996-1997 academic year.

19.00 - Muggle/Wizard Relations and Diplomacy (HASS-D [humanities distribution elective])
REQUIREMENT FOR ALL STUDENTS FROM THE CLASS OF '01 OR LATER
Units: 12 units, 3-0-9 [3 hours lecture, 0 hours recitation, 9 hours homework estimated per week]
Prerequisites: None
Lecturer: [Russian House Witch's real name]
Location: 26-100 [a large lecture hall]
Description: A discussion of the history of wizard/Muggle relationships over the years with lots of readings.

19.01 - History of the Magical World (HASS-D)
Units: 12 units,
Prerequisites: None
Lecturers: Nagle [men]/Demeter [women]
Location: QS
Description: A labless history of magic course derived from the Wizarding course History of Magic.

19.02 - Magical Physics
Units: 12 units, 3-0-9
Prerequisites: 8.02 [electromagnetism], 19.01
Lecturer: TBD
Location: 6-120
Description: This course will cover what is known of the laws that govern magic.

19.03 - Magic and Technology
Units: 12 units, 3-0-9
Prerequisites: 19.02
Lecturer: TBD
Location: E
Description: The course will explain what happens when magical forces interact with modern technology and why.

19.04 - Magical Spells and Formulae
Units: 12 units, 3-0-9
Prerequisites: 19.02
Lecturer: [Russian House Witch's real name]
Location: 2-190, at least one foreign language course
Description: Goes into the details various of various spell pronunciation and their history.

19.05 - Magical Focus
Units: 12 units, 3-0-9
Prerequisites: 19.01
Lecturer: TBD
Location: 2-190
Description: Discuss practices wizards use to improve their focus and concentration. Some of these techniques can be used in the nonmagical world as well.
19.06 - Magical Transportation
Units: 15 units, 3-3-9
Prerequisites: 19.02, 8.03[quantum mechanics]
Lecturer: TBD
Location: D
Description: Gives an overview of means of magical transportation such as Portkeys and Floo powder. It will cover what can and cannot be done with magical transportation.

19.07 - Brooms and Flight
Units: 12 units, 3-3-6
Prerequisites: 19.06, 16.004 [unified engineering, the culmination of a series of four difficult courses imposed on aerospace students]
Lecturer: TBD
Location: 54-100 [another lecture hall]
Description: Goes through the aerodynamics of flight on brooms and gives further details on the history of the broom.

19.08 - Magical Items and Muggles
Units: 12 units, 3-0-9
Prerequisites: 19.02
Lecturer: TBD
Location: G
Description: Discusses situations where Muggles and magical items come into contact with each other under unusual circumstances. For instance, why is it difficult for a Muggle to control a broom?

19.11 - Wizarding Lab
COUNTS FOR LAB REQUIREMENT [each student must take at least one lab course]
Units: 18 units, 3-3-12
Prerequisites: 19.03
Lecturers: TBD [men]/Ariadne [women]
Location: QS
Description: This is a lab to create magical compounds with the assistance of a student of the appropriate gender at the Quabbin Academy of Sorcery or the Salem Witches' Academy.

19.15 - Enchanting Everyday Objects
Units: 12 units, 3-0-9
Prerequisites: 19.08
Lecturer: TBD
Location: P
Description: Instructs the student in enchanting everyday objects safely and in a way where interaction with Muggles will not wreck the object.

19.18 - Magical Energy and Physical Energy
COUNTS FOR LAB REQUIREMENT
Units: 18 units, 3-3-12
Prerequisites: 19.08
Lecturer: TBD
Location: H
Description: This course will train the student in the methods needed to cause a magical object to work off of electricity and a piece of modern technology to work off of magic.
19.19 - Magical Enhancement
Units: 12 units, 3-0-9
Prerequisites: 19.03
Lecturer: TBD
Location: G
Description: This course will teach the student how to use magic to strengthen objects and enhance their behavior.

19.20 - Magical Item Creation Laboratory
COUNTS FOR LAB REQUIREMENT
Units: 18 units, 3-3-12
Prerequisites: 19.19
Lecturer: [Russian House Witch's real name]
Location: TBD
Description: Students will create their own magical items under the close supervision of a trained wizard.
NOTE: Course may be taken more than once.

19.90 - Special Studies in Magical Technology
Units: 12 units, 3-0-9
Prerequisites: 19.20, innate Wizarding ability
Lecturer: TBD
Location: TBD
Description: Independent research project for a wizard.

REQUIREMENTS TO GRADUATE WITH A BACHELOR'S: 19.05, 19.06, 19.15, and 19.20. Two of the other courses may be chosen as electives.

--------------
To be continued...

------------

Update #50
------------
February 18, 1996
Sedgwick Hotel
New York, New York
United States of America

Karen Stickney looked around the room. It only took a few seconds for the song to pop into her head.

"If there's something strange...in your neighborhood..."

The ballroom was packed with religious scholars and professors of all traditions. There were Muslims, Jews, Christians, Buddhists, and believers of traditions she had never seen before. She could have sworn that one of the men was a full-blown Native American shaman.

At first glance, the crowd looked like a typical gathering for a convention related to interdisciplinary religious studies. However, one thing soon stood out.

About a third of the guests existed only as translucent outlines floating in midair.
The televised interview of Rebecca Nurse had turned religious studies on its head. For the first time in history, the world had witnessed evidence of an afterlife. Not only that, but the ability to become a ghost was not influenced by a person's religious beliefs or piety. All the candidate needed to be -- at least according to Goody Nurse -- was a wizard.

The Salem witch trial victim -- who had just arrived and drawn a large crowd -- still insisted that God had created the ghost realm to give wizards a last chance to accept the Savior before moving on. Most of the religious scholars didn't believe her, however. Why would God give wizards preferential treatment? Wouldn't He give everyone an equal chance at redemption? After all, everyone was equal in His eyes. Furthermore, if Goody Nurse's theory was correct, why would devout Christians linger in the ghost world once they had accepted the Savior?

It was obvious that several traditional views of religion would have to be revamped. Several of the ghosts had been dressed in garb appropriate for the Big Three religions. One of the Native American spirits, on the other hand, apparently hadn't even heard of Mohammed.

The program would consist of a series of question and answer sessions. Rebecca Nurse, as the best known-ghost, would get the first session. The ghost would discuss his or her experiences in the afterlife, along with anything he or she knew about the ghost realm and whether it was possible for corporeal beings to make contact with the ghosts of their loved once and revered spiritual leaders.

She would be followed by a Native American spirit named Little Cloud (who had muttered irritably about the second-tier status of the Native American peoples when told he'd be speaking after Goody Nurse. He was followed by an Aztec witch doctor who had been felled by disease during the Spanish conquest of the Americas (and who had barely managed to restrain himself from trying to throttle the spirit of a Spanish missionary who had fallen trying to Christianize the Aztecs). There would be lots to learn at this session, needless to say.

Rumors had been circulating for several hours, however, that a VERY important figure would be joining the conference. He was supposed to speak at the end. All Karen knew was that it was a man from the Bible. He had come all the way from Israel to join this meeting. The Christians, of course, proclaimed that the Second Coming of Jesus had finally taken place. Karen was skeptical, however. Judging from what she'd heard, the man was supposedly in his seventies. Jesus been executed in his thirties. It couldn't be him.

Once the last -- and most mysterious -- speaker had left the podium, all of them would be called back onstage for a communal chat with the audience. More questions and answers would be posed. Once that was done, each ghost (along with any of his friends who had happened to come with him or her) would be sent to a different ballroom to have one on one sessions with the participants. The status of the last speaker was apparently such that he'd been given the primary reception area as his chat room.

Her thoughts were interrupted when there was a spark of flashing white light and an irritated voice burst out, "Bloody hell, madame, watch where you're going. You walked right through me."

The penultimate speaker flew off the podium to tumultuous applause. His name was Peeves, and he had taken to haunting a British school of wizardry. He was notorious for goofing around with other ghosts and with the students. Supposedly he knew Harry Potter, the juvenile wizard who had been caught in the Super Bowl commercial.

The scientists still couldn't make out what or were exactly Sheol was. All they knew is that although the ghost realm had several different names, Sheol was the most popular, primarily because that was how it was referred to in the Bible, which many of the ghosts revered. The ghosts seemed to agree
with Goody Nurse in that the ghost realm was an extension of, or perhaps parallel to, the corporeal
world. It had nothing to do with heaven or hell, and a couple of the ghosts mentioned -- quit ruefully
-- that they had done things in their lives on Earth which they had regretted. These ghosts had
conceded that they would wind up in hell, and the ghost realm seemed much too pleasant to be hell.

Several of the ghosts had allowed themselves to be scanned by scientists. The various voltmeters and
other equipment picked up some unusual traces of energy, but that was it. They couldn't make head
or tail out of it. They hoped that it would be of use at some point in trying to allow people to speak
with their dead relatives and/or to allow people who were not wizards to enter the ghost realm.

There was one speaker left, however. The room was packed. Television cameras were rolling.
References to Jesus filled the room.

Then a bald man with a short mustache and beard floated onto the stage. He appeared to be in his
seventies and looked Semitic. The people who had been expecting Jesus looked at him, perplexed.
This man appeared to be uninjured and had not suffered the trauma of a crucifixion. As far as the
crowd could tell, he had died of natural causes.

The man looked around the room and began muttering something in a language which sounded like
a cross between Hebrew and Arabic. It suddenly dawned on people that this speaker was from so far
back that he'd need an interpreter in order to communicate effectively with the crowd. A few
moments went by, and person fluent in ancient languages walked onto the stage. The ghost looked at
him for a moment, perplexed, and then pointed at the crowd in confusion. Apparently the ghost had
been surprised that no one understood him.

The interpreter, still a bit in shock, started speaking in the ghost's language. The ghost suddenly
understood what had happened and accepted the newcomer's services as an interpreter.

With the translation mechanism in place, the ghost pointed at himself and started speaking. Karen
could have sworn that he had heard name "Endor" mentioned. Don't tell me the guy was a Star Wars
fan...

The ghost finished speaking and turned to the interpreter. The interpreter's eyes widened and he took
a deep breath. Cameras flashed everywhere.

The interpreter spoke. "Ladies and gentlemen, I have the honor to introduce the prophet Samuel.
Normally he doesn't give audiences. However, the end of the Statute of Secrecy worried him enough
that he consented to join us. He says this is the first time he's spoken to people since King Saul
summoned him through the Witch of Endor."

Everyone started talking at once. Christian, Muslim, and Jewish leaders all tried to outshout each
other. Samuel looked a bit peeved and barked something at the crowd.

The interpreter explained. "He's asking you to shut up and behave properly. He doesn't like being
woken up, as Saul and the Witch of Endor found out. If you can't behave, he's going back to bed."

All of religious leaders shut up simultaneously. Eventually, the interpreter tore up some paper and
made them draw lots as to who spoke first. The first person was a Muslim imam.

The first question was obvious. "Does God exist, and have you met Him?"

The interpreter relayed the question, and the prophet responded. "I believe He exists. Where else
would my prophetic ability have come from? It is certainly not of this world. Or my magical abilities in general?"

"But have you met Him?"

Samuel shook his head. "I have not physically met Him, if that is what you mean. Only Moses saw Him face to face, and I am nowhere near Moses in ability. However, I believe He has inspired me several times. I would have preferred that the children of Israel stay under His care and not under a unified temporal ruler, but as we all know people can be stubborn and won't take no for an answer. The result, as we all know, was disastrous."

A rabbi got the next question.

"What do you mean by the children of Israel?"

Samuel looked at the interpreter and then looked at the rabbi in puzzlement. "Those who believe in the One God, of course. Why do you ask?"

The rabbi explained. "Holy One, over the past thousand years several different sets of customs have evolved for worshiping the One God. They correspond to the modern religions of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity."

Samuel stared the rabbi. "How can they be different religions if they worship the One True God? As long as they worship God and live a lifestyle derived from His teachings, they can do whatever they want. Customs can differ from place to place, but as long as worship is directed towards God it's OK."

"But what happens when these three sets of customs fight among each other as to which one of them is the right way to worship Him?"

Samuel shook his head sadly. "Then the people who participate in these fights do not do so in the name of God. All these sets of customs have the same Father. Cain killed Abel out of jealousy once. God will be very angry and punish anyone who tries to do it again. In the name of God, I urge everyone fighting in this manner to reconsider."

There was dead silence for a minute, and Karen knew why.

Finally, Samuel sighed. "I didn't come here to try to discuss religious minutiae, however. We can discuss that later if you want. I came here to discuss life as a ghost and what the ghost realm of Sheol symbolizes. I'll get into that now."

Samuel spent the next ten minutes discussing the ghost realm and saying roughly the same type of stuff the other ghosts did. However, Karen -- and a lot of other people -- were already jockeying for position to ask Samuel more questions in the one-on-one sessions.

To be continued...
Update #51 through Update #55

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Mislagnissa

Update #51

February 19, 1996
Flamel Residence
Devon
Great Britain

Nicholas Flamel felt old.

Granted, he had good reason to feel old. He had been born in -- what was it, 1326? He was now 670. Granted, he'd stayed at age 72 for God knows how long. He still couldn't believe how the world had changed during his lifetime. The discovery of a new continent. English spanning the globe. Men walking on the moon. He thanked God every day for allowing him to witness such wonders. He had already agreed to donate his diary to the British Museum and publish an electronic version of it -- with the notes on the Philosopher's Stone edited out, of course -- when he died. It would be passed off as a diary which was continued generation after generation. He expected it to be the centerpiece of their collection, and had already spent a few years translating six centuries of Middle English into modern English. For most people, seven years of boring translation would be a waste of time. For Flamel, however, it was but the blink of an eye.

He wouldn't have much more time, however. He couldn't hear as well as he used to a couple of years ago, after he'd gone off the Elixir. His wife was complaining about arthritis. At the rate things were going, he'd be dead and gone before the turn of the millennium. He'd expected to have a good fifty or so years ahead of him, given the fact that wizards tended to live longer than ordinary folk. The various aches and pains worried him, however. Perhaps he had been unlucky in this regard and would die young.

He rolled his eyes at that last expression. Him? Die young? What seemed wrong here?

There was a diffident knock on the door of his study. Putting down his pen -- he'd finally given into modern technology and traded in his quill and parchment for a pen and paper -- he looked at the door.

"Yes?"

"Dr. Flamel, it's me, Hugh". Hugh de Bartolome had been his apprentice a long time ago. Hugh had been part of the team which had developed the Philosopher's Stone, and he had immediately taken advantage of the discovery to convince his master to let him take advantage of it. Hugh had been born in 1349, which made him the third-oldest person on the planet. Quite a reward for a mere apprentice.

Hugh continued. "Sir, we've got another one coming in. This one is from some firm in South Carolina. They say they've got a proposal for you."

Flamel rolled his eyes. Some cultures did not take NO for an answer. In the old days, the king or pope could have just issued a decree and everyone would have listened. Unfortunately, people were
much more...stubborn now. And neither the queen nor pope had real power anymore.

Fortunately, living for six hundred years and looking like he was still in his seventies gave him a lot of ideas. He'd honed his deception skills to a sharp point over the past few centuries. He'd fooled everyone before, and expected to fool the world this time as well.

He nodded. "Offer him some refreshments and let him in. Remember to tell him that you're the butler, not my apprentice. And whatever you do, lie about your age. Your wife used to do that a lot, if I recall correctly."

Hugh grunted, nodded, and left the room. Flamel swore at himself. He had allowed his apprentice's wife access to the Elixir as well, primarily to stop Hugh from pestering him about it. Unfortunately, Mary de Bartholome died in childbirth in 1402. He had told Hugh several times that all the Elixir could do was prevent aging, not other forms of death. Yet Hugh still tended to blame him for allowing his wife to die.

A few minutes later, Hugh returned and led a man in his fifties into the room. "Sir, this is Lawrence Green of the Harold-Green Pharmaceutical Corporation. Mr. Green, this is Dr. Nicholas Flamel, my employer."

Green shook Flamel's hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you, sir. I've heard a lot about you."


Part of Flamel's disguise was to serve as the dean of the Department of Medieval Literature at a local community college. It was a clever ruse. It explained all of the old books and scrolls littering his house, and it explained his unusually good command of Middle English.

Green stared at him for a moment but eventually regained his composure. "Actually, for the time being medieval literature is but a means to an end. There have been rumors over the years of something called the Philosopher's Stone. Supposedly it's capable of producing something called the Elixir of Life. We hope to bottle it as a cure for aging. Supposedly the Stone can also be used to turn lead into gold."

Flamel barely suppressed a laugh. They were still thinking it could turn lead into gold? Where did they get THAT idea from? He'd never gotten that part of it to work. Had he been able to turn lead into gold, he'd be vacationing all over the planet.

Flamel shook his head and rolled his eyes. "I'm familiar with that myth. It's just a myth, however. Alchemists had been working on it for years, including a distant ancestor of mine. No one ever succeeded in producing the Philosopher's Stone."

Green shook his head. "That's not what I heard, Dr. Flamel. One of the ghosts interviewed in the United States claimed that an Elixir of Life existed which could prevent aging. It actually existed, sir. She was adamant about that. And the name Nicholas Flamel came up in my research."

Flamel shrugged. "I freely admit that an alchemist named Nicholas Flamel existed. I have some of his documents. That was an easy thing to admit. "He was one of my ancestors. Our family has reused the names John and Nicholas for a good nine or ten generations of men. I'm just another Nicholas. As far as the Elixir of Life and his alchemy career went, I'm afraid that from what I've seen of my ancestor's documents there is no reference to a working Philosopher's Stone. I'm sorry."
"But the witch was convinced it existed! She was sure of it!"

"She probably WAS convinced it existed. Unfortunately, the documents here state otherwise. She was told something in error. And as you know, I'm a well-known scholar on medieval literature."

Green frowned. "May I see his documents?"

Flamel nodded. "Certainly. I assume you can read Middle English? These documents date back to the fourteenth century."

Green stared at him. Aha, Flamel thought. I didn't think so. Eventually, the pharmaceutical representative nodded. "I can't, but someone in my office can. He was the one who suggested that I contact you."

Flamel shook his head. "I'm afraid I can't let them leave my office. The documents are quite fragile. They are also a family heirloom."

The next question was obvious. "May I make a copy of them?"

Flamel paused a minute. "That will probably be OK. Let me get them. I must warn you, though, that you're not going to find anything about a working Philosopher's Stone. Are you sure you want them?"

Green nodded. "Yes. Considering the payoff if we get this working, it's worth it."

Flamel bit back a swear. He hadn't invented the Stone for financial gain. Calming himself, he nodded. "Well, if you insist, let me go get them. It may take a while to find them, so please be patient."

He walked past an excited Green. Once Green was out of view, he conjured up an old piece of parchment and wrote some Middle English gibberish about the Philosopher's Stone on it. He wrote down some instructions -- completely wrong, of course -- and added something about an attempt to create the Stone which caused it to blow up and burn the alchemist badly. Double-checking the document to make sure it looked authentic, he aged it a bit with an Aging spell and brought it back into the room.

He laid the piece of parchment gingerly on the table. "Do you have a portable scanner? I'd prefer that you scan it here. Look how old it is. I don't like carrying it around too much, and the copier has been on the fritz of late."

As it turned out, Green did have a scanner. He scanned the document and packed the scanner up. "Thank you, Dr. Flamel. You've been most helpful."

Flamel shrugged. "Don't mention it, Mr. Green. I don't think you're going to find anything useful here, but maybe there's something which I've overlooked. Best of luck to you. Tell me if you find anything."

Green nodded. "I will, Dr. Flamel. Thank you for your time. Oh, one more thing -- before I forget. My uncle claims to remember you from college. Where did you go to school, and when did you graduate?"
Flamel nearly laughed again. Another attempt to try to get him to reveal his age? Well, that wasn’t going to work. "Oxford, class of ’46. I barely avoided being drafted for the Second World War."

Green grinned. Flamel knew exactly what Green was going to do -- look up the Oxford class list somehow and check if Flamel was on it. Flamel would be on it, of course. His wife had modified the class lists so he appeared to be class of ’46 and Hugh came out as class of ’69. He kept his face steady, however, as Green spoke once again. "Ever heard of someone named Herbert Wrexham?"

Flamel shrugged. "I can’t say that I remember him. Then again, I’m getting a bit old, and we old people start to lose our memories here and there. Where exactly did I meet Mr. Wrexham?"

Green looked flummoxed for a moment and eventually shook his head. "Not sure. I’ll have to go ask him."

Flamel nodded. "Do that. I’m kind of curious about it now. I’d like to talk to him again -- maybe if I saw him face to face I’d recognize him."

Green looked even more rattled. Now Green had to try to concoct a story about a fake uncle. "I’ll get back to you as soon as I can. In the meantime, I’ve got to take off. Thank you for your time, and I’ll tell you if I find anything in these documents."

Flamel shook Green’s hand. "Please do. It would be a great benefit to literature if you do. And good luck with the Philosopher’s Stone, if it really existed."

With that, Green took his leave and Flamel sat down again. A few minutes later, he heard the door slam. Hugh then walked into the room.

The two fourteenth century men looked at each other and smiled. The word came unbidden to their mouths simultaneously.

"Sucker!"

Both men started laughing like there was no tomorrow.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #52
-------------
February 19, 1996
SAS Division C Headquarters
[location classified]
Great Britain
-------------
"Bloody hell, it’s Uncle Nigel!"

Special Agent 018, Jacob Gold, spun in surprise at the announcement. Sure enough, Special Agent 008 -- better known as General Nigel Alexander Marcellus -- had returned to visit his old stomping grounds. Nigel had been a legendary operative in his day and had done yeoman work infiltrating the Soviet infrastructure during the Cold War. Last Jacob knew, Uncle Nigel had retired and had been working in an office somewhere downtown near where the IRA bomb had gone off.

Normally, there would be a good 30-50 men in the building. Half of them were away, however,
trying to snoop on the IRA without being caught. A couple of them were busy interrogating someone who appeared to have been an IRA plant inside their unit. Dear old Seamus wasn't going to have a pleasant day, Jake feared.

Of the twenty agents in the building, nine of them immediately headed over to Uncle Nigel and started talking shop with him. Uncle Nigel had trained many of these agents, and he was respected by all of them.

Nigel held up his hand to forestall the inevitable reminiscence. "I'd love to catch up with you chaps, but duty calls. I've come to brief you on something which may be quite important at some point down the line."

At this, everyone stopped speaking. Nigel took a deep breath and began his report.

"Many of you may know that I work downtown, in the Canary Wharf district. What you may have not known was that I was actually working in 5 Canada Square, which was badly damaged in the attack. I had was fortunate enough to be outside when the truck bomb went off. Had I been in the building at the time, I would have likely fallen to my death. As it was, I was pinned by debris and began clawing myself out."

Nigel hesitated a moment. "That's when a couple of blokes started waving wands and lifted the heavy beams off of me, freeing me."

Jacob whistled. "You actually met some of those wizards? I thought the wizard stories were some kind of misunderstanding or joke!"

Nigel shook his head. "They're real, all right. I will vouch for them myself. Needless to say, I was surprised at first. However, they soon convinced me. I'll never forget that metal beam rising away from me with nothing supporting it."

Another agent gasped. "They can actually make objects levitate and do things like that?"

"You got it, Banks. They seem to have amazing powers. Until they bring out their wands, they'll look like any other human being. Once they bring out their wand, the bad guys are going to be in big trouble. After I was freed, it occurred to me that wizards could be quite an asset in protecting queen and country."

Jacob put two and two together. "You're thinking of having them join the SAS as special agents?"

A new voice answered. "Exactly, my dear fellow. The wizards have their agents, and the Muggles have theirs. Both are on the same side. It only make sense to have them train together as a unit."

Heads turned as the new person walked into the room. It was a middle-aged man in strange clothing. He was carrying a staff of some sort and had a metal VISITOR badge on his suit. Underneath it was his name: C. FUDGE.

Nigel indicated the newcomer. "Fellow agents, this is His Excellency Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic."

One of the agents looked a bit skeptical. "There's a MINISTER OF MAGIC?"

Fudge nodded. "Indeed there is, young lass. Allow me to demonstrate."
He brought out his wand pointed it at the ceiling. Waving it around with a flourish, he uttered one word. "Avis"!

A flock of birds suddenly burst from the end of the wand. The agents began babbling excitedly. One of the men swore and put his hand to his head. When he removed it, there was a white stain on it. Jacob could barely restrain a laugh. He could have sworn he heard a laugh coming out of empty space, but passed it off as an echo.

Minister Fudge gestured once again with his wand, and a window opened. The birds flew out of the building and perched themselves in a tree. He then blushed slightly and pointed his wand at the targeted man's head. There was a flash, and his hair was clean.

Nigel nodded and gestured once more at Fudge. "Thank you, Minister, for the demonstration. Needless to say, agents, someone like Minister Fudge here would be a great asset in our reconnaissance missions, wouldn't you say? I doubt the target would have ever expected to deal with wizards."

Jacob answered for the group. "Hell, yes!"

Fudge nodded. "My thoughts exactly. We wizards are capable of great things. You've only seen a fraction of what a trained Auror -- that is, wizard trained to spy upon and catch enemy wizards -- can do. I'm nowhere near powerful enough to become an Auror and even I can cast simple spells like this. Put together some Aurors and a bunch of you guys and missions are suddenly going to become much safer and much easier."

Nigel looked around the room. "I spoke with several of the wizards before coming here and recommended that Division C be assigned an Auror as an experiment to see how well the Auror and traditional units complement each other. With your permission, I'll introduce you to your Auror. I assume you're all right with your role in this project?"

Everyone shouted their agreement. In response, Minister Fudge snapped his fingers, and nearly fell over as a third man suddenly materialized in the room. Grinning, he saluted the agents and pointed at a piece of fabric in his hand.

"Invisibility Cloak, gentlemen. I was there the whole time. I must say, Cornelius, I've never seen one of the birds relieve itself on a person's head before. Dawlish is my name, and justice is my game."

Jacob couldn't believe it. An Invisibility Cloak! Spying would become so much easier!

Fudge clapped his hands and indicated the newcomer. "This chap here is John Dawlish, a trained Auror. He'll be working with you guys. Nigel and I have developed some training exercises and we'll see how well they work out.

[Note that this particular Auror is NOT part of the Order of the Phoenix. I deliberately chose him for that reason. He was part of the group Umbridge sent to arrest Dumbledore in book 5.]

Judging from the reaction Dawlish was getting from the rest of the agents, Jacob doubted that there would be any problems making the Auror part of their fellowship.

Nigel raised his hand once again, and all of the agents stopped talking, including Dawlish. "There is another thing to consider, however. These combined wizard/SAS task forces are going to be spying
on both wizards and Muggles. Your opponent may attempt to use magic against you now that their world is out in the open. The Auror will help defend you against this magic. I suspect that you will still have an advantage, on the other hand, as wizards aren't expecting to be shadowed with Muggles and their fancy technology. Combine magic and technology and you'll get an unbeatable combination. Please keep this in mind when you go about your missions.

"There are at least two wizards around who have been known to kill Muggles. We're going want to go after them at some point. Their names are Sirius Black and Tom Marvolo Riddle. The latter often goes by aliases, such as Lord Voldemort, the Dark Lord, You-Know-Who, and He Who Must Not Be Named. Of these two men, Riddle is much more dangerous."

At the mention of Riddle's name, Minister Fudge blanched and shook his head. Clearly, Fudge recognized the evil wizard's name.

Nigel continued. "Both of these men have been seen recently. Sirius Black escaped from prison two years ago, and Mr. Riddle was spotted back in May or thereabouts."

Minister Fudge cleared his throat as Dawlish's eyes shot up. "Mr. Marcellus, where exactly did you get this information? It appears to be in error. Last time I checked, You-Know-Who was out of the way permanently."

Nigel looked at the Minister, confused. "Why, the blokes who rescued me told me. Chaps named Weasley and Cattermole. Are you saying that this Riddle fellow has already been dealt with?"

Fudge nodded. "As far as I know, yes. However, to be fair to Messrs. Weasley and Cattermole, he was an extremely dangerous wizard. When you're dealing with people like him, people tend to spread rumors and even the best can fall victim to them. Rest assured, Mr. Marcellus. You-Know-Who is out of the way." 

Nigel nodded, and Jacob breathed a sigh of relief. One fewer enemy to deal with. "That's good to know. All right, forget Riddle. However, Black is still out there, and you're going to have to deal with him. Dawlish here has some information on this particular wizard which will help you track him down and hopefully catch him. Keep in mind, however, that he can turn into a dog."

The agents stared at him, John included. "A DOG?"

"Yes, a dog. Wizards often develop the ability to transform into an animal. It's good for disguises."

The agents perked up at this again. Jacob wondered what it would be like to walk around as a dog. It would help his career a lot.

Fudge looked at his watch. "Blimey, I've got to go. If you have any questions, don't hesitate to talk to Dawlish. Nigel has also volunteered to return to work as well, at least until the damage to 5 Canada Square is repaired and his brokerage reopens. Good luck with your new mission, and may the magic be with you as you hunt down Sirius Black."

With that, the Minister disappeared and all eyes turned to Dawlish.

To be continued...

--------------
Update #53
--------------
February 19, 1996
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
England
---------
The word had gone out from Dumbledore's office a few minutes ago. The Muggle surprise was ready, and all prefects were going to be allowed to visit the headmaster's office to see it in action.

There had been rumors circulating about the nature of the surprise for a long time. Supposedly it was a piece of Muggle technology which Dumbledore had adapted to work off of magic. Hermione had to manually restrain Ron from telling his father as it was likely that, given Arthur Weasley's infatuation with Muggles, the man would not be able to sleep until he got his hands on the object.

For the first time in a many a moon, Ron didn't mind being called a Weasley. His father had rescued several people during an attack on a Muggle building in downtown London. The mayor had personally thanked him and had given him and his fellow rescuers the keys to the city.

The Muggles were slowly realizing that the witches would be a great boon to human society general. Apparently one of the men who had been rescued by Ron's father had been a former elite soldier. This man, someone named Nigel Something-or-other, had realized that wizards could use their abilities to defend Britain from terrorists and other attackers. Supposedly plans were being made to merge the Aurors into the British constabulary or something like that. Ron's father had had Nigel over for meals several times since the attack, and the old warrior had been floored by the power of magic each time he'd come.

There was trouble in paradise, however. Supposedly his father had blurted out the fact that Voldemort had returned to Nigel -- while he was effectively operating as a member of the Ministry of Magic. Cornelius Fudge hadn't been particularly thrilled about that. Fudge had reprimanded Arthur Weasley several times. The only thing that had kept his father out of Azkaban was the fact that he had become a Muggle hero. If word were to leak out that London's favorite son had been incarcerated for disagreeing with the Minister of Magic, the fallout would likely make an attack by the Death Eaters look tame by comparison.

Ron never thought that he'd have a father who was loved by the Muggles, respected by Dumbledore, and hated by the Ministry. It was enough to give him a headache.

He'd received several letters from Harry over the past few weeks. Unable to attend lessons at school, Harry was being home-schooled by Ron's mother. He was a bit peeved that he couldn't visit his friends, but house arrest was house arrest, regardless of how specious the accusation had been. She wasn't as good a teacher as McGonagall, Hagrid, or even Snape. However, it was better than nothing. The only thing Harry was concerned about was the possibility of OWLs. Home-schooling by a housewife did not prepare a student for a possible career as an Auror.

Ron and Hermione were far too busy to visit Harry. The lecturers were overdosing them with homework, Dolores Umbridge had effectively installed herself as dictator, and the Inquisitorial Squad was watching everything they did. As if that were not bad enough, Harry's departure forced the leadership of Dumbledore's Army onto Ron and Hermione.

Both Hermione and Ron had asked McGonagall to let them borrow some Time-Turners. McGonagall had refused, however, saying that Hermione had overworked herself two years earlier and Ron was a bit too mischievous to be trusted with such a powerful item. This forced them to make do with what they had. A five-hour sleep was a blessing for both of them.
They had to add to this their prefect duties as well, which were plentiful. Yes, they got to use the special prefects' bathroom. But it wasn't worth all the hassle.

Both Ron and Hermione wondered if getting a chance to see the Muggle surprise was worth all the stress of being a prefect. Hoping for the best, they headed over to the headmaster's tower and let the staircase carry them up to Dumbledore's office.

All of the professors were there, as well as the six other prefects. Snape glared at them and started trying to take points from Gryffindor because they were late. Dumbledore glared at him, however, and he wisely shut up.

The headmaster had cleared all of the little machines off of his desk. Or had he? Gingerly, Ron reached over to the desk and touched where the machines would have been.

He felt cloth, and suddenly thinks clicked into place. Dumbledore, noticing this, grinned but shook his head. So, Ron thought. That's what happened to Harry's Invisibility Cloak.

The portraits on the wall had apparently seen the object and were moving around excitedly. Dumbledore told them to keep quiet so that he could surprise the rest of the staff. The warning was unnecessary, however. A few of the portraits mentioned that they'd never seen anything like this before. This made sense, Dumbledore replied, since the object was created by Muggles.

Looking around the room one last time, he made sure that everyone was here. He clapped his hands a few times to get everyone's attention.

"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming and helping us celebrate the addition of this new object to our school. From what I've been told about it, it will be quite useful in helping us solve problems and remember things. I must say, however, that I still have absolutely no idea how to use the fool thing. However, we are fortunate in that we have Miss Granger here. I believe that she is specially qualified to teach us how to use this object."

Snape rolled his eyes. "Headmaster, we know she is a bit of a know-it-all, but I doubt that she -- "

Dumbledore turned to Snape and responded in an even tone of voice. "She was raised by Muggles, Severus. She has probably used objects like this before. If anyone can show us how to use this object, it's Miss Granger."

Hermione stared at Dumbledore with mixed emotions. "Sir, I'm flattered by your suggestion, but I'm a bit swamped right now. I don't think now would be a good time for me to do this. I've got some extra work I have to catch up on."

Dumbledore smiled. "Mr. Longbottom will help you with your extra work. I've spoken to him about it. You can spend time training us how to use this."

Ron assumed that Dumbledore was referring to Dumbledore's Army. With Umbridge in the room, however, there was no way he would be able to admit it and get away with it.


In response, Professor McGonagall smiled. "I don't think Longbottom will be able to help her get D's. I doubt that his assistance will reduce her grades to anything below an E."
Hermione ignored Snape's comment and continued staring at Dumbledore. "Sir, there are lots of instances of Muggle technology which I am not familiar with. I haven't driven a car before, for example."

Dumbledore shrugged and got up. "I suspect you'll be familiar with this, however. Now, Miss Granger, would you be so good as to sit behind the desk, in the operator's position?"

He gestured to the chair he had been sitting in. Nervous, Hermione sat down and faced the empty area on the desk. She tried to calm herself and told Dumbledore she was ready.

With that, Dumbledore put his hand on the Invisibility Cloak, counted to three, and pulled it away. For the first time, the staff and students of Hogwarts got to see what had been under the cloak.

Most of the staff couldn't identify it. It consisted of five pieces: a large standalone object with a black panel in front, a large box, a small object about the size of a fist, something which had a piece of paper coming out of it, and a small tablet with images of letters and strange symbols on it. Ron had never seen anything like this before and scratched his head. "What the hell is this?"

Hermione, however, just looked at the object. A few seconds later, a huge smile spread across her face.

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled. "Are you familiar with this type of object, Miss Granger?"

Hermione pulled up closer to the object. "Indeed I am, Professor! Where did you get it?"

"It was a gift from the Prime Minister. He delivered it to me after he visited. It's been configured to run off magic instead of electricity. Start using it -- it should work fine."

Grinning, Hermione started pushing buttons on the various pieces of the object. Various lights turned on, and the black panel suddenly flickered and began displaying a word.

McGonagall looked at the word and then outside. "Windows? What do windows have to do with this?"

Hermione explained. "Professor, let me explain what this is. This object is called a computer. It can be used to store information electronically, without use for scrolls or other physical forms. If you want to retrieve the information, you can have it bring it back for you so you can see it again. You can then write out multiple copies of it using this object over here, called a printer. In theory, you should be able to store your entire library on this box."

Filch stared at it. He may have been a Squib, but he hadn't grown up with Muggles. "Amazing!"

She grasped the object the size of a fist, moved it around, and pushed some buttons. "This is a word processor. You can write little notes in here and save it so you can retrieve them later. See? I'm going to write my name. Watch this."

She pressed some buttons, and the word "HERMIONE" appeared on the word processor.

Hermione pointed at the panel and continued. "This will be useful for storing the steps required to cast complex spells. That way, you will be able to bring them up even if you don't have a Remembrall or a Pensieve."
McGonagall frowned. "That sounds dangerous. Won't people start using this device as a crutch, entrusting all their memories to this object? What happens if they have to cast a complex spell without this object at their side?"

Hermione shrugged. "Keep the computer in this office. That way, no one will be able to cheat. Ladies and gentlemen, I truly believe that this will be a great asset for -- wait, what is this?"

Unbidden, buttons on the tablet with the letters and symbols suddenly began moving up and down. Soon, additional letters appeared on the word processor.

HERMIONE

umbrid

Hermione lifted her hands from the keyboard, but the letters kept on coming. The screen now read

HERMIONE

umbridfgeisatosdfacedgit

Dolores Umbridge, however, was not particularly pleased. Gritting her teeth, she reached behind the computer, felt around for a little, and suddenly grabbed something.

Fred Weasley suddenly appeared as his Invisibility Cloak was removed. He had been pressing the buttons on the tablet. He smiled and pointed at the computer. "Yes, its use seems obvious. Press the symbols on the tablet and the equivalent symbols appear on the word processor. Even a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher can figure that out."

Furious, the High Inquisitor pointed her wand at Fred and shoved him out of the room. As soon as she left, the rest of the staff began nodding in quiet agreement.

To be continued...

-------------

Update #54
-------------

February 19, 1996
Sanders Residence
Prescott, Arizona
United States of America

-------------
The air punctuated by a sharp crack, followed by a deep "Good morning, Mr. Sanders."

Isaac Sanders jumped and raised his hands in surprise. The coffee spilled out of his mug and onto his hand. It didn't scald him, but it was still quite hot. He put down the mug, rushed over to the sink, and washed it off.

Swearing, he spun around see where the voice had come from. He rolled his eyes when he saw who it was.

"Strong Bear? Where the hell did you come from? The fireplace isn't in this room!"
Strong Bear shrugged. "I Apparated in."

"You what?"

"Apparated. You call it teleportation. I just transported myself from Fourth Mesa to here. It's another method wizards use to travel from place to place. I thought you may be interested to see how it worked and come along with me for your first day at work."

Sanders gritted his teeth. "I'm definitely interested. However, next time, please don't catch me off guard like that. I nearly burned my hand there on my coffee."

Strong Bear smiled. "I will. Where's your wife? Is she ready to go?"

"She's in the bathroom. She'll probably be fascinated by teleportation as well."

Strong Bear shook his head. "She's pregnant. Apparation is not recommended for pregnant women as the subject often experiences compression which could harm the baby. I'll send her over via Floo powder. Which reminds me, I've brought over a whole bucketful of the stuff. It's next to the fireplace right now. I've modified it so all you have to do is toss it in -- you don't need me to activate it. It should allow for a good six months of trips from here to Fourth Mesa."

"I see. In that case, I think I'll pass on the teleportation -- I don't want the two of us separated over there. Particularly since we're going to be teaching the class together."

"Understandable, Mr. Sanders. We'll do an Apparation after she's had the baby. In the meantime, we'll wait for your wife and then Floo ourselves over there when she's ready."

Both Sanderses walked out of the fireplace together. Strong Bear had preceded them to tell the wizards they were coming. Sure enough, the wizards were there to welcome them, Two Bear in the lead. The man in charge of Fourth Mesa stepped forward and shook their hands.

"Welcome to Fourth Mesa. Are you excited to be doing this? Nervous?"

Izzy nodded. "Both, to be honest with you. I've never taught before."

Melissa put her hand on his shoulder. "I'll be there with you. If you need help, I'll try to back you up. I'm pretty good with kids, as you know."

Izzy looked at her. "I sure hope so, because in a few months you're going to have to deal with one."

He then turned to Two Bear. "Well, sir, we're here. When's the first class?"

Two Bear started leading them through the complex. "The first class is at 10:00 in the Coyote Room of the Dine Center for Sorcery and Shamanism. It's going to be a bunch of seventh graders, eleven girls and twelve boys."

Melissa frowned. "Kids going through puberty. That's not going to be easy."

"Don't worry about it. One of the things our school focuses on is conduct and good behavior. They should not be very disruptive. If one of them misbehaves, tell us and we'll Transfigure him into a chicken for five minutes."
Izzy stopped in his tracks. "You'll WHAT?"

Two Bear explained. "Transform him into a chicken. He'll wind up clucking and cackling around for a few minutes in front of his classmates. It's quite embarrassing and serves as a good deterrent. After he's learned his lesson, we turn him back into a person."

Melissa gaped at him. "You turn him into a CHICKEN? You mean those myths of witches turning people into frogs are REAL?"

Two Bear shook his head. "No, Mrs. Sanders. At least not in this facility. We do not turn people into frogs. The choices are chickens, pigs, foxes, and armadillos. The instructor can choose which animal is appropriate given the nature of the infraction."

Melissa closed her eyes and drew a deep breath. "That really makes me feel better."

"It should, Mrs. Sanders. The policy almost guarantees that you are going to have a well-behaved class. However, if a child does misbehave, just jot down his or her name and we'll deal with it after the class. Now, if you'll come with me, I'll show you to the classroom."

Twenty-three students looked at Izzy as he stood on the dais at the front of the room. He turned to his wife, who shrugged. "I don't know what to tell them. How can we describe our whole way of life in a few short lectures?"

Izzy rolled his eyes and drew a deep breath. "Hello, kids. I'm Isaac Sanders. This is my wife, Melissa. We're Muggles -- supposedly that's what you guys call people who do not have magical ability. Strong Bear has hired us to introduce you to the Muggle world now that our world has found out about yours. What are your names?"

The students then went around the room, giving him their names. Several of them were Hispanic. One looked distinctly Mexican -- Izzy wondered if he had come over the border illegally. That teleportation trick could easily fool some of the border guards.

Some seemed to be run of the mill American. Most, however, were Native American. There were four Zuni, three Apache, six Dine, and two from some tribe with at least six O's in its name which Izzy was supposed to associate with telescopes.

The students were dressed in what appeared to be the equivalent of school uniforms. The Native Americans were dressed in formal clothing which seemed be reserved for shamans of their individual tribes. The Americans and Mexican were wearing what appeared to be matching robes with various symbols embroidered on them. Supposedly the animals represented Native American tribes whose names served as homerooms.

Izzy jotted down the students' names as they went around. He then recommended that they sit in the same places for the next few days so he could figure out who was who. Shockingly, the students agreed. This was indeed a well-behaved class...or at least a careful one.

He then started describing his way of life. Hopefully, that would break the ice.

"Well, that's you. Now, I'll talk about myself. I live in Prescott, Arizona. That's between Phoenix and Sedona. You know Sedona? The place with those vortices?"

Several of the students nodded. One actually chimed in. "I can explain the vortices, Mr. Sanders."
There's a branch office of this institution there where they sometimes train wizards. The effects sometimes break out your world and manifest themselves as vortices."

Melissa stared at him. "So the vortices really exist?"

The student shook his head. "Yes and no, Mrs. Sanders. Sometimes they're there, sometimes they aren't. It depends on what the wizards are doing there. Usually, the wizards are careful and don't let anything show."

Melissa whistled. "I've got to tell my friends that. They'll be excited."

The student shook his head. "I'd discourage that if I were you. Objects in these so-called vortices can have strange things happen to them. It could be dangerous. Furthermore, Muggles walking around in these magical fields could cause spells to backfire, potentially harming both the Muggles and the wizard. It's extremely rare, but it does happen."

Izzy nodded. "That's good to know, and it may save lives. I'm going to give your house five points. If there's anything else you guys know which can help save Muggle lives, tell us before we accidentally fry ourselves."

The students talked excitedly for a few minutes. When the din had subsided, Izzy continued with his introduction. "Less than a month ago, I was working for Blast Cola Corporation."

Another student spoke up. "You were part of the group that created that disgusting drink?"

Izzy stared at him. "What? You didn't like it? Muggles seem to like it a lot."

The student laughed. "We don't really like it much. Do Muggles have different mouths from wizards?"

Izzy chuckled. "Look at my mouth. Does it look weird at all?"

The student looked at him. "Not really. It looks more or less normal. Perhaps it's an acquired taste."

Izzy nodded. "Perhaps. Maybe we can try an experiment where we serve Blast Cola a lot in the school cafeteria and see if the wizards learn to like it."

The Mexican started speaking. "I doubt it. We like butterbeer."

"Ah, the stuff that we're piloting in the ASU cafeteria. Muggles seem to like that too. However, due to the alcohol content we can't serve it to people under 21."

The students started muttering to each other. Finally, the first student who spoke up laughed. "So that's why you're trying to feed us this Blast Cola instead of butterbeer. We're under 21. Good to know – we won't drink butterbeer too much around Muggles. I suppose we can always enhance the flavor of the cola with those peyote extracts."

"The WHAT?"

"Peyote extracts, Mr. Sanders. They cause us to have visions. They're often used for religious ceremonies."
For some reason, Izzy decided that this was not the time to tell them that most American authorities banned peyote as a hallucinogenic drug...

To be continued...

------------
Update #55
------------
February 21, 1996
North Side of the DMZ
Democratic People's Republic of Korea

Choi Yeon Mi hushed her apprentice as she looked out into the distance. There, spread out before her, was the infamous Demilitarized Zone separating her homeland from the refuge in the South. All she had to do was get across there and she would be able to blend in with the rest of the population.

She had done it several times before -- the army wasn't exactly equipped to handle wizard transportation methods. It had been South Korean wizards, after all, who had first alerted her to the breach of the Statute of Secrecy. But she had to be very careful about it. Especially with Mr. Wong at her side, who had never done it before.

She pulled Mr. Wong to her and pointed into the distance. "See that little hill over there? We're going to Apparate over there. Grab onto me and get ready."

Wong shook his head. "I wouldn't, Mistress. If I were a soldier, I'd have a patrol stationed up there to have good view of the DMZ. In fact, I'm surprised that this vantage point isn't taken by our own troops."

"Don't worry about it. I've done it before. Now, on the count of three. One, two, three!"

She willed herself into the void holding Wong's hand. Moments later, the two of them rematerialized on top of the hill on the south side of the border. Wong whistled and was about to say something, but Choi Yeon shook her head and mouthed the words: "Too close. Let's head over to that hill over there."

Wong nodded and grabbed onto her again. She Apparated once more and brought them over to the second hill. The DMZ was out of sight behind them. Only then did she breathe a sigh of relief.

"We're safe now. We've made it into South Korea."

Wong laughed. "That was so easy! No one suspected a thing!"

She laughed as well. "Like I said, those Muggles weren't expecting people to do this. Come on, let's head over and catch the bus."

Wong's eyebrows shot up. "A BUS? Won't they ask us for identification or something like that? I doubt they'll accept North Korean currency."

She grinned, reached into her purse, and brought out a Galleon. "They definitely won't accept North Korean currency. However, they'll probably accept this."

Wong looked at this. "Is that GOLD? Ancestors take me, where did you get gold?"
"It's wizard currency. It's accepted by wizards all over the world. Where do you think the gold standard came from? Now all we have to do is head down to the road, where the bus will pick us up."

The two refugees headed down the hill. Wong frowned for a moment and thought of something. "Do you think the Dear Leader is going to be able to find us? What's more, I suspect our farm is going to be punished if the overseer comes back with an invitation to meet with the Dear Leader and we'll have fled the coop."

Choi Yeon shook her head. "I don't think he'll be able to find us. However, we're still going to have to go back at some point. The farm will suffer if we don't."

"But he's going to demand that we use our abilities for the army, to kill people! You heard him! That's why we left, right?"

"Yes. That's why we left."

"So why go back?"

She smiled. "Because we're going to have to do cast some spells to make it so the farm can experience increased productivity even with us gone. The overseer will probably be expecting it now, especially if the Dear Leader holds him to it."

She hesitated for a moment. "There's another reason as well which recommends that we return. We tell the South and have South Korean wizards at our side, under Invisibility Cloaks, when we visit the Dear Leader to discuss militarizing the wizards. Once we're close, the wizards can assassinate him in a way which will make it look like an accident. As long as they're protected by the Invisibility Cloaks"

Wong stared at her. "That's dangerous!"

She shook her head violently. "I agree, it's dangerous. However, getting yoke of the Dear Leader off our backs -- and ensuring a permanent peace -- is worth the risk."

Wong looked at her pleadingly. "Can I help?"

"Absolutely. However, we're going to have to get in touch with the Southern wizards first. And to do that, we're going to have to reach the road."

The two continued in silence through the forest. Eventually, the forest opened up into a clearing with a small roadway running through it.

Wong grunted. "Where's the bus stop? I don't see any bus stop here."

She smiled. "Don't worry, my apprentice. The bus will be there."

The breeze suddenly whistled through the trees. Wong, curious, headed out into the road to check to see if the bus was coming. He was surprised however, when his mistress suddenly screamed out of her to get out of the road.

Wong stared at her. "What are you nervous about? There's nothing -- "
There was a loud honk, and a bus materialized out of nowhere, heading down the road. Wong cursed and spun around to look right at the bus barreling down on him.

He didn't move and turned to her with a puzzled expression on his face. The bus honked again.

She cursed herself -- he was a half-wizard! He could cast spells but not see magical entities easily! If he couldn't see the bus --

There wasn't any time to lose. She brought out her wand and pointed it at him.

"Levicorpus"!

Wong shrieked as he suddenly flew into the air just in time to prevent being hit by the bus. "What the hell did you do that for? I heard a honk, but there was no bus!"

She pointed at the road as she gently lowered him to the ground. "The bus is here -- you couldn't see it because it's a magical entity."

Wong stared at her and started walking towards her -- only to walk right into the side of the bus. He rubbed his forehead. "What the hell?"

She ignored him and continued on smoothly. "I'll help you on. They have a charm which will allow people like you to see it."

She directed him around the bus and over to the curb next to her. Meanwhile, the door to the bus opened and a short man looked out at them.

"Welcome to the Ancestor Bus, transportation for the stranded witch or wizard. My name is Shi Hsao and I'm going to be your conductor for this evening. Is it just the two of you?"

Wong just stared at him for a moment and turned to her. "Who said that?"

The driver grinned and pointed at Wong. "Let me guess. He's a Squib. He couldn't see us on the way in. Thank the ancestors we didn't hit him. Fortunately, we're prepared for people like him. We'll cast a charm on him so he can see us."

Wong grinned and nodded. "That would be most helpful, kind sir. And what is a Squib?"

The conductor muttered something and pointed his wand at Wong. Wong's eyes went as wide as saucers as he took in the bus that nearly hit him. Wong apologized profusely for not getting out of the way.

The driver shook his head. "Don't worry, sir. It sometimes happens with Squibs."

Wong rolled his eyes. "And what is a Squib?"

Choi Yeon answered for him. "A child of Wizarding parents with no magic of his own. It's the reverse of a Muggle-born."

Wong scratched his head. "But I can do magic. Why couldn't I see the bus?"

The driver frowned as well. Apparently he was confused as well. Turning to Wong, he said. "I'm not
sure, sir. Maybe you've been cursed in some way. Hop on in and we'll take care of you."

The two refugees got on board and the driver took off again. "Where to?"

Choi Yeon responded with the utmost seriousness. "The Seoul Wizarding headquarters. A lot of interesting things have just taken place...and a couple of serious ones as well."

The driver grinned. "I should say so. Did you hear the Statute of Secrecy has fallen and the Muggles have found out about our world?"

Choi Yeon smiled. "Absolutely."

To be continued...
Update #56 through Update #60

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Misagnissa

Update #56
----------

February 22, 1996
Dine Center for Sorcery and Shamanism
Fourth Mesa, Arizona
United States of America
----------

Hidden behind his Invisibility Cloak, Strong Bear watched the Sanders speak to the students. So far, everything had gone more or less as expecting. The students were as curious about the Muggles for the most part as the Muggles were about the wizards.

The Muggles had never heard about Quidditch or Quodpot before. Both Muggles seemed like Quidditch and wanted to watch a match. Quodpot, on the other hand, was something else entirely. Mrs. Sanders had nearly had a heart attack when the students discussed the exploding ball. Izzy himself had gasped and asked: "And kids think this is a GAME? Don't people get hurt? The Department of Social Services would have a field day with this."

The student responded accurately and concisely. "Yes, Mr. Sanders. People occasionally get hurt. However, the wizards have lots of good spells for putting people back together."

Shaking his head, Sanders recommended that the wizards try out a Muggle game: baseball. The standard Quidditch set had "those bats" and "the little gold ball". He told the wizards that you didn't need brooms for this and it was much less likely to hurt people than Quodpot. The students hadn't been particularly thrilled that they couldn't fly around.

That's when Mr. Sanders got creative. He asked the class to think of a way to change the game of baseball in a way which would work for wizards. He discussed things such as outfielders chasing down fly balls on brooms. The kids, of course, got all excited and started suggesting new rules. It looked like the new instructor had caught on pretty well.

Grinning, he left the room and started heading back to his office to deal with the day's latest issues. With the Statute of Secrecy gone, his job as an Obliviator had been rendered obsolete virtually overnight. Instead of laying him off, however, Two Bear had realized that the people had to learn to interact with Muggles more and had tasked the former Oblivitors to serving as liaisons between the Muggles and the wizards in the area. The Oblivitors were already familiar with Muggle customs to some extent, and Strong Bear had already taken the lead in advocating that Fourth Mesa hire the Sanderses.

It hadn't taken long for Strong Bear to become president of the new organization. The Muggles knew him from the Sanderses' videos, and he had done yeoman work trying to stop the Super Bowl Breach. He was fairly certain that he would have stopped it completely had that damned videotape not made it to NBC.

Strong Bear's work had not gone unnoticed. Several of the other regional centers of the Department of Magic, finding themselves with out of work Oblivitors, had immediately started copying his idea. Radner had eventually updated the headquarters in the Four Towns. Rumor had it that Grand
Mugwump Dialonis was even debating making the change to the international headquarters on Atlantis.

Two Bear had informed him that Radner was seriously considering inviting Strong Bear to go to the Four Towns and start heading the new Muggle liaison wing. Strong Bear didn't think he was ready for that yet, but he would do his best.

He was still lost in his thoughts when he entered his office and nearly collided with a tall man in a suit. The man looked like a Muggle and towered over the five-foot-five Two Bear.

Strong Bear looked at his boss and at the Muggle in confusion. "What's going on here?"

Two Bear indicated the Muggle. "Strong Bear, this is Marc Popovich. He works for the National Food and Drug Administration. Dr. Popovich, this is Alexander "Strong Bear" Parkman. He's the head Muggle liaison here."

Popovich shook Strong Bear's hand. "Pleased to meet you, Strong Bear. Full-blooded Navajo, I gather?"

Strong Bear nodded. "Yes, Doctor. Although we prefer to be called Dine, not Navajo."

"I apologize, Strong Bear. At any rate, you may wonder why I'm here. We have heard some disturbing news from some of the Wizarding communities in the area. Are you familiar with the beverage known as butterbeer?"

Strong Bear nodded. "I am. It's very popular in our community, and from what the Sanderses have been telling us it's becoming popular in the Muggle world as well. Have you ever had it?"

Popovich shook his head. "I'm afraid not. I'm not really big on exotic drinks."

"You should, Doctor. It tastes really good."

"I'm sure it does, Strong Bear. Unfortunately, I don't have much time and we have to get down to business. We recently caught a bunch of Muggle children drinking some of this beverage during a party with some wizard children in Sedona."

Strong Bear frowned. "How old were these children? Don't Muggles have an age limit of 21?"

Popovich nodded. "Yes, they do. However, word has been leaking out that there is no age limit in the Wizarding community. Muggle children have been starting to complain that Wizarding children can drink before they're 21 and Muggles can't."

Strong Bear shook his head. "Our rules only apply to the Wizarding community, Dr. Popovich. Muggles follow their own rules. We have no jurisdiction over how you govern your community, and you have no jurisdiction over how we govern ours. That's the way it's always been."

"Indeed. However, the policies we have in place hadn't considered the possibility that Muggles and wizards would be doing something together. In the situation I've explained to you where underage Muggles and wizards are drinking butterbeer together, who is liable for underage drinking?"

Strong Bear frowned. "I see your point. The wizards would complain that they'd never been told that they weren't allowed to drink, and the Muggles would complain that they were doing it because the
wizards were and they need to be treated the same way as wizards. How did you handle it?"

"We all of the children off with a warning. The wizards didn't like it all that much, though. What I suspect will happen is that the wizards will just invite the Muggles into their domain and say that their rules will allow the Muggles to drink while in the wizards' domain.

"This is probably the first case I can think of where Muggles and wizards would be competing over jurisdiction issues. I spoke with a government official about this, and he suggested that I talk to a Muggle liaison officer like yourself. The official recommends that in cases like this, the more stringent rule should apply to both groups."

Strong Bear nodded slowly. "That makes sense. Unfortunately, it will inconvenience a lot of wizards who do not interact with Muggles and have no plans to interact with Muggles. Why should they suffer because something they wouldn't be involved with?"

"Don't worry, Strong Bear. The rule would only apply to public locations in Muggle territory. Are you familiar with American baseball?"

As of half an hour ago, he was. "As a matter of fact, I am."

"Good. There are two baseball leagues, the National League and American League. They have slightly different rules. National League rules apply to both teams when interleague games are played in National League parks, and American League rules apply to both teams when the games are played in American League parks."

Strong Bear caught his drift immediately. "I see where you're going. Muggle rules apply in Muggle territory and Wizarding rules apply in Wizarding territory. If that's the case, the wizards should be cited for underage drinking under Muggle laws. And in the subsequent gathering in Wizarding territory, the Muggles don't get cited."

Popovich nodded. "That's what I'm thinking. Does that sound all right with you?"

Strong Bear thought for a moment. "I'm not sure if it will apply to every single case of Muggle/wizard legal issues. However, it's a good start. Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Yes, Strong Bear. Inform the wizards that underage wizards cannot drink outside Muggle territory. Furthermore, warn underage Muggles entering Wizarding territory that although they can drink during their visit, they cannot do so once they return to Muggle territory."

Strong Bear nodded. "I'll do that. It's probably a good thing in general to think about when it comes to Muggle/wizard jurisdiction, at least for now. I have one more question, however. What happens with an 18-year old wizard in Muggle territory?"

Popovich frowned. "He gets cited. Why not?"

"Because wizards consider a person to have come of age at 17, not 21. Anything which requires that a wizard be an adult becomes available when the wizard turns 17. According to this, an 18-year-old wizard is considered an adult and should be able to drink in Muggle areas."

Popovich shook his head. "That could be an issue somewhere along the line. However, we luck out here. First, since it's Muggle territory and it specifically states the age of 21 instead of adulthood, the 21 applies. Second, Muggles usually consider a person to have reached adulthood at 18. The
drinking age is a special case."

"So what happens if the wizard is 17 1/2?"

Popovich laughed. "I see you're going to make a good official. You're bright and have the mind of a lawyer. Unfortunately, my time is limited, and I think we've gotten ourselves an agreement here."

He picked up his briefcase and shook both wizards' hands again. "I hope to see you again sometime. May all our negotiations be this easy."

Both Two Bear and Strong Bear nodded. "I agree, Dr. Popovich."

With that, Two Bear put his hand on Popovich's shoulder. "Now, if you'll follow me, I'll show you how to get home."

Seconds later, Strong Bear was alone in his office. Damn, he thought. That had been much easier than he had anticipated. Maybe he didn't have to be as nervous about his new position.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #57
-------------
February 22, 1996
Death Eater Safe House
England
-------------
Nagini was hungry. She liked her master a great deal. It wasn't often that she could actually talk to one of these Two-Legs. Furthermore, unlike most Two-Legs, her master and his friends were actually respectful of snakes.

Several smaller snakes had told her that they were afraid of humans. Humans seemed to always have this insane notion that snakes thought of them as a prey animal. That was not true. Most small snakes could not swallow a human, and most of them generally hid when humans came close. It was only when a snake was trapped that he was forced to defend himself. Nagini suspected that the occasional encounter between a human and a cornered venomous snake was responsible for most of the fear humans had of snakes.

Large snakes like Nagini, however, were an entirely different matter. These animals could in fact swallow humans whole, venomous or not. Nagini herself was twelve feet long and had disposed of several of her master's enemies. They hadn't tasted all that great, but when you've been living off of meager rodents for a few months a large meal like that was more than welcome.

She was sick and tired of hanging around this house. She had cleared out the local rodent population several days ago and was getting quite hungry. The last time she had been sent on a mission to attack a human, a man named Arthur Weasley, she had not been permitted to eat him. What's more, apparently the human had survived the attack. Her master had been furious when he had found out about this. Nagini shook her head. Had she just eaten the man after biting him, her master wouldn't be in all this mess.

Sometimes she felt like she can hear her master talking to her even when he wasn't physically around. She didn't know that this was possible, but it had been happening routinely ever since she had assisted in the neutralization of one of her master's enemies, a woman named Bertha something.
Her master had told her something about his soul being embedded with hers, like lovers.

A human in love with a snake? She didn't know whether to be amused or flattered. How could a human and a snake breed? She'd lay an egg and one of the Two-Legs would pop out?

At the moment, her favorite Two-Legs was speaking with the short, ugly-looking man in the unintelligible language of humans. She didn't understand what they were saying, but the short man looked frightened and her master looked very angry. Hope surged through her. Generally, when this happened, her master allowed her to kill and eat the frightened person. About time, she thought. At the rate things were going, she'd have to start chewing on the furniture.

Her master closed his eyes for a second, turned to face her, and opened his eyes. She looked at him in anticipation.

He called her over. "Nagini, I was wondering if you could do something for me."

Nagini slithered over excitedly. Did she finally get her meal? Her hope faded a little when she realized that the short man had left the room. She didn't mind chasing down her prey, but she was very hungry right now and didn't feel in the mood for it.

She crawled on her master's lap. "Yes, Master. How can I help you?"

"It's occurred to me that you haven't eaten for a while. You're probably pretty hungry, I'd expect."

Dinner bells rang in her head. "As a matter of fact, Master, I am. I finished off the rats in this building several days ago. Do you have more food for me? I hope you do."

"Indeed I do, Nagini. A human. However, you're going to have to leave the house to look for him. Would you be up for that? You'll be able to eat rats and stuff while you're trying to find him."

Nagini didn't particularly like being tempted with humans only to find herself eating more rats. However, she didn't question her master's orders. "Yes, Master. Who do you want me to eat? The short person you were just talking to?"

"No, Nagini. Not him, at least yet. I want you to go after someone who was very mean to me. I want him dead, and you want to eat. If you eat him, we're both happy."

Nagini slithered around excitedly. "I'll do that, Master. Who do you want me to go after?"

"Are you familiar with a friend of mine named Igor Karkaroff?"

"I believe so. He is a male, tall, and has a triangular patch of hair on his chin. Why? Do you want me to eat him?"

"Yes. I want you to eat him."

Nagini looked at him, confused. "Why do you want me to eat your friend?"

"Because he did something I don't like and doesn't want to be my friend anymore. I've asked him for help several times, but he refused to come. He's not a very good friend if he doesn't help, right?"

"No, he is not, Master."
"Exactly. That's why I want you to eat him. I'm concerned that he may be in the process of transforming from my friend to my enemy, and I want him out of the way before he does that. If he's my enemy, he may hurt me when I'm not expecting it."

Nagini reared back, horrified. "I don't want anyone to hurt you! Now I'm mad at him. I'll be more than happy to eat him now!"

"I'm sure you would, Nagini. However, there's only one problem. I'm not sure where exactly he is. I've heard rumors that he's up in the north of England somewhere, but that's it. I'll send you up there so you can look around. If you smell him, go after him immediately. Meanwhile, I'll keep on trying to find him. If I get more information, I'll tell you and transport you over there. You'll be able to eat soon enough."

Nagini looked at him. "Does this human know that I'm going to be trying to eat him? He may run away or try to hurt me if he does."

"He may, Nagini. That's why I want you to be careful and make sure no one sees you. If he sees you, he may attack you, and you don't want that to happen. Come to think of it, I don't want it to happen either because our souls are intertwined."

"I'll be careful. What will you be doing in the meantime?"

"Trying to get more information about him and planning on how to take advantage of the fact that the Statute of Secrecy has been lifted and that people other than wizards now know about our society."

Nagini looked at him in amazement. "People other than wizards know about your society now?"

"Yes, Nagini. They may try to hurt me as well, so I want to lie low until I've got everything planned out. Once I've got everything planned out, I'll put myself in a position of power and surprise them. If everything goes as planned, I will put myself in a position to make myself the king of the Muggles. I'll also conquer a lot of the wizards who fought me in the past and get rid of wizards with Muggle pedigree."

Nagini stared at him. "You're going to be a king! Exciting!"

"Thank you, Nagini. However, I'm not going to be king if this friend betrays me. Are you ready for your mission?"

"Yes, Master. I am."

"Good. Now hold on a second while I set up the Portkey which will take you to your destination."

Nagini watched as her master pointed his wand at a nice, juicy, dead rat which she appeared to have overlooked. He muttered a word. The rat glowed for a second and flopped around.

"Good. We're all set. Swallow the rat. Once you've done that, I'll activate the spell and you'll be off. Good luck."

With that, her master turned back to his scheming. Excited, Nagini slithered up and swallowed the rat whole. The next thing she knew, she found herself flying through the air. She didn't particularly like
the feeling all that much. However, it didn't last long. Soon she found herself lying on the floor of a forest maybe fifty feet away from a clearing.

She figured that the prey would likely be in the clearing. It would be the first place to check at least. She started heading towards the clearing with one thing on her mind.

That one thing on her mind changed about five seconds later as something suddenly caught her eye.

Rabbit! Rabbit! Rabbit! Damn, he got away!

Irritated, she resumed her stealthy progress towards the clearing.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #58
-------------

February 23, 1996
SAS Division C Headquarters
[location classified]
Great Britain

Jacob Gold was impressed with Dawlish. For a guy who was just about old enough to be forced into retirement due to the SAS's age limits, the wizard was doing a bloody good job.

Granted, there was no way that the man was going to be able to put a bullet through an enemy's head from 100 paces or be able to climb mountains with a 30-kilo backpack on his back. However, he was able to use magic to do several of the equivalent tasks with great skill.

Take, for example, the sharpshooter requirement. Dawlish claimed that there was a curse which would be able to kill an enemy, and that the victim would be slain as long as he was hit anywhere on his body. He refused to divulge the exact nature of the spell. However, he was able to demonstrate its effectiveness by using the Expelliarmus disarming spell in its place. If the opponent's gun flew out of his hand before Dawlish was killed in the exercise, the opponent was considered dead. Who needed pinpoint accuracy with a spell like that?

Dawlish was able to climb mountains not with his feet but with his broom. As long as he got to the top quickly and stealthily, that was all that counted. The fact that he could carry lots of equipment along for the ride was a bonus, so instead of forcing everyone to carry 30-kilo packs everyone could get away with 10-kilo packs.

Dawlish was the only person who had an Invisibility Cloak at this point. However, the ex-Auror had asked for more. Jacob soon realized that invisibility was a double-edged sword: the commander nearly ran Dawlish over with his jeep because no one could see him.

Several other spells sounded like they would be of good use during stealthy missions. There was the Silencio spell, which allowed for silent tracking of an enemy. Combine that with an Invisibility Cloak and things would be really interesting. There was the Stealth Sensoring Spell, something which would help with guard duty. Dawlish had once pulled a Serpensortia during an exercise and managed to reach his objective while the guard was busy trying to deal with a snake which had appeared out of nowhere. Stupefy was good for incapacitating an enemy without harming him (provided that the person didn't fall off a cliff when he was knocked out). And those were only the S's. A quick Relashio would be good at getting you out of handcuffs. Jacob was sure that there were
more surprises waiting for their group.

The only spell which hadn't worked as effectively as Dawlish had hoped was Protego. This spell, supposedly a shield charm, didn't work against bullets or tear gas. Fortunately, the quick-thinking Auror had compensated for it very quickly:

"Accio Uzi!"

He had then tossed the gun to the man covering him and started shooting jinxes at the enemy as the exercise continued. The opponent was eventually felled by a virtual bullet wound and a Petrificus Totalus.

Virtually everyone in the unit had thought that their group would be invincible and that this pilot program should be spread to other army units. Dawlish had shaken his head at that, however. This group was far from invincible. He explained that although these tricks may work against Muggles, they will likely be countered by wizards. An attack on a magical opponent would be far more dangerous. The only advantage the combined wizard/SAS unit had would be the fact that the wizards wouldn't be expecting an attack using technology.

Jacob looked down at the dossier in front of him, which Dawlish had conveniently provided to show what a unit like this would be up against. He had been horrified when he had read the reports on the two wizards and had wondered what he'd managed to get himself into. However, he focused on the positive. Demoralization could hurt performance, especially for an elite soldier like himself. He calmed himself and tried to memorize the information.

-----

SUBJECT: SIRIUS BLACK III  
GENDER: Male  
Date of Birth: August 11, 1959 (current age: 36)  
Alias: Padfoot  

Current Status: At Large  

Sirius Black is responsible for killing twelve Muggles and one wizard in cold blood. Without provocation, this evil wizard cast a spell which generated a tremendous explosion. 

This incident occurred in 1981, well before the recent events which accompanied the exposure of Muggles to the Wizarding world. These Muggles were no threat to Black, yet he killed them anyway. In doing so, he murdered an old friend of his, a man named Peter Pettigrew. All that was left of Pettigrew was his finger. Furthermore, he endangered the Statute of Secrecy which kept the two worlds separate. The Obliviators had to modify the memories of several Muggles who witnessed the explosion and pass it off as a gas leak.

Black was also responsible for betraying Lily and James Potter to Lord Voldemort (see the report on him). Not content with killing one friend, he convinced the Potters to use them as their Secret-Keeper to ensure that they would be safe from the Dark Lord. Black then revealed the Potters' hiding place to Voldemort, who then killed both Potters and nearly killed their infant son.

Black was convicted and sent to Azkaban, the wizards' prison, for these crimes. Against all odds, he broke out of Azkaban -- alone -- and returned to the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, presumably to finish off the Potters' son, who was then a third-year student at the school. He was caught inside Hogsmeade and sentenced to be executed by Dementor's Kiss.
What happened after that is still uncertain. Suffice it to say, Black somehow managed to escape from a locked room inside Hogwarts. The Ministry suspects that he is still out there, waiting to finish the job. One wonders how long it will take him to take advantage of the fact that Harry Potter is currently under house arrest for permanently breaching the Statute of Secrecy.

DESCRIPTION: Sirius Black is tall and gaunt, with shoulder-length brown, curly hair. He has a thick mustache and a goatee. He has been known to take the form of a dog from time to time.

Jacob tried to digest what he read. This Black was a nasty piece of work. He had to be a powerful wizard to change into a dog, break out of jail, and create an explosion using magic. He wondered if Dawlish would be able to take him out.

Something didn't seem right, however. What was it? Jacob thought for a moment and it suddenly came to him. Nigel had mentioned something about Sirius Black which he had heard from Arthur Weasley. Something about Black having been framed by Pettigrew and imprisoned unjustly. Jacob shook his head. Weasley was presumably mistaken. The government knew what it was talking about.

Jacob then turned to the second dossier. This one was much longer. The first time he had gone through the dossiers, he had been able to make it through most of Black's dossier before losing his mettle. This second one, however...he barely got through the opening paragraphs. This second criminal made Sirius Black look like Mary Poppins. He just prayed that the Ministry was correct and the man was in fact dead.

SUBJECT: TOM MARVOLO RIDDLE
GENDER: Male
Date of Birth: December 31, 1926 (current age: 69)
Aliases: Lord Voldemort, the Dark Lord, You-Know-Who, He Who Must Not Be Named

Current Status: Missing and presumed dead. However, disturbingly unable to confirm.

The closest thing to an evil genius to ever exist in the British Isles, Tom Marvolo Riddle is responsible for the deaths of countless wizards and Muggles. He and his band of Death Eaters terrified wizards all over Britain for many years and fought against the Ministry in the Wizarding War...

Jacob's hands were shaking by the time he gotten down to the fourth paragraph, and he had to put down the document simply because he could no longer read it. It was better than last time, however, as he'd barely gotten through the second before he lost his nerve.

He shook his head. He was a special forces soldier. He took a deep breath and continued to read.

There was a scream next to him. He spun only to see Banks shaking in terror. Banks's hand opened and Riddle's dossier fell out.

Jacob winced. He prayed the Ministry was right. If they weren't, and Riddle was still alive, the country was in deep trouble.

To be continued...

-------------

Update #59
Jacob Gold looked over the man seated behind the desk. For someone who was supposedly 114, the headmaster looked in remarkably good shape. What's more, the wizard seemed to have kept his wits about him well enough to learn how to use a computer. Many old men found it difficult to learn new technology.

Dawlish had explained some of the headmaster's background to Jacob on the way to Hogwarts. It was clear that Dumbledore was widely respected in the Wizarding world and that he was an extremely powerful wizard. However, he was a bit of a loose cannon from time to time and often butted heads with the Ministry of Magic. Most of the (hopefully untrue) rumors that Tom Riddle had returned had been spread by people under Dumbledore's jurisdiction.

Jacob hoped that there weren't any problems here. From what he had finally forced himself to read in Riddle's dossier, one of the evil wizard's henchmen may have been hiding under Dumbledore's nose all this time. He had convinced Dawlish to allow him access to Hogwarts so that he could warn the headmaster about this possible threat. Dawlish had balked about it a little, but he had eventually given in.

Jacob stood and introduced himself. "Headmaster Dumbledore? My name is Jacob Gold. I'm with the British Special Air Services."

Dumbledore frowned. "Special Air Services? I'm not familiar with them."

"I'm not surprised, Headmaster. We're an elite unit of highly-trained British troops tasked with protecting the country. We're good at reconnaissance and black operations and we've just started some joint exercises with Auror Dawlish over here. One of my colleagues freaked out during one exercise where Dawlish here fired a snake at him."

Dumbledore store an accusing glance at the Auror, who squirmed a little but responded. "Serpensortia, Headmaster. The snake was a garter snake. It was nonvenomous, but the opponent didn't know that. I dismissed it once the exercise was over."

Dumbledore breathed a sigh of relief and turned back to Jacob. "Wizards supporting British special forces? Now that would be something to see. You have my full support in this endeavour."

"Thank you, Headmaster. However, that's not why we've come here. We have reason to belief that one of your staff members may be a wanted man."

Dumbledore looked at him sharply. "Really? Who?"

"A man named Severus Snape. He gives lessons in Potions. He has appeared on lists of Death Eaters. Death Eaters, in case you are wondering, are wizards associated with an evil mastermind known as Tom Marvolo Riddle. Riddle is believed to be dead, but the Death Eaters are still around. We also believe that the criminal Sirius Black may also be a Death Eater. Are you familiar with Riddle and these Death Eaters?"

Dumbledore paused for a moment. A troubled expression crossed the old man's face. Jacob was
reminded of the scene in Star Wars where Obi-Wan Kenobi was thinking back to his training of Anakin Skywalker.

The headmaster slowly nodded his head. "I'm afraid I'm familiar with both Mr. Riddle and the Death Eaters. I actually helped train Riddle in the use of magic when he was younger, before he turned to the dark side. Riddle, also known as Lord Voldemort, is probably the most gifted student to ever graduate from Hogwarts. It is a pity that such power is being used for evil purposes."

Jacob was about to bring up Snape when he caught the verb tense in the last two sentences. His face blanched. Surely Dumbledore didn't mean what he said...

He had to ask. "Headmaster, I noticed that you refer to Mr. Riddle in the present tense. The Ministry believes that this man is dead, but has never been able to confirm it. Do you have reason to believe that he is alive?"

Dumbledore nodded. "I'm afraid so, Mr. Gold. I have reason to believe the Ministry may be mistaken here. And even if I didn't have evidence that he had returned, this man's power is so great that he should be considered your #1 priority until you have his body in hand."

Dawlish cleared his throat and shook his head. "Headmaster, you have to understand that the Ministry knows what's going on --"

Dumbledore interrupted him. "I would hope so, John. Unfortunately, we have among us a witness who saw Mr. Riddle less than a year ago. This witness reports a gathering of Death Eaters and a fully alive Lord Voldemort. Voldemort attacked two students from this school, killing one and nearly killing the second. The second is our witness."

Jacob stared at Dumbledore. "Bloody hell, I don't want this Riddle fellow coming back. We've already got a problem with Sirius Black."

Dumbledore looked like he was about to say something, but Jacob wasn't paying attention anymore. The SAS man turned to Dawlish, who looked as if he had swallowed something very sour. "John, I assume you've read Riddle's rap sheet. That man makes Hannibal Lecter look like Mother Teresa. This makes it even more important that we deal with the Death Eaters and do so quickly."

Dawlish nodded at this, though he didn't seem happy about it. Jacob couldn't tell if it was because the Ministry overlooked something or because the Auror, too, was afraid of this Riddle. If Riddle scared even the Aurors that would be even bigger trouble.

He calmed himself and turned back to Dumbledore. "Is there a way we can speak with this witness? Presumably he's at the school."

Dumbledore shook his head. "He's not at the school at the moment, unfortunately. He's under house arrest right now for completely different reason. His name is Harry Potter."

Jacob stared at him. "Wait a minute. Harry Potter? The kid who flew his broom during the Super Bowl?"

"The same. Riddle killed his parents and nearly killed him as an infant."

Jacob's mind reeled. Fortunately, Dawlish took over. "Gold, forget about Riddle for now. We'll deal with determining whether or not he's survived. Perhaps the witness doesn't remember what happened..."
properly -- meeting evil wizards can do things like that. It's going to take a while to figure out. For
the time being, let's get back to what we came to talk about. Snape."

Jacob looked at him blankly for a second. Snape? Oh right, Snape. The Death Eater. He cursed
himself -- he was an SAS man, and he was supposed to be more focused than this.

Wincing, he turned to the Auror. "You are correct, John. Thank you for reminding me". To
Dumbledore: "Headmaster, I'd like to get back on topic. Severus Snape is believed to be a Death
Eater, a supporter of this Riddle. Our agency believes that he is on your staff. Is that correct?"

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes, Professor Snape is here."

"Do you have any reason to believe that he would associate with the Death Eaters?"

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes, Mr. Gold. It's because I told him to. He's actually a double agent. He
used to be a Death Eater but changed his mind a while back. He is now working for us, reporting on
the Death Eaters' comings and goings while outwardly appearing to be one of them. Snape,
incidentally, also has reason to believe that Voldemort has returned."

Jacob stared at him. "You've got a man inside the Death Eaters' inner circle? Someone who has
access to Riddle if he's come back?"

"Yes, Mr. Gold."

"Would this man be willing to help us plan an operation to attack the Death Eaters and possibly
destroy Riddle if he has indeed come back? I would ask for him to join the SAS with Dawlish here,
but I would expect that he is busy with his undercover activities and his duties as professor."

Dumbledore nodded. "I know Severus very well, Mr. Gold. He is one of the bravest people I have
ever met. I can absolutely guarantee that he will be more than willing to alert the SAS and Ministry
to Death Eater gatherings."

Dawlish broke in at this point. "If he can be trusted, that is. I'm still not entirely certain of his
allegiances, Headmaster. Recall that you recently had one professor possessed by You-Know-Who
and another one be forced to resign when he was exposed as a werewolf."

Jacob's jaw dropped. A werewolf? He didn't want to know.

Dumbledore glared at Dawlish, who cringed. "I trust Severus with my life. If you wish, we can give
him Veritaserum and have him prove his allegiance."

The headmaster turned back to Jacob. "Advise your supervisors that Snape will be more than happy
to support your cause. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a dinner to prepare. Both of you are
welcome to join in the feast. Snape will be there, and rest assured that he will be able to convince
you that he's on our side."

Jacob thought about it as Dumbledore escorted them out of the room. A double agent inside the
Death Eaters. Quite useful.

----------
Update #60
----------
February 24, 1996
Hagrid glared down at the diminutive woman. He was twice her height and probably five times her strength. Yet she acted as if she had all the power in the world.

"Hmm, hmm. If I recall correctly, unicorns are a Class XXXX creature. I highly doubt that unicorns are appropriate for underage wizards. Don't you agree, Professor Hagrid?"

All that Hagrid -- along with most of the other professors -- could agree on would be that Dolores Umbridge's clipboard should be shoved down her throat, her body should be pureed, and that the liquified remains should be fed to those cats decorating her walls. He couldn't say that, however, without him possibly jeopardizing his job. The woman had been paying close attention to Trelawney of late, which couldn't be good. Trelawney had told her several times that she could not prophesy on command. Hagrid knew this to be true for all seers. Yet Umbridge didn't seem to believe it.

He drew a deep breath and tried to steady his voice. "Professor, dear old Sleipnir here has been at Hogwarts since he was a foal. He's familiar with the grounds and considers the students to be part of his herd. Take a look now -- he's nuzzling Hermione Granger."

Umbridge shook her head and jotted something down on her clipboard. "I find it hard to believe that this animal thinks that a creature with half his legs is part of his herd."

Hermione glared at Umbridge. Virtually everyone in the room started muttering darkly. Hagrid, however, had the perfect rejoinder.

"Yes, and I often wonder whether human females with half my height are part of my herd. Now sit down and watch me teach."

The whole class cheered for a moment, but the cheers wilted as Umbridge cast an evil stare around the room. That done, the High Inquisitor turned back to Hagrid, her face full of fury. Hagrid frowned for a moment. Maybe he had gone too far. He didn't want to wind up in the same position Trelawney was in.

Fortunately, there was a knock on the door. Breathing a sigh of relief, he excused himself and opened the door.

It was Professor Dumbledore. He seemed quite happy, as if something very good had happened. Hagrid wondered what it was, but refrained from asking. He'd presumably find out with the rest of the teachers.

It was most unusual for the headmaster to interrupt a class like this, though. Confused, Hagrid shook his head. "Professor Dumbledore? Good afternoon. Is there a problem?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "Not at all, Hagrid. I was wondering if you would be so good as to join me in my tower. You have a visitor with a most interesting proposal for you."

Hagrid stared at him. "A visitor? Who?"

"A representative of the United States of America."
Hagrid's jaw dropped. "An American? What's he doing here? How did he find out about me."

"I don't know, Hagrid. However, I believe you will enjoy what he is going to say."

Hagrid shook his head and gestured at the students behind him. Most of them were glaring at Umbridge. However, Draco Malfoy was asking if he use his authority as a member of the Inquisitorial Squad to put Hermione in "pre-emptive" detention.

"I can't right now, Professor. I'm in the middle of a lecture right now. We're doing unicorns, as you can see, and Professor Umbridge doesn't think they're appropriate for children."

Dumbledore suddenly grinned. "I'll handle this. Since they're going to kick me out anyway in June, I'd might as well go out with a bang."

His smile vanished from his face as he turned to face Umbridge. "Professor Umbridge, I'm going to have to take Hagrid for a few minutes to discuss something with him. He has an important visitor. Would you be so good as to take care of the unicorn while the teacher away?"

Umbridge stared at him. "Take care of him? He's a dangerous animal!"

Dumbledore shook his head. "He isn't, Dolores. As the only adult witch in the room, it is up to you to handle the unicorn. However, if you have trouble and need assistance, don't hesitate to call on the students for help."

With that, Dumbledore closed the door, blocking Hagrid's view of a short pink woman with her eyes virtually bulging out of their sockets. He then led Hagrid over to his tower to meet his visitor.

Hagrid had never seen this man before. He appeared to be a Muggle and was dressed in an expensive suit with an American flag on his tie.

The man took one look at Hagrid and his went almost as wide as Dolores's. He gasped and finally was able to croak a few words to Dumbledore.

"Jesus Christ! How tall IS this guy?"

Hagrid shrugged. "Eleven feet, sir. However, I'm not all that tall. After all, I'm only half-giant. My brother Grawp is sixteen feet tall. He's not very comfortable around strangers, though. I've heard of several giants who were taller even than that."

Dumbledore told everyone to sit down, which undoubtedly was to compensate for the fact that the Muggle was about to collapse into a chair in shock. "Gentlemen, allow me to make some introductions. Dr. Roach, this is Rubeus Hagrid, our Care of Magical Creatures instructor. I believe he's the one you've been looking for."

The Muggle nodded. "Indeed he is, Professor. I must say, sir, he's not easy to miss."

Dumbledore chuckled. "Indeed, he is not. Hagrid, this is Dr. Robert Roach. He works for the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. He has been sent here on the direct request of President Bill Clinton of the United States."

Hagrid nodded. "Dr. Roach, welcome to Hogwarts. Is this your first exposure to the Wizarding world?"
Roach paused for a moment while he considered his response. "Somewhat, sir. I haven't met many wizards before, and I certainly haven't been in a school like this before. Up to now, the only experience I have with the Wizarding world is what I've heard from Radner and Deirdre the unicorn."

A baffled Hagrid turned to Dumbledore, who explained. "Travis Radner is the American Secretary of Magic, similar to our Minister of Magic. Deirdre is a unicorn which he gave as a gift to President Clinton. She is now on display in the National Zoo in Washington DC."

Hagrid stared at Roach. "You put a unicorn in a zoo? That is a very bad idea, sir. Unicorns are difficult animals to handle unless you raise them from infancy."

Roach nodded. "That's what Radner told me when we were discussing putting her in the zoo. Don't worry, Professor Hagrid, Deirdre seems to be docile. She was also adopted as a foal. Originally, she was kept in the White House but she started eating all the houseplants and trees. So, she had to go to the zoo."

Hagrid stared at him. "You're bloody lucky the President wasn't injured. That could have been a disaster."

Dumbledore nodded. "Indeed, it could have. However, everything worked out in the end. It worked out so well, in fact, that the National Zoo has decided to create a wing dedicated to magical creatures. It will be the first zoo of its kind in the Muggle world. Judging from the interest the American people have in Deirdre, it would give a big boost to the Washington economy."

Hagrid shook his head. "That's dangerous, sir. I'd advise against it. Magical creatures are not to be trifled with. Some of them have magical abilities which Muggles will not be able to handle."

Roach agreed. "That is exactly what Radner told us. The President said that we would be able to do it, however, if we were able to hire someone with familiar with most magical creatures to be part of this groundbreaking development. A Care of Magical Creatures professor, if you will."

Hagrid stared at him. "Wait a minute. Did you come to offer me a job?"

Roach nodded. "Yes, I have. Radner actually recommended you by name."

Hagrid shook his head in disbelief. "I'm flattered, sir. However, I already have a job -- I'm a teacher here. I can't leave the school. This school has done a lot for me. Besides, doesn't the United States have a school of wizardry as well similar to this one?"

Roach nodded. "Several, in fact. The most prestigious one is located in the Wizarding capital district in Massachusetts."

"I thought so. Why would they come all the way to England to hire me if they had several, possibly more capable, wizards on their own soil? Presumably they have all of the abilities I have."

Roach paused for a moment. "Radner has told me that animals like you and you have a soft spot for animals. Furthermore, Dumbledore confirmed Radner's claim that you have a forest here teeming with unusual animals which would be interesting to the Muggle population."

Hagrid shook his head vehemently. "Most of the animals are much too dangerous to be placed in a
zoo, especially in cages. Granted, there are a few which may be appropriate -- I'd say everything from Class XX down. XXX if you're lucky, and XXXX if they were raised from birth thinking that a human was their mother. XXXXX? Forget it. You don't want a dragon setting fire to, and then eating, patrons from inside the cage."

Roach blanched at that. "No, sir. That would not be a good idea."

Dumbledore looked at Hagrid. "I must say, Hagrid, that although I'm reluctant to see you leave, this is probably a once-in-a-lifetime offer. You may seriously want to consider it."

Hagrid shook his head. "My home is here, Professor. I owe my life to Hogwarts. Besides, I'm certain that there are more capable instructors in the United --"

Hagrid suddenly stopped speaking and turned on Roach. "Wait a minute. You want me because I'm a half-giant, right? That I'm once of those strange creatures you want to put on display!"

Roach closed his eyes and sighed. "That's part of it, I must admit. However, you would not be part of the exhibit. You would be on the staff. You could talk to the patrons if you wish, though. I'm certain they'd be intrigued by you."

Hagrid didn't like this at all and fought to restrain his anger. "We are people, just like you, Dr. Roach. We're just bigger than you are. I cannot accept a job where a sentient, talking being like myself would be considered part of an exhibit. It wouldn't be much different from what people did in the old days when disfigured people, or people of a different race or color, were made into exhibits."

Roach raised his hands to placate Hagrid. "You can always decide not to mingle with the patrons. It would be your choice. After all, the job isn't to mingle with the patrons, it's to deal with animals."

Hagrid put his hands on his hips. "The answer's no, Dr. Roach. I'm staying here at Hogwarts. Now, if you would excuse me, I've got to go back to class."

Roach sighed and stood to leave. "I'd better go then. Here's my business card, Professor. If you ever change your mind, don't hesitate to call on us."

With that, the Muggle left the room. Dumbledore stared after him and shook his head. "That was an amazing offer you turned down, Hagrid. I hope you don't regret doing that at some point in the future."

Hagrid shook his head violently. "I'm not going to a company which would consider placing creatures like you on me on display. Flobberworms, yes. Unicorns, yes if they can be raised to accept humans. People, no. Besides, I have a job here."

Dumbledore nodded as he led Hagrid back to the entrance. "Indeed, Hagrid, you do. And you do a good job at it. Thank you for staying."

As he headed back down the spiraling staircase something occurred to him. He definitely had a job. He had no reason to leave.

But what would he do if Umbridge suddenly started dismissing teachers?

To be continued...
Update #61 through Update #65

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Mislagnissa

Update #61

February 24, 1996
The Burrow
Great Britain

Harry Potter wished he were still at school. That dunderhead Umbridge was of no help in preparing
the students for fighting Lord Voldemort. Unless something had changed over the past month, she
was probably regurgitating the same policies she had before he'd been placed under house arrest:
Voldemort had not returned, and anyone who said otherwise would have word-shaped scars all over
his hands for weeks to come.

As if that were not bad enough, the possibility of a confrontation with Muggles was also high
enough to take seriously. Judging from what he knew of the history of the relations between
Muggles and wizards, the Muggles inevitably began fearing the witches and persecuted them. Often
relations between the two communities started out friendly, but then one bad witch or wizard ruined
the reputation of the entire Wizarding community. Considering that Voldemort was about as bad as a
wizard could go, it was only a matter of time until the wizards had to fight off Muggles a well. Harry
doubted that spells like Protego and Expelliarmus would work on bullets as well as curses.

Harry wondered if the wizards knew how terribly efficient the Muggles were at making war.
Hermione's grandfather had served in the Royal Air Force in the Second World War. He had
participated in missions which had dropped bombs on German cities. Each of those bombs was
enough to level most of a building. The last time the wizards had fought Muggles, the Muggles had
probably opposed them with swords and shields.

James Granger's bombs, however, didn't even hold a candle to the bombs dropped on Japan at the
end of the war. Only two major bombs were dropped, one on Hiroshima and one on Nagasaki.
Those had decimated entire cities with one blow. That had been half a century ago. Nowadays,
weapons existed hundreds of times more powerful than those. Thankfully, no one among the
Muggles had dared use them in anger.

Dark wizards, however, presented the Muggles with curses which they had no defense against.
Many people could consider powerful curses to be weapons of mass destruction. If a wizard killed
hundreds of Muggles with one blast -- Voldemort and Pettigrew were certainly capable of such of an
attack -- would the Muggles respond in kind?

Nukes weren't the only thing which would likely catch wizards by surprise. Harry doubted that the
wizards had ever considered the possibility of a chemical or biological attack. Come to think of it,
many Muggles didn't. Surprised wizards tended to overreact. Harry had a horrible feeling that a war
between Muggles and wizards would likely result in either the end of the world or the extermination
of the entire Wizarding population.

Groups of Muggles already existed which advocated the destruction of wizards. In fact, Dumbledore
had informed him -- through Ron -- that his aunt and uncle had joined such a movement. The
headmaster believed that this decision would very likely negate Privet Drive's status as a sanctuary
for Harry. As a result, Dumbledore had recommended that he not go back to the Dursleys at the end of his incarceration. He had suggested that Harry live at the 12 Grimmauld Place safe house with Sirius. Harry wouldn't mind that at all. What's more, if Sirius were exonerated, Sirius would likely adopt him, giving him the right to live there permanently.

Ron had reported that Dumbledore's Army was still in operation. Hermione, Neville, and Ron hadn't been as good instructions as Harry. However, Hermione knew the book on defense spells inside and out. They had managed to take over in his absence. He hoped that the Army would be able to fend off Voldemort, the Dursleys, and/or Umbridge if everything full apart.

His ruminations about the future of Dumbledore's Army were suddenly blasted out of his head by a tremendous pain in his forehead. It was his scar, his connection to Voldemort. Once again, Voldemort was plotting evil against the rest of the human race. He had tried to relay these warnings to his guards, but they refused to believe him and had not allowed him to communicate them to Ron. This forced him to suffer the trauma of pain with the even worse feeling of not being able to do anything about it.

The view of his bed vanished in a blaze of pain. He suddenly found himself looking at a man he'd never seen before. The man didn't look happy, and Harry had a suspicion he knew why. He -- as Voldemort -- seemed to be pointing a wand at him.

Voldemort spoke. "Well, Rookwood? Explain yourself. Why have you been unable to retrieve the prophecy?"

The man shook his head. "My lord, I'm truly sorry. Forgive me. The prophecy may only be retrieved by the people it refers to. That means either you or Harry Potter have to pick it up."

Harry frowned. A prophecy? Concerning him and Lord Voldemort? What was this?

The scar flared again. Voldemort apparently didn't like this. "This means we will have to break Harry out of house arrest in order to get him over to the Ministry. Is he guarded?"

"Yes, my lord. It's going to be as bad as trying to break into the Ministry."

Voldemort's voice turned even colder. "You're IN the Ministry, Rookwood. You have twenty-four hours to get that restriction off the prophecy and come back with it. Otherwise, Nagini's going to eat you after she comes back from terminating Karkaroff."

Rookwood stared at him. "My lord!"

Harry felt Voldemort's anger. "Get out of my sight, you sniveling worm. I have other business to attend to."

Rookwood cringed and nodded. "Yes, my lord". With a flash, he Disapparated. Seconds later, he was replaced with another one of his servants.

The new servant fell to his knees. "My lord! You sent for me?"

"Yes, Avery. I want an update on our plans for world domination. Are these Muggles as vulnerable to magic as we think they are?"

Avery nodded. "Yes, my lord. They have absolutely no defenses against most of our spells, and for
the most part they have no idea as to what we can do. They will be easy to intimidate. Just a few random curses here and there and demonstration of our abilities to stop their attacks have make them eating out of the palm of our hands."

Voldemort nodded. "That's good to know, Avery. I'd recommend showing our strengths as well, showing them that we can do things only the gods of the past could do. If we were able to pass ourselves off as gods, that would be good."

Avery smiled. "That would be a great idea, my lord. Flying will be pretty impressive. Curses like Imperio will be useful as well. However, I believe that we'll be able to use part of Muggle culture to our advantage here."

"Indeed? How so?"

"The Muggles have illustrated books called comic books. Many of these books discuss the exploits of superheroes, beings who have unusual powers and can use those to rise above and beyond people as a whole. There is also the concept of a Jedi Knight, a wizardlike hero from Muggle films. If we were to mimic the abilities of these heroes through magic, the Muggles’ own subconscious will help ensure our superiority."

"Smart move, Avery. Can you suggest a list of abilities which will be most effective at influencing Muggles?"

"Yes, my lord. Flight would help, and we all can do that. Levitating objects is common for Jedi Knights, and we can do that easily. Feats of extreme strength mimic the hero Superman, and the ability to Transfigure ourselves mimics a few other heroes."

Voldemort seemed to like this. "Excellent work, Avery. Anything else?"

"One more thing. There are several groups of Muggles who are rebelling against the rightful authorities in the name of God or country. They have weapons. If we take over one of these groups, possibly via the Imperius Curse, we could even have Muggle weapons to work with. Combine Muggle weapons and magic and we would probably be powerful enough to rule the world."

"That's a great idea. Make it so."

"Yes, my lord."

With that, Avery disappeared. Seconds later, the sending from Voldemort ended.

Harry gulped. Yet another threat from Voldemort. He had to tell the guards. However, he didn't hold much hope that this one would be any better received than the previous ones, and he had the horrible suspicion that Voldemort knew that. Maybe he could ask about that prophecy...

To be continued...

------------

Update #62
------------

February 25, 1996
Room of Requirement
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
Great Britain
Ron Weasley had never led one of the Dumbledore's Army lessons before, but he didn't have much of a choice. Normally Hermione would have been in charge -- after all, she had read up on all of the curses and countercurses. Unfortunately, Hermione had managed to earn another detention, courtesy of Dolores Umbridge. As usual, it had been because of something which had not been worthy of detention.

Umbridge had panicked after Hagrid had left with Dumbledore. Convinced that Sleipnir would wreak havoc on the poor, defenseless students, she had strode purposefully towards the front of the room, wand poised for action. Hermione, of course, had gotten up and positioned herself between Umbridge and the unicorn, saying that the class had worked with this particular animal before and that he was perfectly harmless. Umbridge, of course, didn't believe her. The Ministry official had nearly had a heart attack as she had seen Hermione walking towards the unicorn. She had yelled at Hermione to get out of the way so she could attack Sleipnir. Not only had Hermione refused, she had cast a Protego charm to protect the unicorn from a bolt of blue light which had burst from the end of Umbridge's wand. Fed up with Hermione's mischief, she had given Hermione a week's worth of detentions for her serious lack of judgment.

This had left Ron in charge of Dumbledore's Army. He frowned as he looked around the Room of Requirement. The Army's numbers had swelled over the past few weeks, as the original core of students who joined to defend themselves against Voldemort was supplemented by wizards who were concerned that they would be attacked by Muggles now that the Muggles knew about the Wizarding community. Several residents of Hogsmeade had started attending lessons as well. They were easily recognizable by the simple fact that they were the only people over seventeen. Not many Hogwarts students had beards, with the possible exception of Fred and George after their failed attempt to get their names into the Goblet of Fire the previous year.

The class had gotten very good at producing Patronuses. There was a veritable zoo of animals represented among them: lions and tigers and bears. Oh, my! Several students who had never spoken to each other before had managed to bond when they realized that they had the same Patronus. Ron was convinced that two of them were going to hook up and start dating.

A couple of Slytherin students, concerned about Muggle attack, had joined Dumbledore's Army. They wore masks most of the time to hide their identity. Ron understood why: they didn't want to be ridiculed by Malfoy or other, more radical members of their House. Not surprisingly, their Patronuses were both snakes.

Ron had decided on an interesting change of pace for the class. The class now mastered several different defensive spells: Expelliarmus, Petrificus Totalus, Protego, and so forth. However, simply knowing how to cast the spells didn't teach you when exactly to use which type of spell. It also didn't teach you when ordinary spells like Accio could be used as defensive weapons if people thought outside the box.

Harry, who had been determined to be an Auror, had told him that several Muggle films had been made about an extremely competent British spy named James Bond. Hermione as a Muggle-born, had been familiar with this character and had been able to reel off the plots of several of the movies. Oddly enough, Neville -- who had been studying more and more nature books to bolster his knowledge of Herbology -- seemed to think that James Bond was an ornithologist. Neville and Harry had gotten into several arguments about this, which Hermione had eventually managed to resolve by explaining that both of them were right. Ian Fleming the man, who had created James Bond, had been a birdwatcher and had named his spy after the ornithologist Neville had read about.
Today's lesson was inspired by James Bond movies. Specifically, the movie The Man with the Golden Gun. He doubted that anyone in the room had ever heard of this tactic, let alone the movie, before. Hermione and Harry would have, of course, but they weren't here.

Ron flared some sparks into the air to call for attention. Fifty pairs of eyes turned to him in anticipation. A couple of people frowned, however. Inevitably, the question came up.

"Where's Hermione?"

Ron rolled his eyes. "In detention. Umbridge had tried to attack the tame unicorn we had been working with in Care of Magical Creatures. Hermione tried to intervene, protecting the unicorn and explaining that the animal was tame. Hermione didn't believe him. Presto, detention."

The Army members grumbled. "Typical Umbridge. The few times that one of us tries to do what's right, she punishes us."

Ron nodded. "What's more, you not learned the Shield Charm, you'd have one dead unicorn and a rather big fight between Hagrid and Umbridge. To be honest with you, I'd like to see Hagrid lift his leg and step on her. He probably could, you know."

The class chuckled as Ron continued. "However, that's not important here. This is Dumbledore's Army, and we have to focus on practical defensive magic.

"Today's class is going to be slightly different, and it's going to be adapting story that I've taken from a Muggle film. Only two of you will be actively participating in the class today. The rest of you, however, are going to learn a lot by watching the way these people act."

Ron looked around the room. "First, we're going to need two volunteers, preferably not people who are familiar with the Muggle film The Man with the Golden Gun. That shouldn't be so hard to come by here, though."

Neville raised his hand, but Ron turned him down, saying that Hermione had told him about the movie. Fred Weasley took Neville's place as the first contestant. Not surprisingly, George raised his hand next. Ron turned him down flat, saying that he knew Fred too well and in a real duel he could not count on knowing too much about his enemy's tactics. He was eventually replaced by Cho Chang.

Having selected the two participants, Ron wished for the Room of Requirement to include a set of bleachers and instructed the rest of the students to take a seat and watch the show. He then called Fred and Penelope to him and explained the rules to the class.

"Here's what today's lesson is going to be. Penelope and Fred here are going to be participate in a full-scale duel. They're going to duel until one of them strikes the opponent with a Stunning spell, winning the duel.

"In an actual duel, the spell in question would likely be an Avada Kedavra or something nasty like that. In this case, however, we're going to be using the less deadly, though clearly recognizable, Stupefy to serve as the coup de grace.

"Fred and Penelope will head to the center of the room, where I will referee the duel. They'll start back to back and then take twenty paces. Once both of them are ready, I'll give the signal and they'll start firing away."
"What you will probably see is going to be most interesting. There will probably be a lot of Shield Charms and stuff like that as each one tries to protect from the Stunning Spells. They'll soon find, however, that the only way to defeat their opponent will be to catch them off guard, using the various pieces of furniture and other tools to surprise or confuse their opponent. Dueling involves both brains as well as spellpower. If they do start getting involved with tools, may I HIGHLY recommend that they not use the bleachers for cover? I don't want Fred turning half of the spectators into a flock of geese or something like that."

Fred glared at him. "Would I do that, little brother?"

Ron grunted. "Probably."

Fred waved his arms theatrically. "Why would I turn them into geese when I could turn them into eagles or basilisks or something like that?"

Ron groaned. "Shut up, Fred. Any questions?"

Neville raised his hand. "What happens if the duel doesn't end before the end of class? This could go on for a while."

Ron was ready with an answer. "In that case, two new volunteers will be chosen who will take the positions of these two competitors. The new volunteers will resume the duel. Anything else?"

There was nothing. With that, Ron called Penelope and Fred over. They raised their wands to the ready position, stood back to back, and marched twenty paces to opposite sides of the room.

Ron then put on his best Shorty imitation. "Miss Clearwater, are you ready?"

She nodded.

"Mr. Weasley, are you ready?"

Fred waved his wand in acknowledgment. With that, Ron got out of the way and shouted, "Begin!"

Fred turned and fired a Stunning Spell at Penelope right off the bat. Penelope, however, had anticipated this and blocked it right off the bat. She then dove for cover behind a suit of armor as Fred used Accio to summon a mirror. Perhaps Fred was going to try to reflect a spell back at her.

The duel went on and on. Bond and Scaramanga, they weren't. But they were close.

To be continued...

----------

Update #63
----------

February 25, 1996
Presidential Palace
Pyongyang
Democratic People's Republic of Korea

The overseer was nervous, and rightly so. He had been invited to a meeting with none other than the Dear Leader himself, Kim Jong-II. Apparently word of the wizard on the collective farm had been
well received by His Excellency's government.

The overseer had initially been excited when the invitation had come in. He had packed up his best dress uniform and hightailed it over to the capital as fast as he thought possible. No one kept the Dear Leader waiting and lived to tell about it.

The functionaries had hustled him into an anteroom which probably cost more to furnish than his entire farm's yearly output. There were expensive vases from all over the world, a fountain, and huge paintings. Most of them depicted the Dear Leader and his late father standing triumphantly against a background of mountains and oceans. The overseer had suspected that they had deliberately been placed there to intimidate and awe any people who wished to speak with him.

The intimidation was working. The functionaries had left him here about fifteen minutes ago, telling him that the Dear Leader would be with him shortly. Although he refused to show it on the outside, the overseer was quivering in his boots. He wondered what he had gotten himself into. Granted, he couldn't imagine why the Dear Leader wouldn't like it. Not only did he have the soccer ball the witch experimented with, but he had the secret videotape of the encounter as well. It was more than obvious that the witch had done something very strange. She had told him it was magic, and he couldn't see anything to disprove her claim.

His thoughts were interrupted by footsteps in the hall. Looking up, the overseer had noticed that the Dear Leader's secretary had returned with an update. The overseer saluted him crisply, and the secretary returned the salute and bowed.

"Comrade Overseer, His Excellency is ready to see you now. Before you go in, please hold your hands out to your sides and spread your legs so I may search you."

The overseer did as he was told. However, he balked when the secretary told him to hand over the tape. In response, the secretary explained that he wanted to scan it for explosives. It made sense, the overseer thought. Except there was one minor problem.

He pointed at the tape. "The tape has important information on it which is vital to this interview. Don't powerful X-ray machines like those used by your security procedures wreck videotape?"

The secretary shook his head. "Only for undeveloped film, Comrade. However, if you concerned, I will ask for a blank videotape to be retrieved from our secure storage. We will then copy your tape and then bring the copy to your meeting."

The overseer breathed a sigh of relief. "I'd appreciate that, Comrade Secretary."

Ten minutes later, the copy was complete. The overseer nodded, braced himself, and was ushered into the Dear Leader's office. At the first glimpse of the great man, he saluted sharply and bowed deeply.

"Good afternoon, Your Excellency. I am Overseer Xu, reporting as ordered."


The overseer shook his head, dimly realizing that it was almost impossible to procure any of those three objects on his farm. "No thank you, Your Excellency. I do not drink or smoke."
"I see. Now, on to business. Please, Comrade. be seated. I have been told that you have discovered a group of people who may be of great use in strengthening our country and bolstering our productivity."

The overseer sat down on the other side of the Dear Leader's desk. "Indeed, Your Excellency. It appears that a woman gifted in magic has begun using her abilities to improve life on our farm. Her spells have increased our productivity twofold and have improved morale all over the farm."

The Dear Leader steepled his fingers on his desk. "That's a bold claim, Comrade. Although my intelligence has reported rumors of witches and wizards in the South, I was passing them off as mere saber-rattling. Do you have any evidence to support your claim?"

The overseer saluted stiffly. "Our farm's productivity speaks for itself, Your Excellency. You must have read our reports."

"Indeed I have, Comrade. Most intriguing, and worthy of a closer look. However, increased productivity can be accomplished by other, less unusual means."

The overseer brought out the copy of the videotape. "Your Excellency is wise to be skeptical here. Fortunately, I have video evidence of her unusual abilities. With your permission, Your Excellency, I will play the tape for you."

The Dear Leader nodded and asked the secretary to bring in a videotape player. The delay was less than thirty seconds. Soon, the player was set up and ready to go. Seeing everything to his satisfaction, the Dear Leader nodded. "Go ahead, Comrade."

The overseer bowed. "As you command, Your Excellency."

The overseer watched the Dear Leader's expression as he watched the videotape. The man's eyebrows shot up momentarily when he saw the soccer ball floating through the air. He steadied himself quickly, however.

"Very interesting, Comrade. However, are you sure it was magic? Perhaps there were magnets in the ball or she had attached strings to it."

In response, the overseer presented the ball. "Here's the ball, Your Excellency. You may inspect it at your leisure. I assure you that it has not been tampered with."

Kim Jong-Il took the ball and looked it over. "I'll send it over to our labs for further analysis, but I don't see any signs of tampering. There aren't any unusual marks on it, and the metal detectors should have picked up any magnets inside it."

The overseer saluted once more. "Your Excellency, I will vouch for what I saw. I was there. I am absolutely convinced the woman used magic. You can't improve productivity that much using duct tape and magnets. She must have done something far beyond anything we've seen before."

The Dear Leader thought for a moment. "I'm not convinced yet. However, you have a pretty strong case."

He placed the ball in an evidence box along with the tape and sealed it. Turning back to the overseer, the Dear Leader asked a simple question.
"Suppose we indeed prove your claim. How do you propose that this witch use her abilities to help improve life in our country as a whole? One peasant woman can't really do much. I doubt she's even literate."

The overseer grinned. "There's more than one of them, Your Excellency. She has at least one apprentice. He works on the farm with her. And where there are two, there are probably others who haven't been noticed yet."

The Dear Leader nodded. "You're thinking that they'd make a good fighting force. The South won't have any chance against them if the witches try turning them into frogs."

"Correct, Your Excellency. Furthermore, if this woman can train other witches in her agricultural techniques, our farms will be able to produce much more produce and feed lots of our people. Your administration will gain a good reputation."

Kim Jong-Il thought for a moment. "That's a great idea. And just in time, however. Now that I've seen that this woman can very likely do magic, we have to assume that the stories we have of wizards in the South are also genuine. We need to cultivate these wizards and improve their abilities to continue our struggle against capitalism."

The overseer blinked. It hadn't occurred to him that the South also had wizards. Suddenly, his grandiose vision of wizards flattening Seoul had diluted itself into a means to maintain the stalemate. He couldn't say that, though. Instead, he frowned. "If that's the case, improving the army is our first priority. We can't let the South get ahead of us, Your Excellency."

"My thoughts exactly, Comrade Overseer. Is the witch willing to help us?"

The overseer grinned. "She's willing to help us, Your Excellency. I managed to talk her into helping organize a school for training wizards and witches. She bought the idea immediately, figuring that its graduates would be able to improve the lives of peasants all over the country as well as increase productivity. If Your Excellency decides to start messing around with the curriculum, you might wind up with the army you need."

The Dear Leader smiled. "Good idea. I take she doesn't realize the real purpose of the school."

"No, Your Excellency. I don't think so."

"This is getting better by the moment. You've done a great service to the nation, and you're going to be rewarded for it. I'm promoting you to the chief operating officer of the farm. The current COO is going to be demoted to your old position. I'll write out a document formalizing the transfer."

The new COO smiled. "Thank you, Your Excellency. If it is your wish that I serve in this capacity, I will do so."

"Indeed you will, Officer Xu. Now, to your first task. I'm going to be doubling the work quota for the farm -- after all, the woman said she can do things twice as fast. The woman is to teach her apprentice how to run the farm. Once that's done, I want you to bring her before me so we can discuss our school. Can you do that?"

The COO saluted. "Of course, Your Excellency. The new apprentice will work the farm while the witch herself runs the school."
The Dear Leader paused for a moment. "The apprentice is male and the master is female? Kind of backwards, isn't it?"

The COO shrugged. "You can say that, Your Excellency. Then again, the witches seem to have not interacted with us for a while."

"That explains it. Are the witch and apprentice in good enough health to be able to do what is needed?"

"Yes, Your Excellency. Both are young. She's about 30 or so, he's in his 20's. Both do not have spouses to tie them to any one location, so they can move around pretty easily."

The Dear Leader gawked and laughed at this. He shook his head in admiration. "I've always liked arranged marriages. Don't you? Especially arranged marriages which can produce high-quality offspring. Bring both of them before me so I can solemnize their wedding."

The COO chuckled a bit as well before discipline took over. "It will be done, Your Excellency."

"Good. I'll write up the papers and have them for you in half an hour. Dismissed."

To be continued...

-------------

Update #64

Thursday, February 27, 1996
Cox Residence
Near Westboro Park
Westboro, Kansas
United States of America

Claire Cox was furious. Her husband had left without telling her once again. And this time, he had taken his fancy suit.

It was obvious he was having an affair. He had told her that dear old Mindy was just one of his coworkers. However, Claire didn't buy it. She knew many of the people at her workplace, but she didn't have their phone numbers in her phone book. Larry, however, had not only her phone number but her sister's phone number as well.

It was time to get even, she thought -- or at very least, know for sure. Having retrieved the woman's name from her husband's Rolodex -- there was only one Mindy -- she jotted down the woman's address and put the Rolodex back where it belonged until the time was ready for her to spring her trap.

The time was now. She grabbed her camcorder, put it in her car, and headed over to Mindy's address. Sure enough, there was her husband's car. She recorded the scene, walked up to the door, and rang the bell.

A few minutes went by, after which a young blonde woman in her mid-twenties opened up. Claire groaned inwardly: eye candy, just the type of stuff he liked. The woman looked like she had just thrown some clothes on in a hurry. The woman blinked at her. "Hello?"
"Hello there. Are you Mindy Wilkes?"

The woman looked at him quizzically. "Yes, I am. Do I know you?"

"I'm Larry Cox's wife. I believe you have something of mine and I want it back."

The look on Mindy's face was priceless: absolute horror. The arguments started almost immediately. Eventually, her husband hurried down the stairs and nearly fainted when he saw her fighting with his mistress. Meanwhile, the altercation had attracted the attention of several people outside.

Swears were exchanged and punches were thrown. Eventually, Claire was eventually able to hustle her wayward husband out of Mindy's house and slam the door in the astonished woman's face.

With her rival temporarily out of the way, she took advantage of the opportunity to turn on her husband and shove him down the driveway to their car. "I hate you, Larry. I HATE YOU! I wish you were dead and damn you both to hell!"

Her husband cringed. "Listen, Claire. It's not what you think. It's -- "

His response was cut off by a squeal of tires as a car swerved and skidded around the corner and headed down the street. The maneuver was apparently too much for one of the tires, which blew out with a bang. The car suddenly started throwing up sparks and began barreling towards Claire and her husband.

Claire shrieked and got out of the way. The door opened a second later as Mindy Wilkes hurried out into the driveway to defend her paramour. Neither she nor Larry saw the car coming.

The out-of-control Toyota slammed broadside into both Mindy and Larry, crushing them against the side of Mindy's house. Part of the wall fell in on top of them. Surprisingly, the car did not explode. However, the damage had been done. Mindy and Larry had been killed instantly by the impact.

For several seconds, Claire just stood there, looking at the wreck in shock. She had been angry at her husband, of course, but deep down inside she didn't really want him dead. She had just screamed and begun heading towards the wreckage to see what she could do to help when a loud voice pierced the night.

"SHE'S A WITCH!"

She blinked and turned to face the speaker. It was a middle-aged man wearing an Aryan Nation T-shirt, and he was pointing at her. Great, she thought. Just what she needed. One of those idiots from Pitmoss's church. From what he knew of Pitmoss's people, they were bigoted enough to make the Aryan Nation looked like Mary Poppins. He could scream as much as he wanted, however. She'd just ignore him.

The man continued. "You heard her threatening him! She said that she'd kill him and damn them both to hell! And that's exactly what she did! She cast a spell on them! You are all witnesses!"

She spun and stared at him. What the hell? Meanwhile, several people began moving in her direction, presumably to help the three accident victims.

The man continued his rant. "Her spell made that car's tire blow out! Interesting coincidence, wasn't it? What were the odds of that happening? What would the dear Reverend Pitmoss say about this?"
America for Muggles!"

This looked like trouble, she thought. Checking to see that people were attending to the accident victims, she turned to the speaker. "A witch? What do you mean, a witch? I'm not a witch! I'm an ordinary American citizen, just like you are. I don't have magical powers! It was in fact a coincidence! If I were you, I would keep that bigoted trash where it belongs, in the gutter! Now are you going to help me rescue these people or not?"

The speaker laughed at her. Disturbingly, some of the other onlookers joined in. "Of course", he said. "Of course you're not a witch. That's what they always say. However, witches exist. God mentioned them in the Bible, and He never lies. His words have been proven true at last, sorceress. Even the President has admitted they exist. How many times have you coupled with dear old Travis Radner, my dear Hecuba?"

She was about to respond when something hit her from behind. Of the ten people who had headed over to the house, seven of them had gone to do what they could do assist the accident victims. Three, on the other hand, were closing in on her. One of them had a crowbar in his hand. The second had a bat. The third was wearing a KKK robe and was carrying a torch and a rope.

Shit, she thought. It was time to get out of this, pronto. She raced over to her car and put her hand on the door. She pulled back the handle just her feet slid out from under her. Mr. Crowbar had tackled her. He swung with all his might and whacked her on the knee. Pain shot through her body, and she screamed in agony. Dimly, through the haze of pain, she heard a chant slowly gaining in strength and volume.

"BURN THE WITCH! BURN THE WITCH!"

She barely had time to gasp when the end of the baseball bat hit her on the head. She nearly blacked out as the world spun around. She had the vague sensation of people tying together her legs and hands with extension cords. She was completely immobilized.

She tried screaming for help, but all that managed to do is increase the crowd's bloodlust. More blows rained down on her and she slumped in her restraints, almost virtually unable to move.

She abruptly felt grass beneath her feet -- it seems like she had been carried over to one of the parks. She couldn't marshal enough of her faculties to figure out which, however. All she could do was whimper and shudder in pain.

The mob dragged her over to a tree. The man who had originally accused her of witchcraft handed out a few more ropes and they tied her to the three. One of them handed him his bandanna, and the attacker tied it over here head.

She couldn't believe what was happening. It was as if the Salem Witch Trials had come back to the United States after a hiatus of 300 years.

The last things she sensed were the smell of gasoline and excruciating heat.

----------
Update #65
----------
Thursday, February 27, 1996
Claire Cox couldn't believe it. She was alive.

However, she felt as if she had been run over by steamroller several times. Her head throbbed, her body ached, and she couldn't feel her legs. Her chest hurt as well -- she suspected that the man with the baseball bat must have hit her a few times after she had been knocked out.

She tried turning her head and nearly blacked out again with the pain. It took a tremendous amount of effort simply to prevent herself from falling back into blackness.

She opened her eyes a crack and found herself in what appeared to be a hospital bed. Her view was partially obstructed by what appeared to be bandages. Apparently they had covered her head in white wrappings. She wondered if she looked like a mummy.

She tried moving her arms. Those worked. However, she couldn't move her legs. She remembered the fire licking at her legs and had the horrible suspicion that they had been amputated. Gritting her teeth against the agony, she managed to lift her head enough to look down the covers at her feet. Sure enough, her legs were gone. She'd be confined to a wheelchair for the rest of her life. A wheelchair was better than a hearse, however. She let her head fall back to the pillow.

There were IV's plugged into her arms and enough electronic equipment to make the Death Star look like an Amish settlement. The equipment started beeping as she watched. She suspected that it was alerting the doctors to the fact that she had regained consciousness. Her theory was confirmed seconds later, when no fewer than three people hurried into the room.

Two of them appeared to be doctors. They were dressed in the classic disposable gowns and had stethoscopes and other tools around their necks. The third, however, appeared much different. He appeared to be an older man with a beard and wearing -- of all things -- a robe. He looked vaguely familiar, but she couldn't put her finger on where she'd seen him before.

The three people were arguing with each other. Judging from what she could make of the argument, the man in the suit wanted to do something which the doctors didn't want him to do. The man in the suit was trying to explain that his method was better than the doctors' and that they should trust him. They didn't, however. The argument fell by the wayside as the three people approached her gurney.

The man in the suit stepped forward. "Mrs. Cox? Can you hear me?"

Her voice came out as a croak. "Yes, Doctor. Will I make it?"

The man nodded. "You'll make it. The authorities reached you a couple of minutes after those bastards -- pardon my language -- set you on fire. As far as the car accident went, the driver and the man were taken here as well and are in critical condition. The woman was killed on the spot."

Claire was puzzled for a moment. Accident? What accident? Then she remembered what had happened. She didn't know whether she should be happy or sad that her husband's mistress had been killed. Then again, she couldn't imagine that she could enjoy anyone's death, even someone who could have ruined her marriage.

The man continued. "What exactly happened? They claimed you were a witch and tried to kill you?"
"Yes, Doctor. I had gotten into a fight with the man and the woman involved in the crash. The man was my husband, and the woman was his mistress. I had suspected he had been cheating for a while, so I went over there and confronted them. I started yelling and cursing at both of them. Then this car raced around the corner, blew out a tire, and crashed into them. One of Pitmoss's crazies claimed that I was a witch and that I had ensorceled my husband and the mistress. I was therefore responsible for the crash. Then everything went to hell."

The man shuddered. "It's the Salem witch trials all over again. Once again, intolerant people are attacking innocent people. I thought we had progressed beyond that, but unfortunately we haven't."

She gaped at him. "Muggles. That's a wizard term, if I recall. Are you a wizard, Doctor?"

The man chuckled for a moment.

"Yes, Mrs. Cox. My name is Travis Radner. I'm the United States Secretary of Magic. I'm the highest-ranking wizard in the country. When I heard that religious fanatics had attacked someone who was believed to be a wizard, I headed over here as fast as I could. We don't need another Salem. As far being a doctor goes, I do in fact have a doctorate, but it's not in a field you'd be familiar with."

Claire grunted in surprise. So that's where she'd seen him before. He'd appeared on a few television broadcasts over the past month with President Clinton. "Pleased to meet you, Secretary Radner. I must admit, I've been intrigued by your community. I've always liked fantasy novels: Robert Jordan, J. R. R. Tolkien, Ursula --"

Radner rolled his eyes. "Those are fantasy worlds, Mrs. Cox. Real Wizarding communities don't --"

Then it hit him. "Merlin's beard! You must be a Muggle! That makes a lot of sense, come to think of it. Real witches would have been able to escape from the predicament you were in, and do so in public now that the Statute of Secrecy is gone. In a sense, that makes it even worse than the Salem witch trials. During the witch trials, most of the victims were in fact witches who were unable to defend themselves due to the Statute of Secrecy. If people are pointing fingers at Muggles and calling them witches the number of possible victims increases drastically. I'm going to have to talk to the president about this. Who exactly is this Pitmoss fellow? Is he a member of a gang?"

Claire explained. "He's an evil man, Secretary Radner. Stephen Pitmoss is the pastor of the Church of the Right Wing. Imagine a version of Fred Phelps who is not averse to violence. He is involved with a group called America for Humans [formerly Muggles] which is basically a white-supremacist organization whose platform is based on the destruction of wizards. He's got at least one KKK guy in the fold. I remembered four of the attackers: a guy with an Aryan Nation shirt, one with a crowbar, one with a baseball bat, and one with a KKK robe and a torch."

The blood drained from Radner's face at this. "I need to bring this up with the president. This man has to be stopped for all our sakes."

"I fully agree with you, Secretary Radner. If there's anything I can do to help, I will. I need something to live for now that my husband has proven to be untrustworthy."

Radner thought for a moment and nodded. "That is most gracious of you, Mrs. Cox. I can already tell you that the news stations will all be talking about this attack tomorrow morning. If you'd be willing to come with me and give interviews, you will likely get us a strong sympathy vote. You'll probably be a household name by this time tomorrow evening."
Claire nodded. "I'm up for that. I'm a Christian -- or at least try to be -- and believe that it's my duty to do what I can for the community, especially if it involves saving lives. Considering I was attacked by a mob and tied to a wooden object to suffer, it's almost as if I endured my own crucifixion and returned to help mankind."

Radner smiled at her. "That would be most appreciated. However, you're not going to be able to do much given all these injuries. I believe I may be able to help you somewhat in that regard."

At this point the doctors immediately started yelling at him again. He just glared at them and said, "Watch. You might learn something."

He turned back to Claire. "I believe I can use magic to help heal your injuries. The Pope reported that good wizards exist and that the doctrine arguing that witches should be killed does not always apply and needs to be taken in context. Would your religious beliefs permit me to try to heal you with magic?"

Claire nodded. "It's being done for a good cause, so I guess it's OK. Jesus would have likely approved."

Radner took out his wand, and the two doctors looked at it like it was a poisonous snake. "Thank you. Now, hold still for a minute, and let me work on you."

The wizard spent the next few minutes going over the injuries with the doctors and nodding. When he understood what exactly needed to be done, he turned to her, pointed the wand at several parts of her body, and spoke some arcane words.

What happened next truly amazed her. The pain began to fade all over her body. What was even more astonishing was the fact that she could see her legs starting to be regrown! At the rate things were going, it would take them a few hours to regrow completely. But she wasn't going anywhere anytime soon.

Radner inspected his handiwork one last time and nodded. "That ought to do it, Mrs. Cox. You should be good as new in a couple of days or so, at which point the doctors should look you over one last time and let you out of the hospital if there aren't any other problems."

Claire squealed. "Thank you so much! Perhaps Jesus sent you to help us! Perhaps God Himself did so!"

Radner smiled. "I'm afraid I cannot comment on questions of a religious nature. The world of the divine is as obscured to wizards as it is to Muggles."

The doctors meanwhile, were staring at Radner. Specifically, at his wand. Slowly, timidly, one of them pointed at the wand.

"Secretary Radner, I apologize for doubting your abilities. Is there anything you can do for some of the other people in this ward?"

Radner nodded. "I don't have much time, Doctor, but I'll see what I can do. I'll check on the two survivors of the accident, though."

The doctor who had spoken up nodded. "That would be most appreciated, though. Oh and one more
"thing."

"What's that?"

The doctor pointed at the wand. "Where can I get one of those?"

To be continued...
Update #66 through Update #70

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Misagnissa

Update #66

Friday, February 28, 1996
169 South Street, Apt. 1
Waltham, Massachusetts
United States of America

Three or four months ago, I would have been absolutely certain that I would eventually continue on to complete my Ph.D at Brandeis University. However, everything had changed when I stumbled across a high-school classmate of mine crossing the train tracks near the university. He had come in on the commuter rail and asked me to drive him down the street to his office. He also happened to mention that they were hiring. I'd never heard of the company before, but I interviewed. Sure enough, they offered me a job. I wound up leaving Brandeis after the Master's and started a career as a software engineer.

I've always liked programming. However, I soon discovered that being forced to do what you like for a job tended to take the fun out of things. I had the impression that I was good at what I did, however. At the very least, I was good enough to not be thrown out the door immediately after one month.

I've always had other interests as well: astronomy, Scrabble, science fiction/fantasy, and so forth. Had I found out that MIT had a meteorology program a few years earlier, I'd have become a meteorologist. I've often wondered what life would have been like had events turned out differently: I become a meteorologist, I choose astronomy over computer science, I don't run into Aaron on the train tracks, and so forth.

I've always liked to write stories and humorous parodies. I wrote lots of (albeit bad) stories when I was a child, and I satirized the perceived extreme rigidity of my high school in a longer story.

Had someone told me that in an alternate universe I would be posting timelines about wizards and cloned Jedi Knights on the Internet, I would have figured it was plausible as long as I didn't do it for a career. I may be a good writer, but I'm not THAT good.

The wizards, of course, were the talk of the office, as they were everywhere else. I personally hadn't noticed the teenager on the broomstick, primarily because I had been in the bathroom at the time the Blast Cola commercial had supposedly been aired. But the effects of that commercial were still echoing around the world.

Matt, inevitably, attracted attention. He'd been involved with various live-action role playing communities even before the Super Bowl. Throw in the fact that he looked like a Tolkien elf and the fact that his LARP group was based out of MIT, and he was constantly being badgered for interviews. Was he an elf? Was he not an elf? Was he a wizard? He kept on explaining that he was neither an elf nor a wizard and wanted to just get back to work.

Of course, the reporters naturally assumed that he was a wizard but wanted to keep it private. So, they kept on interviewing him, hoping he would confess. Inevitably, Sorcerer Meeks -- from the I-
Entry tour fame -- had made a special trip out to Parametric to check on Matt. Sure enough, he was a Muggle. Matt had then thanked Sorcerer Meeks profusely and called on security to escort the reporters out the door for good.

Inevitably, the interviewers got around to me. It had only been a matter of time, I suppose. I worked for Matt, and Matt had been a suspected wizard. I had told them that although I had seen that painted I between H- and J-Entry in MacGregor, I had always figured it had been some kind of hack or joke hadn't take much notice of it. I only used it to keep track of where H-Entry ended and J-Entry began.

In all fairness, I was astounded when word came out that there was a witch in Russian House. I had had many friends from Russian House when I was at MIT, which prompted even further questions. No, I had no idea who the person was. For all I knew, she was from the class of '98 or '99, so she would have arrived after I left. Furthermore, had I known that she was a witch, I probably would not have outed her without her express permission.

I had heard rumors that the MIT Science Fiction Library, on the fourth floor of the Student Center, had been virtually ransacked by the wizards. The wizards had browsed through several of the books using "unnatural" methods and had been horrified at what the Muggles thought wizards could, or would, do. Wizards couldn't travel into the Astral Plane (Dungeons and Dragons), live forever (the Belgariad), or create rifts in space and time (Riftwar saga). Although they admitted that it was possible to travel through time, like Raistlin did in several of the Dragonlance books), it was extremely dangerous and should never be done due to the risks of time paradoxes.

The Raistlin depiction was also wrong in that the wizards never injured or mutilated people who wished to study advanced magic. Advanced Wizarding schools were very strict on discipline and careful as to whom they admitted. They also reminded candidates that although they may be powerful, they were not gods and never would be. The teachers didn't need to maim the students to mind them of their mortality.

Needless to say, the MIT Science Fiction Society wasn't happy. They were even less happy a few days after the I-Entry tour when the proprietor woke up and found that many of the sword-and-sorcery books were gone and had been replaced by things like the Tales of Beedle the Bard. The new books, the wizards argued, would allow Muggles a more realistic view of a wizard and his abilities.

I've still got a couple of the "forbidden books" in my apartment. I don't see how they can hurt, to be honest with you. They're fantasy, not real life. We'll learn about what the wizards can actually do soon enough. Most real spies don't act like James Bond, right? A real James Bond would have likely been shot by a sniper in Dr. No and terminated the series there and then.

----------------

I was absolutely horrified when I saw the news this morning. I had hoped that society had learned from the Salem witch trials, and I suspected that part of the reason the wizards had isolated themselves from the Muggles was because of pogroms like those. Unfortunately, that was not the case.
The President and Secretary Radner had issued a statement declaring America for Humans to be a terrorist organization. I wouldn't go so far as to call them terrorists -- they weren't like al-Qaeda or the IRA. However, they should definitely be watched, much like the KKK and other hate groups. If they start attacking people on a regular basis, then they should be placed on the terrorism lists. Until that, we can hope this was just an isolated incident.

Unfortunately, I've seen all too well what religious people can do in the name of God. I went to a religious high school myself, and one teacher -- who will remain nameless -- remarked that the recent 1987 Loma Prieta earthquake was God punishing all the gays in San Francisco. He had said this with a straight face. I was absolutely horrified and told my parents. They informed a friend of the family who was a clergyman, and the clergyman preached against the teacher from the pulpit in his next sermon.

How is it that people can kill in God's name? If the other two Abrahamic faiths' holy books are like the one I'm familiar with, God does not want people to kill each other. If that's the case, how can someone kill someone else and consider himself to be doing God's work?

I'm very curious how Samuel is going to figure into this. The discovery that Samuel had survived as a ghost had shocked the entire religious community, both at MIT and at Brandeis. Many people, expecting to see some powerful lawgiver like Moses with the flowing hair and beard, were a bit surprised when they found that Samuel had been a thin, bald ascetic with a mustache and short beard. If you think about it, though, isn't that what you'd expect a prophet or seer to be like? An ascetic, hermit, or both?

They had been even more surprised to realize that he couldn't talk to anyone without an interpreter, as the last people to speak his language had died out about seven hundred years before the time of Christ. Supposedly Hebrew and Arabic speakers could get snippets here there of his speech. However, he had a very strange accent: the letter Vav was pronounced as a W, Tet was pronounced as TH, and sometimes the letter 'Ayin was pronounced as G. The latter explained place names like Gaza and Gomorrah, which were written with 'Ayins and pronounced "Aza" and "Amorrah" nowadays. Apparently the 'Ayin-as-G variation had died out over time. Linguists were supposedly falling over themselves trying to talk to him.

Channel 4 has reported that Samuel has not yet issued a statement on the Cox lynching. There are two possibilities running around: Samuel had gone back to the ghost world and had not returned, or -- more disturbingly -- he wasn't sure whether to support or condemn the attack. I suspect that Samuel is waiting to hear back through the Wizarding grapevine that Cox was in fact a Muggle and not a witch who had intentionally hexed two of the victims. If that is the case, I suspect he will eventually condemn the attack. I sure hope he does, however.

A few of the Brandeis undergrads have told me that there's going to be a meeting of Islamic, Jewish, and Christian students in the Sherman Auditorium to discuss the ramifications of Samuel's implication that all three Abrahamic faiths are considered equivalent. It's going to be tomorrow night, the 29th, at 7:30. Rumors have it that there's going to be a discussion about ways to mend the barriers that have risen between the three siblings over the past fifteen hundred years. That would be a good thing to see, in my opinion. I doubt we'll be able to get it done before the end of the century, or perhaps even in my lifetime. But it's a start.

I hope the Orthodox Jewish community will show up -- I still remember how a popular religious Brandeis girl named Alisa Flatow was killed in a terrorist attack in Israel while studying abroad. I had still been in grad school at the time and had been friends with several undergrad seniors who had known Alisa. If the Orthodox are able to bury the hatchet over this it will be a very good sign. Blood
feuds are never pretty. I distinctly remember having to talk one grieving friend out of looking for revenge: "what good will that do? It won't bring her back, and it will just make things worse". They've never seemed all that keen on having witches running around to this point -- let's hope they'll do the right thing here.

Enough for now -- I have to go to work.

---------------------------------------------

OOC -- Yes, these are all real people. Aaron was my mentor at my company for four years, after which I left and went to where I am today. Matt DOES look like Legolas (he's actually a BRILLIANT software engineer).

Unfortunately, the story about the teacher and the earthquake is also true. Rest assured that is a minority opinion. A small minority, I hope. The Alisa Flatow incident also, unfortunately, took place. I believe her family donated her organs to science or hospitals. Ironically, I may have actually MET Alisa at a party in 1995, but I don't remember the details. All I remember is a clique member named Alisa I never saw again.

The Russian House witch is also a real person. She is obviously not a sorceress (as far as WE know!). However, supposedly she has some Wiccan traditions. No, I'm not telling you her name. I have reason to believe that I was not supposed to know, and a mutual friend at the time told me about five years later. As a result, I'm keeping her anonymous.

As far as Samuel's accent goes, it is believed that Hebrew had a Ghayin letter, just like Arabic. Ghayin and 'Ayin used the same symbol (to this day, the Hebrew letter Pay is used for both P and F with the difference only being a dot). Ghayin has since dropped out of Hebrew, replaced with 'Ayin. Teth was transliterated into Greek as Theta, and Arabic still has the Vav pronounced as W.

To be continued...

--------------

Update #67

------------------

Saturday, February 29, 1996
Westboro Park
Westboro, Kansas
United States of America

Joe Pullman and the rest of the Kansas Highway Patrol officers were loaded for bear. Joe himself had managed to scrounge up a few tear gas bombs, some rubber bullets, and a full-body Kevlar suit. Yet he had a suspicion that even that wouldn't be enough if everything went south. If that was the case, he and his thirty friends would have a lot of work to do.

The order had come down less than 24 hours after the attack on Claire Cox. Secretary Radner, determined to show the people of Westboro that witches weren't the terrifying creatures depicted in movies and books, had asked Morgan Dresden, chairman of the Chicago Wizardry Institute, to visit Westboro and speak to the populace.

Dresden was the man in charge of the North Central region of the American Department of Magic. There were seven regional offices of the Department of Magic: Fourth Mesa (protected by invisibility, for Southwest), Mount St. Helens (protected by very realistic-looking volcanic eruptions, for the Northwest), the Chicago Wizardry Institute (protected by invisibility, for North Central), the Big Thicket Swamp Facility (hidden in the swamps of the Big Thicket National Preserve, for the South Central), the central facility in the Four Towns (underwater, for the Northeast), a facility in the
Ocala National Forest in central Florida (protected by a spell which caused Muggle intruders to become lost and head for home, for the Southeast), and the Smoky Mountains Facility (protected by virtually impenetrable terrain, for the Mid-Atlantic).

Joe had been told that Dresden was an extremely accomplished wizard. Prior to the Super Bowl Breach, when the Statute of Secrecy had still been in effect, he had once captured Jim Butcher, a Muggle from Missouri who had managed to stumble across a CWI satellite office. He had just been about to Obliviate Butcher when Butcher somehow managed to convince him that the few CWI operations the Muggle had stumbled across would make good fantasy novels. Dresden had relented and modified the man's memories so that the they were completely garbled, given a fantasy twist, and had no references to the CWI. Joe wondered how many other fantasy series were actually due to wizards messing with Muggle memories.

Dresden's accomplishments, however, weren't going to do much good in a situation like this. Since the entire purpose of this meeting was to improve public relations between wizards and Muggles, Joe had been told that Dresden would not use magic in a position which could hurt Muggles, even in self-defense. Hence the assistance of the Kansas Highway Patrol.

Dresden had hoped to give his talk at the foot of the half-burned tree which had nearly been the site of Claire Cox's death. However, Joe's superiors turned him down, explaining that it would be too cold to have a big public gathering outside this time of year. Furthermore, holding the talk inside a school auditorium would be much easier in terms of security. Dresden had relented and allowed the talk to be moved inside.

Looking around at the auditorium, however, Joe wondered whether having the talk inside had been a good idea after all. Judging by the number of people who were trying to crowd into the room, the crowd was approaching the maximum occupancy limit. He barked a few orders into his microphone, and KHP officers started heading towards the front door to ward away additional guests. Some of the guests argued with the officers, but nothing happened. Apparently the site of three men dressed in full riot gear managed to scare them off.

It took half an hour for everyone to file into the room and take their seats. Joe took advantage of the delay to install a bulletproof shield at the front of the stage in the auditorium. If anyone was going to take out Dresden, he'd need something on the order of a full machine gun. Given the security, the guests would be lucky to bring a set of nail clippers into the facility.

Eventually, everything with all set. Joe took last look around the room, saw that everything was to his satisfaction, and nodded to the mayor. The mayor took a deep breath and walked onto the stage.

"Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to this emergency meeting. I apologize for the short notice, but in the light of recent events it's important that something be done as quickly as possible to prevent additional incidents.

"As most of you are aware, our fair city was recently the site of a terrible hate crime. A fundamentalist group known as America for Humans recently accused someone of witchcraft, tied her to a tree, and began burning her like they did in times of old. Had the authorities responded less quickly, or had the damage not been delayed by the snow and cold temperatures, the victim would not have survived. As it was, she was rushed to the hospital, where the doctors were forced to amputate her legs and perform several hours of emergency surgery."

The mayor gestured offstage for the next guest. "The doctors had removed her legs, convinced that
nothing known to science would be able to save them. That was, however, before they met Travis Radner, the Secretary of Magic, who had visited the hospital as soon as he had learned of the incident.

"Secretary Radner realized that the doctors had been partially incorrect when it came to the victim's legs. Although he admitted that there had been no way to save her legs from being amputated, he told the doctors that he knew a spell which would allow the victim to regrow her legs from their stumps."

The crowd gasped at this. Most people applauded. However, Joe heard a few grunts and jeers. Uh-oh, he thought. He immediately scanned the audience for the troublemakers. They were easy to identify, as it turned out: they were wearing America for Humans T-shirts.

The mayor paid little attention however. "Yes, I can understand. It sounds too good to be true. However, we can prove that this in fact happened. Allow me to introduce Claire Cox and Chairman Dresden!"

The crowd began talking excitedly amongst itself as two new people came onstage. One of them was clearly Claire Cox, sitting in a wheelchair. Both of her legs were clearly visible, much to everyone's amazement. Behind the wheelchair was a tall, bearded man wearing a garish green robe and holding a small rod in his right hand.

The wheelchair was moving by its own accord. Joe nearly dropped his billy club in astonishment. The robed man was not physically touching it, yet it was still moving. What's more, he managed to turn the wheelchair around a corner without touching it either, something which supposedly defied the laws of physics.

Dresden's left hand was wearing a glove and busy with a long, black and brown object. It looked like a burned branch or something like that. The crowd suddenly gasped once more and began pointing at it. Then it came to him and he swore in amazement.

The wizard was holding one of Claire Cox's amputated legs. It was incontrovertible proof that Claire had suddenly grown at least one more leg. That would make three legs, if Joe's count was accurate.

Dresden pushed the wheelchair to the center of the stage, shook the mayor's hand, and then bent down to place the burned leg next to one of Claire's. It was obvious that they had come from the same person. Despite the fire damage, they looked identical.

Joe took a hard look at the America for Humans representatives. They looked to be absolutely beside themselves and had no idea what to do. He couldn't tell if they were convinced that the wizards could do good as well as harm or whether they'd been cowed into submission by an actual display of magic.

He turned back to the crowd as a whole. Several people were in tears, talking about Jesus and miracles. One of the people near him was discussing how the doctors had discussed Claire's healing in the lunchroom the next day and had spread the story far and wide. Another person claimed that he had been visited by Radner shortly after he had finished healing Claire and had watched in amazement as the wizard had mended his broken arm.

Dresden tried to speak but couldn't get a word in edgewise. He shrugged off the mayor's request, pointed his wand at his throat, and muttered the word "Sonorus". When he spoke again, it was at a volume high enough to be audible in the front row of a Garth Brooks concert performed during a
"Good afternoon. My name is Morgan Dresden. I'm a wizard from the Chicago Wizarding Institute."

The audience's conversation was silenced immediately by the booming voice. Talk about making an impact, Joe thought. The wizard nodded, pointed his wand to his throat again, and said "Quietus". He then continued in his normal voice.

"I've come here to dispel some myths that seem to be circulating about wizards in your community. Misunderstanding can be a big problem when it comes to wizard/Muggle relations. The Salem witch trials of 1692 were a result of a misunderstanding, and we know how that worked out. Part of the reason for the old Statute of Secrecy was to make sure that we wizards weren't attacked by your people because of things that one or two bad apples might have done."

One of the America for Humans members spoke up. "Why should we trust you? You're in league with the devil!"

Dresden shook his head. "That's one of the misunderstandings. We are people, just like you are. We just happen to have some unusual abilities. Some people have the ability to run a four-minute mile. Some people have the ability to become grandmasters in chess. And some people have the ability to cast magic spells."

"But magic is a tool of the devil!"

Dresden rolled his eyes. "Have you ever met any devils before, sir?"

The America for Humans man gaped momentarily but soon regained control. "I don't THINK so, but..."

Dresden hammered his point home. "If you haven't met any devils, where is your evidence that devils use magic?"

The crowd applauded for a moment, after which the America for Human said, "Because God told us!"

Dresden looked at him intently. "Has God spoken to you?"

"Yes! He speaks to me every day! He tells me you're a devil!"

Dresden thought for a moment and bent over to talk to Claire for a moment. She nodded, and he removed one of her necklaces. He held it in before him, in clear view of the crowd.

It had a crucifix on it.

Dresden pointed at the necklace. "If I am a devil, why am I not being burned by holding the symbol of the Savior?"

The America for Humans man floundered for a moment. It was obvious he was in over his head. Eventually, he croaked out a response. "You're a wizard! You're suppressing the pain with magic!"

Dresden didn't buy it. "According to your tradition, this crucifix has the power of God behind it. Certainly a punishment from God would be stronger than anything a human wizard, such as I, would
be able to do to stop it. Don't you agree?"

Th America for Humans man just stared at him, slack-jawed. Joe grinned. It seemed that Dresden had the crowd well in hand. It looked like his services wouldn't be needed after all.

To be continued...

------------
Update #68
------------
Sunday, March 1, 1996
Seoul Ancestral Wizarding Shrine
Seoul
South Korea
NEXT PoV: Pitmoss

----------
Choi Yeun stared at the Director in shock. "What do you mean, sir? What do you mean, you won't do it?"

The Director shook his head firmly. "Kim Jong-Il is a Muggle leader, madame. It would not be appropriate to interfere with Muggle governments."

"But he's been oppressing everyone! Now that we can cast spells in the open, we can overthrow him!"

"We are wizards, madame. We are not assassins. Now that the Statute of Secrecy is no longer in force, we have been able to help improve the quality of life here in the South. The trains are running more on time, and the quality of the roads has increased. We have no jurisdiction up in the North."

"But --"

The Director cut her off. "Furthermore, a case where a wizard assassinated a Muggle ruler in another country will set a dangerous precedent, particularly if the attack was unprovoked. Wizard everywhere will start attacking politicians they don't like, causing worldwide chaos and war. You know the power we wizards can wield. Imagine this power in the hands of a terrorist. Imagine every national capital attacked by dragons. The Seoul Ancestral Wizarding Shrine refuses to take the responsibility for such a grave threat."

Choi Yeun tried another tack. "You must remember that I told you that Kim Jong-Il is thinking of militarizing the wizards. That's why I came here. At the very least, you've got to stop that, or at least counter his wizards."

The Director nodded. "I believe you. Unfortunately, we have no proof yet. The best we can do is prepare our defenses for a possible invasion, and do so quietly. Thanks to you, we know what we're up against at least."

She stared at him, aghast. "You can't send a black ops team in there and take out the wizards that join up with him?"

"No, madame. Our standing orders include a firm prohibition against any magical first strike. We can only move against the North if we subjected to a magical attack or if there is a serious magical threat to the country as a whole which cannot be handled by the regular army. Until then, we must wait until we are fired upon, so to speak."
Choi Yeun threw her hands up in the air. "I don't believe this. I come all the way down here, risking my life and that of my apprentice, to warn you that the North is militarizing its wizards, and all you're going to do is do some behind the scenes preparation and take a wait and see attitude?"

The Director nodded. "I'm afraid so, madame. Orders are orders. Rest assured, though, we will try to look over our defense plans and update some of our old military exercises. Trust me, your trip was not in vain."

Choi Yeun groaned. "I hope not. Otherwise, I'll be really disappointed."

The Director grinned. "Trust me, you won't be. Especially after I offer you asylum in South Korea. That is the least we can do for your troubles."

She stared at him. "You're allowing me to defect along with my apprentice?"

"Yes, madame. Both of you are welcome to stay in South Korea. You will be able to serve in our Wizarding corps, and he will be able to join you once he reaches full wizard status."

To the Director's surprise, she nearly broke down crying. "I'd love to stay, and I can tell you that Mr. Wong would like to as well. Unfortunately, I'm not sure we can. The overseer is going to be looking for us and is going to get a bit suspicious when we don't come back. Furthermore, life on my farm would go completely down the tubes unless we came back. Were it not for my magical labor-saving practices, the peasants would be working almost 16 hours per day."

The Director nodded. "I'm aware of that. How about going back, faking your deaths, and returning? We'll send two of our people up to join your farm. They'll serve as spies and be able to help with your work if need be."

Choi Yeun stared at him. "Fake our deaths?"

"Yes, madame. Have you ever heard of the Geminio spell?"

She frowned. "I can't say that I have, sir."

"It's a simple charm which allows you to duplicate an object. Allow me to demonstrate."

The Director place a spellbook in front of him. He pointed his wand at the book and shouted "Geminio". A second spellbook materialized next to it. It looked like an exact duplicate of the first. Fascinated, Choi Yeun picked it up and began rifling through the pages. As far as she could tell, it was an exact copy.

She didn't see how it helped, though. Turning back to the Director, she said, "Impressive spell. But how would it help us here?"

The Director grinned. "When Geminio is cast on a human being, a nonliving clone body is created. It will eventually decay, but as long as it's there it will look and act just like a corpse. You two clone each other, make it so the clone bodies looked like they "died" in accidents, and then Apparate out of there. Any Muggle who came in would think that you had perished in the accident and not defected. You'll have covered your tracks pretty well."

Choi Yeun chuckled. "That might actually work. And the extra work that we would have needed..."
from the farm --"

The Director finished the sentence. " -- will be handled by the spies. You'll make a quick getaway, just as you hoped."

She smiled. She may not have gotten everything she'd hoped for, but the defection was a good consolation prize. "I'm definitely going to go for that. I'll the apprentice. Which reminds me -- do you have a school for apprentice wizards that he can join?"

The Director hesitated for a moment. "Yes and no, madame. We do indeed have a school for apprentice wizards. Unfortunately, it is for younger wizards, teenagers for the most part. Your apprentice is a grown man and will likely not feel comfortable with it."

Choi Yeun shook her head. "I think he'll be fine with it."

"Perhaps, madame. However, there is a more serious issue. From what we can tell, he is a bit...odd."

She took the words right out of his mouth. "His ability to cast spells but not see magical objects doesn't seem to make sense."

"Correct, madame. The inability to see what he casts will be problematic, and none of the teachers are willing to teach him. I hope you know what you're doing. In the meantime, we've run a few tests on him. In some cases, he registers as a wizard. In others, he registers as a Muggle."

She stared at him. "How could that be? Could he be a Squib?"

"No, madame. Squibs cannot cast spells. Your apprentice can."

"Then what is he?"

The Director frowned. "I honestly don't know. No one here has seen anything like this before. Were his parents wizards?"

Choi Yeun shook her head. "He doesn't think so. They were just farmers. He nearly fell over when he found out he could summon magic -- he thought he was an ordinary farmer as well."

"In that case, he could be a weak Muggle-born wizard, but that still doesn't explain the imbalance between the seeing and casting as strength in magic normally affects both seeing and casting. The only thing I can think of is that he is some hybrid between Muggles and wizards which has never been encountered before. For all we know, the Muggle population may be crawling with them. We never knew about them because the tests which searched for candidates for the Wizarding schools registered them as Muggles. It's going to be an interesting thing to research now that the Wizarding world has been exposed to the Muggles. Do you know of any others like him?"

She shook her head. "No, sir. However, I don't know much outside my farm."

"What about his parents? Did you talk to his parents?"

"I'm afraid not, sir. They're both dead, sir."

"What about his siblings?"
"His sister is a straight Muggle."

The Director paused once more. "I think we should get some scientists to run genetic tests on him. Perhaps this will tell us something about what makes a wizard tick. However, don't worry about that for now. As far you're concerned, you should spend the next few hours relaxing and preparing yourself to go back to your farm and clone yourself. I'll send someone to teach you and your apprentice the spell in a few minutes."

Choi Yeun nodded. "Thank you, sir. Your help will be most appreciated."

The Director shook his head. "No, madame. Thank you for alerting us to the change in the North and introducing us to your most unusual apprentice."

To be continued...

------------

Update #69 [sorry, Xandrel -- it's a Pitmoss talk: I apologize for portraying a fanatic...]

Sunday, March 1, 1996
Church of the Right Wing
Westboro, Kansas
United States of America
NEXT PoV: Fred Phelps

Patrick Dursley-Burgess had mixed feelings as he entered the church. On the one hand, he was happy that America for Humans had gotten bold enough to come in the open and actually go ahead and attack someone for being a witch. The group's popularity -- and notoriety -- had increased as more people found out about the witches. Had it not been for the snow and the quick response of the authorities, the victim would probably have found herself on the doorstep of Hell.

He was more than disturbed, however, by the fact that the victim had turned out not to be a witch. The attackers had killed an innocent, God-fearing person. Not only that, the victim had apparently been a Christian -- she had been wearing a crucifix around her neck. Patrick knew God, however, and was fairly certain that He would have not approved of this action.

He looked up at the ceiling of the church. Forgive me, Almighty. Unlike You, we are only human. At the time, we were convinced that she was a witch. I know that You forgive sins. I promise you, My Lord, that I will atone for this transgression by burning a witch in Your name. May Thy will be done. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

His prayer finished, he settled into his near the front of the congregation. He had spoken with Reverend Pitmoss early this morning, and the preacher had told him that he had a most interesting sermon planned for today. Patrick hoped so. America for Humans had gotten some very bad press -- undoubtedly God punishing the faithful for attacking a Christian. Patrick couldn't get the sight of the demon holding the crucifix out of his head. Was that a sign from God? The demon, as a representative of Hell, was going to turn the tables on the faithful and take hold of a Christian like himself? Patrick sure hoped not. Then again, he wasn't a minister. He wouldn't know for certain.

The church was packed. Patrick recognized most of the regulars. However, there were people he'd never seen before -- and a lot of them. There were several well-built men who looked like undercover officers in the crowd. One heavily tattooed man with a PULLMAN nameplate stood near him. There were a few reporters and television cameras as well. He suspected that these people
had been tipped off that Stephen was going to have an interesting sermon and wanted to see what was going on...or interfere.

It was easy to figure out when the sermon was going to start. Everyone sat down and the lights above the television cameras all flickered on in unison. The crowd looked like it was about to erupt. Patrick kicked himself for not bringing his pistol. Granted, he didn't think it was appropriate for someone to bring a weapon into a house of God. But what would he do if his life was in danger?

On the other hand, perhaps nothing would happen. He put his Bible on the pew next to him and looked up at Reverend Pitmoss. The preacher had a troubled look on his face, one which was quite unusual for him.

Pitmoss looked down at his notes and began. "Good afternoon, my fellow believers, and welcome to the Church of the Right Wing. It's a new month on the calendar, one in which momentous events will likely be happening. Momentous indeed, my friends. I pray that we survive this. For, as far as I can tell, we have entered the End Times. I suspect that if the Rapture has occurred, none of us warranted a quick exit which would have allowed us to avoid the seven troubling years ahead."

Patrick gaped at him for a moment. Well, well, well. It looks like he finally realized something that Patrick had thought of a while back. One of these wizards was the Antichrist. The question was: who? Radner? He had mixed feelings about this. He was happy that his idea seemed to have support. On the other hand, he wasn't particularly happy to think that the world was going to completely fall apart. He knew that Jesus would return in seven years -- but it wouldn't do Patrick much good if Patrick didn't last until the Second Coming. Patrick firmly believed that he was a good Christian and that he'd make it through the Tribulation. However, he didn't know for certain.

The preacher continued. "It is now fairly certain that we are seeing the first divisions of the Evil One's army. Magic, my friends, is the mark of the beast. God certainly doesn't like it -- he said to kill witches. It's in the Bible. Look it up yourselves if you don't believe me.

"We have already started trying to kill witches in His name. Unfortunately, I must freely acknowledge that the last one we tried to kill, Ms. Claire Cox, had in fact not been a witch, though she had seemed to be a witch at the time. I trust that God understands our motives and will not punish us for making an all-too-human mistake.

"You may be interested to know that Claire Cox survived the attack -- let's all thank God for that!"

A resounding "Amen" echoed through the room. Pitmoss continued:

"However, I still believe we need to pray for her. You see, she allowed one of these so-called wizards to heal her and regrow her amputated legs. Let us hope that this poor woman did not sell her soul to the devil in order to regain the ability to walk. Let's all ask God to exorcise the spirit of the wizard from the poor victim's body, leaving her a healthy pair of legs without the taint of Satan."

The crowd prayed for a moment. When they were done, Pitmoss resumed his speech. "I've told you for several weeks now that these witches are not to be trusted. The research I've done over the last few days, however, has firmly convinced me that we should redouble our efforts against them. You see, I am absolutely convinced that the End Times have come and that the Antichrist has arrived -- or is about to arrive."

He opened up his Bible. "I've got here a list of signs that indicate the Antichrist is about to arrive. Let's go through them one by one, shall we?"
Pitmoss held up one finger. "ONE: The Antichrist will appear at a time when catastrophic events are overtaking the Earth". Ever heard of global warming, my friends? Lots of floods and hurricanes. Running out of oil and other fossil fuels. Battles in the Holy Land won't help, either.

He continued his enumeration. "TWO: The global economy will be immediately affected by the preliminary events of Revelation". I'd say fights over oil is a good preliminary event, is it not? Especially since running out of oil is going to be bad for the human race.

"THREE: The world's superpower will cease to function as the world's economic center". We're the world's superpower. You and I both know that. But what do we do? Export all our jobs to places like Mexico and China. I suspect that we're on the verge of losing our superpower status.

"FOUR: The Antichrist will replace free-market capitalism with a single economic system connected with the Mark of the Beast". My friends, I have discovered that these so-called wizards use special coins called Galleons, Sickles, and Knuts. No wizards will accept the good American greenback as currency. If the wizards take over the world, we'll be forced to use these Galleons. That's bad."

"FIVE: The Antichrist will establish a single, mandatory religious system". This one I'm not sure about yet. However, I'm working on it. I'm fairly certain I'll find the answer within a few weeks or so."

Pitmoss paused for effect. Patrick looked around the crowd and saw that the words were hitting home. The preacher seemed to be making a good case.

"SIX: The Antichrist will be aided by the False Prophet, a spiritual leader, possibly from Rome, who will lead the world to worship the Antichrist". I think we know who that is, my friends. Don't we, Secretary Radner? Yes, Secretary Radner is the False Prophet. He's trying to convince everyone to start working with wizards. He's even managed to get himself into position to ensorcel the President!"

Pitmoss started waving his hands excitedly. "Think about it. You have no idea who this Radner was one month ago. Don't you find it odd that there happened to be a Secretary of Magic which we hadn't known about? Use your heads, people. There IS no Secretary of Magic. You know the government. I know the government. Where's the Department of Magic? Underwater? Nice try, Satan. Of course we have to take that on faith as we can't get down there to check it out! This Radner is the False Prophet, whom Satan has sent to lay the groundwork for the Tribulation. He's got one of the marks of the beast -- magic. What else can you ask for? And if that's not bad enough, he's gotten pretty popular!"

He raised his hands and pointed them at the crowd. "How much would you be willing to bet that dear old Radner had an aunt or uncle from Rome?"

The people muttered to each other about that. The man with the PULLMAN nameplate frowned and shook his head slowly. However, he didn't interfere. Looking around the room, Patrick noticed that most people were expecting Radner to have a Roman aunt or uncle -- or possibly a relative in Rome, New York. Either one would probably fulfill the prophecy. This was a really good speech, he thought.

Pitmoss paused for a moment to let everything sink in. "Ladies and gentlemen, we know Radner's supposedly a powerful wizard. Yet we now know he's the False Prophet. If he's that powerful, can you imagine what the Antichrist himself is going to be like? Just think about it. I'm imagining an
extremely powerful wizard with the mannerisms of a serpent, the ancient representation of Satan. Someone who will rise to power out of obscurity -- convenient, that Statute of Secrecy -- be killed by the authorities, and return with even more power -- this time, the power of Satan himself. Someone who has the Ten Kings underneath him, a group of wizards who will do anything for their evil master. Mark my words, my friends. If you find a wizard with a noble title such as King or Lord, we've got our man. Especially if he claims that he can't be killed and will live forever.

"Some of you may be scared of what I've just revealed. That is quite understandable, my flock. However, you need not be worried. All we have to do is obey the word of God, exterminate the witches, and we'll be fine. If we're really lucky, the Rapture is still ongoing, with people being taken slowly over the span of a few days. Do you realize that killing a few witches in the next few days may be enough to allow you to not have to face the Tribulation?"

Pitmoss gestured to crowd. "Go ahead! Join our crusade and go after these evil witches! If you find a witch, make sure to burn him or her. And make sure the person's a witch first!"

The crowd roared. Patrick punched his fist excitedly. Meanwhile, Mr. Pullman put his hand to his face in absolute horror.

To be continued...

Update #70

-----------------------
Sunday, March 1, 1996
Westboro Baptist Church -- Fred Phelps, Pastor
Westboro, Kansas
United States of America
NEXT PoV: Chief Operating Officer (formerly Overseer) Xu
-----------------------

[Warning -- this may offend Catholics. I apologize in advance but...it's Fred Phelps, another wacko. I have to write in his voice]

Fred Phelps looked out over his congregation. Rumor has it that Stephen Pitmoss had just delivered a provocative speech to the Church of the Right Wing, over on the other side of town. Supposedly Pitmoss had claimed that the wizards were the agents of the devil and that Radner had been the False Prophet, the herald to the Antichrist.

Phelps didn't really know what to make up of Pitmoss. Pitmoss was clearly correct in that various undesirable ethnic groups had managed to corrupt the American way of life and had to be put in their place. He also agreed that wizards should be watched as diligently, if not more so, than illegal immigrants and cultural minorities.

However, there were some things that Phelps couldn't stomach. Phelps wanted the undesirables relegated to a lower tier in society. What he did not advocate, however, was their murder. He was a Christian, and Christians did not kill people. The Good Book had spelled that out, clear as day.

The decree that all witches be slain troubled him. In principle, he agreed with the doctrine. However, what happened if a witch became a Christian and used her powers to help the community? Was she still required to die? As if that was not bad enough, there were very few witches in the community as a whole. The odds were that there would be many cases of false positives -- ordinary Christians who were falsely convicted of witchcraft. Could he in good conscience order the execution of someone
who quite likely was not in fact a witch?

He supposed he could make a compromise: if the accused witch was from one of the undesirable groups, he'd have her burned. Otherwise, he'd give her a second chance.

He had been debating how to handle the wizards for a long time. The wizards' association with the devil became painfully obvious when Osama bin Laden recommended that they use their powers to fight holy war against America. However, there were always lessons to be learned from experience. The terrorist mastermind had given him an idea, and Phelps believed that he would be able to beat bin Laden at his own game.

Was Radner the False Prophet? Probably not, thought Phelps. He couldn't imagine an American being the False Prophet, particularly one who was a Protestant like himself. The Good Book said that the False Prophet would likely have a tie to Rome, and Radner was not associated with Rome at all.

There was, however, a wizard who was. His name was John Paul II.

The Pope was about as high in the Roman hierarchy as you could get. John Paul II had freely admitted that he was a wizard, and he had demonstrated his abilities in public. He considered himself to be a good man and a Christian. Although Phelps freely admitted that this man had presided over several good developments, the fact remained that the man was a Catholic. And Catholics were not good Christians, despite what they claimed about themselves. Phelps suspected that the Church put homosexuals in monasteries, ostensibly getting them out of people's lives but in reality supporting them behind the world's back. If there's anything that maddened Phelps more, it would a homosexual.

Phelps knew that the idea of the Pope as the False Prophet would be even more controversial than having Radner be the False Prophet. It would probably get him and his church into deep trouble. On the other hand, God was with Phelps. People had protested against Phelps and tried to silence him. However, God in His great wisdom had thwarted these enemies in the past would likely do so again.

He scanned the crowd. Did he have the guts to go through with this sermon? He took a deep breath, asking God to strengthen him and give him some guidance. It took a few moments, but eventually Phelps felt His grace fall over him. Smiling, he stepped to the podium and began his speech.

"Good afternoon, my friends. I'd like to talk about an extremely important event which took place a few days ago. A group named America for Humans, led by Pastor Stephen Pitmoss, attacked a woman whom they believed was an evil witch. They tied her to a tree in Westboro Park and tried to burn her, like they used to do many years ago. The authorities intervened, however, and rescued the woman. She was brought to the hospital, where she was stabilized but lost her legs. What happened next was most unusual. A wizard supposedly visited the hospital and regrew her legs on the spot. A few days later, wizards performing witchcraft in public presented her, along with an amputated leg, to the city to explain that wizards mean no harm to ordinary Christians.

"Let me emphasize one thing at the outset. I will not condone mass killings. I've told you one, and I've told you again. All I ask that people do is protest. We are Christians, and Christians do not kill. If you believe killing people you don't like is justifiable, get the hell out of my church."

Phelps paused. This was the tricky part. "Witches, on the other hand, are more problematic. The Bible specifically says that witches are not allowed to live. Yet the Ten Commandments specify that the faithful are not permitted to kill. Even the Noahide laws prohibit murder, and the entire pagan world is supposed to follow those.
"How do we reconcile these laws? The general consensus is that the commandment to kill witches is a special case, an exception to the general rule which allows the faithful to kill witches. This makes sense to me, and I suspect it does to you as well.

"Now hold on a second before you start going around killing all the witches you see. Killing witches is one thing. Vigilante justice without benefit of a trial is another thing entirely. If the person has performed witchcraft in public in a manner which can serve as solid evidence in a court of law, then you can burn her. If not, she is not to be touched. I've told you about Hell a lot of times, and rest assured you don't want to be sent down there by killing someone who wasn't a witch."

Phelps stared hard at the congregation. "If a someone confesses to you that he or she is a witch, you can burn her. However, you are to not use torture or any other painful means to forcibly extract a confession. Jesus Christ wouldn't like that, and I doubt the secular authorities would care much for it, either. After all, we're signatories to the Geneva Convention. You don't want to put our glorious nation in a bad light."

His voice softened a little. "To the best of my knowledge, there are several well-known individuals who have admitted they are witches and are therefore fair game. There's Morgan Dresden, who performed magic during the meeting with the mayor. There's Travis Radner, this so-called Secretary of Magic. There's that kid with the broom in the Super Bowl commercial, but I doubt you'll be able to get your hands on him as his loving parents will probably protect him. And, of course, there's John Paul II."

The crowd started muttering at this.

"I know. He's the Pope. But you saw how he cast a spell on that dove. He's also a wizard. I've always told you that Catholicism has a bit too much idolatry in it and that we broke free from the Pope for a reason.

"The fact that the Pope is a wizard disturbs me greatly and leads me down a truly frightening path. You would have expected a godly man to use all of the powers at his disposal to help the world, right? So why didn't he use his magic to help? Why did he allow famines in Ethiopia? Why did he allow American soldiers to risk their lives in the Gulf War? Someone in his position probably would have the authority to do anything he wants! Of course, he'd say that there was a Statute of Secrecy. However, if I were the Pope, I'd use magic all the time and explain that I was doing miracles to spread the glory of God.

"This means that the Pope is unwilling, or unable, to use his powers for good. And it brings to mind rather troubling verses from the Book of Revelation. I'm not sure about your Bibles, but my Bible has stories of a man called the False Prophet, a harbinger of the Antichrist. Supposedly this man will come from Rome and lay the groundwork for the Antichrist's arrival. He will be very popular, by the way.

"I obviously have no way to tell if John Paul II is in fact that False Prophet. However, there is a definite case. Strange things are happening in the world, what with global warming and stuff, and I've told you several times that I think we're living in the End Times. We've got witches and wizards running all over the place, creatures which can be identified easily through their use of magic. That looks like the mark of the Beast to me. As if that's not bad enough, someone tried to shoot him and he miraculously came back from the brink! Someone's got the help of the devil, I'd say!"

The people started talking loudly -- some in fear, some in determination, some in absolute disgust.
Phelps had to raise his voice in order to continue.

"Regardless of the Pope's status as the False Prophet, rest assured that he is not the Antichrist. We still have some time, and if we're lucky we can still redeem the world and introduce everyone to the word of our Savior. However, once the Antichrist arrives, we're going to have to batten down the hatches and hope to survive the Tribulation. I'm guessing it will be easy to identify the Antichrist -- he'd probably take the form of a homosexual wizard in a leading position of authority in North America or Europe. But until then, we can still act.

"Our best hope at this point is to try to convince these wizards that they're in the wrong and turn them from their ways of evil, back into Christ's arms. You are not to harm any wizards you apprehend unless they are given a chance to atone for their sins and refuse.

"I never thought I'd be saying this, but I believe that the hated Osama bin Laden had the right idea for handling the witches. We'll allow for several different levels of atonement similar to those mentioned by bin Laden.

"At the lowest level, the accused must renounce all wizard powers for all eternity. Level 2 requires membership in this church in addition to renunciation of Wizarding powers. Level 3 requires membership in this church plus use of Wizarding powers to do good works and only good works. Level 4, the highest level, will require the accused to turn on his or her demonic allies and use his or her abilities in defense of the faith. Call it a jihad against the Antichrist, if you will.

"Do what you can. I know, it will be difficult, but I believe it's necessary. If we work hard enough, we may be able to undermine the enemy well enough for the Pope to resign or even turn against the Antichrist. If that were to happen, Lucifer will have to try to create a whole new False Prophet before pestering us with the Tribulation -- something which will probably take a long time.

"So persecute the confirmed witches using the suggestions I've given you while continuing your protests against other undesirables. God willing, we'll be able to earn our Rapture before the False Prophet comes again -- if at all."

To be continued...
Update #71
-----------

Monday, March 2, 1996
Collective Farm PX-311
Outside of Pyongyang
Democrat People's Republic of Korea
NEXT PoV: A Brand New Character You've Never Seen Before

Chief Operating Officer Xu. It had a nice ring to it. And it would have even have a nicer ring once he started taking all the credit for the farm's improved productivity.

People in a position such as this should be absolutely loyal to their country and do whatever the Dear Leader told them to do. However, "should" was not always "was". That was definitely the case with his predecessor, who had not been particularly thrilled that he had been demoted to deputy COO. He complained that he hadn't done anything wrong and had no reason to be demoted. However, he had stopped whining very quickly once Xu had showed him the note signed by Kim Jong-Il. Granted, the initial break in the whining had been punctuated by the sound of poor old Li falling to the floor in a dead faint. Eventually, though, he had recovered, congratulated Xu on his promotion, and started cleaning out his old office.

As overseer, he had had a small apartment of his own. In some cultures, that would have not seemed like much. However, on the farm, it was a big deal. Most of the peasants slept in small huts, often two or three people to a cushion. He'd always considered himself lucky to have at least some privacy.

That apartment, however, was nothing compared to what he was looking at now. The position of Chief Operating Officer came with a house. An honest-to-goodness HOUSE. He'd be living like an emperor. As if that weren't enough, the house came with several butlers and maids. What a life!

He understood, however, that success came with a price. The Dear Leader had demanded that he double the output of the farm. Had it not been for the witches, it would have been an almost impossible task. He believed he would be able to pull it off and would gain even more power. However, he didn't like thinking about the possibility that he wouldn't be able to do it. As overseer, he'd have probably been whipped and demoted to the peasantry. As a COO expressly promoted by Kim Jong-Il himself, he'd probably wind up with a bullet in the back of his head if he screwed up. He wondered if it was possible for the witches to raise the dead.

It didn't take long for him to move all his stuff into the new house. The butlers and maids sped things up a great deal. Several of the peasants walked over and congratulated him. Not surprisingly, they all started asking him for reductions in their workload. Although he was in a generous mood, he realized that he shouldn't start giving in to their every whim. It set a bad precedent. Besides, if the witches couldn't deliver he'd have to work the people even harder.

He had just locked the door to the new home when one of the maids screamed in horror. He spun to look at her and saw that she was pointing into the distance, towards the female peasants' huts. He didn't see anything all that unusual -- maybe a bit of haze. Puzzled, he turned to the maid and asked
for an explanation.

She responded with one word. "Fire!"

Fire? He stared at her blankly for a minute and then turned to look over the women's huts again, this time focusing on the haze. Sure enough, the haze was actually smoke. It seemed to be coming from a spot in the midst of the huts. He brought out his binoculars and put them to his eyes. The base of the smoke column burst into view, and he saw that it was accompanied by a lurid red and yellow glow.

Shit, he thought. The maid was right. Something was definitely on fire over there. Even worse, no one seemed to be doing anything about it. Perhaps they thought that it had already gotten out of control. That's not a very patriotic thing to do, he thought. He'd better rectify that. People had to help their comrades.

He ordered the servants into the house and told them to bring out any fire extinguishers and pails of water they could find. He had to extinguish the fire before it burned down half the village. People without houses didn't work well, regardless of whether or not they could cast spells. They'd either freeze to death of find themselves buried waist-deep in snow.

The servants were well-trained and returned in less than a minute with no fewer than five fire extinguishers. He thanked them profusely and told them to help him fight the fire. He was in his fifties, but they were barely able to keep up with him due to the fact that overseers tended to get better food than peasants.

He hadn't spent much time in the women's section during his tenure as overseer. As a result, he didn't know who exactly lived where. He decided that his first task would be to find the people whose hut had caught fire and give them the bad news. He figured they'd be able to stay with their friends or with the maids until their new hut was built. That hut would be the first communal task under his tenure.

He hurried over to a woman who was staring at the burning building in absolute horror. He told one of the maids to tap her on the shoulder to get her attention. She turned around, saw the overseer, and bowed deeply.

"Comrade Officer, how can --"

He wanted to throttle her. Handing her a fire extinguisher, he shushed her. "Don't worry about that right now! Here, take this fire extinguisher and help put that thing out! Do you know how to use a fire extinguisher?"

The peasant looked at it the red cylinder in puzzlement, and he answered his own question. No, she doesn't. Double shit. "I take it you don't. These maids here know. I want you do follow them over to the fire and put it out. Tell me when it's extinguished, will you?"

The peasant looked terrified. She couldn't tell whether it was because she was scared of him or because she was scared of the flames. Eventually, though, she nodded. "Yes, Comrade Officer."

"Thank you, madame. One more thing. Whose hut was that? I need to tell them and offer them sanctuary until their new hut is finished."

The woman nearly broke down in tears. "Ming Tsao, Choi Yeun, and Wei Hu."
Xu froze. Was she saying what she thought she was saying? Gulping, he asked: "Choi Yeun's the witch, right?"

The woman nodded. "Yes, Comrade Officer. That is her hut."

"Was there anyone in there?"

"I think so, Comrade. I can sometimes see evidence of a charred body through the smoke. I can't tell who it is, but it's fairly obvious the person's already dead."

With an effort, he regained control of himself. "Don't give up on the victim yet. Perhaps the witch or Mr. Wong will save her. Now don't talk. Hurry! Get that thing out! That's an order!"

The servants headed off as Xu raced over to where the women were working in the fields. He found Ming relatively quickly. The poor woman started wailing hysterically when she heard the news and said she'd stay with the maids. Five minutes later, Wei immediately dropped her basket and started racing through the mud and snow towards the hut. He tried to call her back, saying that it wasn't safe to return yet, but she didn't listen.

He saw no sign of Choi Yeun. That was not good. If she had been the one killed in the fire the whole farm was in deep trouble.

Or was it? He grabbed one of the peasants and asked him to fetch Mr. Wong. The man nodded and raced off. That done, he spent the next fifteen minutes running through the greenhouses trying to find Choi Yeun. No luck. As if that weren't bad enough, the peasant had come back and told him that Mr. Wong was missing. Xu told the man to start looking again and not to come back until he found Wong.

Twenty minutes later, word came in that the fire had finally been extinguished. He immediately headed over to the scene, pushing onlookers out of the way as he hurried into get a better luck.

The little hut had been almost completely destroyed. The walls had, oddly enough, blown out and the air reeked of burned flesh. Everything had been completely blackened. Bracing himself, Xu turned to look at the two bodies on the floor.

In the center of the conflagration lay Mr. Wong, or what was left of him. The man had a shocked look on his face. Judging from the positions of the walls, it looked as if Mr. Wong had caused an explosion which had set the hut on fire. It made all too much sense -- the explosion had killed him before he could escape the burning building.

Next to Wong's body was what appeared to be a book. The book was badly burned, but he could make out a few arcane words. All of them looked like gibberish to him. One of them, Geminio, had been highlighted. Choi Yeun's body, also badly blackened, lay on the other side of the book.

Xu groaned. It was obvious what had happened. Choi Yeun had been training her apprentice in magic from this book. The apprentice had made a mistake casting a spell and managed to blow both him and his teacher to kingdom come. Spells which concentrated power were quite useful. However, if all that concentrated power released itself prematurely, it would be just the type of thing which could blow up people and set houses on fire.

This was bad, he thought. Very bad.
Eric Street threw down the want ads irritably. He'd been out of work for six months already and there didn't seem to be anything in sight.

He had been trained as a teacher. Unfortunately, there weren't any openings in the area. There were a few in the western part of the state, but that would require uprooting his wife Helena and his young daughter. The net result would be a mother without a salary instead of a father.

Both he and his wife had insisted that they both get a job to give Justine the best chance to go to college. He hated to think how much a good school would cost by the time 2010 came around. $50,000 per year? $75,000? $100,000 and your firstborn son?

As if that weren't bad enough, Justine appeared to have inherited his Wizarding abilities. That was the only explanation he could think of for her managing to set fire to the living room rug when her Barbie doll's head fell off. This meant that they'd have to start sending her to the Big Thicket Swamp Facility as soon as she entered junior high. That would also cost money. It would cost even more if his wife managed to badger him into signing Justine up for Big Thicket's Little Wizard Program, their optional program for K-6 wizards. She would probably argue that that rug could have been one of her parents and she needed to learn how to control her powers.

Eric was now low on both dollars and Galleons. He'd converted most of his Galleons to dollars, leaving only the fund to send Justine to college. All this had managed to do, however, was keep him solvent for maybe three more months. At the rate things were going, he and his family would be begging on the street before the Fourth of July. He'd have declared independence from his house.

He needed more money, and fast. He had briefly considered the possibility of using the Geminio spell to take a dollar bill and clone it a few million times. Unfortunately, that wouldn't work as all the bills would have the same serial number. Even the most jaded shopkeeper would be suspicious if he were handed two bills labeled G80406019A.

He'd tried out for positions at McDonald's and had been turned down because he was overqualified. He had wanted to punch the manager in the mouth. So what if he was overqualified? He needed money, and a relatively simple job at McDonald's was better than nothing.

He swore at the newspapers which had betrayed him, tossed them into the fireplace, and set them on fire with an Incendio charm. It was obvious that doing what he was doing wouldn't work. He would have to think outside the box.

Should he ask his wife to get him a job at her office? He didn't think it was worth it. She was a detective and he knew nothing about police work. The only way he'd be able to get a foot in the door would be through nepotism, and he refused to be a party to that. It would probably get BOTH of
them fired, leaving them in a worse place than when they started.

He wondered whether he should try starting his own company. However, what would he produce? He could try to start a tutoring service, but he'd have to spend a lot of money to get the business off the ground. With all of the tutors and teachers in the area, the risk of going bankrupt before getting enough business to survive was too great.

He stared into the fire, worried. What service could he provide that no one else could? What service could a wizard --

Suddenly, it dawned on him. A wizard-for-hire service.

The more he thought about it, the more he liked it. Judging from what he knew of the Wizarding population, roughly one in every 10,000 people was a wizard. He wouldn't have much competition. And the Statute of Secrecy was moot now. Most of the people in the area had watched the Super Bowl -- after all, the Cowboys had been in it -- and had discovered quite early on that wizards existed. Hell, the President had openly admitted it.

There were things Muggles wanted to do which they couldn't but wizards could. There was a market for his services, and he was willing to supply them providing that the Muggles' needs were not illegal or unethical. He'd be more than willing to use magic to help raise a house, heal an injury like that wizard had done in Kansas, get a cat out of a tree, whatever. However, he wouldn't brew love potions, turn siblings into frogs, rig sporting events, or hurt anyone. He had always been irritated at the corruption and amorality in big business and was determined not to give in to that. After all, if he had a monopoly, he could set things up whichever way he wanted.

And if he didn't have a monopoly? As the first wizard on the scene, he'd have the most advanced and organized company. He'd probably have more money than the other ones. He'd have better name recognition. He'd just buy them out and make them his employees.

As a rule of thumb, he would only provide services which a Muggle would find difficult to provide on his own. That would allow the Muggles to try to learn a new skill instead of rely on magic to get everything solved for them. Furthermore, it would allow him to focus on the things for which wizards were truly necessary.

He'd speak to his wife about it, but he knew what she'd say. She'd be all for it. Although she'd been initially skeptical when he'd told her he was a wizard, magic had gone a long way to cleaning and maintaining the house. People didn't realize it, but he gotten Chairwoman Shawna Santana of Big Thicket to convert his Dodge Caravan to run off magic instead of gasoline. It was greener and a hell of a lot cheaper.

What would he call himself? Eric Street, Wizard for Hire? Nah, sounded too corny and pretentious. How about Wizard Street? Sounded like an address, and it didn't lend itself to an expanding company. It took a while, but he eventually decided upon a name. Wizarding Services Corporation.

He had no idea how much to charge for his services, however. No one had ever tried selling magical services to Muggles before, so there wasn't a going rate. Theoretically, he could charge anything as long as he had a monopoly. However, overcharging people wouldn't be proper and could give wizards a bad name. With America for Humans and the rest of those bastards already complaining about wizards, that was not a good idea. On the other hand, he couldn't do it gratis either as it wouldn't put Justine through college.
He would cross that bridge when he came to it, however. In the meantime, he set about trying to develop his first commercial and advertisement.

Could he publish a dynamic photograph, with moving images, in the Dallas Morning News? He didn't know, but it didn't hurt to try. He doubted Muggles would have seen dynamic photographs before and figured it would have a big impact upon the readers. If all else failed, he could place dynamic photograph advertisements in various restaurants and go on from there.

This would be exciting, he thought. And it may very well solve his financial crisis.

He wondered what would happen if he made a deal with Chairwoman Santana to start converting other people's cars to run off magic...

To be continued...

-------------

Update #73
-------------

Wednesday, March 4, 1996
Parliament Chamber
London, England
NEXT PoV: Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia
-------------

Arthur Weasley looked around the room in wonder. He wasn't sure if he'd ever seen this many Muggles in one room at a time.

He and the rest of the wizards were seated in the center of the room on what appeared to be Muggle folding chairs. He'd actually tried to take a closer look at one of him when a grunt from Reg Cattermole alerted him to the fact that Muggles took these things for granted and that he'd look stupid examining the chair. Most of the wizards were wearing dress robes. Here and there, he saw a witch with an elegant dress or a wizard in a tuxedo. Judging by the clothes of the Muggles on the benches, he assumed that these wizards were Muggle-born or had Muggle spouses and as a result knew what constituted formalwear in the Muggle world.

Reg had been one of the wizards who had known enough to wear a tux. From what Arthur knew, Reg’s Muggle in-laws had drilled Muggle customs into his head as a prerequisite for allowing him to marry their daughter. His experience with the Muggles had been more than welcome when he and Arthur had to take the Underground over to Parliament. Arthur had nearly been left behind at the turnstile for the second time in less than twelve months. As if that weren't bad enough, he'd blown out an emergency light on the subway car with a simple spell to help clean his robe.

Cornelius Fudge had come by his office a week ago to deliver the invitation. Queen Elizabeth II and Prime Minister Major had been elated that the wizards had come to help rescue people during the terrorist attack. They had argued, quite logically, that it was difficult for the wizards to overcome centuries of aloofness and come to the Muggles' aid. They obviously didn't know Arthur, who had been curious about Muggles for years and was just itching for a chance to interact with them.

The Minister of Magic had explained that the queen had invited all of the wizards who had taken part in the rescue to a special session of Parliament which would honor them for their bravery. Arthur had known that England had a queen. However, he didn't know much about Parliament. Reg had to explain the nature of Parliament to him as well. He couldn't understand how people could run a country simply by yelling at each other all the time. He shrugged. Muggles were strange. Maybe that
was it.

To be honest, Arthur was a little surprised that Fudge had even invited him. He had been in the Minister's doghouse ever since he had contradicted the Ministry of Magic's party line on Voldemort in the presence of Jacob Gold. Cornelius was still saying that Voldemort hadn't returned and that all of the reports that he had were unsubstantiated. The only non-Death Eater who had supposedly seen him -- and survived -- had been Harry, and Fudge was more than fed up with the antics of the author of the Super Bowl Breach. Harry had been a mischievous boy in the past, and this was no different.

Word was starting to get around, however. Several people in the Ministry were starting to become convinced that Voldemort -- or at least a high-ranking Death Eater -- had taken command. Strange things had been happening of late. First, Augustus Rookwood had been found dead, sprawled out in the Hall of Prophecy next a prophecy which supposedly referred to Voldemort and Harry Potter. It looked as if he had tried to listen to the prophecy and failed. Lucius Malfoy, a suspected Death Eater, had been absent more often than usual ever since the end of the Triwizard Tournament last year. Many people believed that Fudge was deliberately covering it up, either out of denial or to prevent a panic among the wizards of Britain.

Although Fudge admitted that several odd events had transpired since the end of the Triwizard Tournament -- starting with Cedric Diggory's death -- he vehemently denied that they had been due to Voldemort's return. He kept on reiterating that Sirius Black was still at large and was capable of doing virtually anything. The Ministry had been forced to admit that it had underestimated Black's power. After all, only a prodigiously powerful wizard would have been able to break out of Professor Filch's office in Hogwarts -- not to mention Azkaban to begin with -- after he had been apprehended in the Shrieking Shack two years ago. Cornelius himself confessed that he didn't know exactly what Sirius had done. Whatever it was, though, it had been far beyond anything Cornelius could have imagined. And to do it right under Snape's nose was even more amazing.

As far as Cedric's death was concerned, the obvious explanation was that he had fallen performing the final task. He wouldn't have been the first Triwizard contestant to die in the tournament. With two of the other three contestants out of the country and Harry in no position to talk, there was virtually no way to refute this allegation.

Arthur looked down to the front of the room, where Fudge was waiting to meet the queen and prime minister. Arthur would have liked to denounce Fudge in public here and now. Unfortunately, that would make the wizards look bad to the Muggles. Not to mention, of course, that he'd probably lose his job. Fudge was probably looking forward to several photo ops with the British leaders.

It wasn't hard to figure out when the leaders were reported to be approaching the room. Virtually everyone in the room stood up and applauded as the Prime Minister was introduced. They all then bowed as the queen walked in. Arthur wondered if Fudge would insist that everyone in the Ministry start bowing to him. Some of the witches tried bowing as well and had to be gently reminded that women were supposed to curtsey.

The queen told everyone to rise and they did. She then smiled and walked to the podium in the center of the room. The Prime Minister and Minister of Magic stood on either side of her. Behind her stood none other than Nigel Marcellus. It looked like he was doing double duty, serving both as a security guard and as a man who had been rescued by a wizard.

The queen looked around the room and began. "Ladies and gentlemen. We have assembled here today to express our most profound gratitude to a segment of society which had, until quite recently, been forced to hide itself from our presence. From what we have been told by Minister of Magic
Cornelius Fudge, part of the reason for the Statute of Secrecy had been because in ancient days, people were afraid of magic and associated strange powers with the devil. The wizards had to isolate themselves from the Muggle population simply because the Muggles would have persecuted them otherwise.

"We are certain that it may have been difficult for many of these witches and wizards to overcome their fear of Muggles, put their lives in danger, and help free people who had been trapped in the debris from the Canary Wharf attack. They likely never knew about the IRA, and as far as we know the IRA has never posed a threat to their world. Yet they still came to our aid. As the queen of England, we issue a formal apology for all of the persecution the Wizarding community has suffered in over the centuries in our realm."

The entire audience clapped. Arthur felt embarrassed. He probably would have tried helping the Muggles even if Cornelius hadn't told him to go. It felt tacky to accept an award for something any decent man would have done.

The queen continued. "We have with us today someone who was rescued by the wizards: SAS agent General Nigel Alexander Marcellus, Retired. This man was working at 5 Canada Square when the building was attacked. He will now explain what happened to him and how he was rescued."

The crowd clapped once more as Nigel walked to the podium. He was wearing what Arthur interpreted as an SAS officer's uniform. There were a few medals on his chest. He looked quite dashing.

Nigel saluted the audience and began his story. "I had been having a rough day in my post SAS job as a stockbroker and had gone outside to try to wake myself up in the cold air. When the bomb went off, my SAS training immediately kicked in, and I was able to determine where the epicenter of the blast had been. It had been in one of the parking lots. I had seen a truck with Irish plates in the area shortly before the blast, and had found it bloody strange. It didn't take long for me to figure out that the IRA had been at it again.

"However, I nearly found myself unable to relay this information to the rest of the world. I found myself pinned by debris when the building came down. I tried to escape by tunneling through a snowbank – a common training exercise. However, when you're as old as I am things don't work as well as they did when you were in your twenties."

There were nervous titters in the crowd. Nigel looked for a moment, confused. Then the Prime Minister coughed and discreetly pointed at the queen. Nigel's face went beet red, and he bowed. "I apologize, Your Majesty."

The queen actually grinned. "Don't worry, General. Each time I look at one of our banknotes I realize that things don't work as well as they did when we were younger."

Nigel nodded and wisely didn't respond. Instead, he continued with his story. "I thought I was going to freeze down there. It was getting hard tunneling through the snow, and I couldn't push those beams off of me. My leg had been injured as well, which didn't help.

"The next thing I know, I hear this chap say some nonsense phrase and the beams suddenly floated up into the air. I was surprised, to say the least. I was even more surprised when I discovered that my rescuers had been two wizards. I explained to them what had happened, and they called over a constable. I brought the constable over to the epicenter and showed him the remains of the truck. The constable agreed that it had all the hallmarks of an IRA car bomb. Meanwhile, the two wizards went
off and started rescuing more people. Had it not been for those two men, I would likely have been seriously injured or killed. We all owe the wizards a great deal of gratitude."

Everyone clapped once more as the queen took the stand again. "Thank you, General. We would now like to ask this man's rescuers, Wizard Arthur Joseph Weasley and Wizard Reginald Louis Cattermole to step forward so we can present them with the George Cross."

The crowd cheered as Arthur's jaw dropped. What was he supposed to do? Who the bloody hell was George Cross? Nervous, he nodded to Reg and they both headed up to the podium and bowed. The queen then reached over and placed some kind of pin on his robe. It looked like a silver cross hanging from a black banner. He didn't know what it was, but judging from the reaction of the Muggles it seemed important. The queen then bade them rise, shook their hands, posed for photo ops, and had them go back to their seats.

The queen smiled. "Congratulations, Wizards Weasley and Cattermole."

She then turned to Cornelius Fudge. "Minister of Magic Fudge, would you be so good as to kneel so I can give you your Cross?"

The Minister did so, and everyone clapped again. Arthur had a bad feeling that Fudge would start yelling at him for getting his award before Fudge himself did.

With that, Fudge rose and then turned to the rest of the wizards in the room. "Thank you, Your Majesty. And now, if the rest of you chaps would be willing to line up, we'll hand out the GC's to the rest of you."

To be continued...

-------------

Update #74

-------------

Thursday, March 5, 1996
Audience Chamber
Royal Palace
Riyadh
Saudi Arabia
NEXT PoV: Travis Radner

-------------

King Fahd looked up from his desk as the messenger entered his office and bowed. "You may rise, Abdul. What's going on?"

"Your Majesty, Wizard Dagher has arrived. Shall I send him in?"

The king nodded. "Of course. We shouldn't keep him waiting. After all, he did save my life. The kingdom owes him a great deal of gratitude."

The servant bowed once more. "Yes, Your Majesty."

- - - -

The king recalled the momentous events which had transpired earlier in the year. On New Year's Day, he had suffered a serious stroke and had nearly died. According to Prince Abdullah's report, the doctors had told the prince that there was nothing that could be done and that the king would lie in a vegetative state for the rest of his life. They had turned to the prince and asked him for permission to
euthanize the king. Meanwhile, Imam Ibrahim had been hustled into the sickroom to minister to the
patient and the soon to be grieving family.

That was when the man had suddenly materialized in the room. During the few seconds of shock
between his arrival and the prince's inevitable command to summon the guards, the visitor had held
out his hands, bowed to the Prince, and pleaded: "Your Highness! In Allah's name, listen! I'm here to
help! Hear me out!"

The prince had stared at him. "Who are you? How'd you get past the guards?"

"I'm Wizard Haydar Aziz Dagher. I'm your father's Minister of Magic."

The prince's jaw had dropped. "My father's WHAT?"

"Minister of Magic! I'm in charge of the wizards in the realm? I know. You probably didn't know
about it. The only person who knows is the king. However, we can't deal with this right now. This is
an emergency, and we don't have time. Am I correct in assuming that you have concluded that you
can't save His Majesty?"

The prince had stared at him skeptically. "Yes. Let me guess. You're going to say you can heal him
with magic."

The Minister had shaken his head. "I can't, Your Majesty. However, we have a healer, Dharr
Malouf, who can. With your permission, Your Highness, I will summon him and have him go to
work."

Realizing that there had been no other option, the prince had been about to give his consent when
another voice had broken in.

"BLASPHEMY! WITCHCRAFT! KILL HIM!"

The prince had cursed, having forgotten the imam. Well, Abdullah had dealt with him. The prince
had immediately summoned the guards and told the cleric that if he didn't shut up he'd be with Allah
in five minutes. Sayyed may have loved Allah, but apparently he didn't love Him enough to want to
visit Him THAT quickly.

Once the imam was dealt with, the prince had given the wizard the go-ahead. Seconds later, a second
wizard had materialized in the room and brought out something which looked like a small cylinder.
The guards had hissed and looked at the prince sharply, but the prince had waved them off. Abdullah
had later told the king that it wouldn't have made sense for the wizards to try to kill him as they
hadn't needed his help to send him to Allah at the rate things were going.

The second wizard had then pointed the wand at him and muttered arcane words. Whatever they
were, they weren't Arabic. A few minutes later, he had nodded to the first wizard and bowed to
Abdullah. He then spoke words which Abdullah had told him he'd never forget.

"Your Highness, the king has been stabilized. You may now confirm it with your doctors. You
should keep him under observation for a month or so -- it was very touch and go there. However,
he'll make it."

The doctors had looked at the readouts for a few moments as the prince looked on in incredulity. The
doctors’ eyebrows had shot up, and they reported that the king had been stabilized. The prince had
thanked the wizards profusely. Meanwhile, the imam had fallen to the floor in a dead faint, unable to
determine whether to praise Allah for a miracle or curse the wizards for endangering the king's soul.

That had been two months ago. The government had sent out an announcement announcing the
king's recovery a month after the incident, once His Majesty had gotten out of the hospital. Fearful of
an Islamic backlash against the wizards, Minister Dagher had recommended that the king leave the
wizards' role out of it until both parties believed that the clergy was ready to deal with wizards in
their midst.

Judging from what he'd heard from Minister Dagher, it was clear that these wizards would be a
benefit to society. All he had to do was get the fundamentalists to buy in. He had heard bin Laden's
request for jihadist wizards. Putting wizards in charge of al-Qaeda would be very bad. Bin Laden
was bad enough. A new bin Laden casting spells? That would be a lot worse.

Al-Qaeda had to be dealt with, and dealt with soon. Hence this special mission.

The door opened once again, and Wizard Dagher walked into the room and bowed. "You wished to
see me, Your Majesty?"

"Yes, Minister. Close the door, please. There's something I need to talk to you about, something
which cannot be divulged to Muggles."

The wizard nodded, brought out his wand, and waved it around for a moment. A couple of seconds
later, he nodded. "Our conversation is secure, Your Majesty. I take it you want the Ministry of Magic
to do something that certain Muggles should not be made aware of?"

"Yes. Particularly a Muggle named Osama bin Laden. I take it you are familiar enough with the
Muggle word to be familiar with this man."

The Minister grimaced. "Yes, Your Majesty. I hope Allah takes him soon."

The king grinned. "I don't think you need to worry about that, Minister. I doubt Allah will actually
want him. I suspect that He's going to send bin Laden somewhere where he doesn't really want to
go. At any rate, I was wondering if you could do us a favor involving bin Laden. You see, Allah
probably doesn't want him on this earth. I want you to fulfill His will and expedite this process."

The wizard stared at him. "You want us to sneak a man into al-Qaeda and assassinate bin Laden?"

"Yes, Minister. You're probably aware that bin Laden has been trying to recruit jihadist wizards. I
know what you can do, Minister. Trust me, we DON'T want wizards in al-Qaeda. I need bin Laden
taken out and al-Qaeda disbanded before he does so."

The wizard nodded. "I understand, Your Majesty."

"Good. Can it be done?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. We possess Invisibility Cloaks and are capable of modifying people's memories
so that they don't realize we've been around. That's how we handled Statute of Secrecy breaches in
the past. There is one complication, however."

The king frowned. "And that is?"
Dagher took a deep breath. "Unless you want one of us to take over al-Qaeda and disband it -- which I would not recommend as a wizard takeover would just be fodder for the jihadists -- we would have to hit bin Laden with Avada Kedavra and perform the Imperius Curse on bin Laden's second and ensure that he follows our orders."

"The Imperius Curse? And what's Avada Kedavra?"

"The Imperius Curse allows us to brainwash the victim and force him to do exactly what we tell him. Avada Kedavra kills painlessly, leaving no evidence of magic or Muggle explanation of how the victim died."

The king smiled. "Sounds all right with me. What's wrong with that?"

"The use of the Imperius Curse and Avada Kedavra is forbidden, Your Majesty. There are actually three forbidden curses: brainwashing, torture, and execution. We can't use them, and it would be a disaster if we did it and people found out -- especially now that Muggles are aware of our existence."

The king smiled. "I'm giving you permission. This is an emergency, after all. Make it a black operation. If you can do that, you're home free."

The wizard squirmed. "I don't like black ops, especially now that the Muggles know wizards exist. However, if that's your command, we'll do it."

"It is. Good luck, Minister."

"Thank you, Your Majesty. I know the perfect assassin. You'll know when the deed is done. Allah willing, the whole world will know."

"That's all that I can ask for. May Allah be with you. Dismissed."

To be continued...

--------

Update #75
--------

Friday, March 6, 1996
Oval Office
White House
Washington, DC
United States of America
NEXT PoV: Jason Morgenstern
--------

Travis Radner had met President Clinton before and knew how to react when he was introduced to arguably the most powerful man in the world. If anything, Clinton had been caught more off guard than he had been. Then again, of course, Clinton hadn't realized wizards existed until he had been first elected president back in 1992.

The two other members of the delegation, however, were a bit more nervous. Morgan Dresden, head of the Chicago Wizarding Institute, was accustomed to dealing with important officials. However, he wasn't entirely sure how to handle Muggles. Most of the stuff Dresden knew about Muggles came from Robert "Bob" Burke, a ghost of an early nineteenth-century wizard who had lived a Muggle life as a farmer in what was then the Far West. Bob had done what he could, but even he found himself at a loss when it came to things like computers and airplanes.
The closest Dresden had gotten to learning from a living Muggle was when that Jim Butcher fellow from Missouri had somehow managed to break into an office of the CWI and learn more than he was supposed to about CWI's operations. Dresden was kicking himself for mangling Butcher's memories into data appropriate for a fantasy novel too quickly. Had he spent more time interviewing Butcher, he'd have gotten more information on how to interact with Muggles. There was no way he could have known, however, that the Statute of Secrecy would have fallen a short time after the interview. Had he been placed in the same situation again, he would have likely done the same thing.

The third member of the delegation was a Muggle who was more than familiar with President Clinton. Claire Cox was still in her wheelchair, though both the wizards and Muggle doctors believed that she would be walking on her own again pretty soon -- albeit with crutches for the time being. Her first problem was that she was a devout Christian and had voted against Clinton in the 1992 election. Second, she was often intimidated by people in authority. A sitting president whom she had voted against was about as tough for her as it could get. She tried to reassure herself, however, that if the November election went as she hoped Dole would take over and get rid of the Democrat. Finally, she was nervous because she didn't know what exactly she was supposed to do when visiting such an illustrious person. This put her in the same boat, so to speak, as Dresden, albeit for a completely different reason.

Radner hoped that the delegation would be able to keep itself under control long enough for him to get his message across. If having Cox and Dresden in the room didn't help, nothing would.

The door on the other side of the room opened, revealing a chubby, long-haired woman with a daringly low neckline. She nodded to him and gestured towards the door.

"Secretary Radner, the president will see you now. Go on in."

Radner got up, followed quickly by Dresden. He couldn't understand how a young woman like this managed to get a coveted position so close to the president. He shrugged. Muggles often acted strange. "Thank you, Miss Lewinsky. You can wait for us outside."

Lewinsky nodded. "With pleasure, Mr. Secretary."

With that, the intern moved aside and Radner led Dresden into the Oval Office, propelling Cox's wheelchair with his wand. The president had a big smile on his face. He must have been having a good day, Radner thought. Maybe he'll be more willing to help us. He kept this in the back of his mind.

Clinton stood and shook his hand. "Welcome to the Oval Office, Secretary Radner. When I heard that you wanted to speak with me, I figured it had been prompted by the attack in Kansas. Is that correct?"

Radner nodded. "Yes, Mr. President. Allow me to introduce my colleagues here. The man is Wizard Morgan Dresden of the Chicago Wizarding Institute."

Clinton pursed his lips. "That's the North Central headquarters of the Department of Magic, if I recall correctly."

"Correct, Mr. President. The woman in the wheelchair is Claire Cox, the woman who was attacked by the America for Humans mob."
The president shook the other two people's hands. "Welcome to the Oval Office, lady and gentlemen. Can I get you anything to drink?"

Both wizards asked for water. Claire, however, asked for a Wild Turkey. At this, Dresden's eyebrows shot up and he turned to her.

"Mrs. Cox, how can you drink a wild turkey? You can't drink poultry! Is that a Muggle custom?"

Both Radner and the President laughed at this. Radner explained. "Wild Turkey is a brand of alcoholic beverage which is not unpopular among Muggles. It has a higher alcohol content than we permit for consumption by wizards."

Clinton grunted approvingly. "Sounds like you don't allow beverages with a high alcohol content in the Wizarding community. Butterbeer, if I recall, is relatively mild."

Radner nodded. "Yes, Mr. President. Spellcasting and alcohol don't mix well, and everything more alcoholic than the 90th percentile of butterbeer brands' alcohol content is regulated by my Department. Slur one word or have your wand slip and you can blow yourself to kingdom come. We try to regulate it as best as we can, but occasionally things get through. That's how things like spontaneous human combustion occur in which people get killed under mysterious circumstances. Speaking of people getting killed, is it wise to have Miss Lewinsky as your final line of defense? She seems young and inexperienced, and I know she's not a wizard."

Clinton laughed. "She's got all the experience she needs for her job, Mr. Radner. She isn't around for security duty. That's what the Secret Service is for."

Radner nodded. "I'm glad to hear that, Mr. President. At any rate, here's what I've come to talk to you about. As you suspected, it's about America for Humans. They're starting to become a rather dangerous nuisance. Morgan, will you do the honors?"

Dresden nodded. "Yes, Mr. Secretary. Mr. President, we have reason to believe that America for Humans is growing rapidly. I'm not sure if you've been paying attention the group -- after all, it's just one hate group among many Muggle hate groups. However, it's been one of the North Central Wizarding Region's main focuses ever since Mrs. Cox here was attacked in Westboro. Over the past few days, a good two-thirds of the members of Fred Phelps's Westboro Baptist Church have started working for America for Humans."

Clinton frowned. "That would be bad, if it's true. I'll have to check that out. However, from what I know Phelps's church discourages attacks on innocent people, claiming that it's not Christian to do so."

Radner cut back in. "That is indeed the case, Mr. President. Unfortunately, Phelps's interpretation of the Bible indicates that although Muggles cannot be targeted, wizards are fair game. As a result, most of his congregation has allied itself with Patrick Dursley-Burgess and his movement. As if that's not bad enough, he's taken a page out of Osama bin Laden's book and is trying to recruit wizards to turn on their colleagues and join his cause in order to save them from AFH persecution."

The president uttered a most unpresidential four-letter word. Claire Cox's eyes widened.

"My thoughts exactly, Mr. President. However, it's getting worse. America for Humans chapters are springing up all over the Midwest and South. Chairwoman Santana of Big Thicket reports that three new chapters were founded this past week in her region, and Chief Two Bear of Fourth Mesa claims"
a couple more were just started up in his. As if that's not bad enough, Dursley-Burgess's cousin
Vernon has started one up in Britain under the name Britain for Humans."

The president didn't mince words. "Crap. I didn't realize it was that bad."

"Oh, Mr. President, it gets worse still. Phelps threw in a major monkey wrench when he declared the
Pope the False Prophet. I take it you are familiar with Christian eschatology?"

"Yes, Mr. Radner, I am. The False Prophet is the herald of the Antichrist."

"Correct, Mr. President. At the rate things are going, these hotheads are going to precipitate a war
between Muggles and wizards. Such a war would be disastrous to both parties as wizards can wield
immense power. We don't like using it and take care to forbid the most extreme curses. However,
wizards may get desperate if they're backed into a corner. Phelps's announcement could trigger
attacks on the Pope and possibly Catholics across the country as well."

Radner grinned sadly. "I must confess, though, that the only thing GOOD that came out of Phelps's
announcement is that he seems to have directed their attention away from ME for the time being.
You see, I was the man PITMOSS thought was the False Prophet."

Dresden chimed in. "Mr. President, is there any way you can help us? We don't want to start
attacking Muggles with magic, even in self-defense. Once we start cursing Muggles in self-defense,
America for Humans will spin the news report around, say we were the aggressors, and claim that
they were right all along. At that point, you'll probably GET the Apocalypse regardless of whether I
am the False Prophet or not."

Clinton nodded. "I think I'll be able to help out. Which of your sites are in need of protection? I can
send National Guard troops out there to prevent people from entering without magical means. Thank
God we're not at war right now."

"My thoughts exactly, Mr. President. Here's what I recommend. Prevent the Muggles from visiting
the Big Thicket Natural Preserve or the Ocala National Forest. Close down the part of the Smoky
Mountain National Park near our facility there, and place a military base near Fourth Mesa."

Clinton shook his head. "We can't put a base near Fourth Mesa. That's Navajo territory. I'll try to talk
to the tribe, though. Maybe they can think of something."

"That would be most appreciated, Mr. President. This leaves three more locations. Mount St. Helens
is easy -- say there's a volcano alert and it's off-limits. We don't want to have the mountain blow its
top again like in 1980."

Clinton stared at him. "YOU did that?"

Radner nodded. "Yes, Mr. President. There was a minor breach of the Statute then and Wizard
Eubanks -- who's in charge of the Mount St. Helens facility -- felt like he had no choice. The other
two facilities, however, are going to be hard. The main office of the CWI is hiding, Unplottable, in
downtown Chicago. I don't know how Jim Butcher got in, but the fact that he did makes it
complicated. Maybe you can buy up a lot of the buildings there."

Radner paused. "This leaves the Quabbin. The Wizarding capital in Dana and the rest of the Four
Towns are all underwater. However, boats occasionally go fishing out there. You don't want them
dropping things other than fishhooks in the water. A breach of the shields protecting the cities from
the water above, though unlikely, would be disastrous."

Clinton nodded. "I agree. What do you say about me declaring that the Quabbin is off-limits because of water pollution issues from the boats?"

Radner nodded. "That would work quite well, I think. This covers all of the main locations. As far as the Catholics go, you can try to institute a program protecting churches, synagogues, and other places of worship. Finally, you may want to close some other locations as well, just in case. If only seven locations are closed, America for Humans will probably figure out that something fishy is going on there and may attack. If you close fifty, however, we may be able to deal with it."

Clinton shook his head. "The people won't like that."

"It has to be done, however. Can you do it?"

Clinton sighed. "I'll do what I can. Let's hope I still get re-elected in the fall."

Radner smiled. "We hope you are as well, Mr. President. You seem to be getting along with us pretty well."

Clinton's eyes shot up for a moment. "Same here, Mr. Radner. I hope we'll be able to work together more in the future. Hey, that gives me an idea. Maybe you can -- "

Radner shook his head. "No, Mr. President. We cannot influence Muggle politics. It would be inappropriate."

Clinton sighed. "It was worth a try, I guess. Bummer."

To be continued...
Jason Morgenstern knew that his date had arrived. It's not like it would have been easy to miss: the entire frat was abuzz.

It wasn't often that a freshmen looking out the window raced back into the common room claiming that a witch was circling the building on a flying carpet. By the time Jason and the rest of the brothers made it down the stairs and out the door, they found themselves barely able to open the door due to all of the other students jamming the courtyard in front of the frat, craning their necks to look up into the sky.

Jason looked up just in time to see another flying object appear of nowhere. The crowd gasped and pointed as it approached the flying carpet. His jaw dropped when he realized who it was.

It was the Russian House witch. Good thing he brought her broom back, he thought. Jason was startled to see her nearly fall off her broom when she realized what Guinevere was flying.

Jason watched as Guinevere waved at the Russian House witch. "Ha! Another witch! I didn't know there were many witches out here -- wait! You're the Russian House witch, right?"

The Russian woman nodded at her. "Yes, I'm the so-called Russian House witch. I've been hiding my abilities successfully over the past few years. A few people know I was involved with a Wiccan group, but that's it. I tried not to advertise that all that much because some religious people I know may not have liked it."

Guinevere frowned. "You're both a witch and a Wiccan? They're not the same thing, you know. Wicca is a system of beliefs and traditions. Magic is an ability."

"Yes. I know, the Muggles tend to conflate the two, but I actually am both. I'm also from one of the mainstream religions as well."

"So am I. I'm Guinevere de Mornay, a recent graduate from the Salem Witches' Institute. What's your name? Have you ever seen a magic carpet before?"

The Russian had just finished introducing herself when her eyes fell on the carpet. Her jaw dropped. Pointing at the carpet, she exclaimed, "That's a pretty expensive Oriental rug! How much did it cost?"

Guinevere smirked. "About $3500. In other words, nine ounces worth of gold coins. I must say, that
pawn shop in Central Square was a bit surprised that I was exchanging so much gold."

The Russian House witch stared at Guinevere and suddenly started laughing uncontrollably. "You took some of your Galleons and sold them for their metal content to Muggles?"

"Correct, my friend. Last time I checked, gold was running about $400/ounce."

The Russian woman shook her head and grinned evilly. Jason realized what she was thinking. MIT tuition was around $30,000/year. That was a lot of money. Young witches like Guinevere often had a few hundred free Galleons to their name. In the Wizarding world, that wasn't that much money. In the Muggle world, however...He wondered if the Muggles would catch on, and if either he or the Russian witch would suddenly find that they had an easy way to pay for tuition. He'd have to act fast in order to pay everything off before gold prices crashed due to the excess of Galleons.

The Muggles around him were still staring up at the two women. Most of them didn't know much about the Wizarding monetary system. They had no idea that the two wizards were discussing instant wealth. For all Jason knew, they thought that they were referring to Spanish shipwrecks!

Guinevere nodded. "My thoughts exactly. I'm just waiting to see how Muggles are going to react when someone gives them leprechaun gold."

Both women were laughing uncontrollably at this point. However, they soon came back to reality as several reporters and police cars suddenly turned around McCormick and headed down Amherst Alley.

The Russian House witch cursed. "Damn. Another interview. I think we'd better get going. What brings you down here?"

Guinevere gestured in the general vicinity of Alpha Chi Gamma. "I've got a date with an ACG man tonight. That's the one between Deke and Kappa Sigma, right?"

The Russian nodded. "Does he know you're a witch?"

"Absolutely. He found the idea quite intriguing, to say the least."

With that, the two women shook hands and separated. The Russian woman landed on the roof of New House and raced down the stairs just before the reporters got to the door. A brief spell on the door to New House 1 safely and securely barred the door, much to the chagrin of about 8 Chocolate City men who suddenly found they were having trouble getting out of their building.

Jason braced himself as the reporters crowded under Guinevere. The newsies would have a field day with this. How was she going to get to him without having to hex away some of the reporters? There certainly wasn't anywhere for her to land near him.

She scanned the crowd beneath her, looking for him. Of course, that was when every single Delta Kappa Epsilon, Alpha Chi Gammon, and Kappa Sigma man started waving frantically at her to try to get her to pick him up. Eventually, she saw him and pointed her wand at him.

"Levicorpus!"

Jason shrieked as he suddenly flew into the air. Reports spun and pointed their cameras at him. A few seconds later, he landed with a thud on the magic carpet. Making sure he was safe and sound,
the carpet flew away, leaving the shocked bystanders clustered in front of the frats.

Jason massaged his rear end and stared at her. "I must say, Guinevere, you sure know how to make an entrance."

"Indeed I do, Jason. I figured we'd head out to an island somewhere where people won't be able to bother us. I'll put a Disillusionment Charm on us so that no one will be able to see us unless they're using video equipment. I'll cast a spell which will warm up the area under the carpet. And if they don't know where to look, too bad for them. Sorry about the Levicorpus spell -- I didn't have anywhere to land. Now, if you'll hold on a second, I'll cast the Disillusionment Charm."

She brought out her wands and muttered a few words. She looked around for a moment, satisfied, and started directing the carpet over to the harbor. Once she was happy where the carpet was going, she turned back to Jason and presented him with a little box.

Jason looked at the box. "What is it?"

She pointed at the box. "Open it. It's your first magical item."

Jason stared at the box. A magic item! Just for him! Perfect! He tore away the wrapping paper and uncovered a small spherical object. It looked like a little transparent ball. He picked it up to get a better look, and was astonished when it turned red.

He twisted it around to look at it more. "What is it?"

"It's a Remembrall. I brought it to make sure you don't forget me. It's a magical object. If you ever forget something, it will turn red, like it is now. Once you remember what you forgot, it will turn clear again."

Jason hummed in appreciation. This may be useful for exams. Aloud, he asked, "Does this mean I've forgotten something?"

She nodded. "Yup. Do you have everything? I see you've got your jacket, clothing, and so forth. Check to see if there's something you're missing."

Uneasy, Jason started rummaging through his pockets. It didn't took a while until he realized what was missing. He winced and turned, pleadingly, to Guinevere.

"You wouldn't by chance have a spell which will unlock the front door of the frat, start my car, and get into my mother's house, would you?"

To be continued...

------------

Update #77

March 7, 1996
Al-Qaeda Headquarters
Afghanistan/Pakistan Border
Next PoV: Rubeus Hagrid

Osama bin Laden looked at the latest list of recruits. There were now twenty new names on the list, thirteen men and seven women. He had interviewed many of the men personally and administered
the oath of initiation. All of the men had passed all of the necessary mental and physical exams required to be an al-Qaeda operative. They were all dedicated and disciplined enough to follow orders unquestioningly and were willing to commit murder or suicide if necessary.

The men were from all over the Arab world. Five were from Afghanistan, three were from Pakistan, two from Iraq, one from Morocco, one from Syria, and one from Saudi Arabia. One of the people running the boot camp had noted that the Saudi recruit had been extremely impressive, able to run with a 20-kilo knapsack on his back without having to break out a sweat. Not only that, he appeared to be extremely strong and focused in everything he did. Osama hadn't actually interviewed the Saudi, but the man who had had been absolutely bowled over.

The Saudi was also a master of disguise. He was very good at thinking up fake costumes and seemed to be able to make himself blend into everything. He also liked to hide his strong physical stamina from his marks by stooping a little and carrying around a walking stick which he never let out of his hand. Bin Laden planned to promote him if he survived his first few assignments.

The declaration of jihad against the wizards and served him well. However, there was one thing which had not worked out for him. None of the new recruits were wizards who had seen the light of Allah and decided to use their abilities in His name. He wondered if it would take a few attacks on Wizarding targets to encourage the wizards to start siding with him.

Bin Laden really wanted to send a suicide bomber into a Wizarding area. However, most of them were in secret locations where Muggles couldn't go. The few that he knew were underwater, invisible to Muggles, or hidden in mountains or volcanoes. Sure, there was a link between the American Department of Magic and an MIT dormitory, but how the hell was he going to get someone into the dorm? The only person who'd have had a chance of getting in there would be Aafia Siddiqui, but she had graduated MIT the previous year.

He supposed he could tell her to tell everyone she was visiting a friend in MacGregor. Getting her into the dorm, however, was only part of the problem. Presumably the wizards had security arrangements preventing Muggles from entering I-Entry without explicit permission. Siddiqui wouldn't be able to do much good if the I-Entry door were closed in her face.

An idea came to him. If she were able to get into dorms but not into I-Entry, maybe she could take out the MIT student who had come out as a witch. He'd compiled a decent amount of information on this witch. There were problems with this, however, as well. First, the student was supposedly a junior or senior, so Aafia may have as little as three months left to trap her in her room and take her out. Furthermore, the witch was a member of a sorority, and a couple of the larger sororities had houses. What would happen if Aafia finally managed to break in and found that the witch was out at some sorority gathering? Aafia would have to get into the sorority house -- which may not be easy. And even if she got in there, the witch's sisters would undoubtedly protect her.

There was also the possibility that Aafia knew the witch. Would she be willing to kill one of her friends? On the other hand, an acquaintanceship would make it easier for her to reach the witch.

Lastly, there was the possibility of magic. Bin Laden had no idea what this witch could do. She had a broom and she knew how to fly it. Even worse, she was more than familiar with technology, having gone to MIT. A witch who could wield both magic AND technology? Allah Himself would probably have a problem with her. The only bright side bin Laden could think of would be that she may be too hooked on technology to use magic TOO much. And once Aafia was in the dorm, she could open the door for further operatives.
This operation could work, he thought. Perhaps he can send some of the new female recruits after her at some point. It would probably take a couple of months to organize something like this, but it could just work. It would probably be hell of a lot easier to organize than the scheme he'd been toying with of flying airplanes into buildings.

He hadn't interviewed any of the women -- it would have been inappropriate. However, the female recruiter had assured him that all seven women were more than capable of taking out the witch with a rifle shot or something like that. The recruiter claimed that the best place for an attack would be a private sorority gathering, where the agents would not have to wear a burqa in public to identify them as Muslims.

Bin Laden had recommended that the agents not wear the burqas to this assignment. This had shocked the recruiter for a while, but eventually she agreed.

The terrorist mastermind had just finished jotting down notes on the new recruits when he heard a knock on his door. He frowned: he wasn't expecting anyone. What was going on?

He looked up from his desk. "Who is it?"

"Ismail, sir."

It was Ismail, all right. Bin Laden recognized his voice. The man didn't seem particularly frightened, though. If anything, he seemed excited.

He disarmed the security protocol for the door and told him to enter. Ismail came in and saluted his leader sharply.

"At ease, Ismail. Report."

In response, Ismail handed over a sheet of paper. "This, sir. I believe we may have found ourselves an ally in the United States."


"A group called America for Humans."

"America for Humans? Odd name. How do you believe they would be of use to us?"

"Sir, their primary platform involves the destruction and/or conversion of wizards. You may be interested to know that they got the idea of converting wizards to Christianity from your speech."

Osama rolled his eyes. "Converting wizards, yes. Converting them to Christianity, no. We've got enough crusaders to deal with as it is. Why would they join us?"

Ismail grinned. "They won't join us intentionally, sir. However, both of us have a common enemy: American Christian wizards. I recommend that we have one of our men infiltrate their organization and assist them in attacking their targets. They've got foot soldiers, so we don't have to waste our own men. We give them our weapons and tell them what to do, and they'll be more than happy to do our dirty work for them."

Osama shook his head. "I see where you're heading. They won't follow Muslims, though, particularly if they mention they're members of al-Qaeda. If anything, they'll attack us with our own
weapons."

"Not if we use American agents and don't tell them we're part of al-Qaeda. We'll tell them that we're some part of some obscure anti-wizard militia which just found out about America for Humans and wants to join up. We've got weapons, and they've got fervor. They'll bite. Trust me."

Osama thought about it as Ismail continued. "There's more, sir. We'll tell them the weapons are less powerful than they actually are. When they go off, the group will be more than happy and pleasantly surprised. The agents will look like heroes in their eyes. A powerful attack will also rattle the American psyche and hopefully inspire the people to turn against their own wizards. The resulting chaos could distract the Clinton administration from actually prosecuting us. It will give us time to organize our own signature attacks, such as the airplane attack."

Osama continued the man's thought. "You may be onto something. If the group gets captured, they have no idea we were involved so we get away scot-free. We'll have to warn our agents that we'll have to disavow any involvement if they are captured, but they're probably going to be OK with that. On the other hand, if the attack succeeds our agents will -- as you said -- be seen as heroes. America for Humans will probably depend on us to get them more weapons and training. If we decide to withhold our weapons unless they attack certain targets which are more to OUR advantage..."

Ismail finished the thought. "...we'll effectively have a front in the United States. Eventually, we'll have them pull off a REALLY big attack which will kill off most of the group -- unexpectedly, of course -- and then we'll reveal that we're really members of al-Qaeda and we were just using America for Humans. Then they'll know who REALLY is running the show."

Osama nodded. "Sound thinking, Ismail."

"Oh, it gets better, sir. You see, the two main leaders of America for Humans are two radical pastors in Westboro, Kansas: Fred Phelps and Stephen Pitmoss. Pitmoss isn't against using weapons against witches and has already attempted to burn someone suspected of witchcraft. and Phelps has already accused the Pope of being the False Prophet. Remember he's a wizard."

Bin Laden grunted. "All modern prophets are false. Muhammed was the last true prophet."

"That's not what I meant, sir. The False Prophet is considered a herald of the Antichrist in Christian lore. A sign that the End of Days is coming. The point is, Phelps's group is more than willing to attack Catholics -- the ultimate crusaders. I believe you've considered attacks on Catholics as well, if you're not mistaken."

Osama nodded. "I have. I must say, though, that a wizard Pope probably means that the End of Days is probably upon us. Allah would have to come down Himself to get rid of someone like that. At any rate, though, this sounds like a good idea. Go ahead and see what you can do. Find agents who are American rednecks if possible and do not look Muslim. May Allah be with you, Ismail."

Ismail nodded. "May He be with you, sir."

"Thank you, Ismail. Oh, before I forget -- when you get a chance, get me in touch with Aafia Siddiqui. I may have an assignment for her...and perhaps America for Humans as well."

To be continued...

----------

Update #78
Rubeus Hagrid patted Sleipnir the unicorn. Umbridge was so wrong about these animals, he thought. Sure, if you surprised a unicorn or threatened them, they'd do nasty things to you. But if you were nice to them and got them accustomed to humans, they'd consider you to be part of their herd and would be very friendly. The American Minister of Magic -- well, as they called him Secretary of Magic -- must have known that, as he had given President Clinton a unicorn. Surely Cornelius Fudge would have known this as well. In that case, why didn't he tell Dolores Umbridge? It would have made things a hell of a lot easier.

The unicorn neighed and turned to look at the fruit basket. Hagrid got the point immediately. He headed over to the fruit basket to pick out an apple.

That's when he saw the note on the fruit basket. It was in Umbridge's handwriting and decorated with meowing cats.

"Come to my office immediately."

Hagrid frowned. What was this? Was she still holding a grudge against him from when he had confronted her over Sleipnir? He wouldn't be surprised, given how much of a jerk she was. Maybe she was trying to impose her authority over him again.

Puzzled, he waited until the end of his current class and headed over to Umbridge's office. He knocked on the door, and she let him in.

She was not alone. There were five burly men in the office with her. Ministry officials, he suspected, or perhaps Aurors. He had no idea what they were doing there. Perhaps she was concerned students and staff might try to rebel against her increasing authority.

He'd find out soon enough, he supposed. He nodded to Umbridge. "You wished to see me, Headmistress?"

Umbridge nodded. "Indeed I have, Hagrid. I've called this meeting to inform you that you have been terminated. You are no longer a professor at this school. You have until the rest of the day to pack up your belongings. These men are trained Aurors and will help you on your way."

Hagrid stared at her. "WHAT? You can't get rid of me! On what grounds are you letting me go?"

Umbridge smiled sweetly at him. "You're too insolent, and you expose the students to dangerous creatures like unicorns. There are creatures out in the forest which can be a threat to these students, yet you treat them like friends and claim that they'll be all right."

"But they are! They're misunderstood!"

Umbridge shook her head. "Tell that to Draco Malfoy, who was bitten by your tame hippogriff. A hippogriff which should have been executed two years ago, had things gone as planned. The Ministry is still unsure how he escaped."
Hagrid longed to punch her in the nose and barely restrained himself. "What are you talking about? Draco Malfoy provoked Buckbeak!"

"That's what you would like to think, Hagrid. However, Cornelius knows what really happened. After all, Lucius is an important Ministry official and Cornelius has his ear."

Bloody hell, he thought. It was all politics. Lucius was going to be using his political clout to frame Hagrid for the Buckbeak incident. Hagrid knew that he and Umbridge hadn't seen eye to eye, but he had hoped it wouldn't be this bad.

Umbridge hesitated for a moment, and then said: "If it makes you feel any better, you're not going to be the only teacher dismissed today. Professor Trelawney has also been let go. She claims she's a seer, but she doesn't seem to have any idea how to actually see into the future."

Hagrid shook his head. "That's not the way seers work, Headmistress. They're more along the lines of oracles, spontaneously reciting prophecies. They can't prophesy on demand."

Umbridge didn't buy it. "That's what you say. However, how would you know? You're not a seer. Now, I'd recommend you start packing. You've got until the end of the day."

Hagrid didn't like where this was going. "Can I at least have a second chance?"

"No, Hagrid. You've been reviewed several times and haven't improved. Goodbye."

"Who's going to teach Divination and Care of Magical Creatures when we're gone?"

Umbridge looked at a piece of parchment in front of her. "Professor Grubbly-Plank will be taking over for you. Divination is going to be discontinued permanently, as it obviously doesn't work. It is going to be replaced with additional Muggle Studies classes now that the Statute of Secrecy has been breached."

Hagrid glared at her. "Professor Grubbly-Plank has no experience with some of the creatures in the forest, Headmistress. Some of them will only talk to me."

Umbridge shrugged. "If she runs into any of those, I'm sure that a more capable staff member in this building will be more than willing to exterminate them. Why, I've even heard rumors there's a giant out there. I suspect it will take multiple Aurors to bring it down."

Hagrid was barely able to contain his anger. "Now hold on a second, Grawp is my brother! You can't touch him! He's gentle!"

One of the Aurors muttered something. Seconds later, all five men pointed their wands at him and muttered incantations. Hagrid felt his body freeze solid and topple to the ground. From somewhere above his head, Umbridge said: "Just as gentle as that hippogriff, I'd imagine. And I shouldn't have been surprised he's your brother, given how stupid the rumors say he is. Dismissed."

Hagrid was a very strong man. He couldn't avoid being strong given his half-giant stature. However, five Stunning Spells hitting him simultaneously could even do him in.

Umbridge nodded. "Smart move. If you were to attack one of the Aurors, you'd be going to Azkaban. Now get the hell out of my sight, half-breed."
Hagrid could only fume helplessly as the Aurors picked him up -- with difficulty -- and started carrying him back to his former office. En route, he passed through the Great Hall, where a disheveled Trelawney was pleading with a stunned McGonagall. A whole gaggle of students surrounded the former Divination teacher, staring at both her and McGonagall in horror.

Hagrid couldn't believe what had happened. What was he going to do now? He doubted the Ministry of Magic would give him a job given the fact that bigots were in charge. Most of the giants had sided with Voldemort, so he couldn't go back home. He couldn't live in the Muggle world either -- he'd stand out too much and would likely scare Muggles.

Suddenly, something came to him. Shaking his huge head to clear it (and getting lots of wands pointed at him for his trouble), he asked if he could go to Dumbledore's office one last time. There was something he needed to check out.

One of the Aurors shook his head. "Dumbledore isn't here, Mr. Hagrid. I'm sorry. To be perfectly honest, we don't think you've done anything to deserve a dismissal, but orders are orders."

Hagrid shook his head. "I don't need to talk to Dumbledore. There's something which may be of use to me up there."

The Auror considered it for a second. "Will you give me your word of honor that you will not try to escape custody?"

Hagrid swallowed. "I will. I know the password. Let me in there."

Dubiously, the Aurors followed him into Dumbledore's tower. The tower was unoccupied. The little machines were still whirring on the headmaster's desk, and the computer monitor seemed to be showing a document involving spell components.

Hagrid looked frantically around the room. Where was it? It had to be here somewhere! He prayed Dumbledore hadn't thrown it out. He wished he had a wand so he could Summon the object.

Eventually, though, he found it. It was a little card, sitting on a shelf. At the time, it hadn't seemed important. Now, however, everything had changed.

He looked down at the card. It had everything on it that he needed.

DR. ROBERT J. ROACH
FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
inotabug@fws.gov
202-555-1212

He looked at the computer on Dumbledore's desk. Slowly, he turned to the Aurors.

"Any of you know how to use a computer?"

----------------------
FROM: albus@hogwarts.uk
TO: inotabug@fws.gov
SUBJECT: hagird half-giant ghanged mind
dear sir
this gis hagrid oi talked to you earlier your preident asked me about zoo job
i changed my mind and woant ot go to the usa
i'll send tyou an owl f=so you can talk to me
sincerely
rubeus hagrid

ps is it ok if i bring my borther his name iw grawp and hes very friendyl wont hurt a foy

To be continued...

-------------

Update #79
-------------

March 8, 1996
Oval Office
The White House
Washington, DC
United States of America
Next PoV: Travis Radner

-------------

TEXT OF THE PRESIDENT'S SPEECH TO THE NATION

My fellow Americans.

A little over a week ago, a terrible tragedy took place. A hate group called America for Humans, based in Westboro, Kansas, brutally assaulted an innocent woman. They beat her savagely, dragged her through the snow to a park, tied her to a tree, and tried to set her on fire. Had it not been for the timely intervention of the local authorities, she would have likely been killed.

She was attacked because America for Humans thought she was a witch. As a matter of fact, she was not a witch. She was just an ordinary, nonmagical human being like you and me, often referred to as a Muggle. She just happened to have been in the area when a car swerved out of control and injured someone she had been arguing with. America for Humans thought that she had ensorcelled the car, and things deteriorated from there.

I must confess that I am quite disappointed. I had thought that America had outgrown the rancor and superstition which had triggered the Salem witch trials. For those of you who are unaware, a minor breach of the Statute of Secrecy in Salem, Massachusetts frightened the Puritans and started a witch hunt. Several people were accused as witches and executed after show trials virtually guaranteed to the convict the defendant. Some of you may have seen the ghost of one of these witches on the Four Towns video. Yes, Rebecca Nurse -- Goody Nurse, as she refers to herself -- was one of the women executed during this ordeal.

The vast majority of the victims were in fact not witches. Although a few witches were in fact picked up, they were in fact in the minority. Furthermore, the Puritans would have been horrified to learn that the witches would have in fact been able to escape from their nooses using magic. Had they done so, the only people who would have lost their lives would have been people who would have been wrongfully accused. As it is, these brave witches decided to sacrifice themselves to prevent the knowledge of the Wizarding world to spread any further.

The wizards are among us. You know it. I know it. I have met several of these individuals and am convinced that they want to live out their lives in peace, just like we do. It is not their fault that they have magical abilities. They can turn off their Wizarding powers about as easily as someone can turn
off blue eyes. Please don't discriminate against the wizards for something like this.

I call upon the House and Senate to start work on an bill, the Civil Right Act of 1996, which will outlaw discrimination against people on the basis of magical ability. This is still a first contact situation for the most part, and we need to make sure that relations between these two groups of people are as smooth as possible. I spoke with Secretary Radner about this, and although he said he could in theory use magic to force the bill through Congress, he refused to do so because it would inappropriate and that the Muggle government is outside his jurisdiction. He also said that sending things through Congress without first consulting the will of the people would set an extremely bad precedent.

I call upon the House and Senate to have this bill in place by the end of 1997. It is about time that our country started doing something about its history of discrimination. If I am still your president at the end of 1997, I will do everything possible to ensure its rapid ratification. If you so choose to go in a different direction in the November election, rest assured that Senator Dole also agrees that legislation is necessary to protect our most unique citizens.

Until the time that this bill passes, the federal government will be establishing a program designed to protect the wizards and their communities from the attacks of hate groups such as America for Humans. Although Secretary Radner has told me that the wizards will be more than able to defend themselves in case of an attack now that the Statute of Secrecy is gone, he is requesting that the federal government handle the protection duties simply because the repercussions of a magical attack on American citizens -- even in self-defense -- would be problematic, to say the least, and open to misinterpretation.

As a result, the following precautions will be put in place to ensure that Wizarding communities are allowed to practice their traditions in safety. These will all take effect on April 1st, 1996.

1. Motorized fishing boats will not be permitted onto the Quabbin Reservoir in central Massachusetts. That is the home to the Wizarding Capital District. Kayaking and canoeing will still be permitted in small boats and in small boats only.

2. The following areas will be made off limits to American Muggles without express permission from a Wizarding authority:
   a. the summit of Mt. St. Helens,
   b. the center of the Ocala National Forest,
   c. Big Thicket National Preserve, which will be closed on April 1st,
   d. a remote section of Smoky Mountain National Park,
   e. everything within half-a-mile radius of Mt. Rushmore,
   f. the Yucca Mountain waste dump, and
   g. the American Eagles gold mine in Colorado.

In addition, the MIT dormitory know as MacGregor House will be forbidden to all non-students and staff at the beginning of the 1996-1997 school year.

For a complete list of the affected areas, contact your local congressman or congresswoman.

3. A $500 reward will be issued to anyone who reports an act of discrimination on the grounds of magical ability. The reward will only be given if the case results in a conviction.

4. All houses of worship will be provided with security guards. America for Humans has already threatened to attack some of our most cherished institutions and have accused great religious figures...
of witchcraft. Whenever possible, the guards will be of the faith of the congregation they are
protecting.

We in the government apologize for the inconvenience. However, it is important that our relationship
with wizards get off on the right foot. What we do now will set a precedent for generations to come.

Thank you for your attention.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #80
-------------

March 11, 1996
Harvard Pilgrim Health
Boston, MA
United States of America
Next PoV: Head Imam, al-Aqsa Mosque

The nurse stepped out into the waiting room and called out a name.

"Charles Nelson?"

Finally, Charles thought. He'd been sitting around in this waiting room reading old issues of Sports
Illustrated for thirty minutes already. Not only had that article about the Celtics been boring, reading
it had done nothing to alleviate his headache. He figured it was allergies, but he wanted to be sure. If
he was lucky, they'd prescribe him something to make the pain go away.

He got up and let the nurse follow him into an examination. They took his vital signs and then left
the room so he could get into the hospital gown. The blood pressure seemed normal: for the first time
in a while, he hadn't recorded a high blood pressure due to the infamous "white coat syndrome".

Fifteen minutes later, the doctor hadn't come in. Charles frowned. He knew the health care system
was screwed up, but he didn't think he'd have to wait this long. To top that off, the headache was
getting worse. Maybe it's stress, he thought. If all else failed, he'd get on some antidepressant or
something like that. He'd better get SOMETHING for all of this waiting.

After a couple of more minutes, there was a commotion outside his room. It sounded like a large
number of people -- at least five -- were talking quietly and urgently outside. What was this all about?
Was he sicker than he had thought? Were they going to tell him it was a brain tumor or something
like that? Was he on the brink of death?

Be realistic, he told himself. They haven't examined you yet. How could they have determined he
was about to die simply by weighing him? So he was a bit overweight. Big deal. Everyone was now.

Then the door opened and the doctor came in, followed by a man Charles had never seen before.
The man was wearing a doctor's lab coat -- over a bizarre purple robe. Charles started at him. What
hell was he, some kind of trainee?

The doctor shook his hand. "Good afternoon, Charles. I'm Dr. Marks. I'll look you over
momentarily. However, I was wondering if you would be willing to participate in a news conference
about a new medical initiative involving the Wizarding community."
Charles stared at him. "A news conference? What do you mean?"

The doctor indicated the robed man. "This is Secretary of Magic Travis Radner. He has come to announce the new initiative. Would you be willing to be part of the announcement? You don't have to do anything. If you wish, you can have the Secretary examine you."

Charles stared at the wizard. "You're going to have this witch cast a spell on me and tell me what's wrong?"

Radner shook his head and smiled. "Wizard, Mr. Nelson. A witch is a female wizard, and I am most assuredly not female. However, in all fairness, I wouldn't be the one doing the examination. I am not a trained healer. All examinations would be conducted by trained Wizarding healers. You will be in safe hands."

Charles shook his head. "I'm a bit nervous about Wizarding medicine at this point, Secretary Radner. I'll help with the announcement if you need a patient, but I'd prefer focusing on traditional medicine for the time being. No offense, sir."

Radner nodded in understanding. "I understand, Mr. Nelson. Magical remedies and cures, while effective, are still considered a bit...alternative when it comes to Muggles. However, if that is your wish, I'll respect it. Now, I'll withdraw while the doctor examines you. The doctor will summon us when the session is done.

With that, Secretary Radner shook hands all around and left the room. The doctor spent the next ten minutes examining him and determining that he'd been suffering from stress headaches. He recommended relaxation and counseling. When Charles said that he was wondering if the doctor could prescribe medicine, the doctor explained that although he was willing to do so, it would be better for the patient in the long run to make lifestyle and attitude changes which would allow him to be more tolerant of stress. Life was stressful, for good or for ill. It would be better to spend some time learning this new skill than falling for a quick fix.

Charles agreed with the doctor and jotted down several phone numbers and email addresses for therapists, as well as for sanctuaries such as the Cambridge Insight Meditation Center. Charles hadn't tried meditation before, and was still a bit skeptical of it, but he figured it was at least worth a shot.

When everything had been decided, the doctor excused himself and left the room to tell Radner everything was ready. Seconds later, he and Radner returned...with five other people.

Two of them were holding lighting equipment. One of them was holding a microphone. One was holding something which appeared to be a television camera. The fifth one -- dressed in a robe similar to Radner's -- appeared to be holding a gigantic photographic camera of some sort. Charles stared at it in puzzlement.

The robed man nodded his head at the camera and explained. "This takes dynamic photographs, Mr. Nelson. It uses magic to create photographs with moving contents. Imagine a video camera which is able to animate the subject matter without a long exposure."

Charles grunted. "Isn't that impossible?"

The robed man nodded. "Using Muggle technology yes. However, it's commonplace in the magical world. I've got a magical newspaper here, if you'd like to see some more examples of these photographs."
Charles stared at him. "You wizards have a special newspaper?"

"Several of them, Mr. Nelson. The most famous one is the Daily Prophet, based in London. The local newspaper is called Greenwich Magical Journal. It's published in Greenwich, one of the Four Towns. The GMJ staff is actually debating allowing Muggles to subscribe so they can learn more about the Wizarding world. If you want, I can subscribe you to it."

Charles shook his head. "No thanks. I've already got enough problems without having to worry about giants and vampires taking over the world."

Radner grinned. "There aren't that many vampires, and the giants stay away from humans for the most part. Rest assured, you have nothing to worry about. However, I understand your concern. Now, if you're ready, we'll begin the announcement."

Charles looked at the doctor and then back at Radner. "Fine with me."

Radner smiled, ran his hand through his hair, and turned to face the phalanx of video cameras. The main Muggle cameraman counted down from three and then pointed at Radner. He was on the air.

Radner looked into the camera and began speaking. "Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. This is Secretary of Magic Travis Radner speaking from the one of the internal medicine wings of the Harvard Pilgrim Health building in Boston, Massachusetts. I've come to this hospital to announce a new initiative which will be made available to all Muggles starting July 1st.

"This initiative involves assigning various Wizarding healers to hospitals all over the country as practitioners of, for the lack of a better word, alternative therapies. All health plans which permit alternative therapies will be required to permit magical healers as well.

"We are still working out the final distribution of the wizards through the country's hospitals. However, I can already tell you that there will be at least one wizard-augmented hospital within 20 miles of 98% of the United States population. The remaining 2% of the people will be able to receive free house calls from wizard healers at no additional charge.

"Wizard healers can do things typical Muggle doctors cannot do. They are able to deal with diseases like AIDS and migraines. However, they have limitations as well. First and foremost, they cannot reverse aging or death. Second, Wizarding surgery is a bit primitive and they themselves recommend that they use our practices. If you do choose to have a wizard accompany surgery, you will likely undergo an ordinary Muggle operation where the wizard will be of assistance stemming bleeding and dealing with simple complications.

The Secretary turned to look at Charles, who blinked as the cameras all turned to look at him. "Keep in mind that wizard support is entirely optional. Some people may prefer to trust in Muggle doctors. That may very well likely be the case in the beginning, and it appears to have been the case in most of the people I've spoken to so far, including this patient here.

"I envision a day where the medical expertise of the Wizarding and Muggle worlds will be able to join forces to make health care a cheaper, and more effective, reality for both parties."

He then motioned the Muggle doctor over to Charles's examination table and told all three of them to smile. A bemused Charles smiled for the photo op as the robed figure with the camera pointed it at the group.
There was a big flash and a thick cloud of colored smoke poured into the air from the camera. The doctor suddenly gasped and told the man with the camera to leave the room, as smoke could just make sick people worse -- and many of the people in the wing had conditions more serious than a stress headache. Radner had barely gotten through explaining that the smoke was harmless to humans when it reached the ceiling and naturally triggered the fire alarm. Sprinklers started spraying all over the room and alarms started hooting. It took a good five minutes or so for officials to restore order in the hospital.

Radner swore. "Damn! I forgot about the damn smoke alarms. I thought I knew a lot about Muggles. Well, there's even stuff I don't know how to handle yet. Note to self -- don't bring our cameras into Muggle buildings with fire alarms."

Irritated, Radner waved his wand and the alarms all shut off. Amplifying his voice, he announced that everything was all right and that it had been a false alarm. None of the patients were in danger and everyone could re-enter the building. Charles didn't know whether the other occupants would believe him, but it was better than nothing.

Inevitably, the fire department had to come and sort out all the mess. However, before they were forced to evacuate the wing, Charles managed to get a quick glance at a piece of paper which had fallen out of the strange camera. It showed video -- an honest to goodness video -- of him, the doctor, and Radner smiling at the camera. As he watched, the doctor on the film gasped and started racing towards the camera, waving his hands feverishly.

There's a shot that went awry, he thought.

To be continued...
Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Misagnissa

Update #81

March 14, 1996
Al-Aqsa Mosque
Jerusalem
Next PoV: Lucius Malfoy

The head imam looked out over the congregation. Everything seemed to be going the way it was supposed to. No one had brought their shoes in, at least to the men's section, and for the time being the screams of the children was being kept to a minimum. There were a few tourists here and there, but most of them had left when he had told them that it was time for services. If they felt like praying, then by all means they could stay. However, if they weren't in the mood for services, they should come back at a more appropriate time.

It had been less than a month since Samuel the Prophet had shown up at that Allah-forsaken ghost convention. Although Samuel hadn't intended to ignite a controversy among the three Abrahamic religions, ignite one he had. The idea that all Judaism, Islam, and Christianity were functionally equivalent in Samuel's eyes was hard to swallow. The imam had enough trouble reconciling Shi'a and Sunni Islam. Now he had to bring the other two faiths in there as well? If there was ever a time for the Mahdi to arrive and clear things up, it would be now. Then again, there wasn't much he could do about it for the time being. So, he tried to keep everything more or less the way it was. He figured that if Allah in His great wisdom had allowed Islam to maintain control of the Temple Mount, He was at the very least satisfied with what he, the imam, was doing.

There were, of course, a few hotheads among the other two monotheistic traditions who tended to disagree with him. He kept on hearing rumors of Jewish and Christian fundamentalists who were trying to blow up his mosque, arguing that a neutral place of worship needed to be constructed which did not favor any one of the three faiths. He doubted that Allah would allow fundamentalists of any sort to destroy a holy shrine such as this, but he couldn't prevent himself from being a wee bit nervous. He had asked the mayor of Jerusalem to provide extra security around the mosque, a request that the mayor had granted immediately. Unfortunately, he couldn't help but think of the possibility that a bomber or fundamentalist would "happen" to sneak his way into the security forces.

Quiet footsteps behind him interrupted his train of thought. He turned and saw one of his staff members looking at him with a panicked expression on his face. What had happened now? Did one of the women accidentally walk into the men's section again? Lowering his voice as to not disturb the worshipers, he asked the newcomer what was going on.

The response was short and sweet. "Imam, Samuel is here. He wants to talk to you."


The messenger bit his lip. "It's Samuel. Period. The Prophet. He just showed up here with his interpreter and wants to talk to whoever's in charge here."

The imam blanched. Allah protect me, he thought. What am I supposed to do now? How am I
supposed to win an argument with a legendary historical figure? Granted, Samuel didn't seem at all like what the Old Testament made him out to be. He had proven to be a short, ascetic bald man with a small mustache and short beard. He didn't look like someone who could call upon Allah to strike His foes with lightning. Then again, the Prophet himself had been an ordinary person before the archangel spoke to him. No one would have been able to pick Mohammed up in a lineup before that.

He sighed and nodded. "I'll be in my office. Let him in and join me. No offense, young man, but I'm a bit nervous talking to him."

The messenger put his hand on the imam's shoulder. "Sir, I understand. If there's anything I can do to help, I will."

With that, the messenger walked off and the imam headed over to his office. He looked around at all the religious tomes and books for spiritual guidance. He doubted that any of them actually considered the possibility that one of the great figures of history would show up three thousand years later to talk to him.

The door opened, and the messenger led Samuel and the interpreter into the room. Samuel was dressed in his usual ancient-looking clothing. The interpreter had dressed in modest clothing and a robe, as was appropriate for his role and for the fact that he would be entering a mosque.

Samuel looked at him and barked something at him. The imam couldn't tell what language it was, though it sounded vaguely related to Arabic. He should have known, he thought. Arabic has changed a great deal since the time of the Qu'ran, and this man was from sixteen hundred years before that.

The interpreter's eyebrows shot up, but he translated. "Samuel bids you greetings and was wondering if he could speak to the High Priest."

The imam looked at his colleague, confused. "High Priest? What does he mean, High Priest?"

The interpreter responded in modern Arabic. Judging by Samuel's reaction, the biblical figure had no idea what the interpreter was saying. "I think he's confused, Imam. He thinks that this is the temple from the Old Testament, which was led by the High Priest."

The imam stared at him. "I'm not the High Priest. There hasn't been a High Priest here for millennia."

The interpreter thought a moment. "You may not be the High Priest. However, to be frank, you're the closest thing to a High Priest right now in Islam. Perhaps Allah intends you to be the new High Priest. Think about it, Imam. You're in charge of the direct successor to the Jewish Temple. That would make you the acting High Priest."

"But this site is not the holiest site in the Faith! Mecca is!"

"I'm aware of that, Imam. Samuel probably isn't, however, and he would likely be shocked to hear that a site outside the Holy Land is going to be considered more important than the Temple Mount. As far as Samuel is concerned, you're the High Priest, and I think you're going to wind up stuck with the role."

The imam didn't like this. Unfortunately, he didn't seem like he had much of a choice. Bracing himself for the inevitable explosion, he told the interpreter to tell Samuel that he was the highest ranking clergyman in the mosque.
In response, Samuel tried to shake his hand and looked on in irritation as his hand passed right through the imam's. He then spoke once again and the interpreter translated.

"Good afternoon, High Priest. Congratulations on your appointment."

The imam couldn't lie to a man like this, he thought. He couldn't. So, he told the truth. "I'm sorry, Revered One, but I'm not the High Priest. There hasn't been a High Priest in this shrine for thousands of years."

Samuel stared at him. "Very strange. However, it's understandable how traditions can be corrupted over thousands of years. At any rate, I'm going to be making some changes to unify these various monotheistic sects into one coherent faith, just like God wanted. Would you be willing to act as High Priest until we're able to figure out who the highest-ranking priest is?"

The imam stared at him. If he said no, he'd probably get kicked out by whoever Samuel installed as the new High Priest. Oh well, he thought. Allah worked in mysterious ways. He hoped he knew what he was getting into.

The imam took a deep breath and nodded. "I'll do it, Revered One."

Samuel looked pleased. "Good. I was hoping that you can make an announcement which ensures that all three monotheistic sects -- you call them Christianity, Judaism, and Islam -- to worship here at the Temple."

The imam stared at his colleague, only to see his friend's jaw drop. What the hell was he supposed to say NOW? It would be blasphemy to have the other two faiths here! It was time for some fast talking here.

He turned to Samuel and explained. "Revered One, Christianity and Judaism are older versions of the faith. Their beliefs don't recognize the existence of several prophets who preached after the movements split off."

Samuel frowned. "They aren't using the words of all the prophets? They're ignoring a few of them?"

"Yes, Revered One."

"Who aren't they using?"

"The Jews don't use Jesus and Mohammed. Christians don't use Mohammed."

Samuel looked at him, puzzled. "I don't think I recognize either of those names."

"I understand, Revered One. You see, both of those men preached after your time. They helped clarify several of the customs."

Samuel started pacing through the desk, disturbed. "This is troubling. Are you saying that we have three groups of people who follow God's word but can't agree over how exactly it is to be interpreted?"

"That's it, Revered One."
Samuel muttered something which the interpreter didn't translate, but judging from his tone of voice it was something which would probably have been transliterated as a bunch of asterisks, ampersands, and percent signs. He then spoke once again and the interpreter resumed his translation. "Have we ascertained that both Mohammed and Jesus were indeed valid prophets?"

The imam nodded. "Yes, Revered One."

Samuel groaned. "This leaves me in a difficult position. It is clear that of the three faiths, Islam seems to the one God wants. That's probably why He lets you guys use the Temple Mount. Unfortunately, the other two faiths will tend to disagree with this ruling. Please don't tell me the three of you fight from time to time."

The imam looked down in shame. "I'm afraid we do, Revered One."

Samuel looked at him sternly. "We've got to stop that right now. Here's what I want you to do. Tell all three sects that they're allowed to worship at the Temple. However, we'll encourage them to use Islamic customs, or at least we'll introduce them to Islamic customs. Do you think you can do that?"

The imam hesitated. This was going to spark a big fight. He just knew it. Drawing a deep breath, he said, "Revered One, they're not going to want to change their customs, and unless I'm mistaken we can't force them because they're also monotheists."

Samuel nodded. "Correct. We cannot. However, we can tell them that Islam is closest to what God wants. Meanwhile, I'll go over the words of Jesus and Mohammed and see if we can adapt these teachings for the modern era."

The imam looked at him in surprise. If the teachings were adapted, would this still be Islam? Samuel was digging himself in deep. He hoped that the prophet knew what he was doing.

Aloud: "I'll bring you and the interpreter a copy of the Qu'ran, Mohammed's holy book. I'll also make sure you get a copy of the New Testament, which records much of Jesus's work."

Samuel nodded. "That would be most appreciated. I want to get everyone started unifying the three religions by the time next month comes around."

The imam stared at Samuel. "Next month? What happens next month?"

Samuel grinned. "Passover, of course. I'll see you next month. Hopefully you'll be able to fit a lot of pilgrims in here. Now, if you would excuse me, we have to go. Have a good afternoon."

With that, Samuel disappeared and the interpreter left the room. This left the imam and his friend staring at each other in disbelief.

Finally, the friend broke the silence. "What in Allah's name do we do NOW?"

To be continued...

-------------
Update #82
-------------
March 15, 1996
Main Audience Chamber
Royal Palace
Lucius Malfoy sat in the audience chamber, thinking whether he had done the right thing. The Dark Lord had issued a call to all the Death Eaters, asking them to arrive at the graveyard where he had been revived the previous year. Lucius, who fancied himself one of Voldemort's most loyal servants, yearned to join them. He hadn't seen many of his Death Eater colleagues for a long time and had looked forward to catching up with a few new faces. Granted, he wouldn't have been able to see EVERYONE: Karkaroff was in hiding, Snape was at Hogwarts, Pettigrew was locked in Snape's house, and Rodolphus Lestrange was out talking with someone in North Korea. But he'd have gotten a chance to see most of him.

Unfortunately, the Dark Lord had given him orders, just like Rodolphus Lestrange. His orders were to leave England and visit a foreign dignitary to see if they needed any help dealing with perceived threats to their regimes. Hopefully, this would allow Voldemort to insert Death Eaters into the government, placing them in a position to take control of Muggle countries. Voldemort figured judicious use of magic would make it easy for him to impress Muggles and manipulate world governments. Considering "good" wizards' reluctance to use Unforgivable Curses and other strong spells, Lucius gave the Death Eaters a good chance of success.

Lucius's task was to speak with King Fahd, the leader of Saudi Arabia. He had never been to the Middle East before and had been forced to read up on some of the local customs from a Muggle book he'd managed to unobtrusively Geminio from a library. Fortunately, as a distant member of the British Wizarding nobility, he was more than familiar with etiquette and protocol in royal circles. He hoped that this experience would come in handy here.

He suspected that Fahd knew very little about the Wizarding world. He probably had no knowledge of Dark Lord's prior attempt at power in Britain, and even if he did he'd have probably passed Voldemort off as a regional threat to the United Kingdom. In all likelihood, he and any wizards in his kingdom didn't even know what a Death Eater was. The fact that Minister Fudge had refused to acknowledge Voldemort's existence worked to his advantage in this case.

He looked up as the secretary entered the room. "Wizard Malfoy, the king is ready to see you now. Please follow me."

Lucius bowed respectfully. "As you wish, sir. Lead on."

The secretary nodded and led him through the palace. Lucius, figuring this would be a good time for some investigation as to Saudi Arabia's Wizarding defenses, struck a conversation with the secretary.

"Have you or His Majesty seen any other wizards before?"

The secretary nodded. "Allah be praised, we have. You see, His Majesty had a stroke at the beginning of the year and was on death's door. We were about to euthanize him when Haydar Dagher, our Minister of Magic, came in and told us that he would be able to save the king with magic."

Interesting, Lucius thought. These guys had a Ministry of Magic. He needed to learn more about them and figure out how powerful they were. They couldn't be THAT open given what he knew about Islam. Aloud, he said: "I take it Wizard Dagher saved the king's life? I heard he'd had a miraculous recovery but didn't know wizards had saved him."
The secretary nodded. "Indeed, a Wizarding healer saved his life. It was touch and go there: the imam who had been in attendance to perform last rites was offended when Dagher recommended magical cures. Fortunately, Crown Prince Abdullah told the imam that he'd be with Allah in five minutes if he didn't change his mind. Not surprisingly, he did."

Lucius whistled. "Praise Allah for the end of the Statute of Secrecy. In the old days, His Majesty would have likely fallen. Now, thankfully, things will be different. Is your Ministry well organized?"

The secretary shook his head. "I don't know, Wizard Malfoy. No one seems to know much about them, including the king. The religious community would be in an uproar, as you would suspect, if they came out too much in the open. If you wish, you can ask His Majesty to summon Wizard Dagher so you can talk to him."

Lucius hesitated. If anyone was to know about Death Eaters, it would be the Minister of Magic. The Minister could recognize his name, and very likely ask him to pull back his robe in the presence of the king to reveal his Death Eater tattoo. He couldn't refuse a request in the king's presence, and the presence of the tattoo would give the game away immediately. He'd better be cautious. Aloud: "Thank you for your assistance. I must admit, however, I don't want to pry into state secrets, and as a result I don't think it would be appropriate for me to get involved."

The secretary nodded. "As you wish, Wizard Malfoy."

With that, the secretary led Lucius into the audience chamber and introduced him. Lucius prostrated himself on the ground, as was the custom in these parts. The king then bid him rise and shook his hand.

"Welcome to Riyadh, Wizard Malfoy. Is there anything I can do to make you more comfortable? Fruit juice? Water?"

Lucius thought for a moment. "I wouldn't mind some wine, but from what I understand wine is forbidden to Muslims and I don't want to offend anyone."

The king nodded. "You are correct, Wizard Malfoy. We don't serve wine at audiences like this for precisely this reason."

Lucius grinned. "I see my knowledge about your culture is accurate. We wizards have had to catch up in a hurry. So, I'll have pomegranate juice instead."

The king snapped his fingers, and the secretary bowed and raced off to get the drink. Alone with the king, Lucius cast his line.

"Your Majesty, I have come here to offer the assistance of me and my allies in Britain in combating wizards who may be joining al-Qaeda."

Fahd stared at him. "How did you know we needed help?"

"Osama bin Laden's tape to the West. He mentioned that he was recruiting jihadist wizards. You don't want evil sorcerers in Saudi Arabia, and we don't want al-Qaeda casting Unforgivable Curses against our assets either. The enemy of our enemy is our friend, and I come here in the hand of friendship."
Fahd looked at him thoughtfully. "Are your allies going to be powerful enough to take out a wizards-enhanced al-Qaeda? I know the Muggle authorities, including my own government, haven't had much success."

Lucius grinned. "Your Majesty, my group is headed by the man who may be the most powerful wizard ever to walk the face of the earth. All of his enemies tremble before him, and very few dare speak his name."

Fahd stroked his beard. "That's an impressive group, I must say. Are you involved with the British Ministry of Magic? I figure Britain has a Ministry of Magic similar to ours."

Lucius didn't even have to lie about this. "Yes, Your Majesty. I work for the British Ministry of Magic."

Fahd thought for a moment. Lucius waited expectantly. He had him. He knew it. He was surprised, however, when Fahd shook his head. "I've given it some thought, Wizard Malfoy. Right now, we've got a plan in place to deal with the possibility that al-Qaeda manages to pick up a few wizards. Our Ministry of Magic will be taking care of it. If our Ministry of Magic is as powerful as yours, I think we'll be able to take care of it ourselves."

Lucius bit back an oath while maintaining his prim and proper face. "Are you sure? I don't want to see you overthrown just because a terrorist group picked up a wizard."

Fahd's eyes narrowed at him. "And I don't want to become indebted to someone who wants to try to force a reduced price for oil, either."

Lucius's mind raced as he tried to understand the reference. Eventually, though, he succeeded. "I understand, Your Majesty, and I will respect your decision. However, don't hesitate to call upon us if you need any advice in the future."

The king nodded as the secretary came in with the pomegranate juice. "I'll take that under advisement. In the meantime, let's have some pomegranate juice and exchange stories of our vastly separate worlds."

Thousands of miles away, Severus Snape thought about the report he'd just heard from Lord Voldemort. It seemed as if almost everyone was going to be attending the meeting. The only people missing would be Lucius, Wormtail, Rodolphus, and Karkaroff. It would have been helpful to take out Lucius, but this was too good an opportunity to pass up.

He'd played double agent long enough. It was about time he showed Voldemort his true colors. It was about time the Dark Lord was punished for his murder of Lily Evans.

He fumbled around in his pocket for a Muggle coin and inserted it into the payphone. He dialed the number written on the small piece of parchment in front of him.

The phone rang three times and someone picked up. "This is Emerald City."
Snape spoke precisely into the phone. "Emerald City, this is Scarecrow. I regret that I must report that a tornado warning is in effect until 7:30 PM tonight. It's where we expected, in Kansas."

The voice on the other end of the line understood immediately. "Acknowledged. 7:30 PM in Kansas. Make sure to get out of the way before houses start flying around."

Snape nodded. "I will. Scarecrow out."

To be continued...

Update #83
---------
March 15, 1996, 1545Z
The Burrow
Great Britain
Next PoV: Jacob Gold, Arthur Weasley, and a Puma Helicopter

J. K. Rowling looked in amazement at the oddly-shaped house in front of her. Its lines seemed a bit strange, and there wasn't a driveway leading into it...or even a road, for that matter. She had realized quickly, however, that the people who lived here wouldn't be in need of roads or driveways.

It reminded her of one of her old dreams, a long time ago. Back in the early nineties, well before the Super Bowl Breach, she had dreamed up a fantasy world featuring a teenage wizard. She had fleshed this world out to the point where she believed that someday she might be able to write a novel about this teenager's experiences.

However, that was not to be. A bad case of writer's block midway through the project slowed and then eventually stalled it. Her dreams eventually fell apart completely when all of the publishers turned down samples from a short novel describing the wizard's world. She had thought it was the end of the world when she realized that she would never become an author.

Fortunately, every cloud had a silver lining. In this case, the lining happened to be a connection one of the publishers had with the Daily Mail. Although the publisher had believed that her book about the teenage wizard wouldn't sell, he realized that she was a good author. Knowing that a single mother had to have a decent job in order to raise her children in this economy, he sent her writing sample off to the Mail to see if she would be able to sign up as a columnist or reporter. His connections paid off, and six months later she had taken a job writing for one of the most important newspapers in Britain.

Her first article, about a celebrity polo match, hadn't been anywhere near the front page. However, it had received good reviews from the few people who had read. She then graduated to stories about the royal family and opinion pieces. Eventually, an article about the Canary Wharf terrorist attack made the front page and catapulted her onto the national stage.

It was then that she learned about the Wizarding community. Remembering her failed book about the teenage wizard, she had asked her boss for permission to be the newspaper's point person for interviewing the wizards. Her supervisor, recognizing her talent and knowing that the other newspapers would be sending good reporters to compete for Wizarding news, agreed.

So far, everything had gone according to plan. The only fly in the ointment had been the fact that combining her traditional duties with those on the rapidly developing Wizarding front were forcing her to work sixty to seventy hours per week. Add to that the time that she had to spent raising her
family and she could barely keep herself afloat.

Less than a week ago, news had leaked out that Harry Potter -- the boy who had triggered the Super Bowl Breach -- had finally decided to give an interview to the Muggle world. This immediately led to a frenzy where no fewer than seventy newspapers vied for access to the accidental celebrity. Inevitably, Cornelius Fudge -- who still controlled access to Harry thanks to the young wizard's house arrest -- decreed that one reporter's name be drawn from a hat.

As it turned out, she had been the lucky winner. J. K. Rowling wondered if there was some kind of magical connection linking her and the young hooligan.

The interview had been scheduled for 4:00 PM today. She had spoken with Ministry of Magic officials, and they had given her a charm which would allow her access to the Burrow. As far as they knew, she would be the first Muggle woman to actually visit a Wizarding residence without having had any prior ties to the Wizarding world. She had arched her eyebrows when they mentioned the word "woman". When she pressed the official for details, they admitted that a Muggle man had visited Hogwarts a few weeks earlier on classified business.

She was not going to be alone in her interview of Potter. Apparently the Wizarding world had their own newspapers, and one of their reporters, an attractive blonde woman named Rita Skeeter, had also been selected to speak with the boy. J. K. Rowling was intrigued by the witch. However, there was something about her which made her a little uneasy. The fact that she wrote on parchment, had a quill which moved of it own volition, and was dressed in garish clothing probably contributed to her discomfort.

The police of both worlds were out in force for this event. She didn't know how they'd gotten here, but gotten here they had. Muggle cops were doing their best to keep back the hundreds of reporters whose names had not been drawn. Scattered among the cops were oddly-dressed men with what must have been magic wands. Ministry officials had told her that Wizarding law enforcement officers known as Aurors would be helping with crowd control and that they would only use magic in absolute self-defense. Both sides were nervous about the repercussions of an Auror being let loose on a mob of confused Muggles.

A man approached her and Ms. Skeeter with five minutes to go. "Ladies, listen to me. Here's how it's going to work. It's now about 3:55. The interview will start promptly at 4:00 and last one hour. You can ask whatever questions you wish. I have told Mr. Potter that he can say whatever he wants. However, be advised that any newspaper columns must be run by the Minister of Magic for approval. That includes you, Ms. Skeeter."

Skeeter glared at him. Rowling, however, stared at him, confused. "Sir, how do I get in touch with the Ministry of Magic? Besides, I wouldn't expect that Muggles would be under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Magic. Shouldn't someone in Her Majesty's government be supervising me? At the very minimum, my boss ought to know of this."

The functionary nodded. "Normally, that would be the case, Ms. Rowling. However, this is an exceptional situation. You're dealing with someone under house arrest here, and the Ministry wants to make sure nothing improper makes it into the Muggle presses. Minister Fudge is especially worried about stuff that could compromise relations between the Muggles and the wizards. Furthermore, this particular boy has been a troublemaker his entire life. The Super Bowl Breach was the final straw."

Both women nodded at that. The functionary then produced a parchment and a quill, asked both
women to sign it, and then disappeared.

Two minutes later, Rowling's wristwatch chimed 4:00. Nodding to her colleague, the two reporters headed into the house.

Rowling looked around the home and was amazed at what she found. Dishes washing themselves. Clocks which kept track of all of the children's whereabouts. So many chores being handled using magic instead of main strength. This kind of life seemed a lot easier. She made a note to ask for silverware like this -- women raising a child on their own and working seventy hours a week needed equipment like that.

Skeeter, on the other hand, didn't give the magical implements anything more than a cursory glance. Looking over her shoulder with cold disdain, she told the Rowling to follow her into the living room.

Rowling entered the room to find Skeeter arguing with a boy of about fifteen with a round face and glasses. She had seen the Super Bowl footage and could tell pretty easily that it was the same boy. It appears that Skeeter recognized him as well -- and he recognized her.

Harry was pointing at the door. "Get out of here, Skeeter. I had enough trouble with you last year. There I was, fighting for my life against dragons and Lord Voldemort, and all you did was get in my face and distract me. That Hungarian Horntail could have killed me."


Skeeter wasn't moved. "I'm here to interview you for the Daily Prophet. Will you answer a few questions for me?"

Harry folded his hands across his chest. Rowling whistled -- this was a cery strong-willed boy. "No. You already know everything about me. Bloody hell, you probably covered that damn trial I had back in August. What's more, you're going to distort everything I say so that Voldemort is erased from the record and sensationalize the rest. I want you out of here. Now."

Skeeter stared at him, furious. "Young man --"

Harry rose to his feet. "There's the door, Skeeter. Do you want Hermione or someone like that to turn you into an insect? Get out of here, at least until I speak with the Muggle reporter."

Skeeter fumed for a moment but composed herself. "Fine. However, I know where you are, and I know you can't go anywhere. I'll be back". With that, she left in a huff, leaving Rowling alone with Harry.

Rowling sat down next to Harry as the boy calmed down and stared at her. "I'm sorry, ma'am. That reporter is a pain in the arse. I've dealt with her before."

Rowling looked at the door. "I can tell, Harry. She seems like a most unfriendly woman. At any rate, I'm Jo Rowling and I write for the Daily Mail. Can I ask you a few questions?"

Harry nodded. "Go ahead."

"Why did you do it? Why did you violate the Statute of Secrecy?"
Harry shook his head. "It was unintentional. Judging from what my friends have concluded, the Disillusionment Charm -- used to make an object invisible, in this case me -- does not prevent electronic video equipment from recording images of the subject. I was caught by complete accident flying past that boat. There was no way the Wizarding community could have known."

Rowling wrote that down. "What were you doing at the time?"

"My family was attacked by a dementor, an evil creature which causes depression in Muggles and can force people to suffer a fate worse than death. Trust me, Ms. Rowling. You don't want to know. At any rate, we were flying away towards a Wizarding safe house where the dementors wouldn't be able to get at us as easily."

"Why were you attacked? Have you done something wrong?"

Harry shook his head once more, this time more violently. "No. You see, the dementors have defected from the Ministry's control and have sided with an evil wizard named Tom Marvolo Riddle. He often goes by the name Lord Voldemort."

Rowling jotted that down. "This was the Voldemort you mentioned to Rita?"

"Yes, Ms. Rowling. He is an extremely dangerous man. He killed my parents, if that tells you something. I have virtually no memories of him. He's the head of a group called the Death Eaters. The Death Eaters can be easily identified by tattoos on their arms in the shape of a skull with a snake coming out of its mouth. If a Muggle authority sees any of these men, he should contact a man named Albus Dumbledore immediately -- and if time permits, then the Ministry of Magic. They should not attempt to confront Riddle by themselves."

"Is Mr. Riddle a threat to Muggles?"

Harry looked at her and nodded slowly. "I believe so, Ms. Rowling. However, I would recommend that you only tell this to the Muggle authorities, not the papers. I don't want to cause a panic, and Muggles would have absolutely no defense against this madman."

Rowling frowned. That would explain why she hadn't heard of him. An evil wizard attacking Muggles WOULD be the type of thing the government would want to cover up. However, there was one wizard who had made the news in the Muggle world.

"Are you familiar with Sirius Black? He's also an evil wizard, from what I've known. Is he a Death Eater?"

Harry's eyes blazed. "Sirius Black is innocent. Not only that, he's my godfather. He was framed by a Death Eater by the name of Peter Pettigrew and sent to Azkaban, the wizards' prison, for twelve years. The Ministry doesn't believe me, but it's true. Have the Muggle officers visit a man named Remus Lupin during a time other than full moon. He'll explain everything. You can take Sirius's innocence to the bank."

Rowling's eyes narrowed. "Full moon? What does full moon have to do with it?"

Harry closed his eyes. "Trust me, Ms. Rowling. You don't want to know."

Rowling had been about to tell Harry that he was simply trying to defend his godfather when she looked into his eyes and saw the fire there. She suddenly came up short. She could tell when
someone was telling the truth. He wasn't lying here.

"I believe you, Harry. However, I've got a lot of questions to ask you -- we'll get back to this later on if time permits. How long have you been a wizard?"

"This is my fifth year at the Hogwarts Academy of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

"Were your parents wizards?"

"Yes. Both were wizards. However, like I mentioned earlier, they were both killed by Voldemort's minions when I was an infant."

"Who raised you then?"

"My mother's sister, Petunia Dursley. I normally live with her and her husband Vernon when school is not in session."

Rowling stared at him. "Vernon Dursley? The man behind Britain for Humans?"

Harry looked at her, confused. "Britain for Humans? What is this?"

"It's an anti-wizard hate group. They've been having a lot of protests of late."

Harry snorted. "Sounds like something Uncle Vernon would do. They treated me as if I were the family dog. That whole family is bigoted. I saved their son Dudley from the dementors and got no brownie points from it. Once I get out of here, I'll see if I can exonerate Sirius and move in with him."

"If you were raised by Muggles, how did you find out you were a wizard?"

"I received a letter from Hogwarts directly from the hand of an eleven-foot tall half-giant. I was more than surprised, to say the least. I didn't realize I had any magical talent."

She checked more questions off her list. "Which world do you prefer, the Muggle world or the Wizarding world?"

Harry thought carefully before answering. "Both worlds have their benefits, to say the least. Muggles have technology, wizards have magic. Both tend to want the same goals in life and could help each other immensely now that the Statute of Secrecy is gone. However, I would say that I would prefer the Wizarding world to the Muggle world, thanks to my mistreatment at the hands of the Dursleys."

"Is Wizarding ability learned or inherited?"

Harry shrugged. "We're not sure. I suspect it's genetic in that wizards tend to have wizard children. However, we don't know for certain, and the ability to sense magic does not necessarily mean you will make a good wizard."

"Could there be other people in the Muggle community who are able to wield magic and don't realize it, such as the position you were in before that giant found you?"

Harry nodded vigorously. "Yes. One of my friends has Muggle parents and is the brightest witch of our class. I'm sure she'll go far."
The interview continued for a good forty-five minutes. Eventually, Harry winced and told her she had to leave -- he had to confront Rita Skeeter for the remaining fifteen. However, he told Rowling that he appreciated speaking with her and would be more than willing to tell her the rest of his story.

He grinned. "It would make a good Muggle novel, at least."

-------------------------

It was 6:30 when the announcement went over the military channels. Nigel Marcellus had suspected things were going to happen, and this cinched it. It was time to see how the SAS and wizards do on a joint mission.

"Emerald City to all units. Emerald city to all units. Flying House is a go. I repeat, Flying House is a go. Dorothy is prepared, and the Tin Man is on station. Good luck."

To be continued...

------------------------

Update #84 [warning, long]

-------------

March 15, 1996, 1850Z
Riverside Cemetery
Little Hangleton
Great Britain
Next PoV: A Brand New Character

-------------

Jacob Gold looked around the graveyard. As far as he could tell, he was alone under his Invisibility Cloak. He wasn't, however. At least ten other Tin Men were in the vicinity, and they were all wearing Invisibility Cloaks. Trying to find a camouflaged SAS man was hard in itself. Give him an Invisibility Cloak and it would be well nigh impossible.

All of the men were armed with sniper rifles and infrared goggles and stationed a good 500 meters away. Each rifle was centered on Tom Riddle's tomb. However, Jacob hoped that he would not have to use them. The only case he would have to use them would be if the primary attack failed. He was an expert marksman, as was everyone else in the group. However, ten SAS men were probably cannon fodder to someone of Sirius Black's -- let alone Tom Riddle's -- caliber.

The man with the code name Wizard was among them. Although Dawlish didn't believe that Riddle had returned, he couldn't deny that a large gathering of Death Eaters was something that should be monitored. It would be up to Dawlish to call in the bomb strike. If the Death Eaters were just hanging out and discussing old times, they did not warrant destruction. However, if they were actually plotting against the state or -- against all odds -- Riddle himself reappeared, then things would be different.

Dawlish had one piece of equipment in addition to the Invisibility Cloak and rifle. As the leader of the group and a wizard, he had positioned himself between the rest of the SAS men and the Riddle tombstone, protected by SAS bullets by a monument to the late Muriel Erlacher. However, he would likely not be using his Wizarding abilities. Instead, he was in charge of a small but powerful infrared laser beam. This beam was used to guide the bomb in.

The infrared goggles served three purposes. Night was falling, and it would be difficult to see in the dark without them. The laser beam would be clearly visible to the soldiers, but not to the targets. Finally, the Scarecrow -- a.k.a. Wizard Snape -- believed that wizards hiding under spells MAY, just MAY, be visible to modern infrared detectors. A Disillusioned wizard had been captured on a video
camera. Perhaps that piece of equipment would help the soldiers avoid sentries.

Snape had planned to arrive around 1915 to give last-minute instructions. However, he had warned the strike force that they could not guarantee that they would receive these instructions. After all, if other Death Eaters got there before him, he would have to stay under cover.

Jacob settled down into his watch. He still had plenty of time to kill. All he could do now was wait.

--------------------------
March 15, 1996, 1905Z
--------------------------

Arthur Weasley stared at the machine standing in front of him. He had always wanted to learn how airplanes fly. He had figured he'd get his chance with this mission.

Except that from what he had been told about airplanes, this wasn't an airplane.

The machine was made of metal. It seemed to consist of a small room with a few seats in it. There were two objects which looked like propellers attached to the room. There was a large propeller attached to the room's ceiling, and there was a smaller propeller attached to the back.

The pilot grinned and nodded at him. "It's called a helicopter. Ever heard of those?"

Arthur shook his head. "I heard of airplanes, but I haven't heard of these things. Are they a type of airplane?"

"Yes, though they don't work like ordinary airplanes. The big propeller on top spins and lifts the helicopter off the ground. The one on the back helps stabilize the craft."

Arthur grinned. "I can do that with magic. You don't need the propellers, sir."

The pilot shook his head. "Wizard Weasley, please don't use magic here. We know magic tends to wreck electronic equipment. If you break this thing we're going to be falling from a high altitude and won't live to tell about it."

Arthur nodded. "Fair enough. Lead the way."

"Thank you. Here, put these on. It's going to be loud."

With that, the pilot held out a pair of ear mufflers. Arthur put them over his ears and climbed into the room with a bunch of other people. The passengers closed the door, giving Arthur a chance to look around.

He didn't think he'd seen this many gears, dials, and buttons in his entire life. He longed to take a photograph of the contraption but couldn't due to the inability to use magic. It was a hell of a lot more complicated than getting a simple car to fly with magic.

The pilot went through a checklist, nodded, and pushed some buttons. The propellers above started spinning -- it WAS loud -- and the blades eventually began moving so fast that they became a blur. Slowly but surely, the fantastic vehicle made its way off the ground.

The pilot pushed another button and spoke into what appeared to be something attached to his helmet. "Emerald City, this is Lion. We've just found the Yellow Brick Road and are starting to follow it."
The engines flared, and the Tornado aircraft started zooming down the runway of the airbase. Soon, it was airborne and headed in the general vicinity of Little Hangleton. The flight path had it veering off somewhere to the west of the target and over the Atlantic, where it would wait in a holding pattern. If the call came to fire the weapon, the aircraft would head in, low to the ground, and drop the bomb once it got close enough to the target to sense the infrared targeting beam.

The bomb -- a.k.a. the Flying House -- was a pretty powerful one. It should knock out virtually everything within a 50-meter radius. The pilot had been reluctant to drop it on a cemetery. However, once he had been briefed on the nature of the targets, he changed his mind in a hurry.

By 1923, he was in position. Everything was all set. All he needed was the targeting information and the order to fire.

He activated his radio communicator. "Emerald City, this is Dorothy. The tornado has been spotted in Kansas and the house is starting to shake."

A flash of light announced Snape's arrival at the graveyard. His Death Eater mask was on, as usual. However, despite his reduced peripheral vision, he could tell he was not alone.

Bellatrix Lestrange greeted him. "Welcome, my dear Potions Master."

Snape dipped his head to her in acknowledgement. "Good evening, Bellatrix. How are you doing?"

Bellatrix smiled. "I'm excited. From what I've gathered, the Dark Lord and Avery are about to announce a bold initiative which had been impossible prior to the dissolution of the Statute of Secrecy."

Snape raised his eyebrows. "World domination, perhaps?"

Bellatrix nodded. "I think so. Now that we're going to be able to practice magic in the open, we're going to have fun."

Snape nodded. "Indeed. We will remember tonight, I suspect, for a long, long time."

There was another flash. Bellatrix and Snape turned and greeted their new guest. The Death Eater mask covered his face, but they could tell who he was by his hair.

"Hello, Fenrir."

Snape looked around the cemetery. All of the Death Eaters he knew of were there other than the four he knew would be absent: Lucius, Wormtail, Rodolphus, and Karkaroff.

Nothing seemed out of place. However, he saw one thing which concerned him slightly. One of the Death Eaters had brought a Foe-Glass. Snape looked into the Foe-Glass, hoping that the SAS men weren't visible. They weren't. Either they were out of range, shielded from the Foe-Glass by the
Invisibility Cloaks, or not picked up as enemies due to the Muggle weapons.

One Death Eater was still missing. The star of the show. The man who had started the entire movement.

There was a final flash of light, and Lord Voldemort Apparated into the clearing. Snape and all of the Death Eaters bowed to him in salute, and he smiled magnanimously. "Welcome, my friends. Welcome."

March 15, 1996, 1931Z

John Dawlish could not believe what he was seeing. Harry Potter had been right the whole time. Voldemort had returned. The Ministry was going to get into a hell of a lot of trouble for this.

The man needed to be finished off right now. At the very least, he needed to be cut down before the word came out that the Ministry had refused to admit that he had returned.

He stared at the serpentine face. Goodbye, Tom Marvolo Riddle. See you in Hell.

March 15, 1996, 1932:12Z

Deep in the bowels of the SAS Headquarters, the commander in chief picked up the signal from Dawlish. The time had come.

He took a deep breath and spoke into his communicator. "All unit, this is Emerald City. We have a report from the Wizard. The Wicked Witch has been spotted along with all 21 Flying Monkeys. Dorothy, get that house in the air. I repeat, get that house in the air."

March 15, 1996, 1932:26Z

The fighter pilot nodded. "Acknowledged. Get the house in the air. Preparing to launch."

He looked at his heads-up-display to see if the bomb would be able to detected the infrared beacon from Dawlish. Not yet. He'd have to come in closer.

"Emerald City, this is Dorothy. The tornado's getting closer and the house is shaking, but it's not off the ground yet."


Voldemort was explaining his plans with a big grin on his face. "There you have it, my friends. This is how we're going to dominate the world. We are the only people who have the guts to use Unforgivable Curses, and the tactics I recommended will make us look like heroes to Muggles.

Snape cheered with the rest of the Death Eaters. A quick glance at the Foe-Glass still revealed nothing.

Jacob Gold stared in horror at the man with the snakelike face. Bloody hell. Riddle's alive. God help us if we don't take knock him out here.

He looked at his wristwatch. The backlight was yellow. This means that the fighter pilot had acknowledged the receipt of the order to fire and was closing in.

March 15, 1996, 1937:02Z

Bellatrix Lestrange thought she heard something in the background. She frowned and turned to Dolohov.

"Did you hear something?"

Dolohov's eyebrows shot up. "No. Did you?"

Bellatrix looked up. "It sounded like an airplane."

Dolohov grunted. "Ignore it. The Dark Lord is more important right now. Leave the Muggles to their amusements."

March 15, 1996, 1938:43Z

The HUD in the fighter pilot's visor reported that it had picked up the signal from the infrared beam. He pressed the button, and the bomb fell into the night. It was tracking beautifully.

He shouted into the communicator. "Emerald City, this is Dorothy! The house is in the air! The house is in the air! ETA, 90 seconds and counting!"

March 15, 1996, 1938:53Z

The red light appeared on Jacob Gold's wristwatch. The bomb was away.

He hunkered down, took off the infrared goggles, and braced himself for the explosion.

March 15, 1996, 1939:21Z

Now the Foe-Glass suddenly perked up. It was ghostly and fuzzy. People unfamiliar with Muggle technology would likely have just passed it off as a shadow. However, Snape knew better. It was a missile or bomb. And judging by the size of it, a big one.

He feigned a look of concern. Turning to Voldemort, he said, "Sir, I'd like to scour the grounds to make sure there are no Muggles or wizards eavesdropping on us. I'll be back in a moment. If you don't hear me come back in, say, five minutes, come and help as I'll be in danger."

Voldemort nodded. "Be my guest, Severus. We'll hold off on the grand finale until you come back."

With that, Snape Apparated out of there. He reappeared on a hill about a mile away where he would have a good view of the target zone.

March 15, 1996, 1939:53Z
The helicopter lurched forward, nearly throwing Arthur out of his seat and ramming his head into the soldier in front of him. As he rubbed his head, the pilot spoke once again into his helmet. "Roger, Emerald City. The house is in the air and is about to touch down. Lion is on the move. Scarecrow has evacuated."

----------------------------
March 15, 1996, 1940:12Z
----------------------------
Bellatrix Lestrange saw something out of the corner of her eye. What the --

----------------------------
March 15, 1996, 1940:13Z
----------------------------
The center of the graveyard erupted in a pillar of flame. Rocks flew all over the place, followed by charred body parts. The concussion nearly deafened Jacob and the rest of the SAS men. Yet they held their positions. They had no idea if any of the wizards had survived the attack.

Quivering with anticipation, they waited for the explosion to subside. Meanwhile, they received a message from Wizard that he was all right.

----------------------------
March 15, 1996, 1940:33Z
----------------------------
The smoke had cleared enough for Jacob to get a first glimpse of the results of the attack.

There were bodies everywhere. No one had been left standing. The Death Eaters had been caught completely off guard.

There was only one remaining infrared heat source which hadn't been accounted for. He wasn't sure what it was, but he knew it wasn't one of the wizards. It was only two or three feet long and near the center of the explosion. Probably some burning grass, he thought. Nothing to worry about.

So far, so good.

----------------------------
March 15, 1996, 1942:17Z
----------------------------
The helicopter arrived on the scene to survey the damage. There was a huge crater in the ground where the bomb had hit.

Dawlish ordered the pilot to fly a little lower to check things out. The SAS men got their guns at the ready in case there were any surviving wizards. However, there was no resistance. Better and better.

Arthur and the pilot made a cursory inspection from a few hundred feet. Death Eater marks were everywhere, many still attached to charred faces. They did a body count. All of the Death Eater masks were accounted for. Everyone was dead.

As for Voldemort? He'd been right at the center of the blast. There was no way he could have survived that. He had almost certainly been vaporized, and the Tin Men had reported that he had still been there when the bomb had come in.

The pilot looked at the crew and cheered. Seconds later, Dawlish and the SAS men joined them. One man brought out a victory cigar.

The chant rang through the night.
"DING, DONG, THE WITCH IS DEAD!"
-----------------------------------------------
Buried in a mound of rubble, a deformed creature the size and shape of a human baby played dead.

To be continued...
-----------------------------------------------
Update #85
---------
March 15, 1996, 1944Z
Bullock Residence
Near Riverside Cemetery
Little Hangleton
Great Britain
Next PoV: Hermione Granger
---------
Phillip Bullock looked at his wife in astonishment. "What the bloody hell was THAT?"

They had just sat down to dinner when a tremendous flash lit the night sky. It seemed to have come from somewhere out in the cemetery. A few seconds later, two sounds assaulted them at once. One of them sounded remarkably like a sonic boom. The second sounded like a tremendous explosion.

The house shook like a wounded animal. Both windows blew in, and Jennifer swore as one of the shards of glass cut into her arm. The table danced around, sending silverware and plates flying. A picture fell off the wall and landed with a crash on the floor.

Both of them stared out the window. Something was on fire out in the cemetery. Whatever it was, it was big. Neither of them had seen anything like this before. As they watched, a rock the size of a baseball caromed into the house, bouncing off a wall and just barely missing Phillip's foot.

Jennifer stared at him. "I don't know, Phil. All I know is that I've got this shard of glass in my arm and it hurts like hell. Get the first aid kid while I try to get this thing out."

By the time he had come down with the first aid kid, his wife had removed the piece of glass. She was damn lucky it hadn't severed an artery. As it was, it still bled a lot. He did what he could to bandage it up. Once everything seemed to be holding, they turned back to the window.

Car alarms were going off everywhere. People were looking into the cemetery, wondering what had happened. The flames had diminished somewhat, but it still looked ugly out there.

Phillip tried to figure out what it had been. It sounded a lot like a bomb blast, but there was nothing to attack in the cemetery. Had there been a gas leak? He doubted it. As a former firefighter, he knew there was no gas line through the cemetery. It made no sense to put a gas line in a place where there would be constant trips to the cemetery to dig into the ground and inter people.

This left only one thing. He looked at the rock lying there on the floor.

"A meteor."

His wife stared at him. "Sorry?"

Phillip glanced out the window and started heading upstairs to dig out his old firefighting gear and a few fire extinguishers. He wouldn't be able to finish the job without the aid of the fire department,
but he had to do something.

He called back down to his wife. "It's got to be a meteor. That's the only thing I can think of. Nothing else makes sense. I'm going out there. I don't hear any sirens yet, and we need to stop that fire now before it spreads any further."

His wife stared at him. "Phil, you're retired. The fire department will take care of it for you."

He just glared back at her in response as he dialed the fire department and reported the fire. After hanging up the phone, he turned on her. "They're not here yet, and no one's trying to put it out over there. They had heard something, but they hadn't been sure what it was. It will take them a few minutes to get over there. I'm going in. Don't argue with me, Jennifer. I'm doing this. I'll see you in a little while." With that, he slung the bag with the fire extinguishers over his shoulder and headed out into the cemetery to investigate.

As he get closer to the site of the explosion, the footing got more treacherous. Several of the gravestones had been toppled, and he tripped over a few of them. He noticed that several other people had come to investigate. Shining his flashlight on his uniform, he told them to go back to their homes. He was a retired firefighter and would mind the scene until the active employees arrived with their trucks. When a couple of people begged to help, he told them to douse themselves with water and bring as many fire extinguishers from their homes as they could.

Phil climbed over a small rise and suddenly found himself staring into a huge, rubble-strewn crater. There were bodies everywhere, but that wasn't surprising given the fact that he was standing in a graveyard. Some of them were remarkably preserved, however. One woman with long curly hair seemed to have died only a few minutes ago. Many of the bodies were wearing strange masks. As far as he could tell, there were no survivors.

He frowned. Was this some kind of terrorist gathering? Had the military been called into destroy some kind of al-Qaeda or Britain for Humans cell? A desolate graveyard sounded like a good place for a clandestine meeting. Maybe it wasn't a meteor after all. If it were a secret government operation, he did not have the right to interfere. Hell, if he did and the government saw him, they could shoot him on sight.

There was a strange smell to the air. He couldn't place it at first, but when he did he recognized it immediately: explosives. This had in fact been a covert military operation against a bunch of masked criminals.

Shit, he thought. He frantically tried to figure out what to do. The site of the explosion was deserted at the moment. Apparently the government had been satisfied with what they’d done and had gotten all the information they needed. However, that fire still needed to be put out. Judging from what was left of the fire, he thought he could put it out himself. It was better to have him do it than allow random civilians into the area. The civilians would report the operation and strange smell to the news, in all likelihood, exposing a black op. That would have nasty consequences. He also didn't want the civilians messing around with what was obviously a crime scene.

He brought out his camera and took photographs of the area as he found it. This would be important evidence for the government as he would be forced to tamper with the environment in order to put out the fire. He screamed over his shoulder that he saw evidence that the area was still hazardous and that the people with the fire extinguishers should take them back home. He, as a former firefighter, would be the point man here and handle most of this.
He had just about finished putting out the fire when he thought he saw something move out of the corner of his eye. He spun in place, fire extinguisher still spraying foam on the blaze, as he scanned the area.

There was definitely movement. It appeared to be in a pile of rubble. Brandishing his fire axe and turning off the extinguisher, he slowly headed over there to investigate. Perhaps a captured prisoner would be of use to the government. He turned on his flashlight and began looking through the pile.

It was a child.

At least he thought it was a child. He was maybe three feet tall and -- strangely enough -- stark naked. The child's face seemed to be deformed, almost snakelike. There were wrinkles up and down his cheeks which looked out of place on such a small body.

It was clear that the boy had been injured in the blast -- nothing else could have caused those scars and wrinkles. Phillip didn't know how the child had managed to escape without bleeding, however. Maybe the child had been burned by the explosion and hidden under the pile of rocks to hide from the Boogey Man.

Perhaps his parents were part of the terrorist organization. This child, however, was clearly not part of the group -- and even if he were part of the group, he was young enough to be deprogrammed.

He lowered his axe and knelt next to the child. "Don't worry, young man. I'll take care of you. I'll make sure you're OK. I'll adopt you if necessary."

In response, the child turned to look at him. Phil had the uncanny feeling that the little boy's eyes were staring right through him.

"Don't worry, my friend. I believe you will suffice quite well."

Then something very odd happened. Phillip screamed as a searing pain raked the back of his head. His head spun for a second, and he nearly threw up.

He put his hand on the back of his head, expecting to feel bleeding. Instead, he felt something which felt like...a nose. He couldn't make head or tail out of this. Oddly enough, whatever injury caused him to grow this "nose" wasn't bleeding at all.

He looked to his feet. The child was gone.

What the hell was going on here? In response, a little voice came to him, seemingly out of nowhere.

"Don't worry about the back of your head, Phillip. Everything is fine."

He nearly fell over with shock. "Who are you? Where is the child?"

"I'm your conscience, Phillip. Listen to me, and you'll do well. Now if I were you, I would start helping out with the fire department. I hear them coming now. Don't worry, the child will be cared for."

For some reason, he obeyed the voice automatically. Looking over his shoulder, he saw fire trucks heading in his direction. He waved his hand and they blinked their headlights in recognition.
The voice spoke again. "Good job, Phillip. Now let's clean this mess up. Oh, and if I were you, I'd start wearing that fireman's hat all the time. There's one thing I'd like you to do, however, before you head off and do your duty. See that large tombstone over there? It's marked Tom Riddle."

Phillip turned. There was a half-demolished tombstone there. The explosion had dug up several bones of the occupants.

The voice continued. "Take one of the bones, Phillip. We'll need it later on."

Phillip found the instructions a bit odd, but he found himself doing what he had been told.

"Excellent, Phillip. Put it in your pack. I believe you're going to work out just fine. Now go ahead and put out the fire."

To be continued...
March 15, 1996, 2130Z
Gryffindor Common Room
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
Great Britain
Next PoV: A Character You've Never Seen Before

The cheering started up less than half an hour after Hermione got into her room. The voices were indistinct, having had to make it up three flights of floors and through walls which were enhanced with magical soundproofing. But the fact that she had been able to hear them at all meant that they had to be VERY loud. It was as if there were a House-wide party going on outside.

Hermione groaned. Her OWLs were coming up soon, and she had to do all the studying she could. Unlike other people, SHE was actually concerned about her future. She half expected that most of her classmates would be living off of Wizarding Welfare before they were forty. Ron might luck out, and Harry certainly would. However, the vast majority didn't seem all that focused on their work. Neville may make a good Herbologist, but she was a wee bit concerned about how he'd fare on the rest of the exam.

She thought back to Harry and realized something awful. Harry might have more problems with the OWLs than she had thought. Harry was a bright student. That was obvious. However, he wouldn't be able to pass the OWLs unless he learned the required material. With him sitting under house arrest. he doubted he was being given the opportunity to learn.

Would he have to defer his OWLs? Would he be held back a year and placed in the same class as Ginny? She wondered if that might be the lesser of two evils. If he was require to take the OWLs at the end of this year, as was customary, he'd get lots of P's and D's. His hope of being an Auror would be absolutely obliterated through no fault of his own. It was obvious that the only reason Harry was incarcerated at the Burrow was because Cornelius Fudge needed him as a scapegoat for the Super Bowl Breach. Did Fudge realize that he was ruining the boy's life forever?

Granted, holding him back a year would allow him to spend more time with Ginny. It was obvious that Ginny was still smitten with him. She had been sending Harry lots of cards, and he'd done what he could to respond. But would this extra time with Ginny be worth what appeared to be a nasty blotch on his academic record?

Hermione shook her head. It wasn't worth it. And at the rate things were going, she'd have a similar blotch on her own record if she didn't get back to studying. In order to get back to studying, however, she had to tell everyone to shut up. Bracing herself, she headed down to the common room to tell everyone to pipe down a little.

She had just set foot in the common room when Ron suddenly appeared out of nowhere and gave her a big kiss. She blushed -- how embarrassing. She saw Fred and George taunting their brother out of the corner of her eye. They tried to say something, but their voice was drowned out in the cheering. What the hell was going on here?
It took her a good ten seconds to try to extract her lips from Ron's. When she spoke, she had to scream in order for Ron to hear her.

"Ron? What the bloody hell is going on here? What's everyone happy about? I'm trying to get some studying done! In case you're wondering, we've got OWLs in less than three months!"

In response, Ron just shoved a piece of parchment at her. Skeptical, she looked at the headline. Her eyes went as wide as saucers as she read. It was a special edition of the Quibbler. As she read, Ron tried to explain that Luna's father had created the special edition right after the news broke. Hermione wasn't paying attention to him at this point, however. She literally could not believe what she was reading.

The Quibbler -- EXTRA EDITION
Xenophilius Lovegood, Editor
15 March 1996

VOLDEMORT ASSASSINATED
You-Know-Who, Most Death Eaters Killed by Muggle Explosive Weapon
Lucius Malfoy, Peter Pettigrew, Igor Karkaroff, and Rodolphus Lestrange Still At Large

Wizards of Britain, rejoice. Your hour of redemption has come.

In a turn of events virtually no one could have anticipated, a team of British Muggle special agents, assisted by former Death Eater Severus Snape and Auror John Dawlish, killed Lord Voldemort and most of his Death Eater allies with one crushing stroke, quite literally out of the blue. According to Professor Snape, Snape fulfilled the promise of his double agent role and betrayed the location of an important Death Eater meeting to Muggle authorities. The British SAS, a unit of elite Muggle soldiers, donned Invisibility Cloaks provided by Auror Dawlish and observed the gathering from a distance. Once Dawlish realized that Voldemort himself was attending the gathering, the Auror called upon the Muggles to perform an attack known as an targeted air strike.

In an air strike, a secret agent -- in this case Dawlish or one of the SAS men -- uses a Muggle device to indicate the target. Once the target has been chosen, a second Muggle takes off in a flying vehicle called an airplane and releases a powerful weapon known as a bomb. The bomb falls down to the ground and heads towards the target. When it hits the ground, it detonates in a tremendous explosion. The explosion left a hole in the ground dozens of meters across and destroyed every single man and woman there. Several of the bodies were almost unrecognizable. In some cases, Death Eater masks covered completely charred faces.

It was obvious that none of the Death Eaters had seen it coming. Snape reported that a Foe-Glass in the area had picked up the bomb as it was coming in, but the Death Eaters were so contemptuous of Muggle technology that they didn't even know what it was and passed it off as a shadow.

According to Professor Snape, who found a excuse to escape just before the bomb arrived, the SAS man had chosen a target directly behind Voldemort. This left Voldemort at the direct center of the explosion. The Dark Lord would have likely been killed simply by having the weapon fall on top of him out of the air. Having a device weight several hundred kilos landing on your head would ruin
your day as well.

No trace of the Dark Lord's body was found at the scene. However, do not despair, wizards of Britain. Lack of bodily remains is not unusual for victims standing at the center of such an explosion. However, Snape assures us that he witnessed Voldemort standing there, completely unaware, as the bomb came in. The Dark Lord had no time to Apparate out.

Wizards, Muggles, and SAS men scoured the scene immediately after the smoke had cleared. The Dark Lord was gone, and they counted 21 dead Death Eaters -- virtually all of Voldemort's inner circle. The only four not accounted for were Lucius Malfoy, Igor Karkaroff, Peter Pettigrew, and Rodolphus Lestrange. Using special Muggle devices which are supposedly able to detect the heat from living beings, the SAS reported that nothing had survived. There was a brief alarm when they picked up a small heat source near the center of the explosion. Further analysis indicated that it was likely burning grass as it was far too small -- only about 60-90 centimeters long -- to be an adult's body. The SAS was able to rule out a child or dwarf Death Eater as they had noticed that all of the people at the gathering had been fully grown.

The Muggles were divided as to whether to explain the true nature of the attack to the Muggle community. In the end, they decided to cover it up, explaining that the explosion was due to a gas leak. People had been trying to dig a grave at the Riverside Cemetery in Little Hangleton and struck a gas line with their shovel. One spark from the shovel and the gas exploded. Professor Snape believes that the Muggle authorities are worried that references to evil wizards such as You-Know-Who may cause the Muggle population to fear and turn against the entire Wizarding community, fearful that any wizard they see may be a Death Eater. It would be a pity for the Muggles to learn about the Wizarding world only to have them start persecuting the wizards like they did in the Middle Ages. As a result, Her Majesty’s government is passing the incident off as an accident.

Those of you who remember Voldemort's attack on the Potters back in 1981 may recall that Voldemort was believed killed in by his own Avada Kedavra curse. We now know, much to the sorrow of the Diggory family and countless others, that that was not the case. This brings up the inevitable question: did this attack truly finish off the Dark Lord, or will he come back from the dead again?

No one seems to know the answer to this question. Albus Dumbledore, current headmaster of Hogwarts, is unable to comment on this problem at this time. On the other hand, the wizards who witnessed the attack -- Snape, Dawlish, and Ministry of Magic employee Arthur Weasley -- are all convinced the Dark Lord is dead. Snape, however, warned our reporter than he thought the Dark Lord had been killed back in 1981 as well, and we now know that was not the case.

I, Xenophilius Lovegood, personally believe that this is it for Voldemort. I suspect that Voldemort suspected that the Potters might fight him back in 1981, so he cast a spell to preserve himself just in case. Here, however, Voldemort was caught completely off guard, without any obvious threats to defend against. Furthermore, the fact that he was filled by a Muggle weapon throws another monkey wrench into any defense plans. Would Voldemort's magical defenses have been able to protect him from a Muggle device, particularly one which would create such a big explosion and kill everybody else?

The fact that all the Death Eaters are dead is another good sign. Even if Voldemort did in fact survive, he has no supporters anymore. He won't be able to do much with over 80% of his inner circle cut to pieces.

So rejoice, people of Britain. Voldemort is dead, and you can retire at night once again without
worrying that a masked man will kill you in your sleep.

We all owe a great deal of gratitude to all of the men involved with Operation Flying House, as the Muggles called it:

    Severus Snape, code named Scarecrow;
    the SAS forces, code named the Tin Men;
    Pilot Flight Lieutenant Kevin McCullough and Weapons Officer Squadron Leader Ian Rowland-Smith, members of 31 Squadron RAF* and crew of the flying vehicle, code named Dorothy;
    Pilot Flight Lieutenant Andrew Erickson, Pilot Flight Lieutenant Martin Baker, and crew member Sergeant Jacob McCandles, members of 230 Squadron RAF and crew of the flying vehicle, code named Lion, which graciously allowed Arthur Weasley to fly with them during the attack;
    Nigel Marcus, the commander in chief of the raid, code named Emerald City; and
    John Dawlish, code named Wizard.

Cornelius Fudge is currently in negotiations to award these individuals the Order of Merlin, First Class. The Tin Men, McCullough, Erickson, and Marcellus will very likely be the first Muggles to ever receive such an award.

More information will be reported as it comes in. Look to future issues of the Quibbler for more details.

In the meantime, seize the day and celebrate. For as the Muggles say, "ding dong, the wicked witch is dead."

*RAF = Royal Air Force, a British Muggle airborne unit.

Underneath the document was a still photo -- presumably a Muggle one -- of a big hole in the ground with tombstones and rocks flung all over the place. That was one hell of an explosion, she thought.

Hermione reached the end of the document and looked at Ron in amazement. She didn't know where to begin: Voldemort's death, or Ron's father getting the opportunity to go on the mission. However, she didn't have to worry about it for the moment as Ron gave her a big kiss again.

For the first time in many months, the OWLs slipped from her head.

To be continued...

-----------
86A -- RASPUTIN REVIVED VIA HORCRUX
-----------

Update #87

March 17, 1996
First Baptist Church
Columbus, MS
United States of America
Next PoV: Cornelius Fudge

Martha Ivie gasped and put her hands on her belly in shock. She knew that people went to church to ask for deliverance. That's why she had gone, after all. What she hadn't expected, however, was the deliverance would involve two eight-month fetuses named Allison and Robert.
Her husband, sitting in the pew next to her, turned to her in surprise. One look at her face told her everything. He turned white with fear as he forced out two words.

"You're kidding."

Martha shook her head. "I'm not! My water just broke. I think we'd better get to the hospital."

Her husband looked at her in shock. She understood what he was thinking: they still had a month to go. He knew twins tended to come out early, but not this early! "Do you think you have time to make it to the hospital? Do you want me to call an ambulance?"

She nodded. "Tell Reverend Michaels to call an ambulance. I think we've got time, but it doesn't hurt. In the meantime, move out of the way so I can lie down on this pew."

He nodded and stood up. He didn't like it when people started talking in church, but he didn't have much of a choice here. Raising his voice, he turned to face the crowd.

"Reverend Michaels, I apologize for the interruption here, but my wife's water just broke. She's carrying twins and is eight months along. Is there a doctor in the house? In the meantime, Reverend, would it be possible for you to call an ambulance?"

The minister nodded. "Absolutely. God be with you, and I'll be right back."

With that, Reverend Michaels ran off the raised platform at the front of the church. This left a room filled with worried chatter. Unfortunately, no one seemed to be offering his or her services as a doctor. Martha cursed. Here she was in church, listening to people talk about doing good deeds for people. It was about time people practice what they preached.

Her husband was about to ask again when a young man stood up. "Excuse me, sir. I believe I may be able to help. However, I've never done anything like this before."

Her husband glanced down at her and she nodded. Reassured, he turned back to the speaker.

"Whatever you can do will be appreciated. Come on over -- I'm sorry, but I didn't get your name, sir."

People hurried out of the way as the good samaritan headed towards their pew. "Wizard Jeff Simpson, sir."

Martha and her husband gaped at each other. A wizard in a church? It almost sounded like an oxymoron. However, emergencies like this made strange bedfellows. Wincing through a contraction, she managed lift her head and stare at the wizard. "You can deliver babies via magic?"

Simpson shook his head as he came over. "Wizards can deliver babies via magic. It's well known in the Wizarding community. Spells exist to ease childbirth and make it so it's less painful. You'd be surprised what we can do."

"Have you delivered babies before?"

Simpson shook his head as he came over. "I personally haven't. However, I have a friend of mine who is a healer. He may know someone who will be able to assist you. Would you be willing to allow us to cast spells on you? I'm aware that many religious people are reluctant to have us ensorcel
them. I come to church most Sundays, and I can tell that you're a regular. It would only be fair for me to ask.”

She nodded as the minister raced hurried back into the room. "Go ahead. Make sure that the healer is a woman, though. The idea of a man sticking his wand —"

The wizard and chuckled interrupted her before she could finish his sentence. "Don't worry, ma'am. Most of the healers I know are female. There shouldn't be a problem finding someone who will suit you."

Simpson then turned to the minister. "Reverend, is there a private room around here where we'll be able to handle this? I don't want to disrupt the services with rituals which could be considered offensive to some people, and I don't want to desecrate the sanctuary with any bodily fluids."

The minister nodded. "Absolutely. I have a private office here, in the back. It's got a couch for her to lie down on."

"Do you have a bath for ceremonies like baptisms? A water birth may make it easier on her, but I'll understand if you don't want us using it."

The minister shook his head. "We usually do the adult baptisms in the river. If it worked for John the Baptist and Christ, it will work for us. I'm afraid the couch will have to suffice."

The wizard nodded. "That will be all right."

Martha's husband cut in. "Do you think it will be safe to move her?"

The wizard nodded and brought out his wand. People started talking excitedly. Some of them shied away from him while some stared at him in excitement and curiosity. "Don't worry, sir. I'll handle that right now. Wingardium Leviosa!"

He waved his wand. Martha squealed as the red cushions on top of the pew suddenly rose into the air, carrying her above the crowd. The murmur of the crowd rose by about 20 decibels, punctuated by clapping and talk of miracles. Even the minister's eyes widened.

Wizard Simpson motioned for Martha's husband to follow him as he led the strange procession down the aisle towards the front of the church. The minister moved out of the way, discreetly turning his back as the laboring woman floated by. He then gave the wizard directions to the office. The wizard thanked him and continued into the bowels of the church. Meanwhile, the minister told everyone to get back to their seats and start praying. "You've already witnessed one miracle today. Can you imagine that you may very well see a second? We are very fortunate indeed. Praise Jesus, and remember this when people start accusing witches of being sinners!"

Martha's husband heard the crowd singing psalms for a moment as he entered the minister's office. Then the door closed, leaving the wizard and two Muggles alone in a thankfully silent, private room.

The wizard gently lowered Martha down onto the couch. The contractions were coming faster, and her husband wondered if the ambulance would get there in time.

Simpson then stood up. "I think I've done all I can do here. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll Apparate out of here and see if I can find someone to do the actual delivery."
Martha's husband nodded and shook his hand., "You've done a good deed, Wizard Simpson. May all of your people learn from you."

The wizard nodded. "May they indeed, sir. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll be back with the healer:. With that, the wizard disappeared. One of the lights went out, but no one noticed.

Ten minutes went by and the contractions got stronger. There was no sign of the ambulance. Worried, the husband called the hospital. They said the ambulance was en route and it would be there momentarily.

Then Martha screamed. "David! Give me a hand here! It hurts!"

David looked at her. What the hell was he supposed to do? He couldn't do anything. All he could do was hold her hand and try to cover her with one of the minister's spare robes. He didn't know what else to try.

The labor continued for five more minutes. Martha began to howl and inevitably started cursing him for putting her in this predicament to begin with. The curses were cut off abruptly, however, as someone else suddenly materialized in the room.

It was a matronly, gray-haired woman in a white robe. Embroidered on the robe was an image of a red cross which -- amazingly -- pulsed like a beating heart.

The woman realized what was going on immediately. She told David to move out of the way as she bent over to examine Martha. Nodding, she turned to face both parents.

"Mr. and Mrs. Ivie, I'm Witch Helen Oglethorpe. I've been delivering babies for several years now, and I'll be able to handle this. Let me explain to what I'm going to do. Most of the problems with human delivery involve the fact that the baby, particularly the head, is too large to easily make it through the birth canal."

Martha gritted her teeth and glared at her. "Like I didn't know that."

The witch nodded. "Therefore, the obvious solution is to shrink the baby so it will be able to come through more easily. Once the child is delivered, I'll return it to its normal size. In order to do this, however, I'll have to stick my wand in there and touch the tip of the wand to the baby's head. With your permission?"

The witch's matter-of-fact statement stunned both mother and father into silence. Eventually, David nodded, and the witch rolled up her sleeves and inserted her wand where the sun didn't shine.

The witch poked around for a minute and finally found the baby. Taking a deep breath, she shouted two words.

"Reducio! Anesthesio!"

Martha's eyebrows shot up and she turned to her husband. "The pain's gone! I don't even feel any pressure anymore!"

The witch nodded. "That's the point. Now, it's time for me to finish the job. Mr. Ivie, I'm afraid you're not going to be able to get a chance to cut the cord."
David shook his head. "Don't worry about it! Get on with it!"

She then ran through a long series of spells. Eventually, she smiled, reached out her hand, and lifted something off the couch. Grinning, she placed it on top of Martha's chest.

It was a baby girl. She looked exactly like what the doctors had predicted, except for one minor difference. The baby was approximately eight inches long.

Both parents stared at the infant in disbelief. David was the first to find his voice.

"That's impossible!"

The witch chuckled. "I figured you'd say that. Magic can do things you Muggles can barely conceive of. Now, Mrs. Ivie, if you would be so good to push some more, I'll bring out the other one."

Fifteen minutes later, the second baby was out. The little boy had barely been lain on the mother's chest, next to his sister, when the paramedics rushed into the room along with the minister.

The five Muggles were stopped dead in their tracks by what they saw. The minister fell to his knees and thanked God for allowing him to witness something which truly was a miracle.

The wizard ignored him. Withdrawing her wand, and wiping it off, she pointed it at each child and repeated the word "Engorgio" twice. She then moved out of the way, revealing two full-size, albeit one-month-premature, babies on their mother's chest.

David Ivie could barely stammer. "Witch Oglethorpe...how can I repay you for this? I can't believe it!"

The witch tucked her wand back into her robe. "There's nothing you need to do, Mr. Ivie. You don't need to repay Wizard Simpson either, as he is also truly a good samaritan."

"Will they make it? They still look awfully small."

The witch nodded. "I think so. Listen, they're already starting to cry."

The minister winced as one of the children shrieked. It's not like he could have missed it all that easily.

The witch continued. "They're out. However, I agree, they're premature. There's something I can do to help. However, to be honest we've never been all that good with premature births. Now that the paramedics are now here, I'd recommend that they take over at this point. They'll be able to serve your children better than I can at this point."

"Is there anything you can do to help my wife?"

The witch nodded once more and uttered a few more spells. Martha's eyes widened once again and she made to stand up. However, the witch pushed her back onto the couch. "Not so fast, ma'am. You don't want to dislodge the kids, and I'd still recommend a good day or so of bed rest before you get back to your normal routine. If you want, I'll help you fall asleep to expedite your recovery."

Martha nodded. Within seconds, she was asleep.
David had tears in his eyes. "Thank you, Witch Oglethorpe. You've been a godsend."

The witch grinned. "What else would you expect in a church? I believe the saying goes, the Lord works in mysterious ways."

The new father asked one more question. "Your given name is Helen, right?"

The witch nodded. "Yes. Why do you ask?"

In response, the father gingerly pointed to the newborn girl as the doctors lifted the boy into a portable neonatal unit. "Meet Allison Helen Ivie."

To be continued...

-------------

Update #88
-------------

March 18, 1996
Office of the Minister
Ministry of Magic
Great Britain
Next PoV: Eric Street

Cornelius Fudge stared down at the copy of the *Quibbler* in horror. The headline said it all. Voldemort Assassinated.

It wasn't that Fudge was angry that Voldemort was dead. Far from it. The evil wizard formerly known as Tom Marvolo Riddle had been a menace to society for many years. He was believed to have been killed back in 1981, when his *Avada Kedavra* curse backfired during an attack on Harry Potter. All of the evidence had pointed to the man being gone for good: the Death Eaters had gone underground for the most part and the attacks on Muggles and Muggle-born had ceased.

Then came the news that Harry Potter had encountered the Dark Lord about nine months ago during the climax of the Triwizard Tournament. Fudge hadn't believed it himself at first. For all he knew, Harry had killed Cedric in a squabble for the Triwizard Cup. However, everything changed when Bartemius Crouch Jr. had been interrogated by the Aurors after he had been caught impersonating Alastair Moody.

The young man had sung like a canary. He explained that a ritual existed which was expected to be able to revive the fallen Voldemort. One of the ingredients had been the blood of one of his former foes. Crouch Jr.'s task had been to ensure that Harry won the tournament and was Portkeyed over to Riddle's father's grave for the ritual. Once Harry had reached the graveyard, one of the Death Eaters would perform the ritual and bring Voldemort back.

When pressured to explain how Voldemort had managed to survive his apparent death in the Potters' house, Crouch Jr. had shrugged and admitted that he couldn't explain it. A quick application of Veritaserum revealed that the Death Eater had been telling the truth, both in his belief that Voldemort would be revived and in his claim that he didn't know how Voldemort had managed to survive in this world after 1981.

Crouch Jr.'s testimony by itself would likely not have been enough to convince Fudge. Harry's testimony would not have either. However, they corroborated each other perfectly. Fudge had to admit that Voldemort was back.
He had immediately set to work trying to pretend that the Dark Lord was still dead. He knew that wizards all over Britain would panic at the return of Voldemort. A nation of frightened wizards would throw society into chaos, making his job more difficult. Furthermore, the fact that Voldemort had returned under Fudge's watch would make it much more difficult for him to keep his job. As a result, Fudge had issued a statement that denied the rumors that Voldemort had returned. He chalked up Cedric's death and the various other strange events over the past few years to rogue Death Eaters and other more plausible causes.

Things had been pretty stable since then. The only people who still believed that Voldemort had survived were Dumbledore and his friends, and Fudge did what he could to prevent them from getting the word out. It looked like he'd done everything he could to stabilize his government and keep himself in the Minister's office.

The good times had lasted until January, when the so-called Chosen One had the audacity to fly in front of a Muggle recording device and the footage was shown all over the world. Within a matter of weeks, the entire world knew about the wizards. The Statute of Secrecy had been irreparably breached, and Fudge suddenly found himself focusing on Muggle-wizard relations. He had to be extra careful about Voldemort references now: if the wizards were scared of the Dark Lord, imagine what the Muggles would be like!

He had done what he could to put the wizards and the Ministry of Magic in a good light. When the IRA terrorists had attacked the Canary Wharf district in February, he had sent the wizards out of the Ministry headquarters to go help the Muggles -- taking credit for as much of the operation as he could. His work had paid off, and he and many other wizards had been given awards by Queen Elizabeth.

He'd also jumped at the opportunity have the SAS join forces with the Aurors. Hooking up Nigel Marcellus with the wizards had probably been the only good thing Arthur Weasley had done for his government. It was ironic that a successful joint operation between the SAS and the wizards had been responsible for the article which had reported that Voldemort had survived.

Dawlish had briefed him about the attack shortly before it took place. He didn't think Voldemort would be there. However, a gathering of Death Eaters wasn't something to take lightly. Fudge had told him not to go through with the attack unless it was obvious that the Death Eaters were up to no good. Many former Death Eaters, such as Lucius Malfoy, had turned from their dark ways and become prominent members of society. Officially, Malfoy and his friends had been exonerated. As long as the Death Eaters were busy chatting about the weather and Quidditch teams, the Ministry had no legal right to drop that Muggle weapon on him.

The debriefing after the attack had had a completely different tone. Dawlish had been incredulous that Voldemort had been among the group. However, the attack had been a success, and Voldemort was now down for the count for good -- or at least in the position he was after 1981.

Fudge realized that he may be able to salvage this situation. The official Ministry of Magic position had been that Voldemort had been dead the whole time. As long as no one leaked the fact that Voldemort had appeared in the graveyard, the Ministry would keep mum and would never have to worry about covering up the Dark Lord's return again.

Judging from the latest issue of the Quibbler, someone had leaked information about the attack to Xenophilius Lovegood. The SAS operatives, realizing that the idea of an evil wizard would ruin Muggle-wizard relations, agreed to classify any knowledge about Voldemort or the Death Eaters,
passing the attack on the cemetery off as a gas main explosion. So the Muggles hadn't leaked it. Dawlish swore that he hadn't. None of the Death Eaters present in the graveyard had survived the attack, so he could rule them out.

This left Snape and Arthur Weasley. Both suspects were in a position to leak the information to Xenophilius. All Snape had to do was blurt it out in the Ravenclaw Potions class; Luna Lovegood's owl would do the rest. On the other hand, Weasley could have told his children, who would have inevitably told Hogwarts and launched Luna's owl.

He couldn't do anything about Snape without proof. Dolores Umbridge had told him that only two teachers were going to be fired, Sybill Trelawney and Rubeus Hagrid. Umbridge would inevitably have to be the one to dismiss Snape, and Snape had not given her any grounds for dismissal.

Weasley, on the other hand, was a different story. The man was one problem after another. He'd been caught with a flying car while in charge of the Department for the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts - - if there was a bigger scandal, he couldn't think of one. Now Fudge had reason to believe that one of his officials was leaking classified information to the Wizarding community.

Fudge looked out the window. What could he do to clean all this up?

He couldn't throw Weasley in Azkaban without proof. House arrest wouldn't work all that well either, as he'd inevitably wind up sharing the Burrow with Harry Potter. However, he could at least put him on probation, citing the flying car scandal. If the investigation concluded that Weasley had indeed been the source of the leak, then Fudge could fire him.

Fudge would also have to issue a statement to deny any reports that Voldemort had returned. He grinned: the Obliviators had been grumbling that they had lost their jobs with the Statute of Secrecy. Maybe he could let them loose on everyone outside Hogwarts who had received the Quibbler. All he needed to do was Taboo the word "Quibbler" and they'd take care of the rest.

Finally, he had to talk to Xenophilius Lovegood and convince him that his newspaper needed Ministry oversight, just like the Daily Prophet. That way, Lovegood wouldn't find himself in the position of publishing false rumors.

Fudge smiled. There may still be a way to salvage this situation.

To be continued...

------------------------
Update #89
------------
March 19, 1996
Street Residence
Richardson, TX
United States of America
Next PoV: Phillip Bullock
------------
Eric Street had thought that he would never be able to find another job. How ironic, he thought. Now he thought that he'd never be able to stop working.

His advertisement for Wizarding Services Corporation had worked. He had been elated -- and, he had to admit, somewhat surprised -- when the first call had come in.
The first customer, a Jessica Boardman from Dallas, had contacted her a couple of days after he had posted the advertisement. She had been quite skeptical at first. However, he had assured her that he was indeed a wizard and would be willing to demonstrate a spell for her if it made her feel more comfortable. Still skeptical, she had agreed to have him visit and prove that he was claimed.

He asked her what exactly she wanted. She explained that there was a man whom she had been trying to pick up for years. She had spoken to him several times and done what he could to befriend him. However, he had refused to go out with her. Desperate, she was hoping that Eric would cast a spell on him to make him go out with her.

Eric's eyes had shot up when she told him what she wanted. He wasn't a particular good potioneer. However, his wife was. He'd have to get his wife involved in the business, and she hadn't seemed all that keen on getting involved. She had a job, and she couldn't spend too much time working on potions for her husband. He had eventually managed to convince his wife to do this one potion for him -- it wouldn't be a good idea to chicken out at the first sign of a customer.

Second, Eric wasn't very comfortable with the idea of love potions. Although love potions had been the rage throughout the Big Thicket School of Sorcery for a couple of years, the simple fact was that they only helped for the short term. They caused the drinker to become temporarily infatuated with another person. It did not, however, ensure that the relationship would continue after a first date. His wife had lost her senior prom date due to a partner who had gotten cold feet after the love potion had worn off. Granted, that had been good for Eric, because it had forced his future wife to try to find another partner -- him, and the rest was history. He doubted that his wife's ex-boyfriend would have said the same.

After demonstrating his abilities by lifting a vase into the air with his want, he had explained to the customer that although he was more than willing to create a potion for her, he warned her that the potion would only ensure infatuation for a limited time. She had only a day or so to convince the partner to be with her for the rest of his life. Judging from his past experience, he told her that it was unlikely that she would be accomplish this. Given this knowledge, would she still be willing to go through with the operation? She said yes.

How much should he charge for this service? He had no idea. If he charged too much, he'd get a bad reputation. If he charged too little, not only would he not make much money but he would be encouraging the client to choose a short-term solution over a more beneficial, long-term solution simply because it was cheap. Eventually, he settled on $250. She accepted.

He was committed. So, he went back home and helped his wife make the potion. Once the potion was finished, he delivered it to the customer and told her he'd call her in a week to see how well it happened.

As it turned out, he didn't have to. She called him a couple of days later, explaining that the love potion had worked and that he'd completely fallen head over heels over her. He had agreed to a second date in a week. She admitted that she had no idea if the relationship would survive to a second date. However, she was absolutely convinced that the love potion had worked and that the Eric was in fact able to perform magic. Eric thanked her for her time and reminded her that it was up to her now to cement the relationship. He had helped open the door. It was up to her to step through it.

He had concluded with a simple request -- tell other people what he had done for her as an advertising service. She had agreed and hung up.
He woke up the next morning to find six messages on their answering machine. One was from one of his wife's friends. The rest were all people looking for love potions or other magical aids. One woman had asked for help for curing pneumonia. Another seemed to have an incurable backache and needed some help. Finally, there was a jilted lover who asked him to curse a woman who had dumped him.

He had called the jilted lover back immediately and told him bluntly that he did not curse people. He explained that it was against his principles to use magic for any harmful purposes. He recommended therapy and going to a dating service. The customer had screamed at him for a while, but he was adamant about this.

As far as the other people had gone, he explained that he'd have to get back to them as he needed to get in touch with a magical healer. Although he himself was somewhat familiar with healing scrapes and bruises with magic, backaches and pneumonia were too involved for an amateur like him to deal with. They, predictably, started complaining that he was a fraud and couldn't actually heal them. That irritated him to no end. He told them that he'd be willing to demonstrate that he was indeed capable of magic. Both customers had accepted the challenge. He then asked them where they were so he could talk to them. They gave them their locations.

Two Apparations later, they were convinced. They admitted that he knew what he was doing and agreed to wait a month for him to consult a healer. To compensate them for the delay, he reduced their fee to $750 for the incurable backache and $100 for the pneumonia consultation. He reminded them that hospitalization and rehabilitation for the conditions would be more expensive under Muggle health care plans, and they were more than willing to accept these terms.

Within a week, the phone was ringing off the hook. He had called upon no fewer than ten of his Wizarding friends in the greater Dallas area. In addition to his wife the potioneer, he'd recruited eight of his Big Thicket classmates, including his wife's ex-boyfriend (who hadn't even remembered her). Several of them were more than willing to join Wizarding Services Corporation if the company got off the ground.

He'd picked up $5000 in the span of one week, and the workload had just increased. That was a rate of $250,000 per year! It was far more than he had made in the Muggle world. It was more than enough for him to start hiring new specialists and make his wife thinking about quitting her job and joining him. And to think that he was deliberately keeping prices low!

If he got himself a monopoly, did more advertising, and started hiring more people, Wizarding Services Corporation would very likely get off the ground...and not just off the ground, into the ionosphere.

To be continued...

-------------------
Update #90
-------------
March 21, 1996
Bullock Residence
Near Riverside Cemetery
Little Hangleton
Great Britain
Next PoV: 91 -- Rubeus Hagrid
-------------
Phillip Bullock had thought that he had been acting a bit strange ever since he helped put out the fire
after the attack on the terrorists in the cemetery. He had dutifully covered it up, explaining that it had been due to a gas leak. However, he must have been affected by whatever nerve gas the terrorists had been working with. There was no way he'd be able to go to the doctor without revealing the true nature of the attack and compromising national security. All he could do was hope that things got better.

First there was the vision of the injured child he had experienced shortly before putting out the fire. Then there had been a sensation of pain, evidence of an injury which felt like a second nose on the back of his head, and his conscience talking to him. He had been a bit surprised by his desire to keep his fireman's hat on all the time. Eventually, when his conscience had realized that his wife would probably think he was acting strange, his conscience requested that he trade his fireman's hat for a turban-like bandage wrapped around his head. That would allow whatever injury he had suffered to heal. His wife had been a bit surprised, claiming that he hadn't been acting like he was injured. However, his conscience told him that concussions and nerve agents could have strange side effects and that it wouldn't hurt to be careful.

He had been more than surprised by the stuff his conscience had brought up. First was a nickname he didn't realize he'd ever had. Once he had put on his bandage for the first time and looked in the mirror, his conscience told him that he looked the spitting image of something which sounded like a Squirmy Squirrel ("Squerr-ell"). Since the bandage didn't make him look all that much like a squirrel, he concluded that the squirrel referred to an old memory which his conscience had dragged up. However, the nickname stuck, and soon his wife was calling him Squirrel.

Phillip also found that he seemed to have a deep-seated hatred for wizards with one or more Muggle parents. This didn't make all that much sense to him either. He knew, like most Britons at this point, that wizards lived among them. As far as he knew, the wizards were a great boon to the society. They had gone out of their way to rescue Muggle civilians after the Canary Wharf bombing. He had seen no evidence that wizards with Muggle parents tended to be evil.

His conscience had patiently explained the paradox. Wizards with Muggle parents tended to not learn their lessons very well and as a result were a threat to themselves and to the community. For the safety of all involved, they had to be eliminated, or at the very least prohibited from using magic. This explanation made sense to him.

Suddenly, everything became clear. Britain for Humans must have seen at least one wizard misbehave. Otherwise, why would they be so adamantly against magic? The obvious explanation was that the founder of Britain for Humans had had the misfortune of running into one of these Muggle-born wizards and had been injured when the wizard had tried to cast a spell. ' 

He had told his wife some of his misgivings. She couldn't understand how a nice man like him could suddenly turn against a certain segment of society. From what she had heard about the magical world -- supposedly she'd gone to a talk by Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge -- there was a school which taught wizards of all backgrounds and races how to wield their magic. Wouldn't the school be giving these mixed-background wizards lessons instead of their parents? Something here didn't make sense. Phillip's conscience, however, seemed to be convinced this was right. Something deep down inside just resonated with it.

He brushed off her suggestion that he go to a doctor and have them check his head. He said he'd go to a doctor only if things got really bad. He couldn't explain what had happened due to state security -- his conscience wouldn't let him -- but he told her that it hadn't been a gas leak and he was under orders not to reveal any information about what had happened. A visit to a doctor would prompt questions which could jeopardize national security.
Jennifer had then recommended that he go to a Wizarding doctor. She suspected that he had been ensorcelled by some spell -- how else would he have explained seeing things -- and needed professional help from a wizard. She suggested that he contact Cornelius Fudge or some other man in the Ministry of Magic and tell them to check him out, or at least point him to a Wizarding healer. She mentioned that there were wizards called Aurors who were good at chasing down bad wizards.

His conscience hadn't liked that at all for some reason. For some reason, he refused to go anywhere near the Ministry of Magic. He rationalized it by thinking that some members of the Ministry's staff may have been improperly trained wizards. His wife hadn't bought that at all, however, and had a quite reasonable argument: the Ministry wouldn't want to hire improperly trained wizards for government positions!

His conscience had brought up another repressed memory at this point. Supposedly deep down inside the Ministry of Magic there was a little ball with his name on it. He wanted to get his hands on it. That chilled Phillip to the bone and brought up an awful suspicion.

Could he have been abducted by these evil wizards as a child and had experiments performed on him? He'd heard stories about aliens abducting humans and carrying them away in their flying saucers. Presumably wizards could abduct them as well. That would explain his repressed memories coming to the surface now and his apparent distrust of inexperienced wizards. Everything made sense: he was abducted, was operated on by an inexperienced wizard, had his sanity placed in a ball somewhere in the Ministry of Magic, and sent home. The injury at the cemetery had brought these memories to the surface. Hell, this even explained his exposed conscience. Only a wizard could have done that.

Still, something didn't make sense. How was he supposed to get into the Ministry of Magic to retrieve this ball and restore his sanity? He didn't know. His conscience wasn't all that sure either. He guessed that would have to wait. For a few seconds, he couldn't understand why he didn't want to get into the Ministry of Magic even though the key to all the problems -- this ball -- was there. The thought passed quickly, though.

His wife, clearly concerned, had sent him to a psychiatrist. The shrink had reluctantly conceded that he could not rule out Phillip having been abducted by wizards. Granted, the shrink had told him that he knew of no Wizarding abductions. However, he had admitted that there could be classified sections of the Ministry which most wizards, let alone Muggles, did not have access to. Phillip soon resigned himself to trying to accept what had happened and do what he could to live with this new information. Oddly enough, his conscience had told him to go after the bad wizards. Phil had to manually override those thoughts with more appropriate ones which involved the rehabilitation of the untrained wizards. He didn't want people to die.

He had a long discussion with his wife and eventually managed to convince her that he'd be all right. She was a bit skeptical, but let him go about daily routine. He found, much to his pleasant surprise, that his conscience was actually quite wise and helpful. Perhaps some wizard had given him magical powers during the experimentation. This wisdom and knowledge almost made up for his strange new view of the world.

At the moment, he was outside watering his plants with a hose. He hadn't heard anything from his conscience for a while and couldn't tell if it was bad or good. However, he didn't need his conscience for this as he mindlessly moved the hose from plant to plant.

Suddenly, the water flow coming from the hose abated to a trickle. Damn, he thought. It must be
caught on something. He glared at the hose in frustration. In response, the hose just sat there menacingly, as if it were a large green snake.

Still staring at the hose, he yelled "Jennifer! Can you give me a hand here?"

At least that's what he thought he said. What came out of his mouth had actually been some kind of weird hissing sound.

He dropped the hose in shock. What the hell? He spun and let out another shriek as he saw a decent-size snake staring him in the face. This time, it was a live snake, not the hose. He didn't know of any venomous snakes in England. However, that didn't mean they didn't exist.

He slowly started to back away. And then he had his next shock.

The snake spoke to him.

"I heard your request, sir. What's the problem? How can I help? My name is Nachash. I must say, sir, I haven't spoken to a human for a while."

Phillip shook his head to clear it. The snake was still there, its head cocked at him with curiosity. Looking at the snake in trepidation, he screamed for his wife again.

All he got was another hiss and a response from the snake.

"Why, of course there's a snake here. That's me. I've come to help you. Is there anything I can do for you?"

For some reason, his conscience told him that this was expected. Those damn inexperienced wizards! Well, two could play at that game. If this was a practical joke, he was going to puncture it very quickly.

Still staring at the snake, he shook his head and pointed at the hose. "This hose is stuck. There's no water coming out of it. Can you check it out and see where the kink is?"

The snake turned and looked at the hose. "All right. Hold on a second."

With that, the snake slithered away. Phillip grunted a sigh of relief and turned back to his flower bed, where the water was still coming out in a trickle.

Jennifer still hadn't come out. Come to think of it, she hadn't even responded. What the hell was going on here? He'd called her twice! He didn't know why he'd heard a hiss, but according to his conscience everything was still fine.

The hose shifted a few millimeters. Seconds later, the water came spurting out. Phew, he thought. He turned back to the house and saw the snake coming back to him. Still no Jennifer.

The snake nodded its head to him. "I've found the kink and cleared it up. Is your hose working better now?"

He closed his eyes in disbelief. "Yes. Thank you."

The snake turned around and started slithering away. "Don't mention it. Don't hesitate to call me"
again if you need any help."

Second later, the snake had headed back into the bushes where it had come from. His conscience told him, once again, that everything was OK and this was expected. He did know one thing, however.

He wasn't telling anyone about this. One word of this and he'd be going to the funny farm.

He suddenly had an overpowering desire to get rid of all the alcohol in the house.

To be continued...
Update #91

March 22, 1996
[classified] Air Force Base
[classified]
Great Britain
Next PoV: 92 -- John Paul II

The Royal Air Force were among the queen's first and finest. They were very brave men who wouldn't be thrown by much. Unfortunately, at the rate things were going, they were on the verge of being thrown by Grawp. Literally.

Hagrid stamped his feet and screamed at his brother to stop. "Grawp, no! They're people, like the ones you saw at Hogwarts! Treat them right or we'll both get hurt! We're guests here! I thought you'd outgrown that!"

Grawp looked at him curiously and then turned to looked at the soldier in his hand. Slowly, gently, he put the soldier back on the ground and smiled. "Grawp sorry. Hagger, me want pat his head."

Hagrid rolled his eyes. "No, Grawp! Last time you tried to pat my head, you nearly knocked my brains out. Trust me, Grawp. You don't want to get these people mad at you! We're diplomats here, Grawp! Diplomats!"

Grawp fumbled over the long word. "Diplo-what?"

Hagrid had gotten some incredulous stares from the troops when he had first materialized on the tarmac. One of them had dropped his backpack and reached for his gun. Hagrid had had to wave his hands frantically in order to wave him off.

"Don't fire! I'm not your enemy!"

The soldier hadn't seemed convinced. "First I see Bigfoot. Then I hear him talking to me in plain English. Why do I not believe this?"

Hagrid had looked at his feet. They weren't unusually big for his size. He'd shrugged and held his hands out in resignation. "I'm sorry, sir, but my name isn't Bigfoot. My name is Rubeus Hagrid. You've been expecting me."

The soldier's eyebrows had risen nearly to his hairline. Slowly, he'd lowered his weapon. "YOU'RE Professor Hagrid?"

Hagrid had nodded. "Yes. I've been told that the American representative will meet me here to transport me and my brother to the United States. Is he here yet?"

The man hadn't answered immediately. Instead, he'd juar looked Hagrid up and down. "Crikey! I heard you were tall, but this is ridiculous! Just how tall ARE you, Professor?"
"Hagrid had shrugged. "Last time I checked, 337 centimeters. Eleven feet, one inch. I'm a half-giant. My brother is a full-blooded giant. I'll be bringing him along momentarily."

"Christ, you mean he's even taller than you? At the rate things are going, I'm going to need to dig out my old slingshot. How tall is he?"

"Five meters, give or take a couple of centimeters."

Another of the airmen had nearly choked on that. "Jesus! Ever heard of the square-cube law, Professor?"

Hagrid had frowned. "No. Should I have, sir?"

The first soldier had chuckled. "I didn't think so. Never mind, Professor. I sure as hell hope the Americans brought over a cargo plane or something like that. Otherwise, I have no idea how you two chaps are going to fit through the door. How many seats are you going to take up? Five? I guess we don't need to worry about choosing aisle or window."

Hagrid hadn't entirely gotten the last comment. However, it had been obvious what they were getting at. "Don't worry, sir. President Clinton is aware of our heights. He was a bit surprised at first, but he promised us he would send an appropriate vehicle. Now, if you would excuse me, I'll have to retrieve my brother. I should warn you, he's a bit sensitive about his height. He was abandoned by our mother because he was the runt of the litter. Most giants are taller than he is."

The soldiers rolled their eyes at that. One of them grunted: "Ground control, this is Foxtrot-35. We've collided with someone's head at 31,000 feet."

Bringing Grawp had nearly been a disaster. However, thanks to the wonders of automatic pilot, the American military cargo carrier managed to make it down the runway in one piece while the man at the controls was gawking at the two huge humanoids standing near the end of the runway.

Hagrid was fascinated by the obscure contraption the Muggles used to fly. Absently turning down Grawp's request to play with it, he walked over to get a closer look.

The machine was quite large, about five times the size of Grawp. It seemed to be made entirely of metal. It had large wheels which allowed it to roll on the ground. It looked like a long sausage with a tapered nose, a tail on the back, and two motionless wings with odd cylinders hanging under them. There were small holes in the side which looked like windows. It seemed a hell of a lot more complicated than a broom.

The only door he could see was maybe 75-100 centimeters wide. Hagrid suddenly understood why they had been concerned about getting him and his brother into the vehicle. Fortunately, he found that he wouldn't have to use the door. The back of the vehicle opened up and something which appeared to be a ramp extended itself from the vehicle. A man walked down the ramp and headed in their direction.

Hagrid recognized the man. It was Dr. Roach, the man who had interviewed him at Hogwarts earlier in the year.

Dr. Roach walked up to him and shook his head. "It's good to see you again, Professor Hagrid. I'm happy you've changed your mind and accepted our offer."
Hagrid nodded. "My pleasure, sir. Allow me to introduce my brother, Grawp. He's a full-blooded giant."

Roach looked at Grawp and did a double-take when he realized that Grawp was even taller than Hagrid was. "Good grief! How tall do you guys get?"

Hagrid smiled. "I'd say twenty-two, twenty-three feet. Seven meters. Grawp here is actually short for a giant. Our mother didn't want him because he was too short."

Roach winced. Turning to Grawp, he nodded slowly. "I'm sorry to hear that, Grawp."

Grawp nodded. "Hagger family now."

Roach frowned. "Hagger?"

Hagrid laughed. "That's what he calls me. He's never been able to get my name right. No offense, Grawp, but half-giants are generally more intelligent than full-blooded ones."

Roach looked at Grawp thoughtfully. "I must say, I --"

Hagrid glared at him. "No you don't, Dr. Roach. You're not putting him in the Zoo. He's my brother, and he lives with me."

Roach shrugged. "As you wish. However, I must warn you that there aren't many Muggle houses fit for people of your height. If I were you, I'd recommend renting out a two-car garage somewhere."

Hagrid nodded. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it, Dr. Roach."

"Sounds like a plan, Professor. Are you thinking of bringing any other creatures to help start off our Zoo?"

Hagrid didn't say anything. He just stared at Roach until Roach realized his faux pas.

"Creatures other than Deirdre, I mean."

Hagrid relaxed and smiled. "Yup. I'll have to run a few of them by you, but we've got lots of stuff in the forest near Hogwarts. We've got giant spiders, a few Blast-Ended Skrewts, a hippogriff, a dragon left over from the Triwizard Tournament. We've got a few centaurs, but they're off limits as they're sentient beings like me, you, and Grawp."

Roach stared at them. "You're kidding. Are these animals tame?"

Hagrid shook his head. "Not really. However, they'll listen to me, which should be good enough. I think I can get a tame dragon for you -- his name is Norbert, and he imprinted on me when he hatched. That was about four years ago, though. Hopefully he'll remember me."

Roach winced, and one of the soldiers muttered something about a place called Jurassic Park. "Uh...Professor, although I'm convinced those animals are fine creatures, may I recommend creatures which are easier to control and will not eat the patrons?"

Hagrid sighed. He figured it would come to this. Well, it had been worth a try. "That would be
doable, Dr. Roach. I'll start with some Class X and XX creatures. If they fit well at the zoo, we'll start bringing over the bigger animals. Rest assured, Doctor, I'll have creatures for you."

Roach smiled. "Sounds reasonable. Are they native to the United States?"

Hagrid thought for a moment. "I'm not sure. I wouldn't be surprised if they are, though. Why do you ask?"

"It's because we don't want them getting free and wrecking the food chain here. We've got enough problems with invasive species as is."

Hagrid nodded. "This makes sense. You give me a list of species, and I'll tell you what I'll be able to provide."

"Have they had rabies shots?"

Hagrid stared at him and chuckled. "These magical creatures don't need rabies shots."

Roach smiled. "Really? That's...intriguing. At any rate, here's the plan. I'll bring you and Grawp over and introduce you to the staff. Once we've figured out which animals you can bring, you can start sending them over. Hopefully you'll be up to speed when you take office on April 1st."

Hagrid nodded. "Sounds all right with me, Dr. Roach."

Roach nodded. "Then let's get onto the plane and head off. Have you ever seen a plane before?"

"No, Dr. Roach. I must say, it's an intriguing contraption. Is there anything I can do to help speed the journey?"

"It is indeed an intriguing contraption. However, may I recommend that you not cast magical spells while in the vehicle? They may make the airplane stop working. If that happens, we're going to make a pretty big splash when we fall into the Atlantic."

Hagrid grinned. "Don't worry about it, Doctor. Judging from the splashes Grawp and I will make, no one will notice yours."

Even Roach laughed at that. "I can't agree with you more, Professor Hagrid. Now, shall we?"

To be continued...

-------------

Update #92
-------------
March 23, 1996
Papal Private Chambers
The Vatican
Next PoV: 93 -- Xenophilius Lovegood
-------------
Pope John Paul II looked over tomorrow's sermon. He thought it was a good one. Once again, he was advocating that wizards all over the world use their gifts for the betterment of mankind. Now that he was free to use his magic in public, he had tried to set a precedent for them to follow.
First, he had taken advantage of the copious amount of space available in St. Peter's Basilica and conjured into existence a reflecting pool and several fountains conducive to meditation and introspection. He had also gone into the vaults and Geminioed several Christian relics and artifacts so that the copies can be viewed by pilgrims from all denominations.

His Holiness chuckled as he cast the spell to identify the relics. Of the 500-or-so objects in the vault, the spell claimed that only 162 were authentic. The pope didn't know how the spell did what it did, but he knew that it worked.

The 162 authentic relics were copied and placed in the courtyard. The 338 which were forgeries were placed in storage, away from the public eye. The pope realized that although HE knew they were forgeries, the ordinary people didn't and likely believed in them. Debunking something which was the focus of their faith would just disappoint and offend them.

All in all, reaction to his admission that he was a wizard was mixed. Many Catholics were happy that the man chosen to serve as the intermediary between them and God did indeed have traits which appeared supernatural. On the other hand, he didn't even want to think about the lunatic fridge, such as that man from America for Humans who claimed that he was the False Prophet. The pope rolled his eyes just thinking about it. How could he be the False Prophet? He spent his life working for the greater good. Beside, his name wasn't Peter. Wasn't the last pope, the evil one, suppose to be named Petrus Romanus?

Disturbingly, there were rumors that a segment of the Catholic population were thinking of divorcing themselves from Rome and their "devil-empowered" leader. He had explained that not all popes had been wizards: on the average, maybe 10% had been practicing wizards. Furthermore, the Church had prospered under many of the Wizarding popes, and they had done so to this point under John Paul II's reign. The point was that the disgruntled sheep had no reason to be afraid of either wizards or popes. However, it became evident that he was only preaching to the choir. The new movement, supposedly called New Catholicism, had sucked up maybe 10-15% of the world population. It would still use Catholic rites and liturgy. However, the supreme authority would rest in the highest-ranking Church official (possibly a cardinal) who was a Muggle.

He had been tempted to excommunicate the priests who had initiated the movement. However, he knew what had happened the last time a major schism took place: the two leaders had excommunicated themselves and the Greek Orthodox Church had been born. He didn't want another schism. He contemplated retirement -- after all, he was getting up there in age -- but figured it was not up to him to determine how long he was to stay in office. It was up to God. He was God's steward on earth, and as a result it was up to Him to tell his servant to stay or go. Hopefully he could stipulate in his will that his successor be a Muggle and thwart the movement before it got off the ground. How many years did he have left? Five? Ten?

His musings were cut short by a knock on the door. He frowned: he hadn't been expecting any guests. He turned and opened the door. It was one of his assistants, who bowed to him deeply.

"Your Holiness, I apologize for the interruption. However, there are two people here who would like to see you."

The pope shook his head. "I'm sorry, Deacon. I'm a bit preoccupied today. Tell them to come back later or send them to one of the cardinals."

The assistant shook his head. "I'm not sure that's a good idea. You see, these people are rather...important."
The pope's eyebrows shot up. Important people? What was going on? Aloud: "Really? Who are they?"

The assistant response was short and to the point. "The prophet Samuel and his interpreter, Your Holiness."

His Holiness's jaw dropped. "Samuel? Here?"

"Yes, Holiness. They're in the main audience chamber. Henri the guard nearly fell over when Samuel materialized in front of him. Amr had to help him up and calm him down."

"Amr?"

"Samuel's interpreter, Holiness. He's from Algeria."

John Paul looked out the window, where the sun was shining brightly. "That's a bit surprising, David. I wouldn't expect Samuel to be working on a Saturday afternoon."

The assistant grinned. "My thought as well. However, they arrived Friday just before sundown and have been holed up in a hotel for the weekend. They -- well, the interpreter -- walked over."

The pope grunted. Samuel seemed to be a bit more open-minded than he'd thought. This could be interesting. "Send them in. I'll meet them in the main audience chamber."

The assistant nodded and left. The pope followed him out the door, heded to the main refreshment area. After a few minutes, he returned with two people. One was a tall dark-skinned man with a long beard and a robe. He looked quite saintly and inclined his head to the pope with respect. He seemed like a spiritual leader, and could easily have been mistaken for someone out of the Bible.

The fact that his comrade was a glowing spirit debunked that theory in a heartbeat. Samuel was maybe 5'4" -- the pope had to remember that people were shorter in those days -- and quite thin. Apparently he'd been a bit of an ascetic. He was bald and had a short beard and mustache. He looked to be somewhere in his early sixties, which would have been very old in those days.

Something seemed out of place for a moment. Suddenly, John Paul realized what it was. It was a quote from the book of I Samuel. The quote claimed that Hannah, Samuel's mother, had taken a vow that Samuel would never let a razor touch his face.

Judging from what he saw of Samuel, the man had clearly shaved. Very interesting, he thought. Either the Bible was wrong or Samuel wasn't who he said he was. He hoped for the later, but suspected the former. The man was clearly a ghost, and he looked Semitic. He was dressed in very old-fashioned robes, and he was much too short to be a modern adult male. He received another surprise when Samuel began speaking. The pope understood a little about linguistics and understood how languages could change over time. Although he couldn't get most of what the prophet was saying, the language sounded like a very old version of Hebrew or Arabic -- complete with the ghayin in Hebrew terms.

Samuel nodded to the interpreter, and the tall man began to speak. "Holiness, my colleague here is the prophet Samuel from the Old Testament. He would like to know if you are the leader of the sect of the Children of Israel known as the Christians. I'd recommend agreeing, since you're the closest they have."
The Pope nodded. "There are several different strands of Christianity now, as you know. However, as the Pope, I'm in charge of the original. Tell him yes."

The Pope looked at the ghost after the discussion with the interpreter. It was obvious that Samuel -- or whoever he was -- hadn't understood a thing they'd said, or at least hadn't had any reaction to it. Someone not knowing English in a modern environment? Very unlikely. This increased the odds that the man was in fact Samuel.

The interpreter turned to the ghost and spoke a little more. Samuel nodded, turned to the pope, and started talking again.

"Sir, I've come on an important mission, important enough to feel like it's worth bending the rules on coming on the Sabbath. I've discovered that there are three subgroups of people among the Children of Israel and that they've been fighting among each other a lot. These groups are the Christians, Jews, and Muslims. Is that correct?"

The pope nodded. "Yes, sir. That is correct, much as I regret to admit it."

Samuel frowned. "If that's the case, I want you to tell everyone to stop fighting. We all worship the same God. Children of Israel who fight amongst themselves will be excommunicated. I'll handle it myself if necessary."

John Paul whistled silently to himself. He and Samuel were in absolute agreement here. Perhaps people will listen to Samuel as a famous biblical hero. Aloud: "I will do so, sir. I believe I've actually made great strides in reconciling the faiths. However, I still think there's a lot of work to be done."

Samuel grunted something in response. The interpreter winced before continuing. "Well, work harder at it. You can persecute many of the unrepentant idol worshipers as you want. However, the Children of Israel are off limits."

The idol worshiper comment caught John Paul completely off guard. It took him a second to understand why. Samuel had grown up in a world where he and the rest of the prophets were trying to introduce the worship of the One God into a world with many Canaanite deities like Moloch and Baal. Most of the prophets would have naturally had strong biases and prejudices against the idolatrous cults. He hoped Samuel never found out about the Buddhists and Hindus with their little statues and idols.

The pope drew a deep breath and turned to the interpreter. Speaking in English, so that the prophet couldn't understand it, he said: "Let me guess. He thinks people like Buddhists are the descendants of the people who worshiped Asherah. He sees an idol and goes berserk."

The interpreter closed his eyes and nodded, a troubled look on his face. "That's what I'm thinking. God has done us a favor here by not giving Samuel access to those faiths yet. We don't want another divinely-ordained crusade."

The pope thought about this. He turned to Samuel and said. "I understand where you're coming from. However, I would prefer convincing the idol worshipers to following the Noachide laws instead of persecuting them. Would that be acceptable?"

Samuel's eyebrows shot up and he nodded. "By all means. I didn't think they'd be amenable to those. If you can pull that off, perfect."
The pope breathed a sigh of relief. He'd dodged a bullet there. "I will, sir. Thank you for your suggestion. Rest assured, I'll do what I can."

Samuel nodded. "That's all I can ask for. In the meantime, I will leave you to your devotions. Thank you for your time. You are truly a man of God. I see that He did the right thing by giving you His gift of wizardry. Once the Sabbath is over, you can show me around this facility here. I take it that this is your version of the Temple in Jerusalem?"

The pope nodded. "Yes. Is it acceptable to you?"

Samuel thought about this for a moment. "I take it that people in this area will find it most difficult to get to Jerusalem and they would likely need a substitute Temple headed by a duly authorized representative of the Faith?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Keep doing what you're doing. I've made the man in charge of the primary facility on the Temple Mount the Kohen Gadol. He'll be your supervisor. You should take his words into consideration when you minister to your people. May God bless you and keep you."

With that, Samuel headed for the door, followed by his interpreter. Soon, he and the assistant were once again alone in the office.

The two men looked at each other. Finally, the pope broke the silence.

"An imam ordained as the Kohen Gadol, and we're supposed to follow him. Who'd have thought of THAT?"

To be continued...

-------------
Update #93
-------------
March 24, 1996
St. Catchpole's Roman Catholic Church
Ottery St. Catchpole
England
Next PoV: 94 -- Samuel
-------------
Xenophilius Lovegood sat in the pew with rest of the parishioners, listening to the priest's sermon. He may have had strange beliefs about the way the world worked, but that didn't prevent him from being a religious man. He still tried to go to church on most Sundays. He often wondered whether Luna would continue to follow in his footsteps. He still loved her, though, and would do anything to make sure she was safe.

Until recently, most of the congregation didn't realize that St. Catchpole had actually been a wizard. Catchpole -- then known as Catpolus -- had been caught practicing Christianity in Rome during the time of Nero. This had inevitably led to his arrest and eventual death in the Colosseum at the hands of an unknown gladiator. From what he knew of Catolpus's legend among the Wizarding community, the saint had known immediately that his life was forfeit as soon as his opponent's sword pinned him to the floor of the arena. Nero's thumb had turned up, not unexpectedly, and the opponent had raised is weapon to deliver the coup de grace.
At this point Catpolus could have used magic to escape from this predicament. The Statute of Secrecy was not as rigidly enforced in those days as it was today -- well, had been as of two months ago. Wizards and healers still walked the community, and it was not unheard of for wizards to fall back on magic in life-threatening situations. However, Catpolus had realized one thing. Had he used magic to save his life, he would be able to do so. However, there would have been a price: Christianity would inevitably have been linked to wizards in the eyes of the Romans. This would perform two grave injustices: (a) extend Nero's persecution to the wizards, and (b) imply the heresy that magic, not God, bolstered the Christian faith. As a result, he had allowed himself to be martyred to save both of his communities.

The first church of St. Catchpole had been raised in the 11th century. It had been a flourishing, albeit small, community which included several wizards. When Henry VIII took over and broke with Rome, the congregation all but disbanded. It eventually reformed in 1962 and had been going strong ever since.

Xeno had waited for several weeks, gauging the opinions of the community, before telling his fellow worshipers that he was in fact a wizard and that he attributed his gift to the grace of God. Most of the people had been intrigued by his abilities. Some were jealous, to which he had responded that they likely had abilities he didn't have and as a result the two of them were even.

All in all, the reaction had gone in his favor. He had expected that, however. After all, they were all nominally subservient to the Pope, and the Pope had come out as a wizard!

His Wizarding abilities weren't needed here, however, as all humans were equal in the eyes of the Almighty. He had his wand with him, just out of habit. However, he had no intention of using magic during the service. He had actually turned down a request by the priest to use magic to lighten things up a bit, saying that magical interference would be inappropriate.

The congregation had just finished a set of psalms when he heard a commotion outside the building. One of the staff members went outside to investigate. Xeno heard voices raised outside. It seemed like people were arguing. He put it out of his mind, however. Unless people began getting really unruly, it wasn't right to get involved.

A few minutes later, he heard a scream. Heads turned across the entire congregation. Xeno watched in horror the staff member's body slumped back through the doorway. There was a bloody bruise on his head. Behind him, outside the building, stood a mob of no fewer than twenty people armed with clubs, pitchforks, and other weapons.

The two sets of people stared at each other for a moment. Finally, one of the ruffians shattered the silence with a loud cry:

"Destroy the workshop of the False Prophet Pope! BRITAIN FOR HUMANS!"

With that, the attackers barged through the door and headed into the room. One of them pulled out a gun.

Shit, Xeno thought. He pulled out his wand. If there was a time for him to use magic in church, it was now. It sounded like Britain for Humans had been listening to Pastor Phelps's sermon after the Kansas preacher had joined America for Humans. Phelps had argued that the wizards were the tools of the devil and that the Pope was the False Prophet. One of the America for Humans chapters had attacked a Catholic church in Kentucky the previous week and had been beaten back. That had
appeared to have triggered a copycat attack by their British cousins.

Xeno hated to think how they'd react if they ever found out about Voldemort. If the Pope was the False Prophet, then Voldemort would have to be the Antichrist. Hopefully that was a prophecy that wouldn't come true -- after all, Voldemort had been killed. But as he himself had admitted, he couldn't be certain that You-Know-Who stay dead. And coming back from incapacitation was something the Antichrist was supposed to be famous for.

First things first, however. He needed to deal with this attack. The priest simultaneously turned to him, waved his hand as if it had a wand in it, and yelled, "XENO!"

Xeno stood up and looked around at the mob. Casting a spell would serve two purposes. First, it would help defend the congregants. Second, it would divert all the attackers' attention to him. He'd have to Obliviate the lot of them when this was over -- he couldn't allow an attack by a wizard to justify their beliefs. But first things first. He turned to the man with the gun, who was getting ready to fire at the priest.

"Expelliarmus!"

The gun went flying into the air, startling the attacker. Leaping onto the stage to get a better view, he started casting Disarmament Spells on each of the attackers. A decent arsenal began to accumulate next to the pulpit: clubs, bats, chains, and so forth. This still left a good seven or eight attackers. One of them had a torch in his hand, and another was trying to open a can of gasoline. That was the obvious next threat. Figuring that the Disarmament Spell wouldn't think of a torch as a weapon, he cast the Accio spell and caught the torch flying through the air.

By this point, the attackers had gotten the point. Slowly but surely, they began retreating out the door. Furious, Xeno cast a spell of protection about himself and raced after them. He was only half done: the church had been saved, but he still had to Obliviate the attackers before they got away to spread the news!

He screeched to a halt after maybe ten feet. There were frightened people milling around all over the room, and it took him a while to make it out of the church. By the time he was out the door, most of the attackers had fled.

Double shit, he thought. He had to tell the Ministry. Ignoring the cheers of the people in the church, he Apparated to the Ministry, went to the the Minister's secretary, and asked to see Cornelius Fudge. The Minister let him in immediately.

Fudge reacted about as Xeno would have expected. He Taboo'ed the name of the church for all locations outside it and sent Obliviators out en masse to deal with the fallout. Xeno thanked him and was about to leave when Fudge held up his hand and told him to stay.

Xeno stopped, surprised. "Is there something else, sir?"

Fudge smiled. "Yes, Mr. Lovegood. Would you be so good as to tell me how you learned about Voldemort's death?"

Xeno shrugged. "I got an owl from Luna. Why? Is that a problem?"

Fudge nodded slowly. "The official Ministry of Magic position is that Voldemort never returned. We didn't want people to think he came back. That would alarm the populace."
Xeno stared at him. "Why does it matter now? He's dead! There may have been a leak for a while, but it's gone now."

Fudge hesitated for a minute. "I suppose you're right. How did Luna find out about it though?"

Xeno shrugged. "I'd assume it was Snape or Ron Weasley. Ron's father and Snape both witnessed the attack."

Fudge jotted the information down on a piece of parchment. "Thank you for that information -- it will help with the investigation. You see, the information that Voldemort had returned had been classified, and as you can tell someone spilled the beans. You may want to consider having the Quibbler adopt Ministry of Magic supervision. That way, leaks like this won't happen."

Xeno grunted. "I'm sorry to hear that, Minister. I'll be more careful in the future."

"You do that, Mr. Lovegood. Inform the people in the church that each witness will receive 50 pounds in compensation for the trauma they suffered in the attack. They will receive 150 additional pounds if they refuse to tell anyone that the attackers were hexed. We don't want stories of wizard attacks on Muggles to spread."

Xeno smiled, surprised. "Thank you very much, Minister Fudge. They'll appreciate that."

Fudge nodded. "I'm sure they will. Dismissed."

To be continued...

Update #94
------------
March 24, 1996
St. Peter's Square
The Vatican
Next PoV: 95 -- Damodharan Dilm

Less than two months had gone by, and Samuel still had trouble understanding the new world he found himself in. He made it a point to return from Sheol every so often that he wouldn't be caught off guard again.

He had died early in the reign of King Saul, at the age of 63. He had been trying to convince the people that a king wasn't necessarily in their best interests. Unfortunately, everyone had been clamoring for a central authority so they can fend off the Philistines with their iron weapons. The fact that the Philistines had managed to hire a mercenary giant named Goliath didn't help much. So, he had crowned Saul and hoped for the best.

Of course, Saul had been an absolute disaster. Samuel had figured that a man trained as a warlord had no idea how to run a country. He was right. Granted, he'd done what he could to suppress pagan customs. However, he'd been rather ineffective, particularly since he had had a few idol worshipers in his court.

And as if that hadn't been bad enough, the man had actually gone to a Philistine wizard in disguise to ask Samuel's ghost for help. He'd told the Israelite wizards to leave him alone after he died and let
him see how the young Israelite kingdom worked out -- and whether he'd feel like coming back a
few hundred years later and say "I TOLD YOU SO!". The Witch of Endor had nagged him enough
to get him to show up. He made up a prophecy saying Saul would lose the throne, which shut up the
whining monarch rather quickly. The placebo effect took care of the rest.

Samuel's fears had been justified. David and Solomon proved to be relatively strong kings. However,
they hadn't been particularly humble. It wasn't out of character for them to send people they didn't
like off to the front lines. As if that weren't bad enough they had nearly bankrupted the treasury to
plan and build the Temple. Samuel had the distinct impression that God wasn't particularly happy
that His new temple was a wee bit over the top and built by hordes of forced laborers in squalid
working conditions. He was reminded of the Israelite legends of the people building pyramids in
Egypt for the pharaoh. The peasantry was overburdened with taxes and crying out for help.

David, however, had been a master of PR. He kept on concocting stories about him being a world-
class lutist, poet, God-fearing man, and stuff like that. He took credit for the slaying of Goliath even
though he had not been the champion who had actually killed the Philistine warrior -- it had been a
wizard who had been adept at killing giants. From what he'd been told of the history of the past
thousand years, the old fox had actually managed to fool the historians. Samuel made a mental note
to rectify that at some point. These people deserved to know the truth.

God hadn't been fooled, however, and His revenge came soon enough. Squabbles over the
succession split the kingdom in two, and a succession of weak rulers had eliminated both little
princedoms within four hundred years. The last time Samuel had visited the world, he had watched
as Jerusalem fell to a foreign army and Solomon's temple was destroyed. He remember mixed
feelings: sadness for the people and for the destruction of the holiest site in Israel, but a sense that the
aristocracy had deserved it, having brought it on themselves by their unfair rule.

Jerusalem had fallen to an army wielding swords, bows, and the occasional iron spear. From what
the people of the present were telling him, that was about 2500 years ago.

Boy, had things changed.

It was now obvious that the Children of Israel were the most powerful ethnic group in the world
(which, oddly enough, had been found to be ROUND!). Over half the population worshiped the
God of Abraham. Samuel had been thankful for that -- the Israelites must have cleaned up their act
after their expulsion from Jerusalem. There was, however, the minor problem that the two largest
factions, the Christians and Muslims, kept on claiming that the other two factions weren't worshiping
God the right way. There were people in each faction who refused to marry people of the other
factions because they didn't belong to the right faith.

What a mess! Samuel had learned his lessons well, but it appeared that some of these people hadn't.
God didn't have a name or form for a reason: He was supposed to be entirely abstract. The purpose
of spirituality was to allow the people to get in touch with the divine and give them a sense of
purpose and a wider, more generous view of the world. Trying to visualize Him in any concrete form
limited what He could represent -- hence, idols were discouraged. The rituals which had been
handed down from Moses's time made sense for the society at the time, as the group which had left
Egypt had been accustomed to animal sacrifices and was not mature enough to understand the idea
of an abstract deity. What people didn't realize was the fact that the rituals were not an end in itself,
only a means to an end. They were designed to help the people of the Exodus connect with the
divine. Any personal ritual which produced the desired end result was all right.

The two large factions seemed to be competing in trying to win the hearts of the world. Samuel
groaned to himself. He could understand proselytizing to the pagans, but not to other monotheists! The third, smaller faction, the one which seemed to be closest to the way the Israelites had practiced during Samuel's lifetime, had been subjected to persecution and evangelization from the two larger factions. A war about fifty years earlier had eradicated most of its European adherents. However, they were still around.

Samuel looked around the plaza as the leader of the Christians, John Paul (why did he have two names?), described the sights. John Paul was actually a wizard, and he seemed to have the right idea when it came to spirituality. Samuel kicked himself for not making this man the Kohen Gadol. He then kicked himself for even thinking of anointed this man Kohen Gadol without first consulting the man who was leading the third, smaller faction -- the Jews.

At the moment, John Paul was pointing out the reflecting pool. "There's the reflecting pool, sir. I figured that would be a good spot for meditation and contemplation. You can see two nuns sitting there."

Samuel looked at the two women, puzzled.

"Nuns? Are they related to Joshua?"

The pope smirked at that. "No, sir. They're women from an order who have taken ascetic vows. There are two orders, one for men and one for women. Men who join are called monks. The vows usually involve celibacy, humility, and poverty."

Samuel thought for a moment. "Sounds like a distant descendant of the Nazirite custom."

"Somewhat, sir. However, these women much of their time in prayer and contemplation, trying to feel closer to God. That sounds like the type of stuff you were discussing earlier."

Samuel nodded. "I'm impressed, John Paul. That's personal spirituality through meditation. That's the type of stuff I was hoping for but couldn't hammer into the heads of those Bronze Age warriors who couldn't see past the end of their spears. I see society has changed."

"Indeed it has, sir. Now, over here, we've got a fountain. I conjured it up a couple of weeks ago. It shows scenes from the life of Jesus and has a water supply which won't run out."

Samuel looked at the fountain. "Quite impressive. Jesus was one of the prophets whose authenticity the three factions disagree on?"

"Yes. I told you about his career. He began his ministry in his thirties about a millennium after your death. He was very popular. Unfortunately, the authorities were a bit nervous about him and as a result he was crucified by the Romans around AD 30. A man named Saul of Tarsus spread his teachings throughout the known world. This was the origin of our faction, as you call it."

Samuel shook his head. "That story is all too familiar, John Paul. Saul killed my teacher Tiqwael because he wouldn't anoint Saul king."

John Paul stopped in his tracks. "Who?"

"Tiqwael, John Paul. Isn't he in the history books with David and Saul? I haven't been able to read much of them yet due to the language and alphabet barriers."
John shook his head. "No, sir. He isn't. Sounds like someone wanted him silenced. And I bet I can guess who."

Samuel nodded. "Sounds like something Saul would do. You know you're an authentic prophet when the authorities try to kill you. That happened to Tiqwael, it happened to Moses, it happened to Muhammed, and it sounds like it happened to this man as well. May curses fall upon everyone who murders a prophet."

The pope looked at him quizzically for a second. Suddenly, Samuel realized what had happened. "No, John Paul. I died of old age, surrounded by my sister and two nieces. I --"

Samuel's voice broke off as he stared into the distance and frowned. Standing off in an alcove was something which looked very out of place in this temple.

It was an idol. It appeared to be showing a man being executed on a cross. The man appeared to be suffering. The letters INRI were visible above the man's head.

Samuel gritted his teeth and pointed. "John Paul, why is there an idol in the temple?"

John Paul frowned and turned to look at the idol. He turned back to Samuel with a troubled look on his face.

"That is a statue commemorating the execution of Jesus. It is there only as focus for concentration and faith. It inspires people who honor Jesus to do great things. It is not used in religious services."

Samuel frowned became troubled. "I see where you're going. It's not actually an idol because it's used for spiritual growth and not actual worship?"

"Yes."

Samuel thought for a minute and shook his head. "Get rid of it."

John Paul's eyebrows shot up. "Why? It isn't an idol."

Samuel sighed. "You know that. I know that. However, not everyone is as spiritually advanced as the two of us are. It is quite possible that someone might see someone praying in front of the statue and conclude that the Faith endorses idol worship. We've already got enough trouble with the three factions arguing with each other. We don't want any more."

John Paul hesitated for a moment. "Sir, are you sure about this? It's a relic and a popular pilgrimage site."

Samuel nodded. "Take it inside and place it in an alcove where only one person can access it at a time. That way, no one will start thinking that we endorse idolatriy". John Paul stammered for a second and said that he'd do what he could.

Samuel nodded and continued his trip. It looked like he had a lot of work to do. However, it sounded like people were finally ready to listen.

To be continued...

-------------

Update #95
Lord Voldemort was dead.

Damodharan Dilmi couldn't believe it. How can the most powerful wizard the world had ever seen be killed -- and by Muggles, for that matter? Wizards had powers the Muggles couldn't match! Wizards were supposed to be in charge, not the other way around!

Reports were still coming in. However, from what he had heard, one of Voldemort's top aides had defected and betrayed the location of a secret Death Eater meeting to the British Secret Service. The Secret Service had then dropped a half-ton bomb on the group of wizards less than ten minutes after the scheduled start of the meeting.

Virtually all of the British Death Eaters had been killed in the blast, and the traitorous Potions master had been given the Order of Merlin, First Class, for his role in the attack. Supposedly only three British Death Eaters were confirmed to have survived: Lucius Malfoy, Rodolphus Lestrange, and someone named Peter Pettigrew whom most people thought had been long dead. Two more Death Eaters, Igor Karkaroff and Sirius Black, were also supposedly in England somewhere and on the run.

Voldemort hated Severus Snape with a passion. He vowed revenge, and he knew that he had to make sure that Snape suffered an excruciating fate after he had been forced to witness Dilmi's takeover of the world.

But how would Dilmi get started on this great endeavor? He had a bunch of wizards at his command, most of whom were in line with his ideals. However, he didn't think that would be enough. To really cause mass destruction, he needed Muggle technology and people brave enough to use it. In short, he needed a terrorist cell which would be willing to have wizards in their midst.

He had been elated when he heard about the offer from al-Qaeda. He was already a Muslim, albeit a non-practicing one. As a result, he was guaranteed a reward from al-Qaeda regardless of whether he in fact actually came out as a wizard. He could only dream about what he would be able to accomplish if his band of wizards joined up with al-Qaeda and started combining magic with terrorism. He prayed that Allah allow his first attack to be against Britain, specifically against Severus Snape and the British Secret Service.

He had contacted his local al-Qaeda office in Colombo shortly after the assault on the Death Eater meeting. The recruiter had been skeptical at first that he was in fact a wizard. Dilmi had shrugged that off, pointed his wand at the recruiter's assistant, and turned him into a camel. He had then grinned and then climbed onto the camel's back. The demonstration had been more than enough to convince the recruiter that he meant business. He had then dismounted and transformed the assistant back into a human being.

The assistant had run off in terror. Dilmi had looked at the recruiter and told him that the assistant was not fit for command. The recruiter agreed and jotted down orders to demote the Transfigured man.
He had expected word of his arrival to spread rapidly, and he wasn't disappointed. Less than two days after his arrival in Colombo, he had received a phone call from a Dr. Faisal, an al-Qaeda officer in Pakistan. Faisal had told him that he had made it through the first round of screening and was welcome to attend training at Recruitment Center 'Alif, in Pakistan. Faisal said that Dilmi was welcome to bring any other wizards whom Dilmi believed were capable of the strict, disciplined life of an al-Qaeda operative.

Dilmi had relayed the message back to his friends on the Indian subcontinent. Eight of them were willing to join him in the fight to avenge their fallen leader. He then gave them the coordinates of Recruitment Center 'Alif and told them to Apparate over at exactly 1500Z.

The wizards' attempt at theatre nearly got them all killed. The last wizard had scarcely materialized when Dilmi noticed that virtually all of the agents in the camp were pointing AK-47's at them. Dilmi looked on approvingly. The Muggle agents were well-trained. This should work well.

He brought out his wand and cast a spell protecting himself and his colleagues from flying projectiles. He then introduced himself as Dilmi the Wizard and told the shocked al-Qaeda operatives that they had come at the invitation of Dr. Faisal. Some of the operatives lowered their guns. However, a couple of them kept a wary eye on the wizards. One of them asked Dilmi if he could prove that he was in fact a wizard.

Dilmi rolled his eyes. "We just materialized here, Agent. I doubt you Muggles can do that."

The agent didn't blink. "That could be an illusion, or we could have just overlooked your arrival."

Dilmi snorted. "You seem well trained, gentlemen. I don't see how you can overlook nine people appearing out of nowhere."

The agent didn't buy it. "I want more proof."

Dilmi smiled and folded his arms across his chest. "Fine. Shoot me. I've cast a spell which will prevent the bullets from hitting me. That will prove that we're wizards."

The agent thought about it and looked at the gun. Dilmi could see what he was thinking. He didn't want to kill someone who had been invited by Dr. Faisal. Well, Dilmi could work around that.

He brought his wand out and yelled, "Accio AK-47". The agent squealed as the gun suddenly launched itself out of his hand and flew over to Dilmi's. The Death Eater caught it and handed it, butt-first, back to the stunned operative. Meanwhile, the other eight wizards chuckled at the prank.

"There, Agent. Is that proof for you? All of us are wizards and we're willing to work for al-Qaeda. Now, let's try this again. I'm Dilmi the Wizard, and the nine of us have been invited by Dr. Faisal to join this camp and train with al-Qaeda. Where is Dr. Faisal."

A voice from behind them answered. "I'm Dr. Faisal. Allah take me, I don't think I've ever seen anything like that. Was that a complex spell, Mr. Dilmi?"

"Wizard Dilmi, if you don't mind. And no, it is a simple spell. First-year trainees can perform a spell like that."

Dr. Faisal's eyes widened. "You nine must be extremely powerful. Allah has sent you to us in our
time of need. Are you familiar with the bylaws of the group?"

Dilmi nodded. "Yes, we are."

"Are you willing to commit murder?"

"Yes."

"If necessary, are you willing to blow yourselves up on command, martyring yourselves in the name of Allah?"

"Yes. However, I highly recommend that you don't have us martyr ourselves -- we're aren't exactly expendable."

"Are you willing to attack women and children if it becomes necessary to do so?"

"Yes."

"Are you willing to unleash weapons of mass destruction on people, which could include chemical or nuclear weapons if they come into our hands?"

"Yes."

"Are you willing to follow your superiors without question and without hesitation? Wizard Dilmi, you are to follow me. The rest of you are to follow him."

"Yes."

Dr. Faisal looked at the group. "Good. Now it's time for basic training. I must warn you, you need to be in excellent physical condition in order to be an al-Qaeda agent. Forgive me, but you nine seem a bit...scrawny."

Dilmi shrugged and tapped his wand. "Magic can make up for that. Allow me."

He waved his wand around, and boulders the size of automobiles started moving around from place to place. The Muggles gasped in astonishment and admiration. He then explained that he would be able to increase his strength and stamina via magical means and insisted that basic training would not be a problem.

Dr. Faisal's eyes shot up at that. "Indeed? Would you be able to enhance the stamina of our Muggle agents as well?"

"Yes, Dr. Faisal."

Dr. Faisal whistled. "I'm impressed, gentlemen. I'm damned impressed. I think we're going to be working together for a long, long time."

He raised his gun in the air. "Allahu akhbar!"

Dilmi and the rest of the agents responded with a roar. "Allahu akhbar!"

The fun was about to begin.
To be continued...
March 25, 1996
Wizarding Royal Palace
St. Petersburg
Russia
Next PoV: 97 -- Lucius Malfoy

"Grigori Yefimovich, you son of a bitch!"

Svetlana Romanova was startled at her father's horrified remark. She looked up from her homework at her father, who had been busy reading a Muggle newspaper.

Svetlana was one of the few remaining members of the Romanov royal line. Virtually all of the Muggle members had been rounded up and executed when the Communists took over the country and transformed it into the Soviet Union. The only person who had escaped had been Anastasia, who had some of the Wizarding genes but not enough to count as a wizard. The little girl had frantically Apparated over to her Wizarding cousins and reported that it was no longer safe to be a royal Romanov in the new Soviet Union. The wizards had wanted to question her further, but they didn't get a chance. Due to her fear and her lack of training, she had Splinched herself very badly, losing a leg in the escape. She bled to death within two hours.

The Romanovs had gone underground for the past eighty years, doing their best to blend in with the Muggle population. The Romanovs, however, had a double challenge. First, they had to refrain from using magic, like any other wizard. Second, they had to stay away from anyone with a hammer and sickle on their uniforms. Nicholas II hadn't known for sure if Lenin and the rest of his thugs had heard about the Wizarding branch of the family. However, it was best to play it safe, especially if the surviving members couldn't use magic to defend themselves.

Svetlana saw that her uncle, Crown Prince Lavrenti, was staring at the Muggle newspaper in absolute horror. His face had gone white. She watched as he mouthed an odd word which sounded magical but she'd never heard before: Horcrux. She wondered what it was.

She turned to her uncle and asked. "Uncle, is something wrong? Who is Grigori Yefimovich? Is he a friend of yours?"

Her uncle glared at him. "Far from it, Svetlana. He was a long-time enemy of our family. He was partially responsible for the deaths of the Muggle royals, unless I'm badly mistaken."

Svetlana giggled. "That's impossible, uncle. He'd have to be very old. Should he be dead by now?"

Lavrenti nodded. "He SHOULD be dead. However, I have a suspicion that he left a surprise for us."

"A surprise? What do you mean? And what exactly is this Horcrux you were talking about?"

Lavrenti glared at her. "Something you should not know about. Forget the word. I'll punish you if
you ever mention it again. Now, go to your room. I need to summon the rest of the adults for a consultation."

Svetlana's eyes widened. She'd never seen him like this before. Lavrenti Romanov was a powerful wizard. He was the strongest of the current tsar's children, which automatically made him the successor. If something scared HIM, it had to be serious. This wasn't a good time to argue with him.

She picked up her notebook and headed upstairs as a popping sound downstairs betrayed her uncle's Disapparation to find the rest of the family. The only man named Grigori Yefimovich she knew of was Rasputin. Rasputin had been a half crazed wizard-monk who'd been making a mess of things at the time Nicholas and his family were assassinated. Could he have done something which had interfered with the lives of the surviving Romanovs?

There was one way to find out, but she didn't have much time. She raced into her room and grabbed something which a friend of hers had found in a startup British joke shop.

An Extendable Ear.

This ingenious device attached to a person's ear and dangled unobtrusively into a room. It allowed the listener to overhear conversations in that room without actually being there.

Right now, the Extendable Ear was picking up lots of popping sounds. People were Apparating into her uncle's study. Virtually all of her father's generation were there, including the tsar himself. Most of them were curious about why her uncle had summoned them.

Lavrenti spoke up, and when he did so it he was straight to the point. "We have a problem. I have reason to believe Rasputin has returned."

People muttered among themselves for a moment. Then, Tsar Alexei responded. "Rasputin? What do you mean, Rasputin? He's dead. He was killed off eighty years ago."

"That's what I thought, Alexei. However, I have since stumbled across some information which may indicate otherwise."

Another man snorted in disdain. "Lavrenti, what are you talking about? The man's dead! And even if he had survived, how old would he be now, 130? No one lives to that age! Besides, I get the impression that he wasn't a very good wizard. After all, he'd always boasted that he'd get us all with a death curse and nothing happened."

Lavrenti had expected this. "There's a very good reason for that, Ilya. He never died."

There was a pregnant pause. Finally, her aunt brought up the inevitable question. "What's a Horcrux?"

"A Horcrux is a disembodied piece of soul created by a certain Dark magic spell. The caster invokes the spell to split his soul and hide one of the pieces in an common, everyday
Svetlana gasped as the rest of the Romanovs invoked various saints desperately. This was horrible. Was this Rasputin fellow going to kill them all? Fortunately, the Extendable Ear didn't allow for two-way communication.

The woman cut in again. "How is that possible? Where does someone go while he's, forgive the expression, half-dead?"

Lavrenti answered. "We don't know. To be honest, we don't want to know."

"Alexei?"

The tsar responded. "I don't know either, Maria. However, to be honest with you, I find it extremely unlikely that Rasputin (a) has a Horcrux, and (b) knows how to revive himself with one. I take it that the newspaper article you're pointing at will explain this?"

Lavrenti responded. "Yes, Alexei. According to this newspaper, there was a break-in recently at a famous museum in Moscow. Two objects were stolen, a music box formerly owned by Rasputin and a reliquary which contained a bit of one of the former tsar's blood."

"So?"

Alexei whistled. "From what I gather, four components are necessary to revive someone via a Horcrux: a representation of the subject or the subject's soul, a drop of an enemy's blood, one of his father's bones, and a piece of flesh sacrificed by one of the subject's allies. The Horcrux itself need not be present at the ritual."

Lavrenti continued. "My thoughts exactly. The music box represents Rasputin, and the reliquary provides the enemy's blood. Anyone present at the ritual can provide the piece of flesh. That's three of the four components. And I will give you two to one odds that the music box has Rasputin's father's bone in it...hold on a second..."

He ruffled through the paper. "Aha! According to the paper, the music box supposedly served as a ceremonial urn for Yefim Rasputin. There we have it. Whoever it is has all four components. And now that the Statute of Secrecy has been weakened due to that idiotic kid in the United Kingdom --"

Alexei swore. "Rasputin can be brought back and explain his return as 'wizard work'. I must say, Lavrenti, this is not good. You are making a very strong case here. Do they know who's responsible for the break-in?"

"They don't know yet. However, the article says that they've got leads in Ukraine."

People swore all across the room. "That's doubly not good. There's only one flaw in the argument, though. Where would Rasputin have learned to create a Horcrux? It's not something which gets taught in school."

"I don't know, Alexei. For all we know, have no idea if he can even come back. I must say, however, that it's not something we can take lightly. Speaking of that, that reminds me. We're probably in big trouble if we permanently kill him, as well."
Ilya cut in. "Why? The bastard should have been killed a long time ago."

"His death curse. If we kill him all of us are probably toast."

This triggered more muttering. Svetlana heard a woman scream. She had to bite her lip to make sure she didn't join her.

Lavrenti responded. "Here's what I recommend doing. There's no way we're going to find the Horcrux, if it exists. However, there's one thing we can do. Go to Yefim Rasputin's grave, dig up the body...and destroy it. If we destroy all the bones and incapacitate him again --"

Alexei finished the statement. " -- then he's down for the count even if he's got a Horcrux. Very clever, Lavrenti. He never dies, but he can't be brought back short of possession -- and we can tell people to look out for that. Furthermore, since he never dies, we don't need to worry about the death curse."

Murmurs throughout the room. Finally, Svetlana heard chairs scraping across the floor. It sounded like everyone had stood up.

Alexei spoke once more. "Thanks for the heads up, Lavrenti. I'll make sure Atlantis finds out about this. In the meantime, keep in quiet. We don't want to cause a panic. Let's go, everyone."

With that, the meeting broke up. Svetlana decided then and there that there she'd try to find an Obliviator: there were things she didn't want to remember.

To be continued...

--------

Update #97

--------

March 26, 1996
Malfroy Manor
Great Britain
Next PoV: 98 -- J. K. Rowling

--------

Lucius Malfoy turned into space and rematerialized with snap in his living room. It had been another long, irritating day at work. The Ministry was still going gaga over Voldemort's assassination while, at the same time, Minister Fudge was doing what he could to cover up the fact that he'd been denying the Dark Lord's return the whole time. Fudge's latest pet project had been an investigation of who had leaked information about the attack to Xenophilius Lovegood. As far as Lucius knew, the editor of the Quibbler had gotten the information from Luna. The next step, obviously, would be to talk to someone at Hogwarts.

Lucius had mixed feelings about Voldemort's assassination. In one sense, he was furious -- his mentor and brother-in-arms slain, of all people, by Muggles. Talk about an ignominious way to go! He was also furious that the Dark Lord had been betrayed by, of all people, Severus Snape. His wife had never trusted the Potions master. Lucius had thought that she was being hysterical. But, by Merlin's beard, she had been right all along. Lucius made it a point to Cruciate Snape to death as soon as he got his hands on him. Bellatrix had driven the Longbottoms insane with the Cruciatus Curse. Lucius intended to go all the way this time and finish off Snape completely.
On the other hand, he felt a sense of completeness and pride. He had to admit to himself that he had been someone afraid of Voldemort. Voldemort had been somewhat like a lightning bolt in that he inspired both awe and fear. Lucius was upset that the Dark Lord was gone, but he was also thankful that Voldemort could no longer hurt him.

He was lucky to be alive. Had Voldemort not sent him to Saudi Arabia before the meeting, he'd have been taken out with the rest of them. As far as he knew, he was now the highest-ranking survivor of the Death Eaters. Peter Pettigrew was a worthless piece of filth, and Rodolphus Lestrange -- who had never been a particularly strong wizard -- had gone to pieces over Bellatrix's death. It was up to him to reorganize the movement. He'd heard some interesting rumors about a man in Sri Lanka named Damodharan Dilmi and would have to check them out. Another escapee from Azkaban, Dilmi had organized a decent-sized cell of Voldemort supporters out on the Indian subcontinent somewhere. Dilmi's people would be quite helpful in getting the movement off the ground again.

Lucius had been stunned when he had seen Pettigrew alive at Voldemort's revival. As far as he knew, Sirius Black had killed Pettigrew and been incarcerated in Azkaban for the deed. The only evidence he had had for a living Wormtail had been a rather confusing account by Snape two years earlier, when Macnair had been summoned to Hogwarts to execute the hippogriff which had attacked Draco.

He thought back to that time. Something very strange had happened, and even the Ministry wasn't sure what it had been. Snape had mentioned encountering Sirius Black, Remus Lupin, and three Hogwarts students inside the Shrieking Shack. He had been about to arrest Sirius when he got hexed by something. The next thing he knew, he had woken up and found himself trying to defend the three children from Lupin, who had gone werewolf. Fortunately, an animal had attacked the werewolf and helped people escape.

Back in Hogwarts, Snape had heard testimony from the three students that Peter Pettigrew had been in the Shrieking Shack as well, masquerading as Ron's familiar. They claimed that Peter had killed some Muggles, faked his own death, and successfully managed to frame Sirius for the crime Sirius had been accused of. Snape didn't buy a word of it, however. Unfortunately, the investigation was cut short when Sirius's miraculous disappearance distracted everybody involved.

Later, Snape suspected that Hermione could have been involved -- she had been using a Time-Turner to travel from class to class. However, he could not imagine Hermione actually going back in time and changing history. He may not have personally liked Hermione, but he could not deny that she was the smartest witch of her year and it seemed against her nature to misbehave to the extent Ron and Harry would. She certainly had been told that interference in history was strictly forbidden. Dumbledore, of course, denied any illegal use of Time-Turners on the premises.

Lucius's chain of thoughts were interrupted by the ring of the telephone. Unlike most pure-blood Wizarding families, the Malfoys had a Muggle telephone in their house. Lucius had made a reputation as a philanthropist, and he had tried to cover up his Death Eater past by donating to Muggle causes as well. Since the Muggles wouldn't accept owls flying through their window -- especially before the Statute of Secrecy had been breached -- he'd been forced to communicate with them via telephone.

He headed over to the phone and looked at the caller ID. The magical box reported that the call had originated from the house of Phillip and Jennifer Bullock in Little Hangleton. He frowned. He didn't know of any wizards named Bullock living in Little Hangleton. He had been quite familiar with the area -- after all, he'd attended Voldemort's revival party. This probably meant that they were Muggles -- besides, wizards would likely not use the phone. But why would individual Muggles want to call
him? Most of the Muggles who spoke to him regularly represented large charitable institutions such as the Red Cross and UNICEF. He had no idea what these two people represented. Well, it was time to find out. He had appearances to maintain.

He picked up the receiver. "Lucius Malfoy speaking. How may I help you?"

A man's voice responded from the other end of the line. "Mr. Malfoy, my name is Phillip Bullock. I have a friend here with me you may be acquainted with."

Lucius looked at the phone line. Was there something wrong? The man's voice seemed forced, as if he were being coached or prompted. Damn Muggle contraptions! However, he kept his opinion to himself. Aloud: "Indeed? What's his name?"

"Paul de Mort. Do you know him?"

Lucius froze. That name sounded awfully similar to Voldemort, and the call had originated from the same town Voldemort had last been seen in. But Voldemort was dead, or at least incapacitated. How would this Muggle know about the Dark Lord? He needed more information.

Cautiously: "The name sounds vaguely familiar. Should I know him?"

"I believe you do, Mr. Malfoy. He was the head of a group you were once involved with. I met him recently and he's --"

The man's voice cut off, and there was another delay. It definitely sounded like this man was being coached. But by whom? Eventually, Bullock continued. "Paul de Mort has told me to tell you that he's right in the back of my head, though I don't know what that means. He says I'm like a Squirmy Squirrel. I must say, I don't know what he's talking about. Do you?"

Lucius mind raced. What the hell was this man talking about? Suddenly, it hit him and his jaw dropped in shock.

The last time Voldemort had been without a body, between 1981 and his revival last year, he had walked the world by possessing other people. His most recent victim had been a former wizard by the name of Quirnius Quirrell. Quirrell had been a Defense against the Dark Arts teacher during Draco's first year. "Squirmy Squirrel" sounded a hell of a lot like Quirnius Quirrell. And the stuff about the back of the head -- Voldemort's face had materialized in the back of Quirrell's head, and the teacher had worn a turban to make sure no one saw him.

Bloody hell! Voldemort had survived by possessing this man!

He had to be certain. However, he needed to take precautions. "Are you alone?"

Bullock responded. "Yes."

"Good. Now tell me -- has anything...strange...happened to you of late?"

The man laughed. "Bloody hell, strange things have happened! It all started with that big explosion in the cemetery. I'm a former firefighter, so I headed over to put the fire out. There were a bunch of chaps with masks lying on the ground, dead. Then I saw this naked kid near the center of the explosion. I told him I'd help him as he was probably an orphan now. Then I feel this pain in the back of my head and felt a bump on the back of my head which felt like a nose. The kid disappeared,
and then my conscience started talking to me and tried to convince me that Muggle-born wizards were bad."

Lucius could only listen, dumbfounded, as the Muggle continued. "My wife thought I was crazy, so she took me to the psychiatrist. The psychiatrist concluded that I'd been abducted by wizards a while back. They'd done some experiments on me and stuck part of my mind in this ball in the Ministry of Magic. It was a memory I'd had repressed for a long time, apparently. Apparently the experiments had been done by Muggle-born wizards. Those untrained bastards messed up and screwed up my brain."

Lucius could barely hold back a laugh. The guy had fallen for the abduction by aliens/medical experiment story, with the only change being he'd replaced aliens with wizards. Lucius was intrigued by the ball comment, however. It sounded like Voldemort had been talking about the prophecy about him and Harry in the Ministry of Magic. He couldn't discuss that here, however.

The man continued. "A few days later, I had something which must have been a hallucination. I was watering my plants when this snake started talking to me. I haven't even told my wife this -- she'll think I've gone COMPLETELY loony. The snake helped me unkink my hose, however. I decided to get rid of all the beer in the house at that point."

Lucius found his voice. "Did the snake have a name?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact it did. It called itself Nachash. Does this make sense to you? Am I crazy?"

It wasn't Nagini, Lucius thought. However, he knew lots of languages. The term nachash meant "snake" in Hebrew. It was plausible. And talking to snakes -- well, that meant either Voldemort or Harry Potter. And he doubted it was Harry.

Aloud, Lucius replied: "No, Mr. Bullock. I don't think you're crazy. Wizards can do strange things in their experiments. However, I'm a philanthropist. How can I can help you? Do you want me to ask the Ministry of Magic for money to compensate you for your troubles?"

Lucius suspected that wasn't what Bullock -- sorry, Voldemort -- wanted. As it happened, he was correct. "You're supposed to come and pick up Paul de Mort. I live at 24 Cemetery Terrace, Little Hangleton. You're supposed to say you're Paul's uncle. He will take the form of a small child -- what's this thing with the child again? Bring clothes for the child. In response, I'm supposed to give you one of Paul's father's bones. Bloody strange gift, sir. Do you by any chance have a pet dog?"

Aha, Lucius thought. I think I see where this is going. I head over there and tell everyone I'm Voldemort's -- sorry, Paul de Mort's -- uncle who has come to adopt him. Phillip opens the door and drops dead as Voldemort disassociates from him. I take the bone, dress up Voldemort like a kid, kill the wife, and take off with Voldemort's child form. Once I'm done there, I get my hands on Harry Potter's blood and I'll be able to revive Voldemort again.

Lucius thought about the ritual. He'd have to sacrifice part of his body in order to get the job done. He supposed he could have the doctor remove his appendix or something like that. He really didn't want to cut his hand off like Wormtail had.

The Ministry is going to go nuts, he thought. However, he couldn't say that over the phone. Instead, he replied. "No, I don't have a pet dog. A strange gift indeed, but I think I know what it's for. I'll try to be over there in a couple of weeks -- I'm very busy right now. Will that be all right with you?"
Bullock seemed to agree. "Fine with me. I'll see you then. Oh -- and Paul says to keep in quiet."

Lucius nodded. A sensible precaution. "I agree. I'll see you in a couple of weeks. Malfoy out."

To be continued...

---------------------

Update #98

March 26, 1996
London Daily Mail
Next PoV: 99 -- Bentley Motor Corporation

INTERVIEW WITH HARRY POTTER, INSTIGATOR OF THE SUPER BOWL BREACH
TAKEN 15 MARCH BY J. K. ROWLING, MAIL COLUMNIST

I'm Jo Rowling and I work for the write for the Daily Mail. Can I ask you a few questions?

Go ahead.

Why did you do it? Why did you violate the Statute of Secrecy?

It was unintentional. Judging from what my friends have concluded, the Disillusionment Charm --
used to make an object invisible, in this case me -- does not prevent electronic video equipment from
recording images of the subject. I was caught by complete accident flying past that boat. There was
no way the Wizarding community could have known.

What were you doing at the time?

My family was attacked by a dementor, an evil creature which causes depression in Muggles and can
force people to suffer a fate worse than death. Trust me, Ms. Rowling. You don't want to know. At
any rate, we were flying away towards a Wizarding safe house where the dementors wouldn't be
able to get at us as easily.

Why were you attacked? Have you done something wrong?

No. You see, the dementors have defected from the Ministry's control and have sided with an evil
wizard named Tom Marvolo Riddle. He often goes by the name Lord Voldemort.

This was the Voldemort you mentioned to [a competitor's interviewer]?

Yes, Ms. Rowling. He is an extremely dangerous man. He killed my parents, if that tells you
something. I have virtually no memories of him. He's the head of a group called the Death Eaters.
The Death Eaters can be easily identified by tattoos on their arms in the shape of a skull with a snake
coming out of its mouth. If a Muggle authority sees any of these men, he should contact a man
named Albus Dumbledore immediately -- and if time permits, then the Ministry of Magic. They
should not attempt to confront Riddle by themselves.

[Editor's note: an anonymous source claims that Mr. Riddle and the Death Eaters were recently killed
in an attack on Little Hangleton which the Muggle authorities claim was a gas main explosion. The
Ministry of Magic and British government both deny these allegations.]
Are you familiar with Sirius Black? He's also an evil wizard, from what I've known. Is he a Death Eater?

Sirius Black is innocent. Not only that, he's my godfather. He was framed by a Death Eater by the name of Peter Pettigrew and sent to Azkaban, the wizards' prison, for twelve years. The Ministry doesn't believe me, but it's true. Have the Muggle officers visit a man named Remus Lupin during a time other than full moon. He'll explain everything. You can take Sirius's innocence to the bank.

Full moon? What does full moon have to do with it?

Trust me, Ms. Rowling. You don't want to know.

[Editor's note: our sources appear to be divided over the statues of Messrs. Black and Pettigrew. The Ministry of Magic claims that Pettigrew is dead and that Mr. Black is an escaped convict. Other informants, however, agree with Mr. Potter. The informants, however, both agree that we Muggles don not want to know about Mr. Lupin and the full moon.]

How long have you been a wizard?

This is my fifth year at the Hogwarts Academy of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Were your parents wizards?

Yes. Both were wizards. However, like I mentioned earlier, they were both killed by Voldemort's minions when I was an infant.

Who raised you then?

My mother's sister, Petunia Dursley. I normally live with her and her husband Vernon when school is not in session.

Vernon Dursley? The man behind Britain for Humans?

Britain for Humans? What is this?

It's an anti-wizard hate group. They've been having a lot of protests of late.

[Editor's note: Mr. Potter is under house arrest for the Super Bowl Breach and may be out of touch with the rest of the world. Furthermore, the failed attack on St. Catchpole's, which announced Britain for Humans's presence to the world, had not yet taken place.]

Sounds like something Uncle Vernon would do. They treated me as if I were the family dog. That whole family is bigoted. I saved their son Dudley from the dementors and got no brownie points from it. Once I get out of here, I'll see if I can exonerate Sirius and move in with him.

If you were raised by Muggles, how did you find out you were a wizard?

I received a letter from Hogwarts directly from the hand of an eleven-foot tall half-giant. I was more than surprised, to say the least. I didn't realize I had any magical talent.

Which world do you prefer, the Muggle world or the Wizarding world?
Both worlds have their benefits, to say the least. Muggles have technology, wizards have magic. Both tend to want the same goals in life and could help each other immensely now that the Statute of Secrecy is gone. However, I would say that I would prefer the Wizarding world to the Muggle world, thanks to my mistreatment at the hands of the Dursleys.

Is Wizarding ability learned or inherited?

We're not sure. I suspect it's genetic in that wizards tend to have wizard children. However, we don't know for certain, and the ability to sense magic does not necessarily mean you will make a good wizard.

Could there be other people in the Muggle community who are able to wield magic and don't realize it, such as the position you were in before that giant found you?

Yes. One of my friends has Muggle parents and is the brightest witch of our class. I'm sure she'll go far.

What do her parents do?

They're both dentists. They operate out of an office in suburban London.

Does dentists tend to produce strong spellcasters?

No one knows, Ms. Rowling. Due to the lack of interaction between the wizard and Muggle worlds to this point there's never been an investigation.

I see. Now, let's get back to the giant. Have you seen lots of fanciful creatures like this at your school?

Wait a minute, here. Let's clear something up right now. First, the man I met, Rubeus Hagrid, is a half-giant. Second, giants are not creatures. Hagrid is a kind, intelligent man. He's a person, just like the rest of us. Granted, he's eleven feet tall, but otherwise he's an ordinary human being. He's actually a professor at the school. His mother was a giant, his father was an ordinary human like us.

Amazing! If I remember my biology right, that would make giants a subspecies of Homo sapiens!

Possibly. I'm not that familiar with advanced genetics. However, he's certainly got all the characteristics of a human being. If he isn't our species, he's very close.

Have you ever seen any unusual, magical creatures? Dragons, orcs, elves, and so forth? From what I've been told, the National Zoo in Washington, DC has a unicorn.

I had to deal with a dragon during the Triwizard Tournament, a competition between three European Wizarding schools. I haven't met any orcs. However, elves do exist. They are also capable of speech, just like us and the giants.

Are there any half-elves?

I don't know. At any rate, that's just the tip of the iceberg. I've seen basilisks, hippogriffs, hinkypunks, thestrals, Acromantulas, centaurs, and lots of other strange creatures. All of them are semisentient with the exception of centaurs, which have the intelligence and speech ability of humans and giants and should be treated as such.
Is a centaur a cross between a human and a horse?

I believe so. However, I'm not entirely certain how exactly a human and a horse would mate to produce a centaur.

Aha...all right, I'm almost done. What is the most amazing thing you've ever done with magic?

Well, I traveled through time once.

You can travel through time? Amazing! How?

We used a device called a Time-Turner. Keep in mind, however, that travel through time should only be done in exceptional circumstances due to the possibility of time paradoxes.

Like in the movie Back to the Future?

Exactly, Ms. Rowling. Granted, we won't blow up the universe if we screw up. However, wizards have been known to kill themselves accidentally when they travel through time.

What was important enough that you had to travel through time for?

It's interesting that you ask that, as it will explain some of the confusion over Sirius Black and so forth which has crept up over the past few months. The story begins with an order coming in to execute Hagrid's pet hippogriff, Buckbeak. An obnoxious son of a Ministry official in my year provoked the hippogriff into attacking him. The boy complained to his father, and the father convinced the Ministry to order the hippogriff's execution. We tried to stop the execution and believed we had failed. Later on that day, one of my friends was attacked by a dog and pulled down a secret passage. It turns out that the dog was the man who had been accused of killing my parents, Sirius Black.

Sounds like you had a very bad day.

That's an understatement. At any rate, there was a meeting of school officials in a room at the end of the secret passage. Eventually, it came out that Sirius had been innocent and the real culprit, Peter Pettigrew, had been hiding out by masquerading himself as my friend's familiar, a rat.

People can transform into animals?

Some of them can, yes. However, it's rare. At any rate, we cornered Pettigrew and got ready to return him to the castle. Things went south, however, and Pettigrew escaped. The authorities then arrested Sirius and planned his execution, not knowing that he had been wrongfully convicted.

I see.

It was obvious that both lives would be lost. However, Dumbledore instructed us to use a Time-Turner to go back in time and save both Sirius and the hippogriff. We did so, being very careful not to cause any time paradoxes. Our time-traveling alter egos managed to run off with the hippogriff before the executioner could do the deed; the swing of the axe which we had thought was the decapitation of Buckbeak the first time around proved to have been the executioner smashing a pumpkin in two in frustration for losing the animal. Yes, there were two of us running around at the same time, a closed time loop.
Later on, after Pettigrew escaped, our time-traveling alter egos found ourselves in a position to save Sirius -- and my original self -- from the dementors. As it so happened, my second self wound up saving my first self and Sirius, but it didn't cause a paradox as I hadn't realized the first time around that my "savior" had actually been myself.

This is coming on a bit fast, Harry.

I know, it's confusing. However, I'm almost done. We flew Buckbeak to the cell Sirius had been imprisoned in. He escaped out the window and flew away on the hippogriff. We then returned to where we started to complete the time loop. We were immediately greeted by irritated Ministry officials wondering where Sirius had gone.

Sounds a lot like something out of a fantasy novel. Are Sirius and Buckbeak still safe?

I believe so, yes. I must warn you, however, that I've got to talk to the other interviewer now. Let's wrap this up.

All right, Harry. I understand. However, I'd like to talk to you more. Would you be willing to grant me future interviews? I'd like to hear more about your story. In fact, I'd always wanted to write a novel about a young wizard, but I never was able to pull it off.

Of course. I like you a lot more than [the competitor's reporter]. I'll give you as many interviews as you want. It would make a good Muggle novel, at least.

Thank you for your time, and good luck with your studies.

You too, Ms. Rowling.

To be continued...

Update #99

March 27, 1996
Bentley Motor Corporation Headquarters
Crewe
England
Next PoV: 100 -- Cornelius Fudge

The president of Bentley Motor Corporation woke up with a start when he heard the knock on the door. He'd been working on an important report when the power suddenly had gone out a few minutes ago. It had come back relatively quickly thanks to the emergency generators. Unfortunately, his computer was still down. He'd need to talk to someone in IT to get it working again. Until then, he could just wait. An eyeful of secretary would probably help him pass the time, however. "Come in."

The door opened revealing his secretary. She nodded and said, "Sir, Wizard Weasley is here. He's waiting in your office."
The president's eyebrows shot up. He had been waiting for the wizard to visit for a while. Unfortunately, he wouldn't have access to his scheduler or the computers during the interview. Bad timing, but he'd have to live with it.

"Splendid. Send him in."

The secretary nodded. "Yes, sir. Oh, and Wizard Weasley would like to apologize for the power failure."

The president stared at her. "WHAT?"

The secretary giggled as she explained. "As soon as Wizard Weasley saw the showroom with the new '97s, he went absolutely gaga and tried poking around among the cars. At one point, he cast a spell so he could get a closer look. Unfortunately, the vehicle was right next to the wall, and the wall was hiding a decent-size transformer."

The president rolled his eyes. Magic and technology didn't mix very well -- everyone knew that by now. However, if what his friend in the SAS had told him about Wizard Weasley, it might be possible to overcome that problem.

It had better be, the president thought. If that problem can't be surmounted, this entire project is going down the drain. Well, they'd cross that bridge when they got there. Turning back to the secretary, he nodded. "Tell him it's all right -- it's probably the first time he's seen top-quality automobiles before. Supposedly he the last one he had was a Ford Anglia."

The secretary stared at him. "An Anglia? Wasn't that --"

He cut her off. "Yes, Pamela. It's been out of production for decades. I think Mr. Weasley is going to be in for a pleasant surprise. Go on and get him."

"Yes, sir."

With that, the secretary left the room. The president then rummaged in his drawers for a pad of paper so he could take down notes. The lack of a computer was frustrating, but there wasn't much he could do about it. Supposedly most of the machines had gone down and IT was completely swamped.

When he looked up again, there was a man standing before him. He appeared to be in his forties and had wild, reddish hair. He looked a little like a mad scientist. Judging from what the SAS man had told him -- granted, the SAS man had supposedly heard the information secondhand -- this man was a wizard, about as close to a mad scientist as you could get. Considering the power failure and the incident in the showroom, it was quite possible that this man actually WAS a wizard.

Scratch that "possible", he thought, and make it "certain". The man was holding something in his hand which could be nothing other than a wand. Considering that Muggles and wands didn't mix, that more or less sealed the deal.

The man was actually dressed in a suit, which was most unusual for a wizard. Then again, the president reminded himself, this man was a most unusual wizard in that he liked studying the Muggle world. Hanging from the pocket of the suit was a medal of some sort. It looked like -- Christ, it couldn't be --

He blurted it out. "The George Cross?"
The wizard nodded and tapped the medal. "Yes, sir. I got this award rescuing Muggles from collapsed buildings during the recent terror attack. However, first things first. Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Arthur Weasley. I work for the Ministry of Magic in the Department of Misuse of Muggle Artifacts. You wished to see me, sir?"

The president nodded. "Yes, Wizard Weasley. Please, sit down. Would you like something to eat?"

"No thank you, I ate before I came. How can I help you? And why did you send for me instead of some higher-ranking Ministry official?"

The president smiled. "It's simple. You know how to make cars fly, do you not?"

To his surprise, the wizard winced. "As a matter of fact, I do. However, how did you find out about that? The Ministry wasn't happy that I magicked up a car, and I was under the impression that the Obliviators erased all memories of the incident."

The wizard smile widened. "I heard from a friend of mine in the SAS who will remain nameless."

Weasley groaned. "And he heard it from Nigel, who heard it from me. I thought these SAS men weren't supposed to reveal secrets."

"If they're state secrets, they'll keep them. However, gossip like this would probably seem relatively benign, particularly something as outlandish as a flying car. Regardless of what happened, the secret is out. Now we need to figure out what to do about it."

Weasley stared at him, confused. "Sir?"

The president steepled his hands on his desk. "Simple. We make cars, and exceptionally good cars at that. You can make cars fly. If we join forces, we can start selling exceptionally good flying cars. The first company to make flying cars is going to have a big head start on this new technology. You'll get a decent cut of the proceeds, incidentally."

Weasley stared at him. "I can make flying cars for a living? I'm flattered, sir. However, I'm not sure if I'll have much time. You see, I work for the Ministry of Magic --"

The president grinned and talked right over him. "I would expect that a car capable of flight would go for...say, 500,000 pounds. About twice the price of a typical luxury car. And that would be just one vehicle."

The wizard's gasped. "That's a lot of money! 100,000 Galleons? I didn't know cars were that expensive! I thought they were more like 1,500 Galleons. Will people buy them?"

The president chuckled. "Wizard Weasley, Bentley has been selling top-of-the-line automobiles for many years. The cars are expensive because the quality is first-rate and our customers aren't willing to settle for second best. We serve people for whom money is not an issue when it comes to buying cars. Trust me, they're going to pay up, particularly if we've got a monopoly on them. And you're going to get a cut of the extra 200,000-250,000 pounds per vehicle. I suspect that a new model, the 1998 Pegasus, is going to be one of our bigger hits in a couple of years."

The wizard stared at him in shock. After a few moments, he said, "You know, sir, that's actually a very tempting offer. Give me some time to think about it."
The president suppressed a grin. I've hooked him, he thought. He's probably going to make a hell of a lot more money than he does at this Ministry. And all he has to do is patent and copyright his method of making a car fly...and sell it to us as a prerequisite of his employment. Aloud: "Is the spell easy to cast?"

The wizard shrugged. "It won't be that difficult, especially if we pipe in argon-38 or convert the vehicle to run off magic. All I need are some magical spell components which I can come by relatively easily."

"What about safety issues? Can the spell fail at 5,000 feet and cause our wealthy customer to plummet to his doom?"

The wizard frowned. "I hadn't thought of that. I didn't have problems with the Anglia. However, I think I'll be able to overcome it. I believe you Muggles have things known as parachutes. Maybe we can put a parachute on the car."

The president grunted. There was no way a parachute would be able to support the weight of an automobile. However, if there was a parachute embedded in each seat which automatically deployed in case of an emergency, the passengers would likely still survive. The top of the car could come off and the seats would automatically eject. He'd deal with that later. "A parachute would be a smart idea, Wizard Weasley. I think we'd be a formidable team."

The wizard nodded. "You may be right, sir. I'll have to think about it, though."

The president smiled magnanimously. "I'm not in a hurry. Take your time. However, if you don't mind, don't tell anyone else about our idea while you're thinking it over. We don't want other people stealing our idea and cutting into our profits."

Weasley nodded. "I'll do that, sir. I'll inform you of my decision in a week or so."

The president pumped his first underneath his desk, where the wizard couldn't see it. The man was hooked, and the president knew it. "Thank you, Wizard Weasley. That would be most appreciated. I'll hear from you in one week, then."

To be continued...

-------------
Update #100
-------------
March 28, 1996
Office of the Minister
Ministry of Magic
London
England
Next PoV: 101 -- Agent Habibi

Cornelius Fudge stared at the Muggle newspaper in front of him. He already had enough trouble dealing with the fact that someone had leaked the attack on Voldemort and the Death Eaters to the Quibbler. Now Harry Potter was talking to the Muggles and saying things which, curiously enough, he had not admitted to Rita Skeeter.

Much of the interview had involved a discussion of Lord Voldemort and had included a warning for
the Muggles to keep an eye out for someone named Tom Marvolo Riddle. Although the Ministry had done what it could to prevent Voldemort's return from making it into the Daily Prophet, they hadn't bothered monitoring the Muggle newspapers. After all, the Ministry had never warned the Muggles about Voldemort (short of the Prime Minister), even during the Dark Lord's first attempt at power. As far as the typical Londoner knew, Voldemort had never existed to begin with. The government had hushed him up with various other classified threats to national security. Thankfully, the editor had written that Voldemort had been killed since the interview had taken place.

The government coverup had allowed the Ministry to dodge a hex here as the Muggles would never know that the Ministry had been caught covering up Voldemort's return. His government, and his reputation, would not suffer among the Muggles.

However, the Ministry had not emerged unscathed. The little brat had nonchalantly admitted that the world was full of magical creatures, several of which were extremely dangerous. Take, for example, the dragon. Fudge suspected that Muggles would start watching the skies much more often to make sure that the feared flyer wasn't heading their way. There would likely be a run on fortress-style houses made out of brick and stone as compared to the combustible wood. As if that weren't bad enough, the Muggle view of the dragon was even more terrible than the reality. Supposedly the creatures had superhuman intelligence. They could speak, cast spells, and carry riders. A real dragon's main weapon was its breath, which it could only use sparingly. The creatures weren't particularly smart, and tended to go berserk when their eggs were threatened.

Harry had also told the Muggles about giants. That may have also been a mistake. Although some giants, particularly half-giants, were quite civilized, the vast majority of the full-blooded giants were titanic wrecking balls who were difficult to deal with even for wizards. Fudge was concerned that the Muggles would start looking for giants in out-of-the-way places much as they did for the Abominable Snowman and Bigfoot. It was only a matter of time until Muggles and giants came into contact. Once that happened, the giants' curiosity would inevitably lead them into populated areas. The high density of creatures would likely spook the giants and cause them to panic, killing dozens of people before wizards came in to subdue them.

Finally, there were creatures like hippogriffs, centaurs, and Acromantulas. Acromantulas were similar to dragons in that they were animals out of a Muggle nightmare. Thankfully, they were far less dangerous. Adult specimens were capable of speech, so there was at least a chance of diplomacy.

Hippogriffs were stupid, but they could fly. The idea of a half-bird, half-horse creature would probably fascinate the Muggles. The mythical Muggle known as Santa Claus would probably wind up flying hippogriffs in a few years in the Muggle legends. Unfortunately, as the Buckbeak incident had shown, hippogriffs were dangerous and could bite if provoked.

Centaurs were half-man and half-horse. They were among the most intelligent of the cross-breed creatures, right up there with the half-giants. Both species were intelligent enough to teach at a school like Hogwarts. Although a few centaurs were intrigued by humans, most feared them. Fudge hated to think what would happen if a bunch of Muggles stumbled across a centaur and tried to ride him or shoot him. Presumably the Muggle would think it was some kind of bastardized creature. Most wizards, with the stubborn exception of Dolores Umbridge, knew enough not to insult centaurs in that way. Very few people insulted centaurs and lived to tell about it.

The Minister had been absolutely horrified to hear that a zoo for magical animals had opened up in the United States. Granted, most of the animals would likely be Class X or Class XX. They would be chosen specifically because they would be less likely to attack Muggles. On the other hand,
zoologists all over the world could very easily discover that their Class XX creature suddenly went Class XXXXX when it realized it was stuck in a cage. None of these animals had been domesticated, and Fudge didn't know of any cases where magical animals were confined to cages for long periods of time.

Supposedly humans often went nuts in Muggle prisons. He suspected animals would do the same. Merlin's beard, for all he knew the Muggles would stick an Animagus in one of those cages and wake up the next morning to hear him yelling at them from inside the bars!

All of these exposures were bad. However, Harry had saved the worst exposure for last: his explanation of the mysterious events which had surrounded Sirius Black's escape from Hogwarts back on June 9th, 1994.

The boy had always stood by his claim: Sirius was innocent, Peter Pettigrew was guilty. The Minister and Snape had always figured that the kid had been ensorcelled. Furthermore, the Potions master had been convinced that Harry had been an accomplice in Sirius's escape. Dumbledore's response had stuck in the Minister's head:

"Unless you are suggesting that Harry and Hermione are able to be in two places at once, I'm afraid I don't see any point in troubling them further."

Normally, Harry's declaration that he had used a Time-Turner would be laughed off as impossible. Time-Turners were kept under strict control, and it was almost impossible for ordinary wizards to get their hands on one. However, Fudge had access to classified information which seemed to -- amazingly enough -- support Harry's claim.

He knew that Hermione had been given a Time-Turner to attend classes. Fudge hadn't been particularly thrilled about that, but the girl had seemed all right. She was one of Hogwarts's star pupils, after all. He also knew that Harry and Hermione were friends. He suspected that Miss Granger wasn't as holy as everyone made her out to be, particularly since she spent a lot of her time with Messrs. Potter and Weasley.

As if that weren't bad enough, Dumbledore seemed to have been in on the joke. The headmaster's off-the-cuff comment was exactly the type of thing he'd have said had he been planning to get involved in the plot. Harry's report to the Muggles confirmed this. The man certainly had means, motive, and opportunity to assist Hermione and Harry in going back and rescuing Sirius. Furthermore, the Time-Turner tale explained the disappearing hippogriff as well: one Harry stole the hippogriff while the other was talking with Lupin and Black in the Shrieking Shack.

If Harry's tale was true, then he'd have to do something drastic. He DIDN'T want this going any further. The most influential wizard in the land thwarted by a bunch of thirteen-year-old kids! As if that weren't bad enough, Dumbledore could be sent to Azkaban for interfering with an investigation, or at the very minimum allowing an unauthorized minor to use a Time-Turner. And Merlin knew what would happen if Muggles got their hands on Time-Turners!

He needed to find out the truth, and fast. Fortunately, there was a way to do so. He dropped the paper and headed down to into the Department of Mysteries. After a few wrong turns, he found himself in the room with the Time-Turners.

He called one of the witches working in the area. She came to him at once.

"Good evening, Minister. How can I help you?"
"Ah, Miss Hortenson. I was wondering if you could do me a favor. Unless I'm mistaken, each time a Time-Turner is used it notes the location, start time, and destination time of the journey?"

The witch nodded. "Yes, Minister. It is a standard security practice for Time-Turners."

"Good. I was wondering if you could check the use dates on unit number TT-0153."

The witch headed over to a cabinet and withdrew a box containing the little hourglass and a piece of parchment. "Here it is, Minister. According to the documentation in the box, it was last used by a Miss Hermione Granger back in 1994."

"That's the one. At any rate, would you be so good as to check the last time this Time-Turner was used? I'd like to know the date, start time, and destination time."

The witch grunted at him. "I'll need authorization for that."

The Minister glared at her. "I'm the Minister. I've got the authorization."

The witch shrugged and cast some spells on the Time-Turner. Eventually, a slip of parchment floated out of the necklace and fell into the palm of her hand. She unfolded it and looked at the contents.

"According to this report, the Time-Turner was last used on 9 June 1994. It transported two people back in time, from 11:55 PM to 8:55 PM. The journey took place in the medical wing at Hogwarts. Anything else?"

Fudge controlled his anger with deliberate effort. Heads were going to roll for this. He vowed it to himself.

"No thank you, Miss Hortenson. I have what I need. Good evening."

To be continued...
Update #101 through Update #105

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Mislagnissa

Update #101
---------
March 29, 1996
Al-Qaeda Headquarters
[location classified]
Afghanistan
Next PoV: 102 -- Chief Executive Officer Xu
---------

Agent Habibi had been waiting for this moment for a long time. Now, he had his chance.

Three and a half weeks ago, King Fahd had told him to infiltrate al-Qaeda and assassinate Osama bin Laden. His Majesty had told him that the terrorist leader needed to be dealt with as soon as possible. Bin Laden had issued a call for jihadist wizards, a threat the king could not ignore. Al-Qaeda had to be taken out before the wizards could get involved.

It hadn't been difficult for him to join the terrorist association. Using his magical powers -- discreetly, so no one could realize he was a wizard -- he had shown enough potential to be promoted very quickly. Now he was about to receive the ultimate reward: a personal interview with the mastermind himself.

He had to bring his wand with him this time. There was no choice in the matter. Fortunately, there was an easy way to get it through bin Laden's security. He kept a walking stick/cane with him at all times and hid the wand in it, inside a secret compartment. The guards would be able to frisk him everywhere, including where the sun didn't shine, and not find anything.

He had no idea if al-Qaeda had successfully recruited terrorist wizards. Although he was a relatively powerful man in the organization, he doubted he had a high enough security clearance to be privy to that information. He could only hope for the best and pray to Allah that he wasn't too late.

He was not alone in realizing the threat posed by jihadist wizards. A few days ago, he had met a man from Bangalore. The Indian man supposedly was also a wizard, and he had been sent by his country's government on a mission similar to his: eliminate bin Laden as quickly as possible. Figuring that going into a confrontation two against one was better than entering it at even strength, the two men had formed an unofficial alliance.

Habibi’s interview was supposed to be one-on-one. Bin Laden's reasoning was sound: the terrorist leader didn't want to be surprised in an ambush attack regardless of how powerful his guards were. As a result, the Indian would not be able to enter the room with Habibi. Fortunately, the Indian had pulled some strings -- he, too, was a highly-placed individual -- and managed to secure a position in the building. If things went south, the Indian man assured him that he would be willing to use the Avada Kedavra curse if necessary.

Comforted by the fact that the Indian was in the building, Habibi waited in bin Laden's personal antechamber for permission to enter. While he was waiting, the guards told him to strip down and checked him for weapons. Finding nothing out of the ordinary, they apologized for the inconvenience.
He noticed no fewer than eight guards in the room. That concerned him greatly. If bin Laden dodged the Avada Kedavra bolt and called for help, Habibi would likely be taken out before he was able to finish them all off. Apparating after taking a bullet in the back wouldn't save your life. It was unlikely that the Indian would be able to get to him in time. And even if the Indian did come to his assistance, would he be able to fight his way through all eight of them? For all he knew, some of them were the jihadist wizards Habibi had been worrying about.

One of them walked up to him and said: "Sir, I'm afraid I'll have to take your cane. The boss is concerned that such things could be used as weapons. Would you be willing to use a wheelchair?"

Habibi was afraid of this. Apparation was difficult when you were sitting down. However, he had a backup plan. He told the guard that he understood bin Laden's concerns and was willing to use a wheelchair. With that, the guard headed off, leaving seven others in the room.

Now came the tricky part. He sat down and placed the cane on his lap. He reached around the end of the shaft and pressed a magical seal on his ring to a certain point. The spell was activated and the wand fell out into his palm. He used it to -- soundlessly -- cast a Disillusionment Charm on the wand itself while the wand was still hidden underneath the cane. That done, he extracted the now-invisible wand and shoved it up his sleeve. One of the guards looked at him curiously for a moment but didn't say anything.

Eventually, the first guard came back with the wheelchair. Apologizing profusely for the inconvenience, he held out his hand for the cane. Habibi handed it over, shook off the guard's assistance, and forced his way into the wheelchair. Allah be praised, the wand stayed up his sleeve. The waiting game then began anew.

Finally he heard a door open and looked up. Osama bin Laden was staring him in full the face. All eight guards saluted smartly. Bin Laden then told them to be at ease and made a gesture to Habibi, telling him to enter his room.

The terrorist mastermind's sanctuary was Spartan: a desk, a chair, some cabinets. The walls were covered with soundproofing material, and the entry door had what appeared to be an airlock. This made sense, Habibi thought: secret meetings were often held here. This would make his job easier, he thought: no one was there to hear him cast the spell. Come to think of it, the invisible wand made it easier still. He found himself able to bring out the wand and point it at bin Laden even before he was seated.

The two men spoke a little. Bin Laden told him that he was an exemplary recruit and was thinking of promoting him to al-Qaeda's equivalent of a general. In return, Habibi asked if bin Laden had had any luck recruiting jihadist wizards for their cause. Bin Laden told him that the information was classified. However, at the rate he was progressing, he would soon be in a position to help with the wizards' recruitment if he so chose.

Eventually, the interview ended. It had gone about the way he had expected. There was only one thing left to do.

Bin Laden got up leaned over the desk to shake his hand. In response, Habibi extended his hand and spoke two words.

"Avada Kedavra!"
There was a flash of green light, and the terrorist mastermind toppled over onto his back. Making sure not to touch the body, Habibi summoned magic to move the dead man's arms onto his chest. The shock on the man's face was priceless. It fit perfectly for what he was trying to do: convince everyone that bin Laden had had a heart attack.

With the deed done, Habibi shoved his wand back up his sleeve and pressed the emergency button under bin Laden's desk. He then started performing CPR on the body, knowing of course that it wouldn't work. Seconds later, all eight guards raced in with their guns drawn.

Habibi feigned shock. Fatigued from the CPR, he explained that bin Laden had had a heart attack and that the doctors needed to get over here NOW. Four of the men left the room. Two of the others took over the CPR, and the last two held Habibi at bay with their guns.

Habibi stared at his two captors. "You think I did it? How could I cause a heart attack?"

The guards didn't flinch. One of them said, "You could have poisoned him. You -- what the --"

That was about as far as he got. In one fell swoop, nine men suddenly appeared in the room. All of them were Indian. Habibi breathed a sigh of relief as he recognized his friend. The cavalry had arrived. One of the men looked around the room and nodded at the guards. Every single one of newcomers raised a wand. Green lights flashed around the room, and the guards went down in droves. The wizards were opening an escape route for him.

Habibi laughed. "Thank you, gentlemen! Now, let's Apparate out of here and start dismantling the rest of this organization!"

He tried to turn into space, and couldn't. He frowned. What was going on?

He looked back around the room. One of the Indians smiled, shoved bin Laden's body out of the way, and sat down in the dead leader's chair. The man muttered some words, and nameplate on the leader's desk changed from OSAMA BIN LADEN to DAMODHARAN DILMI.

Dilmi punched his first in the air. "Al-Qaeda for Voldemort! Now the game begins in earnest!"

The eight other attackers responded with their own shouts. "Al-Qaeda for Voldemort! Allahu akhbar!"

Habibi barely had time to open his mouth before the green beam hit him in the chest.

To be continued...

-------------

Update #102
-------------

March 30, 1996
Collective Farm TK-421
Outside of Pyongyang
Democratic People's Republic of Korea
Next PoV: 103 -- Rubeus Hagrid

Chief Operating Officer Xu was doing quite well, considering everything that had happened. He had been terrified at first when Choi Yeun and her apprentice accidentally blew themselves up trying to
cast that Geminio spell. How was he going to make his farm's higher quota without the two wizards helping him?

However, his luck had turned. Shortly after the two wizards had blown themselves up, a couple of wizards had arrived in the area looking for work. They claimed to have been exiled from their home because their overseer had not liked witches. The only question that he had thought of at the time was: which ancestors am I supposed to thank for this? All of them? Everyone starting with a S?

The two wizards had done what they could to keep the farm in line. They didn't seem to be as skilled as Choi Yeun, however. When he had shown them the burned book with the word Geminio underlined in it, the two had looked at each other for a moment and frowned. They had then turned back to him and told him that they'd never heard of the spell before. They had explained it was because their teacher, a Master Sok, had been killed in a farming accident.

The skills they did have, however, made people notice. Soon, people from the neighboring farms started coming to him, asking him for advice. He had told them that they should be looking to see if any of the peasants were wizards. If so, the overseers had to convince the wizards that it would in their best interests to help the state by increasing their farm's crop yield. The representatives of the neighboring farms had been intrigued, to say the least. They had gone back, promising to check to see if anything strange had happened among their workers.

That had been about a week ago. A few days later, a man from Collective Farm TK-421 had come to Xu and told him that they found someone who could very well be a wizard. He had written back immediately, telling the overseer to treat the man with respect and promote him if necessary. Xu said that he would come over to speak with the man to see what exactly he could do.

The Dear Leader had told him that the wizards would make a good fighting force if trained properly. The two new wizards on his farm didn't seem to know anything more than the basic spells for enhancing the farm's productivity. This guy, however, seemed to have more skills than the two newbies.

So here Xu was, on Collective Farm TK-421. Would this guy make a good soldier? Would he know of other interesting skills which could make Xu's own farm better?

According to the man who had visited Xu, the new wizard's name was Park Gi Gi. He was 38 and was married with two children in their early teens. His wife was actually a Muggle, and neither of the children seemed to have been granted the gift of magic. He'd learned magic from his late mother, who had been a pretty powerful witch. This should be an interesting interview.

Xu watched as the man and his wife walked into the room and bowed to him. He seemed to be about 175 centimeters tall and had graying black hair. He was wearing a small hat, which Xu suspected was covering a bald spot. She stood about 165 centimeters and was a little overweight. Being overweight was unusual for a peasant, Xu thought -- they barely got enough food to survive sometimes. Something told him that the wizard was conjuring food for his family. He'd find out soon enough, he supposed.

Xu smiled as they completed their bows. "Good afternoon, Wizard and Mrs. Park. I'm Chief Executive Officer Xu of one of the neighboring farms. I was wondering if I could ask you some questions about your magical abilities."

Park nodded and immediately pointed at his wife. "Certainly, Chief Operating Officer Xu. However, I must warn you that she isn't a wizard. Don't expect magic out of her, sir."
His wife snorted. "Hey, I can cook pretty well. I'd call that magic, my husband. I've seen what happens when you try to cook, with or without magic."

Park glared at her. "Jung Ni Chan, will you be quiet? This is not time to complain about my cooking. Besides, I don't have to cook. All I need to do is take the stuff you make and clone it with the Geminio spell. You probably get more food each day than half of our village put together."

Xu's eyebrows shot up as soon as he heard the name of the spell. "You have a spell which will clone food? That could be good for famines and droughts."

Park shook his head. "Actually, it's not restricted to food, sir. The Geminio spell can be used to make an inert copy of any object. If cast on a living being, it will produce a clone body."

Xu swore to himself. Could Choi Yeun have faked her death? She'd always been a bit of a pacifist, and she could have overheard him talking about making an army. If so, where was she? He'd deal with that later, however. In the meantime, he turned to Park with an excited look on his face. "WHAT? You can clone yourself? That's one way to produce workers in a hurry!"

And soldiers, Xu thought. However, Park burst the bubble rather quickly. "No, sir. The spell will work, but the clone will not be alive. I should know: I tried to clone my cat and it didn't work. My wife freaked out when she saw what appeared to be the cat's body on the kitchen floor."

The wife shuddered. "Don't remind me."

Xu chuckled. "I see. However, first things first. I'd like you to verify that you're a wizard. You seem to be familiar with at least one spell, though. Can you demonstrate it for me?"

Park nodded and brought out his wand. "Certainly, sir. Allow me."

He looked around the room for a moment. Eventually, his eyes landed on an old chair sitting in a corner. He pointed his wand at the chair and shouted, "Geminio!"

There was a flash of light. When the light cleared, there were two chairs there, sitting side by side. They looked identical.

Xu's mind raced as he stared at the chairs. You could make counterfeit money like this, he thought. Who actually checks serial numbers on banknotes? He wondered if it was possible to Geminio guns, bullets, and so forth. It may not be possible to clone humans, but an army with unlimited materiel would...unstoppable. He brought himself back to the discussion with a start.

"Amazing! Is the duplicate chair safe to use? Is it hot, magical, or anything like that?"

Park didn't say anything. All did was get up, move over to the duplicate chair, and sit down on it. It held his weight perfectly.

Xu whistled. North Korea could becoming an exporting powerhouse with a spell like this. All you had to do was steal one gizmo from somewhere and then start Geminioing it. South Korea may have assembly lines, but North Korea had wizards working for the government! He couldn't say that, of course. He didn't want this wizard to start faking his death as well.
He made a mental note to have TK-421's COO consider holding the wife and kids hostage to ensure the wizard's good behavior. He had no idea if the tactic would work -- for all he knew, the wizard would cast a spell which would blow the whole farm up. But it was something to think about.

He pointed at the duplicate chair. "You do indeed appear to be a wizard, Park Gi Gi, and a powerful one at that. Is Geminio a difficult spell?"

The wizard shrugged. "Not particularly. Virtually all of the wizards I know can do it."

Even more interesting, he thought. He cursed himself for being saddled with the two wizards who didn't know how, however. "You know additional wizards?"

"Yes, sir. They're from various locations all over the country. I don't think many of them have started practicing magic in the open at this point, though."

Xu steepled his hands on the desk? "Would they be willing to work for the government? We could use wizards."

Park shrugged. "I don't know, sir. Like I said, they may be reluctant to practice magic out in the open."

"But they can do so much good for our country!"

Park hesitated for a moment, then grinned at him. "They could indeed, Chief Operating Officer. However, that would leave no one working the farms. Even a wizard can't duplicate food which isn't already there, sir."

"Can you tell me their names and where they are?"

Park shook his head. "No, sir. I have sworn an oath to keep them anonymous."

"Is one of them named Choi Yeun Li?"

Park shook his head. "Like I said, I cannot mention names."

Xu glared at him. "The government isn't going to appreciate your refusal, Wizard Park."

The wizard shrugged. "I doubt it will. Unfortunately, Muggles will find it difficult to force wizards to do anything. Although every single one of the wizards I know will refuse to use magic to proactively harm anyone, now that the Statute of Secrecy is gone the vast majority of us will be willing to use it in self-defense in case of emergency. Trust me, Chief Operating Officer. If you want us to help you, you're going to have to think of a way which will allow us to serve the country without violating our moral and ethical guidelines."

Xu looked meaningfully at the wizard's wife. The wizard nodded.

"I can probably guess what you're thinking, sir. Rest assured, we can defend our loved ones if necessary. Although we will not use lethal magic, we can use Obliviation to make people forget what has happened. It's a much more humane method of resolving the problem, and no one gets hurt. Besides, every wizard of our era is familiar with the spell."
Xu didn’t like this. The wizard was probably right, he thought. Muggles probably couldn’t force wizards to do anything. He needed to think of another idea which would allow wizards to voluntarily choose to help the country.

The Dear Leader wanted an army of wizards, and the wizards would be likely to dodge a draft. What was he going to do? And where was Choi Yeun? Was she dead, or had she faked her own death?

There was a lot of stuff to think about.

To be continued...

------------
Update #103
------------
April 1, 1996
National Zoo
Washington, DC
United States of America
Next PoV: 104 -- Arthur Weasley

Shelly Caba got off the Metro, her young family in tow. She hadn't been particularly keen on going to the National Zoo, what with the Smithsonian and other museums spread all over the city. However, her kids had managed to convince/dragoon her into doing it. They had been clamoring to visit the National Zoo ever since they’d found out that they had a unicorn there. Emma was at the age where kinds inevitably had unicorns all over her clothes. Stuffed unicorns had become the rage all over the country in the span of a few short weeks, and several people had claimed to have discovered unicorns out in the distant backcountry of the Ocala National Forest.

Presented with incontrovertible evidence, Travis Radner had been forced to admit that the Ocala National Forest did indeed have a few unicorns. Supposedly a few had managed to escape from the Department of Magic's facility hidden in the National Forest and had multiplied into a herd of a few dozen animals. However, he refused to give any coordinates. Despite their benign appearance, unicorns could be extremely dangerous creatures. That horn could supposedly penetrate six inches of wood when the animal charged. An encounter between a wild unicorn and a human could result in the death of both parties. Furthermore, the unicorn was an endangered species, as were many other magical creatures. Global warming affected magical animals as much as mundane ones, and there weren't many of the magical ones around to begin with.

There was at least one known exception, of course: Deirdre. The little unicorn foal had become the mascot of the National Zoo. T-shirts with her image were selling like hotcakes, and banners advertising her were being shown all the way from Baltimore to Richmond.

The Cabas had gotten to the Zoo early, hoping to beat the crowds. However, she hadn't arrived early enough. The line to pay admission was snaking out of the visitors center and into the parking lot. While they were waiting, Shelly and her family were bombarded by people hawking Deirdre paraphernalia and shirts announcing the dedication of the Radner Wing, a newly-opened section of the Zoo dedicated to magical creatures. The dedication shirts had today's date and three faces on them: those of Deirdre, Radner, and a bearded man she'd never seen before.

That explained the high turnout, she thought. The group of tourists currently in line would be the first people in the land to see some of the most exotic creatures which existed on this planet. They'd get to see Deirdre, of course, at the very end of the tour.
She took a look at the special program which had been printed specifically for this day. She didn't look at the information for the animals per se -- she wanted them to be a surprise. However, she did notice that the animals had been chosen specifically because they were either tame or harmless. There would be a section which showed dynamic photographs of more dangerous creatures. Due to the graphic and frightening nature of the photographs, children under 18 would not be admitted without a parent or guardian.

The program identified the third person on the souvenir shirt: a man by the name of Professor Rubeus Hagrid. Professor Hagrid, a half-giant, was a professional caretaker of magical creatures, and he had come from England to help set up the zoo. He was a very articulate man and looked perfectly normal apart from the fact that he stood about 11 feet tall and weighed over half a ton. Patrons were reminded to treat Hagrid with the same respect they would give any other human being. Violators would be removed from the park.

The program also said that although normally patrons to the Zoo would have to pay a $15 fee to see the magical creatures, that fee would be waived for the new wing's first week. She grinned -- she'd lucked out there.

Shelly looked back up and reread Hagrid's stats. That couldn't be right, she thought. How could he be 11 feet tall? Wasn't there something about primate physiology that prevented that from happening? She'd find out soon enough, she supposed.

Eventually, she made it to the front of the line. The receptionist gave her her ticket and stamped it with a time, "9:00". He then explained that due to the high turnout on this opening day, Professor Hagrid would be giving one-hour, personal tours of the facility. He would introduce several of the animals and answer any questions.

Of course, it was 7:00 right now. She had to convince the children that they would have to wait two hours to enter the new wing, which was blocked off by display panels and screens. Fortunately, the children tended to lump all of the "fantastic" animals together, and these animals included unicorns, meerkats, chimps, and other mundane creatures. The exhibits were admittedly fascinating, even for someone as accustomed to zoos as she was. However, it was obvious the kids were bored. They wanted to see the magical animals.

She returned to the entrance to the Radner Wing at around 8:45 only to find herself in line once again. It appeared that everyone else in the 9:00 tour had had the same idea she had: get there early in case there was a problem and they couldn't admit everyone. She was maybe 50th in line. Was that close enough?

Ten minutes later, a large group of excited people -- presumably the 8:00 tour -- emerged from the new wing. She counted at least 100 people in it, so it was obvious they were going to get in. The new wing appeared to have a gift shop somewhere inside it: several of the tourists were carrying bags with odd books in it (what was the Monstrous Book of Monsters, Muggle Edition?).

The doors closed temporarily at 8:55, presumably for maintenance. The anticipation mounted as countdown continued. Finally, at the stroke of 9:00, the doors opened once again to admit one man. This man had a thick, bushy beard and was extremely muscular. He looked like something out of the Flintstones, actually. However, that wasn't what made him stand out.

She was about 5'5". As far as she could tell, he was about twice her height. Incredibly, the program was right. He actually WAS 11 feet tall.
Shelly gasped, as did virtually everyone else in the tour. Children squealed. Several people screamed in fear. The man, having expected this, raised his hands in the air in a gesture of submission.

"Ladies and gentlemen, don't worry. I may be tall, but I'm an animal lover at heart, just like you are. Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Professor Rubeus Hagrid. I've come from England to help care for the magical creatures at the Zoo. I'm actually a half-giant. My father was a human, just like you. My mother was a giant, Homo sapiens titanae. The giants have their own civilization, just like yours. They have laws, and they have a king, known as the Gurg. You just don't know about them yet because of the years under the Statute of Secrecy."

The introduction caused another stir among the crowd. Shelly couldn't make everything out, but the general consensus was: "This brute is actually articulate! He's a professor! And he's Homo sapiens to boot!"

Professor Hagrid continued. "There are several sentient species of hominids in the magical world. There are goblins, Homo goblinus; elves, Homo eldar; and several other species. The sentients also include creatures like the centaur, Homo equus. They can speak, just like you and me. There is also an extinct sentient hominid species, the Neanderthal. Like any other sentient beings, you will not find any of these species in this zoo, as it would be as if we were imprisoning other people. However, I can tell you some stories about them along the way. For those of you who have come to see Deirdre, she's in here, at the end of the tour."

Emma squealed as Hagrid's face turned stern. He continued, "In a moment, I'm going to lead you into the Radner Wing, named after the American Secretary of Magic, Dr. Travis Radner. However, I'd like to lay down some guidelines here. First, there is to be no flash photography. Several of these animals startle easily. Second, there is to be no sticking hands through the bars of the cages. Many of these animals were living in a forest in England only a few weeks ago and are just marginally tame. Finally, don't make any sharp sounds, and talk quietly whenever possible.

"Near the end of the tour, we will encounter the Dangerous Creature Dynamic Photographs display. A dynamic photograph is a magical photograph which can be display a moving image on a piece of paper. You will likely find this interesting, to say the least, as from what I recall Muggles do not know how to do this. These photographs will introduce you to other, more dangerous creatures: dragons, hippogriffs, Blast-Ended Skrewts, basilisks, Acromantulas and so forth.

"Due to the extreme danger involved in dealing with these creatures, you will not be able to see them in the Zoo. Instead, you will witness them in action in their natural habitats. Due to the graphic and terrifying nature of this footage, children under 18 will not be permitted to view this display."

Hagrid smiled. "Well, that's all the introduction. Video cameras are permitted as long as they do not use flashes. Let's go, everyone!"

With that, he turned around and started leading everyone into the new wing. Shelly moved forward with the rest of them, excited. She wished she had a leash to put on the kids.

As she headed through the huge doors leading into the new wing, she heard someone mutter something, in jest, behind her.

"Welcome...to Jurassic Park."

To be continued...
Arthur Weasley looked over the information on Bentley Motor Corporation. The cars were as expensive as the president of the company had claimed: a Brooklands often went for £200,000, more than the cost of tuition for all seven years of a Hogwarts education. Yet against all odds, the cars sold. Someone in England must have a lot of money.

He had been given a ride in one of the 1996 Brooklandses before he'd left the factory. The car rode like a dream and was extremely comfortable. It was much better than the Ford Anglia that he had been tinkering with a few years ago. The vehicle stood out from all of the other Muggle models in the streets: the VW's, the Toyotas, the Saabs, and so forth. It seemed much more...substantial, and it turned a lot of the Muggles' heads. He had no idea if it was actually worth the equivalent of 25 ordinary Muggle vehicles, but he wasn't someone who was actually going to buy a Bentley.

The president had explained that creating the 1998 Pegasus was going to be easy -- if they were lucky, they'd be able to debut the model in 1997. Since the car was going to be sold on the fact that it could fly, the chassis itself didn't matter as much as long as it had the traditional Bentley quality. All they were going to do is take a Brooklands, add a few cosmetic changes to make it look like a different car, improve the aerodynamics, throw in a few ejector seats and flight safety mechanisms, change the steering wheel so that it looked like that of an aircraft, enchant it so that it would be able to fly, and stick it in the showroom. The additional parts and labor would probably go for £50,000. That would be an additional £250,000 profit if the Pegasus was going to be sold for £499,995. They'd make a fortune off of it.

Arthur was tempted, very tempted. However, he knew that his knowledge of Muggles was limited. Granted, he knew more than most people. However, he couldn't help but think that he might make a faux pas -- dress inappropriately, or make a fool out of himself at a Muggle business meeting by gawking at things like staplers and paper clips. He would be representing a Muggle company and could very easily be passed off as a Muggle. A faux pas when trying to close a major sale could get him into big trouble. Screwing up a sale of two vehicles just cost the company one million pounds. He did NOT want to do that.

On the other hand, his position at the Ministry seemed dangerously unstable. Minister Fudge was on the warpath, and everyone with half a brain was doing what he or she could to get out of the way. From what Arthur had heard, the Department of Mysteries had confirmed that Hermione Granger had used a Time-Turner to go back in time around the time of Sirius Black's escape. Against all odds, Harry Potter's bizarre tale about rescuing a convicted felon and freeing a dangerous hippogriff was becoming increasingly credible.

Arthur knew the truth, of course, as Harry had told him several times. He hated to think what would happen if Fudge ever found out the truth. The Minister had been mad at Dumbledore ever since Dumbledore had started claiming that Voldemort had returned after the Triwizard Tournament. Well, rumor has it that Dumbledore was in big trouble. Supposedly Dolores Umbridge was going to take over as headmistress of Hogwarts and Dumbledore was going to be sent to Azkaban. And that wasn't the half of it.
Grant, Arthur had not actually been caught up in the dragnet over the Time-Turner scandal. However, Fudge was in a mood where he'd probably fire people at the drop of a pin. This was not a good time to cross him. As a result, Arthur had been keeping his mouth shut and nose to the grindstone ever since Fudge had found out about the Time-Turner.

He had just put aside a report on the Brooklands when he felt an awful chill permeate the room. It sounded like Fudge and his cronies were getting the dementors involved. He hated to think who he was going after this time. Dumbledore, he supposed.

The chill intensified abruptly, and Arthur heard footsteps heading towards his office. Uh-oh, he thought. He hurriedly shoved the Muggle report underneath his desk and looked up just in time to see Cornelius Fudge enter the office accompanied by two dementors. The two dementors stood guard in front of the Minister, separated by just enough room to allow space for Fudge's Patronus, a chicken.

The look on Fudge's face said it all. Arthur suspected he knew what was coming. He hoped he was mistaken, and realized that getting rid of the Bentley evidence had been a wise move.

When Fudge spoke, he sounded furious. "Good afternoon, Mr. Weasley. I regret to inform you that your services will no longer be needed here at the Ministry of Magic."

Arthur stared at him in feigned surprise. "What? Why?"

"I have heard from several sources that you told your son about the attack on Voldemort. That was classified information, Mr. Weasley. You were not to tell anyone about it."

Arthur's faced blanched, but his voice was steady. "Why did it matter, Minister? You were telling everyone Voldemort was dead. He's dead now. I saw it myself. Doesn't that support your goals?"

Fudge grunted. "Partially. However, you've just managed to make the Ministry look like a laughingstock. You have been aware that we've been hiding Voldemort's return the past few months, specifically as to not cause a panic. Now that you've told everyone that he had temporarily returned, people are going to start asking questions as to why we were not telling them the truth. Ordinary people don't understand that we often hide information from them for their own good. They're going to demand that we take action to ensure that they're kept in the loop and that this won't happen again."

Arthur tried to reach for his wand. The Minister noticed that, however, and smiled. "Careful, Mr. Weasley. Right now you're just facing termination. If you try to attack me, the acting Minister of Magic, you're going to be facing either Azkaban or the Dementor's Kiss. Your choice: long-term imprisonment or a quick end to your existence? Phobos and Deimos here are more than willing to finish you off."

Arthur shook his head and raised his hands over his head, palms out. Fudge noticed this and nodded. "Smart move, Weasley. It's a pity you're not like your son Percy. He knows how to serve the Ministry well."

Arthur had to try at least one more thing. "I'm a hero of the British Empire. I've got the George Cross, just like you. The Muggles won't particularly like it if I'm dismissed, especially if it's just as a scapegoat."

Fudge smiled evilly. "Actually, the official explanation for your dismissal is going to be the scandal..."
three years ago with the flying Ford Anglia. Yes, Mr. Weasley. Word of the Anglia scandal is leaking out. It doesn't look good to have the man in charge of the dealing with Misuse of Muggle Artifacts abusing some of his own, does it not? Particularly when they had faulty Disillusionment Charms in the era of the Statute of Secrecy? Once I'm rid of you, I'll issue another statement claiming that you didn't see Voldemort -- just another Death Eater. I'll have the Quibbler publish an erratum and that's it."

Arthur nearly lost his temper. "You don't control the Quibbler, Minister. That's Xeno Lovegood's paper."

Fudge's smile widened. "If Mr. Lovegood knows what is good for him, he'll soon be relinquishing control of that paper to me. After all, I've got Dolores Umbridge around at Hogwarts to keep an eye on his daughter...and four of your children, I might add."

Arthur's spirits sank. It seemed like this guy had thought everything out. "I see your point, Minister. I must confess, sir, that I don't think I deserve this. I have a family to feed, and I believe I've done my job satisfactorily. In fact, I've got a larger family to feed now, thanks to Harry staying at the Burrow."

"Worry not your little mind, Mr. Weasley. Percy's about to get a promotion. He's been doing quite well so far. He'll be the breadwinner for your family. Besides, if all else fails, you can get your wife to work."

Arthur stood up. The dementors stepped forward a little, and Arthur backed off instinctively. Fudge continued. "Don't be stupid now, Mr. Weasley. You've got the rest of the day to clean out your office and report to the Obliviators to have classified information about the Ministry erased from your memory before you leave. These two chaps will help you. I've ordered them to stay at your side at all times for your protection."

Arthur barely managed to croak out a response. "Yes, sir."

A brief look of compassion flickered into Fudge's face. "If it's any consolation, you may rest assured that your fate will be better than that of Dumbledore's now that this Time-Turner thing has gone public. Now get going with your cleanup. I want you to promise me that you won't make any more flying Fords. The safety of the Muggle drivers, of course."

Arthur barely stifled a grin. "I'll swear to that now, sir. No more flying Fords."

"Good. I'll see you in a little bit for your exit interview."

To be continued...

Update #105

April 4, 1996
Dolores Umbridge's Office
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
Great Britain
Next PoV: 106 -- Priest, St. Catchpole Roman Catholic Church

Dolores Umbridge was nearly knocked over by all of the people tumbling out of her fireplace into the room. First came Cornelius Fudge, warrant in hand. Amazingly, his had had managed to stay on
his head. He was followed by no fewer than three Aurors, wands at the ready. The last person out was a young woman she'd never seen before wearing a HORTENSON nametag. The Professor recovered quickly, however. She suspected she knew what this was for. It was about time people realized that the Ministry of Magic did not tolerate violation of laws on a whim.

She shook the Minister's hand. "Good afternoon, Minister. I take it you've finally figured out what to do with Dumbledore and his time-traveling friends over here?"

The Minister nodded. "Yes, Dolores. As of today, you are now the new Headmistress of the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Congratulations, Headmistress."

Dolores giggled like a little girl. "Thank you, Minister. I'll make sure the school doesn't stray from our control anymore. I promise you that, Cornelius."

Fudge nodded. "I expected no less, Dolores. Do you have any idea as to whom you want as your deputy?"

Dolores frowned. "I was thinking Professor Snape. He's one of the few senior teachers who seems halfway competent and managed to avoid the debacle with the Time-Turner. I take it McGonagall is going to be shown the door?"

"Yes, Dolores. Dear old Minerva is going to be leaving the school for good. And I would concur with you about Snape. Much as I do not like the man, we have to look at this impartially. Given that, Snape is, in fact, probably the best choice among the remaining staff members."

Dolores nodded. "Good to hear. Do you want me to summon Miss Granger? We should probably talk to her first. Divide and conquer, if you will."

Fudge thought for a moment before he responded. "I agree. She's been caught doing naughty things once before. We don't want her interfering with this operation. Go ahead, get her. We'll be waiting."

With that, Dolores left the room, leaving Fudge and the Aurors alone in her office. The two Aurors looked around at the wall full of cat photographs.

One of them chuckled. "Judging from what I've heard of her reputation here, she probably feeds the cats better than she does the students. Or she make sure that the students have nine lives before trying to bully them to death."

Fudge couldn't help a grin. "I agree with you there. However, she is effective at what she does, just like a good Ministry official should be. As long as the students learn the material, whether they like her or the contents of her lessons is irrelevant."

It took a good five minutes for her to return with Hermione. The little girl gawked at everybody in the room. Puzzled, she turned to the Minister. "Minister Fudge, what are you doing here? Professor, I don't understand. Is something wrong?"

Fudge looked down at the young woman before her. Figuring out what to do with her had been a very difficult decision. She clearly been an accomplice in the Time-Turner incident and Sirius Black's escape, having allowed the Time-Turner to be used for inappropriate activities. However, she was underage and as a result could not be sent to Azkaban. She was also just following Dumbledore's orders, so she didn't deserve as severe a punishment. Finally, she was a brilliant student. Assuming that Miss Granger learned her lesson here, she would be a great asset to the
community.

There was another problem that Fudge had had to deal with when it came to Hermione. Her parents were Muggles. If her parents found out about this they would likely drag the Muggle government into this. Fudge had no idea how it would turn out in that case.

He cleared his throat and began to speak. "Hermione Granger, I'm here to inform you that you are hereby suspended from Hogwarts until a time the Ministry deems fit to let you back in. You have until the end of the day to pack your things and say goodbye to your friends. At the end of the day, you will be moved to a Ministry safe house. Your wand will be kept here at Hogwarts until the day you return."

Hermione stared at him in shock. "WHAT?"

Her hand reached for her pocket, but the Aurors had been expecting precisely that reaction. One Expelliarmus later, the girl's wand was embedded in the wall, quivering silently in one of the pictures. The cat which had been photographed was looking at it in confusion.

The Minister continued his speech. "On the night of 9 June 1994, you violated our trust in you when you used a Time-Turner to go back in time on an unauthorized mission, risking your life and those of your comrades. Furthermore, you are an accomplice in the escape of a man who was believed to be an escaped felon, Sirius Black, and a dangerous hippogriff known as Buckbeak. What say you to these charges?"

Hermione's jaw dropped, but she quickly composed herself. "What do mean? I don't understand?"

Smart kid, Fudge thought. However, he had prepared for that. He pointed to Hortenson. "This woman here, Miss Janice Hortenson, works in the Department of Mysteries. She is in charge of the Time-Turner division. She cast a classified spell on your Time-Turner and it reported the last date of use. It was just before midnight on the 9th of June, from 11:55 to 8:55 PM. During this time, Sirius Black and Buckbeak both disappeared. Interesting coincidence, wouldn't you say?"

Hermione's face went white. "How -- "

In response, Fudge produced the issue of the Daily Mail with Harry's interview. "Your dear friend Harry broke the information to the Muggles, not realizing that people in the Ministry occasionally read Muggle newspapers. Although most wizards don't read newspapers like this, a good 10-20% of the people in the Ministry do. How would the Obliviators know who to visit in the old days? We knew you had a Time-Turner, and we knew its serial number. Miss Hortenson here did the rest."

It took a few minutes for her to realize she was outgunned -- to use the Muggle term -- and outclassed. She may be clever, but she wasn't going to be able to thwart a bunch of trained Aurors. Finally, she slumped and began to sob. However, suddenly something occurred to her.

"You've acknowledged that Harry's description of the events that night is correct?"

Fudge nodded. "We're suspecting that they are. No one would have been crazy enough to fabricate a story with a Time-Turner."

"Does that mean Sirius Black has been vindicated?"

"Yes, Miss Granger. We have just asked Azkaban to suspend the search for Mr. Black and
concentrate instead on finding Mr. Pettigrew. If, after further investigation, Sirius is proven innocent, he will be completely pardoned and given a significant monetary reward to compensate him for his false imprisonment. However, the fact remains that you did a very irresponsible thing with that Time-Turner."

Hermione stared at him. "Nothing went wrong, and we just did what Dumbledore had suggested! It hadn't occurred to me to go back and free Sirius and Buckbeak! And even after we did, there weren't any serious time paradoxes!"

Fudge didn't bite. "Harry saw himself, which was bad. And rest assured, Miss Granger, you're getting off easy. Just imagine what's going to happen to McGonagall and Dumbledore. Now, head off to your room and start cleaning up. Dolores, would you accompany her?"

Umbridge nodded, pointed her wand at Hermione, and ushered her out of the room. The rest of the Ministry party then headed over to Professor McGonagall's office to talk with her.

Fudge got straight to the point. "Professor McGonagall, we have received intelligence that you were an accomplice in Sirius Black's escape. Furthermore, you decided to give Hermione Granger a Time-Turner even though she was underage. This is not appropriate behavior for a Hogwarts teacher, especially a Head of House. You are hereby fired from Hogwarts."

McGonagall was a tougher nut to crack, however. "Wait a minute, Cornelius! You authorized that Time-Turner! If you've been busy looking through records from that school year, take a look at my comments when I asked for the Time-Turner. I had tried to talk Hermione out of it, believing that she could abuse it! She tried to take out a troll during her first year, after all!"

Fudge turned to Miss Hortenson. "Is this true?"

In response, she pulled out the offending Time-Turner and cast another spell on it. Another piece of parchment came out, and the technician looked it over. Her eyes widened. "Yes, Minister Fudge. Professor McGonagall was against giving her the Time-Turner and was overruled by Dumbledore. We've got the debate right here."

Fudge frowned and didn't speak. He hadn't expected this. This gave McGonagall the opportunity to muddy the waters further.

"As far as freeing Sirius Black went, how was I going to know she would do that? I gave her the Time-Turner nine months earlier, and to the best of my knowledge she didn't abuse it! Furthermore, I wasn't involved in the decision to send Hermione back in time to get Sirius! Give me Veritaserum if you want! I'm telling the truth!"

Now Fudge grinned. "Well, Minerva, it just so happens I have a dose of Veritaserum here. As they say in the Muggle world, I'm calling your bluff."

Five minutes later, the interrogation was complete. McGonagall was indeed innocent. That made him do a double-take. He couldn't fire her now. Hell, Umbridge herself had admitted that McGonagall was a good teacher, so he couldn't claim she was incompetent!

He'd have to tell Dolores to make McGonagall her deputy. Dolores didn't like McGonagall at all, but she wouldn't be able to fault his reasoning.

Apologizing profusely to McGonagall, it was time for their third suspect, Dumbledore. Arresting
Dumbledore would not be easy, he thought. All three Aurors were loaded for bear. He had briefly considered sentencing him to the Dementor's Kiss but concluded, reluctantly, that the offense wasn't serious enough for that. Azkaban would suffice.

He waited a few minutes for Umbridge to rejoin them after ensuring that Hermione was doing what she had been told. Once Dolores was back, the delegation of them marched over to the headmaster's tower. Umbridge spoke the password, and the gargoyle slid aside. The staircase carried them upstairs into Dumbledore's private sanctuary.

What happened next, however, didn't go as planned. Dumbledore, seeing all of the wands pointing at him, calmly confessed to the charges. A brief application of Veritaserum confirmed Dumbledore's guilt on all counts. Grinning with victory, he ordered the Aurors to take out Dumbledore.

Lights flashed everywhere. Fawkes was hit with a powerful curse, burst into flame, and fell to the ground, where he woke up as a chick. Paintings fell off the wall, and furniture was thrown everywhere. The computer fell off the desk with a hole blasted through a disk drive.

Two minutes later, all three Aurors had been incapacitated and Dumbledore had Apparated away. Fudge swore at himself. He should have cast the spell making her headmistress before he had come to get Dumbledore. As it was, the school still thought he was headmaster and gave him leave to Apparate from the building.

Well, that was something could be fixed in a hurry. Declaring that Dumbledore was to be put on the Most Wanted list along with Pettigrew, he cast the spell anointing Dolores as the new headmistress. He then informed her of the interview with McGonagall and convinced Dolores to take McGonagall as her second.

Dolores agreed. However, it was obvious her mind was elsewhere, as pictures of cats were starting to appear all over the walls.

Fudge groaned. More cats. Couldn't it have been dragons, Blast-Ended Skrewts, or something like that?

To be continued...
Update #106 through Update #110

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Misagnissa

Update #106

April 5, 1996
St. Catchpole Roman Catholic Church
St. Catchpole
England
Next PoV: 107 -- Nagini

Father Richardson stared at the letter he'd just received from the cardinal. He'd heard strange things before, but this was a bit much. Granted, His Holiness had always been a bit of a religious reformer. But this was more than a reform. It was revolutionary.

Dear Father Richardson:

I have just returned from an interview with His Holiness, John Paul II. In attendance was a good 75% of the Congress of Cardinals as well as the ghost of the prophet Samuel and his interpreter, Amr Suleiman Hassan.

The Pope reported that he has spent a great deal of timing consulting with Samuel. Although the prophet was pleased that he and His Holiness shared several of their views, Samuel was disturbed by something he witnessed during a visit to the Vatican.

The Pope was showing Samuel and his interpreter around St. Peter's Square when the prophet noticed an icon showing the Savior on a cross. Much to His Holiness's surprise, the icon offended Samuel greatly. Samuel then explained that he considered it to be an idol and that it was inappropriate to have it in the courtyard of the holiest shrine of the "Christian sect", as he called it. The Pope explained that the icon was not there as an object of worship but as an object to inspire pilgrims.

Nevertheless, the prophet was adamant. He brought up the doctrine known to Jewish theologians as ma'arat ayin. That is, people who are unfamiliar with the nature of the icon may see people clustering around the idol and reach the heretical conclusion that Christianity supports idol worship. He told the Pope to remove the icon from the courtyard and replace it with another spiritually moving scene or object which could to be mistaken for a graven image.

My dear son in Christ, you are hearing me right. Samuel endorses a form of iconoclasm. He wants all of the "sects" to remove objects from houses of worship which could be mistaken for idols. He said he was going to send emissaries to the other Christian sects and to the Jews as well once he figured out who their primary authority was.

He went on to explain that the "sect in charge of the Jerusalem Temple" -- that is, Islam -- is iconoclastic. He is starting to believe that since the heir to the Jerusalem Temple is under Islamic control, Islam should be probably be starting point for a reformed faith that recombines all three Abrahamic religions.

Needless to say, this caused an uproar. It also put the Pope in a very tricky position. As you are
aware, the Pope's view of Samuel is that Samuel is to serve as a very powerful authority on religious matters -- after all, he was a prophet and biblical figure -- as long his teachings do not conflict with those of Jesus. Samuel's return isn't exactly the second coming of Christ, but it's close. If Samuel and Jesus disagree, of course, Jesus supersedes Samuel.

One of the cardinals brought up the possibility that Samuel might not be saying what the interpreter claimed he was saying. Remember that the interpreter is in fact Muslim. If the interpreter was biased and realized he was the only person to understand Samuel's speech, he may try to sway everyone to Islam using Samuel's authority.

The Pope invited a monk fluent in ancient Hebrew to the meeting and asked him to confirm that the interpreter was in fact saying the same thing Samuel was. The monk listened to a good hour and a half of Samuel's talk and concluded that the interpreter was indeed translating Samuel's speech impartially.

With this settled, the Pope reluctantly concluded that Samuel's view had to be adopted and that congregations should do what they can to ensure that the transition to a more iconoclastic ritual be as painless as possible. If it proves to be too difficult, His Holiness said he'd talk to Samuel for advice.

Here are some of the suggestions the Pope recommended.

1. Remove the icon and replace it with something else conducive to prayer or meditation which will serve the same purpose.

2. Keep the icon there but place a warning in a prominent location indicating that the icon is only intended as an inspirational aid.

3. If your church has both statue-like icons and paintings, remove the statue-like ones first as those are least likely to be considered graven images.

4. Move the icon into another room which is not used during the actual service: for instance, an auditorium or vestry.

5. If you do wish to dispose of an icon, please do so with the respect and veneration the icon deserves as a religious artifact. You may consider donating it to a museum.

The Pope admits that this may be a shock to people. However, sometimes following the will of God may be difficult. We have our own crosses to bear.

If you have any questions, feel free to contact me or your local bishop.

Your friend in Christ."

It was signed by the cardinal. Underneath the cardinal's signature was a photograph of an odd expression burned into paper. It was handwritten, but obviously by a different person. It seemed to be the word "JKYMW" written in a very strange font.

The letter was followed by a postscript.

"P.S. One of the people I spoke to in the Vatican reports that several of the cardinals are trying to pressure His Holiness into being a little more wary of Samuel. They're not convinced Samuel is who he says he is. Several of the things Samuel claims don't match up with the Bible, for instance. His
Holiness said he'd take it under advisement, particularly after this revelation about the iconoclasm. Until then, we'll keep on following Samuel.

"P.P.S. That JKYMW is actually Samuel's signature. They're ancient Hebrew characters. The J is a Lamed, the K is an Aleph, and so forth. The word transliterates as ShMW-l"

Father Richardson walked into the main sanctuary and looked at the statue of Jesus hanging from the ceiling. What should he do with it? He didn't want to destroy it. Maybe he could put it in the basement, in the community hall, for the time being. If the Pope and Samuel changed their minds about the iconoclasm, he'd bring it back.

He wondered if Xeno Lovegood would be able to conjure something up that would float in midair and inspire the people. A fountain? Some living vines?

He headed to the telephone to contact Xeno. As he did, an amused thought came to him. Regardless of what happened, he could always argue that this was indeed a form of Orthodox Christianity...

To be continued...

-------------

Update #107

April 7, 1996
Somewhere
England
Next PoV: 108 -- Vernon Dursley

Nagini slithered through the grass, her beady eyes focused intently on the house in front of her. It had taken a while, but she had finally picked up Igor Karkaroff's scent. He was holed up in that house, and it was up to her to take him out.

Her master had been guiding her along the entire time. However, his messages to her had been a bit muted of late. She had experienced a moment of absolute shock a little under a month ago, one which had seared her mind. She hadn't been able to place it, but thankfully it hadn't recurred. She had cried out to her master, and her master had responded and comforted her -- albeit in his more muted form. He had also, much to her surprise, thanked her profusely for her assistance and told her that she had helped him to overcome his latest adversary.

This last statement puzzled her a little. What exactly had she done? She didn't remember doing something specific to help him deal with an enemy who had been threatening him. Granted, she'd bitten various Muggles and threatened a few wizards. But she'd never been placed in a situation when the master's life itself had been in jeopardy.

She couldn't describe how her master's signal had been muted. However, it felt as if it he was talking to her from a great distance, or possibly through someone else. But he was there. He was sure of it.

She recalled when she had first met him. He had apparently stumbled across her den while she had been sunning herself. She had been startled, naturally, and had immediately reared back to bite him. That was when he had started talking to her and explained he meant her no harm.

The sheer shock of a human speaking in a language she could understand caused her to reel back in shock. Voldemort, mistaking her retreat as a preparation for an attack, spoke to her a little more
urgently. Eventually, she lowered herself back down to the ground, curious about this new creature. The two had been friends ever since.

Voldemort had been the only human she had ever met who was a Parselmouth. He said there were others out there, but they were few and far between.

At the moment, her human friend was extremely excited and itching to get his hands on this Karkaroff fellow. She had been a bit puzzled as to why he wanted Karkaroff killed -- hadn't he been one of her master's friends? However, when her master gave orders, she followed them. He'd nearly killed her once, after all. She owed him her life.

She explored the perimeter of the house. It wouldn't make any sense for her to go in through the door. After all, this Karkaroff fellow could have placed a hex on the doorstep which would obliterate anyone trying to come in after him. The house was made of stout brick, without any little holes or crannies for her to sneak in. The windows were all shut, so she couldn't come in that way. That left only one option: the chimney.

Making sure to hide in the grass for as long as she could, she crawled up the side of the house and eventually made it onto the roof. All her instincts told her to lie on the roof and take a nap on the warm tile, but she dismissed them. She had a mission to accomplish. Once she had bitten Karkaroff, then she could relax.

She headed over to the chimney and crawled up the outside. Hoping that Karkaroff wouldn't start a fire while she was in the chimney, she crawled over the lip of the chimney and started heading down, towards the fireplace.

The chimney was dark, which was good. However, the footing was a bit treacherous, with soot and ash plastered to the inside. It would be difficult, but she thought she could handle it.

She was about twenty feet from the entrance to the fireplace when she heard a whirring sound -- could that be what her master called a Sneakoscope? There was some abrupt motion down below and a human-language word which his master said was a bad word in Bulgarian. A few seconds later, she heard footsteps heading away from the fireplace. Damn, she thought. That Sneakoscope had warned him that she was coming!

She pondered what to do. There was no way she would be able to chase him through the house. She had no idea if he was going to stay in the house, so searching the house could be pointless? Furthermore, Karkaroff could have allies in the house who were waiting to hex her as soon as she emerged from the fireplace. So going down was not a good idea. Staying put wasn't a good idea, either, as it was only a matter of time until the aforementioned allies thought of checking the fireplace.

That meant up. She started heading back up the chimney again towards the roof. However, she soon realized that it would take a long time for her to come back up due to the sooty walls. She eventually reached the top, lay out flat on top of the chimney, and surveyed the area. No Karkaroff in sight. It was unlikely that he would have left the house. That meant he was still inside somewhere. This posed a problem.

She knew she had to kill Karkaroff. However, she preferred to catch him by surprise, before he and his friends could react. With the Sneakoscope there, that wouldn't work. If he were ready for her, he might be able to hex her. Humans did not fight fair, she mused.
She didn't like the idea of waiting. However, it was the only thing that made sense. She decided to wait in the grass, motionless, outside the house and see if he came out. Better luck next time, she thought. In the meantime, perhaps she could sun herself out here. After all, he may leave the house thinking that the threat was gone. This was a good vantage point, after all.

--------------------------------

Igor Karkaroff nearly jumped out of his shoes when the Sneakoscope went off. How the hell had Voldemort found him here? He then realized, bitterly, that how was irrelevant. The fact remained that he'd been caught.

He was alone in the house, so he didn't have anyone available to back him up. There was no way one of the Death Eaters would be coming down the chimney, and he'd probably hear the windows if they creaked open. That meant the door. They were going to come in the door.

He couldn't Apparate out because he'd managed to trap himself in the house as a side effect of the same spell designed to keep everyone else OUT. He cast a spell on the door to slow them down and then headed for his safe room in the basement. A few waves of his wand transformed the staircase into a brick wall. It locked him in the basement, but that was better than having people walking in on him. This done, he cast a series of hexes which would ensure that anyone trying to get close to him would get a nasty welcome.

He waited for a good half hour. Nothing happened. Eventually, the Sneakoscope stopped whirring. It sounded as if the threat had passed. Karkaroff had no way to know that the Sneakoscope had shut down simply because the distance between Nagini (on the roof) and Karkaroff (in the basement) had gotten too large for her to be considered a threat.

He pondered what to do next. Presumably the Death Eater who was tailing him would be back, this time with reinforcements. He needed help, and need it big time.

For the first time in his life, he considered asking Dumbledore for asylum.

To be continued...

-----------

Update #108
-----------

April 7, 1996
4 Privet Drive
Surrey
England

Next PoV: 109 -- Jennifer Bullock

-----------

HORCRUXES LEFT: 6 (Harry, tiara, locket, ring, snake, cup)

Vernon Dursley never thought that he'd actually be able to get Britain for Humans off the ground. He had his wife and son to take care of, after all. However, that was before he'd met Isabel Miller. The young woman seemed to have a gift for organization and had helped out immensely. Granted Petunia hadn't been particularly keen on seeing her hanging out with him all the time. But she learned to tolerate it once she realized what Isabel could do.

Both he and his wife were convinced that something had to be done to put the wizards in their place. However, Dudley did not. It had never occurred to him that their pride and joy could interfere with their cause.
Dudley had been vehemently anti-wizard -- or at least anti-Harry -- until that mysterious incident back in July where something -- Vernon still wasn't entirely certain -- had scared the hell out of him. Originally, Dudley had thought Harry had just staged the whole thing to make fun of him. However, things had started to come back to Dudley over the succeeding months, shortly after Harry had headed off to that "school" of his. Time healed all wounds, including the trauma induced by the attack.

It had taken him a while, but Dudley eventually figured out what had happened. He had told his father that he had been attacked by a hooded figure in a black robe [recall Dudley has the Z gene, inherited from Petunia's mother, so he can see dementors; he is the reverse of Mr. Wong] which had tried to lift him off the ground. He remembered terrible despair and a biting cold. He had been convinced that he was going to die.

That was before some glowing...animal...appeared out of nowhere and frightened away the hooded figure. The animal had looked like an obvious magical construct to him, and sure enough Harry had been pointing his wand at the animal, trying to get it to do his bidding.

Dudley still didn't care for Harry all that much. However, he could not deny the fact that, as far as he could tell, Harry had saved his life. And he had done so in a way which would have been impossible were it not for Harry's Wizarding abilities. The incident had caused Dudley to start having mixed emotions about wizards.

Vernon did NOT want Dudley spouting good things about wizards during a Britain for Humans gathering at his house. He supposed, however, that if Dudley were to do so, he could just say that someone had ensorcelled him. After all, that giant had given Dudley a temporary tail. Who knew what side effects magic could have on its victims?

Marge had been acting strangely ever since Harry had inflated her like a balloon and floated her out the window. Then again, Marge had always been a bit strange. There was no way to tell if she had gotten any weirder since she had been attacked.

Fortunately, Britain for Humans had been prospering despite their founder's son's divided loyalties. There were now no fewer than 25 chapters spread throughout the United Kingdom. Several of them had popped up in Ireland. One of them had appeared on the Isle of Man, of all places. Most of them were doing what they could to try to get their political leaders to pass anti-wizard legislation. For the most part, they had been unsuccessful. But here and there, cities had issued ordinances telling the wizards that they had to leave by the end of 1996.

There had only been one incident which had had the potential for disaster: the St. Catchpole church attack. Vernon hadn't been particularly thrilled about the idea of attacking a church simply because the Pope was a wizard. After all, it was unlikely that there would be lots of wizards in the church. The only people who would be affected would be Catholic Muggles who had believed in their faith even before the Pope had come out as a wizard. He'd tried to talk Isabel out of it. However, the fiery woman seemed to be as anti-Catholic as she was anti-wizard. She basically overruled him and gave the St. Catchpole chapter permission for the operation.

The operatives found themselves in big trouble, however. Apparently there actually HAD been a wizard in church at the time -- and it had been one of the congregants, not the priest. The wizard had promptly done what Vernon would have expected, hexing people all over the place in revenge for the attack. Judging from the fact that a good 75% of the people in the St. Catchpole chapter had no memory of the attack, it seemed as if the wizards had done what they could to cover up the attack.
with their Obliviators.

Britain for Humans got some bad publicity as a result of the church attack. Many of the participants were put in jail. However, the Ministry's response had actually helped the movement a great deal. A complete Obliviation would have had no long-term effects, and no Obliviation at all would just allow Britain for Humans to make the news. The botched Obliviation, however, served as proof that wizards were not to be trusted. Participant A had no memory of the attacks, but Participant B -- whose memories were intact -- remembered talking to Participant A on the telephone and overhearing A's Obliviation. This left B with both experience under his belt and the knowledge the wizards were out to get everyone. That was a good combination.

It was now well known throughout Britain that Vernon Dursley was Britain for Humans's founder and president, whereas Isabel Miller was effectively the group's CEO. They made a formidable team. However, Isabel was a genius who managed to plan everything so that there was no way that the authorities could trace any of the attacks to the top.

Vernon's ruminations were interrupted by the doorbell. He frowned: he wasn't expecting any guests. He debated opening the safe in the living room and withdrawing his new revolver, but decided against it. Scratching his head, he went over to the door and opened it.

Three police officers were standing in the doorway. Vernon looked at them, puzzled. "Good afternoon, Officers. Is there a problem?"

The leader officer responded with a question of his own. "Are you Mr. Vernon Walter Dursley, husband of Petunia Flora Evans Dursley and guardian to Harry James Potter and Dudley Vernon Dursley?"

Vernon's eyebrows shot up. What the hell was this? Cautiously, he said. "I am. Is there something wrong?"

The officer didn't bat an eye. Instead, he nodded to the two men next to him, and they both put their hands on their gun belts. "Mr. Dursley, you and your wife have been implicated by Frederick Davidson of St. Catchpole. You are under arrest for disturbing the peace, plotting to attack a house of worship, and child abuse of Harry James Potter. We have a warrant. Raise your hands over your head with your palms open."

Vernon stared at the officers incredulously, but he complied. He had thought that he had insulated himself from the St. Catchpole crowd, but if the wizards had managed to get their hands on some of the attackers, God knows what they could do! And child abuse? What the hell? Aloud: "What is this? What are you talking about?"

"You are to come with us to hear testimony from Frederick Davidson, your nephew, and several other people. Until the trial is concluded, you will relinquish custody of your children, both of whom will be housed in Wool's Orphanage when school is not in session. Dudley will be moved in immediately, and Harry will join him once he finishes the Ministry of Magic's sentence of house arrest."

Vernon's mind raced. He hadn't been particularly nice to Harry, but he didn't think he'd abused him! Feeling like he had to say something, he stammered that he had never abused Harry.

The officer explained as the other two put him in handcuffs. "We discovered Joanne Rowling's interview of your nephew in the Daily Mail while we were searching for information on the St.
Catchpole attack. Needless to say, that piqued our interests, so we asked around and badgered the Ministry of Magic into letting one of us talk to Harry. I'm sorry, sir, but I think we've got a case. We're fairly certain that we'll be able to book you on one of those three charges. In the meantime, we'd to ask you some questions about a certain Miss Isabel Hannah Miller."

And with that, the officers frogmarched him into the house to go pick up his wife and son. Vernon was in shock, to say the least. However, he was thankful for at least two things: he hadn't been wearing the gun when he had been arrested, and Isabel was currently somewhere in Scotland trying to set up a new chapter...

To be continued...

-------------------

Update #109
-----------

April 8, 1996
Bullock Residence
Little Hangleton
England
Next PoV: 110 - Travis Radner

HORCRUXES LEFT: 6 (Harry, tiara, locket, ring, snake, cup)

Jennifer Bullock was at her wits' end. She'd always thought that her husband had been a little strange. However, he'd gone completely off the wall ever since the therapist had recovered the repressed memory of his being kidnapped by the half-trained wizards and used as a guinea pig in some bizarre experiment.

She understood his ill will towards the wizards. However, she had put her foot down when he had mentioned that he was thinking of creating a Britain for Humans chapter which was devoted entirely to ferreting out wizards with Muggle parents. Britain for Humans had made the news a lot recently -- supposedly the authorities had just arrested two of their leaders on charges ranging from child endangerment to being a public nuisance. She had heard bad things about the movement and did NOT want her husband involved, especially if it required attacking or persecuting wizards. Phillip had grumbled about this a little but had eventually given in.

Had her husband started taking drugs about the same time as the explosion in the cemetery? This type of behavior was so unlike him. Yet the doctor she had described her husband's symptoms to -- quietly -- didn't believe that he was operating under the influence of drugs. If anything, it seemed almost as if he'd been possessed by a demon who didn't like wizards. Jennifer had scoffed at that, telling the therapist that there were no such things as demons.

The therapist, of course, had responded by saying that three months ago he'd have said that there were no such things as wizards. If wizards couldn't exist, why couldn't demons? The explanation was as likely as his being abducted by the wizards.

Neither she nor Phillip had been particularly religious. However, the comment about the demon had her worried. So, she went to her church and set up an appointment to have a spiritual leader perform an exorcism on her husband. She was not entirely surprised to find that the exorcism had no effect. If anything, her husband had found the whole thing rather amusing.

The final straw came when she walked out into the garden only to find her husband hissing at
something on the ground. What did he think he was, a snake? As if that hadn't been bad enough, a
decent-sized snake HAD actually been in the garden at the time! Jennifer had immediately raced
back into the kitchen and slammed a frying pan onto the reptile's head. Her husband, of course,
complained that Nachash hadn't been doing any harm and shouldn't have been killed. Nachash,
apparently, had been the snake. Good grief, he thought he could talk to snakes too now?

For the first time in her life, she began to contemplate divorce. She thanked God that the kids were
already grown. Several of her friends had tried to talk her out of it, stating that they'd overcome
bigger obstacles during their marriage. Jennifer had countered, however, that Phillip turning into a
raving lunatic who thought he could talk to snakes was something that NO ONE could have possibly
suspected.

Right now, she was in the kitchen, trying to cook dinner. She had taken up cooking again as a major
hobby for the first time since college -- it demanded all her attention and took her mind off the
problems with Phillip.

She had just started working on the tuna casserole when the doorbell rang. Her husband said that
he'd get it, which was good. Safely secluded in the kitchen, she heard the door open and her husband
greeting the guest.

"May I help you?"

A man's voice responded. "I believe so, sir. My name is Lucius de Mort. I'm here to pick up my
nephew Paul."

Jennifer grunted. Paul de Mort? Who the hell was Paul de Mort? She didn't recognize the name, and
she doubted that her husband did, either. She fully expected him to tell the guest that he'd gotten the
wrong house.

Instead, she heard her husband say, almost as if he was being prompted: "Yup, Paul de Mort is here.
Please, close the door and slide the curtains over the windows -- he's a bit allergic to light."

Jennifer rolled her eyes as she heard the doors and curtains moving. Allergic to light? What had he
gotten into now? She couldn't let her attention waver too much from the food, however.

What happened next, however, changed her mind about the food. There was an odd thump in the
room next door, almost like a body falling to the floor. It was followed by a weak, raspy voice he'd
never heard before.

"Welcome, Uncle Lucius. I've been expecting you."

The visitor responded. "It's good to see you again, my lord. I take it you have the bone in this
house?"

"I do, Lucius. All we need to do now is go to the Burrow and take some blood from our dear friend
Harry. Once we've got that, we're all set. Wormtail can perform the ritual when he's ready."

Jennifer dropped everything and started heading towards the door to the living room. Had Phillip just
gotten involved with a group of Satanists? She didn't know who this Wormtail was, but judging by
the person's name he didn't sound particularly pleasant. And judging from "Paul de Mort's" voice,
the man seemed older than his uncle! Something very strange was going on here.

She opened the door, took one look around the room, and gasped. Meanwhile, the people already in
the room stared at her in surprise.

Her husband's body was lying on the floor. He looked dead, or at least very badly hurt. Next to him was something which looked like a shrunken version of an old man, completely naked. She couldn't tell if it was an injured child or an old dwarf. Finally, standing in the doorway was an elegantly dressed gentleman with blonde hair and an elaborate walking stick. The man exuded wealth and power.

The three people stared at each other for a second. Finally, the old man spoke.

"Get rid of her, Lucius, and let's get out of here."

The blonde man nodded and extracted something which looked suspiciously like a magic wand from his cane. Bloody hell -- this was probably one of the insane wizards who had experimented on her husband! She had no idea what he was going to do, but she didn't want to find out. She screamed and raced into the kitchen, slamming the door in the man's face. Meanwhile, the man shouted a strange word -- something which sounded like "Abracadabra". There was a green flash and a rather large bang.

Jennifer didn't like this at all. This man was indeed nutters, she thought. He had just incapacitated her husband and had this "nephew" of his as a backup. Two on one, with at least one of the enemies a wizard?

It was time to run.

She slammed doors behind her, heading for the garage. If she could get to the car, perhaps she'd be able to get away from this guy. She made a mental note to run over any brooms she saw in the area -- if they were relying on brooms as their means of escape, they'd probably find themselves in a bit of a bind. She heard the man following her, taunting her that she wouldn't be able to escape.

She reached the garage and jumped into the car. The blonde man burst into the garage seconds later and fired a green beam at her. It smashed into the rear window and shattered it. Gunning the motor, she burst out of the house and headed down the street.

She didn't see any unfamiliar brooms or cars in the area. It looked like she'd caught a break -- the man had arrived on foot. She headed towards the police station to report the incident and ask for protection.

She had gone approximately one block when something abruptly materialized in the middle of the road. It was the blonde man. He had somehow managed to teleport from her house to right in front of her!

The man raised his wand. Jennifer ducked, and another green beam shattered her windshield. Realizing that the next one would likely be aimed at her head, she tried to keep her head low. Unfortunately, that made it more difficult for her to see the road. Before she realized it, she'd run off the side of the road and hit the curb. Instinctively, she stuck her head up over the steering wheel to see what had happened.

The blonde man was waiting for her. And this time, he didn't miss.

Five minutes later, Lucius Malfoy Apparated out of Little Hangleton, leaving a rather confused town behind. At his side, traveling by Side-Along Apparation, was a small child wearing too-large clothes
stolen from the Bullock house. In the child's pants pocket was a small piece of burnt bone.

To be continued....

----------------

Update #110
-----------

April 8, 1996
Near Phi Beta Epsilon Fraternity
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Cambridge, Massachusetts
United States of America
Next PoV: 111 - Jason Morgenstern

---------------

HORCRUXES LEFT: 6 (Harry, tiara, locket, ring, snake, cup)

Travis Radner swore under his breath. He should have known not to bring a veela onto the MIT campus. Particularly when the ratio of men to women was approximately 2:1.

Poor Jeannette had been completely out of her element. She had made it out of the I-Entry door out into the MacGregor courtyard without incident. Unfortunately, that was about as far as she made it. Several members of Phi Beta Epsilon who sitting outside on their roof deck started ogling and whistling at her like mad. Jeannette, of course, began staring at them curiously, probably because they were been the first Muggles she'd ever seen. This only encouraged them further, and eventually they started taking their shirts off and making muscles even though it was barely 55 degrees outside and they weren't exactly the most gorgeous men in the world. Radner eventually had to bodily interpose himself between the two men and their quarry to prevent them from running down and chasing her around.

Things just got worse from there. A young man on a bike turned to stare at her instead of the road, ran into the curb, and fell on his face. Radner, thinking of the diplomatic opportunity here, took out his wand to help with the injury. Unfortunately, the biker had had the bad luck to make his tumble right outside the entrances to Burton and Kappa Sigma. This left the veela at the mercy of two more fraternity boys and a Jewish student from Burton who promptly walked away from the woman he'd left the dorm with to chat with Jeannette. By the time Radner was done healing the fallen boy, she'd been handed two phone numbers, given an email address, and asked if she was Jewish. From what Radner knew of the woman, she'd probably never met any Jews and had no idea what a telephone or computer was.

He instructed Jeannette to put her hood over her head so no one could see her. That didn't help much, as people walking down the sidewalk towards them could see her more or less. One poor fellow walked into a tree, tearing Radner away again; by the time the Secretary had returned, Jeannette promptly asked him who Princess Leia was and whether Muggles princesses always wore slave outfits. His explanation was interrupted by a car horn honking at Jeannette, who -- of course -- lowered her hood to stare at the fascinating Muggle vehicle.

That does it, he thought. Holding her hand -- and carefully making sure not to look at her face, for at 73 even he had a few urges -- he cast a Disillusionment Charm over her, making her invisible to everyone. That worked fine until someone literally walked into her in Lobby 7. Both Jeannette and the woman who had collided with her fell down in surprise. This gave Radner a chance to extricate himself from this awkward situation by apologizing to the fallen woman and helping her up. He couldn't just leave, after all, because he also couldn't see the Disillusioned veela and was worried
he'd leave her behind. Eventually, he felt Jeannette's hand squeeze his -- he could tell she was now a little frightened -- and continued his journey down the hall.

Finally, he reached his destination: room 6-120. The biology professor was already there, as was a large audience. It seemed that the announcement had gone out in time. There were at least 100 people in the room, he thought. Of course, maybe 70 of them were male.

He heard a whisper from the empty air next to them. "Tell them that if any of them even TOUCH me, I'm going to turn them all into toads. The only reason I haven't gone harpy on the men we've already encountered was because a few of them was cute. Besides, you told me that I'm serving as a bit of a diplomat here."

Radner grinned and looked over at the biologist, who nodded nodded and held up his slides. "I'm all set. Where's the young lady you were telling me about?"

Radner nodded at the empty space next to him. "Right here. She's holding my hand. I've made her invisible because veela...well, have a tendency to affect men in a certain way."

The biologist looked around the room. "You mean she's..naked? They don't wear clothes?"

Radner smiled. "No, Doctor. They wear clothes. However...well, do you know the Iliad and the Odyssey?"

"Yes."

"Remember the story about the Sirens? They lured many members of Odysseus's crew to their deaths and nearly seduced Odysseus himself?"

"Yes."

"Those were veela. The woman I'm about to expose could very well pass for one of the Sirens. Keep an eye on the audience, would you? I don't want this to get ugly -- partially because veela can turn into hideous creatures when angered."

The biologist nodded. "Good to know. Well, let's get this show on the road."

Radner nodded and raised his voice. "Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to this special press conference of the American Department of Magic and Life Science Department at MIT. We have come to announce a new breakthrough -- and add another branch to the tree of humanity known as Homo sapiens.

The audience started talking excitedly among themselves. Radner raised his hand. "Before we begin, there is something very important you must know. This is the species associated with the Sirens, the women Odysseus encountered in the Odyssey. They are all female, and extremely attractive females to boot. Most men will fall head over heels for them.

The audience's excitement picked up a notch as Radner continued. "I ask all men here to consider carefully whether they have the maturity to stay. You will almost certainly develop a crush on this woman. You are to leave her alone regardless of what your nether regions are telling you. If you do not think you will be able to control yourselves, you may leave now. Rest assured that if you upset her she will turn you into a toad."
The biologist cut in at this point. "We could always use some more toads for our experiments. We've been running short."

Radner watched the crowd. Most of the men gritted their teeth and stayed in their seats. A few left, however. When the audience had settled back down, he drew a deep breath.

"Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to introduce a member of Homo sapiens sirena, commonly known as a veela. Her name is Miss Jeannette de Lourdes. She has a master's degree from an institution of advanced education in Chicago. Be advised that she will be wearing a hood so you can't see her face that clearly. She has chosen to do this to prevent any...inappropriate behavior among guests with a Y chromosome."

With that, he removed the Disillusionment Charm. A good two thirds of the room groaned, oohed, or aahed. Even with the hood on, most of the men's eyes went as wide as saucers. Several fidgeted in their seats. Radner cast a baleful glare around the room, and within a few minutes everyone had settled back down.

Radner continued. "Veela are magical humanoids of great beauty and intelligence. They are sentient, just like you and me, and are to be treated as such. They tend to be take offense if someone calls them anything other than human."

Jeannette put her hands on her hips and grunted. "That 'they' includes me. Rest assured, you don't want to see me angry. Trust me. All veela have a form of shape-shifting ability, and you DON'T want to see what I can turn into when I'm mad."

One of the students cut in. "Like the Incredible Hulk?"

Jeannette looked at the speaker, puzzled, as Radner and the biologist both glared at him. "I'm sorry, I'm not sure who that is. The only Muggles I've heard about so far are Princess Leia, Joe Hsu, Gillian Anderson, and David Pope. There was also a young man in with a little round hat who asked me if I was Jewish."

The crowd laughed as Radner turned to her and explained. "The Incredible Hulk is a fictional Muggle superhero who turns into an extremely powerful monster when he gets angry. He gets really big and strong, his skin turns green, and he goes berserk."

The veela gaped at him. "He's an Animagus or Metamorphmagus?"

The biologist laughed. "No, ma'am. He's an entirely fictional character, and he does not cast spells. He uses superhuman endurance and strength to overcome adversaries."

Jeannette laughed, and half the men groaned wistfully. "Ah, in that case, I am a bit like him. I get mad, and I change form and become really scary."

Radner didn't like where this was going. Linking up a living person with a fantasy superhero was not a good idea. He needed to change the subject quickly. "Veela are an extremely rare subspecies of humanity. Jeannette here suspects that there are fewer than three million veela on the planet. She claims that several well-known supermodels, who will remain nameless, are veela but have not told the Muggles."

One of the men in the room chuckled at that. "Not surprising, given the way I react to them."
The biologist cut in. "Indeed, my good man. At any rate, Secretary Radner has known about veela for a while. Traditionally, they have gone under the name Homo sirena because it was believed that veela could only produce live offspring with wizards, not Muggles. The general consensus is that in order to be a member of Homo sapiens, the species in question must be able to produce living offspring with Muggles."

Radner smiled. "During the tour of I-Entry a while back, we encountered a Muggle woman who appeared to have some veela traits. Intrigued, we took some blood samples from this woman, some random Muggle women, and some veela. Was it possible that, against all odds, a veela bred with a Muggle?"

He paused and nodded to the biologist, who continued the presentation. "The answer, as it turns out, was undeniably YES. We believe that the Muggle woman in question is roughly 1/32 veela. She knew of no Wizarding ability, or unusually seductive women, in her family for at least three generations. She has neither of the Wizarding genes. This meant that at some point in the late 19th or early 20th century, a veela mated with a Muggle and produced live offspring. And there we have it, ladies and gentlemen. Homo sapiens sirena.

The biologist then went on discussing various proteins and chromosome markers. Genes V1-V35 didn't seem all that interesting to most of the people, primarily because they were all staring at a visibly irritated Jeannette. Eventually, one of the students raised his hand.

Radner nodded to him. "I see we have a question from the audience?"

The student winked at his friend. "Is it possible for magical ability to not appear in a child even if both parents are wizards?"

Radner nodded. "Yes. Such children are called Squibs. Why do you ask?"

"Simple, Mr. Secretary. We cannot prove that this Muggle's ancestor did not have wizard ability at the time he mated with the veela. After all, the veela's son could have been a Squib and raised as a Muggle. Is that not true?"

The biologist slowly nodded. "It's possible. However, Squibs are not very common. I'd say the odds of that happening are relatively low."

"But it's nonzero?"

The biologist nodded. "It's nonzero, but very low. Less than two percent. The people in charge have already added the sapiens to the name of the species. They believe the error is low enough to justify it."

The speaker smiled. "In that case, it behooves that we, the students from MIT, help the advancement of science by determining this new species's status once and for all. We're all Muggles, and she's a veela. Does that suggest anything to you? For the sake of science, of course."

Radner and the biologist stared at each other, troubled. The student had a valid point. Neither of them could deny it. And if they admitted it...

Jeannette answered for them. Smiling sweetly at the crowd, she said. "You have a point, young man. That would be a very worthwhile experiment, especially if you looked outside the room to find a veela who would be willing to participate. Looking inside the room won't do you any good, as the
veela in this room are not interested in your proposal."

Men groaned, and the speaker's confidence wavered. "But..."

Jeannette's smile broadened. "I'll give you to the count of three to stop staring at me and leave the room. One...two..."

The biologist started humming the theme song for the Incredible Hulk.

Jeannette's eyes narrowed. "Two and a half..."

The student bolted, allowing Radner and the biologist to conclude the talk in peace.

To be continued...
Update #111 through Update #115

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Mislagnissa

Update #111

-----------
April 9, 1996
Room 2-190
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Cambridge, Massachusetts
United States of America
Next PoV: 112 - Patrick Dursley-Burgess

HORCRUXES LEFT: 6 (Harry, tiara, locket, ring, snake, cup)

Jason Morgenstern stared in disbelief at the examination paper. He had studied all night for this exam, having gone so far as to tell Guinevere not to visit. He thought he'd understood the text from back to back and had gone over most of the problem sets.

Yet the test still seemed to be giving him problems. Judging from the questions he'd answered so far, he'd be lucky to get a 70 on this one. The only good sign, however, was that looking around the room at his fellow classmates he wasn't alone. He didn't see one happy face in the room.

"6. Suppose you have a broken calculator. You turn it on and you have a 0 show up in the display. Show that you can cause any positive integer to appear in the display. The catch? The only buttons which work are the square root button, square button, tangent button, cosine button, inverse button, and 1/x". [For the record, I was presented with this problem during a high school state advanced math competition -- I believe the second level MAML -- and got it right after a LOT of thought. It was such an unusual problem that I'll never forget it]

He thought about it and thought about it. Finally, he came across a solution. It was very complicated, but it seemed to work. Grinning, he wrote it down and headed off to the next problem. He had just finished reading the next question when he saw a dim red light from inside his backpack. Frowning, he glanced down at the backpack and saw that the Remembrall had turned on.

Great, he thought. Now I have to deal with this test while simultaneously being pestered that I forgot something. I can't focus on both things at the same time. Let's get the test out of the way -- that's more important.

The next two questions were relatively straightforward. It gave him at least a little bit of time to think about what he'd forgotten. He had his keys -- that had been embarrassing last time. He'd been a bit surprised that he'd noticed the Remembrall midway through the test. He figured he'd have seen it glowing right after he'd taken his seat. Then a thought occurred to him -- something which made him drop his pencil momentarily.

Could it be that the Remembrall had gone on DURING THE EXAMINATION? If that was the case, it was alerting him to a mistake in one of the earlier questions. He suspected that it had been question 6, the one about the broken calculator. After all, he'd first noticed the red glow right after he'd gone on to question 7.
He didn't know what to do. Was this cheating? He didn't want to cheat, and having something tell him that he had made a mistake during an exam could be seen as a cheat. On the other hand, he must have once known the material and therefore studied it. Otherwise, the Remembrall would not have gone on after he had made the mistake.

There was one way to find out. He went back to question 6 and looked over his answer.

"Consider the number you have initially on the screen. Consider that to be tan^2 x. Hit the square root button: you now have tan x. Hit inverse tangent. This will give you x. Hit cosine to get cos x. Then hit 1/x to give you sec^2 x. Since tan^2 x + 1 = sec^2 x, the process will increase the value originally in the display by 1. You can repeat this indefinitely to get any positive integer."

It seemed OK to me. He looked it over for maybe 30 more seconds. Then he saw the flaw.

"Hit cosine to get cos x. Then hit 1/x to give you sec^2 x."

He forgot to put the square in. What he should have said was,

"Hit cosine to get cos x. Hit the square button to get cos^2 x. Then hit 1/x to give you sec^2 x."

He hesitated at first. Would he have seen the mistake had it not been for the Remembrall? He wasn't sure. However, he thought he probably would have done so. He always left time at the end of an exam to double-check all of his answers. He figured that he'd have caught it later on anyway.

Taking a deep breath, he made the correction. Seconds later, the Remembrall turned off. Good God, he thought. I was right. It was alerting me to the mistake on the test.

It turned out that the last three questions were extremely difficult. He barely had time to jot down a half-baked answer to question 11 when the bell rang announcing the end of the examination. He was ashamed to admit it, but the Remembrall had given him an advantage here. It had saved question 6. And judging from the reactions of the other people in the room, there weren't going to be many high scores.

He looked around the room for one of his fraternity brothers. David nodded at him, groaned, and started following him back down the labyrinth of Building 2's corridors back towards the Infinite Corridor and from there across the street into the section of campus with most of the dorms and frats.

He had to confess. It was the right thing to do. So, somewhere between Kresge and McCormick, he reached into his backpack and pulled out the now-dark Remembrall.

David looked at it curiously. "What is that thing? Is it a magical item of some sort? I saw Guinevere gave it to you."

Jason grunted. "It's a Remembrall. It glows to warn you that you've forgotten something. I often carry it around to remind myself of Guinevere. However, I have reason to believe that this may be a...problem."

"A problem? Why?"

He jerked his head back at the main buildings. "I take it you had as difficult of a time with that test as I did?"
David rolled his eyes. "Difficult? It was IMPOSSIBLE! I'd be lucky to get a 50! I never figured out questions 2, 6, and 10."

Jason nodded and pointed at the Remembrall. "David...I think this thing gave me the answer to question 6. The broken calculator one. I had gone on to question 7 when I noticed this glowing. The only explanation I could think of was that I had made a mistake in question 6."

He paused. "As it turned out, I was right. I missed part of the explanation. The ball turned off as soon as I corrected the mistake."

David's eyes went wide. "You can use that thing to cheat on tests?"

Jason gesticulated wildly with his hands. "I didn't mean to! I had no idea it would do that! What do I do? Should I turn myself in? Should I give it back to Guinevere?"

David thought for a moment. "What I'd do is keep it in my room unless you get a take-home exam, in which case you stick it in a closet until you're finished with the test."

"The closets don't lock. And if it's in the open, won't my roommate take it then? He's not doing all that well in one of the course 16 courses, and he's already used it a couple of times to remind him of ROTC meetings and so forth. He's probably going to put two and two together."

"Then put it under lock and key and invent some kind of nonsense which says that there is a 1% cumulative chance each time other than you or Guinevere touches the device that the person who touches it will turn into a cockroach."

Jason stared at him. "WHAT? People are going to believe it! I don't want to lie to people here, and Guinevere says that people need to know the truth about what wizards can and can't do! Besides, I've already let him touch it, which sort of discredits the theory that it's dangerous."

David thought once more. "That's a personal gift from Guinevere, right?"

"Yes."

"Say Guinevere has just told you that she doesn't want it out of your sight. She wants you to remember you always. And she most definitely doesn't want this precious gift shared with other people."

Jason got the point immediately. "You know, David, that might work. It sounds like something she'd do. I'll do that. Thanks for the help, my friend."

"Don't mention it. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got to visit someone in Baker. I'll see you at dinner."

To be continued...

-------------

Update #112

-------------

April 9, 1996
Dursley-Burgess Household
Westboro, Kansas
Patrick Dursley-Burgess couldn't believe how quickly his anti-wizard movement had spread. Not only had America for Humans reached 50 chapters, several foreign countries had started their own World for Humans organization. His cousin's chapter in Britain had gotten to the point where it had actually attempted to attack a Catholic church on the grounds that the Pope was a wizard.

On the other hand, everything wasn't coming up roses for his cousin. The investigation into the church attack had brought the cops to Vernon's house, where they had arrested him on suspicion of planning the attacks -- and on child abuse charges stemming from his "mistreatment" of Harry Potter. Vernon had lost custody of the two children, and from what Patrick had been told Dudley had been put in an orphanage for the time being.

Patrick had spoken with Vernon's lawyer and had offered to host Dudley. He'd been shot down immediately, however. The British government didn't want the two children in different countries, and Harry couldn't leave England. Furthermore, Dudley, who had surprisingly warmed to Harry over the past few months, had considered moving into the Burrow with Harry. The Ministry of Magic had opposed that vehemently on the grounds that having the son of the founder of Britain for Humans in a Wizarding home was just a recipe for disaster.

He hoped Vernon would come out of this all right. Before he went to bed each night, he prayed that God would deliver his cousin from the forces surrounding him and put him in a position to help Patrick and the rest of World for Humans finish off the wizards for good.

He looked at the clock in his home office and saw that it was almost time for his next appointment. One of his duties as the head of the Westboro's America for Humans chapter was to interview promising candidates from the Westboro area and initiate them into the group. He would then introduce them to Phelps and Pitmoss so that they could get moral support and guidance. The two religious leaders were quite inspirational, and they soon kicked the new member's passion into overdrive.

The interviews Patrick liked best, however, were few and far between. They involved cases where a small, local anti-wizard militia wanted to join up with his own. These militias were often very well organized and would serve America for Humans quite well under their own officers and bylaws.

His next appointment was of a representative of one of these militias. His name was Mohatma Dameel, and he was from India. He was a member of the Council of Nine, the planning committee for an obscure -- but VERY highly organized, if Dameel's propaganda was true -- group known as the Foundation. Patrick had never heard of the Foundation before. However, that was not surprising. These militias often stayed underground until it was time to strike -- and when they struck, they REALLY put themselves on the map, either assassinating wizards or blowing up buildings.

The clock in his office struck ten. Seconds later, there was a knock on the door. Patrick's eyebrows shot up -- a high-ranking officer from an organization who actually showed up exactly on time? These guys must have military discipline in their organization!

He glanced at the door. "Who is it?"
The visitor responded in heavily-accented English. "Mohatma Dameel of the Foundation, sir. You've been expecting me."

"Indeed I have, Mr. Dameel. Come on in and have a seat."

The door opened, and a tall Indian man walked in wearing a business suit. He looked supremely confident and was carrying a walking stick. The guy had money, Patrick thought. Money and power. This Foundation may be a valuable ally.

Dameel had dark hair and a muscular physique. There were a few medals on his chest. He recognized a few of them as decorations from service in Vietnam. He’d been injured a few times and had been decorated for bravery and discipline. Wow.

Dameel followed Patrick's gaze and nodded. "Ah, yes. The tattoo. It's the insignia of my old Vietnam troop, Mr. Dursley-Burgess. A death's head skull closing its jaws on our common enemy, the serpent which is the bane of all our existence."

Patrick chuckled. "A very apt symbol for both Vietnam and America for Humans, if I should say so myself. Do you want anything to drink or eat?"

Dameel shook his head. "No thank you, sir. I'm all set. I brought my own food. Religious restrictions."

Patrick's opinion of this man shot up even more. He had no idea if the man was actually religious. However, it was a convenient excuse for him not to eat someone else's food and find himself poisoned a few hours later. This guy was smart and powerful. And he had served in Vietnam. Very interesting.

"I see you were in Vietnam. Did you see any action there?"

"Yes, Mr. Dursley-Burgess -- "

"Call me Patrick, my friend. That hyphenated last name has always been a bit of a mouthful."

Dameel grinned. "Yes, Patrick. I served on some elite units and helped clear out Khmer Rouge positions on several classified raids. One of these medals comes from me risking my own life to take out an enemy sniper and save an injured comrade."

Patrick recognized the award. "Indeed, I saw. At any rate, tell me about your Foundation. How is it organized, and how can you help us?"

Dameel lay back in his chair. "The Foundation is very large and organized. It's led by a fellow named Daniel Dillman whose whereabouts I am unfortunately unable to disclose. He's the chairman of the Council of Nine, the planning committee which oversees most of our operations. I have the privilege of being on the planning committee."

Patrick nodded. "I've heard. What type of stuff do you guys do?"
Dameel shrugged. "We use military-style operations against Wizarding targets. We've shot down a few wizards here and there with snipers. You'd be amazed how much of a splatter you get when a wizard falls off a broom from 1,000 feet."

Patrick laughed. "I can imagine. Where'd you get the guns and the training?"

"Personal weapons plus Vietnam experience, Patrick. We've also got some hidden RPG's and improvised explosive devices which we're willing to detonate to further our objectives."

Patrick whistled. "Jesus Christ, you are organized. I'm impressed. Sure, we'd love to have you on board. Is Mr. Dillman willing to take orders from me?"

Dameel nodded. "Yes, Patrick. He is. He'd prefer to be on your planning committee, but if all else fails he's willing to be the head of a local branch. Having a group without the name 'for Humans' in it would be a good way to disguise ourselves."

"Indeed it would, Mr. Dameel. You guys seem to be very good. I take it that in exchange for membership in our organization, you'll be willing to provide us with some of this materiel?"

"Yes, Patrick. Dillman has told me to tell you that he intends to do exactly that. What's more, he's got a mission he wants to run by you. Believe me, you're going to like this. It's going to be big. It's going to make that church attack look like child's play."

Patrick's eyes widened. "Really? What were you thinking?"

Dameel grinned. "As I told you, we've got some big explosive devices. Dillman was thinking of depth-charging the Quabbin Reservoir with a large bomb. I doubt the spells holding out the water will be able to protect against a huge Muggle explosion. If those spells fail --"

Patrick's jaw dropped as he realized the implications. Shuddering in pleasure, he finished the statement: " -- you knock out the entire American Department of Magic along with its False Prophet. We chop off the head of the snake, much as your tattoo was suggesting. Once the head is chopped off, the tail may wriggle for a while but the snake is still dead."

"Exactly, Patrick. What do you think? We have the material to make the device and should be able to perform the attack by Memorial Day."

Patrick stood up, smiling ear to ear. "Welcome aboard, gentlemen. Welcome aboard!!"

-------

Dameel shook the man's hand as they sealed the deal. Inside, however, he grinned. The man had fallen for it. Dilmi had thought he would, and he had. He thought that this would just knock out a few wizards and that was it. That in itself would be good for both some of the Death Eaters and America for Humans. However, there was Voldemort himself and the rest of al-Qaeda -- an expression which translated as "The Foundation" in English. Al-Qaeda had always wanted to do something big to the United States, and these amateurs were the perfect tool to use. Yes, Dana would flood. Dilmi had been pretty sure about that. However, if Dana flooded and the doors to I-Entry were open at the time, most of Boston would be underwater and what was left would have no water supply. He doubted Patrick realized that. Voldemort would have knocked out one major adversary, and al-Qaeda would have its moment in the sun.

Of course, if the plot were exposed, al-Qaeda could just deny all involvement and have the axe fall on America for Humans and only America for Humans. He, Dameel, was prepared for that.
eventuality and had told Dilmi he'd Apparate out of there -- discreetly -- before he was caught.

Osama bin Laden would have loved to see this.

To be continued...

-------------

Update #113
-------------

April 10, 1996 -- Seventh day of Passover
Al-Aqsa Mosque
Jerusalem

-------------

Next PoV: 114 - New character: Jewish religious zealot

---------

HORCRUXES LEFT: 6 (Harry, tiara, locket, ring, snake, cup)

---------

The Kohen Gadol -- formerly the imam in charge of the al-Aqsa Mosque -- was still in shock over how the first day of Passover had gone over at the mosque. Now it was the tail end of the holiday, Day 7. Judging from what had happened on the first day, he had to be ready for lots of surprises.

He had tried to talk Samuel out of inviting everyone to visit the mosque for the holiday. The Jews would not set foot on the mountain, claiming it was holy ground and they might step inside the forbidden area which had enclosed the old Jewish temple's Holy of Holies. Samuel didn't buy that at all. He explained that the Holy of Holies had been, in fact, in the roped off area at the center of the mosque where people were not allowed to tread. There was no risk of offending the Almighty as a result. He had then claimed that many Muslims would be offended at having unbelievers in the mosque. Samuel had responded by saying that as long as they believed in the God of Abraham, they were to be welcomed as believers. Time and time again, he had tried to convince Samuel that what the prophet was proposing, although well-intentioned and certainly beneficial for unifying the three faiths, would not work in practice as the three "sects" had too many differences between them nowadays. Samuel had answers for everything.

Finally, at his wits' end, he said that he did not believe that he was worthy of being the high priest for the combined Abrahamic faith. How could he minister to non-Muslims if he was not as familiar with their customs? How would he be able to end two thousand years of strife? Samuel, had of course, chuckled at this. He explained that Moses had asked the same question -- and had managed to become a world-renowned political and spiritual leader. Allah had placed the imam in the mosque at this particular moment for a reason, Samuel said. Allah had chosen him for this purpose, just as He had chosen people like Moses, "the Arabian prophet", and "the prophet John Paul listened to". All three men had proven to be excellent spiritual leaders. God had wrought miracles to educate this men before: what was to say that He would not do so again?

Eventually, the imam gave in. Samuel was adamant and believed in him. It was quite the point where the Prophet himself had returned to declare him the Mahdi, but it was pretty close. He soon convinced himself that Allah had chosen him for this purpose and it was not up to him to question His will.

It had taken him a while to figure out how he'd handle Passover. However, he did it. It had taken a lot of discussion with Samuel and the rest of the mosque's staff. Eventually, they had come across a tentative solution. Virtually everyone was convinced it would blow up in their faces, but it was worth a shot. And if it didn't work, it would convince Samuel that things weren't as easy to fix as he
thought. The mere thought of bringing sacramental wine into the mosque nearly brought the whole house of cards down. Eventually, they compromised by using fruit juice.

Six days ago, he had risen early to see a small but steady stream of pilgrims of all three faiths waiting at the gate that led to the Temple Mount. Most of the visitors were Muslims, but he did see a few men with Kippot and a couple of Christian monks. Much to his surprise, there had been women among them. He had had to explain that women would not be permitted in the main sanctuary. However, they would be welcome to sit in a courtyard outside the sanctuary and listen to the sermons and so forth.

Pilgrims had been given appropriately modest clothing and told to remove their shoes at the gate. They had all been checked for weapons, though the security check had been placed outside the gate so that the Temple Mount remained a sacred site without any references to war. Men had been given simple white robes while women had been presented with burqas. Several of the non-Muslim women had complained, but the Kohen Gadol had put his foot down: no one was going to face God -- whatever name people chose to call Him -- with any shred of impropriety.

The pilgrims were expected to adhere to an ascetic lifestyle while inside the mosque. Silence was to be maintained whenever possible, and men and women were to be segregated. There was to be no food or drink inside the sanctuary with the exception of water. People who had obviously come to the mosque as tourists only would be asked politely to leave so as to not disrespect the importance of the day.

The enforcement of the dress code had more or less expected by the pilgrims. However, they had soon realized that some things were going to be different. Many of the Jewish pilgrims had brought animals, presumably to be sacrificed in the old rite. The Kohen Gadol had explained that there were to be no more sacrifices. Instead, he had asked the pilgrims to hand over the animals so they could be used to feed the poor or sold for charity. Several of the Christian pilgrims had been carrying crosses; the imam had told them that idols were not permitted and that it would be inappropriate to mourn the death of a prophet on a festive day.

Needless to say, this had made the people a bit curious as to what was going on. Some people had been offended, and the imam had to explain that things had changed over all these years. After all, there was no need for sacrifices because people no longer lived in an agricultural society. There was now a better way to communicate with the divine, one which was more suited for modern society.

The pilgrims had made their way into the central area appropriate for their gender and seated in a room designed for introspection. Several people, primarily Muslims, had sat on carpets. Others sat on chairs. The two groups looked at each other warily but didn't say any thing.

Samuel had then come up to give a speech -- and it had been a speech no one had expected to hear. He had welcomed the people for the festival and explained that there were two purposes for the holiday.

First, there was the obvious one: liberation from Egypt. He explained that it was important to remember that the pilgrims' ancestors had all come from the same place: Egypt -- perhaps biologically, perhaps culturally. They were all one people who could very easily still be Egyptian peasants had it not been for what was believed to have been divine intervention. This inevitably led to Palestinian pilgrims complaining that they couldn't celebrate a holiday like this under Israeli domination; Samuel had countered by saying that the Israelis were still monotheists and that State of Israel seemed a much more benevolent place than ancient Egypt -- or even Samuel's Israel for that matter. The pilgrims were then given small pieces of unleavened bread to experience this shared
background.

It was then, however, that things got interesting. Samuel had also explained that the secondary purpose of Passover was to remind people that it was possible for them to liberate themselves from unhealthy habits and past viewpoints which did not benefit them all that well and in some cases just held them back. The best way to experience God was through personal spirituality, not necessarily a custom someone else imposed on them. How would someone else know what any given pilgrim needed to communicate with a God? God spoke to everyone individually in one sense, with a lesson tailor-made for each person. Each person's practice was there inside him, just waiting to come out and flourish. It was time to liberate that practice. He reminded how God introduced Himself to the ancients: "I am what I am". Each person perceived Him in a different way, and no authority could guess which form He would take. Personal spirituality was the only way to truly know Him.

Samuel had then explained that the animal sacrifices had made sense for a Bronze Age society based on agriculture and polytheism. They had been means to the end of believing in an personalized, abstract God. In the modern society, where people had become accustomed to an abstract God, worshipers no longer needed such props to help transition from polytheism to abstract monotheism. The stage had therefore been set to begin a program based on abstract spirituality, just as Samuel believed God had intended. He then made a reference to Jesus and prayed that spiritual seekers looking for personal spirituality be accepted by the traditional authorities. God had allowed one of His prophets to be executed for reinterpreting spirituality; it was up to the modern age to make sure that Jesus's sacrifice on Passover was not made in vain.

-------------

The pilgrims had been floored six days ago. Several of them had cried, having admitted to themselves that some aspects of the traditions weren't working for them and they'd always wished they could tailor their rituals and traditions for their own growth. They had even been more floored when Samuel had suggested that people spend time in communal silent meditation for a while, after which they would pair up and discuss what they needed for personal spirituality with the person next to them. They soon realized that although they may have come from different traditions, all of them wanted the same type of thing.

The people had left the Passover service in a good mood and convinced that they had experienced an epiphany. They clearly felt that a great weight had been lifted from their shoulders -- and that they had, in fact, been liberated. As the Kohen Gadol watched the new set of pilgrims coming in, he wondered what surprise Samuel was going to pull on them this time.

To be continued...

-------------

Update #114

-------------

April 10, 1996 -- Seventh day of Passover
Al-Aqsa Mosque
Jerusalem

-------------

Next PoV: 115 - Sirius Black

-------------

HORCRUXES LEFT: 6 (Harry, tiara, locket, ring, snake, cup)

-------------

Fatima Ahmadi never thought that she'd have to go through security this intense to get into the al-Aqsa Mosque. Yet here she was, waiting to pass through a metal detector with a whole bunch of other women.
Several of them were tourists who had simply been curious as to what was in the mosque. When they had been told that there would be a serious Passover service in the mosque and that visitors would only be welcome if they were dressed appropriately, joined the congregation, and behaved in a respectful manner, many of them left. One American complained that she wouldn't be caught dead in a burqa and had left in a huff.

Most of the people around her were Muslim. They had heard stories about the service six days earlier and had been pleasantly surprised by the ceremonies. The ceremony had been appropriate to all three monotheistic faiths, much as Samuel had claimed. The vast majority of people had been deeply moved by their experience. Furthermore, they had assured her that there would be no slaughtering of animals on site. She couldn't stand the sight of blood, and she had seriously considered not going if they were going to kill animals on the premises.

She had never been to a Passover service before. Granted, the radio had spent years broadcasting anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic propaganda. Fatima, however, knew better. She was acquainted with many Jews, both men and women, and with a few exceptions here and there they seemed to be as civilized as Muslims. Considering that religious Jewish and Muslim women tended to dress the same, with modest robes, snoods, and so forth -- it was often hard to distinguish the two peoples. She figured it wouldn't hurt to learn more about the Jews so she could bolster herself against all this propaganda.

She had never liked seeing the security outside the mosque. Granted, there were people of the other two monotheistic faiths who may have not approved having a mosque on top of the mountain. But it just seemed to defeat the purpose of a house of God. How dare someone bring violence into a building dedicated to peace and self-knowledge?

She had just about reached the front of the line when...something...flew past her. It looked like a fly of some sort, or perhaps a bumblebee. She didn't recognize the species, though, as it was a glowing white. Whatever it was, though, probably had an eye for her blood. She instinctively reached out to swat it.

The creature passed through the palm of her hand.

She stared at her hand, astonished. She was about to ask the people behind her if they'd seen what she'd thought she'd seen when one of the guards came up to her and started frisking her. As usual, the guard -- a woman, of course -- apologized for the inconvenience. The guard didn't seem all that sincere about it. Either that, or she had said the same thing to the prior 100 people in line and was getting sick of it.

Once through the security checkpoint, she took a burqa and program from one of the ushers, removed her shoes, and followed the other women up to the mosque and took a seat in the women's section. She could hear the men coming in on the other side of the room. She wouldn't get a chance to see much -- after all, there was a divider in the way and she was only 5'2". Yet Samuel's speech supposedly was something you'd never forget.

The room was mostly filled in when she saw the glowing bug again. She was relieved to discover that she hadn't gone crazy: several other women had either tried to swat it or jump out of the way. Those who tried to swat it found, as she had, that it went straight through the palms of their hands. Unable to see much of the men's section, the women started looking at the object and talking about it. The person next to her had never seen anything like this before. All that she had been able to tell was that it looked like a ghostly white honeybee. It was probably something Samuel had been able to create. What happened next, however, brought enough of a gasp out of the women's section to
actually quiet the men for a few minutes.

The bee moved to the center of the hall. It hovered there for a moment, as if surveying the crowd. It slowly moved up in down, as if nodding.

Then, in a span of maybe two seconds, it transformed itself into the figure of a woman.

The woman was wearing a burqa, albeit one a little more liberal than the ones they had handed out at the security gate. She was short -- maybe five feet if she was lucky. Her eyes were uncovered, and Fatima could see ringlets of wavy hair cascading down the sides of her face under her hood. She appeared to be in her thirties, and judging from the expression on her face she seemed tough as nails.

The burqa seemed relatively plain, its only adornment being what appeared to be a stitched-in image of a bee. The image wasn't easy to see, however, because of two complications: her entire figure was translucent and glowing.

She was a ghost.

The women started talking excitedly among themselves as another woman slowly made her way to the front of the room and stood next to the glowing visitor. Who in Allah's name was this? It couldn't be Samuel, as word had gone out as to what Samuel looked like. Besides, what would Samuel be doing in the women's section? She'd find out soon enough, though. She wondered if this was another legend from the Qu'ran.

The glowing woman spoke in an unrecognizable language. She then turned to the woman standing next to her and nodded.

"Ladies, it is my pleasure to introduce Anaiya, wife of Lapidot and mistress of Barak. You know her by her nickname, Deborah -- the Bee Woman. She served as the headmistress of Samuel's school when he was training to become a wizard. She is an Animagus, a witch capable of transforming into an animal, with her animal form being that of a honeybee. She used her magical skills to great effect as she helped the ancient Israelites slowly conquer Canaan. She was best known for her strong organizational skills and her unorthodox feminist ideology. She was assassinated by powerful male authorities at the age of 53 and stayed around as a ghost to see how well the conquest and feminist movement worked out. I, Meira Kavod, will be serving as her interpreter. I have a doctorate in ancient Semitic languages from the University of Haifa."

The women started to speak excitedly and started peppering Deborah with questions. However, Deborah shook her head and started waving her hands frantically. She then motioned for silence and pointed across to the men's section, where Samuel had just started giving his speech.

"You can listen to Samuel if you want. However, there's something else I'd like to tell you which that bastard son of Hannah and Eli isn't going to tell you. There's another type of liberation Passover is supposed to commemorate: liberation from gender stereotypes and from the overpowering rule of a
patriarchal society. God created men and women as equals, did He not? If that's the case, how come we're shunted off to the side where can't even see the main attraction? We come to the sanctuary to worship God in our own way and are either kicked out of the services or stuck over here? That doesn't seem right, does it? Guess what happens when you do everything you put your mind to. Look at me, for example. I actually get to command armies, and do so in some cases better than those pig-headed soldiers who just want to show off their swords!"

Fatima listened in incredulity as Deborah gave one of the most surprising speeches Fatima had ever heard. The woman sounded like a cross between Gloria Steinem and Hillary Clinton. Judging from the commotion on the other side of the room, Samuel probably wasn't able to hear it. Considering Samuel's antiquated view of the world, that was probably good.

The speech was interrupted, however, when Fatima heard shouting on the other side of the room. Deborah shushed the interpreter, shifted back into bee form, and start hovering in the air so she could see over the divider. Fatima understood her reasoning: that was probably permissible as long as the men could not see her female form.

A man was shouting angrily. "Samuel, I heard your speech and agree with it wholeheartedly! You called upon us to liberate ourselves, and that's exactly what we're doing! We want your permission to take our town and request that it be returned to Israel! It's only a few miles east of Jerusalem! What else could be it part of?"

Samuel spoke, and the interpreter responded. "It is disputed territory only at first glance, my friend. Both of the candidates worship the God of Abraham. As far as I'm concerned, we are all one people and there is no need to fight."

The first man wasn't convinced. "Who are you to say this? Do you speak for God? There's a reason we're called the Chosen People, Samuel. Hell, come to think of it, how do we know you're Samuel and not some charlatan? All you need to do is say some magical mumbo-jumbo and pass that off as ancient Hebrew. Then your accomplice here says what you want to say and thinks he has biblical authority."

Dark mutterings started spreading throughout the room. Deborah lowered herself to the ground, flared into her human form, and skewered the women with a glare which immediately forced Fatima and her co-worshipers into submission.

Samuel response was gentle. "Sir, I am speaking ancient Hebrew. The interpreter here can attest to it."

The man snorted. "I doubt it. Samuel isn't the one who's talking to me here. You are. You can put whatever words you want in Casper the Friendly Ghost's mouth and we wouldn't know any better."

"I'm sorry to hear that, but you may believe whatever you wish. However, I stand by my opinion. We are all children of Abraham and it was about time the sects were reconciled."

The man chuckled. "If you were truly a child of Abraham, you'd follow God's orders and have sacrifices like it says in the Torah. I say you are an apostate and should be chucked from the Temple. Who's with me? Who wants to bring God back to the Temple and take out the heathens?"

The men's side erupted. Fatima heard punches being thrown all over the men's section. A chair smashed on someone's head. In the women's section, a couple of worshipers exchanged punches and had to be separated by other congregants.
Then Samuel's voice -- incredibly enhanced -- exploded throughout the room.

"ENOUGH!"

There was a gasp from the men's section. Fatima soon found out why: Samuel had levitated himself so he could be seen by both the men and women over the divider.

"You have brought violence into the Temple. You have acted in ways which are a defamation of the faith of Abraham. I am a wizard, and I know who you are. Each of you who has thrown a punch during the past five minutes will be expected to pay $250 to the upkeep of the Temple in lieu of a sin-offering. If you do not pay up within one month, you will be excommunicated from the Faith of Abraham. The Pope has me as an advisor, the Kohen Gadol listens to me, and I have just received word that the Orthodox Beit Din of Israel has accepted me as a supreme authority due to my strong grasp of ancient traditions. Rest assured, the excommunication will stick."

There was dead silence. Someone whimpered in the back of the women's section. Deborah muttered something and pointed at Samuel. The female interpreter whispered: "He's going to do it! Trust me, he'll do it! He means business! When he gets like this, even people like Saul and Jonathan RUN!"

Samuel wasn't finished. "As for you, my antagonist, the instigator of this incident, you are fined $25,000 and are excommunicated IMMEDIATELY. You have five minutes to leave the building or I will order the Kohen Gadol to expel you. Once you leave, you have until tomorrow night to leave the State of Israel. The Israeli Ministry of Magic will be under orders to execute you if they see you within its borders after that time."

Chairs rustled, and Samuel's glare sharpened. "Anyone who attempts to assist the excommunicate will also be excommunicated."

Four minutes later, the man had left the building. One of the women who had participated in the fight had already brought out her checkbook.

Fatima, who knew a bit of the Old Testament, suddenly realized what Saul had gone through after he had woken up Samuel without permission...

To be continued...

--------------
Update #115
--------------
April 13, 1996
The Burrow
England
--------------
Next PoV: 116 - Harry Potter [I think -- I'll have to look it up]
--------------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 6 (Harry, tiara, locket, ring, snake, cup)
--------------
Sirius Black was free at last.

The official word had come down from the Ministry of Magic. After further investigation, Sirius declared found to be innocent of the deaths of Peter Pettigrew and the poor Muggles so many years ago. The latest issue of the Daily Prophet had reported his vindication and had warned that the
government had a new Most Wanted man, Peter Pettigrew. There was no word of Voldemort, of course, but that was to be expected from the Ministry of Magic.

As if that were not good enough, things got even better. Shortly after his release, he had received a message from Cornelius Fudge personally apologizing for the incident. The message included a comment that would change Sirius's life forever.

"In compensation for the twelve years you served undeservedly in Azkaban, the Ministry of Magic will be granting you a pension of 12,000 Galleons per year for the rest of your life, payable 1,000 Galleons per month."

Sirius was rich. He could travel wherever he wanted and do whatever he wanted -- even more so, considering that the Statute of Secrecy had been lifted. He could fly to Fiji if he so desired on his enchanted motorcycle and not have to worry about Muggles seeing him. He could donate money to Hogwarts, the school which had raised him. He had no idea how he'd be able to spend all that money.

He had known immediately what he'd start spending on: a party.

Ideally, he'd have wanted the party to be held at 12 Grimmauld Place, his ancestral home. Unfortunately, the building was the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix and protected by the Fidelius Charm. His second choice would have been Hogwarts, but there was no way Umbridge was going to allow a party during the middle of the semester. This left his third choice: the Burrow.

The Burrow had seemed an unusual place for the celebration. However, it made sense. After all, his godson -- who was still under house arrest -- had to be there. Had it not been for Harry's interview with the Muggle and admission to using the Time-Turner, the world would have never learned the truth.

The old house so maligned by the Malfoys was festooned with colorful lights. Candles floated in midair, and enough wizards were jammed into the living that Harry had mentioned something about a fire hazard.

Every single one of the Weasleys had returned for this. Percy had to come as a representative of the Ministry. Fred and George visited simply to pay homage to one of the men who had written their wonderful map. Ron and Ginny, of course, were inseparable from Harry. Once Mrs. Weasley had realized that most of her family would be in attendance, she brought out her strongest weapon -- the guilt trip -- and convinced the rest of her sons to visit.

Bill's arrival had not been entirely without incident. He had been accompanied by Fleur Delacour, the talented quarter-veela who had participated in the Triwizard Tournament. Needless to say, most of the men had swooned when she and Bill arrived. Sirius himself had tried to pick her up before Ginny intervened to call him off. Not everyone, however, was enthralled by Fleur, as was apparent when Sirius heard mutterings of "Phlegm" in the background.

Virtually all of Sirius and Harry's friends were there. Most of Hogwarts's senior staff -- with the notable exceptions of Snape and Umbridge -- had been invited as well, but every single one of them had been too busy. As far as Dumbledore had been concerned, even Sirius didn't know where Dumbledore was. He had sent out an invitation, but the great wizard had -- quite wisely, in Sirius's opinion -- not written back, lest he reveal his whereabouts to the Ministry.

Sirius had heard Fudge say that he was not going to rescind the warrant for Dumbledore's arrest. The
old man had had it coming to him for a while, the Minister claimed. He'd been a maverick for too long. This incident with the Time-Turner had been the straw that had broken the camel's back.

Sirius was amused to see Fudge talking with Arthur. Arthur, of course, was now working for the Muggles and had had his memory wiped of most of his Ministry work. The catch was that Fudge didn't know that his former employee had picked up the Bentley job. The Minister was probably trying to figure out why Arthur looked so happy.

Harry's two friends from the Shrieking Shack were also there. Hermione's parents, both Muggles, had come as well, curious to see what a Wizarding house looked like now that the Statute of Secrecy was no longer in effect. Although Hermione no longer had a wand, she was more than capable of explaining the fundamentals of magic to her two stunned parents. Her mother had nearly fallen over when she had seen the dishes washing themselves. She had immediately turned on Hermione and asked her to buy a set for the Grangers. Hermione had said she'd look into it.

Lupin and Tonks were there, of course. Sirius found it amusing that his former Marauder buddy was spending more time staring at Tonks than talking to Sirius. This could be interesting, he thought. He hated to think what would happen when Lupin told Tonks that he was actually a werewolf.

An amusing thought popped into his head. Remus Lupin with Nymphadora Tonks? Lupin could solemnly swear he was up to no good...

There was a thud next to him. Sirius turned to see that Harry had taken a seat at his side.

"Well, Godfather, I believe congratulations are in order. When will I be able to move in with you?"

Sirius smiled. "As soon as you want, Harry. You'll have to finish your sentence of house arrest, though. There isn't much I can do about that. How much longer do you have?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "I'm not sure, Sirius. I -- OUCH!"

Both Sirius and Harry spun to see Kreacher the elf serving cake. Apparently the elf had been a bit clumsy and had poked Harry with a knife by accident. Kreacher took one look at Sirius and immediately began backing off. "I apologize, Master. Here, allow me to clean the wound. I think it's bleeding."

Sirius nodded abruptly and reached into his pocket. "You'd better, or I'm going to be VERY angry. Here, use this handkerchief."

Kreacher shook his head and withdrew a handkerchief of his own. "Don't worry, Master. I prepared for this eventuality". With that, he cleaned off the cut and put the bloody handkerchief somewhere in his robe. Apologizing once more, the clumsy elf walked away.

Sirius shook his head and started working on Harry's cut with his wand. "I must admit, half the time I want to hug Kreacher and half the time I want to kill him. Now that Bella is dead, however, I suspect he'll start behaving much better around me."

Harry laughed. "I doubt he can behave any worse, Sirius. At any rate, now that you're free, what are you going to do now? Become an Auror? Teach at Hogwarts?"

Sirius laughed. "An Auror! I'd always wanted to be an Auror. However, I don't think I'd fit in very well, particularly because I'm a bit...independent. Fortunately, I believe that I may be able to secure a
similar position in the Muggle world."

Harry got it immediately. "You want to join the SAS?"

Sirius nodded. "Either them, or the British Secret Service. They need good wizards, and I have combat experience. Furthermore, I'm familiar with most of the remaining Death Eaters' tactics, so I'll be quite helpful in hunting them down."

"But the SAS is an elite military organization. They won't let in people of a more...reckless nature. Besides, they'll see your criminal record. You won't get in."

Sirius laughed. "Believe me, once they realize I can cast spells and can disguise myself as a dog, they'll take me. Trust me, they'll take me. And as far as the criminal record went, it was wiped off the books when I was exonerated. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll need to talk to some more guests."

To be continued...
Update #116 through Update #120

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Mislagnissa

Update #116
---------
April 15, 1996
Malfoy Manor
England
---------
Next PoV: 117 -- Insert Cliffhanger Here
---------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 6 (Harry, tiara, locket, ring, snake, cup)
---------
The snap of an incoming Apparation jolted Peter Pettigrew back to full awareness. He reeled back in shock, cursing himself for being so frightened. He'd felt bad betraying James and Lily to the Potters, and had felt worse when he had been forced to disguise himself as a rat to keep away from Voldemort's supporters. Now, things had gotten worse still. The entire Wizarding world was supposedly looking for him now, having found out the truth about Sirius Black. Merlin's beard, supposedly the Muggles were alerted as well now.

Most of his allies were either dead or had defected. Normally, he wouldn't have given himself much of a chance. However, he knew something that the rest of the world didn't. The Death Eaters may be dead, but unless he was mistaken, he was on the verge of reviving the entire movement. All he needed was just one thing.

He turned to face the newcomer. It was Lucius Malfoy. In his hand he held a small handkerchief stained with blood.

Lucius was grinning with excitement. "The plan worked perfectly. Kreacher infiltrated the Burrow during Black's party and got some of Harry's blood. He handed the handkerchief to Rodolphus Lestrange, who had convinced Kreacher that he was acting on the late Bellatrix's authority. Rodolphus handed it to me, and now I give it to you."

Just what he was hoping for, Pettigrew thought. He reached out and accepted the gift. "Thank you, Mr. Malfoy. I take it everything is all set?"

Lucius nodded. "The cauldron is set up in the living room. We're ready when you are, Wormtail."

Trembling with both anxiety and excitement, Pettigrew led Lucius into the living room. One of the sofas had disappeared, having been replaced with a large black cauldron. The cauldron was filled with water, little ripples glittering like diamonds on the surface. Next to the cauldron stood Rodolphus Lestrange. The Death Eater had a naked child standing at his side. A child who looked very familiar, yet was not related to him.

The child spoke with a rasping voice. "Good, we're all here. Let's do it!"

Rodolphus lifted the child and gently lowered him into the cauldron. The cauldron began to bubble vigorously. Rodolphus then stepped aside as Pettigrew took center stage.
Pettigrew reached into his pocket and retrieved the small fragment of burnt bone the late Phillip Bullock had retrieved from Tom Riddle's tomb. He dropped it into the cauldron, and the contents began to bubble even faster.

"Bone of the father, unknowingly given, you will renew your son!"

Pettigrew then reached for his dagger. He knew what to do next and that it would hurt. However, he had to do what he had to do. Gritting himself against the pain he knew which was coming, he chopped off a finger and tossed the finger into the cauldron. He figured the finger would be enough. After all, he had eight others. And the Dark Lord would probably fix his hand again.

"Flesh of the servant, willingly given, you will revive your master!"

The pain nearly overwhelmed him. However, there was still one more thing he had to do. He took the handkerchief containing Harry's blood and dropped it into the cauldron. As soon as it touched the surface of the water, it began glowing as bright as the sun. Squinting his eyes, he finished the incantation.

"Blood of the enemy, forcibly taken, you will resurrect your foe!"

Smoke burst from the cauldron, making Pettigrew cough. Grimacing, Pettigrew fell to his knees. Rodolphus and Lucius followed suit. When the smoke cleared, it revealed the Dark Lord standing in the cauldron.

There were a couple of differences this time around, however. This time, Voldemort healed the finger BEFORE speaking with the Death Eaters. And he didn't bother pressing anyone's Mark because all that would do would be to alert Snape and the other defectors that Voldemort had returned.

Back at the Burrow, Harry Potter was woken up by an insistent tapping on the window. It took a while for him to find his glasses, but find them he did. He got out of bed, puzzled. Who would be sending him mail in the middle of the night? It sure sounded like an owl on urgent delivery.

In theory, the Ministry of Magic had oversight of all mail that went in and out of the Burrow during Harry's imprisonment. However, the inspections had gone on for maybe a month or so. Once it became obvious that no one was going to send him contraband, they'd just given up and started to relax their supervision. Now, they just did a few random checks here and there and even let Harry out of the house once to testify at the Dursleys' child abuse trial.

He went over to the window and saw a most unusual sight. It was an owl, but it wasn't Hedwig. There was a large object hanging from its beak. It looked like a broom. Judging by the condition of the twigs at the end and the sleekness of the handle, it appeared to be a very fine broom.

Harry grinned. It had to be Sirius! Now that he was rolling in dough, he had bought Harry an even better broom! He envisioned himself racing Draco Malfoy into the ground during his next Quidditch match -- if he were ever permitted to play Quidditch again.

There was an envelope hanging from the bottom of the broom. He picked up the envelope and opened it. Inside was a card with a simple greeting. It had been written in handwriting he had never seen before.

"Here's a little surprise for you, my dear Harry! Sincerely, Sirius."
Harry felt like he was floating in midair. It sounded like something Sirius would say. He didn't know why Sirius hadn't written it himself, but it didn't really matter. His godfather had helped him out once again. Throwing the card to the floor, he grasped hold of the broom.

There was an abrupt jerk somewhere around his navel. The broom was a Portkey! A vague sense of discomfort began penetrating Harry's euphoria. Something sounded very fishy here. Instinctively, he reached for his wand, only to find that he had no wand. The guards had confiscated it.

The Portkey deposited him with a thud inside a large, opulent room. There were three men in the chamber, standing alongside a chair facing away from him. A large cauldron sat in front of a fireplace. There was haze in the air, as if the cauldron had recently been used to brew a potion.

Harry had a very bad feeling about this. The only time he'd seen a cauldron of that size was when Voldemort had been revived. Painfully aware of the fact that he was unarmed, he looked at the three men.

He recognized two of them: Lucius Malfoy and Peter Pettigrew. Both of the Death Eaters were grinning at him evilly. He didn't recognize the third man, but it was obvious from the man's facial expression that he shared the first two men's views.

Then the chair next to the three men slowly swiveled around, revealing a man who had been sitting there. The man had serpentine face and pale skin. Harry knew that face. Shrieking in surprise, he reached for the broom. If he was lucky, it would Portkey him back to where he came from. If not, he'd fly out the window to safety so he could warn everyone. It's a pity he couldn't Apparate!

The Death Eaters laughed as he reached for the broom and unwrapped it. It fell apart in his hands, just a random jumble of branches and sticks. It hadn't been a broom. It had been a trap all along. They'd faked Sirius's signature -- that explained the handwriting differences.

Voldemort chuckled. "They just don't make things like they used to. Don't they, Harry?"

Harry tried diving behind a chair. He'd gone maybe one foot when a Petrificus Totalus hex hit him in the chest. He toppled like a tree trunk, and his glasses flew off his head. He couldn't move.

One of the Death Eaters reached down to turn him over as the others laughed. Squinting, he could see Voldemort towering over him, wand in hand.

Voldemort shrugged. "Thank you for lowering the Statute of Secrecy for me, Harry. I'll be able to get more power this way. I'm already in charge of several Muggle terrorist groups and am well on my way to controlling countries. It's a pity you won't be around to see it, however."

Voldemort spread his hands in mock resignation as Harry tried to speak and failed. "You don't need to say anything, Harry. I understand. I'm even learning more about the Muggles now. It makes sense for a good leader to know the people he's going to be ruling, right? At any rate, a Muggle phrase comes to mind here. What is it? Ah, yes."

Voldemort narrowed his eyes and pointed his wand at Harry. "As the Muggle police officer Arnold Schwarzenegger says, hasta la vista, baby!"

The Death Eater he didn't recognize nearly fell over laughing as Voldemort paused. "However, if you're not familiar with that statement, let me translate it for you in a language you'll understand."
The serpent-like mouth opened in a grin.

"Avada Kedavra!"

Harry had just enough time to think, THIS IS NOT FAIR, before the green beam hit him in the chest and he was blasted into nothingness.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #117
-------------
April 15, 1996
SOMEWHERE
-------------
Next PoV: 118 -- Nigel Marcellus
-------------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 5 (tiara, locket, ring, snake, cup)
-------------
Harry Potter was dead. At least he thought so.

He was surrounded by what appeared to be a featureless gray fog, almost as if he were flying through a cloud in an airplane. Was he in heaven? He certainly hoped so. He sure felt like he deserved heaven after having been subjected to that cheap, ignominious death at the hands of Voldemort.

How would the world react to Voldemort's return? The Dark Lord would probably want to come back with a bang. He suspected that Minister Fudge would be in big trouble with both the Muggles and wizards, having stated the whole time that Voldemort had been dead. If I were Voldemort, Harry mused, I'd visit the Ministry of Magic, get that prophecy I wanted to check out, wreak some havoc, and disappear before I could be caught. The wizards would probably want to oust Fudge given what had happened.

The big question would be whether Voldemort would do something to the Muggles. Voldemort had claimed that he had control of several terrorist groups and was trying to make inroads into various Muggle governments. Would he announce himself to the world via a magical terrorist attack? He could imagine the Muggles' reaction to a magical attack: fires which couldn't be put out, monsters which couldn't be killed, and so forth. Things could get nasty in a hurry. He wondered what would cause more havoc: a global magical war or a global nuclear war.

He wished he could go back there and warn everyone. Unfortunately, that option didn't appear to be available to him. He'd been hit in the chest by an Avada Kedavra curse, and he knew what that did. He was a goner. Get used to it, he told himself. You can't change the past unless you have a Time-Turner, and you don't have a Time-Turner.

Could he come back as a ghost and warn people? The idea intrigued him. He certainly had information that the Muggles needed to know, and people in those situations often came back as ghosts. Perhaps he was a ghost already! Curious, he looked down at his body to check if it was glowing.

It wasn't glowing. It looked just the same as it had been when he had been alive. Except that he didn't have any clothes on. That ruled out the possibility that he was a ghost. Perhaps he had a body
that only existed in heaven and would start to shimmer once he returned to earth.

If he was going to return as a ghost, he was going to need clothes. Seconds later, clothes materialized on his body. He stared at them incredulously. Where did those come from? Perhaps in heaven everything people asked for came true. He ruled thought out quickly, however, as he'd asked to become a ghost and hadn't returned to earth.

It looked like it was up to him to figure out how heaven worked. In order to do so, he'd have to find St. Peter, God, his father, or someone like that. It was time to go exploring.

He walked through the fog for several minutes. He couldn't tell how far he had gone, or whether he had gone in circles. All he could tell was that he moving.

After ten minutes or so, the fog began to clear. Eventually, it cleared enough for him to figure out where he was. He was in King's Cross Station, near platform 9 3/4.

Harry blinked. How the hell had he gotten over HERE? Did dead wizards get reincarnated as Muggles? That didn't make sense to him. Furthermore, if this was King's Cross, where was everybody? He'd traveled through the station several times with the Dursleys and knew that it was usually very crowded. This version of King's Cross was completely deserted.

Well, almost completely deserted. He caught movement out of the corner of his eye. Grateful for the fact that he had at least one companion in heaven, he headed over to check out what had caused it.

It was a small child, and it looked like he had been injured. It reminded him of what Voldemort had looked like before the Dark Lord had been revived in the Little Hangleton graveyard. This couldn't be Voldemort, however, as he'd seen Voldemort back on earth with his own two eyes. It had to be somebody else.

Dreading to think what happened if someone died in heaven, he called out. "Hello? Anyone around? Someone please help me! I'm new here, and I've found an injured child. Oh, and if this is heaven, how do I become a ghost?"

Seconds later, someone responded.

"Leave the child alone, Harry. There's nothing you can do about him."

Harry spun to face the speaker. The voice sounded VERY familiar. He'd only heard it once before, during the Priori Incantatem incident when he had been fighting with Voldemort after his first revival. Could it be who he thought it was?

His suspicions had been correct. James Potter, his late father, was standing at his side, talking to him. Even more amazing was the fact that James didn't look like a ghost. As far as Harry could tell, James was alive.

Harry's jaw dropped. "DAD?"

James nodded. "Yes, Harry, it's me. Welcome to Limbo, at least that's what we call it."

"Limbo?"

"It's where people go after they've been killed. The magic places you in King's Cross Station, after
which you can take a train to continue on to the next phase of your soul's journey."

Harry stared down at his feet. "So I'm dead after all. I was afraid of that. What do I do now?"

James gestured at the platform. "Take a train. They stop by from time to time."

"Where do they go?"

"I am not permitted to say. Each soul has to find out for his- or herself."

"What did YOU do?"

"I cannot say."

"Can you go back? I want to go back as a ghost."

James thought for a moment and looked at Harry more closely. "You probably can go back as a ghost. I don't know anyone who's done it, though. You'll have to ask some of the bigwigs here if you want to do that. However, there's something strange about your case. I've seen lots of dead people come through here over the years. To be honest with you, my ghostly senses seem to indicate that you're more alive than dead."

James stared into the distance thoughtfully. "For all I know, you may be visiting Limbo in a dream or coma. Perhaps you're clinically dead -- enough for the magic to send you into Limbo -- but revivable. You may get out of this alive, believe it or not."

Harry stared at him. "Alive? How can I be alive? Voldemort's curse hit me in the chest!"

James nodded. "You survived after he hit you in the head when you were a baby, in case you don't remember."

Harry's mind reeled. "True. Did I wind up in Limbo then?"

"I don't know, Harry. I was busy with my own problems at the time, having just arrived in Limbo myself."

Harry shook his head. "What did I do? How is this possible?"

James shrugged. "I don't know, to be honest with you. However, if you are just visiting Limbo in a coma and will be able to return to earth once you are revived, there's someone here I insist that you talk to. Your conversation with this person may very well determine whether or not Voldemort takes over the world."

Harry's eyebrows shot up. "Wouldn't this person have to be dead for me to talk to him?"

James nodded. "Yes, he's dead...well, REALLY dead in that he can't come back. You have actually met this person, believe it or not. He tried to kill you once, but he wasn't operating out of his own free will at the time. He's always wished he could apologize to you and avenge himself on the person who killed him."

Harry nodded, intrigued. "Really? Sure, I'll talk to him. Who is it?"
Another man's voice answered. "It is I, Mr. Potter."

Harry turned to look at the newcomer. Another wizard had materialized in the station. He was bald and looked vaguely familiar. Harry couldn't place him at first. He then wracked his mind for a few moments until it finally dawned on him who the new person was. He'd been thrown by the lack of a turban.

Harry's jaw dropped. "Professor Quirrell?"

Quirrell nodded. "Yes, Mr. Potter. Quirinius Quirrell, your former Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. I was possessed by Lord Voldemort shortly before your first year at Hogwarts and was forced to teach the course with Voldemort sticking out of the back of my head."

Harry shuddered. "I remember all too well, Professor. At any rate, my father says you want to help me deal with Voldemort in case I'm actually visiting Limbo in a coma. How can you help me, Professor? I'm all ears."

Quirrell smiled. "Voldemort may have been a powerful wizard. However, there was something he hadn't considered when he possessed me. When one man possesses another, both men are able to share each other's thoughts. I know lots of things about Voldemort that very few people know. The catch, of course, is that in order for me to take advantage of this information, Voldemort's spirit has to be exorcised. That would kill me before I would be able to do anything with it."

Harry suddenly saw where this was going. "Let me guess. You still remember all of Voldemort's secrets here in Limbo. And you're going to pass them on to me so I can go back to earth and avenge you."

Quirrell nodded. "Correct, Mr. Potter. I know a lot of the tricks of the Dark Arts, both from Voldemort's possession and from my own studies for the Defense Against the Dark Arts position. I believe the information I am about to divulge will really throw Voldemort for a loop."

James whistled as Harry smiled. "Well, then, Professor, what do you want me to know?"

Quirrell paused for a moment and drew a deep breath. "Harry, have you ever heard of something called a Horcrux?"

Harry shook his head. "I can't say I have, sir."

"I'm not surprised, Mr. Potter. It's a very arcane, and dark, branch of magic. Hogwarts doesn't allow the staff to teach it. At any rate, a Horcrux is a fragment of a wizard's soul trapped in an object other than the wizard's body. The wizard creates a Horcrux by splitting his soul -- don't ask me how, I won't tell you -- and hiding part of it in this object. As long as the Horcrux has the wizard's soul in it, the wizard cannot be permanently destroyed. If he is killed, he can be revived through an intricate ritual...one, unless I'm highly mistaken, you were involved with, twice."

Harry and James both stared at Quirrell. James finally broke the silence. "You mean to tell me Voldemort's survived all these years because he has a Horcrux? He went into Limbo or somewhere like that and was brought back through the ritual Harry was involved with?"

"Yes, James. Voldemort created a set of six Horcruxes. All of these objects must be destroyed before Voldemort can be permanently dispatched. Each object must be destroyed using basilisk venom or some other powerful poison."
James swore. "SIX? How the hell is Harry -- or Dumbledore, for that matter -- going to find all of them? I suspect they're going to be guarded by magic only Voldemort can provide!"

Quirrell smirked. "Simple, James. Remember that I know all of Voldemort's thoughts, knowledge which Voldemort had hoped would die with me. These thoughts, of course, include what the Horcruxes are and where they are. All you have to do is send various powerful wizards to those places, get through Voldemort's defenses, and destroy these objects."

Harry grinned -- he'd love to be part of a mission like this. Aloud: "Sounds all right to me, assuming that I can go back. So, what are these objects?"

Quirrell explained. "First, there's Voldemort's diary. I don't know where this is."

Harry smiled. "I can answer that for you, sir. I destroyed it three years ago. The diary projected an image of Voldemort, and the image fought me in the Chamber of Secrets by summoning the basilisk hidden down there. I killed the basilisk and stabbed the diary with one of the basilisk's fangs, destroying the projection."

Quirrell's eyes widened. Slowly, the professor bowed to Harry. "Well done, Mr. Potter. I see you exhibit the bravery of Gryffindor quite well. At any rate, there are five others. There are three relics of Hogwarts which have been made into Horcruxes. Ravenclaw's missing tiara is in the Room of Hidden Things in the Room of Requirement. It is a Horcrux. Salazar Slytherin's locket is hiding in a cave somewhere -- I'm not sure where. You need to knock it out too. There's also Helga Hufflepuff's cup, which is currently sitting in the Lestranges' vault at Hogwarts."

Harry's mind raced. "Is Gryffindor's sword a Horcrux too?"

"No, Mr. Potter. It is not. The remaining two Horcruxes are Voldemort's familiar Nagini and a ring owned by one of his ancestors. I believe his last name was Gaunt. The ring's hiding out in the Gaunts' house. Nagini, of course, can move around, so I won't be able to pinpoint her."

Quirrell leaned forward. "Be careful of the snake, Mr. Potter. It's venomous. Furthermore, killing the snake with a device which is not impregnated with venom will not destroy the Horcrux. You'll just wind up with a snakeskin which has a Horcrux in it."

James and Harry looked at each other, and Harry nodded one final time. "It looks like I've got my work cut out for me, then. I'll see what I can do to get the word out. First things first, however. I need to figure out how to get out of Limbo alive. How do I do that?"

Quirrell shrugged. "Tap your heels together three times and say there's 'no place like home'. And hope the placebo effect will work here."

Harry did so, and much to his surprise the room started to dissolve. Both James and Quirrell smiled and bowed to him. Quirrell's voice echoed through Harry's ears as he disappeared.

"Good luck, Mr. Potter."

To be continued...

-------------
Update #118
-------------
Nigel Marcellus watched the morning news broadcast. As usual, it started off with the usual filth: car crashes, fires, robberies, and so forth. Gore sold, and everybody knew it. He wondered how the news broadcasts would react to the REALLY interesting stuff -- stuff that he had been involved with as a former SAS agent...which, of course, he would never be allowed to divulge.

How about "accidental Soviet missile launch nearly triggers World War III, but catastrophe was averted thanks to some quick-thinking RAF officers?" This would naturally be on the front page, of course. There would be a run on bomb shelters, radiation suits, and stuff like that. People would start fleeing the cities in droves. The Soviet premier would likely get a lot of egg on his face, and he'd probably start blabbing that it was an accident. No one would believe him, however, and tensions would rise between the two countries.

What was truly interesting about this was the fact that the few RAF people who were familiar with the incident swore that the RAF hadn't been involved with it. They had no idea who had actually done the work to prevent the launch from becoming a catastrophe. This meant that the SAS had been given falsified information. But how could that be? Nigel remembered the incident vividly!

He looked back to the dynamic photograph of Wizard Weasley's family in Egypt. Arthur had given it to him as a gift. Could it have been the wizards? Could the Muggles have prepared for war and tried to launch missiles only to have the wizards fix everything behind their backs? It certainly fit what he knew of the Wizarding world before the Statute of Secrecy had been breached. The wizards had done the deed and convinced everyone it had been an RAF operation.

The news continued. There was a traffic report -- the major highways were backed up as usual -- followed by the weatherman reporting that the greater London area would be lucky to break 10 degrees today. He joked that if you wanted reasonable temperatures, either wait a few months, get on an airplane, or send a letter to Cornelius Fudge.

The television set flickered momentarily as the weatherman moved over to the radar display. Nigel swore. Was the cable having problems again? Their TV service, which had been excellent, had suddenly gone haywire about the time the wizards revealed themselves to the world. Nigel suspected that the wizards were casting spells out in the open and messing with all of the technology in the area. He made a mental note to contact Minister Fudge and ask him to do something about it.

Suddenly, the signal disintegrated into noise, vaporizing the weatherman with his radar chart. Nigel scowled. He'd never seen it THIS bad before! He grabbed the remote control and changed the channel. More static. What the bloody hell was this?

He headed over to the staircase and called downstairs to his wife. "Claudia, can you turn on the tube up there for a second? My tube just went blank and I want to make sure that it's the cable service and not the TV set. We've lost every single bloody channel."

A few moments went by as Nigel watched the static on the screen. Eventually, his wife yelled back
at him. "It's the cable service, Nigel. I don't see anything, either. Those morons should have fixed it a long time ago."

Nigel shook his head and headed over to the phone. Oddly enough, the phone still worked. He called the cable service only to get a busy signal. His eyebrows shot up: he'd never heard of the entire service's switchboard being busy.

His wife shouted once more as he sat down in front of the monitor. "You know, Nigel, I think we've got a widespread problem here. I looked out the window at the Molsons across the street and their TV isn't working either. It's not just us."

Nigel chuckled. The wizards would get hell for this, he thought. He moved forward to turn off the television set.

Suddenly, the static morphed into a banner showing a wand and a computer. Underneath it were the words "TOM RIDDEL, WIZARD. ALLIANCE FOR MAGIC PARTY."

Nigel stared at the screen. Tom Riddle? It couldn't be THAT Tom Riddle, because the evil wizard by that name was dead. This must be someone else. Perhaps this Riddle was part of a minority political party who was running for the position of Ministry of Magic. He didn't see how advertising on a Muggle television set would help Riddle: he doubted that the Muggles were allowed to vote for Minister of Magic.

The banner vanished, revealing a lavishly appointed room. There as a fireplace visible and a chandelier on the ceiling. Nigel whistled: someone must have spent a pretty penny furnishing this office.

His wife yelled up from downstairs. "Nigel -- check the tube! Something bloody strange is going on. Ever heard the name Tom Riddle before?"

"Yes, Claudia! I know! I'm watching right now."

A voice which sounded vaguely familiar burst from the screen. "Attention, citizens of Britain. We apologize for the interruption, but we believe that in lieu of recent events it is important that we make this announcement. Allow me to introduce my colleague, and founder of the Alliance for Magic party, Wizard Tom Riddle."

The camera turned and revealed a tall, pale-faced man sitting in front of the fireplace. He was wearing a formal wizard's robe. Nigel snorted: this bloke didn't stand a chance. For one thing, he wasn't particularly photogenic. He was bald, with big eyes and a virtual slit for a nose. It looked almost as if a human woman had been impregnated by a snake. The man's robe was adorned except for one rather ostentatious decoration: a George Cross. Nigel whistled. This man must have helped rescue him and his coworkers. However, he could have sworn that he hadn't seen a man looking like this at the ceremony which had awarded the George Crosses.

He vaguely remembered something about a man who looked like a snake. He remembered seeing it in an SAS dossier. He couldn't remember much about it, though. Then again, there were things on those dossiers he didn't WANT to remember. For some reason, Tom Riddle came to mind again, but this guy couldn't be him. NO ONE survived a direct hit with a Paveway!

The man smiled for the camera; Nigel hoped that he could use magic to fix his teeth. He seemed supremely confident despite his...abnormalities. He looked into the camera and began to speak.
"Citizens of Britain, allow me to introduce myself. My name is Tom Riddle, and I am a wizard. I would like to announce my intention to make Britain a better place for both wizards and Muggles. Traditionally, the wizards have been in a position of power, where they and they alone decide what parts of their world are exposed to the Muggles. Now that the Ministry of Magic has been breached, we need to go to work making a society in which wizards and Muggles both have a place.

"There are those in the Ministry of Magic who do not want me to tell you this. They want to keep control for themselves and not share it with Muggles. They have tried to silence me several times, and in one case even asked a few Muggles to help out. Rest assured, however, my mission will not be stopped. Those wizards can order you Muggles to drop as many bombs on me as they want, but I will always come back to help the people of Britain."

Nigel's jaw dropped when he heard that last sentence. He stared at the screen with an awful suspicion on his face. The camera focused on Riddle's face, and the man winked at the audience. That one wink confirmed Nigel's theory.

Bloody hell, Nigel thought. It WAS that Tom Riddle! The evil wizard had survived Flying House! Nigel didn't know how, but he had! And he was now trying to establish a Muggle power base!

Cripes, he thought. This was BAD. Riddle was probably trying to get himself elected Prime Minister and betray the Muggles once he took office. It was a diabolically clever plan. What was even worse was that Nigel couldn't tell anyone what had really happened because Flying House -- indeed, the entire EXISTENCE of the "evil" Tom Riddle as far as the Muggles were concerned -- was still classified!

Riddle pointed at the George Cross on his robe. "This object here is the George Cross. I received this trying to help rescue Muggles from the Canary Wharf bombing. I suffered serious burns and scarring during the rescue, resulting in my current disfigurement. However, my magic didn't fail me, and I managed to free six people with my own wand. Rest assured, my dear friends, I nearly died for you that day."

Slick bastard, Nigel thought. Now he's even explained why he looks funny. He suspected that Riddle had either conjured up a fake George's Cross or stolen it from someone in the Ministry.

"We of the Alliance for Magic Party are hoping for a system in which the Muggles and wizards work together for mutual benefit. The wizards make sure politicians don't go corrupt and do what they can to help the country run better. There's no way for the Statute of Secrecy to be restored at this point, and as a result it would behoove both wizards and Muggles to get to know each other better.

Riddle smiled. "Now, I assume you want me to prove that I'm a wizard. Well, here we go."

He raised his wand and shouted, "Avis!". A flock of birds suddenly burst from the wand and flew offscreen.

He concluded his speech with a flourish. "Remember my name, Tom Riddle. Rest assured, I will do everything possible to ensure an easy transition into this brave new world. Support me, and we'll have a peaceful transition. Support someone else, and the Wizarding authorities will probably get into fights with Muggles. Have a good day, everyone, and God save the Queen."

With that, the Alliance for Magic banner disappeared. After a brief period of static, the weatherman came back, continuing his report as if nothing had happened.
Nigel shook his head in disbelief. He couldn't believe this. Now Riddle would just blame any Death Eater attacks on the Ministry. Someone up in SAS was probably having a heart attack. Cornelius Fudge was probably trying to Avada Kedavra himself.

He heard his wife call from downstairs. "Nigel, did you see that? This Riddle fellow may look strange, but he's got a point. We do need to start learning more about the wizards. I wonder if there's any way I can get in touch with him. Maybe Arthur Weasley knows him."

Nigel didn't know what to say. All he could do is look at the television in horror.

God would probably HAVE to save the Queen, Nigel thought. He didn't think anyone ELSE would be able to do it if Riddle actually took over...

To be continued...

--------------
Update #119
--------------
April 17, 1996
Main Audience Chamber
Royal Palace
Riyadh
Saudi Arabia

Next PoV: 120 -- A South Korean Scientist

HORCRUXES LEFT: 5 (tiara, locket, ring, snake, cup)

King Fahd didn't like the news he was hearing from his Minister of Magic. Although it appeared that Habibi had indeed assassinated Osama bin Laden, he had managed to kill him off too late. The latest reports indicated that the new head of al-Qaeda, a Sri Lankan man named Damodharan Dilmi, was precisely the type of character Fahd had sent Habibi over there to keep OUT of al-Qaeda.

Habibi had not written back since the reports had come in that bin Laden was dead. He suspected that the agent had been killed by Dilmi during the Sri Lankan's takeover. Habibi had dutifully issued coded reports back to the the Minister of Magic every couple of days. A delay like this was most unusual. Although Dagher admitted that he would likely never know what had become of Habibi, the Minister had presumed the man dead.

Habibi had been an extremely skilled wizard, according to Dagher. However, the man who had taken him out had a rap sheet which could have spanned the peninsula. Dilmi had been involved with a group known as the Death Eaters, a radical Wizarding faction based primarily in Great Britain. The Death Eaters believed that wizards were superior to Muggles and that it was the duty of the Muggles to submit to the wizards. Many of them were prejudiced against wizards who were not of pure blood, which didn't make much sense as blood status appeared to be irrelevant when it came to determining the success or power of a particular witch or wizard.

Dilmi, 59, had been involved the Death Eater movement from the beginning. He admired the confidence and power projected by the movement's founder, an exceptionally powerful British warlock named Tom Riddle who often went by the name Lord Voldemort. He had come to England on a regular basis to assist the Death Eaters in their attempted takeover of the British Ministry of
Magic as well as the persecution of half-blood and Muggle-born wizards.

The Death Eater movement fell apart in 1981, when Riddle was mysteriously killed trying to kill an infant. People defected in droves, and the Death Eaters who remained faithful to the cause were eventually rounded up and incarcerated in Britain's maximum-security Azkaban Prison. Azkaban was about as forbidding a place as Dagher's own high-security prison in the Rub-al-Khali. If anything, it was worse. It was guarded by dementors, terrible creatures which Dagher refused to allow anywhere near Fahd's kingdom.

Voldemort's movement had lain dormant until the middle of last year, when there was an unprecedented mass breakout from Azkaban. Many of the Death Eaters had escaped, including Dilmi. Dilmi had returned home to Sri Lanka and started his own Death Eater chapter. Supposedly Dilmi had had plans to attack the Central Bank in Colombo. Thanks to the grace of Allah, that attack never took place. However, Dilmi was able to spend a lot of time slowly recruiting men for the Death Eater movement.

As if that were not bad enough, there were conflicting reports coming out of England that Riddle had resurfaced. Although the British Ministry of Magic denied it, several unofficial sources claimed that the evil archmage had returned and was once again plotting mischief and mayhem. These sources -- supposedly from inside the Ministry -- had reported a gathering of Riddle and the Death Eaters had been targeted by an SAS bomb strike about the time Fahd had interviewed Wizard Malfoy. Everyone was quickly convinced that Riddle had been finished off for good.

However, some things didn't add up. Dagher reported that Dilmi was funneling a whole platoon of Sri Lankan Death Eaters into England; perhaps Dilmi had been thinking of succeeding Riddle as the head of the movement. The movement had certainly needed more British members, as most of them had been knocked out by the SAS attack. All of the signs had been indicating that Dilmi was planning some kind of magical terror attack using al-Qaeda. Dilmi certainly had a motive: to avenge his mentor Riddle. Whether the attack would actually succeed was still an open question.

All of the Saudi Ministry’s theories had come crashing down, however, less than 24 hours earlier, when a man who looked a lot like Tom Riddle took over all of the British airwaves in an attempt to establish a Muggle power base. Riddle's announcement had caught the BBC and other British broadcasting authorities completely off guard. He claimed that most wizards were elitist and wanted to stay apart from Muggles. Riddle, on the other hand, positioned himself as the Muggles' ally. He had formed what appeared to be a political party, the Alliance for Magic, to try to get his message across.

Riddle apparently had managed to earn a George Cross, as he had supposedly worn one during the broadcast. He claimed that he had received the award -- and a seriously bodily disfigurement -- rescuing Muggles during an IRA terrorist attack. Dagher, however, didn't buy it. The Saudi Minister had told Fahd that Riddle had probably killed a man who had earned the Cross and stolen it to use in the commercial.

His British informants explained that Riddle's commercial had neatly hamstringed virtually all of the authorities who knew that Riddle was in fact an evil wizard who was just trying to gain power. The SAS presumably knew, but they had likely classified the information so they couldn't divulge it. The Ministry knew, but Cornelius Fudge would have gotten himself into big trouble admitting that he knew that Voldemort had been around the whole time and didn't tell anyone. The British government, as a result, never officially commented on the commercial.

This, of course, was exactly what Riddle had been counting on. Supposedly several hundred men
had already joined the Alliance for Magic, with hundreds more undoubtedly on the way. And that was just the tip of the iceberg, so to speak.

Fahd shook his head. Tom Riddle was an absolute genius, an assessment immediately confirmed by Dagher. At the rate things were going, he'd soon be in control of al-Qaeda as well as possibly a good portion of the British population.

This guy had to be taken out. However, doing so would be tricky. After all, Saudi Arabia and Britain weren't exactly enemies. If the world found out that a Saudi agent had assassinated a populist British political leader, there would be absolute hell to pay.

Fahd couldn't take out Riddle. Dagher couldn't either. However, there was one person who might just be in a position to do it. The king had been reluctant to get involved with this man, but he figured he had no choice. Riddle's assassin had to be involved with the British Ministry of Magic, and as luck would have it he knew someone who worked for that Ministry.

-------

Two hours later, Lucius Malfoy walked into the audience chamber and bowed. "You asked to see me, Your Majesty?"

The king nodded. "Yes, Wizard Malfoy. I was wondering if you could do me a favor."

Lucius frowned. "A favor? What do you mean, Your Majesty?"

"It's simple. You work for the British Ministry of Magic, do you not?"

The Briton nodded. "Yes, Your Majesty, I do. I've been working for the Ministry for a while."

"Good, Wizard Malfoy. Are you familiar with a man by the name of Tom Riddle?"

For a moment, Fahd thought he'd caught a glimpse of triumph on Malfoy's face. However, it disappeared so quickly he wondered if he'd imagined it.

Malfoy thought for a moment and answered. "I believe I do, Your Majesty. He's a Wizarding political leader who's trying to endear himself to the Muggles."

Fahd stared at Malfoy more intently. "I assume that the Ministry is aware of his...other...role, as Lord Voldemort?"

Malfoy looked at his shoes. He seemed uncomfortable -- or a very good liar. "As a matter of fact, we are aware of his alter ego as well. Tom Riddle is a very dangerous -- and popular -- man, Your Majesty. One of his agents may be in charge of al-Qaeda, if my memory serves me right."

Fahd whistled. "You definitely know your stuff, Wizard Malfoy. At any rate, I was hoping whether you and I could form an alliance which could be used to send Lord Voldemort to Allah prematurely. I need Riddle out of there because his flunky is running al-Qaeda, and you need him dead because he's going to be interfering with your nation. A Saudi agent can't kill him because it would be an international scandal."

Malfoy thought for a moment and shook his head. "As a member of the Ministry of Magic, I cannot serve any foreign power. I am sorry, Your Majesty."

Fahd smiled. "Not if it's unofficial. You give me Riddle's head, I give Britain a lot of money and oil."

-------
Simple as that."

"Can't your Ministry of Magic do it?"

Fahd shook his head. "We don't assassinate foreign political leaders. You'll have to do it for us, off the record."

Malfoy hesitated, but eventually nodded. "I believe that may work, Your Majesty, as long as it's all off the record. However, I will be needed at the Ministry most of the time. Would it be all right for one of my colleagues to become part of your cabinet? He'll be around all the time to talk to you. You can summon him whenever you want."

"That will be fine. What's his name?"

"Amaram Rikpreet. He's a Hindu, Your Majesty. I assume having a Hindu in your cabinet will be all right? I don't want to offend anyone."

The king shook his head. "Normally, I'd be a bit reluctant to add some Hindus to my cabinet. However, Riddle is enough of a problem that I'm willing to make an exception here."

Malfoy nodded. "Then it is settled. I'll send him over as soon as possible."

"That's all I can ask for, Wizard Malfoy. Good luck, and may Allah go with you. Dismissed."

To be continued...

-------------

Update #120
--------------
April 17, 1996
Biology Lab
University of Seoul
Seoul
South Korea
--------------
Next PoV: 121 -- Igor Karkaroff
--------------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 5 (tiara, locket, ring, snake, cup)
--------------
Cha Joong Joong looked over at the computer printout. Normally, genetic samples from three randomly chosen people would be highly different. There were the X and Y chromosomes, of course, which would differ between men and women. Other sequences of nucleotides would vary as well. Granted, with the Human Genome Project nowhere near finished, there was no way to tell what exactly each gene did. Some of them would be responsible for hair color. Others would be responsible for freckles or heart disease.

A few weeks ago, his advisor had given him and the rest of his postdoc friends two interesting genetic samples, one from a Korean witch and one from a man who supposedly had some magical skills and not others. Both spellcasters had defected from North Korea a while back and had given blood samples for the sake of science. The goal was to figure out which genes and nucleotides were responsible for Wizarding ability.
The only way to determine this would be to grab a whole bunch of Muggles -- say, 50 or 60 -- and have them donate blood samples. In theory, all one needed to do was to take the blood samples of the witch, the so-called half-wizard, and the Muggle -- and make a list of which genes were in both wizards and not in the Muggle. The catch, of course, was that with only three samples there would be lots and lots of genes which would qualify. Some of them could be responsible for hair color, and some could be responsible for heart disease. There would be no way to tell with just three samples. However, if the scientists checked 62 blood samples and found that the only two which had a particular sequence were the two wizards, then they'd be onto something.

As it so happened, they had more than 60 volunteers. Graduate students were notorious for having low incomes, and they often needed to earn money any way they could. Their little advertisement had managed to recruit no fewer than 217 men and women. All of them were Korean -- they had insisted on that to make sure that the experimenters were changing as few variables as possible. Cha Joong had even managed to include a few professors as well.

It had taken a while, but the results had finally come in. The computer had just produced a list of genes which only the two wizards had and no one else did. The list had a very surprising, and worrisome, number of entries.

Zero.

This was impossible, he thought. The few wizards he had spoken to believed that Wizarding ability was hereditary. This meant at least some genetic component. But if that was the case, where was it? Where were the genes that made someone a wizard? They HAD to be there!

It took him a good half an hour of wracking his brain before he realized what had probably happened. The key was the half-wizard. The man had no idea that he had had Wizarding abilities, yet there he was casting spells. As far as he knew, he was a Muggle. He had been quite surprised when his teacher had informed him that he was able to become a wizard if he so chose.

The half-wizard's situation suggested a stunning possibility. His group had selected volunteers who were Muggles and only Muggles. He had to consider the possibility that some of these Muggles were half-wizards, like the North Korean man, and didn't know it. That would likely skew the results.

He hurried back to the computer and looked for genes which were shared by the two wizards and the FEWEST number of Muggles. This would help isolate things a little further. The computer chugged for a moment and eventually spit out its result.

Zero.

Cha Joong frowned. That didn't make sense, he thought. He went outside to think things over again when he came across a third possibility. Perhaps all humans had these genes, but only wizards had chemicals which activated them. If that was the case, magical ability was probably latent in every single human being and could in theory be triggered at the right time of fetal development. The females with the Y chromosome came to mind: they shared the Y chromosome with males, but if the chemicals in their blood didn't trigger the Y to activate the people in question stayed female.

So, he went back to the computer and brought up the blood chemistry statistics. Were there chemicals in the wizards’ blood which were in none of the Muggles’ blood? That would probably help a lot? The computer thought about it some more and reported its result.

Zero.
Exasperated, he extended the search to include chemicals which were included in the wizards' blood and appeared in two or fewer Muggles. If this didn't work, he thought, he'd have to really get creative.

The computer thought some more and suddenly beeped. Cha Joong's eyebrows shot up. This meant a positive result. A couple of seconds later, the machine reported its results.

There was one compound which was shared by both the wizards and by one of the Muggles. One compound was shared by only the witch and one Muggle, but it was not the same Muggle. There were no compounds which were in the blood of the half-wizard and one Muggle which were not also in the witch's blood.

He looked into the computer databases for information about these compounds and found some very interesting results. Supposedly they had just been discovered within the past few months, in all likelihood after the wizards had revealed themselves to the world. He suspected that other labs were trying to do the same thing he did and identify Wizarding biological components.

The compound shared by the Muggle and both wizards had been given the provisional designation "Q-act". The reports claimed that there were two compounds which seemed to control magical abilities, Q and Z. It was unknown how exactly Q and Z worked. What was obvious, however, was that the chemical his lab had isolated was involved with activating Q.

Breathless with excitement, he looked up the information on the second compound. It had no name. Which DNA sequence did it activate, Q or Z? Was it related to both? He needed more information, so he dug deeper. Eventually, he picked up something hiding on page 16 of a 24 page report. It claimed that the compound with no name seemed to be extremely common in those with an active Z chromosome and nowhere else.

Cha Joong suddenly realized what this meant. He needed to double-check things to be sure, but the conclusion made a lot of sense.

An active Q gene was responsible for the ability to cast magical spells. Both the half-wizard and the witch had this ability -- as did, oddly enough, one of the Muggles. This seemed to indicate a proportion of magic-capable people in the general population of about 0.5%. On the other hand, the Z gene was likely responsible for the ability to see magical constructs. The witch had it -- as did one Muggle -- but the half-wizard didn't. What could the witch do and the half-wizard not do? See magical constructs.

He suspected that in order to be identified as a wizard, a person needed both the Z gene and Q gene activated. All people with at least one gene inactive would likely have been classified as a Muggle. It was telling that although there were a few Q's and Z's running around in the list of samples, none of the Muggles actually had both. This made sense -- there would be probably many more half-wizards than true wizards. Judging from this simple test, maybe 1% of the population was a half-wizard -- with one gene activated -- and one out of every 40,000 was a full wizard.

He still wasn't entirely certain where the Q and Z genes were in the human genome. However, he had a strong suspicion he knew what they did.

He had to report this to the head of the lab immediately. This was big news. He'd have to do some more experiments to see if there were any other compounds like these.
He wondered if the two Muggles who had been identified in the experiment realized that they were about to be hit with the biggest surprise of their lives.

To be continued...
Update #121 through Update #125

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Mislagnissa

Update #121
---------
April 18, 1996
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
Great Britain
---------
Next PoV: 121 -- Stephen Pitmoss
----------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 5 (tiara, locket, ring, snake, cup)
---------

Igor Karkaroff looked out at the gates to the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. At least everybody knew who he was now.

He had gained a significant amount of name recognition during the previous year, when he had brought a few talented men to Hogwarts to compete in the Triwizard Tournament. Karkaroff was fairly certain, however, that Krum would represent Durmstrang, and he wasn't disappointed. Krum had performed well, completing all of his tasks. However, even Viktor himself wasn't entirely certain what had happened to him in the maze during the third task. The talented Bulgarian Seeker had meant to speak with Karkaroff after the task had been completed. However, everyone's plans had been disrupted when Harry Potter had materialized with the Triwizard Cup, a dead competitor, and a warning that Voldemort had returned.

Karkaroff had gotten VERY nervous when he had heard that Voldemort had returned. He couldn't deny that SOMETHING had happened: the Dark Mark on his arm had burned a few minutes before Harry had reappeared with the Cup. He had gotten to know all four contestants during the tournament, and none of them seemed to be the type to kill one of their opponents in order to reach the Cup first. Once the students had been ruled out, the only reasonable thing which could have killed Cedric would have been an obstacle in the maze, and Karkaroff knew that couldn't have happened.

This meant that Cedric had been murdered by someone who had not been involved with the tournament. Death Eaters certainly qualified for that role, with a revived Voldemort himself at the top of the list.

Karkaroff had bolted at the first opportunity. He had been on the run for almost a year now, evading curses and Death Eaters whenever he could. He had breathed a sigh of relief when the Quiddler reported that Voldemort had been killed and that most of the Death Eaters had been taken out. However, Karkaroff was familiar enough with the Dark Arts to suspect that the Dark Lord had taken out Horcruxes and wouldn't be an easy target. He'd survived the attack on Harry back in 1981, after all.

As long as Death Eaters had survived the attack, it would always be possible for Voldemort to be revived. Lucius and Wormtail certainly knew how to do it, and they were supposedly still at large. And he hadn't considered the Death Eaters who hadn't been British: de Noelle, Dilmi, Kurosawa, and so forth. He'd heard rumors that Dilmi had resurfaced and was running al-Qaeda: if that were the case, both the Muggle and Wizarding worlds would be in deep trouble.
The Super Bowl Breach had opened another possible avenue of escape for him: hiding out with the Muggles. He'd moved into a Muggle neighborhood, far away from prying magical eyes. However, the Death Eaters had still managed to track him down there. He remembered the Sneakoscope going off and heading into the storm cellar. When he had emerged half an hour later and cautiously left the house, no one seemed to have noticed. It looked like he had dodged another hex.

He was afraid, however, that his luck was running out. He highly doubted that Voldemort would let him back in after betraying Crouch Jr. and several other Death Eaters a few years ago. If Voldemort had returned and had set his sights on Muggle power, the evil mastermind’s sphere of influence could expand greatly. The only way he'd be able to beat off the Death Eaters trying to assassinate him would be to ally himself with a stronger power.

So here he was, outside Hogwarts. It was a big gamble, trying to get an audience with Dumbledore and ask for his protection. Snape, whom Voldemort presumably knew was now a double agent, seemed to have asked Dumbledore for asylum as well. Dumbledore had accepted Snape and offered him a position at Hogwarts. Could a position at Hogwarts be on the horizon for himself as well? He'd left Durmstrang in the hands of its deputy headmaster, Stanislav Drakul. Despite the name, Stanislav was neither a vampire nor a Death Eater. The Drakuls were a well-known magical family, and only a few members had gone to the dark side. Vlad the Impaler, however, had left a legacy which would take his descendants centuries to overcome. Stanislav had routinely warned people that he would duel anyone who dared discuss both him and Vlad the Impaler in the same breath.

The doors of the school were open, as usual. He walked in and started heading for Snape's office. He didn't know Dumbledore's password and as a result would not be able to get into the headmaster's tower without help. He suspected, however, that Snape would.

The Potions master's eyes went wide when he saw Karkaroff. Excusing himself, and angrily silencing the students who were reacting excitedly to Karkaroff's presence, he headed outside to speak with Karkaroff.

Snape was, as usual, blunt. "Igor, what are you doing here?"

Igor shook his head. "I can't talk here. Is your office secure?"

Snape nodded. "Yes. However, I cannot talk now. In case you're wondering, I have a class to teach."

With that, Snape headed back into the classroom and closed the door in an irritated Karkaroff's face. Severus's reaction had surprised, and dismayed, Karkaroff. Did Snape not trust him? However, Karkaroff's fear proved to have been a false alarm. As soon as the class ended, Snape headed over to Karkaroff and told Igor to follow him.

Snape led Karkaroff into Snape's office and closed the door. "All right, Igor. Explain. What brings you over here?"

Karkaroff drew a deep breath. "I want to request asylum with Dumbledore. I'm scared and tired of working for Voldemort. He accepted you, and I've already shown my hand by trying to betray Death Eaters while I was in Azkaban. Will he accept me? I'll tell him some of the Death Eater secrets, assuming you haven't already told him."

Snape stared at him in shock, and thought for a moment. "That would be quite helpful, Igor. Be
aware, however, that Voldemort will not take your defection lightly. And always watch your back whenever you leave the castle."

Karkaroff nodded. "I will, Severus."

"You will have to relinquish control of Durmstrang."

"I have, Severus. Drakul is running the show now."

"Good. As far as I'm concerned, you're now one of us. There is one complication, however."

A lump rose in Karkaroff's throat, and he swallowed deeply. "And that is?"

Snape frowned. "Dumbledore is running from the Ministry because he instructed a student to use a Time-Turner two years ago. No one knows where he is. Dolores Umbridge, a Ministry official, is now headmistress. Let us say that Dumbledore isn't exactly welcome around here for the time being, and that Dolores Umbridge was one of the people who helped convict you as a Death Eater."


Snape nodded. "She is still deputy headmistress. However, McGonagall and I have very little practical power. Umbridge has set herself up as virtual dictator, and everything goes through her. Igor, it appears that the Ministry picked a bad year to try to impose its will on the school. Things were bad enough even before Potter showed up in that damned soft drink commercial. Now things are worse."

Karkaroff hoped he wasn't sounding whiny. "Can I talk to you and McGonagall? Do you have a safe house which I can stay at until Dumbledore comes back or Voldemort is overthrown?"

Snape hesitated. "As a matter of fact, I do. However, it is not up to me to tell you where the safe house is. A particular Auror is Secret-Keeper for its location. You will have to go through him and convince him that you are indeed defecting and not trying to become a Trojan horse."

Karkaroff bit his lip. "Until you get permission to send me into the safe house, can I stay at Hogwarts? Is there anything I can do here to help the school while we're waiting?"

Snape grinned. "I suppose you could help out in the kitchens, Igor. Voldemort would never think to look there. And even if he did manage to get into Hogwarts, he'd presumably go after me."

Karkaroff stared at Snape. "The kitchens? I can't cook well! Besides, what happened to the elves who were supposed to run the kitchens?"

Snape chuckled. "Oh, the elves are still there. But humans rarely go down there, so it would be a safe place for you to hide until this passes. Besides, you've got a wand. People can learn to cook pretty quickly in an emergency."

To be continued...

--------------

Update #122
--------------

April 21, 1996
Church of the Right Wing
Stephen Pitmoss prided himself on the notices announcing his sermons outside the church. He had had a few good ones over the years. However, he had been fairly certain that today's would probably be one of the most effective advertising gimmicks he'd ever thought up.

ANTICHRIST SPEAKS ON BRITISH TELEVISION

Pitmoss had nearly fallen over in a dead faint when one of his college hires had shown him the footage, recorded from a British student's television set and placed on the Internet. Why him? He was but one man, and although he had a devoted following, he didn't think he was adequate for the task he had been chosen to undertake. How would he be able to lead his flock through the seven years of tribulation? Although it was obvious that God had selected Pitmoss to be one of the lucky few to make it through to the Second Coming, He had not yet provided him with the knowledge necessary to convince the masses and tell everyone that they needed to repent and do so quickly. This would likely be Pitmoss's greatest trial, comparable to those of Abraham, Jesus, and Moses. He hoped that he would be up for the challenge.

It didn't take a saint or prophet to realize that spreading the news would be the first step in God's divine plan. Hence the advertisement. In preparation for the large audience, he had opened up the back of the sanctuary -- normally a social hall -- and filled it with folding chairs and old pews. He figured he'd be able to fit more than 1,500 people into the sanctuary in this manner.

Looking around the room, he realized that it wasn't going to be enough.

Pews designed for four people were often holding seven or eight. People -- as well as news reporters -- had begun calling as soon as he had put the sign up. Many of them thought that he had been making the whole thing up in an attempt to get congregants who had defected to the Westboro Baptist Church. He had of course replied the truth: he wished he HAD made it all up. Unfortunately, he had seen the announcement himself. Everything was all too real. He often begged the callers to change their mind, but more often than not they hung up on him. Thanks to the grace of God, however, several people spoke to him with an open mind and were willing to listen. That was all he could do.

His secretary informed him that the new sign had triggered a burst of new members of the congregation. God had performed His miracle and brought the candidates into the church. It was to Pitmoss to finish the deal.

The back of the room was full of television cameras and people working for the Associated Press. Several paparazzi had tried to interview him as he had come out to begin the service. He tried to shoo them away, explaining that they would find out at the same time as everyone else. Everyone was equal in the eyes of the Lord, and as a result press reporters were not going to get any special treatment.

It was a struggle to make it through the first half of the service, before the sermon. Everyone was talking excitedly, and he had been forced to call for silence at least a dozen times. God then granted him an observation which abruptly stopped the conversations: if the years of tribulation were upon
us, we all had to be on our best behavior. After all, God was judging us, and He probably didn't like it when people ignored the words of the Bible and the hymns recommended by the preacher.

Finally, he made it through the first half of the service. The notes of the organ faded away, and he ascended the podium to give his speech. He found it hard to see through all of the floodlights shining from the back of the room.

He drew a deep breath. This had to be good. God, he prayed, please help me. I intend to do Your will, and any help would be greatly appreciated. Feeling the grace of God falling upon his shoulders, he began to speak.

"Ladies and gentlemen, it is my duty to inform you of some terrible news. The moment we have been dreading for centuries has arrived. The Last Judgment is upon us. The Antichrist has come."

The crowd murmured for a moment as camera flashes went off. He waited for the din to subside and continued.

"I had suspected for many months that the End Times were upon us. People claiming to be wizards suddenly materializing out of nowhere. The Pope coming out with powers of the devil. Nuclear weapons proliferating throughout the world. Terror attacks. Climate change. Genocide. Stress. People aspiring to challenge God through technology yet with no more wisdom than the people of Sodom. We have towers and skyscrapers orders of magnitude larger than the accursed Tower of Babel. We nearly destroyed ourselves during the Cuban Missile Crisis thirty years ago, and ever since then our weapons have gotten even more powerful. For the first time in history, mankind may very well have capability to bring Revelation to fruition."

Pitmoss paused for emphasis. "And now, this. The arrival of the Antichrist. May God have mercy upon us all."

He pushed a button on the podium and a movie screen began lowering itself down from the ceiling. "Several weeks ago, I brought up the possibility that magic was the Mark of the Beast and that the so-called Secretary Radner could have been the False Prophet. We all knew that the False Prophet was the herald of the Antichrist, so I prayed for divine guidance and asked God what the Antichrist would likely look like. Praise the Lord, He answered me. I saw a vision of the Antichrist as a man with serpentine features, a wizard who came out of nowhere to try to grow a Muggle power base. A man who would likely seem to be a great leader until he showed his true colors and betrayed the people who had supported him. A man who would likely be deposed and possibly killed only to be revived in a more powerful form.

"Just to show that I am not making this up, I will now replay my sermon from that week to prove that I indeed said this."

Pitmoss stuck a tape into a cassette player hidden in the podium and broadcast the appropriate part of the sermon from the earlier week. The congregants nodded. It appeared that most of them had remembered the speech.

Turning off the tape, he continued his sermon. "With this in mind, watch the following broadcast that mysteriously appeared on British television last week. Every single channel all across the United Kingdom was magically sabotaged and forced to show the following public service announcement. Please do not speak until you have finished watching the footage: we'll have plenty of time to discuss it later."
Pitmoss pressed another button, and a British weatherman appeared on the screen only to be replaced by static and a sign advertising Wizard Riddle and the Alliance for Magic. The pastor figured he wouldn't even have to watch to figure out when Riddle appeared on the screen. All he would have to do was listen to the reaction of the crowd.

He wasn't disappointed. Virtually the entire congregation broke out into a spontaneous, terrible wail. Three women fainted -- at least in the part of the congregation he could see clearly into -- and several men began crying. A good 25% of the worshipers fell to their knees in desperate prayer, their hands clasped to crosses around their neck.

Pitmoss paused the recording, leaving Tom Riddle frozen on the screen. "There he is, ladies and gentlemen. The Antichrist, just as God warned us. If there's a man who looks more like a serpent than he does, I haven't met him. This fellow looks more like a snake than a human! He comes out of nowhere, wields some magic, and tries to convince the world to listen to him. He likely has his eyes set on the Prime Minister's chair. Can you imagine what a man like this could do with one of the most powerful economies in the world at his beck and call? The pound sterling is one of the few currencies more powerful than the Almighty Dollar, for crying out loud! And Britain is part of the European Union, a federation of countries whose combined economic output rivals that of the United States!"

He didn't want to recite the next part of the speech, but he had to. He had to warn everyone.

"The Bible talks about Gog and Magog. We had always thought that this apocalyptic battle would between the United States and the Soviet Union. We thought we had gotten a reprieve when the Soviet Union collapsed. Little did we know that Magog would be reborn with Tom Riddle at the head of the European Union! A European Union which will be caught completely unaware, as it appears that the British government has not yet launched an investigation as to Wizard Riddle's true nature!"

He was barely able to finish his speech over all the screams and cries. "Ladies and gentlemen, listen to me! It is extremely likely that all of us in this church have been saved! We will all be around to witness the Second Coming of Our Lord Jesus Christ! However, we still have our work cut out for us, and we will have to do something to earn our salvation. With great power comes great responsibility. Our mission is obvious. It is up to us to spread the word of the Antichrist's arrival and save as many people as possible from the Evil One and his minions. Time is running short, my friends. The next seven years will be quite likely the most tumultuous period in all of required history. Brace yourselves and do not back down from the challenges we are about to face."

Pitmoss shook his head in resignation. "That is all, my friends. May God walk with us and have mercy upon our souls, our friends' souls, and the souls of all upright human beings who walk this earth."

To be continued...

---------
Update #123
---------
April 21, 1996
St. George's Cathedral
Lviv
Ukraine
---------
Next PoV: 124 -- Harry Potter
Celestine VI waited anxiously in the anteroom leading to the cathedral's main sanctuary. It was going to take a while for him to get accustomed to his new name, he thought. He'd been accustomed to using his given name for 56 years already, and it was often difficult to teach old dogs new tricks.

He had never expected that he would be elected to the papacy. Granted, he was a very charismatic man. His flock admired him, and he had earned a well-deserved reputation for doing things because they were morally and ethically right, not necessarily because God commanded things. The time-worn question "what would Jesus do" meant a lot to him.

The Vatican had taken notice of his devotion and dedication and he had progressed quickly through the ranks. However, he refused to believe that he had the wisdom required to follow in the shoes of St. Peter. He just considered himself an ordinary man helping the community. He had to admit to himself that he wasn't even remotely on the same level as John Paul II. He had assumed that John Paul would likely be canonized at the rate things were going, and he wasn't even dead yet.

However, everything had changed when Samuel got involved. Like many Catholics, Celestine had been rather skeptical about Samuel's claims. All right, so the guy spoke ancient Hebrew. Big deal. There were probably a lot of ghosts running around from that time. For all Celestine knew, the man could be some Assyrian who happened to have had diplomatic ties with the Davidic kingdom and had been forced to learn the language.

Unfortunately, as a Catholic he had to follow the Pope's lead on this. The Pope had announced that he believed Samuel as the real thing and should be considered an extremely power voice in theological matters. This was doubly troubling to Celestine. Samuel had been born a thousand years before the arrival of the Savior, and from what Celestine had heard the man was completely out of touch with the fact that his old faith had splintered into three fractious "sects", as the prophet called them. The new pope had to admit, however, that Samuel seemed to have the right ideas for the most part. He was in fact an extremely profound, and brilliant, spiritual thinker. But would his views be portable over three thousand years?

As if that wasn't bad enough, there were rumors that the ghost of Deborah the prophetess had shown up during Passover. Supposedly the woman was 4'9", dressed in a Muslim-style burqa, and had a vicious Napoleon complex. She seemed to be a three-way cross between Margaret Thatcher, the Wizard of Oz, and Gloria Steinem. Oh, and she could transform herself into a bee. John Paul had not yet ruled on her authenticity, which was likely a wise decision. Preliminary investigations indicated that she was likely as authentic as Samuel...which didn't help much. However, acknowledging Deborah as a de-facto priestess would probably open Pandora's box in the Catholic Church. He wondered which way John Paul would rule.

Deborah and Samuel may have been great leaders in their time. However, their methods of implementing their policies would be absolutely worthless in a modern, industrialized society. Celestine knew that they couldn't be allowed to dictate how Christians all around the world were to live their lives, especially if their policies didn't match those of Christ. Although officially supporting the Pope's decision and openly recognizing Samuel as the real deal, he had spoken with several other clergymen who were convinced that letting Samuel run the show would just get the church into trouble. Some people suspected that Samuel had ensorcelled John Paul and was trying to make himself pope!

He hadn't planned to make a schism in the Catholic Church. Having seen the friction which had
developed over the years between the Catholics and Protestants -- and not to mention the other two Abrahamic faiths -- he had refused to even consider a motion which could lead to centuries of religious hatred. Unfortunately, Samuel's support of iconoclasm had been the final straw.

A few weeks ago, he had received a message from John Paul II indicating that Samuel wanted the icons removed. This had sent Celestine up in flames. The icons were an important part of services here in Eastern Europe. The worshipers knew that they weren't actually idols. Why should churches remove their icons on the off chance that someone thought they were idols? In Celestine's view, explaining the catechism to one person in the congregation per month was not worth the price of removing objects people had been venerating for hundreds of years.

God had allowed the Church to prosper over all these years with icons in their sanctuaries. Obviously, He approved of icons. If God approved of icons, what Samuel was trying to do was heresy. He understood where Samuel -- or whoever it was -- was coming from: icons probably would have been seen as idols to illiterate peasants thousands of years ago. But that was then. This is now. Samuel had no idea what he was doing, yet he had managed to convince John Paul II -- who was getting up there in age and may not be as sharp as he once was.

Celestine had called a conference of archbishops and cardinals to discuss what should be done to deal with the iconoclasm controversy -- and with Samuel in general. They all agreed that John Paul had to take Samuel's words with a grain of salt. They had drafted a letter and sent it to the Pope. John Paul had written back saying that he understood their concern but was convinced that Samuel had the Church's best interests in mind.

This put the conference members in a dilemma. The pope was infallible, but he was clearly wrong in this case. Celestine knew it deep down inside, as did many others. This led to one inescapable conclusion.

God no longer approved of John Paul's position as pope. Furthermore, Samuel was likely a fraud as the real Samuel would be in tune with God's ideas.

Granted, John Paul was a great asset to the Church and was in fact deserving of sainthood. On the other hand, the Parkinson's disease was becoming harder to disguise, and it was getting difficult for him to minister to the people. Was God hinting that John Paul should resign, spend his last years enjoying the fruits of his great work, and make way for someone new?

Jesus had risked his life to do what was right and challenged the authorities of his time. He had been executed by the Romans but had returned in triumph. With the Savior as an example, how could Celestine stay silent?

The conference members had thought long and hard. Raising rival popes had always been a recipe for disaster. However, the committee had figured that they had no choice. They'd done an election similar to that of the papal conclave, and sure enough Celestine had been elected on the first ballot. The fact that it had been unanimous on the first ballot was seen by many to be a sign from God.

He had told the committee members straight out that he would immediately step down as soon as John Paul changed his mind and stopped listening to Samuel. Samuel would probably excommunicate him and the rest of his crew, and the Vatican would probably start calling him an antipope. He wasn't that worried about Samuel as the man was probably a fake. However, he was horrified about the ramifications of the raising of an antipope. Would Catholicism split? Would Celestine's follows be seen as anti-Bible and anti-wizard? Only time would tell.
Drawing a deep breath, and asking God for guidance, Celestine VI headed into the cathedral to face a gauntlet of paparazzi at least as frightening as phalanx of Romans.

To be continued...

--------

Update #124

April 24, 1996
The Burrow
England

--------

Next PoV: 125 -- Arthur Weasley, followed by the End of the First Quarter Intermission Report, Sponsored by Blast Cola

- - - - - - - -

HORCRUXES LEFT: 5 (tiara, locket, ring, snake, cup)

----------

Harry Potter couldn't believe that he'd managed to make it out of Malfoy Manor in one piece. He remembered returning to Voldemort's headquarters, armed with Quirrell's information on the Horcruxes. He played dead as long as he could, waiting for Voldemort and his henchmen to leave the room to pursue their diabolical endeavors. His joints had started to ache and his muscles were screaming at him to change his position. Fortunately, at about that time Voldemort seemed to remember that there was a dead body in the room. He asked Lucius to remove Harry.

Lucius had conjured up a stretcher and carried the motionless Harry outside. The Death Eater then did something which Harry had never even considered: he turned Harry into a Portkey and sent him back to the Burrow, precisely in the location he'd left.

Harry didn't really appreciate life as a Portkey. His body trembled with magical energies which needed to be released. The powers all let go at once as Harry felt the familiar hook behind the navel yanking him back to the Burrow.

The next thing he knew, Harry was back in his room in the Burrow as if nothing had happened. Lucius's action hadn't made sense at first: why didn't he just destroy what the Death Eaters assumed was a dead body? However, Harry thought about it more, and realized why Lucius had done what he did. Harry wasn't supposed to have left the Burrow. A dead Harry in the Burrow could be attributed to a heart attack, an assassination combined with a sleeping guard, or a disease. A dead Harry in Malfoy Manor would have left Lucius with a lot of awkward questions to answer.

Harry tried to tell the guards about the Horcruxes. However, they didn't believe him. They believed Voldemort was dead, for one thing, and attributed Harry's wild tale to a bad dream. Harry wished that he had the pieces of the broom that had served his means of transportation to Malfoy Manor -- that would have served as hard evidence. Lucius, of course, had sent him back empty-handed.

So here he was again, back in the Burrow, with information which could be used to finish off Voldemort once and for all. In the old days, he'd have talked to Sirius through the Floo Network. However, the guards had disconnected the Burrow from the Floo Network to prevent Harry from escaping.

How long was he going to sit here? Probably a while, he thought. The return of Voldemort would probably occupy most of the Ministry's time. They wouldn't really get a chance to reconsider imprisoning Harry for a crime which hadn't really been his fault. Would he get out in time to take his
OWls? Would he even be let back INTO Hogwarts? No one knew. His only companions were Molly Weasley and that monster in the attic, and he was getting a bit sick of Molly's gift for helicopter parenting.

He was just feeding Hedwig when he heard a commotion outside. The guards seemed to be excited about something. Curious, he looked out the window. The guards were all talking to a man he'd never seen before. Harry watched in amazement as one of the guards saluted and opened the door. The newcomer walked in with a piece of parchment in his hand.

Harry heard the man call out. "Harry Potter? Harry, this is Minister of Magic Rufus Scrimgeour. I've got news for you, young man. You've been pardoned. You are no longer under house arrest. I've got your wand, and you can return to Hogwarts."

Harry's jaw dropped. Rufus Scrimgeour? Who the hell was Rufus Scrimgeour? He knew who the Minister of Magic was, and his first name wasn't Rufus. Had the Minister been deposed? Was this man a servant of Voldemort? He needed to play this carefully."

He called downstairs. "I'm here, Minister. I'd come down to greet you, but in all fairness I don't know who you are. Did something happen to Cornelius Fudge? Considering what's just happened to me, I'd prefer to be a bit cautious when it comes to meeting new people."

The voice responded. "That's understandable, Harry. Rest assured, that Fudge is no longer in the picture. He's just been made a special ambassador to Togo. I'm his replacement."

Harry frowned. "Togo? Who's Togo?"

"Togo's not a who, Harry. It's a small country in western Africa."

"What's he doing there -- "

The voice interrupted. "A lot of things have happened over the past few days, Harry. I've got a copy of the Daily Prophet which will explain everything. Headmistress McGonagall should be arriving shortly as well."

Harry gasped. "Headmistress McGonagall? What the bloody hell --"

Scrimgeour shouted back up at him. "I've left the paper on the stairs, Harry. I'll leave the house momentarily so you can come down and read it if you're nervous about having me around. That will explain everything."

Harry heard something being thrown on the stairs. A few seconds later, he heard the front door open and the man leave. A couple of minutes after that, he heard Molly Weasley scream.

"Harry, get down here! You've got to see this! Oh my God!"

That clinched it. He raced down the stairs and watched Molly shaking in her shoes. Wordlessly, she handed over the parchment Scrimgeour had left on the stairs.

Harry only had to read two words to realize that this was going to be big.

------------

VOLDEMORT RETURNS
"Tom Riddle" Addresses Nation on Television, Asking for Support
MINISTRY OF MAGIC -- He's back.

Lord Voldemort, long believed to be dead, has managed to return to Britain. This time, he has his eyes on the Muggles as well as the wizards.

He was first thought dead in 1981 after his failed attack on the Potters. However, he reappeared in June, where he killed Triwizard Tournament contestant Cedric Diggory. A combined Muggle/wizard raid seemed to have finished him off for good once more back in March, yet the man somehow still managed to come back. This time, the Ministry vows that it will not rest until the Dark Lord is dead for good.

The Dark Lord introduced himself to the Muggle world on 16 April by interrupting television service all over Britain and forcing Muggles to watch him announce the formation of a new political party, the Alliance for Magic. Voldemort claims that he will be running on a platform based on peaceful coexistence between the wizards and the Muggles.

Judging from Muggle polls which have been taken over the past week, he is starting to get some support in the Muggle community. A good 38% of the British population is intrigued by AFM, and 4% have already changed their affiliation to the new party. Both numbers will likely rise as time passes.

The Dark Lord portrayed himself as a friend of Muggles, wearing a George Cross which he undoubtedly borrowed from a Death Eater who had been involved with the Canary Wharf rescue. The Muggles have no idea that this man is arguably the most dangerous wizard ever to live, and that he almost certainly plans to turn on the Muggles once he has been appointed Prime Minister.

The announcement caught both the Ministry of Magic and the British government completely by surprise. Both the Muggle and Wizarding authorities had known about the existence of the Dark Lord. However, both of them had classified Voldemort as top secret. Since You-Know-Who introduced himself as Tom Riddle and not Voldemort, the Muggles could not link the new candidate to the evil wizard who did not officially exist. Cornelius Fudge found himself in a bind as well, having spent all these months saying that Voldemort hadn't returned to begin with. He couldn't just admit that he had been withholding information from the community.

Needless to say, there was an uproar in the Ministry as soon as Wizarding officials found out about the broadcast. Cornelius Fudge was sacked almost immediately and sent off to be a liaison to the remote West African nation of Togo. His associate, the former Auror Rufus Scrimgeour, has replaced him as Minister of Magic. Unlike Fudge, Scrimgeour will not hold anything back from the Wizarding community of Britain. If there is something Britons need to know, he will tell them.

There have been changes at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry as well. Realizing that Defense Against the Dark Arts has just become far from theoretical, Scrimgeour has recalled Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor Dolores Umbridge and replaced her with a wizard more than familiar with Voldemort's tactics, Severus Snape. Potions will now be taught by Professor Horace Slughorn, who has come out of retirement to fill Snape's old position.

Minerva McGonagall has replaced Umbridge as head of the school. The position of Gryffindor Housemaster has been filled by Albus Dumbledore, who has been demoted from his prior position
because of the incident with Sirius Black and the Time-Turner. Although Dumbledore's suspicion was eventually proven to be correct, the fact that he encouraged an underage student to use the Time-Turner for unauthorized purposes should not be overlooked. Realizing that Azkaban was likely too extreme a punishment for such an offense, Scrimgeour managed to contact Dumbledore -- something which he found almost impossible to do -- and reduced the sentence to a demotion.

In other news, Harry Potter has been freed from Fudge's sentence of house arrest. In all fairness, though, this was overdue. He may only be fifteen, but he has done great things for the Wizarding community, such as destroying the basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets and making sure that Voldemort didn't get the Philosopher's Stone. He will once again be able to attend Hogwarts.

Hermione Granger, the brilliant Gryffindor who used the Time-Turner, has also been readmitted. She had just been following Dumbledore's orders, after all.

The Ministry would like to emphasize that Harry is not responsible for the Super Bowl Breach, regardless of what Fudge said. In truth, no wizard could have known that the Disillusionment Charm would fail to work against video recorders for the simple reason that it had never been tested on Muggle equipment.

More information will come in as it becomes available. In the meantime, please take all precautions necessary to keep the Death Eaters from spying on you or impersonating you through the Polyjuice Potion.

------------

Harry put down the paper in shock. Everything had happened so fast. It took him a few seconds for him to realize that two new people were now standing front of him. One of them was the man he had seen talking to the guards, Rufus Scrimgeour. The other was one of the people he admired most.

Minerva McGonagall smiled at him. "Welcome back to Hogwarts, Harry Potter. If there is anything we can do to make up for your lost time -- short of using another Time-Turner -- tell us and we will make it happen."

Harry brought himself back to the present in a hurry. "As a matter of fact there is, Professor McGonagall."

McGonagall smiled. "Headmistress, now. However, it's still a bit of a surprise to me as well."

Harry chuckled. "Sorry -- Headmistress. I have an urgent message from the late Professor Quirrell. Yes, he's dead. However, I was comatose momentarily after Voldemort attacked me in Malfoy Manor on the 15th. I spoke with him and my father in a place which they called Limbo."

All three adults stared at him. Finally, McGonagall almost pounced on him.

---

Harry rushed ahead. "I don't know how it happened, Headmistress. However, Professor Quirrell told me something that he picked up from Voldemort's mind after the Dark Lord possessed him. The information should have died with him, but he was able to pass it on while I was...indisposed."

McGonagall's eyes widened. "Really? What is this?"

Harry was blunt. "Voldemort has Horcruxes. Five of them. Quirrell knew what they are and told me. Destroy them and you will be able to kill him once and for all."

There was dead silence for a good thirty seconds, after which McGonagall almost pounced on him.
"Tell me EVERYTHING!"

To be continued...

-------------
Update #125
-------------

April 25, 1996
Bentley Motor Corporation
Crewe
England

-------------
Next PoV: 126 -- Xenophilius Lovegood
-------------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 5 (tiara, locket, ring, snake, cup)
-------------

Arthur Weasley had promised Cornelius Fudge that he wouldn't do any more work to get Fords to fly. Bentleys, on the other hand, were an entirely different story.

Parked before him was the prototype model of the 1997 Bentley Pegasus. They had taken an 1996 Brooklands, made some cosmetic changes, adapted it for flight, and surrounded it with decorations based on the Muggle cartoon The Jetsons. Arthur had learned that this cartoon took place in a somewhat utopian future where flying cars were an everyday occurrence.

The prototype chosen for this demonstration lacked many of the features the fully-developed car would have. The ejection seats weren't in it, for one thing. Although Arthur was convinced that the magic wouldn't allow the vehicle to crash, the Muggles were adamant that the car include the ejections seats. Otherwise, Bentley would be hit with reams of lawsuits.

Adapting the Brooklands chassis for flight had been a relatively simple operation. Someone had managed to purchase a large supply of argon-38 -- the electronics-saving gas was coming increasingly popular and expensive -- and filled the car with it. This allowed Arthur to enchant it without blowing out any of the Muggle electronics. The steering wheel had been modified so that it could be tilted towards or away from the driver, much like the controls of an airplane. Tilting it forward would cause the car to go downward, and tilting backwards would cause it to head skyward. The steering wheel would remain locked in its normal position and would only be able to change the car's altitude when a special button was pressed at the same time the steering column was pushed or pulled. The car was capable of flight, but everyone acknowledged that it would be used primarily as a street vehicle.

The engineers had changed the hood ornament as well. Instead of a simple B, the vehicle sported an ornament which showed a B on a flying horse. Arthur thought that was a nice touch. The only problem was that he'd seen pegasus before and they didn't look at ALL like the animal shown on the ornament. The president promised that they'd change it before the car went into production.

The car had been painted a brilliant white. The president had fitted the test vehicle with virtually every single optional feature: a sunroof, chrome hubcaps, and so forth. Supposedly the vehicle as shown here would be selling for over 650,000 pounds. It would be the perfect advertisement.

Advertising was the goal here, after all. The entire purpose for this press conference had been to introduce the vehicle, demonstrate its flight capabilities, and if possible get some customers to place some orders. Arthur still wasn't certain that people would spend half a million pounds on a car, but
the president seemed to know what he was talking about.

Arthur wasn't the only wizard in the room. In a move that reeked of absolute genius, his son Bill had brought his quarter-veela girlfriend, Triwizard contestant Fleur Delacour, over to the office to show off the vehicle. The combination of a fancy car and a pretty girl would be an overpowering one-two punch. Arthur had never been particularly fond of the girl, but even he had to admit that her veela nature would come in handy here.

The agenda was as follows. The president would make a speech describing the features of the new car. He would then jump into the car with the CEO and hand the keys to one of the engineers. The engineer would drive the car around the block a few times, demonstrating what the car could do. Finally, at the end of the presentation, the engineer would relinquish controls to Arthur, who would get the Pegasus off the ground.

Arthur looked around the showroom. The room was packed with people in black suits which Arthur had learned represented Muggle formalwear. All of them were ogling the car and taking photographs. His eyebrows shot up when he realized that they weren't ogling the car: they were ogling Fleur. Mildly disturbed, he walked over to the president and reported his observation.

The president grinned. "Don't worry about it, Arthur. She's in the car, and any picture of her is going to get the car as well. As long as they publicize the car, that's fine with me. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got to get this show on the road. You're sure the magic is ready for use?"

Arthur nodded. "It is, sir. I've done some field tests in that enclosed hangar and it flies like a bird. We shouldn't have any problems."

Relieved, the president slapped Arthur on the back and headed up to the podium to make his speech.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the headquarters of Bentley Motor Corporation. We have come today to announce a new model of vehicle, the 1997 Bentley Pegasus. It's got specs similar to a Brooklands and rides like a Brooklands. Its base price will be 499,995 pounds."

The guests, who had not been told that the vehicle was capable of flight, looked at each other in surprise. The president, however, had been expecting this. "Yes, I'm aware it's a little pricier than a typical Brooklands. However, this isn't just an ordinary car. What you are looking at, ladies and gentlemen, is the first mass-produced flying vehicle."

There was a gasp of astonishment from the crowd, and Muggles started taking pictures of the new car in droves. The president continued:

"Yes, it flies, and it doesn't even need wings to do it. Thanks to the services of a wizard, the car flies on the wings of magic. Yes, you heard me right. Magic."

The president tried to continue but was drowned out by people asking questions. He had to wait a few minutes for the tumult to subside. When it did, he turned to Arthur.

"Allow me to introduce our chief...wizard, Wizard Arthur Weasley. He served in the Ministry of Magic for several years and had been experimenting with flying vehicles even before the Super Bowl. Arthur, the floor is yours."

Cameras flashed wildly as he approached the microphone. He had to forcibly restrain himself from investigating the curious device that Muggles used to enhance communication. Drawing a deep
"Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I'm Wizard Arthur Weasley, and I was involved with the magical enhancements that made the Pegasus possible. The magic will allow the driver to ascend to at most 500 meters at a maximum ascent angle of 6 degrees. Once at 500 meters, the car will automatically level off. This has been done to prevent people from flying too high and suffering from cold or lack of oxygen.

"Landing the vehicle will be safe and easy. The car will automatically level off when it approaches the ground or another obstacle. Its maximum descent angle, like its ascent angle, will be 6 degrees."

"The magic should last for three years at a time, after which the vehicle should be brought back to an appropriate Bentley agent so the magic can be recharged". That was actually not the case. The magic would work indefinitely, as far as Arthur knew. However, the company was convinced that they could milk their customers for more money by forcing them to come in for unnecessary maintenance. Auto repair shops were notorious for that, from what Arthur had been told.

"It is extremely unlikely that you will encounter problems during flight. You could have turbulence, much as you may experience while you are flying in an airplane. If, against all odds, there is a problem while the vehicle is airborne and the car starts falling back to the ground, ejection seats will automatically ignite, catapulting the occupants to safety. A passenger's ejection seat will be armed as soon as he or she buckles the seat belt.

"The 1997 model will be using magic only to make the vehicle fly. There are plans on the table to use magic to improve the gas mileage, maximum velocity, and other important metrics. These new features will be considered for the 1998 model.

"As far as the spells I used to enchant the vehicle go, I'm afraid I can't give any details as they're proprietary. What I can tell you, however, is that the electronics inside the vehicle did not suffer from the spell casting. This was because we filled the vehicle with argon-38, a gas which prevents magic from affecting electronics, before I cast the spell.

"The car lacks wings, as you can see. This allows it to take to the air at a moment's notice, without even having to reconfigure the vehicle for flight. That has always been one of the main drawbacks to flying cars, and as you can see we have overcome that."

With that, he turned the floor back over to the president, who finished the presentation. After a brief question and answer period, the president moved everyone outside to begin the demonstration.

A few people took pictures of the car navigating hairpin turns, stopping on a dime, driving through puddles, and so forth. However, it was obvious that everyone was waiting for the final exhibit. The flight.

At long last, the time had come. The engineer -- actually a trained stunt driver -- who had performed the road test got out of the car and handed the keys to Arthur. Arthur was nearly blinded by camera flashes as the keys fell into his hand. Sliding into the driver's seat, he drove the car out into the office's parking lot. Checking to make sure that there weren't any birds or buildings too close to him, he pulled back on the steering wheel and rose into the air.

The crowd shrank beneath him as he rose to about 50 meters and made a few laps around the area. His passengers whooped with delight and took pictures out the windows. Down beneath him, a horde of video cameras focused skyward, tracking the vehicle's every movement.
He had completed three out of his planned ten circuits, driving at a leisurely 30 mph, when he saw a helicopter approaching him. It was a traffic report helicopter. As it passed, he saw one of the passengers staring at him with her mouth open. Arthur had just finished waving to her when he heard a thud far below. Looking down, he saw that three cars which had been driving in his direction had bumped fenders on one of the major highways. Presumably they'd seen the Pegasus and been distracted. A few streets away from the accident scene, people were climbing out of their cars just to look up.

Behind him, the Bentley bigwigs shook their hands and congratulated each other. This appeared to have been a very successful demonstration.

To be continued...
Update #126
---------
April 28, 1996
St. Catchpole's Roman Catholic Church
Ottery St. Catchpole
England
---------
Next PoV: 127 -- A Harold-Green Pharmaceutical Employee

HORCRUXES LEFT: 5 (tiara, locket, ring, snake, cup)
---------

Xenophilius Lovegood was VERY curious as to what exactly would happen during church today. A lot of stuff had happened over the past week, including some developments which delivered British Catholics a double blow.

The Catholic Church had always believed that the Pope was the final authority on religious matters. This made perfect sense in that hierarchical organizations often didn't work well when they were governed by committee. On the other hand, no one had ever thought they'd have to deal with a disagreement over who the Pope was.

What had originally started as a dispute over Samuel's authenticity had rapidly snowballed into a referendum on iconoclasm and on wizards in general. The situation was eerily similar to the sequence of events which led to the Reformation. The Celestines, as the splinter group was called, argued that wizards should stay out of the Church and that Samuel -- or whoever it was -- should keep his mouth shut about things he didn't understand. Most of the Celestine churches were in eastern Europe, in areas where there had always been a traditional focus on icons. At the rate things were going, a large portion of the Byzantine Catholic Church would likely go Celestine within a few months.

The cardinal who had eventually become Celestine VI had insisted that he had no intention of splitting off from Rome. He had only raised himself to the papacy because he thought the supposedly infallible John Paul was making a mistake. Unfortunately, both popes were finding that things were getting out of control. Scholars had been arguing over the Church's views on magic ever since the wizards had first come out. The fact that the new pope had disapproved of Samuel and John Paul -- both wizards -- had almost immediately earned Celestine the support of conservative Catholics who hadn't liked the wizards to begin with. As if that weren't bad enough, several of them were spouting America for Humans theories that John Paul was the False Prophet and Tom Riddle was the Antichrist! There were rumors that the Celestines had brought back the Latin mass and were starting to preach against evolution in favor of intelligent design. What a mess.

Samuel must be having apoplexy, Xeno thought. Here he comes to try to unify the Abrahamic faiths and all he manages to do is help create another schism. God works in mysterious ways, he supposed.

Seeing John Paul as the False Prophet was a terrible defamation of the man's name. Regardless of whether one believed in wizards, one could not deny that John Paul had done great things for the Church. The Church had prospered under his tutelage and had managed to do so even though he had
been a wizard the whole time.

Wizard Riddle's role as the Antichrist made no sense from a Muggle perspective. Yes, the man looked strange, had appeared out of nowhere, and was trying to consolidate power in Britain. Unfortunately, the Muggles had no idea that he was actually Lord Voldemort. As far as they knew, he was just another British politician -- possibly an MP -- who decided that he'd be able to help the country by using magic. The fact that he had managed to procure a George Cross also appeared to count in his favor.

Xeno knew the truth, however. He was all too familiar with Lord Voldemort, having lived through Voldemort's bid for power back in the late 70's and early 80's. He was firmly convinced that Voldemort would betray the British population -- and possibly the world -- if he ever actually were elected Prime Minister.

Xeno had to put a stop this posthaste. He had spoken to the priest about Riddle's alter ego, and the priest had agreed to let Xeno speak to the congregation. Xeno was worried, however, that a sermon about the election of the antipope would probably trump anything that the priest had planned for Xeno.

The church wasn't just crowded: it was overcrowded. The priest had actually been forced to add a second mass later on in the morning and had started shooing people out once they reached the limit imposed by the fire code. The icons were still gone, so it looked like this particular congregation hadn't gone Celestine. At least for the time being, Xeno amended.

The congregation hushed almost immediately when the priest stood up to deliver the sermon. "Ladies and gentlemen, several momentous events have transpired this week. First and foremost, we have seen the election of a rival claimant to the papacy. His regnal name is Celestine VI and he hails from a Byzantine Catholic church in the Ukraine.

"From what I've been told, he had believed that John Paul had lost his right to the papacy by supporting Samuel, whom Celestine believed was not the man he claimed he was. He also argued that the prophet's decree against icons would be detrimental to worship in communities which relied on icons for spiritual inspiration.

"I met Celestine when he was still an archbishop. He is a good man. I believe he is sincere when he says that he does not intend to create a schism. I suspect that he would in fact step down if John Paul resigned or stopped listening to Samuel.

"Unfortunately, the schism has evolved into a referendum on iconoclasm -- much as like which happened with the Greek Orthodox Church back in the old days -- and the religious status of wizards. The fact that Samuel and John Paul are both wizards basically gave the factions which disapproved of wizards a casus belli, so to speak."

The priest looked over the crowd. "As you probably suspected from the lack of icons, this congregation is going to stay Roman Catholic. However, if a Celestine Catholic wishes to worship here, I urge everyone in this room to make him feel welcome. If there's going to be a split in the Catholic Church, it's not going to be under my watch. Although we're going to stick to John Paul's rites here, we're not going to treat the splinter movement as second class citizens. Jesus would have welcomed everyone to his services, and we will do the same here."

The crowd applauded heartily, Xeno among them. The priest waited for it to subside and continued. "I'd also like to bring up one of the other major developments this week: namely, Wizard Riddle's
announcement on television. Unfortunately, I'm not a wizard, so I'm not really a good person to comment on it. However, Xeno here is familiar with this man and is willing to speak to you. He has something which I think you should take to heart. With no further ado, Xenophilius Lovegood."

The priest backed off as Xeno walked to the podium. It looked like Xeno would be able to give his speech after all.

"Ladies and gentlemen, Holy Father, thank you for letting me speak. Yes, I do know Tom Riddle. He is a very well-known and powerful wizard. Unfortunately, he is not the trustworthy man he appears in the commercial. In the Wizarding world, he is known as Lord Voldemort and is about as evil as wizards go. There have been multiple attempts on his life, and in all of these cases he was left for dead. However, he has always managed to come back. Some wizards are wondering if he can even be killed.

"You should not associate with this man or get involved with the Alliance for Magic. Riddle is well known for his beliefs that wizards are superior to Muggles and envisions a world where the Muggles are virtually enslaved by the wizards. He is likely trying to capitalize on the fact that the Muggle world is unfamiliar with him by presenting you with a fake persona, one which will allow him to get into power. Once he is in power, he will betray the lot of you and force you into servitude at roughly the level of the Israelites in Egypt.

"I know what you're thinking. Riddle said that he was misunderstood and that the authorities would try to shoot him down. That is not the case. I am an ordinary civilian wizard, like you. I am not part of the Ministry of Magic. However, I was around during the last time he tried to take over, back in the late seventies and early eighties. People were killed left and right and the entire populace was quivering with fear. You Muggles were only spared because the Statute of Secrecy was still in force at the time. Now that the Statute is gone, Riddle finds himself in the perfect position to expand his power base.

"You may wonder how a wizard like him managed to earn the George Cross. The answer is: he likely didn't. You have to remember that virtually everyone in the Ministry participated in the Canary Wharf rescue and got GC's. Riddle either has a clandestine supporter in the Ministry of Magic or killed someone in the Ministry and took his medal. Yes, Riddle has no qualms about killing people, especially Muggles.

"My friends, I urge you to spread this news as quickly as you can. If you want more information, see if you can get an audience with Albus Dumbledore, Severus Snape, and Minerva McGonagall, the senior instructors at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. They will be more than able to provide evidence to support these claims. Rufus Scrimgeour, the new Minister of Magic, will also be a good person to talk to."

Xeno raised his hands in resignation. "I apologize for being the bearer of bad news. However, I must say things as they are. May God have mercy upon us all."

The congregation responded in unison. "Amen."

To be continued...

------------

Update #127

--------

April 29, 1996
Green stared up in surprise. "David? What --"

The wizard didn't keep him waiting. "Flamel lied to us."

"Flamel? Who --"

"Dr. Nicholas Flamel, sir. The British professor who claimed to have created the Philosopher's Stone."

Green recalled the incident now. "Ah. I remember now. We asked him about the Stone and he told us he never got it to work. He showed us his manuscript, and you reported that it claimed that he had experimented with making a Stone and it didn't work."

The wizard smiled through clenched teeth and tossed something onto Green's desk. "I was aware of that, sir. I did the translation. I believed it myself for a long time. However, that was before I stumbled across this."

Green reached down and picked up the object. It appeared to be a dynamic photograph of an old man with a long beard. The man was winking at him. Green knew enough about magical devices to know that anything with a dynamic photograph on it had to have had a magical origin.

He looked from the card back to Hendrickson. "What is this?"

Hendrickson rolled his eyes for a moment, then stopped in embarrassment when he realized that Muggles like Green didn't know what the object was. "It's a Chocolate Frog card, sir. They come in packages of British Wizarding chocolates. The cards feature profiles of famous witches and wizards."

Green frowned. "What do I do with this?"

"You can start by answering the following question. Would you say that this man seems to be in pretty decent health?"

Green looked back at the card. "I'd say so, yes."

"How old would you say he is?"

Green shrugged. "Mid-sixties. Why?"

"You'll see. Now turn the card over and read the back."
Green did so and began reading. "Albus Dumbledore. Currently Transfiguration Professor at Hogwarts and Head of Gryffindor House. Born August 5, 1881, in Mould-on-the-Wold. Considered by many to be the greatest wizard of modern times, Dumbledore is particularly famous for his defeat of --"

He froze. Something didn't make sense here. He looked over the last two sentences again. Sure enough, he had read it right. This man was born in 1881. And still alive.

Slowly, he lowered the card to the table and pointed an accusing finger at it. "Are you telling me that this man is 114?"

Wizard Hendrickson smiled in triumph. "Exactly. Does that seem a bit odd to you?"

Green looked at the card again. "I should say so, my friend. But don't wizards tend to live longer than Muggles?"

The wizard nodded. "Yes. However, 114 is really pushing it, even for a wizard. And to be 114 and look like you're 63..."

"Could it be that this is an old card? Perhaps it's 25-30 years old and the wizard has since died."

Hendrickson shook his head vigorously. "Nope. It claims Dumbledore is Transfiguration teacher and head of Hogwarts. That happened during the past month. It's up to date."

Green read the first half of the back of the card again. "This man is supposedly the greatest wizard of modern times, David. Perhaps he takes good care of himself. Perhaps he has a spell which retards aging."

Wizard chuckled. "Or stops it."

Suddenly, Green realized what you're saying. Slowly, he asked: "Are you telling me that Flamel created the Stone after all and is using it to retard this man's aging in addition to his own?"

"It sure looks like it, sir. Does it not?"

Green thought for a moment. "It's possible. However, there's a bit of a hole in your argument. Does Flamel even KNOW this man?"

The wizard's response was short and succinct. "Read on."

Green picked up the card and continued reading the back. "Dumbledore is particularly famous for his defeat of the Dark wizard Grindelwald in 1945, for the discovery of the twelve uses of dragon's blood, and his work on alchemy with his partner --"

Both Green and the wizard finished the sentence simultaneously. "NICHOLAS FLAMEL!"

Green swore viciously. "Son of a bitch! He lied to us! He had the damn Stone the whole time!"

The wizard reached into his pocket and brought out some old photographs. "It sure looks like it, sir. And if that's not enough proof, take a look at these."

Green looked at the photographs. They appeared to be taken on a college campus. One seemed to be
from 1960. The others seemed to be from 1934 and -- in amazingly good condition -- from 1901. Puzzled, he looked up at the wizard.

"These photographs are of the staff of the English department at Flamel's university. Take a look at the 1963 shot. Do you see Flamel there?"

He looked at the photograph and picked out Flamel immediately. "There he is. He looks exactly the same. He hasn't changed over 30 years."

Hendrickson chuckled. "Oh, he hasn't. However, take a look at his name in the key at the bottom of the photograph."

He did so and whistled. "John Flamel!"

The wizard leaned over the desk. "He's changing his name to hide the fact that he's immortal. He probably takes a few years off as a sabbatical, calls it a retirement, waits for all the students who knew him to graduate, and then has his 'son' take over."

Stunned, Green reached for the other two photographs. Flamel appeared in both of them, looking exactly the same. The 1901 photograph had him as Nicholas Flamel. The one from 1930's had him as Robert Flamel.

The wizard whispered, "He probably cycles through those three names every few generations to keep people off his tail. Remember that medieval Britons often reused names."

Green gasped. "You think he goes THAT far back?"

"I wouldn't be surprised: alchemy is a very old discipline. I'll find out, though. Trust me."

Green thought for a moment. "This changes things a lot. We need to get our hands on that Stone."

"Indeed we do, sir. The question is, how?"

Green looked up at him and tried to wink like Dumbledore. "I think it's time for some industrial espionage."

To be continued...

--------------

Update #128

--------------

April 30, 1996
Room of Requirement
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
Great Britain

--------------

Next PoV: 129 -- Draco Malfoy

- - - - - - -

HORCRUXES LEFT: 5 (tiara, locket, ring, snake, cup)

--------------

Severus Snape followed Fred Weasley through the hallways. He figured that some prankster over the years would create a room like this. The motivation was obvious. Student creates something illegal,
like a love potion. Teacher finds out and rushes to investigate. Student needs a place to hide the potion in a hurry. Voila: a Room of Requirement.

Harry Potter also had had no idea that the Room of Requirement existed. This surprised Snape greatly, as the boy was notorious for getting into trouble. However, he had insisted that the room existed. It had taken a while for the authorities to find someone insubordinate enough to actually know about it and be willing to talk about it.

Potter had claimed that the Ravenclaw tiara was in the Room of Requirement and that it was a Horcrux. The staff was divided over whether to believe Harry's bizarre conversation with the dead Professor Quirrell. Fortunately, there would be an easy way to verify his claim: head into the Room of Requirement, find the tiara, check for the Horcrux, and destroy it.

Snape wasn't alone. Harry Potter was coming along for the ride, much to Snape's chagrin. Headmistress McGonagall, Dumbledore, Flitwick, and Karkaroff were there, as well as Sirius Black and Alastair Moody. The former Azkaban inmate was carrying the great sword of Gryffindor, a weapon which had been anointed with basilisk venom three years ago. If Dumbledore's suspicions were correct -- and Snape believed they were -- the weapon would be able to destroy a Horcrux.

The abrupt departure of the teachers from their classrooms had triggered a burst of free periods and happy reactions from the students. Snape figured that they didn't really need to know what had been so urgent for the teachers had suddenly leave their lectures halfway through.

McGonagall had nearly flipped when Snape explained that Karkaroff had been hanging around in their kitchen. She accepted Karkaroff's request for asylum and listened as the former Death Eater found Harry's story plausible.

Fred's rush through the corridors stopped abruptly in front of a blank wall. Snape watched as the mischievous young man paced in front of the wall a few times, muttering words to himself. The entire Hogwarts staff then gasped in unison as a doorway materialized out of nowhere.

Weasley turned to the instructors and explained. "All right, here's the story. I must be the first to enter the room, as the room has configured itself to show the hidden objects per my request. You can follow me in. Once you're in, the room will around as long as at least one person is in it."

Fred started marching towards the entrance, then suddenly hesitated and turned back to the Professors. "Once you're in there, be careful. There are piles of junk everywhere. If you knock something down, you may block the exit."

McGonagall nodded. Snape, however, looked at him strangely. "I trust that we will not find any of YOUR things in there, Mr. Weasley?"

Fred froze. Snape could see the gears turning in his head. Finally, the redhead admitted it. "Probably. I suppose you can confiscate them if you want."

Snape smiled in triumph just as Fred replied: "My brother and I can always recreate them."

The teachers muttered among themselves as Fred headed through the opening into the Room of Requirement. Snape, wand at the ready, followed Fred into the room.

Weasley hadn't been lying when he said the room was crowded. Piles reached halfway up to the ceiling in some places. The entire place seemed to be a maze: passages ended in dead ends here, T-
Snape looked at the pile next to him. He saw at least three spellbooks, a Remembrall, a picture of several topless Holyfield Harpies team members take in 1966, and several papers.

McGonagall whistled. "We're going to have to catalogue all this stuff! Mr. Weasley, how much of this stuff have you examined?"

Fred shook his head. "Not much, Headmistress. We only know our stuff. I suspect we've got centuries of clutter in here."

Snape cut in. "May I recommend that we catalogue this later and focus on what we came for? I recommend that we split up and search the room. There's too much stuff here for one person to go through. If anyone sees anything remotely resembling a tiara, call for Filius. Filius, I take it you know what the tiara looks like?"

Flitwick nodded. "Yes, Severus. There's a statue of Rowena Ravenclaw with a copy of the tiara on her head. I'd recognize it if I saw it."

"Good. Keep your wands at the ready. If you have to use them, make sure you don't knock things over. For all we know, there could be things that could explode if some dunderhead bumps into it. Potter, Weasley, stay outside and keep an eye on the entrance. Feel free to hex anyone who tries to come in after us."

Both boys, naturally, complained. It was obvious that they wanted in on the action. Well, they weren't going to get it. A few threats of detention later, the two miscreants gave in and left the room. Snape breathed a sigh of relief: he hadn't wanted Weasley interfering with the search by trying to hide his own stuff.

The team spread out and began searching the room. Snape investigated a cabinet which looked to have been a Vanishing Cabinet at one point but now looked to be partially broken. There was a plate with an expression around its edge which even Dumbledore didn't recognize:

```
EFILA TEG OTDE ENUO YSDRAWK CABIHT DA EROT GNIYR TERU OYFI
```

Beneath the plate was a large selection of joke-related objects which appeared to be just the type of stuff Fred and George would be working on. He'd seen them try to deploy these devices against Umbridge earlier in the year. He made a mental note to remember the objects' location. Considering that Weasley's knowledge of the room made it possible for the teachers to have a shot at this Horcrux, the kid deserved a bit of a break. However, the next time he acted up, Snape was going to nail him.

There was a shout from the other side of the room. It was Karkaroff. "Professor Flitwick! I think I've got it!"

It took a while for all of the searchers to make it through the maze over to Karkaroff. The man had stopped in front of a statue of an old witch. On the statue's head was an old, discolored tiara.

Karkaroff moved out of the way so Flitwick could have a look. The Charms master nodded abruptly. "That's it, Karkaroff. That's it. I wonder how long it's been here."

Snape growled. "You can wonder on your own time, Filius. Everyone who is not an Auror, get behind me. Black, get over here with that sword. Cast Protego shields upon yourselves. We have no idea what this is going to do."
Once the teachers were out of the way, Snape cast a complex spell which would react to the presence of human souls. All of the searchers' souls glowed brightly. The color of each soul's aura depended on which House its owner was from: gold for Gryffindor, green for Slytherin, blue for Ravenclaw, and red for Hufflepuff.

One other object glowed as well: the tiara. However, its glow was not the blue for Ravenclaw. It was green, and slightly fainter than the others.

It was good thing that Potter and Weasley had been sent outside. Otherwise, they would have probably nearly died laughing at the long string of expletives uttered by their instructors. Snape didn't know how Harry had managed to contact Quirrell. However, it was obvious that at least part of Harry's outrageous claim was indeed correct. There was something alive in there. And it was not the soul of a Ravenclaw.

Snape considered what to do. The Horcrux needed to be destroyed, naturally. The sword would do that, all right. However, he had suspected that Voldemort had chosen this object for a reason. It was a hallowed Hogwarts relic. The head of Ravenclaw wouldn't want it destroyed. Snape cast a glance at Flitwick and saw the conflict in the man's face.

Snape thought for a moment and then came up with an idea. Raising his wand, he pointed it at the tiara and shouted. "Geminio!" twice. Seconds later, there were three tiaras in front of him.

Now was the tricky part. He cast the Horcrux-detecting spell once again and was relieved to find that the two duplicates were not in fact Horcruxes. The Duplication spell usually did not copy enchantments, but he had no idea how it would handle Horcruxes.

He reached down, picked up one of the copies, and handed it to Flitwick. "This is for you, Filius. It's about time you had your tiara back". Flitwick nodded and stuffed it under his robe.

Gingerly -- not even daring to touch it with his hands -- Snape lifted the Horcrux-tainted tiara off the statue with a wave of his wand. He placed it on the floor in front of him. Picking up the second duplicate, he placed it back on the statue's head. That way, if Voldemort went looking for it, he'd still find it there. If Snape were lucky, he'd never know anything had happened to it.

Snape then ordered everyone back. He called for Black to come over with the sword. As Black did so, Snape pointed at the Horcrux in front of him.

"When I give the word, take the sword and cut it in two. That will destroy the Horcrux. Give me a few minutes to seal the door to this room. If there's anything in there which doesn't want to die, we need to make sure it doesn't get out."

Black nodded. Snape then turned to the door and sealed it with something only a trained Defense Against the Dark Arts professor could break. Satisfied with his spell, he gave the signal to Sirius.

Sirius raised the sword. The other professors slowly backed off.

The sword came crashing down onto the tiara, cutting it cleanly in too. A horrible shriek burst from the metal, tearing at people's ears. Its echoes faded away quickly as the tiara, amazingly, began to disintegrate out of its own accord.

Snape cast the soul-detecting spell once again. This time, it only detected the humans.
He nodded and turned to the rest of the staff. "Mission accomplished. The Horcrux has been destroyed."

The searchers cheered and shook each other's hands. One person, however, did not join in the celebration.

It was Dumbledore, who said it was premature. "One down, four to go."

To be continued...

-------------

Update #129

May 1, 1996 -- 3 DAYS TO FULL MOON
Great Hall
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
Great Britain

Next PoV: 130 -- Ask the Fake Name Generator, And Hope It Does Russian

HORCRUXES LEFT: 4 (locket, ring, snake, cup)

Draco Malfoy was troubled.

He was happy that Voldemort had returned once again. He thought that he, his father, and the rest of the Death Eaters -- he considered himself a Death Eater even though both Voldemort and his father said he wasn't old enough yet -- would all be caught once Operation Flying House had killed off most of Voldemort's henchmen. Now that Voldemort had returned and was trying to gain power among the Muggles, he and his family were likely safe.

On the other hand, there was the issue of Professor Snape. Draco admired Snape a great deal. He seemed to represent everything Slytherin stood for. The Potions master liked him, which was a rarity among the teachers. Draco had been one of the few students invited to the party Snape had thrown when he had finally achieved his dream goal of teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts.

What was Draco supposed to do, now that it was obvious that Snape had been Dumbledore's man all along? Was he supposed to tell Voldemort? If so, how? Was he supposed to take advantage of his relationship with Snape to get close enough to him to kill him? Draco suspected that Voldemort was going to ask him to do that at some point. The mere thought of trying to take out Snape filled him with dread. He doubted he'd be able to win against a trained Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, and he didn't think he'd be able to attack a man he considered a friend. Conceivably he could ask Crabbe and Goyle to do it, but he didn't think either of those two brutes were smart enough and devious enough to manage to pull it off.

He'd spent his free period yesterday studying for his OWLs and thinking about what to do about his feelings for Snape. He had no idea what had happened yesterday. All he knew was that he had been in the middle of Transfiguration class. Dumbledore had been explaining how to turn a mannequin into frog when Flitwick had stuck his head in and reported: "Albus, we've pinpointed the room". Dumbledore had promptly dropped everything, excused himself, and headed out the door with Flitwick. Draco had then heard at least half a dozen pairs of feet racing down the hall towards the staircase.
Right now, all of the teachers were in the room with him. He was in the Great Hall, having lunch with the rest of the students. He was in his element, as usual. He was getting brownie points among the Slytherins making fun of Harry, a hobby which he had had to abandon for a few months when Harry had been under house arrest.

The food was delicious. For some reason, there had been a problem in the kitchen the last few days. The food that the elves had produced seemed to have been a bit...messy, as if they had just introduced an elf who didn't know how to cook well yet. Whoever it was must have learned in a hurry, though.

Draco was about to bit into his custard pie when an envelope bearing his name fell on top of it. He frowned: he hadn't been expecting mail. He turned it over and looked at the handwriting. It was Lucius's.

To my son, Draco Malfoy. Please open this in private. It involves Lisa van Poppel.

Draco froze when he read that. Lisa van Poppel was code for Lord Voldemort. He suspected that Voldemort was going to ask him to do something. Was this the dreaded order to finish off Snape?

Excusing himself, he hurried down to his bedroom -- thankfully, no one was missing the meal -- to read the letter. He opened it with trembling fingers.

My dear Draco.

I have just spoken with the Dark Lord, who has taken up temporary residence here at Malfoy Manor. He has told me that he wants you to do something for him. Think of this as a test to see if you are fit to become a full-blown Death Eater. When you are done reading this message, place your right thumb on the Dark Mark at the bottom of the page and the message will self destruct ten seconds later.

The Dark Lord chuckled as I wrote this and said something I don't understand: "good luck, Jim". I don't get it. If you do, maybe you could explain when you next see me.

At any rate, here's what Voldemort wants you to do. Your mission involves Severus Snape.

Draco gulped. He wasn't against trying to kill Muggles and Mudbloods. However, should he have had some practice killing them before going after his housemaster? He turned back to the letter.

As you are probably aware, Remus Lupin, your third-year Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, is a werewolf. Had it not been for a potion created specifically for him by Professor Snape, the man would transform every month and become a threat to everyone around him. Even Dumbledore would not have permitted Lupin inside the castle had it not been for the support of Professor Snape.

Yes, the Dark Lord knows that Snape has betrayed our glorious cause. Rest assured, we will be dealing with him eventually. However, there's still one thing we need him to do first. He won't do it naturally, however, so we would like you to assist us.

Our informants tell us that Professor Lupin visits Snape at Hogwarts every day during the week leading up to the full moon. He goes down to Professor Snape's laboratory, where Snape concocts the Wolfsbane Potion and hands it to him in a special chalice designed for that purpose. The informant has provided a drawing of this chalice along with this note.
Your mission is simple. Full moon is 4 May, this coming Saturday. The weather is supposed to be clear that night. Before that date, you are to master two spells using any means possible. The first one is the Portkey spell, which can be used to turn anything into a Portkey. The second is a trigger spell which will cause an magical effect to take place only when a certain condition has been achieved. I would recommend that you discuss these with Snape or one of the other teachers and say that you stumbled across them while training for your OWLs.

On the morning of the 4th, before Lupin arrives, you must break into Snape's laboratory -- perhaps you can get yourself a detention -- and enchant the Wolfsbane chalice so that it transports anyone touching it to Wembly Stadium as long as no one other than Lupin is touching it.

Wembly Stadium is a Muggle arena known for football matches. It can hold tens of thousands of people. The more people we can find packed into a small area, the better.

Apparation out of Hogwarts will not work, as you know. However, Portkeys are a different matter. They will work, I guarantee you that.

The plan is elegant. The Portkey will transport Lupin to a stadium filled with Muggles. Travel by Portkey is rough and turbulent, and the potion will almost certainly spill out completely before he gets to his destination. This will leave him in a populated area without having consumed any Wolfsbane.

Muggles, of course, have no idea that werewolves actually exist. Before Lupin realizes what is going on, he will be hit by moonlight and transform. He will probably be able to bite several people before his "rabid dog" form gets killed by Muggle authorities.

Your work will accomplish two tasks. First, it will get rid of Lupin, a member of the Order of the Phoenix. Second, it will likely start a lycanthrope pandemic among the Muggles. The Muggles who were bitten by Lupin will have no idea that they've become werewolves as well. They will therefore not be able to warn their friends and family before they transform at the next full moon. The people bitten will therefore bite more people, spreading the pandemic further. Within a year or less, there will be werewolves throughout the Muggle community.

The Dark Lord, in his guise as the politician Tom Riddle, will say he knows how to deal with werewolves once he thinks the pandemic has gotten far enough along. That will endear him to the Muggle community even further and get him closer to becoming the Prime Minister.

Good luck, Draco. I will look forward to reading the Muggle newspapers on Sunday morning.

Your father,

Lucius

To be continued...

--------------

Update #130

--------------

May 1, 1996 -- 3 DAYS TO FULL MOON
St. George's Cemetery
Ukraine
The phone rang in Pavlo Liteplo's office. The cemetery manager wondered who it would be this time, and what had finished him off. Usually, it had been people in their seventies and eighties who had died of old age, heart attacks, or other normal conditions. However, there was always the possibility that the deceased had been someone who had been cut down in the prime of his life, possibly in his thirties or forties.

Liteplo had been forced to face this possibility more and more often ever since the Super Bowl Breach had introduced the world as he knew it to a one populated by wizards. However, nothing had prepared him for the large number of young victims which had suddenly flooded his department over the past week.

Most of these victims seemed to have been caught by surprise or shock. In many cases, there were no marks on the body and no obvious cause of death. Liteplo had a suspicion, however, as to what had killed them. Everything boiled down to a strange coincidence involving these victims.

All of them were Celestine Catholics. It was well-known that the Celestines disapproved of wizards. What he figured was going was that the victims had tried to attack wizards and the wizards had been forced to use magic to defend themselves. Much of the area around Lviv was Celestine -- after all, that was where the antipope had announced his papacy. He hoped the wizards knew what they were doing. At the rate things were going, they were playing right into the Celestines' hands. The splinter movement could just point at the victims and say that the wizards could not be trusted.

He shut the Celestines out of his head and answered the phone. "St. George's Cemetery here. How may I help you?"

A man's voice responded in an crisp, educated Russian accent. "Good morning, sir. I have a rather unusual request for you. I hope it won't be too much of a problem."

Liteplo's heart sank. Probably another dead youngster. Aloud: "What's the problem, sir?"

"My name is Leonid Rasputin. I am a descendant of the infamous Grigori Rasputin, the Mad Monk."

Liteplo grunted. He knew Grigori Rasputin, of course. What he hadn't known was that the monk had actually fathered children. Well, live and learn, he thought. Turning back to the phone, he said. "I see. What can I do for you, Mr. Rasputin?"

"It will likely be controversial, but bear with me. My uncle recently died, and his estate just announced his will."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Mr. Rasputin."

"We appreciate the sentiment, but we're doing what we can to cope with it. I'm sure you understand. At any rate, my uncle left an unusual request. He wants his extended family's relatives to be buried in his mausoleum. Am I correct in assuming that you have the Mad Monk's father, Yefim Rasputin, buried in your cemetery?"

Liteplo turned on the computer. "Just a moment, please. Let me check". A few minutes later, the
results came in. "As a matter of fact, Mr. Rasputin, we do have him buried here."

The voice on the other end of the line sighed. "I thought so. We were wondering if you would be willing to exhume the body so that we would be able to put it in my uncle's mausoleum as per the dead man's will."

Liteplo bit his lip. This was most unusual. "This is a most unusual request, sir. I'll have to see the will before agreeing to this. I'll also have to determine if the Mad Monk or any of your other ancestors has stipulated that Yefim Rasputin stay where he is."

The voice didn't seem concerned. "I understand, sir. However, we've checked. We've got the documents in front of us as well. None of them seem to have any language which will deny my uncle's claims. If you wish, we will bring them over for your inspection so you can look them over before agreeing to exhume the body."

Liteplo nodded. "I'd appreciate that. What's your schedule for the rest of the week?"

The voice replied: "I can come in today, if you wish. This afternoon would actually work pretty well for me."

Liteplo thought this was damned peculiar. However, he'd seen worse. "All right, you can stop by this afternoon with the documents. My name is Pavlo Liteplo, you can ask for me."

----------

Five hours later, Liteplo stepped outside as the three black-garbed men with briefcases got out of their car. They seemed to be extremely wealthy and educated. One of them, who appeared to be the leader, looked a lot like the last czar of Russia, Nicholas II Romanov. Liteplo figured that Grigori Rasputin would probably be rolling over in his grave when he found that people who looked like the former czar were going to exhume him.

The Nicholas II lookalike stepped forward. "Good afternoon, Mr. Liteplo. I'm Leonid Rasputin, and these are my cousins. As promised, here are the papers I told you I would provide."

Liteplo took the papers and shook all three men's hands. "I'm sorry to hear about your uncle, Mr. Rasputin. Is there anything I can do to help?"

Rasputin -- also known as His Grace, Wizard Igor Romanov, but Liteplo had no way to know this -- shook his head. "Again, thank you for your support, but we have to grieve and get through this. I'm sure someone in your position can understand. All I can suggest is that you look at these documents, verify their authenticity, and exhume the body for us."

Liteplo took the documents and spent a good hour looking over them. Amazingly enough, they all appeared to be in order. Nothing in the wills, including Grigori's, seemed to preclude the dead uncle's wishes. He didn't like the idea of disturbing the dead man's rest, but there was nothing he could really do. Returning the papers to Rasputin, he called up the gravediggers and told them to exhume the body.

As soon as the sunlight hit the coffin, SOMETHING happened. Liteplo couldn't put a finger on what exactly it was, but he could have sworn that a flash of orange light shot into the air from the top of the coffin. He shook his head -- he must have probably imagined it. However, it was obvious that the mourners had seen it as well -- they looked VERY nervous and shocked. He wondered what it was for a moment, but eventually shrugged it off and resumed the excavation.
Half an hour later, Yefim Rasputin's coffin was lying on the surface. Much to Liteplo's horror, the mourners lifted the lid just long enough for the cemetery manager to see a few bones. They then tightened their lips somberly and closed the lid.

Liteplo told them to hold on for a moment as he went back into the cemetery office to get some papers for them to sign. It took a while for him to find the papers -- he hadn't had to deal with an exhumation for a while -- but find them he did. Papers in hand, he opened the door leading to the graveyard, took one look outside, and froze in his tracks.

Multicolored beams of light were flashing across the cemetery. The mourners had apparently been wizards -- he could see the wands in their hands. Not trying to attract attention, he whistled silently to himself. He'd never met wizards before, but the more he thought about Rasputin the more he figured that the Mad Monk could have been a wizard.

The mourners seemed to be fighting a bunch of black-clad, wild-looking men with long beards. The second group of men, also wizards, were shouting slogans about a Black God and inventing derogatory slogans about Nicholas II and his family. One of the Black God men took a green bolt in the chest, fell to the ground, and didn't move. The victim's body looked like it could have been one of the young men who had been died over the past week.

Wizards on both sides hid behind tombstones. The tombs, however, didn't provide much protection against the multicolored bolts. Liteplo watched as one of them shattered as a yellow beam hit it.

That did it, he thought. He didn't know who most of the people buried in the cemetery were, but he knew sacrilege when he saw it. Screaming at both parties in outrage, he told everyone to stop what they were doing immediately. That proved to be a mistake, as one of the Black God faction pointed his wand at him and shot a red bolt at him.

Liteplo shrieked and ducked just in time. The red bolt hit the calendar above his head, burning a hole through May 23rd. What the hell was going on here? He reached for the telephone to call the police when he heard someone shout "Evanesco!". He looked up just in time to see Yefin Rasputin's coffin vanish, taking the body with it.

He started calling the cops. Midway through, however, he noticed that the battle had stopped. The Black God people were screaming in horror and anger. The mourners, oddly enough, looked quite smug. He couldn't imagine what they were happy about: someone had made Yefim Rasputin's body disappear! The only possible explanation was that the mourners had transported the body to the mausoleum using magic. They wouldn't have destroyed their own relative's body!

He finished dialing the cops and started speaking to the dispatcher. Looking up once more into the graveyard, he was astonished to find that both groups of men had vanished. All that was left was the dead Black God person, lying the way he had fallen.

This was just too crazy. He explained the situation to the cops, and the cops said they'd come right over. When they arrived, they couldn't explain what had happened. Liteplo recounted the battle between the wizards, and they reluctantly admitted that this could have been a magical duel.

They saw the dead Black God man, but they had no idea who the Black God was. Liteplo eventually gave them descriptions of as many of the combatants as he could and stepped out of the way as they photographed the corpse on the ground. The cops then cordoned off the area around the body and began their investigation.
Liteplo knew only one thing for certain. He'd have to bury another young man again with no obvious mark on his body.

To be continued...
Update #131

May 2, 1996 -- 2 DAYS TO FULL MOON
Main Audience Chamber
Royal Palace
Riyadh
Saudi Arabia
Ukraine

Next PoV: 132 -- John Major

-------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 4 (locket, ring, snake, cup)
-------

King Fahd had been fascinated by Amaram Rikpreet. He'd never met a Hindu before, let alone someone from as far away as India. He appeared to be an extremely pleasant and intelligent young man.

That false impression, however, had been shattered by one word: "Imperio".

The king didn't know what the word meant. However, he knew that ever since Rikpreet pointed his wand at him and spoken it, Fahd had seemed to lose all sense of self. He started developing all sorts of strange...and disturbing...thoughts, many of which were anathema to Muslims. He tried to convince himself that these thoughts were inappropriate. However, something inevitably popped into his mind that convinced him that the heretical thoughts were in fact all right.

It had taken him a couple of days to realize that Amaram Rikpreet was likely an evil wizard. Wizard presumably had the power to brainwash people, especially people who weren't familiar with magic. Unfortunately, knowing that he was being brainwashed wasn't of any help when it came to trying to beat off Rikpreet's ideas.

He had nearly managed to break free once. He had just been on the verge of calling for Dagher and asking him to remove the curse when Rikpreet, sensing that he was losing control over the king, gave him another dosage of the Imperius Curse. The rebellion stopped rather quickly.

He made a mental note to himself to expel all non-Muslim wizards from his kingdom as soon as returned back to his old self. He just hoped that he wouldn't be forced to forget this idea before that time.

He wrenched himself back to the present -- correction, Rikpreet wrenched him back to the present -- and focused on the situation at hand. The diabolical Hindu had convinced him to grant an audience to no fewer than twenty-five people who looked, for the most part, to be from India. Some of them, thankfully, were Muslim. Others, however, were not and would have warranted further scrutiny had he been able to control his own behavior. One of them, oddly enough, was a woman who was wearing clothing which should have gotten her stoned. Allah, however, had not seen fit to give him the opportunity to administer the punishment.
The only thing that the twenty-five people had in common was a tattoo on their arms which seemed to be a skull with a snake coming out of its mouth. Rikpreet himself had a similar tattoo. He knew that anyone with such a tattoo was going to be a problem. He wished he could have done something about it!

He suddenly found himself turning to the man lying prostrate nearest to him. He was actually Caucasian and spoke with a precise British accent. What was his name again? The next thing he knew, he was looking at Rikpreet. The traitorous counselor had a grin on his face.

Rikpreet bowed and spoke. "His name is Rodolphus Lestrange, Your Majesty. You should be able to remember him pretty easily because he's the only European in the room."

Fahd recognized the name. Something deep down inside told him that Lestrange was one of the nastiest of the bunch. However, Rikpreet's directives neatly brushed the thought aside. Instead, the king smiled at the Brit and told him to rise to his knees.

Lestrange did so, and the king -- make that Rikpreet -- began to speak. "Welcome, my loyal allies. I have been informed about your unusual capabilities as wizards and, after discussion with my Chief of Staff here, have decided to welcome you into the service of my kingdom. All twenty-five of you are to be treated as members of the royal family as long as you are here."

The tattooed men -- he tried to pointedly ignore the woman -- thanked him and pressed their heads further into the carpets. Something told him that tattoos were haraam, but for some reason that didn't click.

"To ensure your safety in a land which is not entirely comfortable with wizards yet, I have issued twenty-five decrees, in writing, which will give you carte-blanche to do anything you wish in my name. Anyone who interferes with you will risk the wrath of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The decrees will give you diplomatic immunity wherever you go and allow you access to many important political figures."

He reached for the topmost copy of the carte-blanche document and signed it. Turning to the kneeling man in front of him, he told the man to rise so he could hand over the document.

Shaking the man's hand, he asked Lestrange to tell everyone what his mission was going to be.

The man responded promptly. "My mission, Your Majesty, is to contact the man in charge of Hamas and ask if they need any assistance in their struggle against their Zionist oppressors. Three of these wizards will be accompanying me: Wizards Hari, Dameel, and Hagdi. If my mission is successful, Hamas will be under the control of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. You will increase your power and prestige greatly. What do you think of that, Your Majesty?"

Fahd blinked. I think it's a ridiculous idea, you swine of Shaitan. The Israelis...that was about as far as he got before his mind went blank and a mile appeared on his face.

He replied, "I agree with that plan wholeheartedly and pray that Allah goes with you."

Lestrange bowed once more. "May He go with you, as well."

He risked a glance at Rikpreet out of the corner of his eye. The man was smiling. Fahd understood what the man was thinking: Allah would be the only Power able to help you here, and that would be a long shot.
He found himself giving the document to Lestrange, who bowed and stepped aside. He then told the next man to come to his knees. The man explained how he would be serving the kingdom's interests by speaking with Hezbollah.

To be continued...

-------------

Update #132
-------------

May 3, 1996 -- 1 DAY TO FULL MOON
10 Downing Street
London
England
-------------

Next PoV: 133 -- Remus Lupin

---

HORCRUXES LEFT: 4 (locket, ring, snake, cup)

-------------

TEXT OF THE PRIME MINISTER'S SPEECH TO THE NATION

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I have come before you tonight to advise you of some urgent information which has just come across my desk, courtesy of Wizard Rufus Scrimgeour, the Minister of Magic.

On the morning of 16 April, a man named Tom Riddle appeared on television all over the country. He introduced himself to the community and announced the foundation of the Alliance for Magic, a political party which is dedicated to the possibility that wizards and Muggles can live in harmony. He claimed that many wizards believe that they are superior to Muggles and see ordinary folk like you and me only as servants or slaves.

Minister Scrimgeour admitted to me, much to his shame, that this is indeed the case. There is indeed a movement among the wizards which seeks to control Muggles through magic. In that sense, Mr. Riddle is correct. What Riddle did NOT tell you, however, is that he the leader of that movement.

My fellow Britons, Mr. Riddle is trying to deceive you. Realizing that you do not know about his true nature, he is trying to take advantage of your ignorance and catapult himself into high political office. According to the latest surveys, 6% of Britons have endorsed the Alliance for Magic and the number continues to climb daily. Minister Scrimgeour is absolutely convinced that if you continue to support this man, there may be a time where Riddle decides that he's achieved his goal of supreme power and turns the table on you, enslaving you, me, and the rest of the British community.

I will now relinquish the floor to Minister Scrimgeour so he can tell you more information about Wizard Riddle. First, some background. Rufus Scrimgeour, 53, began his career as an Auror -- the Wizarding equivalent of a police officer. There were times where he risked his life to protect wizards -- and in some cases, people like us as well, though we didn't know it -- from the diabolical schemes of evil wizards. He believed that if the people unfamiliar with magic fell prey to people like Riddle, the nation would suffer greatly. He became Minister of Magic earlier this year, after his predecessor, Cornelius Fudge, was ousted over one of the incidents involving Tom Riddle. Scrimgeour has vowed that he won't let Riddle's power, charisma, and reputation interfere with what needs to be done.
Scrimgeour attended the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, as did most wizards in the kingdom. He was a member of Gryffindor House and was an excellent student. He was made prefect in his fifth year and got a position in the Auror office immediately after graduation. This, my fellow Britons, is a very talented man.

So, with no further ado, Wizard Rufus Scrimgeour.

Good evening, citizens of the United Kingdom. I have come to speak on your community's public address system to warn you about the real nature of Tom Riddle, the politician behind the Alliance for Magic movement. I have dealt with Riddle before, and he is not who he claims he is.

Riddle is a very famous, and powerful, man in the Wizarding community. Unfortunately, he has achieved this fame for all the wrong reasons. He is better known, at least to us, by the title Lord Voldemort. He is the head of a group called the Death Eaters, an elitist group of wizards who seek to purify the Wizarding community by subjugating the Muggles and weeding out wizards with Muggle parents.

You can identify a Death Eater by a distinctive tattoo on their right arm. Here is a drawing of it. It looks like something from a gang or something like that, but it's not. It's a skull with a snake coming out of its mouth. When Tom Riddle touches the tattoo of a Death Eater with his wand, everything single Death Eater receives the message and comes to listen to his advice.

This has not been Voldemort's first try for power. Back in the late seventies, he launched a bid to take over the Wizarding community via intimidation and coercion. I was an Auror at the time, and rest assured that it was an extremely difficult struggle for us. He and his henchmen killed many innocent people and would have likely succeeded had it not been for the heroic sacrifice of wizards Lily and James Potter. They gave their lives to prevent their infant son Harry -- the same boy responsible for the Super Bowl Breach -- from being killed by Voldemort. Voldemort's Killing Curse backfired when it hit Harry, hit Voldemort himself, and banished him to a place which we know as Limbo.

Normally, Voldemort would have been killed by such a curse. However, Voldemort is extremely difficult to kill. A resident of Limbo, who will remain nameless, was of invaluable support in helping explain Voldemort's resilience. The Ministry of Magic is working to see what it can do to rectify that situation.

Back in March, the Ministry performed a clandestine operation which eliminated most of the Death Eaters and sent Voldemort back to Limbo. That gave us some time to consider the problem. Unfortunately, his henchmen brought him back a month later -- the day before he launched his political campaign.

I would like to emphasize how difficult the struggle against Voldemort was. Many trained Aurors were killed. I know, the Muggle community didn't know about it and wasn't affected. However, the only reason the Muggles weren't affected was because the Statute of Secrecy was still intact at the time. Now, with the Statute of Secrecy gone, Voldemort considers you fair game. This is why I am warning you today.

My fellow Britons, do not go anywhere near Tom Riddle, and do not support the Alliance for Magic. Furthermore, if you ever see a snake which --
Good evening, my fellow Britons. This is Tom Riddle speaking. I apologize for the interruption, but I believe it is important to join this conversation. Like all of you, I have been paying attention to Prime Minister's speech. I would like to comment on what I've been hearing.

When I first introduced myself two weeks ago, I warned you that many wizards were elitist. I warned you that many people in the Ministry of Magic didn't like what I planned to do and would try to think up schemes to get me into trouble.

My friends, do not listen to Minister Scrimgeour. He's the head of Wizarding movement, for crying out loud. He's in a position whose prestige would suffer greatly if the Muggle community and Wizarding community merged. What use is it being the Minister for a few thousand people when you've basically come under the thumb of the Prime Minister, a rule of millions and in all fairness the true ruler of our land?

As far as Prime Minister Major goes, you have to understand that the Prime Minister may be under the influence of Wizard Scrimgeour. It's considered a dark art, but it is possible for one wizard to brainwash an unsuspecting victim. Our Prime Minister may not be acting on his own accord here. Needless to say, you don't want someone brainwashing the most powerful man in the country! For all we know, Scrimgeour may be fabricating this to trying to be elected Prime Minister himself, where he'll just ignore you once he's in office!

Minister Scrimgeour is correct in that Lord Voldemort indeed existed. I remember Voldemort, and thought he was dead. However, I now know that he survived, much to my surprise. How do I know? His real name is Rufus Scrimgeour.

He won't tell you this, but you need to be member of the Wizarding House of Lords in order to be Minister of Magic. Some Magna Carta, huh? His grandfather's barony was Valdemar. If you're wondering if the name sounds similar to that of Voldemort, it does, and for a good reason. As far as the tattoo goes, he's misleading you once again. The people with the tattoos are the Aurors, not the Death Eaters! They coalesced as a magical fighting unit in Vietnam and used their troop's insignia as a recognition aid. They have experience fighting bad guys, and it shows!

Remember this, people of Britain. Tattoos are GOOD! Scrimgeour is figuring that if you Muggles take out the cops, he and the Death Eaters will have complete control of the Wizarding world -- and, eventually, Britain!

I would know, citizens of Britain! My father was a Muggle! I'm not a pureblood like Scrimgeour, and I'd have no chance to even get into their House of Lords! And if I didn't have a chance, would you? He's old school, Minister Scrimgeour. The time of ignoring Muggles is gone. The wizards need new leadership, at the very least, and Voldemort should be thrown in jail.

My fellow Britons, I want to break this impasse as much as you do. As a result, I was wondering if we could have a talk between Minister Scrimgeour, me, and the Prime Minister, alone, all in the same room. Let's get this hammered out once and for all!

I, Tom Riddle of the Alliance for Magic, am not chicken. Ministers Scrimgeour, are you? Do you have the guts to tell everyone the truth? Or will you just decide to not accept my invitation and imply that you're not the generous man you think you are?

Citizens of Britain, I apologize for the inconvenience. May God save the queen.
-- will not rest until Voldemort is dead, and dead for good!

To be continued...

-------------
Update #133
-------------
May 4, 1996 -- FULL MOON
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
Great Britain
-------------
Next PoV: 134 -- Toto (nah)? Fido (nope)? Wolverine (hmm...)? Vinz Clortho, minion of Gozer?
-------------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 4 (locket, ring, snake, cup)
-------------
Remus Lupin's headache was bad this time. He knew what it was from, of course. He was a werewolf, and he going to sprout fur just as soon as the sun set. One of the side effects of being a werewolf was a worsening series of headaches which started a week before the full moon and were nearly unbearable the day of the transformation.

He remembered his first few times he had transformed. The transformation had been very painful, and he had injured several people. Thank God he hadn't bitten any -- he would have been devastated if he had actually sentenced innocent people to lycanthropy. It had taken a while for the Whomping Willow to grow tall enough, and strong enough, to prevent people from following him into the Shrieking Shack. Until then, he had to be very careful.

Times had changed, however. Thanks to Severus Snape, he no longer had to fear turning into a werewolf. The Wolfsbane Potion would allow him to keep his mind while he was in wolf form, preventing him from going rabid/nuts and attacking everybody in sight. The only disadvantage of the Wolfsbane Potion was the fact that he had to stop by Hogwarts every single day in the week leading up to the full moon to pick up today's dose. Snape had tried to make it so Lupin only had to stop by once per month, but the components required tended to lose their potency very quickly. Hence, one visit per day for a week.

The fact that the components degraded quickly required Lupin to drink the potion as close as possible to sundown. He could drink it earlier in the day, just to get it out of the way. Usually, that worked. However, there was one time when it didn't. Dumbledore had told him that he had been about to attack someone and was stopped at the last moment by a Petrificus Totalus. That had terminated the morning appointments rather abruptly.

He wasn't going to make the same mistake this time. Sundown was in about an hour or so, and he'd given himself some extra time to speak with the inevitable Hogwarts students who tried to intercept him before he reached Snape's office. McGonagall, who had taken over Dumbledore's old position as headmistress, always made sure that every single window between the main entrance and Snape's office was closed tightly before allowing Lupin to come. Once he was in the building, he could talk as much as he wanted with students as long as he stayed on the prescribed route.

There weren't any students to greet him today. That was understandable, however. Most of the students he had been particularly close to were fifth-years now, and they would have been preparing for OWLs. Curiously, he did encounter Draco Malfoy, a fifth year, wandering through the corridor near Snape's office. They didn't speak much, though Draco seemed more interested in him than usual. Lupin wished him luck on his OWLs and continued down the hall. Draco was a clever, and
very driven, young man. He'd probably do well if he managed to keep his proto-Death Eater beliefs from taking over his life. Now that Voldemort had returned, having a career as a Death Eater in your resume would be detrimental to finding a job after graduation.

He was grateful that Snape had managed to put his grudge against the Marauders behind him. When he had first heard about the Wolfsbane Potion, he had wondered if Snape would just let him transform without it just to spite him. Thankfully, that had not been the case. However, there were times where Snape left the potion for him in his office and was pointedly absent when he arrived. Snape did what he had to do, but he didn't enjoy it.

Lupin arrived at Snape's office and found that it was one of those days. Snape wasn't there, but the potion had been prepared and was sitting on the desk. There were times where Snape had tried to spite him by hiding the special chalice containing the potion somewhere else in the room and forcing him to look for it, but not today.

Lupin noticed that a little of the potion appeared to have spilled over the edge, as if Snape had jostled the chalice when he'd put it down. Thankfully, there was still more than enough to prevent a violent transformation. It eventually dawned on him that Snape was probably a bit swamped at the moment preparing students for OWLs and was probably a bit distracted.

Shrugging off the ramifications of the spill, he grasped the cup and started lifting it to his mouth. However, it never made it there. He felt a jerk below his navel and found himself flying through space, cup in hand. Lupin stiffened in alarm. Turning the Wolfsbane chalice into a Portkey to play a joke on Lupin was a VERY bad idea. It SOUNDED like something Snape would have wanted to do, except that Snape would have known not to do it because of the risk of an unprotected transformation. Travel by Portkey was chaotic, and potions were almost guaranteed to spill out midway through the trip. He covered the top of the cup with his free hand and hoped he would have a soft landing.

About thirty seconds later, the Portkey dropped him in the midst of a large crowd of people. He fell onto a forty-something wearing a Manchester United jersey. The man screamed and punched at him, accusing him of being drunk. The chalice fell out of his hand and fell on its side, spilling its contents across what appeared to be a concrete floor. His wand fell out of his pocket and went rolling away.

He had time for a brief glance around the area. This was a sports stadium of some sort. It looked like a place for a Muggle football match. There were maybe fifty thousand Muggles in the stadium. The scoreboard read ARSENAL 0, MANCHESTER UNITED 0.

Lupin suddenly realized what the practical joker had done and went pale as a ghost. Either Snape had gone back to Voldemort again or a Death Eater had broken into Hogwarts and messed with the chalice. The Portkey had effectively transported him into the middle of a large group of Muggles just as the moon was rising -- and had done so without giving him the opportunity to drink the precious Wolfsbane Potion. This wasn't a practical joke, he realized. It was a Death Eater operation which would likely turn into something the Muggles would interpret as a biological terrorist attack. They had turned him into a living weapon.

He needed to get the hell out of there, and fast. Unfortunately, he had to retrieve the chalice and the wand first. He didn't know what the Wolfsbane spell components would do to Muggles, and the Muggles would receive an electric shock if they tried to touch the wand. There were a few clouds in the sky, but not many. Thankfully, the moon was behind one of the clouds. He had some time.

Rummaging around desperately, and knocking over someone's beer in the process, he asked some of
the Muggles around him to look for the chalice. The Muggles just stared at him as if he were crazy and started asking him where he'd come from. He ignored them and went searching for the wand. He looked under seats left and right and found nothing; the search was hampered greatly by the fact that it was night and the wand had rolled into the shadows. Meanwhile, someone said that she'd found the chalice and tapped him on the back with it.

He had just located the wand and was reaching for it when the cloud moved away and the moon came out.

He had time to think two words before the transformation began and he lost his mind. Oh shit...

To be continued...

--------------
Update #134
--------------
May 4, 1996 -- FULL MOON
Wembley Stadium
London
England
--------------
Next PoV: 135 -- Rodolphus Lestrange
------------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 4 (locket, ring, snake, cup)
------------
It had taken him several years and hundreds of lottery tickets, but Lauren Mistry had finally managed to score tickets to a soccer match at Wembley Stadium. Just looking at the price on the ticket stub made her realize that the whole endeavor had been worthwhile: she'd have never ponied up 100 pounds at one sitting for this.

She'd managed to score a halfway decent seat, near midfield. She had been concerned that she'd wind up near one of the goals, where she would have no sense of depth and virtually no view of the opposite end of the field.

She'd been to a few soccer games before. However, they had been primarily local events and not major league games. She'd have to make the most of this, as she'd likely never make it into this stadium again.

She'd only had one beer so far. She usually didn't drink, but inevitably she got involved with the noise and the culture at the games and downed a couple of pints. Not here, however. For one thing, the drinks were ludicrously expensive. For another, she wanted to savor as much of the match as possible without her mind partially fuzzed.

About midway through the first period -- with the score still nil-nil -- she decided that it was time for another drink. She decided to go nonalcoholic, though, and decided to try out something new: Blast Cola. There were several Blast products available at the concession stand, but only the cola seemed to be nonalcoholic. Ponying up another three pounds, she grabbed a can of Blast and planted it next to her.

That was when an ornately-jeweled cup suddenly appeared out of nowhere, crashed into the can, and knocked it over. Blast Cola mingled with a bizarre-looking gray broth.

Lauren swore and looked in the direction the cup had come from. She saw a tall man with thin hair
and a pencil mustache climbing up off the floor. He was wearing very strange robes, and Lauren was fairly certain that she hadn't seen him in this section before.

The man looked confused -- and very panicked. Ignoring what appeared to be a small cut on his head, he stared at the sky for a moment and then shouted, "People, I need your help! I need for you to find an ornate goblet that I've lost! Hurry! There's no time to lose!"

Confused, but relieved that she had something to do, she picked up the fallen goblet and turned back to the man, who had bent down to look under the seats in the row in front of him. She told him that she'd found the goblet and tapped him on the back with it. He ignored her, however, and continued his search. It looked like he had lost something else as well.

Shrugging, she left the goblet next to him and turned back to face the game. A few seconds later, the moon came out from behind a cloud. Hopefully that would help the man find whatever he was looking for under the seats.

It didn't seem to be helping. He heard the man groan in agony. Whatever he had lost must have been valuable. She turned back to him to ask if he needed help. What she saw made her freeze in her tracks.

The man's body almost looked like it was changing shape. Or was it? The moon often cast strange shadows going in and out of clouds. If it was an illusion, though, it was a very convincing one, as several other people were watching him as well. A couple of them had backed off slightly. One of them had moved forward to see if he could help.

Finally, the moon cleared the last wisps of cloud. It blazed, in all its glory, on a tremendous wolf-like dog about the size of a man.

This was just WRONG, she thought. She could have sworn that she had seen a sign which prohibited guests from bringing pets into the stadium. She shook her head to clear it as more people began to back away. The man who had tried to help the newcomer hesitated for a moment. Then, with some trepidation. "Uh, excuse me, but I don't think pets --"

Then the dog howled.

Heads spun all across the section to stare at the source of the sound. The dog had perched on one of the empty seats and was screaming at the moon. It looked like a werewolf out of one of those children's cartoons. Jaws dropped across ten rows as fans, thinking that someone had blown one of those humungous South African horns, saw the tremendous creature sitting on the chair.

The dog turned away from the moon and then -- disturbingly -- looked right at Lauren. A second later, it was on her.

She did what she could to fend it off, but a 5'1" woman wouldn't fare that well against a 200-pound monster which was likely rabid to boot. The creature bit her on the arm, sending warmth and a bizarre tingling sensation through her body. Swearing, she punched the animal in the muzzle with her other hand and bent down to make a tourniquet out of one of her shoelaces.

Her motion may have saved her life. The dog lunged at her again, its jaws snapping where her head had been. Wincing in pain, she was now convinced it was rabid. She watched as it jumped over her head and began mauling the man in the seat next to her.
By this time, half the stadium was staring at the events in her section. Down below, on the field, someone was assessed a yellow card and no one noticed. People were screaming and trying to get away from the animal, but they were all hemmed in by the narrow aisles and half-folded seats. The wolf/dog/whatever, of course, took full advantage of the confusion, going after everything within reach of its jaws. She saw twenty people fold up like pocket rulers, wincing and trying to clean up bite marks which looked similar to hers. One of them, oddly, looked at the moon and shivered. Lauren took a quick glance at the moon. It seemed a little brighter than it had before, but that was likely because she was still in shock from the attack.

By this point the authorities had noticed the altercation. Security guards were heading in their direction, talking into their intercoms. Backing away from the animal as quickly as she could, she watched it jump four rows further up into the stands and attack the people there. Five or six people went down with bites. Despite her injury, she still wanted to help. There was only one thing she could think of doing. She raced over to where she had left the ornate goblet, picked it up, and threw it at the animal. The cup hit it on the head, causing it to pull its teeth out of a child's arm and turn its blazing eyes to her. It howled once more and prepared itself for a leap.

Then there were three sharp cracks. The animal shrieked, and Lauren saw three red splotches began to grow on its chest. It wouldn't go down, however. It jumped into the air, heading straight at Lauren, as more gunshots rang out. She put her hands over her head and ducked. As she did, she noticed a rod about a foot long hiding underneath her seat. She tried to pick it up and received an awful jolt. Damn power cable!

The animal landed on her back with a thud and didn't move. Risking a look up at the animal, she saw that there were now no fewer than seven bullets in its body. One look into its eyes revealed that it was most definitely dead.

The security officers began ordering everyone away from the body. They then immediately started asking everyone in the vicinity whether this had been their dog. Most of them said that a man with a thin mustache had appeared in the vicinity -- apparently out of nowhere -- about the time the animal had appeared. Some people claimed, hesitantly, that the man had turned into the dog, but they couldn't bring themselves to believe it. When asked where the man was, they looked around the area and reported no sign of him. The cops said the man would likely be brought up on charges and started asking for more detailed descriptions.

One of the cops came over to her and asked her for her version of the story. She provided it, thought it didn't really add much to what they already knew. However, she felt obligated to bring something up.

She pointed at the seat where she had felt the power cable. "Officer, I believe there's a dangerous electrocution hazard in the stadium here. There's a live electrical wire right down here, in the concrete."

The officer stared at her. "Really? Where?"

She pointed at the cable. "Right there, Officer."

The officer frowned and bent over to look at the object. His eyes widened, and he turned to her. "That's not a power cable, ma'am. That looks like a magic wand."

Lauren stared at him. "A wand?"
"Yes, ma'am. I think we've been attacked by an evil wizard, perhaps this Voldemort we've been hearing about. I suspect Voldemort is the man with the mustache, perhaps with a disguise. He teleported this wolf or dog over here and must have left his wand behind. You've been a great service, ma'am. Now, if you'll head over there with the rest of the victims, we'll give you all rabies shots. The Arsenal coach has generously let us use their locker room as a temporary triage room so we can treat the injured. Now hold still -- we'll need to get that wand."

Lauren watched as the officer grabbed a souvenir program. Making sure that he did not touch the wand, he used it to lift the wand and put it in a box. He then locked the box and passed it to another cop. He then told her to follow her over to the triage area.

For some reason, Lauren looked back at the moon. It definitely seemed brighter. Very strange. She shrugged and turned back to the officer. "It's a good thing you killed that creature, officer. How many people were attacked?"

The officer swore. "28, ma'am, including one fatality. It could have been a bloody lot worse. Those 27 people should be thankful they survived with only a couple of bites."

To be continued...

-------------

Update #135
-------------
May 5, 1996
Hamas Headquarters
[location classified]
West Bank

-------------
Next PoV: 136 -- Eric Street

-------------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 4 (locket, ring, snake, cup)

-------------
Rodolphus Lestrange did the best he could to not trip over things as the militants pushed and shoved him around the complex. He had asked for an audience with the head of Hamas's militant wing. At first, the Hamas representative he had spoken with had been reluctant to ask for one. However, the man's eyes had opened as wide as saucers when Rodolphus had shown him the document from the Saudi king. It appeared that Fahd's seal was worth a lot in these parts.

Royal approval or not, no one was allowed to see inside the headquarters of Hamas (or even where the facility was) unless they were members of the organization. The representative had covered Rodolphus's eyes with a blindfold and led him into a car. Rodolphus thought about magically turning the blindfolds into one-way mirrors, so that he could see out but they couldn't see his eyes. He decided against it, however. The driver did not know he was a wizard, and Rodolphus didn't know how he would react. The driver had done a good job confusing his sense of direction on the way in. The Death Eater had no idea where he had gone, and even a Point Me spell wouldn't work with the blindfold on as he wouldn't have been able to see the wand.

Eventually, after five minutes of prodding and a bodily search (one man yelped when he tried to take the wand), he was ushered into a seat and locked in place. He heard footsteps recede into the distance, followed by the slamming and locking of a door. He also heard the distinct sound of a Muggle projectile weapon being cocked. Ten seconds later, a voice echoed through the room. It told him to remove his blindfold and stay seated.
He was in a completely empty, featureless square room about maybe ten feet on a side. The only thing inside it, other than him, was a small object which Rodolphus recognized as a Muggle speaking device.

The box crackled and spoke. "Good afternoon, Mr. Lestrange. I am sorry for the rough treatment, but we have to take precautions here."

Rodolphus nodded. "I understand...pardon me for asking, but how may I address you?"

The voice hesitated for a moment. "You may call me the Sheikh."

"Are you the head of Hamas?"

Another hesitation, followed by: "My exact identity is irrelevant, Mr. Lestrange. However, you may rest assured that I speak with the authority of the Hamas executive council."

"That will be enough, Sheikh. At any rate, I've come from Saudi Arabia on a mission which, I believe, will be in our mutual interest."

The voice sounded suspicious. "So I've heard, Mr. Lestrange. However, to the best of my knowledge you are a British national. Why would a British national be working for Saudi Arabia?"

Rodolphus smiled. "Saudi Arabia is an ally of my group. I made a presentation to King Fahd and he joined up immediately. Now, I hope to recruit your organization as well. We've already spoken with Hezbollah and they've been supportive. His Majesty, as you can tell, is anxious that we get the word out."

"I see, Mr. Lestrange. And what is the name of your group?"

Rodolphus had this alibi already planned out. "Wizards for Palestine, Sheikh."

A gasp burst out of the box, and Rodolphus thought he heard rustling from somewhere outside the room. The voice asked, "You are a wizard, Mr. Lestrange?"

"Yes, Sheikh. If you wish, I can provide a demonstration. Are you capable of observing what I am doing in this room? I suspect you've got a hidden camera in here for security purposes."

"Yes, Mr. Lestrange."

"Good. Will you permit me to retrieve my wand? I can use it to cast a spell."

"No. You must stay unarmed while in this facility."

Rodolphus shrugged. "In that case, I will be forced to attempt Apparation, or teleportation as you often call it. However, in order to do so I will likely have to escape from this chair. You have my wand, Sheikh. Next time, use a blanket or something to pick it up so you don't get shocked. I will not attempt to escape if you have my wand. Is this acceptable to you?"

"Yes, Mr. Lestrange."

"Good. Now, observe."
With that Rodolphus focused on the far wall and Apparated out of the chair. He materialized on the far side of the room. Bowing in all directions -- presumably he'd reach the hidden camera that way -- he returned to the chair and sat down.

The voice whistled. "Indeed, Mr. Lestrange, you are a wizard. I take it there is a large group of you who is supportive of our cause?"

Rodolphus smiled. "Yes, Sheikh. Many of us, particularly in Britain and India, believe that the occupying Zionists need to be taken down a peg. We wish to join your organization and use our magical skills on your behalf."

"That would be most appreciated, Mr. Lestrange. How many wizards will you be able to recruit for us?"

"At least four, Sheikh, including myself. I believe we'll be able to bring a few more in, however. All of us are highly skilled and are willing to kill to achieve our aims."

The voice seemed delighted. "Four wizards like you could work wonders for us, Mr. Lestrange. The Zionists' Ministry of Magic will have their hands full with the likes of you."

Rodolphus bowed. "My thoughts exactly, Sheikh. In exchange, all we ask for is to be on your executive council so we can attend your meetings and help with your plans and agenda. We will do our share by making sure now Muggle can eavesdrop."

"That proposal is acceptable. Allah has blessed us this day. If you pass our test, we will welcome you aboard."


"A simple test, Mr. Lestrange. You have said that you are willing to kill for our cause. It is time for you to put your dedication to the test. If you would be so good as to turn your back to the door for a second?"

He did so, and the door opened behind him. He heard someone swearing in a Semitic language which wasn't Arabic -- probably Hebrew. He heard a rattling sound, and the newcomer yelped in pain. The door slammed once more.

Ignoring the newcomer's pleas for clemency, the voice spoke once again to Rodolphus. "Look behind you. The creature you see handcuffed behind you is a Zionist demon we have taken prisoner. Its name is Gabriel Sigal, and it works for the Mossad. We caught it spying on our facilities here and captured it. We have returned your wand so you can take your test. You can see it on the floor maybe ten feet from the demon."

The prisoner shouted something at the box. The voice ignored him. "Mr. Lestrange, deal Allah's justice to this thing."

Rodolphus didn't need to be told twice. Keeping an eye warily and hit the prisoner in the chest with an Avada Kedavra. The Mossad agent crumpled to the floor. Bowing once again in all four directions, he put the wand next to the box and sat back down in the chair.

Several voices began babbling excitedly out of the box on the floor. Eventually, the first speaker
barked something and shut them up. Returning to Lestrange, the voice said: "Congratulations, Mr. Lestrange. You are one of us."

To be continued...
Update #136

-------------
May 7, 1996
DeLorean Motor Corporation Headquarters
Humble, Texas
United States of America
-------------
Next PoV: 137 -- Grawp
-------------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 4 (locket, ring, snake, cup)
-------------
Eric Street recognized the vehicle as soon as he walked in the door. He was actually a fan of Muggle movies and had seen all three Back to the Future movies. The car definitely stood out, especially with the gull-wing doors open.

The models being showcased were used and all dated from the 1980's. Apparently they weren't making any new cars. That surprised him for a moment but he realized that it would work to his advantage. The more the car looked like the one from the movies, the more likely people would be to buy it.

Shawna Santana, the chairwoman of the Big Thicket facility, had nearly fainted when he told her of his idea. Her first reaction had been to dismiss it outright because of one obvious problem which she thought the Muggles would not be prepared for. Eric countered this, however, with the requirement that the equipment required to trigger the problem would have to be provided by a wizard and that any Muggle wanting to use said equipment would have to go through extensive training.
Chairwoman Santana then brought up another possible issue. Eric, who had been expecting that, showed her an article in a British automotive journal which almost knocked her off her feet again. However, she thought it over, and grudgingly said that it might work.

That had been just when Eric had been hoping for. He'd run the idea by several Wizarding Services Corporation employees and they'd all been for it. If Chairwoman Santana were willing to loan him some money, he would promise to pay it back within a year. He told him he didn't think he'd need it, but just in case it was a good thing to do in case everything went south -- which he didn't think it would.

Santana had thought about it for a minute. Eventually, she said she'd allow it as long as she joined Eric for his presentation at the DeLorean headquarters. He agreed to that immediately. The forty-something woman was staring at the vehicles as well, an unreadable expression on her face. He suspected that she was having second thoughts about this whole endeavour. Perhaps the interview with the president would change things. He hoped it would.

The fact that the cars being displayed were from the 1980's would reduce the costs to create Eric's idea a great deal. Old cars had fewer and less complicated electronics than newer ones, so they would need to purchase less argon-38 to enchant them. The price of the gas had gone up by a factor of three already over the past three months: it seemed that other people were thinking along the same lines he was. He had to get his project out the door before someone else stole his idea.
The door leading to the main office opened and the president of the company stepped out. He was wearing a suit and tie, and looked at the two wizards a bit quizzically. He must be unfamiliar with the dress robes, Eric thought. The president shrugged and extended his hand.

"Mr. Street, Ms. Santana, I'm the president of DeLorean Motor Corporation. You wished to see me?"

Eric nodded. "Yes, sir. We've got a bit of business proposition for you involving your DeLoreans. Can we discuss it in your office?"

The president turned on his heel and motioned for them to follow. "By all means, Mr. Street. Come on in."

The two wizards entered the president's office and took seats on the other side of his desk. "So tell me, Mr. Street. What can I do for you?"

Eric smiled. "I was thinking of a joint venture which would make us a lot of money selling DeLoreans."

The president winced. "Mr. Street, I must warn you that we aren't really associated with the car manufacturer. The real DeLorean corporation went out of business almost 15 years ago. We just take care of, sell, and refurbish the used vehicles. We don't make new cars, as you can tell from the showroom."

Eric shook his head. "Don't worry about that, sir. If my guess is right, we'll be able to make enough money off of this stunt to bring the company back to life and get you to start making new cars."

The president grunted. "I doubt it, but we'll see. So, what's your plan?"

In response, Chairwoman Santana brought something out of her pocket. It looked like a small hourglass hanging from a chain. Being careful not to touch the hourglass, she asked him, "Sir, have you ever seen one of these before?"

The president shook his head. "Not really. I'm not big on jewelry and necklaces."

Santana grinned. "This isn't just a necklace, sir. It's a Time-Turner."

"A Time-Turner? What's that?"

"A device which allows the wearer to travel through time."

The president gasped in delight. "Ha! Very interesting and ingenious! However, what would a device allowing someone to travel through time have to do with my DeLoreans --"

Then it hit him. His jaw dropped and his eyes widened. He sank back into his seat, his hand on his forehead. It took him a good thirty seconds for the shock to wear off enough for him to respond. This gave Eric to conclude his pitch:

"We can cast a spell which will allow the Time-Turner to activate when, say, the vehicle gets to 88 mph."
The president finally found his voice again. "You're kidding. This has GOT to be a joke."

Eric shook his head as both he and Santana put their wands on the president's desk. "It isn't, sir. Trust me, it's not. You'll see momentarily after we put our wands on our desk for our safety."

The president's reply cut off abruptly as a second copy of Chairwoman Santana materialized next to him. The woman smiled and dangled the necklace in the air. Grinning, the first copy of the woman slowly walked towards her doppelganger. She threw the necklace around her neck and nudged the hourglass hanging from the chain a little. The woman disappeared just before she reached her clone.

The president stared at her. "What the hell?"

Santana explained. "I walked over there and used the device to travel backwards in time, to the point where I was still standing at the desk. This created a second copy of me. After the second copy appeared, you saw the original one move to the location where she jumped back through time and disappeared, completing the time loop."

The president put his hand on his head again. "Just like in Back to the Future. There were two of you running around."

Santana nodded. "Yes, sir. We removed our wands to prevent us from interfering with our clones and creating a time paradox."

"What would happen if that took place?"

Eric answered this. "We would have died. Time travel is extremely dangerous. The fictional Doc Brown was indeed correct in that regard."

The president shook his head. "The insurance requirements for time travel would be enormous."

Eric grinned. "Not if we make the Time-Turner a nonstandard option which requires a long period of training before using it, plus a release of liability for time paradoxes in case it is abused. You have to get the Time-Turner from a wizard in order to use it, and that's where we can enforce this."

The president frowned. "What good would this vehicle be if you can't travel through time?"

Eric shrugged. "Time travel wasn't the only thing the car from the movie could do. Remember Mr. Fusion and the flying circuits?"

The president got the idea quickly. "Let me guess. You can power it by magic and make it fly."

Eric stood up, reached into his briefcase, and withdrew the British journal article he had told Santana about. "You may want to read this article, sir."

The president looked down and glanced at the title. "Bentley Pegasus? What the hell is the Bentley Pegasus? I've heard of the Bentley before, but..."

Eric sat back down. "You'll see."

The president looked over the article and whistled. "They've got flying cars!"

"Yes sir. The enchantment is actually not that difficult. And I believe it will be possible to add safety
features to prevent the vehicle from falling out of the sky and/or rescuing passengers in case of trouble. Bentley used ejector seats, for instance."

The president closed his eyes. Eric thought he was having visions of DeLoreans all over the skies. When he opened them again, he said: "If this works..."

Eric finished the sentence for him: "...we can use the proceeds to start making new cars with all these refinements and modern technology. You'll be selling new DeLoreans for the first time in fifteen years."

The president stared at the document in front of him. He didn't say anything, but the expression on the man's face betrayed him.

Eric smiled. The president was going to go for it. Now the fun would begin...

To be continued...

-------------

Update #137

----------

May 7, 1996  
Hagrid Warehouse  
Washington, DC  
United States of America  

----------

Next PoV: 138 -- Albus Dumbledore  

-------------

HORCRUXES LEFT: 4 (locket, ring, snake, cup)  

-------------

Hagrid was missing, and Grawp didn't like it at all.

Hagrid had told him several times that he would be back around 5:30 or so every day from his job at the Zoo. He'd been doing that virtually every day so far. Granted, there had been one day when he'd gotten back at 6. Grawp had been a little worried for a while, but thankfully his brother had returned before Grawp had gotten frantic about it.

It was now 7:45, though, and Hagrid still wasn't back. This was more than unusual: it was terrifying. Hagrid spent a lot of time working with animals, including dangerous ones like unicorns. Grawp knew that his brother was an expert at caring for magical creatures. However, Hagrid had had a few close calls in the past. He'd burned off half of his beard at one point during the run-up to the Triwizard Tournament when a Blast-Ended skrewt hit him in the face. Thankfully, Madam Pomfrey had treated him quickly enough for him to not even be left with a scar.

Unfortunately, Madam Pomfrey wasn't here. Grawp was fairly certain that no one would be able to deal with complications if one of the animals attacked Hagrid.

The implications were obvious. Grawp would have to go rescue him and save him from whatever danger he was in. It was only appropriate. After all, Hagrid WAS his brother and the only friend he could trust. He was certain Hagrid would have done the same for him. Grawp was a nice person, and nice people helped their families.

He thought for a second about Hagrid's prohibition that he not leave the warehouse under any
circumstances. What Hagrid said did make sense: people didn't know him and might be scared by his large size. However, Hagrid hadn't counted on his being injured by one of these animals. Grawp had to help. He smiled when he considered the fact that he would be able to explain to the Muggles that giants could be friendly as well! He could be what the Muggles called a diplomat! Washington DC had lots of diplomats in it. He'd fit right in.

First things first: he had to get out of the warehouse. Hagrid had rolled down and locked the door after he'd left in the morning, as usual. The door was fairly small, about thirteen feet high. He thought he'd be able to make it out if he ducked. He knew how doors worked, so he put his hand on the handle at the bottom so he could open the door. Unfortunately, he couldn't get his huge paws around the little handle.

Grawp panicked for a moment. He couldn't get out that way. However, he smiled when he realized there was another. Hagrid would be so proud of him because he was so smart!

He raised a huge arm and started smashing at the handle. Metal flew in all directions, and soon he had created a hole large enough for him to stick his hand underneath it and force the door back up. The roll-up door slammed into the roof of the warehouse at a high rate of speed, cracking the roof and leaving the door tilted at a weird angle.

He ducked and made it through the opening. When he stood once again, he was outside. He was on a small road which Hagrid had called a sidewalk. It was next to a larger road made out of what Hagrid called asphalt. There was a small sign which said DELAWARE AVENUE nearby.

It occurred to him that he had no idea where Hagrid was. However, there were lots of people in Washington, DC. Maybe they could tell him how to get to the Zoo.

He saw a person in the distance and started running down the sidewalk. He was amused to notice that he left footprints in the sidewalk. That was good -- he would be able to find his way back by retracing his steps. Occasionally, there would be explosions of water and gas when he put his foot down. He once nearly parboiled by a large cloud of steam, and squawked in surprise when he felt a shock go through his leg and saw all the pretty red, yellow, and green lights turn off. He hoped Hagrid could fix those -- he was very good at fixing things. He didn't mean to break anything. He'd have to apologize later. Nice people did that when they broke things.

He heard horns behind him. He turned around and saw vehicles honking horns and heading in his direction. Two of them collided in the middle of the road as one of them stopped and a human got out. The human said something to him about a Stay-Puft Marshmallow Man. He didn't know what that was, but the fact that human wanted to talk to him was good. He could find out where the Zoo was that way. He didn't need to go after the first person he'd seen.

He raced off the sidewalk and into the street. Vehicles swerved all over the place and began hitting each other. Grawp, being a nice giant, wanted to fix everything. So, he bent down -- creating more footprints in the process, this time in the asphalt -- and started using both his hands to lift the vehicles which had collided so they wouldn't block each other anymore. They didn't move, however. Grawp, however, knew what to do with that. He tried pushing the vehicles to get them moving again. They wouldn't move. All that managed to do is elicit a group of screams in the distance.

He turned to the man who had spoken to him. Being very gentle, he bent down and lifted the man. The man started screaming like a maniac and tried to break free. Meanwhile, many of the other humans put their hands to their mouths for some reason.
He asked the man if he'd seen Hagrid. The man, strangely frightened, stammered that he hadn't seen Hagrid and recommended going to the Zoo. Grawp then asked for directions and asked him if he would be able to join in the rescue attempt. The man nodded his head very quickly and told him how to get to the Zoo. Grawp liked that -- this man was very friendly, too. He then put the man on the ground and watched in puzzlement as the man ran in precisely the opposite direction. Grawp thought about going after him and gently pointing him in the right direction, but something didn't seem right. In fact, it seemed like EVERYBODY was running from him and screaming!

He hoped he wasn't scaring the poor people. If he was, he'd apologize to them later as well. First things first: he had to rescue his brother. He hurried on down the asphalt, leaving behind a trail of footprints, water main breaks, and wrecked cars.

He felt something hit him in the leg. He felt a little tired for a second, but he shrugged it off and continued in what he thought was the general direction of the Zoo.

-------------

Rubeus Hagrid wasn't sure Cornelius the Cornish pixie was going to make it. He'd been about to head back home to his brother when Robert Roach had called him and told him that Cornelius was sick. He had immediately dropped everything and headed over to check on the little guy.

That had been about two and a half hours ago. Hagrid still couldn't figure out what was wrong with him, and the poor chap looked like he was fading in a hurry. He tried feeding Cornelius some of his favorite foods, but it didn't work. The pixie just shook his head and moaned.

He was about to try something more drastic when he heard screams in the distance. All around him, animals started to panic. Deirdre the unicorn squealed in terror, and Cornelius nearly bolted from his cage despite his ill health. Puzzled, he turned to face the commotion.

The blood drained from his face.

Grawp, against all orders, had left the house to come visit. Steam vents were going off all over the place, and there was a cluster of flashing blue lights and fire engines around him. The ground shook each time the giant took a step. He looked a bit sluggish, though. He could hear, even in this distance, the hiss of fire hoses being aimed at his brother.

Leaving Cornelius in his cage -- there probably wasn't much he could have done anyway -- he hurried down the street in Grawp's direction. He wasn't hard to find: all he had to do was run in the direction all the Muggles were trying to flee from.

He got as close he could before the policemen started shoving him away. Fortunately, it was close enough. He shouted: "GRAWP! NO! ABSOLUTELY NOT! GET BACK IN THE HOUSE! NOW!"

Grawp shook his head and -- disturbingly -- smiled. "No, Hagger! Grawp rescue Hagger! Hagger not home, so Grawp know Hagger in trouble! Grawp nice giant! Grawp rescue Hagger! Grawp sorry for making people scared, but Grawp worry about Hagger!"

Hagrid swore. "I'm in trouble NOW, you lumbering ox! GET BACK IN THE HOUSE!"

Grawp was about to respond when he suddenly stiffened and his eyes glazed over. "Grawp tired...Grawp want sleepy". With that, the giant lay down in the middle of the street and took a nap. Meanwhile, one of the people in the zoo reported that it had taken a hell of a lot of animal trank to bring him down. He'd probably be asleep for several hours. They debated killing the now
unconscious Grawp, and Hagrid had to a lot of fast talking to talk them out of it.

Hagrid swore vehemently. Turning to the police officers, he said, "I TOLD him not to leave the house specifically because he's only partially civilized and the Muggles aren't ready for him! Get him back in there and lock the door! And call an Obliviator! NOW!"

The cops ran off, and Hagrid put his head in his hands. What was he going to do now? If Grawp was sent back to England or put in prison, who would take care of him?

Hagrid was wondering if he would soon have to make a very difficult decision.

To be continued...

--------------

Update #138
--------------

May 8, 1996
Transfiguration Office
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
Great Britain

--------------

Next PoV: 139 -- Voldemort

-------------

HORCRUXES LEFT: 4 (locket, ring, snake, cup)

-------------

Albus Dumbledore had thought that actively teaching again would be tricky. Although he was more than familiar with lecturing students in the Great Hall, he hadn't actually TAUGHT anyone for over forty years. He'd been fortunate, however, in that his teaching skills had come back relatively quickly. In the few cases where he wasn't sure what to do, all he had to do was look into his memories in the Pensieve and see how he'd handled similar situations in the past.

The students and staff were reacting to his demotion in wildly different ways. Most of them were supportive and gave him the respect he had earned as the headmaster. Some of them considered him to be the headmaster in all but name and asked him for things which only the headmaster could provide. In situations like this, he would relay the requests to McGonagall, who almost always agreed to them. The headmistress tacitly acknowledged that Dumbledore had been demoted unfairly and that he should be allowed to run the show behind the scenes. She had wanted to nominate him for the position of deputy headmaster but had been forced to choose Snape instead as this information would have been visible to the Minister.

He knew all the students, of course. Having a former principal as your teacher guaranteed that you were going to get well-behaved students. There were, of course, a few Slytherins which acted up in class all the time and started taunting him about time travel. Crabbe had once told him that he'd be able to get his homework done on time if he had access to a Time-Turner. Pansy Parkinson had learned about the Muggle movies with the DeLorean and promised that she'd be able to work better if she got her broom flying up to 88 mph.

Draco, of course, was cocky and confident. He'd been hard to deal with even before the Super Bowl Breach. However, something had happened over the past four days which made him feel as if he were headmaster himself. Dumbledore had to keep an eye on him. It wouldn't be beyond Voldemort to try to have Draco try to assassinate him, Karkaroff, or Snape.
He had just finished off a set of homework assignments when the door to his office banged open. It was Nymphadora Tonks, and she had a frantic look on her face. Something which appeared to be a Muggle newspaper was in her hand.

Dumbledore stood up to welcome her. "Good evening, Tonks. What -- "

Tonks didn't even wait for him to finish the sentence. Instead, she spoke over him.

"Albus, we've got a problem. Remus is missing."

Dumbledore frowned. "Missing? What do you mean, missing?"

"Missing, as in no one knows where he is. Did you, Scrimgeour, or McGonagall send him on a mission for the Order of the Phoenix?"

"No, Tonks. I haven't sent him anywhere. I assumed he was still spending time with you."

Tonks gritted her teeth. "He was, until four days ago. The last thing he said to me was that he was going to head to Hogwarts to pick up his potion. No one's seen or heard from him since."

Dumbledore's brow creased in thought. "Four days ago. That was full moon, right?"

Tonks nodded. "That's right, Albus. Remus disappearing about the time of the full moon is doubly disturbing. I have the horrible suspicion that something prevented him from taking the potion."

Dumbledore shook his head. "That's impossible. I asked Snape if he had prepared the potion for Remus, and Snape said he had. I had Minerva look into Snape's office later in the day, and the chalice was gone. Combine that with the fact that several students saw Remus in this castle and your theory doesn't hold water."

Tonks drew a deep breath and showed him the Muggle newspaper. "If that's the case, how would you explain this? This is from the Sunday edition of the Times", the day after Remus disappeared.

Skeptical, Dumbledore looked down at the newspaper. It only took him a few sentence for him to understand what she was concerned about.

-------------------
RABID DOG ATTACKS PATRONS AT WEMBLEY STADIUM
Bites 28 Fans, Killing One, Before Being Shot to Death by Authorities
Animal Believed to have been Teleported in by Evil Wizard, Possibly Voldemort
Mysterious Man Seen Teleporting Into Stadium Before Attack, Leaving Behind a Goblet and a Wand

In an incident which could only be characterized as a magical terror attack, an evil wizard teleported a man-sized, rabid dog into Wembley Stadium during last night's game between Arsenal and Manchester United. The creature materialized in Section G and attacked over two dozen people before being shot to death by authorities. One of the victims, Terrence Silveira, 34, collapsed in the stands and was pronounced dead before he could be taken to the hospital.

Witnesses report a man with a thin mustache and receding hairline appearing out of nowhere in Section G and falling down into the seats. The man got up quickly and seemed nervous. He took a look at the sky in the general direction of the moon, which was obscured by clouds at the time. He explained that he had dropped a goblet and needed to retrieve it in a hurry. One of the bite victims,
Lauren Mistry, 28, managed to retrieve the goblet, but the man didn't seem content. Authorities suspect that he was still looking for his wand.

Witnesses seem to disagree over what happened when the moon came out from behind the cloud. Most of them claim that the man disappeared at that point and teleported the dog in. A few of them claimed that the man had actually transformed into the dog. The Wembley security people, however, dismissed those accounts as having been influenced by the Muggle myths about werewolves.

The dog looked, and acted, much more like a wolf than a typical domestic dog. It was much larger, and more vicious, than anything people would have normally kept as pets. It was rabid enough to make it attack virtually every human it could get its jaws on. It would have probably gone on to decimate half the stadium had the police not shot it down. Wembley Stadium does not allow patrons to bring pets into the building, and this incident goes to show exactly what they were concerned about.

The victims were all treated at the scene and received rabies shots. The Arsenal manager offered to let the staff use the team's locker room as a triage center, where they bound up all of the wounds and sent the people on their way. A few of the victims seemed healthy enough to not need additional help, so they left the stadium after only receiving the rabies shot.

The game resumed after a brief delay, and Arsenal eventually defeated Manchester United, 1-nil.

Wembley security personnel widely believe that the man with the mustache was Lord Voldemort. Both the Minister of Magic, Rufus Scrimgeour, and Alliance for Magic politician Tom Riddle admit that an evil wizard named Voldemort exists. They disagree, of course, over who Voldemort's true identity is and are accusing each other of being Voldemort to further their political careers. They have agreed to compare notes and discuss the matter on live television on the afternoon of 8 May. Hopefully this will give the Prime Minister and other officials a better idea of what to look for.

The goblet and the wand were eventually found by the authorities and taken as evidence. Retrieval of the wand was difficult, as it tried to electrocute many of the officials who tried to pick it up. It was eventually scooped up with a souvenir program and placed in a box.

For more information, please turn to page 6.

----------

Dumbledore put down the paper with trembling hands. He turned to Tonks with a horrified expression on his face.

"I think I know what happened, Tonks. A Death Eater broke into Hogwarts and turned Snape's chalice into a Portkey. Lupin picked it up to drink it and it transported him to the stadium before he could do so. He fell down, and his wand and chalice flew out of his hands and into the crowd. The chalice spilled, destroying any chance he had to drink the potion. Lupin knew he couldn't leave the wand behind in a place where it could harm Muggles, so he gambled that he'd be able to find the wand before the moon came out from behind the cloud. Unfortunately, he lost."

Tonks looked at him desperately. "Does that mean that Remus is--"

Dumbledore raised his hands in resignation. "I'm afraid it does, Tonks. Remus Lupin is dead. We'd better warn the rest of the Order. If there's anything I can do to help, tell me and I'll do my best. However, I believe that something else will have to be our first priority."
"Oh? And what is that, Albus?"

He picked up the paper again and pointed at the headline. "Remus managed to bite almost thirty people before he went down. Twenty-seven survived. I'm not sure if that's bad or good."

Tonks frowned. "Why is it bad?"

"It's simple, Tonks. Those Muggles are now werewolves, and they have no idea that werewolves exist. One month from now, they will transform and start biting more people. Those people, in turn, will also become werewolves. If each werewolf bites ten more people each month before being taken out..."

Tonks put her hands to her head. "Merlin's beard. Exponential growth. Voldemort has triggered a werewolf pandemic among the Muggles, and they don't realize that the rabies shots aren't going to prevent it!"

Dumbledore closed his eyes. "Exactly, Tonks. We need to think of something, and we've got less than a month to do it. I think we need to talk to the Prime Minister. We also need to get Lupin's wand back. Depending on what the Muggles do with it, it could do more harm in a month than the werewolves would have been able to."

To be continued...

-------------

Update #139
-------------
May 8, 1996
BBC Headquarters
London
England
-------------

Next PoV: 140 -- Kim Jong-Il

-------------
Voldemort was ecstatic. The Ministry of Magic had caved in and agreed to a meeting. In all fairness, though, he couldn't imagine how they could have refused. Refusal would have been tantamount to them conceding that they were wrong and he was right. From the Muggle perspective, that would have been equivalent to a declaration that Scrimgeour was the Dark Lord and that the Muggles should support Tom Riddle.

He was very close now to becoming Prime Minister, or at least in control of what John Major's policies would be. Voldemort had demanded that he, Scrimgeour, and the Prime Minister meet on live television to discuss who exactly Voldemort was. Although he was fairly certain that he would be able to Imperius both Major and Scrimgeour before they went on the air, he wanted to be certain. So, he'd instructed one of the Sri Lankan Death Eaters recruited by Dilmi to hide under an Invisibility Cloak. If things got out of hand, his orders were to stun Scrimgeour and the Prime Minister while hiding under the Cloak. Voldemort, in his guise as the politician Tom Riddle, would appear to bury the hatchet and rescue both men. Of course, the rescue would "happen" to fail, forcing him to be remorseful on television. It would be good publicity, at the very least.

The debate with Scrimgeour wasn't the only plan which was starting to pay dividends. He'd
managed to take control of al-Qaeda, Saudi Arabia, Hamas, and Hezbollah. That put him in a position to wreak havoc in Israel and potentially control a lot of oil. Another of the Indians had reported that he had been able to kidnap a North Korean and grab a few of the man's hairs to add to a Polyjuice Potion. Disguised as the Korean, the Indian was planning to go to Kim Jong-Il and try to start manipulating North Korea as well. North Korea was a very tempting target. It was centered on a tradition of leader worship, which would help him greatly. And it also supposedly had a lot of uranium, which could conceivably be used to create nuclear weapons. He wasn't sure if the country had enough weaponized uranium to produce a weapon at this point. However, all they needed was one pure sample and he'd be able to Engorgio and Geminio it to his heart's delight.

As if that weren't enough, his associates in al-Qaeda had told him that they were within a week of attempting the attack on the American Department of Magic and blaming everything on America for Humans if it failed. The werewolf pandemic had already been kicked off, with Draco risking life and limb to turn Snape's chalice into a Portkey. Draco was proving to be a smart and resilient young man. Voldemort suspected that he would have the determination and discipline necessary to kill off Snape.

First things first, however. He had to get through this interview. Right now, he was alone in a Muggle office, thinking about what exactly he was going to do. Lucius had once again let him borrow his George Cross for this meeting. He was dressed in his best robes and had enchanted the George Cross so that it glowed brightly.

There was a knock on the door, followed by a tentative: "Mr. Riddle, we're just about ready. I'd like to come into tell you how exactly this is going to work. Is it all right?"

Making sure that the Indian was hidden under the Invisibility Cloak, Voldemort turned to the door and spoke with confidence. "Fine with me, sir. Come on in."

The door opened and a man came in carrying a large metal box. Much to Voldemort's chagrin, it wasn't the Prime Minister. It looked like John Major had just sent some low-level flunky as a messenger. Voldemort considered Imperiusing the visitor for a moment but decided against it: if Major found out, he'd be in a lot of trouble.

The flunky shook his hand and began to explain. "All right, this is what we're going to do. First, I'd like you to relinquish your wand and place it in this box. We know that Voldemort exists, but we don't know what his real name is. For all we know, it could be you. The Prime Minister suspects that Voldemort would attempt to disrupt this meeting using magic. Consequently, both you and Minister Scrimgeour will enter the room at the same time, alone and unarmed."

Alarm bells rang in Voldemort's head, and he glanced towards the invisible Indian. He suspected a trap. Although Major probably didn't know that Tom Riddle and Voldemort were the same person, Scrimgeour certainly would have. Would Scrimgeour have been above Imperiusing the Prime Minister to climb off the fence of impartiality and make sure that Voldemort exposed himself? It was something worth considering. He had to be on guard.

For the time being, however, he had to play politics. He nodded to the flunky. "I understand, sir. The Prime Minister is a very wise man. You can have my wand provided that I can get it back at the end of the meeting". With that, he pulled out his wand and dropped it in the box. He personally didn't need a wand, of course, if Dilmi's friend was going to do the dirty work for him.

The flunky thanked him and put the box under his shoulder. "Thank you for your cooperation, Mr. Riddle. When I give the signal, you are to step out of this alcove and into the main conference room. There, you will see Scrimgeour, the Prime Minister, and a neutral wizard who has volunteered to
serve as a moderator. The Prime Minister assumed that there would be no way for a Muggle to mediate between two opposing wizards, even without wands, so he brought in a neutral wizard.

Voldemort didn't like this at all. It was just supposed to be the three of them. This wizard would likely be armed and could interfere with the plan. He glanced quickly at the veiled Indian and was rewarded by a quick tap on the floor under the Invisibility Cloak. Voldemort recognized the signal immediately: unspoken acknowledgement that the Indian would take out the wizard if necessary.

Turning back to the flunky, Voldemort said: "That's not a bad idea. I should have thought of it myself. Who's going to be the moderator?"

"Mr. Riddle, the moderator will be Grand Mugwump Anastasios Dialonis of the International Confederation of Wizards."

Voldemort froze momentarily. This was getting VERY dangerous. Dialonis was the highest-ranking wizard in the world. As a member of the ICW, he was indeed neutral and a realistic choice for a moderator. However, Voldemort would have bet his bottom Galleon that Dialonis knew who he was. And what was worse was that every wizard on the planet recognized Dialonis's authority.

There was no way his Indian sidekick would be able to attack Dialonis without risking a major international incident. Dialonis was the equivalent of the Head of the United Nations in the Muggle world. He bet that Dialonis had brought some guards along -- hidden under cloaks like the Indians -- and was going to be armed. An attack on the Grand Mugwump would probably have ripple effects throughout the world. Death Eaters would come under extreme scrutiny worldwide. He suspected that virtually every country with a Ministry of Magic would put a price on the heads of every Voldemort supporter they could find. His entire international organization would fall apart in a hurry.

If he simply admitted he was Voldemort, Dialonis would likely leave England alone and go back to Atlantis. He would probably be killed, but he could always come back. If he succeeded in convincing the world that Scrimgeour was Voldemort, he'd come out ahead and would likely be the Prime Minister of at least Minister of Magic. If he protested Dialonis's interference the ICW would come down on him and probably send officials to knock out every single Death Eater on the planet.

A Muggle expression from the game of poker came to mind. Voldemort had been pretty certain he had the better hand and had raised the stakes to include all of England. Scrimgeour, however, had surprised him by coming over the top and going all in. Was Scrimgeour bluffing? Was Voldemort willing to commit all his chips to call?

He had to say something, and do so quickly. For the time being, he'd play along. "That's not a bad idea, actually. He'll work out pretty well. I'm surprised, though, that he got involved with what was believed to be a regional dispute. I doubt Voldemort is known outside the British Isles."

The flunky shrugged. "Supposedly the Minister of Magic can call upon the ICW whenever he wants someone to serve as an impartial mediator. I guess Scrimgeour had the right to ask for the Grand Mugwump. I'm not a wizard, though. Now, if you would excuse me, I've got to talk to Scrimgeour."

With that, the wizard left, leaving Voldemort alone with his thoughts.

-----------

Five minutes later, a bell rang. Voldemort took a deep breath, asked the Indian to follow him, and headed into the main conference room to meet Scrimgeour. Much to his surprise, the door closed immediately after he went through it, leaving the armed Indian on the other side.
Shit, Voldemort thought. He supposed the Indian could Apparate into the room, but the wizards would probably see that. And the Muggles would get very suspicious if that door opened seemingly of its own accord.

Television cameras were everywhere, forcing Voldemort to shield his eyes. He could make out three people in the room who weren't trying to attack him with photographic equipment. He recognized Rufus Scrimgeour coming in from an adjacent office. Scrimgeour looked at him with absolute hatred. Voldemort knew what his opponent was thinking: "I've got you now, Voldemort. It's a pity I can't take advantage of it on live television because of the power base you're gaining among the Muggles!"

Seated at the table were two men. Voldemort recognized the Prime Minister, dressed in an expensive black suit. Next to him, as Voldemort had feared, was Dialonis.

It took several minutes for the television cameras to finish taking shots. Finally, Dialonis stood and addressed the media.

"Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Grand Mugwump Anastasios Dialonis, head of the International Confederation of Wizards. My position is equivalent to that of the head of your United Nations. I, as a neutral observer who is not English, have been called upon to mediate this debate between Tom Riddle and Rufus Scrimgeour."

A serious look then crossed Dialonis's face. "However, there is one thing we must do before we get started. As you are aware, there have been awful stories about an evil British wizard named Voldemort who has been terrorizing the country of late. We know he exists, but no one seems to know who he is. Each of these two esteemed wizards believes the other person could be Voldemort, and I can't blame them. However, there is an easy way for us to figure this out."

Dialonis lifted his wand and cast a spell. His hand started to glow brightly. "I am going to require that everyone here take the following Unbreakable Vow: 'I, state your name, will answer the following question truthfully: 'I am not Lord Voldemort'\". I will then ask each person if he is Lord Voldemort. He will be forced to speak the truth. Otherwise, the Unbreakable Vow will kill him. I don't like Unbreakable Vows all that much, but that was the only thing we could think of here which couldn't be outwitted."

Voldemort swore to himself, and watched as a small grin flitted across Scrimgeour's face. He was screwed, and Scrimgeour knew it. He would have to refuse the Vow, in which case everyone would get suspicious. He could take the Vow and lie, which would get him temporarily killed. He'd come back, but the Muggles would never listen to him again. He could try to escape before taking the Vow, but that would force him to leave without his wand. He wouldn't be able to get his wand on the way out, because the flunky with the box was in the room and an attempt to Apparate over to get the wand would be seen by all.

He had only one chance. He had to make sure no one started making Unbreakable Vows. Calming himself the best he could, he said: "Unbreakable Vows? Do you really think Unbreakable Vows are necessary, Grand Mugwump? What about Veritaserum?"

Dialonis shook his head. "That won't work, Mr. Riddle. Veritaserum can be mentally fought, like any other truth-enforcing mechanism, and I suspect Voldemort is more than powerful enough to fight Veritaserum. The Unbreakable Vow is the only way to go. Now, pushing right along..."

He then pointed to his hand and cast the spell. "I, Anastasios Dialonis, will answer the following
question truthfully: 'I am not Lord Voldemort'". The Prime Minister then turned to him and asked him if he was Voldemort. Dialonis said he was not.

The Grand Mugwump then turned to Rufus Scrimgeour. "Mr. Scrimgeour, will you please extend your hand?"

Scrimgeour did so, and waited for Dialonis to cast the spell. "I, Rufus Scrimgeour, will answer the following question truthfully: 'I am not Lord Voldemort'".

Dialonis stared hard at Scrimgeour. "Mr. Scrimgeour, are you Lord Voldemort?"

Scrimgeour shook his head. "No, I am not Lord Voldemort."

Dialonis nodded and walked towards Voldemort. "Mr. Riddle, would you please extend your hand?"

Gritting his teeth, Voldemort did so. Dialonis cast the Unbreakable Vow.

"Repeat after me: 'I, Tom Riddle, will answer the following question truthfully: 'I am not Lord Voldemort.'"

Voldemort got careful here. He had to speak very precisely here. He just hoped no one would pick it up.

"I, Tom Riddle, will answer the following question truthfully: 'I am not Lord Foldemort.'"

Dialonis looked at him with a small grin on his face. "Are you Lord Voldemort?"

Voldemort braced himself as he spoke. "No, I am not Lord Voldemort."

The plan was elegant. He had never sworn to answer the Lord Voldemort question truthfully. He had sworn to answer the Lord Foldemort question truthfully. F vs. V. They sounded the same and could easily be interchanged unless people were looking for it. And he doubted the Muggles would pick it up.

Scrimgeour looked at him in shock. Voldemort shrugged magnanimously. "Don't worry about it, Minister. Everyone makes mistakes."

The Prime Minister, however, was staring daggers at him. "Indeed they do, Mr. Riddle. You didn't pronounce the Dark Lord's name right. You said Foldemort. I heard that F. The question that you swore to answer was not the one the Grand Mugwump asked. You cheated, Mr. Riddle. Ladies and gentlemen, I think we know who Voldemort is now, don't we?"

The rest of the people in the room started to mutter as cameras flashed. Voldemort, however, wasn't focusing on them. Swearing incoherently, he Apparated out of the room, leaving a stunned audience behind.

Dialonis looked at where Voldemort had been standing for a few minutes. Then, he shrugged and got up. "Well, I think that's that. I think my job here is done."

Scrimgeour chuckled. "Indeed, Grand Mugwump, it is. I can't help but say: Lord Voldemort definitely F-ed that one up!"
Kim Jong-Il liked Chief Executive Officer Xu. He'd thought the man was bright, and Xu hadn't disappointed him. He had been thinking of nominating him to be the interim Minister of Magic until he found a wizard capable of fulfilling that position.

Xu had finally figured out what that Geminio spell did: it made a second copy of an object. When applied to a human being, it would create an inanimate clone of the being which looked exactly like a dead body. This spell would be useful for his Ultimate Korean Army as people would lower their guard once they thought one of his officers was finally dead.

Unfortunately, the bad guys could do that as well. Xu had gone through some of the footage on Choi Yeun's farm's cameras and made the startling discovery that the witch wasn't dead: she had defected to the South. The Dear Leader had promptly ordered Xu to destroy the defector's farm and kill everyone who could have come into contact with her. It wasn't a major loss as Xu had already managed to sprinkle a few wizards among the neighboring farms to boost their productivity with magic.

The destruction of Choi Yeun's farm had proven problematic, however. It appeared that there had been a couple of other wizards hiding out in there as well, and those two had violently disagreed with his decision. This disagreement featured incidents such as the tossing of a tank into a river. The Air Force had been forced to take the wizards out with a supersonic missile, virtually the only thing which would kill them before they found out about the threat. Only then was he able to safely annihilate the farm. Judging from the reports from his commanders, nothing was going to be able to grow there for at least 20 years.

A close examination of what was left of the two bodies after the attack revealed papers tying them to South Korea. It seemed like there were defectors everywhere! If the South had wizards who would listen to their government, he needed to match their forces and hopefully exceed them. And he needed to ensure that they would stay loyal to him.

He bluntly told Xu to go find someone who'd support him and tell him to bring his friends. The Dear Leader hadn't had high hopes for this, but amazingly the man had pulled it off. Xu had just entered his office along with a man he'd never seen before named Moon Ji Ji. The man seemed to be in his early forties and unusually healthy for a peasant.

Moon Ji bowed to him. "Your Excellency, allow me to introduce myself. My name is Moon Ji, and I belong to a group of wizards who is willing to work for you in exchange for a position in your inner circle."
Kim Jong-Il looked at him skeptically. "That would be great, if it were actually true. Why should I trust you? For all we know, you could have ensorcelled Xu over there and convinced him that you were trustworthy. You wouldn't be the first South Korean defector who tried to take over up here."

Moon Ji nodded. "Your Excellency, you are a wise man. I admit that my claim seems outrageous and that your skepticism is justified given what Xu told me has already happened to you. However, I am willing to seal my future to yours with an Unbreakable Vow."

"A what?"

"Unbreakable Vow, Your Excellency. It's a spell which forces the subject to fulfill a vow under penalty of death."

The Dear Leader turned to Xu. "Xu, you've spoken with wizards before. Have you ever heard of an Unbreakable Vow?"

Xu shook his head. "I'm afraid not, Your Excellency. However, I'm not a wizard. It's quite possible it exists and I don't know about it. However, there may be an easy way to tell."

He reached into his pocket and brought out Choi Yeun's old spellbook. "It may have been damaged in the conflagration she used to fake her death, but I sent it to a specialist and he managed to restore most of the text. If it's in there, we'll find it. Wizard Moon Ji, would you be able to recognize the Unbreakable Oath if you saw it in here?"

The wizard nodded. "Absolutely, Chief Executive Officer Xu. It's a relatively simple spell. Let me take a look at it."

Xu glanced briefly at the Dear Leader, who nodded. The former overseer then handed the book to the wizard, who began rummaging through the pages. Midway through the book, he took a close look at one of the pages and stabbed his finger at the text. "I thought so. Here it is."

Kim Jong-Il asked to see the book, and the wizard handed it over. Sure enough, he could make out the words "Unbreakable Vow" in the text. It was followed by a shot of a wand hovering over a glowing hand.

He whistled. "I'll be damned, there is in fact an Unbreakable Vow in there. All right, Moon Ji, go ahead and cast your spell. That will be good enough for me."

The wizard nodded and asked for permission to recover his wand from the guards. The Dear Leader granted it. Once Moon Ji had the wand, he muttered something and pointed it to his left hand, which started to glow.

The wizard then spoke clearly and precisely. "I, Moon Ji, vow that I will do whatever I can to support the Dear Leader of North Korea. So be it."

Xu whistled as the glow around the wizard's hands. He turned to the Dear Leader and chuckled. "Hey, if that thing works on Muggles we may have found a way to prevent them from defecting!"

Moon Ji nodded and rubbed his hands. "It will work, Chief Executive Officer. However, you'll need a wizard to cast the spell. I'll be able to do that. My friends and I should be able to help you a great deal."
The Dear Leader got a bit wary at this. "You and I both know that I don't have that many friends among the lower classes. They fear me and admire me, but they don't necessarily love me. What's in it for you?"

Moon Ji shrugged. "We wizards have traditionally lived lives independent from the Muggles, Your Excellency. We've seen how the people here suffer. We believe that if we help with the Muggles' living conditions they're less likely to defect and more likely to help you voluntarily. We're doing this for the people, Your Excellency. Although one wizard like myself will be able to help, even I won't be able to improve an entire country. From what Xu here told me of the defector, she and I had more or less the same idea. I, however, won't be going anywhere. And neither will my friends once we administer this Vow."

The Dear Leader's skepticism faded. "Spoken like a true patriot, my friend. How many of people are in your group?"

Moon Ji thought for a moment. Absently, he reached into his pocket. Xu and the Dear Leader got a bit nervous for a second, but he brought out what appeared to be a vial of some sort and drank it. Noticing the expression on the other two men's faces, the wizard explained: "Homeopathic antacid medication. I get a lot of heartburn, so I have to take this once every hour to keep it at bay."

Putting away the vial, the wizard answered the question. "I'd say we've got at least fifty wizards already who will support you, Your Excellency. I suspect that once the country realizes what we're doing, the wizards will come out of the woodwork to get involved and try to get onto our steering committee."

The Dear Leader smiled. "You get the ball rolling, and the people will maintain its momentum. You've done a good job, Secretary Xu of the National Muggle Relations committee. And you, Minister of Magic Moon Ji."

Both men smiled as they processed their promotions. "Thank you, Your Excellency. We will do our best to serve you."

To be continued...
Update #141

May 9, 1996
Al-Aqsa Mosque
Jerusalem

Next PoV: 142 -- Damodharan Dilmi

HORCRUXES LEFT: 4 (locket, ring, snake, cup)

Samuel -- along with his ever-present interpreter -- stared in shock at the Kohen Gadol. "You mean to tell me they've got ANOTHER sect now?"

The Kohen Gadol raised his hands in resignation. "I'm afraid so, Holy One. They call themselves the Celestine Catholic Church. They've broken off from the main Catholic Church, the one in Rome."

"Those are the people who honor the prophet who was executed and not the Arabian one, right? This is the group John Paul is in charge of?"

"Half right, Holy One. They are indeed operating under the mistaken assumption that Jesus of Nazareth was the last prophet. However, they no longer consider John Paul to be their leader. They have chosen a man named Celestine VI to be their leader."

"What was wrong with John Paul? He seems to be a reasonable man, and he agreed to listen to us. The only thing I found troubling was that statue in the courtyard in...what was that city called, Rome? I recommended that he take it away because people may get the wrong impression that we worship idols."

The Kohen Gadol stared intently at his feet. "From what I've been told, Celestine VI was reluctant to follow John Paul's order to give up his icons. Many of the churches in that area rely on icons to inspire people, and they know that the icons are not intended to be idols. They thought it would be inappropriate to restrict icon usage, and that's what got Celestine irritated."

Samuel stared at him. "They can keep their icons if they just put warnings outside the front door warning people that they're not to be taken as idols!"

The Kohen Gadol shook his head. "That may be what he intended. However, things have taken a bizarre turn. For one thing, Celestine VI doubts you are who you say you are. He doesn't think you're the man from the Bible."

"The Bible?"

"The Judeo-Christian holy book, Holy One. I believe you've been given a copy?"

"Yes, Your Holiness, I have. So far, I've gotten through what you call Leviticus. It looks all right to me. I haven't seen anything unusual yet."
"That's because the first five books were already more or less finalized by the time you were born. The later books, however, are new to you. They include Joshua, Judges -- "

The Kohen Gadol froze. He didn't want to say what the next two books were. Samuel probably would have had a heart attack if he had still been alive.

Samuel cut in. "Joshua, I've heard of. He was the commander in chief of the Israelites when they began their campaign against Canaan. I think one of my great-grandparents served in his army. I don't remember any judges, though. I remember a bunch of warlords who squabbled for control shortly after the initial occupation, though. You're telling me that I appear in this book as well? That makes no sense! Who do they think I am, Moses?"

It was time for a change of topic, the Kohen Gadol thought. "We can deal with who's in the book later. Let's get back to the Celestines. The Celestines revere the Samuel mentioned in the Bible. However, they doubt your claim that you and the man from the Bible are the same person. They complained that John Paul was being influenced by an impostor and started their own sect. This turned the Celestines against both you and John Paul."

Samuel looked furious. "I'll excommunicate him. That will solve the problem. Everyone will listen to me!"

"They won't obey the excommunication order because they won't recognize your authority."

"All right, you excommunicate them! You're the Kohen Gadol!"

"They won't listen to me because I'm a Muslim. I revere Mohammed and they don't."

"But John Paul does!"

"They don't follow John Paul! They follow Celestine!"

Samuel gaped at him and then muttered something which the interpreter delicately refused to translate. The prophet's tone of voice, however, was obvious.

The Kohen Gadol shook his head sadly. "I know it sounds bad. Unfortunately, it is. Many Celestines joined the new sect because the sect quickly turned against wizards to differentiate itself from the traditional Catholics. They believe wizards are the allies of Shaitan, the Adversary. The fact that both you and John Paul are wizards just served as an excuse to make the Celestines into an anti-wizard movement. In general, the Celestines are more conservative than traditional Catholics. They're even against evolution."

Samuel looked at him blankly. The Kohen Gadol swore under his breath.

"Evolution is the process we believe Allah used to create lifeforms during the six days of creation. We don't know how Allah did it, of course, but we think we've discovered one of His tools. The point is, the Celestines and Roman Catholics are diverging very rapidly. It's going to take a miracle to reconcile the two at the rate things are going."

Samuel was about to say something when the Kohen Gadol heard a knock on the door. Excusing himself for a moment, he opened the door and saw one of his aides standing before him. The man had a document in his hand and an ashen look on his face.
The Kohen Gadol stared at him in concern. "Ibrahim, what's wrong? You look like you've seen a djinn!"

The visitor shook his head and handed the Kohen Gadol the document. The High Priest looked it over briefly and his eyes widened.

"Muslims for Humans? What in the name of Allah is Muslims for Humans?"

"I doubt this is being done in the name of Allah, Holiness. Muslims for Humans is an anti-wizard movement which appears to have just taken off in Saudi Arabia. It seems that a few people are a bit irritated that King Fahd has taken on a wizard as an advisor. They claim that the wizard is going to cause the downfall of the kingdom because he is a Hindu wizard. The group is violently against all Hindus and wizards, especially those with one or more Muggle parents. Many of them have tattooed a symbol on their arms with a snake and skull on it. Even most astonishing, there are both Sunnis and Shi'ites in their midst."

The Kohen Gadol swore to himself. "Just what we need right now. I was just telling Samuel about those nut jobs in the Ukraine. Why isn't Fahd doing anything about them?"

Ibrahim stared in the general direction of Samuel. "I don't know. That's something a LOT of people want to find out. Fahd's the king, and he's got a wizard on his cabinet. They've certainly got the power and authority to do something about it. Yet for some reason they're not. Many of my Saudi friends are a bit uneasy about this. Perhaps Rikpreet thinks that as long as they don't have wizards -- which would be unlikely given their nature -- they aren't really a threat, and for the time being they're a rather small movement."

"Are they associated with the Celestines in some way? Could they be trying to initiate another crusade by playing off some people's fear of wizards? Samuel is not going to like this."

Ibrahim looked at Samuel for a moment. "No, I don't think he is. We've already got a problem with Celestine Christians. Can you imagine what Celestine Muslims would be like? For one thing, they probably won't listen to you, which means another 'sect' from Samuel's perspective."

The Kohen Gadol shook his head. "May Allah forbid that!"

Ibrahim looked thoughtfully at Samuel. "Inshallah, He will do so. However, if this is the harbinger of the end of days, we would expect the Mahdi at any minute now, wouldn't we? And even if it weren't the end of days, Allah would need to send a great man in order to clean all of this haraam up."

The Kohen Gadol turned back to look at Samuel, who was looking at the people praying in the main sanctuary below. He paused and thought about it for a moment.

"I'll tell Samuel, who will probably excommunicate the whole movement, much good that would do. However, as far as the Mahdi is concerned...indeed, Ibrahim. We would be expecting the Mahdi, and it would make sense for Allah, praise be unto Him, to send him now."

To be continued...

-----------------

Update #142

----------
May 10, 1996
Al-Qaeda Headquarters
[location classified]

----------
Next PoV: 143 -- Haydar Dagher
----------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 4 (locket, ring, snake, cup)
----------

There was a knock on the door leading to the head of al-Qaeda's inner sanctum. Damodharan Dilmi, the Death Eater who had become the head of the terrorist organization, looked up from his prepared speech to the man standing in the entrance.

"Sir, Ms. Aafia Siddiqui is here. She's been with me the entire time, as I have been serving as her chaperone. She claims she has an appointment with you. Is that true?"

Dilmi nodded. He'd almost forgotten about her, which was a bad sign. The young woman did not realize it, but she would likely be playing a pivotal role in al-Qaeda's next operation...assuming, of course, that the Western powers refused to accept their ultimatum. He said, "Yes, send her in. I'll serve as her chaperone while she's in here. You can wait outside, as this is top-secret business."

The visitor saluted, turned on his heel, and headed back out into the reception room. Ten seconds later, he returned with a modestly-clad woman trailing at his heels. She appeared to be barely out of her teens.

The woman seemed nervous. Dilmi couldn't blame her: she was going to speaking to the head of al-Qaeda and to a wizard to boot. There were a lot of people who were afraid of wizards already, including those rabble-rousers Rikpreet had start up in Saudi Arabia under the Imperiused blessing of King Fahd. Siddiqui, however, had no reason to fear him...provided that she was able to do her duty, of course. She was untested, as far as he knew. This would be a good first test.

The man indicated the woman. "Mr. Dilmi, this is Aafia Siddiqui, a new recruit. Ms. Siddiqui, this a Damodharan Dilmi, head of al-Qaeda. Disobey him at your peril."

The woman trembled for a moment but composed herself. "I understand, sir."

Dilmi looked at her slowly and nodded. "It's good you do, young woman, because any hesitation here could cost you dearly. All right, Sayyed. You can go now. I'll take it from here. Close the soundproof doors behind you on the way out."

The visitor saluted once more and left. Dilmi waited until he saw the doors close behind Sayyed. Satisfied with his secrecy, he turned to the woman.

"Ms. Siddiqui, I have a mission for you. If you succeed, you will make our next operation much safer and potentially much easier."

The woman took a deep breath and tried to calm herself. "I live for al-Qaeda, Mr. Dilmi. How can I help you?"

Dilmi reached into his desk and pulled out a folder. There was a name on the cover along with a photograph. He showed the folder to the new operative.

"Do you recognize this woman, Ms. Siddiqui?"
Siddiqui looked at the photograph for a moment. "She looks vaguely familiar, but I can't place her. Should I know her, sir?"

Dilmi breathed a sigh of relief. She didn't know the mark, which was a good sign. Operatives often had difficulty assassinating friends. However, he kept his face dispassionate. "Possibly. She went to school with you. She is a year behind you, I believe, so she's a senior. She lives in Russian House, and her name is written here on the folder. However, you may be interested to know that people have been referring to her as the Russian House witch."

Siddiqui frowned. "Russian House? I didn't really know anyone in Russian House, sir. There were a couple of people in my dorm who may have, however. I know of one girl named Felicia who was dating someone in G-Entry, so she was in MacGregor a lot. I think she was involved with Hillel and knew several Hillel students in Russian House."

Dilmi's eyebrows shot up. The Polyjuice Potion would work on Muggles, as far as he knew. If Siddiqui were able to kidnap this woman and Polyjuice into her, she could conceivably do what Barty Crouch, Jr. did with Alastair Moody. That would give her access to Russian House through the Hillel students, and it would get people pissed at Jews to boot. Very interesting. However, there was one important thing to check though.

"Is this Felicia woman still at MIT?"

Siddiqui shook her head. "No, sir. She was my year."

"What about her boyfriend?"

"A year ahead of me. His name was --"

Dilmi cut her off irritably: there went that idea. "Forget that I brought it up. Ms. Siddiqui. At any rate, here's what I want you to do. I want you to take this woman out using any means possible. You must do so before the 14th and make it looks like an accident."

Siddiqui froze. He couldn't see under the burqa, but he was fairly certain that her face had gone white. "You want me to assassinate a practicing witch?"

Dilmi nodded. "That is correct, young lady. You have access to MIT, and people will not question you if you're seen in the dorms. You can argue that you've come back to visit friends. I've been told that Russian House is connected to two other dorms, MacGregor House and New House, by a corridor. Is that the case?"

Siddiqui nodded. "Yes, it is. Technically, Russian House is considered part of New House 1, one of the six subdivisions of New House."

"Did you have any friends in the other subdivisions of New House, Ms. Siddiqui?"

Siddiqui nodded slowly. "Yes..."

"Good. You've got yourself an alibi: you were visiting friends and happened to be in the area at the time. Once you're in New House, can you get into Russian House?"

Siddiqui shook her head. "No, sir. Each of the subdivisions has its own lock system. I can get into
New House as a whole but I need to let someone let me into Russian House."

Dilmi nodded and reached into his desk. He had prepared for this eventuality. Grinning, he pulled a knife out of the desk and passed it, hilt first, to the operative.

Siddiqui looked at it, baffled. "You want me to use this knife to do the deed?"

Dilmi shook his head. "You probably won't want to get close enough to her to finish her off with the knife. Besides, the knife isn't supposed to be used to kill. It's a magical object which will allow you to break the lock of any door."

Siddiqui understood immediately. "In other words, I can get into Russian House once I've gotten into New House to visit my friend. And if necessary, into this girl's room."

"Exactly. Once you're in there, get the job done and get out of there. I don't care how you do it as long as she's dead by the 14th. We don't want her anywhere near MacGregor -- especially I-Entry -- that day. What do you say?"

Siddiqui was silent for a moment. Dilmi wondered whether he'd pushed her too hard, too fast. Making no sudden movements, he reached for his wand. He didn't want this woman turning on him at this critical juncture.

Finally, the woman's shoulders slumped. Shuddering, she took the knife. "All right, I'll do it."

"Good for you, Ms. Siddiqui. I know it's hard for you. However, once you're done with this first assignment, the others should come more easily. Good luck, young woman. May Allah be with you. Now head back into the anteroom where Sayyed will rejoin you. Be advised that your mission is top secret. Don't tell anyone about it."

Siddiqui composed herself as she headed towards the exit. "I'll keep the secret, sir. May Allah be with you as well."

He waited for the woman to leave. Once she had left, he turned back to the document he was about to send al-Jazeera.

-----------------

10 May 1996

This message is from Damodharan Dilmi, the head of the brave band of freedom fighters known as al-Qaeda. We have been excited, yet disturbed, by several of the momentous events which have taken place over the past few months. Fortunately, al-Qaeda now has the power to ensure that the Western world listens to our demands.

I, Damodharan Dilmi, am a wizard committed to jihad. I am not alone in this organization. There are several wizards in our community, all of whom have decided to use their powers to further Allah's vision for mankind.

We at al-Qaeda are not fond of hurting people. However, when people are endangering their lives and civilization by risking the wrath of Allah, what are we supposed to do?

After discussion with my colleagues, we have decided to issue a warning to the United States and all other nations which have been involved in the Judeo-Christian crusade against the True Faith.
We at al-Qaeda have concluded that we have no choice but to attack the United States on its home soil using a powerful, magic-enhanced weapon. If successful, this operation will likely result in the deaths of thousands of people. It will occur within a week.

We will call off the attack if the United States accepts the following terms.

First, America is to withdraw any support for Israel and begin divesting from the Zionist country. All American citizens and funds are to leave Israel by the beginning of 1997.

Second, America is to ensure that no infidels transgress upon the Temple Mount. By infidel, I mean anyone who is not a Muslim. The imam in charge of the al-Aqsa Mosque is to be replaced if possible with a man who will not betray the Faith. Jews are also not to be permitted to worship at the Western Wall.

Third, Arab supporters of the United States must create Councils of Wizards which will eventually take control of the government from the Muggles. All members of these councils must be practicing Muslim wizards. Each jihadist wizard on the Council will earn that country fifty million dollars in pure gold.

Finally, wizards who have one or more Muggle parents should identify themselves to national authorities so that they can be recruited to join these ruling committees.

I understand these terms are harsh and that they will be difficult to implement. Unfortunately, we at al-Qaeda feel like we have no choice. It is better for a few thousand people to suffer than for millions of people to die when the Last Judgment comes.

May Allah grant you the wisdom to accept these demands. I look forward to a favorable reply.

-------------
To be continued...

-------------

Update #143
------------
May 10, 1996 - 4 DAYS TO SIDDIQUI DEADLINE
Ministry of Magic
Rub al Khali
Saudi Arabia
-----------
Next PoV: 144 -- Aafia Siddiqui
----------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 4 (locket, ring, snake, cup)
-----------

Haydar Dagher looked up as the man entered the room. "Minister, we've got a problem."

Dagher rubbed his eyes. He'd been having trouble sleeping of late with all of the recent events. "Tell me something I don't know. What are we dealing with now, Dilm'i's ultimatum or those tattooed maniacs who think they're speaking for Allah?"

The subordinate's response disheartened, yet didn't surprise, Dagher. "Neither, Minister."

"What in Allah's name happened NOW? Needless to say, I'm a bit swamped at the moment! Can't it wait?"
The subordinate shook his head. "I'm afraid not, Minister. You see, it involves the king. The king's been acting a bit...strange."

Dagher's jaw dropped. "You mean to tell me the KING's got a problem now? What's going on?"

The subordinate groaned. "Well, the king just made an announcement which most of his cabinet seemed to think was a bit...inappropriate."

"Inappropriate? What do you mean?"

"He said something which is probably going to get the whole kingdom in trouble. I wouldn't be surprised if America tries to intervene in our government and oust him."

Dagher shook his head. "America ousting Fahd? Why in Allah's name would they do that? We've got reasonable relations with the US. We give them oil, after all."

The subordinate was blunt. "Not anymore, after this decree."

Dagher put both his hands on his head. "Fahd declared an embargo against the United States?"

The subordinate showed him a piece of parchment. "You can read the text of the speech right here. He has decided to suspend all oil exports to countries who allow non-Muslim citizens to worship at al-Aqsa. The decree will take effect on June 1st."

Dagher grabbed the document and looked over the text of the king's decree. The subordinate had summed it up quite nicely. The Minister of Magic shook in horror.

"Is His Majesty MAD? No, let me rephrase that. Is he SENILE?"

The subordinate shook his head. "I don't think so, Minister. My guess is that he's been Imperiused."

It took Dagher a good thirty seconds to realize what he was implying. "You think this Rikpreet is controlling the king?"

The subordinate nodded. "I'm afraid so, Minister. Fahd started acting strange almost immediately after Rikpreet -- a known wizard -- joined his staff. We've also done some research on this fellow. Supposedly he's friends with a man named Lucius Malfoy. He used to work with Malfoy in the British Ministry of Magic."

Dagher nodded. "I'm familiar with Wizard Malfoy. He's supposedly an ally of the kingdom. He offered to help after our man was assassinated by Dilmi during Dilmi's takeover of al-Qaeda."

The subordinate grimaced. "I'm starting to think that Malfoy isn't friendly. There are reports coming out of Britain that used to tie him to Lord Voldemort, a powerful Dark wizard who tried to take over the government back in the late 1970's. He lay low for a while and recently re-emerged as the British political candidate Tom Riddle. The British Minister of Magic, Rufus Scrimgeour, challenged Riddle to a debate. Riddle accepted, not realizing that Scrimgeour had convinced Dialonis to come in to mediate. Dialonis required both parties to take Unbreakable Vows to say they weren't Voldemort, and that outed Riddle as Voldemort. Voldemort Apparated away before anyone could capture him. The Brits thought that they had managed to capture his wand, but the wand mysteriously disappeared a few minutes after Voldemort disappeared. I get the impression Voldemort brought an accomplice."
Dagher stared at him. "ATLANTIS intervened? But I thought Atlantis was supposed to stay neutral in regional crises like this!"

"It is, Minister, and the Grand Mugwump agreed only to mediate. However, the fact that Dialonis intervened personally in this incident gives me the impression that Atlantis is starting to watch what's going on here more carefully. We're getting Voldemort and Death Eater connections popping up in various countries now. There are rumors that Damodharan Dilmi, the head of al-Qaeda, is former Voldemort supporter."

Dagher gasped. "You mean this Voldemort character has gone international and has got tentacles in us and al-Qaeda? And he just barely missed an opportunity to become Prime Minister of England?"

"Correct, Minister. And judging from what Fahd's schedule has been like over the past few weeks, I suspect Hamas and Hezbollah as well. He's got control over most of the volatile elements of the Middle East at this point. I'm getting the impression that Voldemort may even be linked to those nutcases behind Muslims for Humans."

Dagher was furious. No Dark wizard was going to wreck the kingdom while HE was in power in Saudi Arabia. He swore it to Allah!

He screamed at the top of his lungs, so everyone in the building could hear him. "Attention, everyone. Get over here, NOW, for an emergency meeting! We need to get rid of Amaram Rikpreet, and do it within 72 hours! DROP EVERYTHING! This is CRITICAL!"

-----------------------

Bill Clinton stared at his foreign policy advisor. "You're sure about this?"

The advisor nodded. "I'm afraid so, Mr. President. Fahd has done a 180 and seems to have been influenced by those loonies in Muslims for Humans."

Clinton shook his head. "First Dilmi's ultimatum and now this. The whole Middle East is starting to go bonkers. Secretary Radner, what are your thoughts?"

Travis Radner looked gravely at him. "I suspect we've got an international organization here, Mr. President. A Briton known as Tom Riddle, widely believed to be a Dark wizard known as Lord Voldemort, was trying to get a Muggle power base to make a bid for the Prime Minister of England. He could be behind it. He had a lot of followers back in the 70's and early 80's. If I were the British Ministry of Magic, I'd investigate Voldemort."

"Does the British Ministry know about Voldemort?"

"Yes, Mr. President. Rest assured, they're looking into things."

"Good. In the meantime, what do you recommend that we do?"

Radner thought about it. "First, I'd start increasing security all around the country. We don't know if al-Qaeda has this superweapon of theirs, but we have to assume that they have such a weapon and are capable of deploying it. Second, we need to send spies into al-Qaeda and Riyadh to figure out what the hell is going on. If they have a shot at assassinating Dilmi and putting a Muggle in charge, they should do it. Al-Qaeda will probably be upset, but a Muggle is a much less dangerous opponent than a wizard."
Clinton jotted down some notes. "Makes sense. Do you think we should warn the Muggles?"

Radner shook his head. "I wouldn't, sir. They'll likely just panic. After all, there isn't much they'd be able to do against a magical opponent. That's our speciality, not theirs."

Clinton nodded. "I agree. I'll tell the Secretary of Defense and the CIA to make the necessary arrangements. You talk to the people in Dana. Now, let's get to some specifics. If they do target us with this weapon, where do you suppose they will attack?"

Radner looked out the window. "I'm not sure, Mr. President. And that's going to be a problem. The size of the weapon and estimate of casualties implies an attack on a city. I'd keep an eye on all the ports and increase security around the Quabbin. We don't want anything getting in there without our knowledge."

Clinton sighed. "That sounds like a good idea, Mr. Radner. I'll issue the necessary orders. However, may I make a suggestion?"

Radner raised his eyebrows. "Yes, Mr. President?"

"If you believe that the Ministry of Magic is a possible target, I'd recommend that we evacuate all high-level Department of Magic personnel -- such as yourself, for instance -- to a secure area until we've dealt with this problem. Would you be willing to stay here for the time being? At least for one week, until Dilmé's deadline expires."

Radner thought. "What you say makes sense, Mr. President. I don't know how they're going to attack the Four Towns with all the water in the way, but it's better to be safe than sorry."

Clinton nodded. "Make it so. Any other suggestions?"

The foreign policy advisor piped up. "Should we freeze gas prices for a while? Any oil embargo is going to cause a panic. Remember what happened in the seventies."

Clinton jotted down the note. "Possibly. Let's see what happens first. In the meantime, we've got ourselves a plan. God help us all if the crap hits the fan. Dismissed."

To be continued...

-------------

Update #144
-------------

May 11, 1996 - 3 DAYS TO SIDDQUI DEADLINE
Spanish House
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Cambridge, Massachusetts
United States of America

-------

Next PoV: 145 -- Igor Romanov
-------

HORCRUXES LEFT: 4 (locket, ring, snake, cup)
-------

Aafia Siddiqui spent as much time in Spanish House as she dared. Her friend was happy to see her, of course. However, she noticed immediately that Siddiqui had something on her mind and insisted
that she help. Siddiqui refused, of course. Everything had to be kept secret, especially an attempt at
an assassination. If a friend found out about what she was doing, the friend would call the cops and
she would be a goner. This would have forced Siddiqui to kill a friend, something she didn't want to
have to do.

She should have realized that killing a fellow student would be so difficult. Some people enjoyed
killing, from what she'd heard. However, these people included people like Adolf Hitler, Vlad
Drakul, and Joseph Stalin. Those people were psychopaths and deserved what they got. She,
however, was not one of those.

She was having second thoughts about going along with this plan. She had to do something,
however. If she chickened out and al-Qaeda found out, she was as much a goner as if the friend had
called the cops. She'd probably be shot in the back by someone under the cover of an Invisibility
Cloak.

She had thought long and hard about how the deed should be done and had decided that she'd go
with a slow-acting poison which caused fatigue, unconsciousness, and finally death. Not only would
that give her time to escape before the victim realized she'd been attacked, but it would provide the
victim a painless death. She didn't want the witch to suffer more than she had to. Allah didn't want
witches to live, but He didn't require that they die in agony.

She had the vial of poison in her pocket. The plan was to get in the victim's bag of toiletries and
spread some of it on the witch's toothbrush. Assuming that the woman brushed her teeth before
going to bed, the effects would take place while she slept and take her out during the night. No one
would suspect her, and it would make it even more certain that the witch would die without
suffering.

The next question, of course, was whether she would take the rest of the poison herself after
committing the deed. She would have to do that or have Dilmi or someone Obliviate her. There were
some memories she refused to live with.

Determined to get this over with as quickly as she could, she took her leave from Spanish House and
headed down the hall towards Russian House. She was caught several times in the main New House
corridor by friends who tried to pull her aside and talk to her. She spoke with each for a few minutes
and continued down the corridor. Finally, she found herself at the eastern end of the building,
between the main entrance and New House 1.

Fervently asking Allah to forgive her for what she was about to do and ensure her victim a place in
Paradise, she headed over to the entrance to Russian House and tried to open the door. Of course, it
was locked. She looked past the door into the living room and saw there was no one there. It
sounded like she would have to resort to the magical lockpick to get into the building.

Curious as to what it would do, she positioned her body so that it blocked the view of the woman
behind the dorm's reception desk and pulled the little knife out of her pocket. She placed it in the
lock. There was a little flash of light, and a lock clicked. Blinking in surprise, she put away the knife
and pushed on the door. It opened easily.

Beyond the door was a large room which looked like it could have been in any dorm. The right half
had a bunch of chairs facing a television set. The left half featured a dining area and an alcove
leading to a kitchen. Opposite the alcove was a dorm room which looked to be larger than the others:
that must belong to the GRT. There was a large mural of a Russian building on a wall, as well as
clock with Cyrillic words for each number. Beyond this main room was a hallway which presumably
led to the various students' dorm rooms.

The first thing she had to do was figure out where this girl's dorm room was. She glimpsed a stairway leading up to a second floor. The stairs extended to the right of the main corridor, above some of the chairs facing the television set. It eventually switched back on itself as it continued on to the second floor.

Trying to avoid asking people for directions unless there was absolutely no alternative, she headed down the corridor looking for the witch's room. The various whiteboards on the students' wall were littered with combinations of Cyrillic and English words, but they didn't help.

Finally, she saw something which would help: a student directory. She picked it up and looked up the witch's name. As she suspected, it listed her phone number and her dorm room. Her heart in her throat, she headed over to that room and positioned herself to listen at the door to check if she was in.

That was when two girls made their way across the staircase and walked in her direction. Both of them were wearing shirts with a sorority's letters on it. The letters matched those of the sorority the witch herself belonged to.

Realizing that people would think she was eavesdropping, she jumped away from the door and continued walking down the hall. She found a bathroom and headed in there, hoping to find an empty stall. Fortunately for her, it was empty. This allowed her to leave the door open a crack to see what was going on.

The two girls stopped in front of the witch's door and knocked. Siddiqui heard someone answer from inside there -- the witch had been there the whole time! Counting her blessings, she continued her observation. The door opened and the witch came out. She followed the girls in the general direction of the main room.

Now was her chance, she thought. She still wanted to inspect the ladies' room, but she could always do that later. Now was the only time she'd get to go into the witch's dorm room. It would be beyond her to keep the toiletries in the dorm room.

The dorm room looked like any other dorm room. She had just started looking around for the toiletries when she heard a shriek from the main room, followed by a thump. One of the girls spoke the witch's name in alarm and asked her what was wrong. Siddiqui froze. She had no idea what was going on. What she did know, however, is that she had to get out of the room immediately in case someone thought the witch was inside. She did so and found herself in the corridor again.

Second's later, someone spoke words which chilled her to the bone. The speaker sounded like the witch, but they seemed to be overlain with some power which reminded Siddiqui of Mohammed or the oracle at Delphi.

"Beware, House of Romanov! You will meet your doom six years after the rising sun arrives with ash!"

Siddiqui's mind raced. What the hell did THAT mean? She had the vague impression that the Romanovs were involved with the Russian Revolution, and that they were dead. There was no House of Romanov anymore!

No one spoke for a good sixty seconds. Finally, one of the girls who had visited the witch spoke her name and asked, "Uh...what was that?"
The witch, oddly enough, seemed to not know what had happened. "What was what?"

"You mentioned something about the Romanovs."

There was a pause, after which the witch said: "I did WHAT?"

"You mentioned something about the House of Romanov being doomed. What's strange was that it sounded like you had become an oracle and were making a prediction."

The witch's voice suddenly sharpened. "I made a prophecy?"

"A what --"

The witch spoke over the girl. "Prophecy! I'm a seer! I occasionally lose control of myself and speak prophecy! It's a talent which wizards sometimes have. What did I say?"

"'Beware, House of Romanov! You will meet your doom six years after the rising sun arrives with ash!'"

There was a pause, after which the witch said: "I have no idea what that means. However, I'm not good at interpreting prophecy. I'll tell the people in I-Entry. Maybe they'll know what it means. However, I'd appreciate it if you keep this to yourselves. People will think I'm crazy otherwise. Being a witch is unusual in itself. Being a seer is doubly unusual, especially for Muggles like yourselves."

The two girls agreed, and the witch took a moment to take control of herself. "All right, you two. What brings you over here?"

The three girls started talking for a minute, and eventually Siddiqui lost track of the conversation. However, that prophecy had shocked her to the core. She didn't realize that these people could see into the future. Dilmi had conveniently forgotten to tell her.

What else had he forgotten to tell her? Something didn't seem right here. She suddenly had third and fourth thoughts about killing off this witch. Siddiqui was as curious as the two girls were as to what the prophecy meant and whether this girl would be able to tell her future. The incident had also reinforced her suspicion that the witch meant no harm to anyone.

She knew one thing for certain: she wasn't going to be able to kill the witch. Not after this. This meant that she needed to seek asylum among the American Wizarding community, especially after the 14th. She considered how she was going to do that.

Perhaps this girl would be her savior instead of her victim.

---------------
Update #145
---------------
May 11, 1996 - 3 DAYS TO SIDDIQUI DEADLINE
Wizarding Royal Palace
St. Petersburg
Russia
---------------
Next PoV: 146 -- Lauren Mistry
HORCRUXES LEFT: 4 (locket, ring, snake, cup)

Lavrenti Romanov nearly fell over when the man Apparated into the palace. Who was the idiot who was supposed to maintain the wards around the palace? The world was going berserk, what with all of the religious strife and chaos in the Middle East. Tsar Alexei had ordered that additional safeguards be put in place. It sounded like someone had been sleeping through His Majesty's talk.

Lavrenti composed himself quickly and aimed his wand at the newcomer. "Who are you? How did you get in here?"

The man reached into his robes and withdrew an official seal. "My name is Travis Radner. I'm the American Secretary of Magic. I was able to pass through your security protocols because I'm the equivalent of a head of state."

Lavrenti lowered his wand. "Diplomatic immunity. Ah. I apologize for my reaction, Secretary Radner. As you've been probably been aware, there have been strange things going on of late. I'm Prince Lavrenti Romanov, Alexei's brother. What brings you to our palace, sir?"

Radner looked troubled. "One of the seers in the United States has uttered a prophecy which we find rather...disturbing. We believe it is important that you hear of it. Is the tsar around?"

Lavrenti nodded. "He is. Come this way, please."

Making sure Radner was following him, Lavrenti led the American through the palace. Their footsteps echoed on the marble floors.

Radner looked around and was taken in by all of the decorations. "Big place, Your Highness. I'm impressed."

Lavrenti shrugged. "Thank you, Secretary. We've spent centuries collecting stuff for it. However, some of our greatest assets are lost forever."

"Indeed? Which assets?"

Lavrenti didn't even bother turning around. "Those which were taken out by the damned Communists, starting with Nicholas II and going on from there. I hate to think what will happen if, as we suspect, Rasputin has come back."

"I heard about that. Let's hope you're wrong, because from what I've been told he's always had a bit of a grudge against you. Unfortunately, this new information seems to support your theory about his return."

Lavrenti didn't like this. "Don't tell me that someone had a vision of Rasputin coming back."

Radner shook his head. "I won't give any details until we speak with the tsar first. He's the head of state, so it would only be appropriate to divulge this information in his presence in case he wants it kept secret."

Both men went silent at that point. It took a good five minutes for the two men to reach Alexei's office. The palace was huge, even by Wizarding standards. Several of the youngest children had taken to flying brooms around the cavernous building, despite the adults' pleas to the contrary.
Svetlana already considered herself good enough to try out for the junior Quidditch teams. Lavrenti, of course, knew the caliber of the people who played on the Russian team and had been trying to beat those crazy ideas out of his niece's head.

Alexei was busy playing chess with Igor. Both men had gotten very good over the years and had been considering participating in international tournaments. Lavrenti figured they had about as much of a shot at beating people like Kasparov as Svetlana had at becoming a Seeker.

Lavrenti bowed to his brother. "Your Majesty, allow me to introduce Secretary Travis Radner of the United States Department of Magic. He has come on a mission which he believes to be of great importance. He claims that a seer in North America has uttered a prophecy which may concern us."

Alexei got up and shook Radner's hand. Behind him, Lavrenti watched in amusement as Igor surreptitiously moved one of the tsar's pawns. "Welcome, Secretary Radner. Congratulations on handling the Super Bowl Breach to this point. I don't think I could have done any better, to be honest. It seems like with the exception of those maniacs in Kansas, the country has gotten accustomed to wizards."

Radner shrugged. "I do what I can, Your Majesty. Only time will tell whether my decisions will prove to have been correct. At any rate, I've come here to warn you about a prophecy a seer in Massachusetts has uttered. Like all prophecies, the interpretation is unclear. However, it sounds like it discusses the Romanovs."

Alexei stared at him. "An American seer issued a prophecy about a Russian noble house? That sounds very odd."

Radner nodded. "It does seem strange, and I freely admit it. However, the seer in question does have Russian ties. She's actually a student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and speaks Russian."

Alexei snorted in disgust. "Some acne-ridden teenager is spouting prophecies about us? I don't think - -"

Radner cut him off. "She isn't a teenager, Your Majesty. She's over 17 and from what I've been told is a brilliant woman. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology is an outstanding school, one of the best schools in the country."

Alexei thought for a moment. "Has she uttered prophecies in the past?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"What were they about?"

Radner shook his head. "The information is classified, Your Majesty. Normally, we don't divulge our prophecies. However, considering the possible implications of this particular one we decided that you ought to know about it. Do you want me to give it to you in private for security's sake?"

Alexei shook his head. "Don't worry about it. Igor and Lavrenti are part of my cabinet. However, I'd prefer it if you'd cast a spell which prevented outsiders from eavesdropping on this."

Radner bowed, cast the spell, and took a deep breath. "Beware, House of Romanov! When the rising sun arrives with ash, you will meet your doom within six years!"
No one spoke for a good two minutes. Finally, Alexei swore. "That's got to be Rasputin. I can't imagine what else it could be. However, I don't see how that's even possible. We agreed not to destroy his Horcrux!"

Radner looked at the tsar, surprised. "You had his Horcrux in your hand and refused to destroy it? Why not, Your Majesty?"

Alexei covered his face with his hands. "We never had it, and we won't destroy it because we're thinking that he's got a death curse levied against us. That would be the best way for him to take all of us out at the same time. The death curse will fire only if we kill him permanently. If we don't kill him permanently, we don't need to worry about the death curse."

Radner looked very puzzled. "But won't he keep on coming back like the British Dark wizard, Lord Voldemort? As long as he can come back, you're in danger."

Alexei grinned and tapped his forehead with his finger. "Oh, I don't think so, Secretary Radner. You see, we destroyed his father's bones in an operation a while back. He may have a Horcrux, but he won't be able to come back without his father's bones as they're needed for the ritual to revive him from the Horcrux. So all we have to do is kill him once and he's out of our lives for good."

Radner chuckled at that. "Very clever, Your Majesty. You can incapacitate him permanently without even having to go out of your way to hunt for the Horcrux. However, this is a prophecy, remember, so you have to consider the possibility that there isn't much you can do about it. I must tell you that the other four prophecies uttered by this particular witch all came true. She has a good track record."

Alexei shook his head. "How on earth are they supposed to invoke his death curse without destroying the Horcrux? The only people who know where it is are likely Rasputin supporters, and it wouldn't make any sense for them to prevent their master from coming back."

Radner's smile vanished. "Perhaps Rasputin will be able to take you guys all out in person before he is killed. Perhaps we've been mistaken the whole time and the prophecy concerns the Muggle Romanovs. It was witnessed by two Muggles, after all."

Alexei's face darkened. "I don't care whether they're wizards or Muggles. I don't want family members dying because of that insane monk. At any rate, let's think about this. For the time being, we must assume that the prophecy concerns us and that it will come true. Secretary Radner, do you have any idea what those words may mean."

Radner shrugged. "House of Romanov, as far as we can tell, could be one of three things: your family, your kingdom of Russia, or -- as a long shot -- Russian House, the dormitory in which the prophecy was spoken. The stuff about the rising sun and the ash sounds like a volcanic eruption of some sort --"

Igor swore and cut in. "Pinatubo. Remember that volcano which erupted in June 1991?"

Alexei swore even more violently. "Igor, I hope you're not saying what I think you're saying."

Lavrenti groaned. "I'm afraid it's possible, Alexei. We could very well have only thirteen months to live. With Rasputin running around, it makes all too much sense."

Radner broke in. "Not necessarily, gentlemen. The prophecy uses the word 'arrives', not 'arrived'.
The choice of words seems to imply that the ash and rising sun takes place in the future. In that case, you have at least six years to prepare."

Alexei frowned. "How confident are you in that interpretation?"

Radner shrugged. "Not particularly. However, it's something to keep in mind."

The tsar sighed. "All right, that's the worst case scenario. Can you think of any other options?"

Radner gritted his teeth. "Yes, but they're worse still. There are actually two other interpretations which were put forth by a few members of our staff. The rising sun is traditionally associated with Japan. You may want to watch out for situations where Russia gets into trouble with Japan. When you have explosions from Japanese weapons throwing ash into the air, you may have to consider the six year countdown as having started. That would affect the entire country, not just the Romanovs. I would argue that's worse. However, the third interpretation could be worse still."

Alexei shook his head. "I hate to think, but tell me."

Radner stared at his shoes. "A rising sun accompanied by large quantities of ash and smoke. I don't know about you, but that sure sounds like a nuclear explosion to me. And Russia has never been good at securing its atomic weapons."

To be continued...
Update #146

------------
May 11, 1996 - 3 DAYS TO SIDIQUI DEADLINE
Mistry Residence
11 Osborne Road
G65 4IN
Kilsyth
Great Britain

------------
Next PoV: 147 -- Ask Fake Name Generator, Hebrew
---
HORCRUXES LEFT: 4 (locket, ring, snake, cup)

Lauren Mistry stared at the hamburger on her plate. She was a vegetarian, yet she had suddenly developed a craving for rare meat. It had taken her several tries for her to put aside her distaste for meat and start on the burgers again. The first time the craving came, it had been easy to dismiss. However, as the days went by, they had gotten stronger and stronger. Eventually, she just gave in just to save her sanity.

She had never felt anything like this before. On the other hand, she had never been mauled by a dog before. Perhaps her body was telling her that it needed meat to help with the healing process.

She had done the obligatory pregnancy check, and it had come out negative. Although not unexpected, it had come as a welcome relief to her and Lucas. There was no way they'd be able to afford starting a family at this stage in their lives. Maybe in three to five years, and that was if they were lucky.

The doctor had poked and prodded her with all sorts of sensitive equipment. They had found nothing particularly unusual other than a few canine compounds in her blood, which presumably were left over from the bite. She had no sign of rabies, which was good. As far as the doctor was tell, nothing was wrong. They recommended that she relax a bit because she was probably experiencing psychological trauma from the attack.

Lauren followed the doctor's orders. However, she was fairly certain that he was mistaken on the psychological trauma. She had two dogs at home, and she suspected that any psychological trauma would cause her to stop liking the dogs. This had not been the case. If anything, the dogs were starting to look up to her more!

She wondered if the dogs knew something the doctors didn't. The dogs seemed to come as soon as she called them, which was new. Although for the most part they were friendly, there had been a few times of late where they had come over to her in a decidedly submissive body position. It was almost as if as they took her as the alpha female in their pack. However, she dismissed that immediately as it made no sense.

After getting a clean bill of health from the doctors, she hurried on off to the ophthalmologist. She
explained that white objects -- especially the moon, which thankfully had receded to third quarter and was out of sight most of the day -- seemed to be brighter than they once were. The eye doctor ran her through a few more tests and discovered nothing particularly unusual. They eventually reached the same conclusion as the nurse had: it was likely stress and shock from the attack. All they suggested was for her to get some sunglasses in case things got too bright.

The bite wounds were healing pretty well. However, it was obvious that she was going to have a mark there for a long time. There were times where she thought that the puncture marks were pulsing, but she dismissed those as being caused by her own pulse.

She turned on the television. As usual, the networks were focusing on the two juiciest news bits over the past few days: the fact that Tom Riddle was in fact an evil wizard, and the fact that al-Qaeda had warned the Western world -- and the United States in particular -- about a possible magical terrorist attack. Rufus Scrimgeour had recently come on TV and explained that magical terror attacks were in fact possible due to the wizards' ability to teleport objects. He believed that Tom Riddle -- sorry, Lord Voldemort -- would not think twice about using such tactics, and he explained that the new head of al-Qaeda, a Sri Lankan whose last name was Dilmi, was in fact a wizard who had once supported Voldemort.

The Alliance for Magic's rise had been extremely rapid, taking virtually everyone by surprise. However, its collapse proved to be faster still. The Alliance had garnered about 8% of the popular vote before the debate between Riddle and Scrimgeour. Within 24 hours, it was down to 1%.

The anchorman reminded the viewers to report anything suspicious to the local authorities. If the viewers had reason to belief that magic was involved, they were to contact the Ministry of Magic immediately. He reiterated Scrimgeour's warning that Muggles should not try to confront a wizard without the help of the Ministry of Magic. First, not all wizards were evil. Second, evil wizards would very likely overpower the Muggle before the Muggle could draw a gun.

The news then switched to the split in the Catholic Church. Celestine VI was continuing his pleas to have the Pope stop listening to Samuel. However, the Pope wouldn't listen. In all fairness, though, the original doctrinal dispute which had started the schism had effectively turned into a referendum on whether wizards should be allowed in the Church. Supposedly Celestine VI had been reluctant to declare himself as antipope precisely for this reason, namely that the movement could be co-opted for other purposes.

Celestines were joining Britain for Humans in droves. Several of them believed that God had chosen them to fight a holy war against the Wizarding community. Despite its first setback in Ottery St. Catchpole, the movement had succeeded in attacking other congregations which had wizards as members.

Three wizards had already been killed in such attacks because they had considered it inappropriate to bring their wands to church. Without wands, they had no defense against bullets other than teleportation -- and teleportation wouldn't work if the wizard were caught off guard.

Although the original founders of Britain for Humans, Vernon and Petunia Dursley, were now in prison, they had left the movement in the hands of a very charismatic woman named Isabel Miller. She was extremely photogenic, not afraid of speaking her mind, and an excellent organizer. The country was rapidly finding out that she was a very dangerous young woman.

The broadcast then switched to more mundane subjects: traffic reports, football scores, and the like. She turned the television off once she saw the weather report for the next day: sunny and in the
upper teens.

She could have watched the various prime time shows after the news. However, she was sick of all the violence on television and preferred to listen to music instead. She and her husband were both was a big fan of the 80's and had lots of tapes from that decade lying around in the house.

It took her a while for to choose a song to listen to. However, she eventually came across a Duran Duran tape and looked at the contents. For some reason, one of the songs just seemed...right, even though she hadn't really been all that fond of that particular song and had bought the tape solely to get her hands on The Chauffeur.

The song in question was Hungry Like the Wolf.

To be continued...

Update #147

May 11, 1996 - 3 DAYS TO SIDIQUI DEADLINE
Congregation Esh Elohim
Tel Aviv
Israel

Next PoV: 148 -- Samuel

HORCRUXES LEFT: 4 (locket, ring, snake, cup)

Rabbi Gideon Cohen had thought his sermon was a good one. He'd spent five days preparing it and had rehearsed it a couple of times in front of the mirror. Maybe this time the congregation would actually pay attention through it and not fall asleep midway through. Well, the time had come to put his work to the test. He bade the crowd be seated as the Torah scrolls were returned to the ark and launched into his speech.

The results were promising...for about two minutes. Then, slowly but surely, he saw the congregants' eyes start to droop and look around the room. Damn, he thought. Not another dud. Still speaking the words as if nothing had happened, he prayed desperately. God, please give me a sign that You want me to keep this job. I want to help these people, but I'm going to need Your help to improve my delivery. If there's anything You can do to help me next week, send me a sign.

A few minutes later, the rabbi received his sign. Unfortunately, it wasn't the sign that he had been looking for. On the contrary, it was the only thing that could have made his day worse.

Gunshots rang out across the sanctuary, and half of the people in the back row crumpled in their chairs. Silhouetted in the doorway was a man wielding what appeared to be an automatic weapon. The attacker was laughing as he held the trigger down and gleefully ran it through the crowd.

Gideon swore and ducked behind the pulpit. He shrieked in horror as a string of bullet holes tore through the wood. One of them hit him in the hand. Pain shot up his arm, forcing him to redouble his cries.

He couldn't see the attacker from this vantage point. All he could see were the far ends of the first two rows. Most of the people had done the right thing, ducking behind the seat backs so that the gunman couldn't see them. He thought he heard the gunman shout something but he couldn't make it
out above the screaming of all the congregants.

How had the man gotten past the guards? Both Reuven and Daniel were trained guards who had served several years beyond the necessary minimum in the IDF. Both men would have been armed with rifles and protected by Kevlar vests. There was no way that they would have gone down without a struggle, and he hadn't heard any gunshots before the man had entered. He briefly considered the possibility of a gun equipped with a silencer, but dropped it immediately as no matter how good a silencer was, it wouldn't drown out the blast completely.

He heard some maniacal laughter from the entrance, followed by someone taunting the congregation in Arabic: "Allahu akhbar! Good Shabbos from Hamas!"

The crowd screamed once more in horror. The gun rang out once more, and people started crying out in pain again. Judging from the views of the front pews, Gideon noticed in amazement that the man seemed to have been aiming at the worshipers' feet, underneath the pews. Shit, he thought. This guy was smart. A smart terrorist. God help us.

He looked up to the ceiling and had to duck out of the way as the Ner Tamid, the symbolic light which was never to be extinguished, darkened, plummeted from the ceiling, and smashed on the floor beside him. Closing his eyes to prevent himself from seeing the desecration, he asked God -- or at least the two guards -- to help preserve himself and the congregation.

Seconds later, he heard a pained shriek from the entrance followed by a thud. The gunfire abruptly stopped, and the room was silent for a few moments. The congregation suddenly started screaming, crying, and talking all at the same time. He heard several people lamenting the attack and others reciting Birchat HaGomel, the blessing designed for situations where the worshiper has just escaped a dangerous situation.

He had to holler at the top of his voice. "Is everyone all right? Is the gunman dead? How many of you are injured?" The crowd responded by saying that 18 people were down and likely dead and at least 21 were injured. Almost forty casualties, he thought. God help us!

Slowly, gritting his teeth and cradling his wounded arm, he got up and looked over the room. Several people were lying down on the floor, jerking around spasmodically. All of them, thankfully, were being cared for. He looked towards the door and saw a pair of feet sticking out from the entry room. The assassin was down, he thought. Good.

He headed out into the crowd to provide whatever assistance he could. He was a rabbi, however, not a doctor. All he would be able to do would be to provide spiritual support in this time of crisis. Although most scientists scoffed at the idea that prayer could heal wounds, the rabbi felt certain that it was only a matter of time until they changed their mind.

Thirty seconds later, another man appeared in the doorway and stopped abruptly when he saw the gunman on the ground. This man, oddly enough, looked Indian. Putting his hand over his mouth, the Indian asked if anyone in the room needed help. Several people raised their hands and started competing with each other to try to impress him with the seriousness of their wounds. The man walked out of the way and started heading over towards one of the wounded.

That was when the gunman suddenly jumped back up and started shooting again.

A bullet went through what was left of Gideon's hair as ten more people went down. The good Samaritan spun and stared at the gunman. Slowly, but surely, he pulled a wand out of his pocket and
pointed it at the gunman. The rabbi ducked down behind the pulpit again and watched the confrontation through one of the bullet holes.

Thank you, God, the rabbi thought. You have sent us a wizard in our time of need. I will revere You forever. He waited for the wizard to cast a spell which would blast the shooter into Gehinnom.

The wizard turned and faced back into the congregation. Slowly, the man smiled and lifted his wand before his face. Then he started uttering strange words and shooting beams of light into the crowd as the gunman continued firing at will.

God help us, Gideon thought. Hamas has a recruited a wizard!

A green beam hit someone in the front pew, and the person toppled. The rabbi suddenly realized that the wizard must have taken out the two guards before the gunman had first opened fire. He doubted Kevlar would have been sufficient protection against magic. At this point, everyone started screaming, including the rabbi. Someone had to do something about this, and fast.

That was when Reuben appeared in the doorway. He looked woozy, as if he'd been hit on the head. The gunman focused on the crowd, didn't see him. It only took him a second to realize what had happened. He drew his gun and aimed at the shooter's chest. He pulled the trigger.

He missed from point-blank range, maybe five feet away. Gideon's eyebrows nearly reached the top of his head. Had he imagined something, or had the bullet curved and GONE AROUND the shooter? All the shot managed to do was distract the shooter, who turned around and pointed his gun at the soldier. However, the rabbi realized that the shooter was too late. Reuben had launched himself into the air in an attempt to tackle the man.

The IDF man slammed into what appeared to be an invisible wall maybe one foot from the gunman's face. Reuben had just enough time to drop his jaw in surprise before the shooter fired at him and blew his head off. He spun just in time to see someone try to run past him out of the room and run into an invisible wall on the shooter's other side, this time keeping the congregants in the room. The woman took a bullet in the head and collapsed.

Gideon nearly threw up. He spun around and looked towards the back of the room, near where the ark rose in majestic glory. There had been a few bullet holes in the woodwork, including several dangerously close to drapes that hid the precious Torah scrolls. He hoped the scrolls hadn't been damaged beyond repair.

He instinctively covered his ears as someone with an Indian accent, presumably the wizard, screamed something at maybe 140 decibels. "Good morning, ladies and gentlemen of Esh Elohim. Your congregation's name means Fire of God. I respect that. You definitely worship a god here, albeit somebody other than Allah. However, is it just me, or are we missing the fire? I think my wand might help here. It will just take a moment."

The taunt was followed by a loud WHOOSH and a blaze of heat. The rabbi stared in disbelief as a tongue of flame launched from the wizard's wand began moving across the far wall, towards the ark. It ignited everything it touched: wood, carpet, books, whatever. Gideon watched as the flame lanced across the ark, focusing for a good second or two on the drapes covering the Torahs. There went the Torahs, the rabbi thought.

Then the tongue of flame suddenly moved in his direction. Yelling, he jumped out from behind the pulpit and tried to get off the stage.
He never made it: the shooter cut him down before he got halfway across. The last thing he saw was
the entire building starting to go up in flames as the screams from the crowd slowly quieted and died.

To be continued...

-------------

Update #148
-------------

May 12, 1996 - 2 DAYS TO SIDDIQUI DEADLINE
Al-Aqsa Mosque
Jerusalem
-------------

Next PoV: 149 -- Jacob Gold
-------------

HORCRUXES LEFT: 4 (locket, ring, snake, cup)
-------------

Samuel stared at the Kohen Gadol in shock. "They did WHAT?"

The imam showed Samuel the newspaper photograph. The prophet wouldn't be able to understand
the Hebrew characters due to the change the shapes of the letters had undergone over the years.
However, the photograph in the center was self-explanatory. "They attacked a synagogue in Tel
Aviv, killing everyone and burning it to the ground. The Israeli government is having an emergency
session today and is trying to think about what to do to Hamas for this."

"Hamas? Who is Hamas?"

"Hamas isn't a who, Holy One. It's a political party active in several of the disputed territories. Many
of their aims are humanitarian and they have done some work improving the lives of their people.
However, others are extremely inappropriate, as you see here. Their ultimate goal is to destroy the
State of Israel and allow the Arabs control of Israeli territory. The militants in this group are willing
to use any means necessary to achieve this goal, including terror attacks like this one. This is the first
one, however, to actually include a wizard on the strike team. A wizard in Hamas is a very bad
development, Holy One."

Samuel swore viciously, and once again the interpreter didn't translate. "The people in the disputed
territories want to no longer be part of Israel?"

"That is correct, Holy One. Many of the people in the disputed territories are angry that the Israelis
occupied their land and see Hamas as potential liberators."

Samuel frowned. "Did Israel actually do so? If so, things get tricky. Saul and David sure seemed to
be the type of people who were big on conquest. Deborah was as well, come to think of it."

"It's unclear, Holy One. I wasn't serving here at the time, and both sides are convinced that their view
is correct. The Israelis claim the territories were occupied in self-defense and the Arabs launched the
attack. The Arabs claim the Israelis started it. The truth, in all fairness, may be irrelevant at this point.
As long as the two factions stick to their beliefs, the fighting will go on."

Samuel stomped his foot on -- and through -- the ground. "These Arabs are Muslims, right?"

"For the most part, yes. There are some Christian Arabs as well."
"Jew, Christian, Muslim, they're all the same. They're all Children of Abraham and they're entitled to be part of the community. However, gratuitous violence is not appropriate for the Children of Abraham, especially against innocent people in a house of worship. I'm going to excommunicate them along with those other groups we were talking about a few hours ago. It's only appropriate, given what happened when that man instigated a fight in the Temple during Passover. If I excommunicate a troublemaker from one sect, I must do so for the others as well."

The Kohen Gadol thought for a moment. Hamas would likely just ignore the excommunication en masse. However, there was another thing he would be able to do. Smiling, he turned to Samuel. "Go ahead, excommunicate them. I don't think it will work, but you might as well try it. However, I've got a special weapon they may have not thought of. They may recognize me because most of the terrorists in the group are Muslims, just like me. And my position in this mosque gives me some authority in the area."

Samuel looked at him in pleasant surprise. "Really? That would be most helpful. What were you thinking?"

The Kohen Gadol grinned. "Ever heard of a fatwa?"

Samuel shook his head. "I'm afraid I haven't."

"This article has the names of the two men involved in the attack. That's all I need to start with. I can also throw in the names of several of the terrorist wing's high officers for good measure. We can't include the entire movement as a whole because there are innocent people supportive of Hamas who are as horrified about this attack as we are. But if we target the leaders we might be able to get something going, especially if I prohibit people who DON'T obey the fatwa to enter this mosque."

Samuel rolled his eyes. "What IS a fatwa, Holiness?"

"You'll see, Holy One. You'll see."

----------------

Damodharan Dilmi looked at the report before him. So, Samuel had excommunicated all members of al-Qaeda, had he? Although Dilmi suspected that several operatives would be horrified by the excommunication, the agents in question had forgotten about one thing.

Samuel hadn't realized that the final prophet, Mohammed, had visited Earth since the ancient Israelite had served his people. From what Dilmi had heard, the last time Samuel had been seen on earth had been shortly after the conquest of Israel by the Romans. Samuel therefore had been supplanted by Mohammed and had no authority in excommunicating people.

Had Mohammed issued the excommunication, then he'd have to worry. Samuel, on the other hand, was so far out of date as to be laughable. Sure, he showed up in the Old Testament. But so did prophets like Jesus and Moses whose ministries were relevant at the time and had much less relevance today.

He set to work on writing a statement which would explain to the members of al-Qaeda that Samuel's excommunication was groundless. That should calm everyone's nerves.

----------------

Celestine VI looked at the letter in horror. "You're sure about this, Father? It isn't a forgery?"

"Yes, Holiness. It appears to be genuine. You've been excommunicated by Samuel."
Celestine thought for a moment. The excommunication was null and void, as far as Celestine himself was concerned. He didn't recognize Samuel's authority, and as a result he didn't need to worry about going to hell if he didn't change his mind. The problem, however, was that the Roman Catholic Church DID recognize Samuel. Samuel's declaration would just take the breach between his church and John Paul's and spread it wide, into a possibly unbridgeable chasm. An excommunication by Samuel would likely have more force, for a Roman Catholic, than an excommunication from the Pope.

He had been reluctant to declare himself as a rival pope for precisely this reason. He hadn't wanted to split the Church and had never ceased imploring John Paul to stop listening to Samuel so that he, Celestine, could step down.

Unfortunately, things had gotten out of hand very quickly. First the split over whether to accept wizards, and now the split over evolution. This decree by Samuel could only mean the end of a unified Catholic Church.

What would he do now?

----------------

The Sheikh suddenly stopped swearing. "You know, Mr. Lestrange, I've got an idea. We need to do something to prevent Samuel from interfering with our work. We can't redeem Palestine if Samuel is backing the Zionists."

Rodolphus Lestrange nodded. "I agree. He's starting to become a pain. Especially with that fatwa. I've heard rumors that several of the operatives are debating turning on the two attackers."

"They are, Mr. Lestrange. Both men are adamant that they were doing Allah's will and don't merit punishment. Unfortunately, it's unclear who the supreme authority is for some of these people. Does the Kohen Gadol map to our Supreme Caliph? Does his decree override everything which people have believed in for all these years?"

"I understand completely, Sheikh. What were you suggesting?"

"I recommend that we take out Samuel's interpreter. If no one knows what in the name of Shaitan he's saying, he's not going to do much good, is he?"

Rodolphus stared at the little box on the floor and laughed. "That's actually clever, Sheikh. However, I don't think that's going to work. From what I've been told, Deborah has her own interpreter. They could just use her."

"In that case, we take her out at the same time."

"That won't work either, Sheikh. There are probably lots of ancient Semitic language professors running around. All they need is for one of them to survive."

"Then what do we do, Mr. Lestrange? Can you do something with magic?"

Rodolphus thought for a moment. Suddenly, the answer came to him. "I believe I can, Sheikh. We don't go after the interpreters. We go after Samuel himself."

There was a shocked gasp on the other end of the line. "You can destroy a ghost?"
"I'm not sure, Sheikh. However, there is a creature called a dementor which can suck out people's souls in a punishment known as the Dementor's Kiss."

The Sheikh got it immediately. "Let me guess. Samuel's body may be gone, but he can still exist as a ghost as long as his soul survives in some form. If you knock out his soul, you wind up with an inanimate, zombie-like body. And if the victim in question has no body --"

Rodolphus finished his statement. "Ta-da. Ghost is destroyed."

"Impressive. Can it be done?"

Rodolphus shook his head. "I don't know, Sheikh. I'll have to look into it. However, getting Samuel out of the picture for good will help a lot. The question is how the rest of the world will react to it."

"In that case, I recommend that we convince someone in Muslims for Humans to do it. They're already anti-wizard and would be the most likely candidates to assassinate Samuel."

"But they'll attack any wizard in their midst!"

"Will they attack a dementor? I've never heard of a dementor before, so I doubt we Muggles can even see them. This dementor can sneak in and eliminate Samuel. If it fails in its mission, we start spreading rumors Muslims for Wizards sent it to destroy Samuel because Samuel is a wizard. If it succeeds, we wait for the world to react. If the world likes it that Samuel is gone, we take the credit. If the world complains, we frame Muslims for Humans. We have nothing to lose, Mr. Lestrange."

Rodolphus chuckled. Voldemort had told him that Dilmi was using the same type of tactic for his upcoming attack on the American Department of Magic: if it succeeds and there aren't major aftershocks, take credit; if it fails or the world denounces the attackers, blame America for Humans. "I like that!"

To be continued...

-------------
Update #149
-------------
Sunday, May 12, 1996 - 2 DAYS TO SIDDIQUI DEADLINE
SAS Headquarters
[location classified]
England
-------------
Next PoV: 150 -- Stephen Pitmoss
-------------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 4 (locket, ring, snake, cup)
-------------
Jacob Gold arrived at the meeting a good five minutes early and found that the chairs had already filled up completely. Standing room only for a status briefing. However, judging from the rumors which had been going around the department, this wasn't an ordinary status briefing. This was going to be an announcement of a mission which, Jacob thought, had been overdue for a long time. The only question was: who was the target?

Most of the people in the room were ordinary SAS agents he had trained with. However, he saw a few people in Wizarding robes. It appeared that the SAS had recruited some more Aurors over the past few weeks; Dawlish was no longer alone.
In a span of less than a week, the world had changed. Dark wizards had infiltrated terrorist organizations and had strengthened them greatly. Al-Qaeda had fallen to someone named Damodharan Dilmi, a man who supposedly had once been a protege of Voldemort. Dilmi had bluntly told everyone that he was a wizard and that he was planning to target a location in the Western world with a terrorist attack capable of killing thousands of people unless the United States accepted some ridiculous demands.

Jacob doubted it was a nuke. First, a nuke in a populated area would kill MORE than thousands of people. Second, as far as he knew, al-Qaeda did not possess nuclear weapons. The big question was whether Dilmi or another wizard associated with al-Qaeda would be able to MacGyver one of them from scratch. He'd find out soon, he thought.

As if that had not been bad enough, less than twenty-four hours ago a team of two Hamas members, including a wizard, had attacked a synagogue in Tel Aviv and killed virtually everyone in the sanctuary. The casualty totals were still coming in, but from what the authorities had deduced the synagogue had a membership of 1025 families. Assuming four people per family, there could have been over four thousand people in that room.

Four thousand casualties in one attack would be something an order of magnitude beyond anything a terrorist had accomplished before. Granted, if the synagogue was at all like his own most of the members only came to services on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. An ordinary Shabbat would likely have drawn maybe 10-20% of the members. Nevertheless, ten percent would have been 400 people. The deaths of four hundred people would be a disaster of -- he winced at the pun -- biblical proportions for the small country. It would likely be the equivalent of 10,000 people being killed in one shot somewhere in the United States. As if that had not been bad enough, the killers had managed to escape unharmed!

It was fairly obvious that the SAS would be part of a multinational coalition to take out SOMEBODY. The only question was whether it would be Hamas or al-Qaeda. He had his bets on al-Qaeda. For one thing, al-Qaeda was a more global threat than Hamas, which tended to focus on Israel. For another, the reports he had read on the synagogue attack seemed to indicate that the wizard had appeared Indian. That was an interesting coincidence considering that Dilmi was Indian.

Could Dilmi be in charge of both al-Qaeda AND Hamas? He sure hoped not. However, if he was, that would make him an even more clear and present danger -- if not just to Britain, than to the world.

He had spoken to John Dawlish, the Auror, about Dilmi. Dawlish didn't like what he was seeing at all. Voldemort comes back unexpectedly, is killed off, and returns. Death Eaters start popping up all over the world in various insurgency movements just as the Dark Lord makes a bid for the Prime Minister's office. Dawlish told Jacob the country should have considered itself fortunate that Dialonis and Scrimgeour had forced the Tom Riddle to admit his true identity. Had they not done so, the evil wizard could have very easily Imperiused the Prime Minister and taken control of the government.

Dawlish reported that scenario was eerily similar to the last time Voldemort had come to power, back in the late seventies. There was one major difference this time, however. Now that the Statute of Secrecy was gone, Voldemort considered the Muggles fair game. What would have been a bid for national recognition in Wizarding Britain had suddenly transformed itself into a bid for world domination. The Death Eaters were extremely well organized, and Dawlish had to concede that the man known as Tom Riddle was an absolute genius.
The Auror gave Voldemort a good 10-15% chance of controlling the world. The biggest obstacle Dawlish foresaw was Anastasios Dialonis, the Grand Mugwump. Dialonis was EXTREMELY powerful and could throw the entire Wizarding world against Voldemort if he so chose. For the time being, Dialonis had insisted on neutrality in what appeared to be a regional dispute. Dawlish suspected, however, that it was only a matter of time until the Grand Mugwump decided to intervene. The fact that he had come in personally to mediate the Riddle/Scrimgeour debate was a telltale sign that somebody on Atlantis was starting to pay more attention to Voldemort.

The agents all stiffened to attention as four men walked into the room. He recognized two of them: Rufus Scrimgeour and the head of the SAS. All he could tell about the other two was that they were wizards.

The head of the SAS returned their salute and began the briefing. "Good evening, gentlemen. Thank you for coming on such short notice. You recognize me, of course, as I'm in charge of the SAS. The man to my left is Rufus Scrimgeour, Minister of Magic. To my right is Professor Severus Snape, a defector from Voldemort's side to ours. Next to him is Wizard Dr. Travis Radner, the American Secretary of Magic. He holds a position similar to Scrimgeour's in the American government. We regret to report that the man you know as Agent Sabra, the man from the Mossad, had originally planned to assist us as well. Unfortunately, events have transpired which required that he alter his plans."

The SAS man pulled down a movie screen from the ceiling as he spoke. "What I am about to tell you is top secret. You are not to tell anyone about this, even other SAS agents. We have no idea if Dilmi or Voldemort have spies in our organization. I have chosen you because you enlisted before Voldemort's return or have participated in operations against Voldemort in the past. You are the only men we can trust at this point."

The speaker pushed a button and an image of an Indian man flashed onto the screen. "This man is Wizard Damodharan Dilmi. He is a protege of Voldemort who escaped from the Wizarding prison of Azkaban summer. He spent a year on the Indian subcontinent recruiting wizards to Voldemort's banner. These new recruits have been more than enough to resupply the Dark Lord with followers, even after Operation Flying House. You can rest assured that whenever you see an Indian wizard attacking Muggles, it's probably one of Dilmi's men."

"As you know, Osama bin Laden was once head of al-Qaeda. An ally who will remain nameless was alerted by bin Laden's request for jihadist wizards and sent a Wizarding agent into al-Qaeda to assassinate bin Laden. The mission succeeded, and the terrorist mastermind was killed. Unfortunately, the mission was launched too late, as Dilmi had already wormed his way into al-Qaeda by the time bin Laden was killed. Dilmi promptly blew away the killer and took control of al-Qaeda. He's been in charge of the group ever since.

"Your mission is simple: infiltrate al-Qaeda and achieve the following objectives. Your first priority is to kill Dilmi and confiscate his weapon of mass destruction. Once that is done, you are to go after the remaining members of the Council of Nine, a group of nine wizards which is effectively in charge of al-Qaeda. Once they are out of the way, the wizards among you are to take control of al-Qaeda and dismantle the organization from the top down. If this mission is successful, we will never have to worry about al-Qaeda again. Furthermore, Dilmi will no longer be able to recruit allies for Voldemort, freeing us up to destroy Voldemort himself.

"You may wonder why we are not attacking Voldemort first. The reason we have chosen to attack Dilmi first is that Dilmi has already warned us he's about to launch an attack. We have no idea if he is capable of actually launching a weapon which can kill thousands, but we have to assume he can."
Wizards Snape and Scrimgeour here are convinced that he is capable of performing such an act.
Killing Voldemort could very well cause Dilmi to launch his weapon against us, partially for revenge
and partially because he may see himself backed into a corner with the SAS on his tail.

"The SAS will not be alone in this mission. We will be assisted by wizards from India, the United
States, and France. Israel would have joined us as well except that they have had to change their
priorities after the attack in Tel Aviv.

"At the conclusion of this meeting, you will each be assigned a wizard. This wizard will Apparate
you -- we call it teleportation -- to your assigned location in the al-Qaeda base camp. If everything
goes as planned, all of us will be deployed within a span of 10-15 minutes. The wizards will be
distributing a few Invisibility Cloaks to team members. Unfortunately, there will not be enough
Invisibility Cloaks to go around. The people who do not get Invisibility Cloaks will be protected by
the Disillusionment Charm, a spell which renders the subject invisible to all human beings. Be
forewarned, however, that electronic equipment such as video cameras and motion detectors will be
able to detect people who have been Disillusioned.

"You will receive individual briefings and mission profiles from this wizard. The wizard will do
everything he can to protect you during the mission from magical threats. This will leave you guys
open to do what you do best, deal with Muggle problems just like you have been trained. Stay close
to your wizard whenever possible, and don't take action against a wizard without his explicit
permission.

"That is all, my friends. Good luck, and Godspeed."

To be continued...

-------------
Update #150
-------------
Sunday, May 12, 1996 - 2 DAYS TO SIDDQUI DEADLINE
Church of the Right Wing
Westboro, Kansas
United States of America
-------------
Next PoV: 151 -- King Fahd
-------------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 4 (locket, ring, snake, cup)
-------------
"I TOLD YOU SO!"

Stephen Pitmoss gestured sharply towards the congregation. "You heard me three weeks ago, ladies
and gentlemen! I told you then that Tom Riddle was the Antichrist and that he had sent wizards
around the world to bring about the Tribulation. Those of you who believed me then are almost
assured of a place among the elect. Judging from the people in the pews today, I thank the elect for
spreading my warning and preparing the world for what is to come!"

He had thought the church had been packed three weeks earlier when he had first claimed
Voldemort had been the Antichrist. It looked like an absolute ghost town, however, compared to the
group he was addressing now. He had been forced to send some people down into the two small
chapels on the lower level, where he had installed televisions which would broadcast the service on
closed-circuit cameras.
Television cameras had sprouted all along the back wall, just as they had done three weeks earlier. This time, however, they were accompanied by a whole second set of them hanging from the ceiling and the balconies. Camera flashes were going off everywhere, and a computer-savvy parishioner had brought out a video camera so he could record images to broadcast to the Internet. There were at least three thousand people in the sanctuary, 1000 in the auditorium, a couple of hundred in each of the chapels, and a good 5000 or so on the lawn behind the church, where another television had been set up. Church administrators had expected 4000, and were stunned when 5000 showed up...in the rain.

The Minister brought out a copy of a newspaper. "London Daily Mail, this past Thursday. 'Political Candidate Tom Riddle Exposed as Lord Voldemort, an Evil Wizard. Grand Mugwump Anastasios Dialonis, Prime Minister Major, and Rufus Scrimgeour Concoct Scheme to Force Riddle to Reveal True Identity."

He threw it away and showed the crowd a copy of the New York Times. "Page 6, New York Times, Thursday morning. 'British Politician Revealed to be Evil Wizard, Political Party in Disarray'. He switched to another paper. 'Here's an Irish one, same day. 'Head Warlock Proves Tom Riddle is Voldemort'.

"There we have it. The Antichrist is trying to consolidate a power base among us, just as he was expected to do in Revelation. He's posing as a friend of the people, just like Revelation predicts. He was dismissed once, just as Revelation predicts. Looking forward into the future, don't be surprised if he winds up in a position of authority once again. He'll probably take over England, since that's where he's from. However, I wouldn't be shocked if he wound up in charge of another country, the UN, or a major corporation. If so, weep for the world, for he has become the avatar of Satan. The Indwelling has taken place."

He threw the paper to the ground and reached for another pile on his podium. "Antichrist Voldemort may have been thwarted for now. However, his minions have certainly been busy. How else do you explain the following headlines? This is from the London Times, a week ago today."

He unfolded the first paper so that the crowd could see the headline. "'Rabid Dog Attacks Patrons at Wembley Stadium. Bites 28 Fans, Killing One, Before Being Shot to Death by Authorities. Animal Believed to have been Teleported in by Evil Wizard, Possibly Voldemort.'"

He threw the newspaper into the crowd. "Satan is called the Beast, is he not? Not only does he look like a beast, but he is summoning beasts of his own to attack innocent Christians! Can you imagine anything more frightening than a rabid dog rampaging through a crowded stadium where no one can escape?"

The crowd muttered to itself, and Pitmoss looked around the room. The people definitely looked scared, or at least concerned.

He wasn't done yet, however. "The rabid dog isn't the only beast who's getting involved here, people. The Nephilim have come back as well, in full force. You remember the Nephilim, don't you? They're the Fallen Ones mentioned in the book of Genesis. They're usually seen as giants. I don't suppose that we've heard stories of people being attacked giants of late? Oh wait, we have!"

He showed the congregation the next newspaper. "This paper is the May 8th edition of the Baltimore Sun. That was this past Wednesday. 'Sixteen-Foot-Tall Giant Rampages Through Washington, Grasping Helpless Victim with its Hand and Scattering People in All Directions. Creature Subdued by Animal Control Specialists Near National Zoo. Miraculously, No Injuries.'"
Pitmoss shuddered. "As if that weren't bad enough, supposedly this giant's BROTHER works at the National Zoo, in the magical creatures exhibit! Convenient, is it not? This brother can masquerade as part of the exhibit! People say he's civilized, but how much would you be willing to bet that it's just an act and this overgrown zookeeper is going to attack us? Do you realize that he's only a few subway stops from the White House?

"How about this one, from the English translation of today's Jerusalem Post? 'National Day of Infamy: Hamas Sends Wizard and Gunman into Congregation Esh Elohim in Tel Aviv, Killing 472 People and Wounding 64. Building is Burned to the Ground as Killers Escape Unharmed. Mayor of Tel Aviv Vows Revenge, as does the Prime Minister and Minister of Magic Michal Oved.'"

Pitmoss shook the newspaper in the air. "You heard that right, folks. The terrorist group Hamas has been infiltrated by wizards. Although our hearts go out to the families of the poor civilians killed and wounded in the attack, you must realize that this is just the tip of the iceberg. You can see here that Voldemort is positioning his minions all over the world so they will be in positions to strike when the time comes. The fact that he's infiltrated terrorist groups means that he knows who is most likely to provide the biggest bang for his buck, so to speak. For all we know, he's infiltrated some of our militias over here!"

He shook his head in disbelief. "I can understand why Israel's Minister of Magic would like to plot revenge. The problem is, of course, that we don't know WHOM she's going to take her revenge on. Is she going to take revenge on Hamas, as she says? Or is she going to take revenge on the rest of us, arguing that she is helping Lucifer avenge his fall from grace?"

The congregants began talking to each other again in low voices. Pitmoss could tell he had hit home here. He'd been having extremely effective speeches of late, and he thanked God for allowing his oratorial skills to peak at the right moment. His eyes widened, however, when he realized that there was a more likely explanation for his new skills: God was speaking through him directly or had improved his speech ability, just like He had done for Moses! It would make sense, Pitmoss thought. It made a hell of a lot of sense. And it made him worry even more about the future of the planet.

He'd told the congregation what they needed to know and had probably scared them half to death. It was time to tell them the good news so they would leave on a happy note.

"My friends, I can understand that you may be concerned about our future. We live in the End Times, after all. However, that doesn't mean that we can't fight back. God has chosen several unlikely people to be heroes over history: Esther, Peter, Moses, and so forth. Could it be that He has chosen some of YOU as well?"

The crowd gasped in unison. Slowly, the fear drained from their faces and was replaced with awe and pride.

"If He has chosen you, as I would expect for members of the elect, you have a responsibility to bring His battle to the enemy. I can understand that this burden may be difficult for you. I have therefore taken upon myself the responsibility to strike the first blow against the forces of darkness."

He lifted his hands to the heavens as his speech reach its conclusion. "As most of you are aware, I am on the planning committee for the group America for Humans, a resistance group whose sole purpose is to eliminate wizards from our country. Originally we had planned to call ourselves America for Muggles, but God inspired us to change the name to America for Humans. Now we realize why He did so: most of the enemies we will be facing will not, in fact, be human.
"It is my duty and honor to inform you that an operation is underway which should cripple, if not destroy, much of the Wizarding infrastructure infesting our country. I cannot say when this operation will occur and what form it will take. However, rest assured that before this week is out, the forces of darkness will be trembling in their hooves at the power and innovation of the army of the faithful!

"God Almighty, may You bless this operation and ensure that it succeeds. And let us all say, Amen!"

The resulting "Amen" nearly deafened Pitmoss. Solemnly dipping his head to acknowledge the crowd, he turned back to the prayer book for the second half of the service.

To be continued...
Update #151 through Update #155

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Misagnissa

Update #151

----------

Monday, May 13, 1996 - 1 DAY TO SIDDQUI DEADLINE
Main Audience Chamber
Royal Palace
Riyadh
Saudi Arabia

----------

Next PoV: 152 -- Jacob Gold
----------

HORCRUXES LEFT: 4 (locket, ring, snake, cup)

----------

King Fahd had started to resign himself to the fact that he would never be able to break free of Wizard Rikpreet's domination. No matter what he tried to do, the damned Hindu blocked it. He tried writing a letter of abdication. Not only did it not work, but Rikpreet informed him that he'd be able to take control of his son just as easily. He tried issuing an order banishing Rikpreet from his cabinet but the words never left his mouth. He tried to summon Minister Dagher only to be overridden at the last moment.

He realized he'd have to get creative to get himself out of this predicament. So, he decided to see if he could separate himself from the wizard on the off chance that distance made the spell harder to maintain. He issued a proclamation saying that Rikpreet would be entitled to a two-week sabbatical every other month to thank him for his help as member of the king's cabinet. The wizard hadn't fallen for it, however. Rikpreet graciously acknowledged that helping the kingdom thrive was hard work, but he felt that it would behoove him to stay around the king whenever possible to provide support.

Right now, the wizard was in the throne room, watching as Fahd was speaking with an emissary from Lebanon. The king was fairly certain that this emissary was involved with Hezbollah, but there wasn't much he could do about it. As far as Fahd could tell, he was just operating as the spokesman for Rikpreet, promising the emissary support which Fahd wouldn't have given a member of Hezbollah on a bet.

Fahd watched as a servant entered the room and poured some fruit juice for everyone. He suspected that this man was another wizard who had insinuated himself into the palace. He doubted that Rikpreet would have been stupid enough to not bring backup for a mission as critical as this one, and a position as servant or butler would be clever alibi for one of his supporters. It would ensure that he would always be within earshot of the king in case Rikpreet was exposed.

For a moment, he wondered if the fruit juice was poisoned. He dismissed that immediately, however. He suspected that Rikpreet would have checked for poison before allowing it to be served. Furthermore, killing Fahd wouldn't do much good for either side. The kingdom would likely destabilize momentarily if a loyal Saudi assassinated the king, and that would give the wizard a chance to take control. The wizard, on the other hand, had no reason to kill the king because Rikpreet had already completely subdued him. Perhaps the wizard would have a more difficult time controlling Fahd's successor.
The fruit juice tasted a little spicier than usual, and the king wondered what the servant had put in it. He had just ruled out thyme and rosemary when he heard a rustle in the seat next to him. Frowning, he turned to Rikpreet and was astonished to find that the man's eyes had gone wide. He uttered a strange word.

"Veritaserum!"

The king scratched his beard. What did that mean? Was it a spice he'd never heard of before? He was about to ask Rikpreet what it was when he saw the wizard pull out his wand and point it at him. Fahd braced himself for another application of the Imperius Curse.

Then all hell broke loose.

The wizard began to shout something. However, he was interrupted by a loud "Expelliarmus". He whirled to locate the source of the sound and saw that there wasn't anything there! He was about to ask the wizard what had happened when he saw Rikpreet's wand flying through the air. The wand clattered to the tiles next to his throne, and he astutely kicked it far away from the wizard. As soon as his foot touched the wand, he felt a jolt of electricity race up his leg. He swore violently. Was the wizard able to control the wand without touching it?

There was a sudden burst of movement in the general area where the king had heard the word "Expelliarmus". Half a second later, he heard Rikpreet shout something in Hindi which appeared to be an expletive. The wizard closed his eyes for a moment and then suddenly opened them wide as his jaw dropped. This was accompanied by Minister Dagher's voice. Whirling, he saw that the Minister had entered the room, his face red with fury.

"No, Wizard Rikpreet. You aren't Apparating out of here!"

Dagher took advantage of the Indian's confusion by pointing his wand at Fahd and shouting, "Finite Incantatem". There was a burst of color in front of Fahd's eyes. When it had cleared, the king found that Rikpreet's control over his mind had completely vanished. He came to his feet, staring daggers at Rikpreet.

That was when the Hezbollah man suddenly dived for Rikpreet's wand. Fahd was astonished when the servant who had brought the fruit juice in the first place suddenly dropped the serving tray and pulled out a wand. He pointed it at the Lebanese and shouted, "Petrificus Totalus". The Hezbollah representative suddenly stiffened and fell right on top of the wand. There was a hideous electric sizzle, and the stench of overcooked meat suddenly permeated the room.

Fahd had to force himself not to retch. Making a sign to ward off evil, Fahd flinched back from the body as multiple flashes suddenly burst into the room. Facing the back of the room again, the king found that no fewer than seven other wizards had teleported into the throne room. All of them had wands pointing right at Rikpreet. One of them had a huge sword in his other hand. Red beams suddenly burst out of three of their wands, hitting Rikpreet in the chest. The man toppled over like a felled tree.

Dagher hurried to the throne. "Your Majesty! Are you all right?"

Fahd breathed a huge sigh of relief. "Yes, Minister Dagher. I think he --"

Dagher never let him finish the sentence. "Did he take control of your mind and force you to do things you didn't want to?"
Fahd stared at him. "Yes, Minister. He did. I take it you've countered his spell?"

Dagher nodded. "We have, Your Majesty, and he's not going to be able to cast any more for the time being given the fact that his wand is lying underneath a dead body and that's he's very badly stunned."

"What did he do?"

"We think he subjected you to a forbidden spell known as the Imperius Curse. Does the expression 'Imperio' sound familiar, Your Majesty?"

Fahd nodded violently. "Yes, Minister. It does. Whenever he said that word, he was able to reinforce his control over me."

Dagher's eyes hardened as he glanced at Rikpreet. The Hindu was lying on the ground, barely conscious, with six wands pointing at his face. Turning back to the king, Dagher continued. "I thought so. At any rate, here's what's going to happen. We're going to interrogate him. We've doped that fruit juice with Veritaserum, a magical truth serum which will force him to speak the truth. Once we've gotten all the information we need from him, the Deputy Minister here with the sword is going to cut his head off."

Fahd scowled at the fallen wizard. "Can I do it?"

Dagher shook his head. "I don't think you're physically strong enough to do the job, Your Majesty. You are, forgive me, getting old."

The king grunted. "Yes, Haydar, I'm getting old. And thanks to you, I'll actually be able to get older. Is it all right if I stayed around for the interrogation?"

Dagher nodded. "It's all right with me. You may hear magical terms you don't understand, which I'll explain later on. Now, if you would excuse me, I've got to question this infidel."

The Minister then walked over to Rikpreet. "All right, that's probably long enough. What's your name, and who sent you?"

Rikpreet's voice seemed unusually hollow. "My name is Amaram Rikpreet. I work for the British Ministry of Magic along with Lucius Malfoy."

The wizards began muttering among themselves as Fahd's eyebrows shot up. Turning to Rikpreet, he roared: "And why would the British want to control my kingdom?"

Rikpreet smiled. "It's not the British, Your Majesty. The position in the Ministry is just a cover story. Lucius Malfoy and I are really working for the Death Eaters. We revere Lord Voldemort. If everything goes as planned, the Dark Lord will return once again and find himself in charge of the entire world."

Fahd listened for the next ten minutes in mounting horror as Rikpreet explained what he had done. Eventually, the man ran out of information. Dagher nodded and motioned to the man with the sword. Glancing at the king for permission, the wizard raised the sword over the Death Eater's head and neatly separated it from his shoulders.
The wizards then began cleaning up the mess as Fahd started crafting letters which, he hoped, would undo a lot of the decrees he had issued while under the Imperius Curse.

To be continued...

Update #152
------------
Monday, May 13, 1996 - 1 DAY TO SIDDQUI DEADLINE
SAS Headquarters
[location classified]
Great Britain
------------
Next PoV: 153 -- Patrick Dursley-Burgess/Rebecca Nurse

HORCRUXES LEFT: 4 (locket, ring, snake, cup)

Jacob had watched the man in front of him disappear. It was most unnerving. First the guy was standing front of him, talking with Dawlish. He had no idea where the man was being sent, and to be honest he probably didn't need to know. The next thing he knew, both Burke and the wizard were gone. He just hoped that the agent was being transported safely and would come back in one piece at the end of this mission.

There was another pop, and Dawlish materialized right in front of him. The Auror put his hand on Jacob's shoulder. "Well, Agent Gold. Are you ready for another mission?"

Jacob nodded. "You bet, sir."

"Do you understand your instructions? You have your pack the Invisibility Cloak on you?"

"I do, sir."

"All right then, put it on and I'll send you over there. Grab on to my hand and don't let go until I tell you. And brace yourself -- it's going to be moderately unpleasant."

Jacob grabbed onto the wizard's arm, and Dawlish closed his eyes. Less than a second later, he abruptly found himself pulled off his feet by a force which felt like a hook around his navel. He felt like he was suffocating for a few moments but maintained an iron grip on the wizard's arm.

After what seemed like forever, there was a blaze of golden light and he found himself lying face down in a large patch of sand. Remembering his instructions, he threw his Invisibility Cloak over his head and surveyed the area.

He was stationed outside something which appeared to be a makeshift army base. There were rope bridges, pieces of exercise equipment, and a boxing ring in view. Masked men were walking around the building on patrol. As far as he could tell, they were all ordinary soldiers. If there were wizards around, they were either inside or disguised as normal people.

Making sure that he was completely covered by the Invisibility Cloak, he set up his gun and pointed at the building. He longed to take out some of the men to help some of his comrades, but he desisted as all that would do would ruin the surprise. He really wanted to see how the bad guys would react to THIS.
A good half an hour went by as the rest of the men were deployed. He had been concerned that the al-Qaeda men would see what they were and investigate, but Dawlish had reassured him that that wouldn't happen. He, as well as all of the soldiers, had been enchanted with Repello Muggletum spells which would cause Muggles to either ignore him or walk away. This, of course, made him blind to friendly forces as well as to hostile ones. The wizards had taken that into consideration by giving each man a walkie-talkie encoded with a state-of-the-art American encryption system that al-Qaeda had no chance of breaking. A wizard might be able to do it, but Jacob doubted the wizards even knew what a walkie-talkie was.

It was hot, probably over thirty degrees. All the Invisibility Cloak was managing to do was keep the blazing heat of the sand from escaping his little foxhole. He figured it was probably forty in the foxhole despite the shade.

He took a look at his watch. It was only a matter of time now. Five, four, three, two, one...

There was a flash of light followed by a large boom. Being careful not to move the cloak, he looked off to his right at the tank which had just materialized out of nowhere and was hovering in midair. The wizards had been reluctant to enchant the tanks with levitation spells, claiming that it would warn the terrorists that the attackers had at least one wizard in on the raid. However, Uncle Nigel had been adamant. Tanks may be strong, but they really didn't like hitting mines strong enough to knock off treads. A stationary target would soon be a dead target if the enemy could see it. The tanks, of course, were a diversion. They were supposed to distract the al-Qaeda forces long enough for the SAS men, the Navy SEALs, and other infantry forces to take out everyone they could see and then advance on the building. If the infantry had problems securing the building, the tanks could always be called upon to finish the job. Jacob had been told, along with the rest of the infantry, that their lives were considered expendable in situations where the tanks had to fire on the building.

The guards froze when they saw the huge machine appear out of nowhere. The tank's gun fired and blew away three guards near the main entrance with one shot. Alarms rang throughout the facility as enemy soldiers raced to their posts. Jacob cut a few of them down, including one with a handheld bazooka. He was fairly certain that the tank's armor would be able to withstand such a weapon, but he didn't want to find out. His eyes widened as the bazooka suddenly hurtled into the air and flew over his head, in the general direction of one of the other Aurors' forces. He suspected that one the Aurors had just brought out a wand and uttered the words Accio Bazooka.

There was another explosion on the other side of the base. It appeared that the other tank had been transported safely and had started attacking the camp as well. So far, so good.

Unfortunately, Jacob could tell that the initial shock of seeing flying tanks was starting to wear off. Enemy units were starting to dig in, and he saw what appeared to be the muzzle of an antitank weapon suddenly stuck out of the side of the building. The weapon fired and hit the tank squarely in the turret. The blast flipped the huge vehicle on its back, leaving its treads flailing in midair. Jacob bit his lip -- that gun must have had its power magically enhanced -- and reached for his walkie-talkie to warn the crew of the other tank. However, he dropped the radio when he suddenly saw the stricken tank rise into the air, flip over, and land back on its treads.

Jacob grinned -- those wizards really had things covered. However, something didn't look right. The tank was just sitting there, not firing. It suddenly dawned on him that the men in the tank may have been injured or killed when the vehicle overturned. That would explain its being out of action. But if that were the case, why weren't the terrorists trying to finish it off? They couldn't assume that the men inside were dead.
Realizing that the tank was out of commission, he turned back to the base and started taking out more men. By this time, however, the enemy had figured out roughly where the shots had been coming from. Jacob's eyes widened as he saw two guns suddenly point in his direction. Bullets spat, and Jacob ducked. When he came back up, he noticed with alarm that there were two men coming in his direction. Reaching for his gun, he blew them to bits. However, his cover was blown, and he knew it.

Then two things happened which were just NOT fair. First, he barely heard someone bark a command from inside the compound. The al-Qaeda agents reached into their backpacks and put on gas masks. Seconds later, a huge cloud of yellow-green appeared out of nowhere and blanketed the area. Jacob started coughing and had to release his gun to put on his mask. No sooner had he released the gun than the gun suddenly jumped out of his hands, heading towards someone in the compound.

To make matters worse, the disabled tank suddenly roared back into action -- this time for the other side. Jacob suddenly realized what had happened: the men in the tank had been knocked out or stunned by the flip and were not in a position to put on their masks. The gas finished them off for good. Then, under the cover the gas and with magic at their beck and call, enemy agents had commandeered the tank. The enemy agents must have also had Repello Muggletum cast on them -- he had been forced to look away at about the time they have emerged from the base and headed towards the tank.

Jacob heard the bazooka fire from somewhere behind him. It hit the stolen tank just as it fired on the second tank. There was a huge explosion as the second tank blew up. The first tank started rumbling towards Jacob's position when it suddenly launched itself into the air as if it had been thrown by a catapult. It was now fairly obvious that both tanks were out of commission.

There was only one thing to do now: charge. He hoped that enough people had managed to sneak in during the tank battle to distract the enemy so that he could enter safely.

Pocketing the Invisibility Cloak -- the Cloak had only been necessary during the first stage of the operation in order to hide the splashes of sand which were released when they Apparated in, and it made no sense to try running in it because it wouldn't cover him completely and take up a hand -- he fitted his mask on his head and started heading towards the base. However, it wasn't easy. He couldn't make good headway in the sand, and he couldn't see well with the gas mask on. As if that hadn't been bad enough, there was an explosion underneath one of the men leading the charge. Wonderful, Jacob thought. Mines.

He was wondering how he was going to deal with the mines when all of the friendly infantrymen suddenly shrieked in confusion as they were lifted into the air. Jacob's eyes goggled as he saw the sand about ten feet beneath his feet. That would avoid the mines to some extent, but it didn't help his fear of heights much!

The men in the base immediately trained their guns on the floating soldiers. Jacob saw one of them point his machine gun at him and pull the trigger. The bullets crashed into whatever platform was holding up Jacob's feet and bounced off. Jacob grinned, asked one of his colleagues to hand over a gun the man had picked up off a body, and blew the terrorist's head off.

It was only a matter of time, however, before the enemy wizards figured out how to deal with his floating platform and dump Jacob and his friends back in the minefield. They all started racing towards the safety of the roof of the building.
Jacob's eyes widened as he saw an Indian man in a robe climb onto the roof. The man pointed his wand at O'Neal and shot a green beam at him. O'Neal went down soundlessly. Furious, Jacob fired at the wizard and hastily threw the Invisibility Cloak back over him -- partial camouflage from the wizards was better than none. He smiled with satisfaction as the wizard went down. It sounded like hexes to prevent magic from hitting you didn't stop bullets.

A good half of the strike force made it onto the roof, and a pitched battle ensued. Al-Qaeda agents started shooting at the SEALs as green beams started crisscrossing through the battlefield, striking men on both sides.

Jacob realized that donning his Invisibility Cloak may have saved his life. He reached for the walkie-talkie and pressed out a series of clicks in Morse Code: "PUT ON YOUR CLOAKS!"

The delay was costly. By the time all of the men had put on their cloaks, there were only three men left in his wizard's unit. Even worse, Dawlish was down with a bullet in the chest. It didn't look like he was going to make it.

His unit was no longer alone, however. Several other units had converged on top of the building. He had gone from having two allies to 17. However, those allies were now completely invisible to the Muggles AND the wizards now. He could hear panicked comments among the al-Qaeda operatives. Smoke bombs went off, and Jacob told everyone to duck and hold their ground lest they fall off the roof back into the minefield due to their inability to see through the smoke.

Eventually, the roof was secure. Now things got interesting, he thought. The good guys had the high ground. He immediately headed for the nearest roof entrance and started tossing down grenades. Someone -- either a wizard or a Muggle -- tossed one of them right back up at him, but Jacob had the wherewithal to bat it down and duck before it went off.

All 18 men raced down what was left of the staircase into the building, followed by no fewer than three wizards. The fact that his men were wearing Invisibility Cloaks and Disillusionment Charms and the bad guys weren't made things a lot easier: the SAS wizards could see the enemy wizards, but the enemy wizards couldn't see them. Both sides were even when it came to hiding from Muggles.

He accompanied his men into the compound and slowly battled the al-Qaeda operatives into a corner. He was about to finish off a wizard when there was a huge explosion of fire behind him.

No fewer than eleven of his men were suddenly set on fire. Wizards collapsed, and Jacob barely had time to duck into a side room. Although the enemy wizards couldn't tell exactly where they were, they had a good enough guess that something which would fill the entire corridor with flame would likely take them all out. When the smoke had cleared, almost all the friendly forces were dead, including all three wizards.

Shit, he thought. This was bad, and he was probably dead. However, he wasn't dead yet. As long as he was still alive, he could do damage.

He hid in the side room and didn't make a sound. If his guess was right, the wizard who had cast the fireball had no idea that he had disappeared into the other room. This gave him a chance to plan and catch his breath. Slowly, methodically, he brought out a hand grenade and began staring at the entrance to the room.

Resisting the urge to jump out and fight on, he listened as the al-Qaeda operatives -- supported by the wizards -- finished off the rest of the strike team. He heard people thanking Allah for delivering them
from the infidel invaders. He laid still, however. Realistically, he only had one shot at this. As soon as he fired the weapon, the enemy wizards would be upon him.

He had one shot. And he knew who had to die. Covering himself completely with the Invisibility Cloak, he waited.

Finally, his chance came as Damodharan Dilmi -- who had, as Jacob had suspected, launched the fireball -- began walking in his direction down the corridor. Five seconds before he judged the wizard would pass the entrance to his room, Jacob recited the Shema quietly to himself and pulled the pin.

Five seconds later, Jacob was dead, along with Damodharan Dilmi, six Muggles, and three other enemy wizards. Al-Qaeda had survived, but it had lost its charismatic leader -- one who had doubled as Lord Voldemort's primary recruiting agent. The only thing which survived the explosion, amazingly, was a digital watch on one of the al-Qaeda Muggle operatives' arms. When the wizards picked it up a few minutes later, it was still displaying numbers:

01:04:53:22
01:04:53:21
01:04:53:20

There would be a brief period of instability as the remaining Death Eater wizards hammered out who would take control of al-Qaeda. That period of instability, however, would come too late to prevent the organization's joint operation with America for Humans.

To be continued...

Update #153
------------

Tuesday, May 14, 1996
1244Z/0844 EDT
T minus 00:01:45:53 and counting
Near Bangor International Airport
Bangor, Maine
United States of America

Next PoV: 154 -- Rebecca Nurse
-----------

HORCRUXES LEFT: 4 (locket, ring, snake, cup)
-----------

Patrick Dursley-Burgess was breathless with anticipation. The time had come to strike back against the minions of the Antichrist.

Mohatma Dameel, the representative of the Foundation, had promised Patrick that the head of the Foundation, Mr. Dillman, would be able to provide America for Humans with a depth charge capable of producing an explosion which, if Dillman's suspicions were correct, would produce a pressure wave strong enough to overwhelm the spell the wizards had constructed to keep the water out of the Four Towns. Seconds after the spell was broken, Dana, Enfield, Greenwich, and Prescott would find themselves under fifty feet of water or more. Every single wizard in them would be killed either by the shock of the water them or drowned before they could act.
That was, however, if he had actually brought the depth charge. If he hadn't brought the depth charge, this whole party would be for nothing.

Dameel had called everyone who had been privileged to witness the attack into a hotel room near Bangor to explain what was going to happen. Patrick, as the founder of America for Humans, had come along. Fred Phelps had as well. Pitmoss had looked forward to coming as well, but he had been forced to decline at the last moment due to a funeral he had to officiate at.

He expected Dameel to be excited about the attack. After all, he'd been planning it for weeks. Patrick was surprised, however, to find the Indian Vietnam vet a bit subdued. He seemed a bit sad. When Patrick asked what was wrong, he said that he had lost a couple of members of his family in a boating accident and was going to head back home as soon as the operation was finished.

Patrick, of course, would have had no way to know that Dameel was mourning the loss of Dilmi and several other Death Eaters when the British coalition had attacked the al-Qaeda headquarters. No one in the room other than Dameel himself knew that the Foundation was in fact al-Qaeda and that they had a wizard in their midst. A wizard who had cast a spell which would open the doors to the corridor connecting Dana and MacGregor shortly before reaching the Quabbin.

Patrick hoped that Dameel would have enough presence of mind to go through with the attack. Judging from the look on the veteran's face, Patrick thought he was going to go through with it. Everyone was here, after all. It was now or never.

Dameel raised his hands for silence and began. "Gentlemen, the time has come. Let us all raise a toast to the Foundation and America for Humans, who will take the first step against destroying our Wizarding overlords."

Everyone lifted their glasses in salute, with the odd exception of Dameel himself. Realizing that everyone was staring at him, Dameel explained that he was going to be the one who would be flying the plane during the attack.

Patrick whistled. "You've got a plane?"

Dameel nodded. "Yes, Patrick. I've got a pilot's license and a small plane capable of carrying five people -- and the bomb, of course. The plan is for me to fly a route from Bangor to Newark. That should put us over the Quabbin Reservoir a little over halfway through. The plane and the bomb come to us courtesy of a high-ranking official named Fidel."

Phelps scowled. "Don't tell me he's a Hispanic or a Communist. That would be really annoying."

Dameel shook his head. "He's not, Reverend. I don't know much about him, but rest assured he's American and quite a charm, from what I've been told". For some reason, the Indian thought this was funny.

"Where's the plane?"

"The plane's at Gate A-35 at the airport. It's got the bomb on board and it's all ready to go. If everything goes as planned and there aren't major delays on takeoff, we'll get to the Quabbin right around 10:30."

Patrick's jaw dropped. "You've left the plane at the GATE with the BOMB in it? Aren't they going to search it?"
Dameel laughed. "Trust me, we're going to be fine. First, this is a private jet, so we don't have to worry that much about the security checks. Second, there's NO WAY they're going to find the bomb even if they did search the plane. Trust me. Our charming Fidel made it so the plane, and the bomb, will be absolutely impossible to find unless I tell someone where they are. He and I are very good secret keepers, my friend."

"It's camouflaged?"

"Something like that, yes."

Patrick had no way to tell that Dameel had placed both the bomb and the plane under the Fidelius Charm so that people who were not in on the secret would physically be unable to see them...until the bomb went off, in which case they'd see the explosion.

The pilot continued. "Once we're airborne, we'll head over to the Quabbin. If everything goes as planned, we'll drop the device from maybe 4000 feet or so. The device will arm itself when it contacts the water and will detonate when it reaches a depth of 75 feet down or is exposed to air on its bottom, whenever comes first."

Another of the passengers shook his head. "How are you going to aim that thing from 5000 feet up? Does it have some kind of guidance system on board so it won't wind up crashing onto Route 32 or something like that?"

Dameel shook his head. "I am not permitted to divulge any more information about the nature of the device. Rest assured, that it will likely be equivalent to between 750 and 1000 pounds of TNT."

Patrick chuckled. "Ouch. What do we do after we drop the bomb?"

"We turn east and fly to Provincetown. Once we land, we can watch the news and see what happened."

Phelps didn't like this. "They're going to put two and two together pretty easily, Dameel. Plane flies over Quabbin. Something falls in and blows up. Who did it?"

Dameel shook his head. "Don't worry about it. The Foundation added radar jamming capabilities to the plane. It will work. Trust me."

Patrick was a bit dubious about it. However, he was committed. Hoping for the best, he listened as Dameel went on to explain the particulars of the mission.

Less than an hour later, they were airborne and heading southwest, towards Newark. Everyone had watched carefully as the pilot completed the preflight checklist, both for the aircraft and for the bomb. They were a matter of minutes away from history.

----------
1422Z/1022 EDT
T minus 00:00:07:53 and counting
Department of Magic/I-Entry
Dana, Massachusetts

Sorcerer Meeks was awakened from his doze by the sound of the door leading to the I-Entry corridor opening. He frowned: he hadn't been expecting any guests.
He elbowed the man next to him. "Jim, do you remember us holding another tour of I-Entry today at 10:30? I certainly don't. If we do, I'm going to need to cast a wake-up spell in a hurry."

Jim frowned. "A tour? I don't know of any tours, Daniel. Let me check the schedule."

He summoned over a computer and started looking things up. He grunted and shook his head. "Nope. I don't see anything scheduled for 10:30, 11:00, or even 11:30. The first tour is at 12. That door shouldn't be open, Daniel."

Meeks stared back at the door. "Well, close it."

Jim nodded. "You got it, boss."

He headed over to the door and began pulling on it. It wouldn't move. Frowning, he pointed his wand at it and ordered it shut. It still wouldn't budge.

Meeks rolled his eyes. Great. The door was malfunctioning again. He called someone from Maintenance to come and look into it. The woman said she'd be there in about 15 minutes.

------------
1422Z/1022 EDT
T minus 00:00:07:48 and counting
H-Entry, MacGregor House

The MIT student was heading down the corridor towards J-Entry when he suddenly heard a creaking sound from the wall next to him. Turning in surprise, he noticed that the door to I-Entry was opening.

He hesitated for a moment. He had wanted to explore I-Entry when they had first started giving tours, but the tours were constantly selling out before he could sign up. This may be his chance.

He hurried back to his room, dropped off his 18.04 textbook, and picked up his camera. Excited, he returned to I-Entry and started heading down the corridor towards a world of magic. From what he'd been told, it would take maybe ten minutes to get there.

------------
1427Z/1027 EDT
T minus 00:00:02:34 and counting
Above the Quabbin Reservoir

The passengers cheered as the north edge of the reservoir passed beneath the plane. Everyone promptly started looking at their watches and bringing out their cameras. Everyone except Dameel, that was.

Dameel, of course, had his hands full. He knew where the headquarters of the Department of Magic were, and he needed to maneuver the aircraft directly to that point. He saw lots of guards and guns around the reservoir, but he was absolutely certain that they did not pose a threat. The plane and bomb were under the Fidelius Charm, after all. No one could see them.

------------
1428Z/1028 EDT
T minus 00:00:01:11 and counting
Department of Magic/I-Entry
Dana, Massachusetts
Jim swore viciously. "Merlin's beard, Daniel! I don't know what's wrong with this damn door! It just won't close! This is getting irritating. Where the hell are the maintenance guys?"

------------
1429Z/1029 EDT
T minus 00:00:00:43 and counting
Above the Quabbin Reservoir

The passengers were all on their feet. Dameel told them to strap themselves in and to be prepared for a sharp turn. The passengers did so, though many of them did what they could to look out the window.

------------
1429Z/1029 EDT
T minus 00:00:00:34 and counting
Above the Quabbin Reservoir

Dameel checked his course one last time. He was right on target. Any minute now, he would pass over the location of Travis Radner's headquarters....

------------
1429Z/1029 EDT
T minus 00:00:00:32 and counting
I-Entry Corridor

This was a long corridor, the MIT student thought. Almost as long as the Infinite Corridor. Fortunately, he saw what appeared to be light at the end of the tunnel.

------------
1429Z/1029 EDT
T minus 00:00:00:26 and counting
Above the Quabbin Reservoir

The light beeped on the control panel. He pressed a button, and the secret cargo hold at the bottom of the plane opened. The bomb fell out, and the plane leaped upwards as the ballast was released.

He looked back at the passengers, who were screaming ecstatically. "Don't celebrate yet! Hang on for the turn!"

With that, he made a sharp turn to the east. What the passengers didn't realize, however, was that he had directed the aircraft towards the dam holding back the water of the Swift River. If he crashed the plane into the dam, the dam would likely burst and the entire Connecticut River Valley would be flooded at roughly the same time as Boston. America for Humans would be content, naturally, with the attack on the Department of Magic. He was a member of Al-Qaeda, however, and his colleagues had recommended an extension to the mission.

------------
1429Z/1029 EDT
T minus 00:00:00:10 and counting
Department of Magic/I-Entry
Dana, Massachusetts

Jim and Sorcerer Meeks traded glances. Finally, Meeks asked: "Am I imagining something, or did I just hear a big splash up there?"

They looked up. The surface of the reservoir above them was roiling, as if something big had hit it.
However, they couldn't see what it was. They looked at each other with confusion. Had someone fallen into the water? Meeks couldn't figure out how that was possible. Ever since Radner had called in the possible terrorist threat, people were forbidden from venturing within half a mile of the reservoir.

They were still staring upwards when a tremendous explosion erupted in the water directly above them. A shock wave began propagating downwards, towards the bulkhead protecting the Four Towns from the reservoir.

--------

1430Z/1030 EDT
T plus 00:00:00:04
Above the Quabbin Reservoir

Dameel struggled to maintain control of the aircraft. He should have known that the passengers would have figured out that he had broken out of the turn too early and was heading for the dam instead of Cape Cod!

Patrick had realized the man's intentions immediately. He called upon Dameel to turn away from the dam as he had just seen the bomb go off. He didn't need to destroy the wizards twice. Dameel just muttered something in Hindi and told him to shut up and let him concentrate.

Less than a second later, Dameel was shoved aside as Patrick and Phelps started fighting him for the controls. The plane started swerving all over the sky. Dameel, fed up with this whole charade, brought out his wand and hexed the obnoxious preacher. He realized his mistake seconds later when virtually everyone jumped him at once. The steering column was pushed forward during the struggle, and the plane suddenly tilted nose down. Within ten seconds, the aircraft had slammed into the surface of the reservoir, exploded, and burst into flames. The flames burned merrily for a few seconds. Then a huge vortex appeared in the middle of the reservoir and began sucking them down into what appeared to be a bottomless pit. Seconds later, a second, smaller vortex appeared near where the plane had hit the surface.

--------

1430Z/1030 EDT
T plus 00:00:00:04
Department of Magic/I-Entry
Dana, Massachusetts

The shock wave from the explosion hit the interface between the air and the water. Meeks and Jim stared at it uneasily as it struggled to contain the forces acting on it. Colors flared across it as magical energies erupted all across the barrier.

Then the colors vanished abruptly, and seventy-five feet worth of water suddenly rained down on the town of Dana in a matter of seconds.

Meeks barely had time to realize what had happened before the flood snuffed him out. The deluge slammed his body against the wall as the Quabbin began emptying itself out through the corridor to MacGregor.

--------

1430Z/1030 EDT
T plus 00:00:00:08
I-Entry Corridor

The MIT student looked on in surprise as the light at the end of the corridor suddenly flicked and
turned a dark blue. He had about ten seconds to ponder the cause when a wall of water cascaded out of the far end and washed him away. It was only a matter of seconds away from coming out the other end and inundating a campus which, until a scant few months ago, had no idea that the corridor had even existed.

To be continued...

Update #154

Tuesday, May 14, 1996
1430Z/1030 EDT
T plus 00:00:00:01
Greenwich, Massachusetts, near the border with Dana
United States of America

Next PoV: 155 -- Bill Clinton

HORCRUXES LEFT: 4 (locket, ring, snake, cup)

Rebecca Nurse didn't like it when the man she was talking to suddenly stopped paying attention to her and began looking upwards. There were several beings in the Four Towns who seemed to discriminate against her. Someone of them didn't like ghosts at all. Others, such as the spirits of the Massachusetts Indian elders, refused to talk to her because they blamed her -- incorrectly -- for their tribes' demise. She hadn't thought, however, that this man had been this type of person. He appeared to be a good Christian.

She opened her mouth to try to bring the man back to the conversation at hand when his face suddenly turned as white as her spectral body. He shouted: "Dear God, NO!"

Puzzled, Rebecca turned around just in time to see the heavens open up on Dana. In less than five seconds, the entire city was wiped out. Stones, bricks, and people were blast apart and flung around in a maelstrom of blue. The ghost was reminded of stories she had heard about the Great Flood, Sodom, and Gomorrah.

The man screamed in horror. Rebecca joined him, as did virtually everyone in the vicinity. Their cries, however, were almost drowned out by the roar of the falling water and disintegrating city.

Was this the end of the world? Why had Dana been stricken, yet Greenwich spared? Had there been more good men in Greenwich than Dana? The man she had been speaking to soon confirmed her belief in that he promptly brought out his wand and began marching towards the doomed city. Rebecca followed him, trying to think of what she could do.

The rescuing party was suddenly waved off by one of the senior wizards. "Don't try it, people! We have no idea if casting spells through the bulkheads will disrupt them if one of them has flooded! Be grateful that the other three held and the rest of the towns are -- what was that?"

The senior wizard looked up. Rebecca's gaze looked up, as did everyone else's. She saw that something must have crashed into the top of the reservoir at a high rate of speed. She couldn't see what it was. Seconds later, however, the object exploded, sending a tremendous shock wave heading towards them.

The senior wizard's brow furrowed in concentration for a moment. Then, his eyes went wide.
Amplifying his voice with the Sonorus spell, he bellowed: "Get the hell out of here! Apparate! Floo! I don't care how you do it...just RUN!"

Rebecca's conversation buddy didn't need to be told twice. He disappeared, as did half of the people in the vicinity. Others, including several people not old enough to earn an Apparation license, began rushing into the nearest house to try to reach a fireplace.

Horrified, she looked back up at the reservoir above them. She could see the water above Greenwich starting to flow into the area which had once held the city of Dana. She was then startled to notice the barrier above her scintillating with colored light as the shock wave from the explosion reflected off of it.

The senior wizard saw this and screamed. Rebecca glanced at him just in time to see him Apparate out of there, having done everything he could have to warn the population. She looked back up just in time to see the colors vanish and the water fall into Greenwich.

Rebecca was a ghost, and as a result could not be harmed by material objects. However, she couldn't bear to watch the destruction around her. The entire world had gone blue, punctuated here and there by the occasional drowning elf or goblin. She looked away just to see the main dome of the Greenwich town hall split asunder and release millions of bizarre spell components into the mix. Whatever was left of the Quabbin after this disaster would certainly not be drinkable by the poor Muggles outside the reservoir.

The roar of the water changed tone. Bracing herself for what she would see, she noticed that everything was starting to flow out of the reservoir into Dana. That made no sense, she thought. Why would --

Then the answer came to her. I-Entry. The door must be open. And there was no one alive in Dana -- or still around in Greenwich -- to close it. The flood was heading into Cambridge and downtown Boston.

She had to warn a Muggle, but how? The Muggles didn't know her, and would likely be scared away by a ghost. They also wouldn't believe that the disaster had taken place. The only people who really believe would be the ones swept away when the deluge came out the other end of the corridor and started running through MIT.

Then the answer came to her. MIT. The Russian House witch.

Leaving the devastated Greenwich behind her, she floated through the barrier into Dana -- both towns were already flooded, so there was no risk -- and followed the current towards the I-Entry corridor.

--------------
1430Z/1030 EDT
T plus 00:00:00:17
Enfield, Massachusetts
--------------
Guinevere was woken up abruptly by a wild chorus of screams. Puzzled, she looked out the window of her apartment. People were running around, apparently in a panic. Several of them Apparated away as she watched. Somewhere off in the distance she heard an odd sound which sounded like a cross between river rapids and a waterfall.

What had happened? Had something gone wrong? She needed to find out, and do so in a hurry.
Putting on a robe, she went downstairs and opened the door. That proved, however, to be a mistake. As soon as she did so, no fewer than eight people suddenly rushed in her direction. She tried to close the door but one of them put his hand in the door.

She prepared herself to cast a spell when the man asked a very strange question: "Do you have a fireplace?"

She blinked. "As a matter of fact, I do, but why -- "

That was as far as he got when everyone suddenly shoved her out of the way and raced into her apartment. It didn't take them long for them to find the living room: the apartment wasn't exactly large, though Jason thought it was a mansion compared to his room in the MIT fraternity house. She reached the living inside just in time to see green flames appear in the fireplace. People started lining up and trying to escape using Floo powder!

Guinevere didn't like this all. A general panic, followed by a home invasion for the sole purpose of escape? Whatever had happened, it must be bad.

She tapped the man at the end of the Floo powder line on the shoulder. Correction, second from the end. No, third! A glance at the door revealed that she had left it open. People were converging on her apartment from everywhere! The man jumped nearly a foot in the air, then turned around to face her.

Giving him her hardest stare, she demanded: "Excuse me, but what in Merlin's mind is going on here? What's everyone paranoid about?"

The man responded in one short sentence. "Dana and Greenwich have flooded!"

Guinevere shook her head to clear it -- she must have still been half asleep. She couldn't have heard that right: something about two towns flooding. "WHAT?"

The man behind him in line turned to face her. "Woman, get out of here! The bulkheads are failing! The Muggles are doing something at the surface which is causing them to rupture one by one! Dana and Greenwich are already gone, and for all I know we're next!"

"That's impossible! Those bulkheads have held for sixty years! Why would they suddenly fail all at once because the Muggles wanted to visit?"

The first wizard cut back in. "I don't know! Maybe the wizards who created the spells didn't have Muggle explosive devices in mind!"

Guinevere jerked back in astonishment. "They're ATTACKING us? I highly doubt that, sir."

"That's what it seems like, ma'am! Now, if you would excuse me, I need to cast the Geminio spell on your Floo powder. I think you're running out!"

The last sentence caused an uproar near the end of the line. Wailing that they were doomed to be at the end of the line when the Floo powder ran out, they raced into the streets and began looking for another house to break into.

Guinevere held her ground. "Why would they attack us? We haven't done anything to them. If anything, we've helped them! Merlin's beard, I'm actually DATING one of them at MIT!"
The second wizard wrung his hands. "Maybe they don't like us! I personally think there had been a REASON for the Statute of Secrecy, but there isn't any way to put the genie back in the bottle now! And as far as your boyfriend at MIT goes, I'm sorry, but rumors are circulating that the I-Entry doors were open at the time Dana flooded. Cambridge and Boston are probably under ten feet of water by now. Now, will you get out of the way so I can duplicate your Floo powder?"

He shoved her out of the way and grabbed for what was left of the Floo powder. This, of course, precipitated a squabble as the various refugees fought for what was left. This was not right, she thought. Well, there was one way to tell for sure. She focused on the Dana town hall in her mind and tried to Apparate there.

Nothing happened. The magic wouldn't take her there.

Frowning, she tried to teleport herself to Greenwich. Still no good. Worried, she tried to go to Prescott. This time, the Apparation worked, and she soon found herself in the middle of the town square in the midst of a stampeding mob. She barely had time to Apparate back to her apartment before she would have been knocked down and trampled to death.

She thought about this for a second. Something must have happened to Dana and Greenwich: Apparation never failed down here. So far, Prescott and Enfield had been spared. However, the man had a valid point in that she had no idea how long the two towns' luck would hold out.

She was reluctant to leave her apartment unguarded with all these refugees here. However, there was no way she'd be able to keep them out now that their colleagues could just open the door from the inside. Besides, there were two other things she had to do.

She Apparated over to the Salem Witches' Academy, which was a few blocks away from her in Enfield Center. If there was anyone who had to know about this, it was Headmistress Ariadne.

She couldn't actually Apparate into the building. However, she was able to make her way over to the front door. She found her view immediately blocked by a man who was at least six feet tall. However, she could hear the headmistress's amplified voice over the sound of the water.

"Ladies and gentlemen, stay calm. You are completely safe in Enfield and Prescott. We are in the process of casting spells which should protect the two remaining cities from any more attacks. Do not panic, and do not try to enter the two flooded towns. Yes, the rumors are true, they have been flooded. We are currently estimating a 99% casualty rate in Dana -- 4,600 people -- and a 50% casualty rate in Greenwich due to people who Apparated out in time, which would add about 2,500 more. Seven thousand people already dead, and that doesn't even begin to include the people flooded out in Cambridge and Boston. We've sent a warning to Secretary Radner, though it will take time for the duck to find where he is. In the meantime, though, we can hope that the Muggles will be able to handle the flood on the surface as we've got all of our hands tied down here dealing with our own problems. May God have mercy on the Muggles above."

That last sentence made Guinevere's mind up for her. She had to get up to the surface and warn Jason and the rest of the Muggles.

--------

1430Z/1030 EDT
T plus 00:00:00:31
H-Entry/J-Entry corridor
Cambridge, Massachusetts
David Michaels stared at his friend. "What do you mean, you haven't taken the swimming test yet? You're graduating in two weeks, and you need to do it before you do so!"

The friend laughed at him. "I'll get to it when I'm done with finals. I really need to concentrate on 8.282. Besides, we all know how to swim, and I've passed the Phys Ed requirement. Why do we need to take another stupid test to confirm that?"

David was about to respond when he heard a roar coming down the corridor. He looked around, but didn't see anything ordinary. Then he noticed the door to I-Entry was open. Meanwhile, the friend was boasting that both he and David had reached Advanced Swimmer in summer camp and could probably swim through anything.

David's eyes bulged at what he saw coming in from I-Entry. "You'd better hope so!"

They found very quickly that they wouldn't be able to swim through everything.

Heather and Pascal were sitting in the courtyard reading books when Heather heard the sound of a train approaching. She put down the book momentarily, confused. Occasionally commuter rail trains crossed Massachusetts Avenue somewhere past WILG, but this didn't seem right. How could one of the trains becoming down Memorial Drive, or possibly out of New House?

Suddenly, the entire first floor of H-Entry blew out in what appeared to be a torrent of water. Debris, bodies, bricks and other garnishes cascaded over the ledge into the courtyard. Instinctively, the two began to run. They were barely able to make it out of the courtyard before it began to flood. They ran as hard as they could and only looked back once they'd made it all the way to the Westgate parking lot, which had somehow stayed dry.

Heather stared at Pascal, horrified. There went their home. They'd have to move to Sudbury earlier than they had anticipated. Slowly, they turned around just in time to see the section of the building containing F, G, and H entries collapse, its supports eroded by the flood. The only question now was whether the high-rise would stand.

Where the hell had that water come from? And what was that white glow which was heading towards New House?

She wondered if she should have studied course 13, naval engineering, instead of course 16, aerospace.

The Russian House witch screamed as Rebecca Nurse flew into her dorm room. Dropping her textbooks on her toe in surprise, she screamed that ghosts weren't supposed to travel in Muggle areas yet, at least in Massachusetts.
Rebecca Nurse shook her head violently. If anything, she looked paler than usual. "Madame, this is an emergency! You have to help, and you may be the only person who can do it! Dana and Greenwich have flooded, and the water is coming down the corridor into the dormitory! Pray to the Savior for help and cast a spell to stop it!"

The witch stared at her. "What? You've got to be kidding?"

Then she heard the screams.

------------
1430Z/1030 EDT
T plus 00:00:00:46
Memorial Drive
Cambridge, Massachusetts
------------
Ben Weaver raised his middle finger at the cars getting off the highway onto Massachusetts Avenue. He had been stuck behind them for a while even though he had no intention of getting off there. Grinning, he made his way into the left lane and managed to make it under the Massachusetts Avenue underpass. He'd make up the time now if he sped. Everyone sped on Memorial Drive, and since it wasn't the end of the month the cops wouldn't be out in force trying to fill their quotas.

He had just gotten past Baker House at MIT when something hit him from the side. Stunned, he took a look and found himself staring into what looked like an aquarium filled with dead bodies and debris, and the occasional fish.

Ben barely had time to scream before the wave flipped his car over and started pushing it towards the Charles River. Seconds later, the underpass began to flood and the wave broke into the Charles.

Slowly, the water level began to rise behind the Charles River Dam.

------------
1430Z/1030 EDT
T plus 00:00:00:36
Alpha Chi Gamma
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Cambridge, Massachusetts
------------
Jason Morgenstern jumped as Guinevere suddenly teleported into his bedroom wearing only a robe. A bit surprising, but a pleasant one. She occasionally did stuff like this to turn him on. He had no idea what she'd be able to do with his roommate around, however. Especially when the said roommate was gawking at her.

Jason grinned. "Uh, Guinevere, this isn't...". He cut off abruptly when he saw the expression on the witch's face.

The woman grabbed both him and his roommate. "I'm getting you out of here, now! Don't move!"

There was a jolt. The next thing he knew, he was sitting in a Buddhist meditation hall. What the hell was going on here?

One of the men in the hall, a monk by his dress, walked over to them and bowed. "Good afternoon, gentlemen. What brings you to the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies?"

------------
Ben Weaver's car finally came to rest against one of the supports of the bridge. The support creaked as the car hit it. Pressure built up as the car blocked the flow of water.

Rebecca Nurse, the Russian House witch, and Guinevere all stared at the disaster unfolding before them. The ghost, of course, just panicked and started talking about Jesus. The two living women, however, had other plans in mind.

The Russian House witch pointed down at the ground. "I'm going to see what I can do to block the exit from I-Entry. There's enough debris from the collapsed hallway to magic up a waterproof seal for the door. That should save the rest of campus and prevent the water from getting into New House.

Meanwhile, you'd better get over to that bridge and strengthen it. The water level is still rising, and I don't think it's going to hold much longer because of the water that's already been released. Can you do that?"

Guinevere nodded. She could tell that the Russian House witch went to an engineering school, and that she was no one to be trifled with.

With that, Guinevere headed for the bridge. The first thing she had to do was get rid of that car blocking one of the supports. She cast a spell, and the car disappeared. Once that was out of the way, she spent a good five seconds summoning a defensive shield around the bottom of the bridge that would ensure that no water touched the supports or the base of the bridge. That would keep that bridge up long enough for the Russian House witch to seal off I-Entry for good.

Unfortunately, the water would still be heading downstream at a good clip and at a good foot above its normal level. Although Guinevere figured the Russian House witch would be able to do the job, she couldn't guarantee it. She had to operate under the assumption that the witch would be unable to do so. This meant she had to assume the water would keep on coming, and that she had to prepare everything downstream for the onslaught.

She Apparated over to the Longfellow Bridge and cast the same spell over there. The water level was already starting to rise down there, and people were. Once she was satisfied with the results, she continued on to the next bridge. And the next.

Finally, she reached the end of the line, the Charles River Dam. Beyond this was Boston Harbor. Looking back, she saw the water still coming on. Apparently the Russian woman was having trouble with her spell.

Guinevere was exhausted from all the effort she had put in over the past couple of minutes. Her brain was fried, and she felt like she was going into shock. She couldn't collapse yet, however. Looking at the dam beneath her, she located the device which kept the water out -- or in this case, in. She cast
one final spell, and the device slid completely open. Water began surging into the river. However, the oncoming wave started pushing the tide out again. The flood had been averted. The question was now whether the reservoir could be stabilized before it ran out of water.

She Apparated back to the field near MacGregor, where the poor Russian woman looked like she was about to collapse. She could see pieces of debris funneling themselves towards what remained of I-Entry corridor. They were piling up, but the shield wasn't waterproof. And as long as it wasn't waterproof, the immense pressure forced upon it by the flooding water just blew the pieces apart again.

The witch turned to her shouted! "I'm going to need help here! You're going to have to cast a temporary force field to keep the debris in place so that the water doesn't erode it away! Once you've got that in place, we can both summon in debris and then I'll cast the waterproofing spell to seal the exit! Hurry, there isn't time to waste! At the rate things are going, the high-rise is going to collapse within minutes!"

Both women were exhausted, but they set to work on the plan. More debris flooded into the hole, and it soon became obvious that with two witches working on it, the debris was being pushed in faster than the water was being pushed out. The force field held in place, and soon the flood began to slow to a torrent, then a stream, and then a trickle. Finally, the flow ceased.

The Russian house witch screamed in exhaustion and triumph. "Good! Now, seal and waterproof it!"

Guinevere did that, and the exit glowed with a blue light. With the last of her strength, she slowly began to take down the force field which had kept the debris in place.

The fix held. Seconds later, a tremendous noise erupted from both sides of the river, where spectators had gathered to watch the events unfold. It took Guinevere a good thirty seconds to realize what it was.

Cheering.

She had a brief moment of satisfaction before exhaustion took her.

To be continued...

-------------

Update #155

-------------

Tuesday, May 14, 1996
1439Z/1039 EDT
Booker Elementary School
Sarasota, Florida
United States of America

-------------

Next PoV: 156 -- Stephen Pitmoss

-------------

HORCRUXES LEFT: 4 (locket, ring, snake, cup)

-------------

Bill Clinton was about midway through his visit to the elementary school when there was a flash of light outside the classroom. Probably one of the lights in the corridor, he thought. Maybe he could
give himself a public relations coup by having himself photographed with students on a "public relations" project.

He turned the page of the little picture book he was reading when the door opened. Two Secret Service agents entered, and both of them had stern expressions on their faces. The president looked at them with surprise -- they weren't supposed to look threatening or imposing to the students. They were supposed to be...well, inconspicuous. However, the two agents looked like Mother Teresa compared to the person who walked in after them.

Travis Radner.

Many of the students, recognizing Radner and associating him with magic, started trying to attract his attention and asked him to do some tricks. However, the wizard paid absolutely no attention. He marched over to the president with the Secret Service agents at his side. Hiding his face with the book to shield his reaction from the students, Clinton grimaced. This couldn't be good. The Secretary of Magic looked like he was on the verge of summoning enough lightning to tow most of the Florida peninsula into the sea and sink it. The students, recognizing the expression on Radner's face, slowly began to realize that the wizard wasn't in the mood to play.

Radner bent over to whisper in the president's ear. "Mr. President, we are under attack. At least two bombs have exploded in the Quabbin, and the towns of Dana and Greenwich have been completely destroyed. This is a virtual decapitation attack on the American Department of Magic."

Clinton nearly dropped the book in horror. However, he composed himself. Lowering his voice so the students couldn't hear him, he asked. "What? When? Who did it and how?"

"We don't know, sir. Reports are still coming in, but from what we've heard so far the shields protecting Dana and Greenwich from the water failed and the towns flooded immediately under seventy-five feet of water. We're anticipating almost 5,000 casualties in Dana and 2,500 in Greenwich, all drownings."

Clinton jerked back in shock. "Jesus Christ! Seventy-five hundred dead! This is impossible! When did this happen?"

"We believe the bombs were timed to explode at 10:30 Eastern, sir. This crisis is only ten minutes old. Had it not been for the ability to Apparate, we wouldn't have found out for a good half hour -- in which case things would have probably been much worse. As it is, the death toll may still be rising. We're thinking that in the worst case scenario, we can have 30,000 dead and millions of people inconvenienced."

The president had to ask. "Did they use a nuke? Will all four of the towns succumb? How can millions of people be affected by this?"

"No, sir. The attackers appear to have used two conventional devices, and we believe that Enfield and Prescott will be safe. You see, sir, the Four Towns are built like a submarine, with bulkheads. If one city were to flood, the others would stay dry. The attackers had the wherewithal to strike in two places, puncturing shields and letting the water in. Unfortunately, the impact points happened to be in separate towns, so two towns were lost."

Clinton frowned. "How'd these guys get magical shields down?"

Radner raised his hands in resignation. "We suspect that whoever raised the shields against the water
sixty years ago hadn't anticipated an attack by Muggle explosives. The most likely scenario in mind is a case where the pressure wave produced by the explosion produced a force stronger than the one the spell had been designed for. As a result, the shield caved in and the water entered."

"Sort of like an exploding depth charge using a pressure wave to attack a submarine."

Radner nodded. "That's exactly the case, Mr. President. It's the same type of attack."

Clinton's mind raced. This was VERY bad, he thought. However, something didn't make sense. Why would millions of people be affected by such an attack? And how could there be 30,000 casualties if the entire total of the four towns was about 21,000? Troubled, he posed the question to Radner.

Radner drew a deep breath. Whatever it was, Clinton though, he wasn't going to like it.

"Mr. President, we have reason to believe that the corridor to I-Entry was open at the time of the attack. The attackers knew about the Four Towns, sir, and about the secret passage to Cambridge. You may recall that the passage connects Dana and the MIT dormitory known as MacGregor House."

Clinton suddenly realized where he was going. He dropped the book, and for the first time since the Secret Service had come in the students could see his face. The chattering suddenly evaporated into dead silence and shock.

Not bothering to pick up the book, he stared at Radner. "Are you saying what I think you're saying? Please say no."

Radner nodded. "I'm afraid so, Mr. President. The message was reporting that the Quabbin has started draining out of the I-Entry corridor into Cambridge. Judging from the size of the reservoir, the consequences could be catastrophic. Depending which direction the water is moving when it comes out, we could have most of southern Cambridge flooded. For all we know, Harvard University and Central Square can go down the drain. And God help us if the Charles River Dam bursts, the bridges fail, or the Back Bay floods. Knocking out the bridges alone will destroy half of the Boston area's subway lines and interrupt I-93 and Amtrak."

Clinton felt sick. "Shit. Furthermore, unless I'm mistaken, the Quabbin is the water supply for most of eastern Massachusetts. If the reservoir disappears, then we've got ourselves millions of people without a clean supply of drinking water -- or perhaps even bathing water."

Radner nodded. "Correct, Mr. President. Now you can see why I'm saying millions of people will be affected by this. And that assumes that the terrorists won't go after some of the other magical headquarters, such as Ocala National Forest and Fourth Mesa."

Clinton gritted his teeth. "I hadn't even thought about that, Mr. Radner. Recommendations?"

"Sir, I'd recommend that we start by plugging the hole in the Quabbin by sealing off the end of the corridor in the dormitory. I wouldn't be surprised if the citizens of Enfield and Prescott are in the process of doing that as we speak: Headmistress Ariadne is very talented."

Clinton couldn't help but think that he wanted to meet Headmistress Ariadne at some point. However, his wife would not be pleased, and besides, the country came first. Instead, he asked: "Ariadne? Who's she?"
"She's in charge of the Salem Witches' Academy, the women's division of the Quabbin Academy of Sorcery. That's in Enfield. The men's campus, the QAS proper, was in Dana and is assumed lost, along with Arthur Nagel. Once the hole is sealed, we reinforce the defenses around Prescott and Enfield. Once that is done, we strengthen magical defenses around all remaining Department of Magic headquarters. Make them a no-fly zone, that type of stuff. Finally, we figure out who did it and put them in their place -- and figure out how to get water to the Boston area and/or purify the Quabbin."

"How long do you think it will take to clean up the reservoir or restock it if it emptied?"

"A month, Mr. President. At least. Boston is going to have to really change its ways, I'm afraid."

"Damn. Do you have any idea who did it?"

Radner shook his head. "We're not sure. Pitmoss boasted that he was about to attack wizards, so it could be America for Humans. Then again, al-Qaeda has called in a threat as well. Although al-Qaeda would be more likely to attempt an attack of this sophistication, it wouldn't make sense for them to target wizards in a terror attack because the Muggles still don't associate themselves with witches much yet."

"Could it be a joint operation?"

"Possibly. However, I don't see why America for Humans -- which is a rather patriotic group regardless of their other beliefs -- would join forces with al-Qaeda. It doesn't make sense."

"How'd the terrorist get over to the Quabbin? I thought Muggles couldn't get in there. Were there any planes in the area at the time?"

"Nothing on the video cameras under 10,000 feet, Mr. President. If there had been a plane, it would have had to have been invisible. That can be done, but it would imply that America for Humans had a wizard, which also makes no sense."

Clinton looked back to the students, who were starting to look nervous. He had to wrap this up soon. "Sounds like a plan to me. Keep me informed. I'll want an update at 1100."

Radner saluted. "Yes, sir."

And with that, the wizard and the Secret Service personnel left the room. Clinton returned back to his children's book, hoping to not let the kids realize that the world may have just changed.

To be continued...
Update #156

Tuesday, May 14, 1996
1453Z/953 CDT
Pitmoss Household
Westboro, Kansas
United States of America

Next PoV: 157 -- Me

HORCRUXES LEFT: 4 (locket, ring, snake, cup)

Stephen Pitmoss knew that something had happened about two-thirds of the way through the funeral. The ceremony had started at 9:00, more or less on time. Although he had been told to expect the attack between 9 and 10, Dameel had admitted that no one could really tell for certain when exactly the bomb would be dropped, or whether the mission would even succeed at all.

So many things had to go right for the mission to succeed. The camouflage Dameel claimed to have had provided for the aircraft had to be good enough to prevent it from being detected by the government forces surrounding the Quabbin. The bomb, which had never been tested completely, had to work as planned. The forces of evil could not be made aware of the plane as it entered their airspace, and if they did find out God would prevent the Antichrist's minions from attacking the plane. Perhaps most importantly, Dameel's suspicion that the Four Towns' defenses were not designed to withstand a "Muggle" assault had to hold up.

Pitmoss was nervous throughout the first half of the ceremony, and he had to force himself not to look at his watch because that would have been disrespectful to the deceased. He figured that God would inform him as to the success or failure of the mission in due course.

The first clues came in about half an hour into the service, when he noticed that people walking down the street next to the cemetery suddenly started walking more quickly and talking urgently to each other. He could make out bits and pieces of the conversation: "wizards attacked...Cambridge partially flooded...7,000 dead already...millions without water."

Pitmoss needed to harness all his willpower to focus on the ceremony. It sounded like the attack had succeeded, and he inwardly thanked God for that. However, several aspects of the report troubled him. First, the fact that there were 7,000 dead. He hadn't realized those towns were so big! He had thought they were villages, maybe with a hundred people each! The country had never seen an attack on this scale before, and the president was going to go haywire.

He experienced his next shock a couple of minutes later, when he thought about the comment about millions not having water. He had been focusing so much on attacking the wizards that he had completely forgotten the fact that the Four Towns were situated in an operational reservoir, one which apparently was an important public water supply! Had he ruined the lives and possibly health of millions of Americans who had been counting on the Quabbin for their water? He began wondering how Phelps, Patrick, he, and Dameel had ALL managed to overlook this simple fact.
The biggest shock of all, however, came when he came to the comment about Cambridge flooding. He had no idea how an attack on the Quabbin could have affected Cambridge as the city was nowhere near the target! He was about to dismiss that as a fluke or an unrelated incident when it occurred to him that the flooding could explain the high death toll: 500-1,000 people in the Wizarding cities and 6,000 people in Cambridge. God Almighty, if that was the case, he had likely killed more Americans than wizards. Either that, or the wizards had taken revenge on America and flooded Cambridge!

If everything went as planned, he'd get a call from Patrick after the plane landed in Newark. That would be at about 10:15 or so. Given the apparent success of the mission, he wondered if Patrick was harboring the same misgivings he was and was about to vent them.

He regained control of his paranoia. God was just and knew that Pitmoss had been doing the right thing in attacking the wizards. He would make sure that His servants would get out of this in one piece. God had given Pitmoss and America for Humans an extremely difficult, but important, task. Some of the things He may have required may be distasteful, but it was not up to humans to question any of His directives.

Giving final condolences to the bereaved family and shaking hands with several of the mourners, he headed back to his car. He needed to know what exactly had happened and how many innocent Americans had to die in order for the wizards to be destroyed. Satan would have a lot of to answer for.

He turned on the radio to the local news station. Not surprisingly, someone was reporting from Boston.

"-all over the place here in Boston. There are at least fifteen of them I can see from this vantage point atop the Hyatt, looking into the Charles. From this perspective, it almost looks like there's another bridge across the river, one made entirely of dead wizards."

The announcer broke in -- it appeared to be a Q&A. "Are they all wizards or a mixture of wizards and Muggles?"

"They look to all be wizards, here. They're dressed the same way as the people David saw laid out next to McCormick Hall, a women's only dorm. Most of the Muggle victims appear to be students who were caught off-guard by the flood and by the collapse of Delta Psi and the three living areas in MacGregor. We're lucky that Burton-Conner didn't go down as well -- that's a very big dorm."

"Is the high-rise tower safe? What about J-Entry?"

"The first floor of J-Entry has about two feet of water in it. The first-floor of E-Entry has about five, and I think we've got some kids trapped in there. We've instructed them to open the windows to let water out. The entire ground level, which includes the only way out of the high-rise, is jammed with debris and bodies. I sure hope the people in A-Entry can cook, because they aren't coming down for a while. The associate housemasters on the top floor of the high rise said they'd what they could to help out, but they're not going to be able to feed a bunch of college students."

"Is the plug for I-Entry holding? How are the two witches doing?"

"The plug seems to be holding, as far as we can tell. The witches seem to be absolutely exhausted, and for good reason. One of them is asleep right now, and the other is busy interviewing people in
"Do you have names yet?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. It turns out that both women are actually somewhat known to the Boston media. The sleeping woman is Guinevere de Mornay. She's 23 and lives in Enfield -- which, from what I've been told, is still dry. The younger woman is an MIT student who lives in Russian House. Her name is --"

The announcer suddenly cut the reporter off. "Michael, I apologize for the interruption, but we've just gotten a press release from Travis Radner, the Secretary of Magic, who has been whisked away to a secure location. He is reporting that Enfield and Prescott are now completely secure and are ready to receive refugees from Greenwich. The head of the Salem Witches' Academy, Ms. Persephone Ariadne, has taken charge down there. Radner reports that both Greenwich and Dana are total losses and that maybe 20 people survived in Dana, if that. The total death toll in the two flooded towns is now at 7,023. These include 4,731 in Dana and 2,292 in Greenwich. Combine that with the 300 dead Muggles we've got above ground and we've got more than 7,300 dead and God knows how many wounded."

"7,300 dead? That's more than bad. It's catastrophic. Does the report say who did it or what exactly happened?"

"Secretary Radner doesn't know who did it yet. However, America for Humans supposedly threatened to attack a Wizarding target, so they're a suspect. As for what happened, he is fairly certain that two depth charges were dropped into the reservoir and the shock waves overwhelmed the shields keeping the water out of the two towns. It's just bad luck the I-Entry was connected to Dana and the door was open: had it been otherwise, the water wouldn't have drained out of the Quabbin once Dana flooded. The only possible flaw in this theory is a rumor that five bodies were seen floating in the water near the surface just before the second bomb went off. At least one of them looked like a Muggle."

Pitmoss shut the radio off and tried to think. There were five people on board the plane during the raid, and there was only supposed to be one bomb. The only thing he could think of would be a case where the plane dropped the bomb on Dana as planned, was picked up by the wizards, and brought down on top of the second town. The problem with that, however, was that he couldn't see why they'd want to destroy their own town in a plane crash.

What he did know, however, was this. The False Prophet had survived, just as Pitmoss had feared would happen. Many of Voldemort's minions had been killed, but not all of them. The wizards were likely going to seek revenge, and many Americans ensorcelled by them would likely join them in attacking whoever they found did it.

Pitmoss needed to find a scapegoat in a hurry, and he couldn't think of one other than the Foundation. And he only knew one person in the Foundation, a man who was likely dead now.

He was in big trouble. Then again, so had Moses and Abraham and God had helped THEM through.

To be continued.

------------
Update #157
----------
For some reason, the bathroom toilet didn't refill after I flushed it. I looked at it, puzzled. Maybe it was time to call the facilities department and have them check it out. Irritated -- and still nervous about my first full-time job in an office after graduate school -- I headed back to the room to call facilities.

I had just picked up the phone when my manager raced into the room with a frantic look in his eyes. I tensed: what had I done now? I'd only been here three months, and the learning curve was steep.

Before I could say anything, he blurted out: "You're originally from here, right? And you went to MIT?"

I looked at him, confused. "Yes. Why?"

"There's been a terrorist attack. Someone managed to drop a bomb into the Quabbin, destroying two of the four towns down there. The water drained out through I-Entry into MIT, destroying half of MacGregor and one of the fraternities, No. 6, whatever that means."


"It happened maybe half an hour ago -- I just found out about it. I've already sent Mark home -- he's another alum, in case you didn't notice. If you want to go home, go ahead. You don't need to take vacation days. The death toll has been catastrophic: supposedly over 7,000 dead already, and the number is probably going to go up. They don't know who did it yet, but they're looking."

Seven thousand dead? I froze for a second in shock -- my brain simply refused to process this. Finally, I found my voice again. "7,000? How can that -- wait, was Cambridge flooded out? Was MIT destroyed?"

"Cambridge and Boston are all right -- virtually all of the casualties were in the two towns, which were destroyed in a matter of seconds. Death was likely by drowning or the shock of eighty feet of water hitting them. There are maybe only 300 or so dead on the surface. It would have been a lot more were it not for the fact that two witches risked their lives to plug the hole and seal the leak. One of them is actually a student at MIT, and I suspect you may know her. She lives in Russian House, and her name is --"

I never got a chance to hear what her name was because at that moment, the phone rang. I looked at the phone and then at my manager. He said -- "It's probably classmates or friends of yours. Answer it and then take the rest of the day off."

He raced out of the room as the phone continued to ring. As I picked it up, I heard faint sirens in the background. It sounded like police cruisers and emergency vehicles were heading down South Street towards the Turnpike and Commonwealth Avenue.
This didn't sound good, I thought. Starting to panic, I picked up the phone.

"Hello?"

It was my mother. "Do you have access to a radio where you are, or a TV? If you do, turn it on. There's been a terrorist attack in the Quabbin which flooded parts of MIT. Most of your dorm has been destroyed. Either go home or come here. It's important that you see this."

That seemed to confirm my manager's story -- if my mother said it, it was almost certainly true. "I'll do that. My manager just ran in, mentioned the attack, and told me to go home and watch. I'll be right over."

I hung up the phone and raced out the door. It turned out that I was not the only person leaving work early. The entire parking lot was filled with people heading for their cars. There was actually a small traffic jam trying to get out of the parking lot and onto Turner Street.

I had just turned from Turner Street onto South Street when I heard a loud noise overhead. Craning my neck, I saw a formation of fighters fly by lower, and faster, than anything I'd ever seen before. I braced myself for a sonic boom but it didn't come. They were heading west, presumably towards the Quabbin. Where had they come from? Logan? Hanscom? Wherever they were going, they were in one hell of a hurry.

I turned onto Commonwealth and started heading eastbound and started seeing even more troubling signs. The airspace above Boston was filled with helicopters, including large ones which looked almost military. I counted no fewer than five, and my view was partially blocked by trees! Something had happened there which had attracted news reporters like bees to honey. There were also smaller specks which I suspected were brooms, and a few angular objects which looked suspiciously like flying carpets.

Crossing over the Turnpike, I saw that the road was absolutely JAMMED in both directions. Everyone and their brother was likely trying to get out of Cambridge or get into Cambridge to see what had happened.

Increasingly disturbed, I turned on the radio and switched to WBZ, the news station. The news was not good.

"...we've got the Mercy and Comfort headed over to Boston right now as we speak, but they're not going to get there for a while. The governor has declared Cambridge a disaster area and has asked for the National Guard to come protect the Fresh Pond water supply and keep all nonessential personnel away from MIT."

"What are the Cambridge police doing now?"

"They're evacuating people from the school down the side streets. The kids were already stressed out with finals coming up, and this will just make things worse. Traffic is a mess throughout the area, and Memorial Drive has been completely washed away from MacGregor almost to the Mass Ave bridge. The cops are in the process of reconfiguring Memorial Drive so that it will become outbound in both directions. I'm not sure how far they will be able to go on Route 2 before they hit the cordon around Fresh Pond, though."

"Are the bridges all right?"
"As far as we can tell, everything seems to be holding. However, there are signs that a couple of the supports to the Mass Ave bridge were weakened substantially. Officials have no idea what that girl did to keep the bridge in one piece, so for the time being the governor has closed the bridge to all traffic."

"Has there been any flooding in Boston yet?"

"Thankfully, no. One of those two witches cast a spell which opened the Charles River Dam all the way, and all that excess water is headed straight into the Atlantic."

"Are there any more wizards helping out with the rescue? Has Guinevere woken up yet?"

"Both of the girls are asleep now, and several people are worried they may be in shock. As far as other wizards ago, I see a couple of brooms and flying carpets out my window here. One of the flying carpets is landing on what's left of J-Entry even as we speak. The one wizard I spoke to was from a Wizarding facility hidden in Mt. St. Helens. He doesn't expect many people from the Four Towns to show up because half the population just drowned and the survivors are probably panicking and trying to figure out what happened. They've got their hands full."

The commentary was interrupted momentarily by a series of sirens. I moved out of the way as a whole convoy of emergency vehicles barreled past me down the street.

Who did it? The only group I could think of which could have pulled off something this big would be al-Qaeda. Was al-Qaeda trying to blow away the wizards so that they could be able to follow up this attack with a larger one on the Muggle population? That didn't make sense. First, there were other Wizarding facilities in the country, and none of the others had been taken out. Second, I suspected that the wizards would be able to defend themselves against a Muggle terrorist.

There was always the possibility that the wizards had managed to hire a jihadist wizard, however. Osama bin Laden had indicated that he wanted jihadist wizards to join al-Qaeda. Had they done so and taken over the organization? Had bin Laden not realized that he was asking for trouble by trying to get wizards involved?

The radio continued its report. They didn't know who did it yet, and the death toll was now up to 7,400. However, they had a couple of suspects. Stephen Pitmoss, the inflammatory preacher behind America for Humans, had boasted that America for Humans was about to attempt an attack on wizards. There were also rumors coming out of Washington that al-Qaeda had been planning an attack as well.

I still couldn't believe this was happening. It was just..surreal. I was definitely in shock. Had I been two years younger and still at school, I would have likely been dead. It occurred to me that Heather and Pascal were probably still living in H-Entry. Had they been killed by the attack? I hoped not.

There had been army units surrounding the Quabbin ever since al-Qaeda had called in their terrorist threat. Yet for some reason those army units hadn't caught anything unusual on their video cameras before the explosions.

My mind was racing as I pulled turned onto Montvale Road and into my parents' driveway. I raced into the den to find my mother watching TV. Supposedly my father was on his way home.

Channnel 5 had gone to a split screen. The left side of the screen was showing what appeared to be
the Quabbin. The normally placid surface of the reservoir was still full of waves and bodies, and the water had turned a murky brown. The comment about the water shortage just came to mind, and I suddenly realized the implications of the attack: most of eastern Massachusetts was now without drinking water. How was the Boston area going to be able to quench its thirst or even bathe, for that matter? I suspected that some MWRA official had shut off the valves connecting the Quabbin with the city. That would have explained the incomplete flush at work. The reservoir was surrounded by a large ring of damp ground and dead fish, indications that the water level had dropped.

Perhaps most astonishing was the fact that off in the distance an odd spire poked out of the water. It appeared that the water level had sank enough to allow one of the buildings in the surviving Wizarding towns to break the surface!

The right side of the screen was showing footage was likely coming from one of the helicopters hovering above Cambridge. The caption said that it was a shot of MIT near where the water had come out. I stared at the disaster zone for a few minutes, not recognizing it at first. It took me a good thirty seconds to realize what I was seeing.

The entire south side of MacGregor was completely GONE, washed away. One frat had completely disappeared, and another had been badly damaged. Burton seemed to have been nicked as well, and one of the walls seemed to be tilted precariously. There were small specks near Burton who were likely people trying to o what they could to prevent the dorm from collapsing.

Amazingly, the high-rise and part of J-Entry had survived. However, there was no way out of the building due to debris and remaining floodwaters. The camera zoomed in on the roof of the high-rise, which had been covered with multicolored dots. The dots suddenly grew into...people. Somehow, students had gotten onto the roof and were clamoring to be rescued. I even recognized a few of them, and my face paled. A helicopter approached, and they started waving their hands frantically. One girl actually lifted her shirt to try to attract the chopper's attention. It didn't work, however, as the helicopter hovered above the side of the roof opposite her and released a rescue basket. I watched in horror as the students began fighting to get onto the helicopter. One of them threw a punch and knocked someone off the roof. The man fell eighteen stories and disappeared in the debris. The commentator screamed in horror when she saw that.

Concerned that the camera would pick up more graphic images, the camera zoomed back out to the larger view. Several of the windows in the high-rise had been opened and people were sticking their heads out and screaming for help. A recent spate of suicide attempts jumping from MacGregor windows had forced the school to install blocks on the windows to prevent them from opening all the way. The school was filled with engineers, however, and engineers often found ways to circumvent obstacles.

I couldn't watch. Stammering incoherently to my mother, I started heading out of the den up to my room. Just as I was about to leave the den, however, the picture changed. I paused for a moment to see the new footage.

The image was once in split screen. However, this time it had before and after pictures of the Quabbin. The changes were shocking. It was now about an hour after the attack, and the reservoir had turned a murky brown. Small angular islands stuck out of the water on the western side, presumably Wizarding buildings which had been exposed by the receding water. The entire shape of the reservoir had changed, and the announcer suspected that the water level had dropped a good 40 feet. The terrorists had actually done something which changed the map of Massachusetts. It then changed to a picture of two women surrounded by guards. Both of them appeared to be sleeping -- or dead. One of them seemed to be a witch about my age -- she was dressed in wizard robes.
I recognized the other from Russian House.

That was all I could take, and I headed up to my room.

To be continued...

Update #158

-------------

Tuesday, May 14, 1996
1600Z/1200 EDT
Oval Office
White House
Washington, DC
United States of America
NEXT PoV: 159 -- Samuel

-------------

TEXT OF THE PRESIDENT'S SPEECH TO THE NATION

Good afternoon, my fellow Americans.

As you are probably aware, America experienced a terror attack more insidious, and more devastating than anything before in this country's 220-year history. Today's date, May 14th, 1996, will likely be remembered throughout history along with December 7, 1941.

First, some background. As you are aware, there are groups of wizards living among us. Although a few of them live among the general population, most of them live in wizard-only cities hiding in obscure locations throughout our great land. Some of them live inside Mt. St. Helens. Others live in the Ocala National Forest, protected by dirt roads which make driving and hiking impassable. However, the oldest, and most populous, Wizarding settlement can be found in central Massachusetts, underneath the Quabbin Reservoir.

According to history as we know it, the Quabbin Reservoir was formed in the 1930's to provide drinking water for the Boston metropolitan area. Although the reservoir does perform that function, it serves a second purpose as well: to hide four Wizarding towns which have existed in that area ever since the Salem witch trials of 1692 forced them to flee from Salem and Boston. These four towns, comprise our nation's Wizarding Capital District, similar to the Muggle Washington DC. They include Dana, the Wizarding capital; Greenwich; Enfield; and Prescott. The four towns have roughly 5,000 people each, people just like you and me except that the vast majority are capable of casting magical spells.

This terror attack was aimed at destroying the nerve center of Wizarding life in this country. Although the attack appears to have been successful, it is up to us to ensure that the wizards survive this ordeal and rebuild their lost infrastructure.

By now, most of you have probably heard stories about wizards. Some of you may have met them. I certainly have, and I can assure you that they are good people, just like you and me. They may have the ability to cast spells, a power which may confuse and frighten some people. However, they have the responsibility and discipline to use that power wisely. Just look to England, where wizards saved dozens of lives in the Canary Wharf terrorist attack.

The details of the attack are still coming in. However, here is what is known so far. At 10:30 this
morning, Eastern Daylight Time, two explosions took place in the Quabbin. One of the detonations occurred seventy-five feet down, directly over the town of Dana. The second one occurred on the surface, in the town of Greenwich near the second town's border with Dana.

These explosions created shock waves in the water. These shock waves encountered the magical shields which have protected the cities from the waters of the Quabbin for over sixty years. Having been cast at a time before tremendous explosives when the Statute of Secrecy was still in effect, the shields' creators had not anticipated that Muggles would try to detonate bombs inside the reservoir. The tremendous pressure waves generated by the explosions overwhelmed the shields and deactivated them. In a matter of seconds, the towns of Dana and Greenwich were wiped off the map as millions of gallons of water, intended to quench the thirst of Bostonians, fell on top of them.

The Dana device went off first, catching the entire city completely off guard. Virtually everyone in the town drowned. Within seconds, almost thousand lives were snuffed out. The tragedy, however, had just begin.

Seconds later, the second device went off over Greenwich. Fortunately, the disaster in Dana had alerted the people in Greenwich and many of them teleported away before the shield broke. As a result, only about 2,300 people were killed in Greenwich. Seven thousand dead, and there were more to come.

I now have the authority to reveal that there was a secret passageway connecting the Four Towns with one of the dorms, MacGregor House, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. This was created to allow the wizards in the Four Towns access to world-renowned scholars in the Boston universities. The Four Towns had to keep more or less up to date with Muggle technology in order to support the Department of Magic, with Travis Radner at its head.

At the time of the attack, this corridor was open. By chance, the Four Towns end of the corridor was in Dana, one of the towns which was attacked. When Dana flooded, the water began draining out of the corridor into Cambridge. Two of the divisions of MacGregor House, H-Entry and G-Entry, were completely destroyed. The first floor of J-Entry was flooded, and half of F-Entry was blown away. Students in entries A-E, which are situated in a tower sixteen floors high, were unable to escape the high-rise due to water and debris. Helicopters are in the process of evacuating them from the roof. Had it not been for the fact that many students were taking finals at the time, the death toll would have been much higher.

The flood waters raged on, knocking down the Delta Psi fraternity and part of Theta Delta Chi. They damaged the walls of another dorm before heading out onto Memorial Drive, a busy Cambridge roadway. The flood obliterated the road and threw bodies, cars, and debris into the Charles River. Floating cars collided with the supporters of the bridges crossing the river, compromising their integrity. If one of the bridges collapsed, it would have triggered an avalanche of debris which would have destroyed all of the Charles crossings, interrupted Amtrak service, disrupted two Boston subway lines, and potentially destroyed a major I-93 connector. The entire Charles River basin could have flooded as the river was choked with debris, placing most of the Back Bay district of Boston underwater and threatening the lives of tens of thousands of people.

However, two young witches risked their lives to save the people of Boston. One of them, Guinevere de Mornay, was in Enfield at the time of the incident. She hurried over to MIT, teleported her boyfriend -- a senior there -- and his roommate from the Alpha Chi Gamma fraternity over to a Buddhist retreat center near the Quabbin, and returned to MIT to help another witch, an MIT student living in Russian House, save the day. The Russian House student immediately demonstrated the abilities which made her a candidate for one of the finest engineering schools in the world, sending
Guinevere off to cast spells to enhance the integrity of the downstream bridges and open the Charles River Dam so all of the excess water flowed unimpeded into the Atlantic. Guinevere then returned to MacGregor, where she and the MIT student combined their powers to seal off the entrance to the Dana-Cambridge corridor with debris from the collapsed dorms.

The two women collapsed with exhaustion shortly after the corridor was sealed. However, their spells worked. The corridor has remained sealed, and the water level of the Charles is beginning to return to normal. They will be awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, one of our country's highest civilian honors; and the Order of Merlin, First Class, a great Wizarding honor; at a ceremony later on this month.

The sealing of the corridor, however, will not mean the end of problems for Boston. Although there is no longer water flowing into the city from the Quabbin, most of eastern Massachusetts has lost access to clean drinking water for a month or even more. United States Navy ships and other military resources are en route to Boston as I speak, ready to help. Wizards are converging on Boston from all over the country. Furthermore, Claude LeCroq, the Canadian Secretary of Magic, has promised a prompt response. Bostonians are being urged to conserve water and to not steal from the Fresh Pond Reservoir in Cambridge, the only source of drinkable water in eastern Massachusetts.

Now, to the specifics of the attack. We do not yet know who is responsible for the attack. However, we have two major suspects. Al-Qaeda warned us about a possible attack last week, but they did not specify a target. They're one possibility. Another is America for Humans, a fringe anti-wizard hate group based in Kansas. Their primary preacher, Reverend Stephen Pitmoss, had announced during his sermon two days ago that a Wizarding target would be attacked. More information will come in as it becomes available. Rest assured, people of America, that my administration will not rest until the perpetrators are found and brought to justice. The FBI and Secretary of Defense is currently examining security tapes taken from sites around the Quabbin at the time of the attack to determine if there are any clues. The only rumor that has come out so far was that the cameras picked up the sound of a small aircraft engine but have, at least at this point, not included a camera angle which has shown the plane itself.

Rest assured, citizens of America, that I am doing everything humanly possible to ensure the safety of all Americans, wizard or Muggle. Although I cannot get into to many details, rest assured that security is going to be stepped up throughout major cities and around Wizarding locations. These extra measures may inconvenience you for a while, but rest assured that it is for your own good. Furthermore, as of this moment, all Wizarding centers are off-limits to Muggles without explicit written permission from the head of the Wizarding center which the Muggle wishes to visit. Any Muggle who attempts to approach a Wizarding headquarters without permission will be taken into custody and prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. Furthermore, there will be five-mile no-fly zones around all Department of Magic offices, including the remaining two towns in the Quabbin. These no-fly zones will extend up to 18,000 feet.

Your congressmen and local news broadcasts will go into more details about your area.

Secretary Radner was away from Dana at the time of the attack, and he is as committed as I am to bringing these criminals to justice. He returned to Enfield during the past half hour to inspect the damage and to reassure the frightened wizards that no further attacks will be coming their way. The Wizarding capital has been moved to Enfield for the time being, and cabinet sessions will be held in the Great Hall of the Salem Witches' Academy, the women's division of the Quabbin Academy of Sorcery magical school.

The headmistress off the SWA, Sorceress Persephone Ariadne, helped stabilize conditions in the two
surviving towns immediately after the attack. She was immediately recommended for Deputy Secretary of Magic, and she accepted the position. She will be succeeded as headmistress by Sorceress Gabriella Molson, the Potions teacher.

The men's division of the QAS, led by Headmaster Arthur Nagel and visited on the initial tour of Dana, was situated in Dana and destroyed in the attack. Nagel was killed immediately. The surviving students will be enrolled in the Salem Witches' Academy as the SWA's first male students and begin attending classes in Enfield in the fall.

That is all for now. If any new information comes in, I will inform you at once. However, until then, rest assured that the United States government will be taking care of everything for you. You will be safe in the palm of our hand.

Thank you for your time, ladies and gentlemen, and may God bless the United States of America.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #159
-------------
Tuesday, May 14, 1996
1625Z
Al-Aqsa Mosque
Jerusalem
NEXT PoV: 160 -- Albus Dumbledore

Samuel stared in horror at his interpreter and the Kohen Gadol. He could not believe what he was hearing. After three thousand years, one would have expected society to become more civilized, or at least God-fearing. He had initially been pleased when he had received word that the God of Abraham was now honored by over half of the world. But how God-fearing could people be if they did things like THIS?

Seven thousand people killed in a span of seconds by a group of people who appeared to be roughly equivalent to a band of anti-monarchists. Seven thousand people! The number staggered them. That was probably the entire population of Hebron in his time, possibly even Jerusalem! He'd never heard of a large city being destroyed so quickly other than in the legends of Sodom and Gomorrah!

Where would it stop? The destruction of Rome, that tremendous city which served as John Paul's headquarters? John Paul had told him that there were millions of people in Rome. Samuel couldn't even conceive of a such a large number. He doubted that entire Kingdom of Israel had had a million people when Saul and David were struggling with the throne. The only nations which could have had a million people were the powerhouses like Assyria and Egypt. The destruction a city the size of one of those two kingdoms in a matter of seconds would be a disaster unparalleled in human history.

A terrible thought suddenly occurred to him. These modern humans had managed to harness the powers God had used to create the universe. They had already admitted that they figured out how exactly he had created animals -- something called evolution. Were these people arrogant enough to try to play God, wielding divine powers in the name of God but without the WISDOM of God? Had this civilization forgotten the legends of the Tower of Babel and dared to challenge Him?

God was abstract, and Samuel knew that. Voices weren't exactly going to come out of heaven and started screaming Avada Kedavra at everybody. But the Tower of Babel story was a valid warning in this case. If you rise too high and forget your mortality and where you came from, your civilization
will corrupt itself and disintegrate in the blink of an eye. Akkad and Sumer had done that by the time
he had been born, and he had repeatedly preached that Egypt and Assyria would follow in their
footsteps at some point. Judging from what the Kohen Gadol had told him, his prediction had come
ture.

Samuel didn't want to admit this to himself, but he was getting a bit fed up with trying to deal with
this complicated society he had found himself in. He had done what he could to try to redeem these
people, but he was only one man. He was not Moses, blessed with divine intuition the power to lead
a people. He was not Joseph, an Egyptian Secretary of Agriculture versed in prophecy. He was
Samuel, an ordinary wizard who was trying to help the community. Perhaps he wasn't strong enough
to accomplish this task.

He looked to his right, where Anitiel and her interpreter were standing and listening to the Kohen
Gadol. Both women were wearing modest clothing, and the only way to figure out who was who was
to check which one was the ghost. God worked in mysterious ways. He had likely reunited
Anitiel and Samuel for a reason. It started to dawn on him that having the two of them team up might
be part of the solution. Anitiel was a warlord, familiar with fighting and diplomacy. She was also a
prophetess able to disguise herself as a bee. She thought women should have the same rights as men,
something Samuel never really understood. He had to admit, however, that she was a brilliant, and
forceful, woman.

She would make a better leader than he would. However, many of these cultures would not allow
women into positions of authority. But if Samuel himself took the lead and had Anitiel as one of his
advisors...

It had taken him a good twenty minutes to hit upon a solution, one which would probably catch all of
these people completely off guard. He had spoke with Anitiel about it earlier, without any
interpreters in the room to serve as potential leaks. She thought it was clever, particularly since these
people considered him to be the first prophet they'd had in over a thousand years. They decided to
give these people one more chance for their society to redeem itself before springing their trap.

He brought himself back to the present, however. Blinking his eyes in an attempt to regain control,
he choked: "That's impossible!"

The Kohen Gadol shook his head, tears in his eyes. "I'm afraid not, Holy One. I just saw it on the
news. Terrorists have detonated bombs above the headquarters of the United States Department of
Magic and killed seven thousand wizards."

Anitiel looked at the High Priest quizzically. "United States? Bombs?"

Samuel explained. "The United States is a large nation on the western continent, Anitiel. It is likely
the most powerful nation in the world at this point. Bombs are devices which explode and destroy
things."

Anitiel stared at him. "These people have explosive devices which can kill seven thousand people?"

The Kohen Gadol nodded slowly. "I'm afraid that's just the start of it, Mistress Deborah. We have
devices which can destroy millions of people in an instant. Thankfully, these devices have not been
used for fifty years. Inshallah, they will never be used again."

Anitiel grunted and muttered that these devices would have helped a lot subduing Jericho and places
like that. Samuel glared at her sharply. "I see, Anitiel. Would you be willing to kill civilians along
with the enemy soldiers to conquer the city? What did they do to you? Who would harvest the grain and pay the taxes?"

Anitiel's mouth clamped shut. Finally she shook her head. "I see your point. Never mind". Thankfully, neither interpreter translated this interchange.

Crisis averted, Samuel turned back to the Kohen Gadol. "Who did it? What did the victims do which warrant an attack?"

"The victims were innocent civilians, Holy One. They were attacked simply because they were wizards."

"What? They were innocent? God curse the attackers! Who was it? I'm going to excommunicate them!"

"No one knows for sure yet, Holy One. However, the prime suspect at this point is an American anti-wizard group called America for Humans. They are led by a minister known as Stephen Pitmoss."

Samuel slammed the palm of his hand against his forehead. "Not ANOTHER Something for Humans group?"

"I'm afraid so, Holy One."

Samuel grinned evilly. "God help us. However, I've got an idea for this group. They are led by a minister, you said?"

"Yes, Holy One."

"A minister is a man of God, right?"

"Yes. The position is equivalent to a priest, imam, or rabbi."

"I thought so. In that case, I'm a man of God. He probably knows who I am -- all of you people seem to. If I excommunicate him, he'll listen, recant, and offer compensation for all the victims."

The Kohen Gadol closed his eyes. "He won't, Holy One."

"What --"

"You're a wizard."

Even Anitiel blanched at the ensuing stream of expletives.

Aafia Siddiqui was still in shock from the news broadcast. She had heard rumors from various al-Qaeda operatives that there was going to be some sort of operation in the US on the 14th. She figured a few people would be killed or injured in a bomb attack.

But not 7,400.

Seventy-four hundred people. It was as if most of the students of MIT had suddenly dropped dead for no fault of their own. This had gone too far. Way too far.
What was even more frightening was the fact that he she followed orders and killed the Russian House witch, it would have been worse. She logged onto the Internet and retrieved a copy of the president's speech.

"However, two young witches risked their lives to save the people of Boston. One of them, Guinevere de Mornay, was in Enfield at the time of the incident. She hurried over to MIT, teleported her boyfriend -- a senior there -- and his roommate from the Alpha Chi Gamma fraternity over to a Buddhist retreat center near the Quabbin, and returned to MIT to help another witch, an MIT student living in Russian House, save the day. The Russian House student immediately demonstrated the abilities which made her a candidate for one of the finest engineering schools in the world, sending Guinevere off to cast spells to enhance the integrity of the downstream bridges and open the Charles River Dam so all of the excess water flowed unimpeded into the Atlantic. Guinevere then returned to MacGregor, where she and the MIT student combined their powers to seal off the entrance to the Dana-Cambridge corridor with debris from the collapsed dorms.

The two women collapsed with exhaustion shortly after the corridor was sealed. However, their spells worked. The corridor has remained sealed, and the water level of the Charles is beginning to return to normal. They will be awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, one of our country's highest civilian honors; and the Order of Merlin, First Class, a great Wizarding honor; at a ceremony later on this month."

She understood now why Dilmi wanted the Russian House witch taken out. Had she done so, Guinevere would have been overwhelmed and the entire reservoir would probably have come pouring out into the Charles. This would have caused the river to overflow its banks and destroy most of Boston and Cambridge. Instead of 7,400 dead, there would have been 20,000 dead or more. Her actions -- or lack of actions -- had saved tens of thousands of lives.

Allah had put her on this earth for a reason. It had been His will that she join al-Qaeda and meet the Russian House witch. Finally, she knew what she had been created for: to betray al-Qaeda to the Russian House witch and save thousands of people in the process.

She promised to do so as soon as the two witches came back from receiving their awards later on in the week.

To be continued...

Update #160
------------

Wednesday, May 15, 1996
St. Elizabeth's Hospital [don't know if it exists though -- tried to pick a name]
London
England
NEXT PoV: 161 -- Harry Potter

------------

HORCRUXES LEFT: 4 (locket, ring, snake, cup)

------------

Albus Dumbledore walked through the doors of the hospital and did his best to ignore the astonished glances of the people in the reception area. He was soon surrounded by curious Muggles who were asking him about the nature of magic, the monster in the football stadium, and the attack in the United States. He did everything he could to try to cut off the interviews because he was on an important mission, one which would likely impact the lives of Muggles all over England -- and
perhaps the world. That was, of course, if his investigation revealed what he feared it would.

Closing the elevator door in the face of the crowd, he headed down to the basement, where the hospital staff kept the morgue. He walked over to the entrance to the morgue and knocked on the door.

A bald, tired-looking man opened the door. "Good morning. How can I help you?"

Dumbledore shook his hand. "Mr. Nichols, my name is Albus Dumbledore. I had an appointment with you."

Nichols nodded. "You're the wizard, right?"

"That is correct. I'm here to investigate the odd circumstances surrounding the attack in Wembley Stadium."

Nichols gestured for him to enter the room. "I figured one of you chaps would come. Lots of strange things happened around that time, and maybe you can explain what happened with the bodies. And with the dog."

Dumbledore's eyebrows shot up. "Bodies? As in plural?"

"Yes, Mr. Dumbledore. When the attack occurred, all of the people who had been seriously injured were sent here. All of them survived except for one, and his body's in this morgue right now. So far, everything seems normal. However, we also took the corpse of the rabid dog as well and stored it here as well. We were hoping that further tests would identify which species the animal was and who its owner had been."

"That sounds reasonable. What did you find?"

The mortician bit his lip. "Well, when we came back the next day, the dog's body was gone. In its place was a chap I'd never seen before. He appeared to have been shot multiple times."

"Shot?"

"Yes, Mr. Dumbledore, shot. We checked to see if there had been a mixup with the bodies, but the computer searches revealed that nothing out of the order happened. We bring in the carcass of the dog, and when we wake up the next morning to start the investigation the dog had been replaced with this gunshot victim."

Dumbledore look at the hem of his robe for his moment. He didn't like this, as everything so far supported his theory. Turning back to the mortician, he asked, "Do you remember how the animal in the football stadium died?"

The mortician consulted his notes. "It was shot five times and --". The man suddenly cut off mid-sentence as something occurred to him. "Interesting coincidence, Mr. Dumbledore. The human corpse which replaced the dog's also had five bullets in him. It's almost as if the dog had turned into the man, but that's impossible."

Dumbledore let determination fill his face. "Mr. Nichols, I need to see the body of the gunshot victim. Now."
The mortician shook his head. "I'm sorry, Mr. Dumbledore. I can't do that unless I get permission first from the authorities --"

Dumbledore reached into his robe and pulled out a piece of parchment. "Does this qualify?"

Nichols took the parchment and read it over. "You've been in touch with the Minister of Magic? You think there's a magical component involved here? Bloody hell, you may be right. Why else would you be here?"

Dumbledore spoke gently and urgently. "I need to see the body, Mr. Nichols. We may have a serious problem that the Muggles don't realize is going to affect them."

Nichols looked at him skeptically. "Problem? What problem?"

Dumbledore had to be very careful here. He thought for a moment, and eventually said: "Think biological warfare with a magical origin."

The mortician stared at him. "You've got to be kidding. That dog had some kind of communicable disease and infected all of the people it bit?"

"Quite possibly. If so, it is a disease that will ravage the entire Muggle population unless we stop the pandemic quickly. Right now, there are fewer than 30 victims. We need to stop it here and now. If wait a few more months, it will be too late and everyone else will succumb. Now, will you lead me to the body or will I have consult your manager?"

The mortician didn't need to be told twice. He told Dumbledore to put on a sterile biological suit and follow him into the morgue.

The morgue was extremely cold and filled with human-sized drawers which presumably contained human bodies. Nichols scanned the labels on each of the drawers and eventually found the one he wanted. He pulled on the handle and pulled it out, exposing body covered by a blue tarp. He pulled back the tarp so that Dumbledore could see the cadaver.

The wizard recognized Remus Lupin immediately. His eyes had been closed, as if he were asleep. There was a bloody hole in his head which had likely been made by a bullet.

Dumbledore shook his head. "It is as I feared, Mr. Nichols. I had suspected that it would be this man. A pandemic may be upon us."

Nichols whistled. "God help us. Who was he? Was he one Voldemort's supporters?"

"No, Mr. Nichols. He was actually one of my staff, and a very devoted member of a group of people determined to destroy Voldemort and his minions. Unfortunately, he was also ill. We thought we had his disease under control, but apparently we didn't. If you wouldn't mind, I'd like you to release the body to a Ms. Nymphadora Tonks for burial."

"Who's she?"

"She's a wizard and his girlfriend."

Nichols nodded. "I'll see to that. What exactly happened here? What did he have? I don't suppose he had a disease which turned people into rabid dogs, did he? It --"
Nichols's voice drained away as a wild look came into his eyes. Dumbledore braced himself. If the Muggles knew enough about the werewolf myths as Dumbledore feared they did --

Nichols suddenly backed off in horror. "Good God! This man was a werewolf! It all fits! Turning into an animal! Biting people! Full moon!"

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes, Mr. Nichols. Please keep this to yourself, as I don't want to start a panic."

Nichols nodded and slowly calmed himself. "Please don't tell me that everyone that he bites also becomes a werewolf and is going to start attacking people like this man did."

"I'm afraid so, Mr. Nichols. Hence the reference to a biological attack."

"God Almighty! When's the next full moon?"

Dumbledore gritted his teeth. "June 1st, Mr. Nichols. Barely over two weeks from now. You now see why we need to contact everyone who was attacked and have them come to the Ministry of Magic before that time."

Nichols nodded and made a call upstairs. Dumbledore could tell that he was speaking with someone in the emergency unit and that he didn't like what he was hearing. Writing some names down, he hung up the phone.

He handed the sheet of paper over to Dumbledore. "These are the people we treated at the hospital after the attack. You should inform all of these people that they may have been infected."

Dumbledore nodded. "Your help is most appreciated, Mr. Nichols. However, what are you concerned about?"

Nichols pointed at the list. "There are fourteen people on this list."

"So? That's good, isn't it?"

Nichols leaned over the desk at Dumbledore. "Twenty-seven victims survived the attack. We only know where fourteen are. I suspect the other group refused medical treatment because they thought they had just received a scratch or something like that. They thought the rabies shot would be enough to make things better. I take it that a rabies shot will not be enough to turn someone from a werewolf back into a normal person?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "No. It is not. There is no known cure for lycanthropy, but there is a potion that can be created which will alleviate some of the symptoms. How do we get in touch with the other thirteen victims?"

Nichols shrugged. "I don't know, Mr. Dumbledore. I honestly don't know."

Dumbledore groaned. "We'll deal with that problem later. Meanwhile, we should start chasing down these people. We'll start here, at the top. I'm sorry, Mr. Nichols, but I can't read your handwriting --"

Nichols pointed at the top row on the sheet. "Lauren Mistry. The first victim's name is Lauren Mistry."
To be continued...
Update #161
------------
Wednesday, May 15, 1996
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
Great Britain
NEXT PoV: 162 -- Stephen Pitmoss
------------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 4 (locket, ring, snake, cup)
------------
Harry Potter stared at Headmistress McGonagall. Snape was sick, and there was no replacement!
They had a free period! Granted, it was an interesting class, Defense Against the Dark Arts, instead
of Snape's old standby, Potions. But a free period would be useful, especially with OWLs just
around the corner.

Harry had no idea what he was going to do about OWLs. He had been out for over two months and
was way behind on his work. Would he have to take the exams not fully prepared? The only good
thing Horace Slughorn had proven to be an exceptional Potions teacher. The change of instructor
had catapulted Potions into the stratosphere as far as Harry was concerned, placing it just below
Defense Against the Dark Arts in his ranking of favorite classes. He was pleasantly surprised when
he heard that Slughorn had been a Slytherin: good Slytherins existed after all.

He headed out into the corridor with the rest of the Gryffindors. Everyone was talking about the
recent attack in the United States. Minister Scrimgeour had recommended that the Prime Minister
muster up several divisions of British soldiers and station them around potential Wizarding targets.
America for Humans, the group which was most likely behind the attack -- no one had at yet claimed
responsibility -- had an equivalent here in the United Kingdom, Britain for Humans. Britain for
Humans had already attacked several wizards and had attempted to burn down a church in St.
Catchpole. Both Scrimgeour and the Prime Minister had to assume that Britain for Humans would, at
some point, attempt a copycat attack.

Harry looked out the window, where men with guns and wands ringed Hogwarts and Hogsmeade.
The Floo connection to Umbridge's former office had been closed off, and all visitors were barred
from entering Hogwarts. These included Sirius Black, who had planned to visit his godson for the
first time as a free man.

From what McGonagall had heard from the American Minister of Magic, virtually the entire
Wizarding police force in the United States had been called into an emergency session. The plan was
to launch a multi-pronged attack, simultaneously, on every single chapter of America for Humans.
The first phase of the attack would likely be done using Muggle forces, as authorities were reluctant
to have wizards be seen attacking Muggles. The wizards would only be called in if there problems
subduing these locations.

Most of the United States was now squarely against America for Humans. One chapter in Kentucky
had been burned to the ground by irate Muggles, and Stephen Pitmoss was supposedly running for
his life. Many former America for Humans members had apparently defected and turned against their
former organization in order to save their lives. The country was angry, and rightly so. Seven
thousand witches killed in one attack. The sheer scale of the attack was beyond belief.

His lifetime ban from playing Quidditch had been revoked, and he was supposed to have been preparing for Quidditch practice today. However, all Quidditch matches had been canceled in commemoration of the attack in the United States. Students were to be in their dorms the whole time, accompanied by prefects and teachers.

He had just about reached the portrait of the Fat Lady when someone put a hand on his shoulder. He turned around and saw Professor Snape standing before him. The man looked awful. His skin was even paler than usual, and it looked liked he hadn't slept for a while. There were a few cuts on his arm as well which Harry couldn't explain.

Harry couldn't help but ask. "Professor! How are you doing? Are we going to be having class after all?"

Snape growled at him. "No, Mr. Potter. I am not going to be teaching class today. Instead, I need you to follow me. Now."

Harry didn't like this. "Sir, we're supposed to be in our rooms now that this attack has taken place, and the Occulumency lessons."

Snape looked furious. "You will come with me, now, or I will take fifty points from Gryffindor for every minute you delay. Time is of the essence here."

Harry knew not to argue with Snape when he was like this. Shrugging, he followed Snape towards the headmistress's office. Snape spoke the password, and they headed up the spiral staircase. Harry watched as the former Potions master marched into the room, reached into a secret compartment behind McGonagall's desk, and withdrew the sword of Gryffindor. Harry didn't know whether he should be offended by having Snape touching the great weapon. Sword in hand, Snape headed back towards the entrance. Seconds later, they were heading back down.

Snape passed the sword to Harry. "Here, Mr. Potter. You will need this."

Harry stared at the sword for a moment and accepted the weapon. "Professor, what are we going to do? What's going on?"

Snape's answer was evasive, but Harry understood it immediately. "We are following the advice of my former colleague, and your late Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Quirinus Quirrell."

Harry's eyes bulged. "You found another one?"

"Yes, Mr. Potter, the locket. It is situated at 12 Grimmauld Place."

Harry stared at him. "There's a Horcrux in the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix? How on earth did it get there? Didn't Professor Quirrell say it was in a cave somewhere?"

Snape grunted sourly, reached into his pocket, and retrieved a piece of parchment. "Indeed, Mr. Potter, he did. There was indeed a locket in the cave. Professor Dumbledore and I went over there to check it out and were nearly killed trying to drink a potion protecting the locket. Both of us were almost delirious by the time we had consumed enough of the potion to retrieve the locket -- and this."

Confused, Harry started reading the document. His eyes suddenly widened.
"To the Dark Lord: I know I will be dead long before you read this, but I want you to know that it was I who discovered your secret. I have stolen the real Horcrux and intend to destroy it as soon as I can. I face death in the hope that when you meet your match, you will be mortal once more". It was signed "R. A. B."

Harry shuddered and handed the document back to Snape. "The locket in the cave was a decoy?"

Snape seethed with anger. "Obviously, Mr. Potter. Professor Dumbledore and I nearly killed ourselves quaffing that potion only to find that the Horcrux had been in 12 Grimmauld Place the whole time. We removed the note and returned the decoy Horcrux to its original location beneath the potion. If it fooled us, it will fool the Dark Lord if he comes searching for it."

"How do you know it's in 12 Grimmauld Place? And who's R. A. B.?"

"R. A. B. was Regulus Arcturus Black, one of your beloved godfather's brothers. Had he been alive, I would not know whether to give Slytherin 100 points for taking the Horcrux or to deduct 100 points from Slytherin for having make Professor Dumbledore and me drink that bloody potion for no good reason. As far as 12 Grimmauld Place goes, we checked there and found that the original is in fact there. The Soul Detection spell revealed a living presence in the locket."

Harry got excited as he continued Snape's chain of thought. "You want me to help destroy it? Is that why you've come here to retrieve me and the sword?"

"That is correct, Mr. Potter. I stopped by to get the sword. As you know, the Sword of Gryffindor -- steeped in basilisk venom -- is one of the few things capable of destroying a Horcrux."

"And you want me to do it?"

Snape hissed. "You are the only person who can do it, Mr. Potter. You see, the Dark Lord placed the Horcrux inside the locket. It is fairly obvious that in order to attack the Horcrux, we most open the locket. None of us were able to, however, Eventually Dumbledore realized that in order to open it, someone would have to speak to it in Parseltongue and tell it to open."

Harry nodded. "Which means you need a Parselmouth. And that's me."

"Correct. Now, please keep your mouth shut as we head through the corridors. We don't want to scare the normal people here."

They headed through the corridors with very little resistance as Snape's imposing presence caused everyone to melt out of the way. Eventually, they made it outside the castle. Snape nodded to the soldiers standing guard, who saluted. He then grasped Harry's arm and Apparated him into 12 Grimmauld Place.

Most of the Order of the Phoenix was there. Dumbledore looked like he had been hit over the head with a baseball bat -- he must have also suffered trauma drinking the potion in the cave. Rufus Scrimgeour was there as well, along with John Major. The adults were all standing silently around the dining room table. The surface of the table was completely empty save for one thing: a small green locket hanging from a chain.

Snape looked around the room. "Ladies and gentlemen, remember the drill. Stay behind me at all times and have your wands at the ready. We don't know what this thing is going to do. Mr. Potter,
are you ready?"

Harry lifted the sword and positioned it over the locket. "I am, Professor."

"Good. Now, imagine that the serpent on the locket is a snake and command the snake to open it."

Harry stared at the locket. After a few minutes, he found himself convinced that he was staring at a snake. That should be good enough, he thought. He shouted, "Open it!"

He couldn't tell if he had spoken Parseltongue. However, judging from the reactions of the people around him, he hadn't. He tried again, this time more clearly. Nothing. Puzzled, he turned to the assembled multitudes.

"I'm having trouble speaking Parseltongue for some reason. Do I need to have a real snake in front of me for some reason now?"

Dumbledore stood silently for second. Suddenly, his eyes widened. "I think I have an explanation, Harry. You may no longer be a Parselmouth."

Harry shook his head to clear it. "What?"

"You may have only been a Parselmouth because Voldemort had a part of his soul embedded in you. When he attacked you, he destroyed that piece and removed your ability to speak with snakes."

Harry stared even harder. "You mean to tell me I was a Horcrux?"

"Possibly. However, if you were you are no longer, so let bygones be bygones. Do you remember what you said to open the entry to the Chamber of Secrets? Think hard, Harry. Everything may depend on this."

Harry wracked his memories for a moment. Finally, the expression came to him. He tried to mimic it as well as he could. After three attempts, the locket opened and revealed a disembodied eye.

The eye swiveled wildly as it looked around the room. Harry was about to slam the sword down on the table when Hermione Granger suddenly materialized in front of him.

"You fool, you don't know what you're doing!"

Harry lowered the sword for a moment. "What?"

Snape roared at him. "IGNORE HER! IT'S AN ILLUSION! DESTROY IT!"

Harry stared at Hermione and then back at Snape. "Sir, I don't think so. She looks pretty real here --"

Snape swore beneath his breath. Harry picked it up: "I can't believe I'm going to ask him this”. Aloud, Snape yelled: "Black, take the sword! You do it!"

Harry was about to yell at Snape that he'd be able to do the job when he suddenly thought of a good way to test whether this was the real Hermione. Reaching out gingerly, he touched the image of his friend.

His hand went right through it as Sirius bellowed at him, "Harry, what are you waiting for? Finish
Having convinced himself that Hermione was indeed an illusion, he raised the sword once more above his head and swung with all his might. The weapon sliced through the illusion of Hermione and slammed into the eye. There was a hideous screech, and the illusion vanished. Lying before him on the table were the remains of a locket, sliced neatly in two. Shoving Harry out of the way, Snape cast the Soul Detection spell once more and confirmed that the Horcrux had been destroyed.

Everyone cheered and shook Harry's hand. Snape's reaction, however, was short and succinct. "Good work, Mr. Potter. Now, if you have any chance of passing your OWLs, you will want to translate your determination here to Potions."

Harry nodded and grasped Snape's hand to Apparate back to the area around Hogwarts. At the last minute, though, he let go. Turning to Sirius, he pointed at the table and said, "Sirius, I'm sorry about the table. I think I've left a bit of a scratch."

Sirius shook his head. "Don't worry about it. Go, pass your OWLs, and you can pay for it later if you want. I'm tempted to keep it as a souvenir of how you destroyed the Horcrux."

Satisfied, Harry grasped Snape's hand once more and 12 Grimmauld Place faded around him.

To be continued...

Update #162
------------
Wednesday, May 15, 1996
Abilene Victorian Inn
Abilene, Kansas
United States of America
NEXT PoV: 163 -- Ask Fake Name Generator

HORCRUXES LEFT: 3 (ring, snake, cup)

In a span of less than 36 hours, Stephen Pitmoss had gone from one of the most influential preachers in the nation to Public Enemy Number One. He should have known that he would be demonstrating the sin of arrogance by allowing his speech linking America for Humans to the attack to be posted on the Internet!

The first church was set on fire less than eight hours after the attack on the Quabbin. Shortly after this, rumors began spreading that people associated with America for Humans were being ridiculed, molested, and in one case actually murdered. This, accompanied by news report which had placed a $5,000,000 bounty in his head, convinced Pitmoss that he had to leave as soon as possible.

He had done what he could to disguise himself. He shaved off his trademark mustache, replaced his glasses with an old set of contact lenses, and had been in the process of trying to disguise his license plate number when God, as expected, had rewarded him for his strike against the wizards in a most unusual way. The doorbell had rung, revealing a panicked Yolanda Dursley-Burgess demanding to know where her husband was.

This had placed Pitmoss in a difficult position. Had she known that Patrick had been involved with the attack? Did she know that her husband was likely dead, or at the very least missing? He asked for God for advice, and He told him to tell her the truth. The woman had naturally started wailing and
screaming like crazy, and he had done what he could to console her. He had said that he would stand by her no matter what happened and that God would grant both her and her husband a place in heaven.

Then it occurred to him that she had come in a car. A car which was registered to her and not to Patrick. A car which was likely not going to be on the police's watch list.

Within the hour, he and Patrick's widow had stopped by Patrick's house, picked up some supplies for Yolanda, and headed westward on I-70. Pitmoss turned on the news just in time to hear a report that FBI agents had broken into his house and were looking for him. They had mentioned that although they hadn't found him, they had confiscated his computer. That wasn't good, he thought. That computer had virtually all of the email addresses and phone numbers of people who headed America for Humans chapters across the nation. With that information, they would be able to track down virtually every single America for Humans member.

They had driven as far as they could in one sitting. Eventually, though, they both started to flag. They pulled into a bed and breakfast in Abilene and booked separate rooms under the names David Lawson and Michelle Aaronson. They had to take a risk taking a lot of cash out of the bank in Westboro before they left as there was no way they'd be able to pay with a credit card.

They had woken up the next morning still in one piece and, as far as they could tell, still free. However, the hunt for America for Humans congregations was still going on. Pitmoss opened the window to see the rising sun reddened by what appeared to be thick plume of ash. He turned on the TV and the local station was reporting that the FBI was in the middle of an operation against the Church of the Holy Savior in Chapman. They had driven through Chapman during their frantic flight out of Westboro. Judging from the town's location on the map, Pitmoss concluded that he was seeing the sun through a plume of smoke from the burning church.

Pitmoss swore to himself. A church on fire and a blood-red sun. If this wasn't a sign that the prophecies were coming true, what was?

The reporter then shifted to a view of Boston. There were enough naval vessels there to match Pearl Harbor. He saw at least one aircraft carrier, a couple of destroyers, and ships he'd never seen before. There were helicopters in the air and fighter jets everywhere. It was followed by a brief shot of the devastated Quabbin area, which looked more or less the same with one exception: the little towers which had been poking out of the western end of the reservoir had vanished. The reporter explained that the surviving wizards in Enfield and Prescott had done something to make it so the Muggles would never see their buildings again.

A few of the ships were there to protect Boston from looters and possible future attacks. The majority, however, were there for one purpose: to provide clean drinking water to over a million thirsty Bostonians. Travis Radner -- couldn't that man DIE? -- had warned the governor that although the surviving wizards were going to do everything they could to make what was left of the reservoir suitable for drinking, it would be a difficult task given the sheer size of the reservoir. The current timetable had the reservoir fit to use by mid-June.

Pitmoss was a Christian. He had to do something to help these Bostonians. He had never intended to hurt anyone other than wizards. Perhaps God was persecuting him and forcing him to flee Westboro because he had not yet done something to atone for this sin. But how would he do it? He couldn't use his name and say that he wanted to help because no one would believe him. If anything, they would just pick him and Yolanda up right there and then. It finally occurred to him that although the people here in Abilene didn't know where he was, God did. God would likely understand if he
started a rescue fund under the name David Lawson.

After having a hearty breakfast with Yolanda and the rest of the guests, he turned to the proprietor and asked if any of the organizations in the area had set up a fund to help the victims of the attack. A couple of them had, but they weren't very organized yet. Pitmoss recommended that the proprietor set up a fund and everyone who visited the Inn could contribute voluntarily if they wished to aid the victims. The proprietor thought that was a good idea, and Pitmoss started the fund off with a $200 donation. Pitmoss was pleased to see several of the other guests writing checks as he left.

Pitmoss checked out at 9:00 and had to wait thirty minutes for "Ms. Aaronson" to check out. While waiting, he purchased a copy of the local newspaper. The first three pages were all about the attack and showed pictures of the devastated Quabbin, the destroyed parts of MIT, and the ships in Boston. The death toll had stabilized at about 7,400. America for Humans was still the primary suspect, and the dragnet had caught a good SIXTY-FIVE PERCENT of the organization's members while they slept. Sixty-five percent! How in God's name had they managed to do that? Pitmoss could only think of one possibility: they had called upon the minions of the Antichrist to help them out with their vile spells. The time of Revelation was close, indeed.

He returned to the B&B just as Yolanda checked out. He picked up her stuff, loaded it into her car just like a gentleman should, and continued west on I-70.

About half an hour went by before a worried Yolanda tapped him on the shoulder. "Reverend, I think someone's following us."

Pitmoss grunted and looked into the rearview mirror. There were a few cars on the road, but none of them looked suspicious. She was probably paranoid, he thought. There weren't many places for cars to get off the highway between Abilene and Salina, where Route 81 crossed I-70. He figured most of these cars were either headed to Salina or points west.

There was an easy way to find out, however. He turned onto US-81 and drove around Salina for a while hoping to lose his tail. After about forty-five minutes, he turned back onto I-70 and continued heading west.

He looked into the rearview mirror. One of the cars -- a nondescript black one -- was still behind him.

Shit, he thought. Well, it could still be coincidence. Hoping against hope, he turned north at the next exit and headed towards the small town of Culver. He thought that it would highly unlikely that any random person driving down the highway would have even HEARD of this town. He certainly hadn't before.

He had to slow down on this smaller road -- he could pulled over for speeding and they'd catch him as soon as they asked for his driver's license. He looked back in the rearview mirror and saw the car still there, behind him.

Uh-oh, he thought. He turned on the radio and was greeted with someone indicating that "sources said" a car whose license plate matched that of Patrick Dursley-Burgess's wife had been seen on I-70 in central Kansas. Furthermore, two people had paid cash to stay at an inn in Abilene and one of them had looked exactly like Yolanda Dursley-Burgess. The other person had looked a lot like Stephen Pitmoss without glasses or a mustache.

Pitmoss began to panic. The road went on and on, and there was nowhere to get off. Had he been in
the position that the police were in now, he would have called the office in Culver and told them to barricade the road and not let Pitmoss's car into the town. This would trap him nicely between the car trailing him and the blockade up ahead.

Gritting his teeth, he gunned the motor and began to speed. The only chance he had was to get through Culver before the police had a chance to organize a blockade. He had a brief moment of satisfaction when he saw the car behind him recede back into the distance.

The moment ended abruptly when he saw the small town up ahead. Between his car and the town was a whole flotilla of flashing blue lights. He looked back just in time to see the car closing in behind him -- along with a helicopter.

Yolanda shivered in horror. Finally, her shoulders slumped and she began to fall into shock. However, she had time for one quiet comment.

"Reverend, I think we're going to jail."

To be continued...

-----------------
Update #163
-----------------
Wednesday, May 15, 1996
169 South Street
Waltham, Massachusetts
United States of America
NEXT PoV: 164 -- Ask Fake Name Generator
-----------------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 3 (ring, snake, cup)
-----------------
The first thing I did when I woke up was to the sink. As I had been afraid of, nothing came out of the tap.

How were people supposed to get by without water? Showering people could get away with -- supposedly people hadn't bathed much in medieval times and it hadn't killed anyone. Granted, people would eventually start smelling bad after a while, but people would survive. I hoped the emergency wouldn't go on as long as the rumors were reporting it would.

I knew it was probably a bit selfish of me, but I would really miss those 30-minute hot showers in the morning. Even if the remnants of the Quabbin were somehow purified, they would very likely be rationed because there wasn't nearly enough water to draw up on as there had been earlier.

I had stopped by several supermarkets on the way back to Waltham from my parents' house to see if anyone had bottled water. The shelves were completely bare on the first two stores I visited, and the third had taped a sign to the front door reading "WE'RE OUT OF WATER! SORRY!" Thinking that some fluids would be better than none, I had headed into the store to see if they had any milk or juice. I was able to come away with a couple of bottles of apple juice but that was it. Disturbed, I stopped by a couple of gas stations to see if their convenience stores had any water left. Nothing. It looked like I was going to have to wash my hands with apple juice at the rate things were going. Either that, or hope that it rained.

It wasn't raining this morning, which meant that I wouldn't get a quick rinse from Mother Nature. I walked into the living room and turned on the TV to see if there was any news. Channel 4 was
showing aerial footage of what appeared to be a riot outside a Whole Foods. I watched as cops started throwing tear gas canisters into the crowd in an attempt to disperse them.

The commentator explained, "This riot starts about 15 minutes ago when a van carrying a shipment of Aquafina bottles parked in front of the store for a delivery. The driver explained that he had been able to deliver only two or three cases before he was attacked by an unknown assailant. Virtually all of Prospect Street between Central Square and Broadway has been closed off until everything clears up. Note that this is NOT the same incident as we started the broadcast with, where a Poland Springs delivery truck was hijacked in Mattapan and sent to parts unknown. Back to you, Dave."

The anchorman appeared onscreen. "Thank you, Lisa. For those who have just tuned in, there is now a second incident involving a water delivery truck in the greater Boston area. This time, it is at the Whole Foods between Central and Inman Squares in Cambridge. People at the scene seem to have tried to take advantage of the fact that Cambridge still has water and are starting to target stores where the residents would not have been forced to stockpile water. We'll now switch to Mike, who is monitoring the situation near Fresh Pond."

The scene shifted to a reporter standing in front of a wooded area. All I could tell was that there were security guards all over the place with guns their hands. Behind them were glimpses of water.

The new reporter began speaking. "This is Mike from Fresh Pond, where the perimeter of the reservoir still appears to be secure. There have been a few attempts by angry Bostonians to try to break through the ring of officers and get at the water, but they have all been beaten off. There a couple of businesses nearby asking the guards to open up Route 2 so that the companies can interact with their customers, but the guards aren't going to accommodate. They say the general public's safety is much more important than the success of any individual small business. Inbound traffic is backed up almost all the way to Lexington. The MBTA recommends that people carpool and take public transportation whenever possible. Don't forget that the Alewife T station has a large parking lot."

At least I was lucky in one regard, I thought. I didn't have to drive through all of that mess to get from my apartment to Parametric. What was it, one mile past Brandeis?

I turned off the TV, got dressed, and walked over to the door to head over to my car. I pulled out of the driveway and turned onto South Street. That's when I noticed all of the envelopes sticking out of people's mailboxes, including my own. The paper hadn't been there in the evening when I had checked the mail.

This could be important, I thought. Turning around, I headed back into the driveway, parked the car, and walked over to the mailbox. I opened the envelope and saw a water rationing card along with a note. A quick look at the first line of the note made me realize that waiting a few minutes to get to work had been a good thing.

-------------

May 15, 1996

CITY OF WALTHAM WATER RATIONING INFORMATION

Dear Citizen:

As you are undoubtedly aware, the Quabbin Reservoir was attacked yesterday by a terrorist organization. The water of the Quabbin was contaminated by the attack and as a result it should not be used for drinking, washing, or bathing.
The Quabbin Reservoir is the sole water supply for over a million people in eastern Massachusetts. The sole exception is Cambridge, which receives its water from the Fresh Pond Reservoir. Cambridge is not included in the water emergency. However, Waltham is.

It is unknown at this time how long the emergency will be in effect. It is important, however, to stay calm and consume other liquids whenever possible to quench your thirst. Fruit juices and milk are excellent substitutes.

Some of you have asked why we have closed the connections to your faucet completely and not recommended that you boil the untreated tap water. The reason is because the dome of the Greenwich town hall served as a storage area for many obscure magical supplies and compounds, several of which can be hazardous to your health. Secretary Radner of the Department of Magic believes that several of these compounds will be able to persist in high enough concentrations to sicken young children and the elderly.

The United States Government has ordered several Navy ships, including a couple of aircraft carriers, to travel to Boston to assist with providing drinking water to the people of Massachusetts. These vessels will be stationed in the harbor near South Boston. Visitors will not be permitted on board these ships due to security arrangements and the need to distribute water as evenly, and as fairly, as possible.

Each town will be allotted an amount of water proportional to the size of its population. It will be up to each town’s mayor or governing council to determine how exactly this water is to be distributed. Although you will be assured of enough water to get by throughout the duration of this crisis, you must understand that the supply is very limited and that steps will need to be taken to conserve the water you receive.

As of today, the following regulations will be taking effect throughout our city.

1. The tap will flow to your house for one day every week. Which day it is will depend on the first letter of your street name. Streets whose names start with A, B, or C will have water available Sundays from 12 AM to 12 AM. You will be able to use as much water as you need during this time. The rest of the schedule goes as follows:

   D-F: Monday
   G-J: Tuesday
   K-M: Wednesday
   N-Q: Thursday
   R-U: Friday
   V-Z: Saturday

2. You may find it necessary to obtain water during the six days where your faucet is not connected to the tap. In this case, you must mail one of the ration cards supplied to City Hall. Each card will entitle the user to 4 gallons of water for emergency use only. You will receive a new set of ration cards once per week as long as the emergency lasts.

3. The Fire Service will be piping water directly out of the Charles, so firefighting operations will not be affected.

4. All of the water being sent to your tap will be safe to drink and will have been produced by the United States Navy's vessels. Note, however, that it will not be fluoridated. You can fluoridate your
water by adding fluoride pellets. Contact the City Hall if you wish to receive pellets.

5. If you have any information, feel free to call the State Water Hotline at 1-800-H2O-HELP. Be aware that there may be periods of heavy call volume which will necessitate a wait of a minute or more to speak to a representative.

As your mayor, I promise you that we will work through this together. My water will be rationed as well as yours, after all.

Sincerely,

The Mayor

-------------
To be continued...

-------------
Update #164

-------------
Thursday, May 16, 1996
Batchelor Household
11 Ivy Lane
LE14 5QN
Waltham on the Wolds
England
NEXT PoV: 165 -- Travis Radner

-------------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 3 (ring, snake, cup)

-------------
Peter Batchelor swore when the football match he was watching suddenly disappeared and was replaced by a black screen featuring the word SPECIAL REPORT in red letters. He swore. What had happened now?

The broadcast. "Attention, please. We apologize for the disruption of service, but we have a special report from the office of the Prime Minister at 10 Downing Street. I repeat, this is a special report from the office of the Prime Minister."

Peter frowned. Another report from the Prime Minister? What had happened now? Did that bloke Voldemort do something obnoxious to piss off a bunch of people in Devon or somewhere? He suddenly felt a brief stab of guilt: for all he knew, that evil wizard had ensorcelled some people somewhere -- possibly torturing or killing them -- and he was busy complaining that he couldn't watch the football game?

The scene shifted to a shot of the Prime Minister in his office. Seated next to him was Rufus Scrimgeour, the Minister of Magic. Scrimgeour was a household name now, thanks to the debate with Tom Riddle and the flood of interest in the Wizarding world over the past few months.

The Prime Minister steepled his hands in front of him and began to speak. "Good evening, fellow Britons. I apologize for the interruption, but I have come to issue a public service announcement which will be of extreme importance to the people of this kingdom. It is vital that you listen to what I am about to say, as this information could affect the safety and security of you and your loved ones."

Peter didn't like this. Voldemort must have done something, he thought. Why would Scrimgeour be making this announcement with the Prime Minister otherwise? He could certainly imagine Tom
Riddle trying to take revenge on Scrimgeour and the Prime Minister by harming innocent people.

The Prime Minister went on. "About two weeks ago, on 4 May, there was an incident at Wembley Stadium during a football match between Arsenal and Manchester United. You may recall that a rabid dog was teleported into the stadium by an evil wizard, almost certainly the politician Tom Riddle under his alter ego as Lord Voldemort. This dog attacked a large number of people in the stadium, killing one. To refresh your memory, here is a picture of the animal in question."

The view of the Prime Minister's office switched to a still photograph taken from, Peter assumed, a security camera at the stadium. It showed a large dog attacking the patrons. The camera zoomed in to focus on the creature. Peter whistled: that was a VERY large dog, almost man-size. It looked sort of like a Great Dane gone feral. For a few seconds, he thought that the wizard had teleported in a wolf but that wouldn't make any sense. How many wolves did he have access to? Peter answered his own question, however: he was a wizard. He could probably conjure wolves if he had to. He had a disturbing vision of a Tyrannosaurus Rex rampaging through Harrods.

The Prime Minister returned to the screen. "This kind of animal appears to be a cross-breed between a dog and a wolf. It weighs about 200 pounds and stands at least three feet tall. It is extremely aggressive and will bite virtually anyone who comes within range of its fangs. Although the specimen which attacked the football stadium was shot and destroyed, we have reason to believe that there may be more of these creatures out there. For those of you with an Internet connection, You can download an image of this creature from the government's website."

John Major's expression turned grave. "Biologists at the University of Oxford have just finished a comprehensive report on the creature. They claim that it is much closer to a wolf than a dog on the canine spectrum, and that it was indeed rabid at the time of the attack. This was more or less expected. However, they discovered a surprise which Her Majesty's government believes it is essential for you to know.

"The biologists believe that a rabies shot will NOT work against the type of disease which the creature had been suffering from. Furthermore, they suspect that ALL members of this species are rabid, not just the one in the stadium. This species is therefore a clear and present danger to all of us. The scientists immediately set to work on an antivenom which will prevent future bite victims from getting sick. They then discovered something even worse. One of the chemicals inside the animal's blood is potentially lethal to human beings. Oxford claims that it has a three-week incubation period, followed by a one-week agonal period and almost certain death. You heard me right, ladies and gentlemen. People who are bitten by this creature may have only 29 or 30 days to live."

"Needless to say, this horrified the doctors. So, they brought in the wizards to see if they could do something about it before 1 June, the time at which the doctors would have expected the people bitten on 4 May to die. By coincidence, that is the day of the full moon. Minister of Magic Scrimgeour here ordered the wizards to work long hours, and they eventually came up with a possible antidote. They believe that although the agonal period cannot be avoided, death can be averted if a bite victim comes to the wizards for treatment as soon as he or she exhibits the first symptoms: headache and nausea."

The Prime Minister leaned forward towards the camera. "From what I have been told, twenty-seven people were bitten by the creature in Wembley. We have identified a few of them, but not all. These people MUST present themselves to the Ministry of Magic prior to June 1st so they can begin their treatment. If you one any of these bite victims, or know such a person, please consider this information. We don't want people dying who can be saved just by visiting the Ministry of Magic."
"There is something else, however. The doctors have reason to believe that the disease may, I repeat may, become contagious after a bite victim has died. This condition will only take effect if the victim dies at the end of the agonal period: the body of the bite victim who died at the stadium is not a threat. This is another reason the people bitten in the stadium have to come to visit Scrimgeour. Not only will they die if they don't, they could endanger the lives of people around them.

"That's the story, ladies and gentlemen. Anyone who was bitten by one of these creatures, or was in a room in which one of the victims died, has to present him- or herself to the Ministry of Magic prior to June 1st. The Minister and his officials will brief the victims as to the nature of the disease and likely require a stay overnight on 1 June to ensure that the treatment is working. Minister Scrimgeour regrets to inform you that additional applications of the treatment may be necessary for the people who survive 1 June."

The Prime Minister looked at Scrimgeour. "I will now cede the floor to Minister Scrimgeour, who will explain how the bite victims are to contact the Ministry of Magic. Minister Scrimgeour?"

The camera panned left to focus on the wizard. "Thank you, Prime Minister. Ladies and gentlemen, do not panic. We believe that the treatment is safe and that it will prevent death. At present, though, the treatment is only temporary, so patients will likely need additional visits once every month or so to receive booster shots.

"Victims should call us at the telephone number shown at the bottom of the screen. I will give you a few moments to write it down. They should explain that they were bitten by the creature. One of our people will speak with you and explain how exactly the treatment is to proceed. Keep in mind, however, that you will be expected to present yourself at the location specified by the agent twice, once to receive the briefing and once on the night of the 31st to begin observation. Hopefully, we will find a permanent solution for those infected with the disease. Until then, this will have to suffice."

With that, the camera panned back to the Prime Minister. "That is all, ladies and gentlemen. We will now return to your regularly-scheduled programming. However, the phone number will remain on the screen throughout the rest of the hour so people who missed this message can write it down. Good night, people of Britain, and may God bless you all."

With that, the screen reverted back to the football game. Peter didn't know what he was more irritated about: the fact that it was suddenly 1-1, or the fact that a big red "WEMBLEY DOG ATTACK VICTIMS CALL THIS NUMBER" was plastered onto the bottom of the screen followed by a phone number. How would he be able to watch the game with the players constantly running behind the words?

To be continued...

-------------

Update #165
-------------

Thursday, May 16, 1996
Rose Garden
The White House
Washington, DC
United States of America
NEXT PoV: 166 -- Choi Yeun
-------------
Travis Radner watched as the two witches who had saved Boston stepped up to stand beside the President of the United States. Radner had already spent fifteen minutes speaking about the bravery and dedication of the two young women and had awarded each of them the Order of Merlin, First Class. He had been somewhat amused when the reporters covering the ceremony didn't realize how prestigious such an award was. He had been forced to explain the history of the Order of Merlin and indicate that the First Class award was similar in prestige to the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the award Clinton was about to bestow on the two women.

Radner and the president had been fielding questions about the Quabbin attack virtually nonstop for the past 24 hours. America for Humans was believed to be behind the attack, though at present there no one had any proof. Stephen Pitmoss, the charismatic -- and bigoted -- preacher who was serving as the main driving force behind America for Humans, had tried to flee the Topeka area and had been caught in the small town of Culver, Kansas, along with Yolanda Dursley-Burgess, the wife of America for Humans's founder Patrick Dursley-Burgess. There were reports that Patrick had likely fled the Topeka area before the attack: no one knew where he was, and his car had last been seen parked at the Topeka airport so he could fly to Bangor, Maine.

Pitmoss was going to be a problem. Although he had surrendered peacefully in Culver, people were taking bets as to whether he would survive long enough to face trial. People all over the country were burning him in effigy, and he had been forced to wear a bulletproof vest whenever authorities transferred him from prison to prison. Radner could understand where the Americans were coming from as the only sentence appropriate for the unprovoked murders of 7,400 people would be the death penalty.

The Muggles would be for a surprise, however. Since the target had been a Wizarding headquarters and most of the victims had been wizards, the Baseball League Protocol -- some idiot in Fourth Mesa had come up with that name, and it had stuck -- demanded that the trial be held under the jurisdiction of the Wizarding authorities. This meant that Pitmoss would be subject to the Dementor's Kiss if proven guilty. Living as a mindless shell without a soul would probably be worse than death from the Muggles' viewpoint.

Radner watched as the president praised the two women. The Russian woman had been accompanied by her family and probably half of her sorority or dormitory. Guinevere de Mornay had brought along a Muggle boyfriend. The fact that a witch was dating a Muggle had triggered a whole new flurry of questions. What did it feel like to be dating a Muggle? Does she do magic tricks for you? Did she ensorcel you when she picked you up? How about love potions? How did the religious authorities feel about this?

Radner had been intrigued by the differences in the way the two wizards reacted. Guinevere seemed to see Radner himself, and not the president, as the supreme authority. The Russian woman, however, seemed to respect Clinton more. He suspected that the Russian woman was either not originally from the United States -- so she would not have known about the American Secretary of Magic -- or had at least one Muggle parent. Oddly enough, the president seemed to pay attention to the Russian woman more than Guinevere. Several paparazzi figured that it was probably because the Russian woman didn't appear to have a boyfriend.

The speech was boring, of course. Speeches usually were. So it was a bit of a relief when one of his aides walked up to him and whispered something in his ear.

"Sir, I apologize for the interruption, but I believe we've found something in Greenwich that you're
going to want to see."

Radner frowned. "Can't it wait? I'm talking with the Muggle president here. I can't just get up and
leave."

"I believe so, sir. However, it's important that you come as quickly as possible when this is done.
You see, I don't think America for Humans did it."

Radner stared at the aide. "What? You've got to be kidding me!"

"I'm afraid not, sir. We've discovered some evidence that leads Sorceress Ariadne to believe that
America for Humans was set up. Someone else was behind the attack and executed it in a way
which was designed to frame America for Humans."

Radner whistled quietly. "Who did it then, if not America for Humans?"

"We believe it's al-Qaeda, sir. That probably means Lord Voldemort through Damodharan Dilmi's
successor."

Radner jerked back in shock. "The British Dark wizard? Tom Riddle?"

"Yes, sir."

Radner paled but quickly composed himself for the cameras. "I want a full report when I get back.
Dismissed."

------------------

Half an hour later, the ceremony was over. Radner shook everyone's hands and then Apparated back
to the Four Towns -- or at least as close to the Four Towns as the security arrangements now
permitted. The entire region around the Quabbin was now protected by a barrier that interrupted
Apparation. Visitors would have to be Apparate outside the security zone, pass through a
checkpoint, and then step through the Apparation barrier into the Quabbin area proper. Once they
were through the barrier, they could Apparate to whatever destination in the Four Towns they
wished.

The administrative capital had been moved from the destroyed Dana to Enfield. Radner materialized
just outside the Salem Witches' Academy, where Headmistress Ariadne appeared to have been
waiting impatiently.

The witch breathed a sigh of relief. "Merlin's beard, sir, that was a long meeting. What took so
long?"

Radner shrugged. "The president made a long speech and probably spent half of it ogling the
Russian woman. You can't just skip out on the president, Persephone."

Ariadne chuckled. "I see. At any rate, there's something you ought to see. Here, have some
gillyweed."

"Gillyweed?"

"Yes, sir. We're going to be traveling into the remains of Greenwich. This means we're going to have
to grow gills. Don't consume this until we've reached the border between Greenwich and Enfield.
Once you eat it, you'll be able to breathe underwater for an hour -- and you WON'T be able to
breathe air. Do you understand, sir?"

"Yes, I do."

Ariadne nodded. "Good. Follow me, sir."

Ariadne updated him as they headed towards the barrier separating Enfield from the destroyed town. "We decided to investigate the Greenwich incident first. The mechanism behind the Greenwich attack seems much clearer, primarily because there were witnesses who saw the explosion and Apparated out of Greenwich before the shield collapsed. We know where it happened, so we figured that would be a good place to search for evidence."

"Wouldn't some of the evidence have flowed out into Dana and Cambridge?"

"Correct. However, there was enough stuff left over -- primarily heavy stuff -- near the point where the explosion took place. We interviewed some of the Muggle guards surrounding the reservoir and they have reason to believe that an airplane may have been involved in the attack. The Muggles believed that they heard an engine, though they never saw the aircraft itself. Furthermore, several witnesses in Greenwich mentioned that something entered the water before it exploded."

"What do you mean, something? Couldn't they see what it was?"

"No. However, judging from the splash pattern on the way in the object had an unusual shape: a tapered front followed by a wider section. That was as far as it got before the explosion. We couldn't see the thing that made the splash itself, but the spray pattern gave it away."

Radner suddenly got it. "An airplane flying into the water."

Ariadne nodded and stared at him. "Not just that. An invisible airplane flying into the water."

Radner stopped short. "An INVISIBLE airplane? The Muggles have a way to make things invisible?"

Both he and Ariadne answered the question at the same time. "No."

Radner whistled as they approached the barrier. "Then how could the airplane be invisible?"

Ariadne grimaced. "You'll see for yourself, sir. Here, eat the gillyweed and follow me into the water."

Radner did so, and his lungs locked up. He dove through the wall into the shattered Greenwich as flippers appeared on his feet. He looked around for Ariadne, who was pointing in a certain direction.

Swimming through Greenwich was an unnerving experience. Bodies and debris were everywhere. He recognized most, if not all, of the people. Whoever did this was going to pay.

They swam for about ten minutes and eventually reached an area surrounded by mermaids. Ariadne spoke to them, and they stood aside to led the two officials pass. Inside the secured area were a few more bodies -- but these bodies were remarkably different from the others.

They were dressed like Muggles.
There were five Muggles lying in various positions in the mud at the bottom of the reservoir. Four of them were clearly American. The fifth appeared to be from India. Ariadne motioned him forward to the body of the Indian. Using magic as to not contaminate the crime scene, she rolled back the Indian’s right arm.

The Indian had a distinctive tattoo on his arm: the Dark Mark, the sign of Voldemort.

Radner's jaw dropped. He took a glance at the other bodies and experienced his second shock: one of the dead was Patrick Dursley-Burgess. He recognized the America for Humans leader from security bulletins. Fred Phelps, one of the preachers associated with America for Humans, was also there.

He spun and turned to Ariadne. "Voldemort and America for Humans, working together? That makes no sense! Why would America for Humans ally with a wizard?"

Ariadne smirked. "I bet they didn't realize he was a wizard. He probably passed off that tattoo as a college prank or something like that. Here's what I think happened, sir. America for Humans wanted to attack the witches. However, they didn't have any explosive weapons powerful enough to destroy the shield surrounding Greenwich. Voldemort or Dilmi found out about the group and realized that the Death Eaters could use America for Humans as a front. They provided America for Humans with a bomb and then Fidelius used the plane so only the attackers could see it. The plane dropped the bomb on Dana -- the most obvious target as that's where your headquarters is -- and then a struggle broke out in the cockpit. The plane spun out of control and crashed into the surface above Greenwich, triggering the second explosion."

"You mean to tell me Greenwich was just collateral damage?"

"I'm afraid so, sir. On the other hand, they had no way to to tell that destroying the shield for one town wouldn't drown all four. It's obvious that they thought they could knock out all four towns with one bomb, so they didn't realize that additional people would be killed if the plane crashed into the surface. At any rate, back to the plan. Whoever set this up was a genius. The attackers don't realize magic is involved because they can see the plane. If the attack fails, nothing happens. If the attack succeeds and America retaliates, al-Qaeda doesn't claim responsibility and America for Humans get punished. If the attack succeeds and America surrenders, al-Qaeda steals America for Humans's thunder. Voldemort had nothing to lose and everything to gain. Particularly if he plans a magical attack on the United States at some point."

Radner shuddered. "I don't even want to think about that. Why do you think it's al-Qaeda?"

"Because the man is Indian. Dilmi had managed to recruit a lot of people from the Indian subcontinent before he was killed. Most of them were involved with al-Qaeda or at the very least came through Dilmi. And Dilmi ran al-Qaeda."

Radner suddenly realized something. "And Dilmi mentioned a possible attack in the US not long ago!"

"Exactly. I think we're going to need to tell the president that America for Humans had help here and that he's going to have to start widening the investigation. One more thing, sir. I believe we have the Indian's name. Mohatma Dameel. Known Death Eater."

"Really? How did you know?"
Ariadne motioned Radner over and pointed at the ground. Radner was astonished to see a wand lying right next to Patrick Dursley-Burgess's body.

"The Indian brought his wand along, and of course Dialonis registers all wands. This is Dameel's wand. He did it."

Radner needed to tell the president immediately.

To be continued...
Choi Yeun Li watched as the Minister of Magic leaned over the table and glanced around the room. "Five more days, ladies and gentlemen. All of our agents are in position and have the date circled on the calendar. If everything goes as planned, ancestors willing, we will have liberated our brothers north of the DMZ."

The South Koreans had realized very quickly that it was only a matter of time until Kim Jong-Il managed to dredge up a force of wizards which would tighten the Dear Leader's grip on the North. Choi Yeun had assured everyone that her former homeland was falling apart as is and new leadership was necessary. She had originally been reluctant to go so far as to try to attempt a coup, but the South's ministers had changed her mind in a hurry.

The biggest debate had been what to do with Kim Jong-Il himself. Several people wanted him assassinated and replaced with either a wizard from the South or an Imperiused Kim Jong-Un. The problem with this, of course, was that an assassination would make a martyr out of him and almost certainly trigger a countercoup by the people whose lives depended on their proximity to the Dear Leader. Kim Jong-Un would almost certainly vow revenge. The assassination attempt could also fail, giving an injured and angry man an obvious excuse for renewing hostilities with the South. A renewed war with the South could easily escalate and trigger World War III -- and nuclear weapons.

This meant that the Dear Leader had to survive but be in a position to reform his agenda. There were two ways to accomplish this. One option involved killing him and shaving his head completely to provide years' worth of fuel for a Polyjuice Potion. The catches here were the possibility that someone managed to find the body or that the fake Kim Jong-Il would be stuck somewhere for an hour and revert back to his true form. The second option involved Imperiusing him. The danger with that, of course, is that strong-willed people could often overcome the Imperius Curse. The Dear Leader was far from stupid, and he was extremely strong-willed. The South couldn't count on the Imperius Curse working.

Both of the solutions which involved a surviving Kim Jong-Il -- or someone posing as Kim Jong-Il -- had another issue as well. Most people would probably get very suspicious if the Dear Leader suddenly started changing his tune. There would likely be an investigation, one which could uncover the plot. The rebels would be executed, Kim Jong-Il would revert back to his old state, and the South would be in big trouble.

Regardless of what happened to the Dear Leader, the South Korean military had to be kept out of it. Even Muggles would suspect that something strange was going on if unfamiliar tanks suddenly started parading down the streets of Pyongyang. The North would immediately suspect a coup and
fighting would break out. That would restart the war and likely kill thousands of civilians in Pyongyang. There was also the issue that the deployment of large numbers of people couldn't be done silently and secretly.

The group had eventually decided on killing Kim Jong-Il in a way which made it look like a heart attack. This tactic had already been shown to work, as it had been the means Dilmi and his cadre had employed to take over al-Qaeda. The Killing Curse could work for that, and that would rule out any obvious foul play from the perspective of the Muggles. Kim Jong-Un would then be Imperiused. If the new ruler did not have the willpower to overcome the South's control, all would be well and good. If he did, he would be killed off and Polyjuiced. Kim Jong-Un was not nearly as well known as his brother, so it wouldn't be as much of a surprise for him to suddenly start discussion reconciliation with the South and improved standards of living for the peasantry.

The South's Muggle government, of course, would disavow any knowledge of wizard involvement in the coup. Wizards using their power to overthrow Muggle heads of state -- even corrupt ones -- would almost certainly set a very dangerous precedent that the South Korean government refused to accept the responsibility for.

The current plan had no fewer than sixty wizards, including a good quarter of the staff of the South Korean Ministry of Magic, involved in the mission. It was extremely unlikely that they would all be needed as the South had not heard any rumors that the North had managed to recruit some wizards to its cause. However, there always was a chance that Kim Jong-Il had managed to do so and was deliberately leaking false information. If so, a fierce magical battle could ensue. Choi Yeun fervently hoped that sixty wizards would be enough to do the job.

She suspected that the North would likely have the advantage in such a fight. First, they were far more familiar with the terrain in and around the Presidential Palace, where Kim Jong-Il would almost certainly be. Second, the wizards from the North would not have any qualms killing any Muggles or civilians who were caught in the crossfire. The South had already agreed not to attack civilians. Although maintaining the neutrality of the civilians was unquestionably the right thing to do, it would likely handicap the South's wizards during the takeover attempt. Choi Yeun shuddered to consider what she would do if she were forced to try to attack a fortified room surrounded by human shields. Finally, the North would likely have platoons of Muggle soldiers in the Presidential Palace who could be called upon to support the North's wizards and the Dear Leader. The South would have fewer Muggles, if any, on the front lines of the coup attempt.

Finally, people had to watch the DMZ. Any rumors of a coup in either Seoul or Pyongyang would almost certainly put the soldiers guarding the DMZ on high alert. Once that happened, one false alarm or bungled signal could result in shots being fired. And once shots were fired, things could escalate in a hurry. Choi Yeun had argued for the wizards to block off the center of the DMZ with a wall of force so that no soldiers could cross from either side. The Minister of Magic shot that down quickly, however, as all a soldier had to do would be to fire his weapon and watch his bullet hit something in midair. An invisible object he didn't know about is blocking the DMZ? Obviously it was the other guy's wizards, which in turn implied that it would probably let THEIR soldiers and bullets through. It means that your side is in big trouble. You're going to call for tanks, reinforcements, and so forth -- and almost certainly get a formal request for support from your own Ministry of Magic.

Once the two Ministry of Magics were fighting each other things would get ugly. There had been many debates over the past few months as to whether a magical attack would be more terrifying than a nuclear attack. Nuclear bombs were tremendously destructive but the Muggle world knew about them and what they could do. Magical attacks, on the other hand, were virtually unknown. The
Muggles had no idea what the wizards could and could not do. For all they knew, the wizards could tow the entire Korean peninsula into the sea and sink it! Choi Yeun knew that none of the wizards on this planet could even BEGIN to do that to even something a KILOMETER across. The Muggles, however, didn't, and their view of magic had been warped by the blatant lies and misconceptions spread by fantasy literature.

Choi Yeun and the Ministry had spent a long time working on this plan. However, even the best battle plan never survived contact with the enemy. She could only ask her ancestors to provide her with guidance during the upcoming campaign.

Five more days, and she would know for sure.

To be continued...

Update #167

Friday, May 17, 1996 - 4 DAYS TO NORTH KOREAN COUP ATTEMPT
Russian House
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Cambridge, Massachusetts
United States of America
NEXT PoV: 168 - Ask Fake Name Generator, British

The Russian House witch had had a very busy week. She had spent Saturday and Sunday studying for finals and thinking ahead to graduation. She figured she'd at least try to stay on as the graduate residence tutor for Russian House at some point. Tests made her nervous, just like everyone else.

The Ministry of Magic had gone bonkers over her prophecy. She trusted Deena and Leah to keep the secret, so the Muggles wouldn't find out about it. Yet scarcely an hour would go by before someone in the Ministry brought up the “Rising Sun Prophecy”, the "Dawn Ash Prophecy", the "Romanov Prophecy", or one of its other synonyms in a conversations. Although the prophecy was vague -- as usual -- the general consensus was that the Wizarding branch of the Romanovs was in danger now that the Statute of Secrecy had been breached. The fact that Rasputin had managed to come back via Horcrux hadn't helped the Romanovs' cause, either.

Why a witch in the United States, as compared to someone in the Romanov family itself, had been chosen to be the instrument of prophecy was unclear, though. Usually the seer had something to do with the prophecy, or at the very least it involved something important to him or her. Perhaps the powers that be thought that she would be an appropriate medium because of her Russian heritage.

Monday had gone about just as well as expected, with more stuff related to finals. As usual, a difficult day, but not unexpected at this time of year. However, the problems on Monday had paled to what had happened the next morning.

She hated to think what would have happened had Rebecca Nurse not alerted her to the attack. She probably would have only found out about it once water had started flooding the corridor connecting the MacGregor low-rise and New House. Several minutes could have gone by in that time, during
which J-Entry could have flooded out completely and the Massachusetts Avenue bridge collapsed. That delay could have cost a thousand more Muggles their lives and could have given the floodwaters enough time to topple the high-rise. Granted, that was nothing compared to what had happened in the two flooded towns. But lives were saved nonetheless, and in all fairness from the Muggles' perspectives the deaths of the Cantabrigians would likely impact their world more than the deaths of wizards they hadn't heard of until February.

As it was, J-Entry was under two feet of water. E-Entry and what was left of F-Entry were in absolute shambles. Most of the students' possessions in the storerooms in the basement of the high-rise had also been ruined. By the time she had finished plugging the I-Entry corridor, the water had started flowing through the tunnel to New House. She had just enough strength left to conjure up a force field to seal off the corridor before she had collapsed.

All finals were put on hold as the school began to clean up. She had planned to help with the operation and had to somehow extract herself from hundreds of reporters who were trying to interview her. One look at what was left of the Quabbin confirmed her suspicion that it would take at least a month to clean everything up. Boston would need a new water supply in a hurry, but she had no idea how to purify water.

The Secret Service had knocked on her door Thursday morning to fly her and Guinevere over to Washington to receive their awards. She said that she and Guinevere would be able to Apparate over there, but the agents insisted, claiming that the Muggles wanted to welcome the two of them at the airport as they landed. Besides, Apparation into the White House was prohibited.

Guinevere's boyfriend, the Muggle from ACG, had come with her. She wasn't seeing anyone (though she suspected that would change in a hurry given the way the reporters were handling the case) and had convinced them to bring several of her friends and family along. They'd pinned a few medals on her jacket and said things which sounded a hell of a lot more heroic than the stuff that she actually did. What did she deserve all this for? Anyone with the magical ability would have helped in those circumstances. She hadn't been special.

She was busy wondering what to do next with her life when she heard a knock on the door. She gritted her teeth: not more paparazzi! Bracing herself, she opened the door and saw two people who looked vaguely familiar.

One was a tall Marine woman with the name D. JANITCH on her uniform. Probably some former MIT ROTC girl, the witch thought, who had been called in to keep the student body from going to piece in the aftermath of the attack. The other one was an Indian woman who seemed determined to see her -- yet oddly frightened and embarrassed.

The Indian stammered a little. "I'm sorry for bothering you, but I was wondering if I could talk to you. My name is Aafia Siddiqui, and there's something I need to tell you. It's urgent."

The witch shrugged. "I don't have much time, Aafia. There's still a lot of work that needs to be done here --"

Siddiqui lowered her voice. "I used to be a member of al-Qaeda and defected. They're responsible for the attack on the Quabbin, and they assigned me a task in preparation for this attack which I thankfully did not carry out. If there's anything I can do to help, tell me."

The witch gasped as the Marine nearly fell over in shock. Both recovered quickly and shouted "WHAT?". The Marine promptly started arguing with Siddiqui -- supposedly they had both lived in
McCormick and knew each other, but the Marine hadn't known about the woman's secret career. Eventually, the witch had to raise her voice to cut over the din. "You can argue about this later, ladies. She's a defector, so I think behooves BOTH of us to at least hear what she was about to say."

Siddiqui took a deep breath. "Very well. You're not going to like this, though."

The witch grated her teeth. "Judging from what happened this past week, we've to deal with a lot of things we haven't liked. Spit it out."

Siddiqui backed off a little. "Well, Damodharan Dilmi called me in shortly before the attack --"

The Marine cut in. "The former head of al-Qaeda?!!"

"Yes, Dede. He was a wizard. He told me that he wanted me to do something and I had to do it before the 14th. It was obvious that SOMETHING big was going to be happening then, but I didn't have all the details as I wasn't highly placed enough to know most of them."

The witch tried to maintain control of her emotions. "I see. What did he want you to do?"

Siddiqui hesitated. "Er..."

"Yes?"

The woman suddenly had a pleading expression on her face. "Well, uh, he ordered me to kill you and I decided against it."

The witch glared at her as she and the Marine immediately got into another argument. Finally, when she could get a word in edgewise: "You're kidding."

"Allah preserve me, I wish I were! Unfortunately, I'm telling the truth. They gave me a funny knife which opens all doors so I could break into Russian House. Here, you can take a look at it."

Siddiqui reached into her pocket -- drawing a stern look from the Marine -- and drew out a knife. She handed it hilt-first to the witch.

The witch looked inspected it closely. Bringing out her wand, she tapped the knife with the tip. It began to glow brightly.

She whistled. "It's a magical item, all right. I don't know how you could have gotten one of these -- Muggles aren't supposed to have them."

"Dilmi gave it to me. I wasn't particularly keen on killing anyone, but orders were orders. At any rate, I asked for a painless poison -- to make your death as humane as possible -- and broke into Russian House to anoint it on your toiletries. If everything went as planned, you would have passed on peacefully in your sleep. You would not have suffered. However, before I could do the deed, a couple of girls took you aside into the living room. Then you said something about the House of Romanov falling in six years --"

The witch shrieked and pointed her wand between Siddiqui's eyes, which widened even further. Meanwhile, the Marine stared at her and yelled, "What do you mean, House of Romanov? The Romanovs were killed in 1917! Well, Anastasia --"
That was as far she got before the witch roared at Siddiqui, "HOW DID YOU FIND OUT ABOUT THAT?"

Siddiqui wailed, "I was in your room! I was trying to figure out where you kept your toiletries! I overheard everything! At any rate, you started discussing this prophecy or whatever it was with these other two girls and it was obvious that you didn't mean any harm. That, your obvious power as a witch, and my distaste for murder killing someone convinced me to defect. I am yours to command, and if you're willing to accept me I want asylum in the Ministry of Magic. I am now convinced that Allah let me join the terrorist organization so that He could use me to undermine and eventually betray it to government forces. He probably saved thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, of people in the Boston area by inspiring me to save your life. I feel awed, frightened, and honored to have been an instrument of His will."

The witch's mind raced. She looked at the Marine, who looked like she didn't know what she was supposed to do either. Clearly the two women had known each other from McCormick and had likely been friends. Now, on the other hand --

Finally, the solution came to her. "Aafia, would you be willing to take an Unbreakable Oath and swear that you will never return to al-Qaeda or mention the prophecy to anyone without explicit permission?"

Siddiqui looked at her, puzzled. "Unbreakable Oath? What's that?"

"It's an oath which will kill you if you violate it."

Behind Siddiqui, Janitch grunted in surprise. The witch hated to think what would happen if the government started subjecting everyone to Unbreakable Oaths. Well, they'd need wands for that, and she doubted that the wizards would consent to administering Unbreakable Oaths on a whim. Marines may have guns, but wands could beat guns if the wizard was prepared. Meanwhile, the witch paled, but nodded.

Asking the Marine to serve as a witness and to not divulge the prophecy to Muggles -- she was a soldier, so she knew how to keep secrets -- she administered the Unbreakable Oath and ordered Siddiqui to vow never to serve terrorist organizations or discuss the prophecy again. Siddiqui obeyed immediately, and in Allah's name. The former terrorist then went even further and, out of her own volition, pledged her allegiance to the United States and the American Department of Magic. The witch and the Marine traded glances and nodded. It was obvious that this woman was sincere. She wanted to make amends and was willing to risk her life to do so.

The witch removed the wand and looked at Siddiqui thoughtfully for a minute. Meanwhile, Janitch took her hand off her gun. "Thank you for your support, Ms. Siddiqui. Would you be willing to speak with some of our authorities in the two surviving towns? I suspect that several people will want to speak with you."

Siddiqui nodded immediately. The witch then grasped her hand and Apparated to Enfield, leaving an astonished former student alone in the room. Wondering how she was going to explain all this to her commanding officer, she left Russian House and began heading back to her position in front of McCormick.

To be continued...

----------------

Update #168
Harrison Cooper had heard of large ships before. This one, however, was at the very least the size of a city block.

He and Courtney hand wrangled for months over what they should do for their honeymoon. They wanted to splurge, but they didn't want to break the bank. They figured they'd keep it to 5,000 pounds maximum. For a three- or four-week vacation, that could be doable.

Around the world in a month? Too much time waiting at airports. A vacation in Australia? You'd need a month to get over the jet lag. A trip to Tahiti? It would work, but they'd probably get bored after a while.

Finally, they'd stumbled across a solution in the Holland America catalog. The cruise ship Noordam was going to be embarking on a month-long trip through the Caribbean, leaving on 17 May and returning on 13 June. It would visit most of the islands in the chain, which would give the guests the opportunity to see many different cultures. And best of all, the two of them wouldn't have to drive anywhere. The boat would take them to each destination.

Harrison couldn't keep track of all the destinations. All he knew was that the first stop was Key West. 1 June, the night of the full moon, would be spent between the Dutch Antilles islands of Aruba and Curacao. The only reason he remembered that is that he had made a deal with the cruise line to do something special for the two of them that night under the light of the full moon. He had already hinted to Courtney that something really exciting would happen that night. That had piqued her interest, but at least to this point he hadn't spilled the beans.

They had flown out from England the day before. Harrison could not have known that while they were in the air, the Prime Minister had issued a statement warning everyone who had been bitten in Wembley Stadium dog attack to report to the Ministry of Magic on 1 June.

Harrison had been one of those victims. He had been in the stands near the mysterious man with the mustache when the dog had appeared back on the 4th. He had been bitten, of all places, on the buttocks trying to keep the animal away from some of the other fans. Thankfully, the bite appeared to have been minor, and the bleeding had stopped after a few minutes. A rabies shot administered during the match had apparently taken care of everything. It still ached to sit from time to time, but the pain was going away in a hurry.

Courtney, of course, had gone ballistic as soon as she had seen the injury. She demanded that he go to the hospital, but he said that he felt fine and that everything had been taken care of at the stadium. His wife hadn't gone to the match with him because she had been out at a friend's baby shower. Harrison suspected that she was trying to think of what she could do for her own shower, as she was three months along already.

He didn't know what that dog had done, but he felt great. He'd developed a craving for red meat and
his metabolism had increased. His senses seemed much sharper. His wife had noticed this as well and had jokingly started calling him "Spiderman", with the out-of-control Great Dane or whatever it was replacing the radioactive spider.

He hadn't told anyone else about the injury. His parents would have probably insisted that he cancel the trip and hospitalize himself -- they tended to be paranoid about everything. Either that, or they would start asking him embarrassing questions as to how a "dog" managed to bite him on the rear end.

He and his wife had to fill out a whole series of documents before the Holland America representatives handed them their stateroom keys. There had been a brief argument about whether they should upgrade to a stateroom with a balcony. He had told her that the ship almost certainly had a promenade deck which allowed passengers to spend time outside, so the upgrade was probably not worth it. However, she had countered that this WAS a honeymoon and a private balcony would give them the opportunity to do things which would not be appropriate in a public domain. So, he had given in.

They crossed the gangplank into the boat for the first time and were absolutely blown away by the opulence. Courtney mentioned that she actually felt embarrassed by all this. There were statues in little niches in the hallways, gold leaf on the elevator doors, and other touches which seemed to make the boat more suitable for the Vanderbils than for ordinary Brits like them. Harrison shuddered to think about what the more opulent cruise lines were like: Holland America was supposedly low-end.

They took a quick tour of the boat. There was a room which served as a combination reading room, library, and board game area. Another section had an honest-to-good casino and duty free shop (currently closed) in it. They'd have to change their pound notes to dollars to use the machines, however. Perhaps they'd get a chance to do that at Half Moon Cay in the Bahamas.

The ship just went on and on. There were jazz clubs, nightclubs, two swimming pools, a fitness center, a sauna and private massage pool (for an extra fee), an art gallery, and a formal dining room which occupied the entire stern of the ship. There was an auditorium for lectures and performances as well. There was a game room, a cocktail lounge, and a sports section on the top deck which included a basketball court. Finally, the topmost deck ("Lido Deck") had a small cafeteria which served as an informal dining room.

The two of them couldn't imagine themselves as possibly being able to do everything and go on all the excursions. Then again, the cruise was going to be almost a month in duration and there would be a lot of time traveling from island to island. Most of the stops allowed the passengers maybe 6-8 hours to visit the island (with the exception of Curacao, which allowed the full day).

They headed up to the cocktail lounge for a special welcome event dedicated to honeymooners. Most of the people on the cruise ship were "youthfully challenged", according to Courtney. He suspected that the two of them were probably a good 40 years younger than the median age on the boat. They found a chance to hobnob with people their age refreshing. Inevitably, the honeymooners began to glom together into a little group.

By the time the cocktail night was over (with Courtney dutifully refusing to drink), he and his wife had traded business cards and stateroom locations with no fewer than ten couples. They were from all over the world: four from the United States, one from Vietnam, one from France, one from Russia, one from South Africa ("I want to skip winter"), one from China, and one from Chile of all places. A couple of them had small kids with them which, they assured everyone, had been born AFTER the couple had been married. Judging from the ages of the children, however, Harrison
doubted it.

It took them a good fifteen minutes to find their room. It was relatively small but did in fact have a balcony, just as the brochure promised. There was a TV and a sitting area along with a wet bar. On the bar was a document listing the possible shore excursions.

The shore excursions ranged from trips to the western part of Curacao to kayaking in St. Thomas. They spent a good twenty minutes looking over the options. Harrison wanted to do all of them. It was a pity that each of them cost money, some in excess of $100 per person. On a one-month cruise, that would add up. They'd have to be careful.

Courtney inevitably brought him back to reality. People only got married once, at least in theory. This was a honeymoon, a once in a lifetime experience. They had used their financial restraint when it came to booking the cruise and doing it during off-peak times. They could afford to splurge on the shore excursions.

Harrison thought about it some more and eventually agreed. They then promptly started arguing over what to do on Key West.

To be continued...

-------------

Update #169
-------------

Friday, May 17, 1996 - 4 DAYS TO NORTH KOREAN COUP ATTEMPT
NEW MOON
Great Hall
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
Great Britain
NEXT PoV: 170 - Bill Clinton
-------------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 3 (ring, snake, cup)
-------------
Draco Malfoy jumped back in surprise as the owl dropped a letter in his pumpkin tart. It was once again, from his father.

To my son, Draco Malfoy. Please open this in private, as Lisa von Poppel seems to like you and wants you to be one of her best friends.

Draco couldn't believe it. Lisa von Poppel, of course, was Lord Voldemort. Her "best friends" presumably were the Death Eaters. Had his work initiating the werewolf pandemic and killing off Lupin impressed the Dark Lord enough to promote him to full Death Eater status before he was seventeen? It was possible, though unlikely. He suspected that his father had been forced to do some fast talking to get the Dark Lord to agree.

He hurriedly stuffed the envelope under his robe and finished his meal. Although he firmly believed in Lord Voldemort's pureblood policies and was honored that he had been made a Death Eater, he was starting to have second thought about this whole enterprise. Killing off Lupin and other Order of the Phoenix members were tasks necessary to keep the blood traitors out of their way. However, he had nearly fallen over when his father had informed him that Death Eaters were behind the attack on the American Department of Magic. Killing one or two enemies were one thing. Killing over seven thousand people who had not raised a wand against him was something entirely different.
He hadn't voiced any of these concerns to his father, his friends, or Lord Voldemort. He had heard about what had happened to Regulus Black when Sirius's brother had realized that he'd bitten off more than he could chew while in Voldemort's service. Any sign of vacillation or weakness would probably earn him a Killing Curse in the chest. He tried to steel himself, reminding himself that sometimes doing the right thing was difficult. Had it not been for the work of Voldemort and the Death Eaters, the Wizarding race could very well go extinct and leave the world at the mercy of the Muggles.

His chain of thought was interrupted by a chuckling Crabbe. "Well, Draco! Look what we have here! I think he's got a girlfriend!"

Draco shook his head and stared at his bodyguard? "What?"

"Lisa van Poppel! What is she, German? Did you meet her during the Triwizard Tournament last year? Was she part of that half-breed veela's school? I take it she's not a half-breed if you're dating her Let's see the letter, Draco!"

Draco looked closely at Crabbe. His friend wasn't particularly bright, so Draco figured that he'd be able to get away with a simple alibi. Pulling Crabbe over to him, he whispered, "Lisa van Poppel is a Hapsburg duchess a little older than I am. My father is trying to set up an arranged marriage. I'm distantly related to the British nobility, after all."

Crabbe looked blankly at him. "Where is Hapsburg? Is that a country?"

Draco gritted his teeth. "It's the name of a Germanic noble family. Now, if you wouldn't mind, don't mention this out loud. It hasn't been finalized yet, and in case it doesn't I don't want Pansy Parkinson to dump me. Can you get that through your thick skull, Crabbe? When my father wants me to open it in PRIVATE, with no one else around, I do that."

Crabbe slowly nodded and turned back to his food. Draco breathed a sigh of relief and excused himself so he could go back to his room and read the letter. He really wanted to see what his father had to say.

--------------
My dear Draco,

I have just returned from a meeting with the Dark Lord. I have some news for you which will please you greatly.

Voldemort was extremely impressed with your diligence and devotion in turning that chalice into a Portkey so we could send Remus Lupin into the football stadium and start the werewolf pandemic. As you are probably aware by now, Lupin is dead and twenty-seven Muggles are running around England not knowing that they are going to turn into slavering monsters in a matter of weeks. The only flaw in the plan appears to be that Minister Scrimgeour has realized the danger those infected Muggles present to the British community. He has alerted Prime Minister Major that these Muggles have to be rounded up and presented to the Ministry of Magic before 1 June, which is the date of the next full moon. We can only hope that a few of them evade the Prime Minister's dragnet and spread the pandemic further.

Not only were you dedicated enough to assist with the Dark Lord's plans, you did so while you were busy studying for OWLs. Although Voldemort agrees that you should be commended and has the final say, I am a bit uneasy that you were so easy to distract from your studies. If you want to work
with me in the Ministry of Magic you will need to excel on your OWLs. I trust that your practice with the Portkey Charm will not impact your grades at all, Draco. If it does, I will be...most displeased.

Back to the matter at hand. It is my great pleasure to inform you that Voldemort is now willing to waive the age-seventeen limit and induct you into the ranks of the Death Eaters. You will be given the same respect as Rodolphus Lestrange, me, and the Indian people who were recruited by Damodharan Dilmi. For the time being, however, you will not be branded with the Dark Mark. Although you certainly deserve the tattoo for your work, I don't want anyone at Hogwarts realizing that you have become a Death Eater. All we need to have happen is to have Dumbledore or Snape see that tattoo and we would be in deep trouble. You would likely be expelled, at which point it would likely be race between the Dark Lord, your mother, and me to determine who would kill you first.

As you are aware, each Death Eater has to undergo a rite of passage -- a challenge, so to speak -- to prove that he or she is strong enough to join the ranks of Voldemort's supporters. This challenge has usually involved the deliberate, direct murder of another person, an act which will forever sear your mind and soul and bind you to Voldemort forever. I tried to argue that your work with the Portkey was equivalent to this initiation rite, but the Dark Lord overruled me.

Here is what you have to do. Once the Dark Lord receives word that it has been performed, he will officially name you a full-fledged Death Eater at our next meeting. Both me and your mother will be glowing with pride as we present you to Voldemort for the ceremony.

Your task is simple.

Kill Severus Snape.

As you are undoubtedly aware, Snape has proven to be a double agent. He betrayed the Dark Lord to the British Secret Service, who dropped a Muggle explosive device on a Death Eater gathering on 15 March, killing virtually all of the British Death Eaters and reducing the Dark Lord to possessing a Muggle until I could retrieve him.

You have told me that Professor Snape is teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts. This will not be tolerated. He knows all of our tricks and will almost certainly give students lessons in dealing with them. The longer Snape teaches that class, the less likely a Voldemort-dominated world will be. The longer Snape teaches that class, the more likely it is that you and I are going to be sent to Azkaban.

Draco, I understand that you will have mixed feelings about this. Professor Snape has helped you immensely and transformed you into a man of honor. However, this is a war, and sometimes people have to do things they do not like for the greater good. I was shocked when I heard about Snape's betrayal as well. I personally liked the man, and I mentored him when we were at Hogwarts together. However, orders are orders. I have already mustered enough courage to sacrifice our feelings for Snape on the altar of our cause. Have you?

I killed my first blood traitor at fifteen. I know you, Draco, and I trust that you have the fortitude and willpower to repeat this act at the same age I was at.

Good luck, my son.

Your father,
Bill Clinton was exhausted. He hadn't slept more than two hours at a time for more than three days. His aides were telling him that he needed to get some rest, and that Secretary Radner's magical assistance couldn't keep him going indefinitely. However, he didn't have a choice. The United States had suffered its worst terrorist attack in history, at the hands of an internal hate group at that. He had to do something to make sure it wouldn't happen again.

He had spent the entire first night trying to help plan the raid on America for Humans through the data retrieved from Reverend Pitmoss's computer. He had thought that tracking everyone down would be difficult, but he had forgotten about the wizards. The wizards' help had been amazing. Within twenty-four hours, seventy-five percent of the people on Pitmoss's list had been arrested and placed in holding cells.

The biggest catch, of course, had been Pitmoss himself. Although it was fairly obvious that Pitmoss had been the mastermind, he still needed to have a fair trial. Granted, no one wanted to defend him, and Radner had already informed the president that since the attack occurred in Wizarding territory, the defendant would have to be judged by a Wizarding court and subject to a Wizarding punishment. The Secretary had already told him that it was almost certain that Pitmoss would be sentenced to the Dementor's Kiss, a punishment which would force the victim into a soulless, vegetative state for the rest of his natural life. It was the most severe punishment available under American Wizarding law, more serious even than the death penalty.

Some things, however, didn't add up. Radner had interrogated the prisoner using Veritaserum -- a magical truth serum -- shortly after his arrest and had discovered that the bomb had been provided by a shadowy group known as the Foundation. Neither Clinton or Radner had known about this group before, and apparently neither Pitmoss before its representative contacted America for Humans. Furthermore, Pitmoss had reportedly been shocked that Cambridge had been hit. He repeatedly insisted that he had had no plans to attack Cambridge. All that he had figured would happen was that the Four Towns would be drowned and that was that. No Muggles would be harmed. He had also, grudgingly, been forced to admit that he had wanted to take out Radner himself with the bomb and claimed that the Secretary's survival was more proof that he was the False Prophet. Radner had rolled his eyes at that.

He looked at the latest document placed on top of his desk. They were from the Navy and reporting on the shipment of drinking water to the greater Boston area. All off the military vessels were in place now, and water was slowly trickling back to the citizens of Massachusetts. There had been a few riots here and there where people had complained that they needed more water, but for the most part everything had been peaceful. Granted, a few restaurants would go out of business and sales of
deodorants would go through the roof. But a few inconveniences would be much more palatable than widespread dysentery.

Most of the affected towns had started rationing water in a manner which would give each household running water one day a week. In an amazing act of charity, Cambridge -- whose water supply was still intact -- requested that Army Corps of Engineers build a pipeline connecting their reservoir to the line which had come in via the Quabbin. That would allow everyone two days of water per week instead of one. The people of Cambridge itself, of course, were protesting. At the moment, it was unclear if the city board would be forced to retract the request.

The current timetable the wizards had provided for the reopening of the reservoir had the Quabbin being usable again by mid-June. One month, the president thought. Let's hope things don't go to pieces in that time. What the citizens of Massachusetts likely DIDN'T realize was the fact that even when the Quabbin was cleared for use, the fact that a lot of the water had escaped into the harbor meant that it would be at a dangerously low level. Water rationing in some capacity may have to stay in effect until the reservoir refilled, which could take a year or more.

The response to this terrorist attack, the impact of hate groups, and the general view of wizards would likely revamp the entire presidential campaign. He wondered what he was going to do, and whether he would be able to do it better than Bob Dole. He had a crazy idea of having Radner be his vice-presidential nominee, but he doubted the political establishment would like it very much.

The intercom on his desk buzzed. He pressed the button, and the secretary's voice burst out of the speaker. "Sir, Secretary Radner is here with a young woman. He says it's urgent. It's related to the attack."

Clinton frowned. "Is the woman a witch?"

"No, Mr. President."

"Who is she, then?"

"Someone with information about the attack. She seems terrified, to be honest with you, sir. Should I send them in?"

"Have they been searched?"

"Yes, Mr. President. The Secretary had nothing other his wand, and the woman was unarmed. He vouches for her, sir. He says she is not a threat."

This would be interesting, he thought. Pressing the button one last time, he said, "All right, send them in."

"Yes, sir."

Seconds later, the door opened and Radner entered the room followed by a woman barely out of her teens. She appeared to be Indian or Pakistani and was wearing modest Islamic clothing. He couldn't see much of her face, but the little he saw was trembling in fear.

Radner shook Clinton's hand. The president then turned to the woman and inclined his head to her in greeting, figuring that shaking his hand would be against her religious customs.
Sitting back behind his desk, the president asked, "Secretary Radner, report."

Radner was blunt. "Mr. President. America for Humans had help and may have been partially framed. It would explain why Pitmoss didn't know everything about the attack."

Clinton nodded. "We know that, Wizard Radner. The Foundation."

"Correct, Mr. President. Or, as the expression goes when it is translated into Arabic, al-Qaeda."

Clinton leapt to his feet. "Al-Qaeda was involved with this? Are you sure?"

"Yes, Mr. President. Al-Qaeda saw America for Humans and realized that America for Humans would be the perfect front for an attack. If the attack fails or the government takes revenge on the attackers, America for Humans takes the blame. If the attack succeeds, Al-Qaeda claims responsibility. America for Humans likely had no idea that the representative of this Foundation was actually a member of al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda is responsible for the attack on Cambridge as they were likely the ones who opened the doors and let the water out. Pitmoss had no idea that would happen."

Clinton stared at Radner. "Then Dilmi's warning --"

"Yes, Mr. President. Al-Qaeda had warned of an attack, and Pitmoss had warned of an attack. None of us thought, however, that they would both be the same attack and that Pitmoss was unknowingly a pawn of al-Qaeda. And judging from our reaction so far, sir, we're behaving exactly the way al-Qaeda was hoping. They get away scot-free while America for Humans is rounded up. For all we know, they're planning further attacks. That's not to say that America for Humans is innocent, of course. Pitmoss will still get the Dementor's Kiss. But it does spread the blame."

Clinton sat down. "God Almighty! They attacked us in revenge for the attack on Dilmi! How did you find this out?"

"An investigation of the Greenwich site revealed evidence that a wizard was involved. A wand was found in the mud and connected to Mohatma Dameel, a known Death Eater and associate of Dilmi. He was dressed in Muggle clothing, so no one knew he was a wizard. Furthermore, we believe that this wizard cast a spell of invisibility so that no one other than the attackers could have seen the plane which dropped the bomb. That would explain the sound of the engines but no visible aircraft. The actual spell cast is more complicated, but the upshot is that there is probably nothing we could have done to stop it at the time. Nothing. No one had ever expected a magical attack. We're remediying that as we speak, though."

Clinton turned to the frightened woman at Radner's side. "Is this woman related to Dameel?"

"She is a former MIT student who is an al-Qaeda defector. We'll call her Agent S. She was ordered by Dilmi to perform an operation which would soften up the wizards' defense. She changed her mind at the last minute and decided to switch sides. As it turned out, that change of heart may have saved thousands of lives. She has sworn an Unbreakable Oath to serve us, one which was witnessed by a member of the United States Marine Corps."

Lowering his voice as to not frighten the woman, the president asked her: "What did Dilmi tell you to do?"

The woman could barely speak. "I was ordered to kill Jelena Kurchatova, also known as the Russian House witch."
Clinton spun back to Radner. "The girl we just gave a medal for saving Boston?"

Radner nodded. "Yes, Mr. President. If she had been killed, I doubt anything could have been done to stop the flooding. As it was, Guinevere de Mornay needed help, and an engineer would be a good asset to have when plugging a leak like that. Were it not for those two witches, most of Cambridge and Boston could have been flooded and hundreds of thousands of people left homeless."

Clinton whistled as the girl spoke once again. "I now believe that Allah made me join al-Qaeda in order to realize how bad the group was and let me turn it over to the authorities. I had found it difficult to accept the assignment to begin with, but I was afraid of Dilmi and figured I had no choice. Later, when I was alone in the dormitory with her and her two friends, I realized that they meant no harm and that it would be wrong to kill her. I’ve come to ask for asylum, sir. Al-Qaeda is a threat, and the group needs to be stopped."

The president stared at Radner and back at the girl. The girl was almost crying. As a politician, the president was good at detecting fake smiles and false emotions. This girl, however, truly meant it. She could be a valuable asset.

First things first, however. He needed to give another speech to the nation. Once that was done, he needed to figure out what to do to al-Qaeda...and with the America for Humans people he had already rounded up.

To be continued...
Update #171

---------------
Saturday, May 18, 1996 - 3 DAYS TO NORTH KOREAN COUP ATTEMPT
Outside of Leeds
England
NEXT PoV: 172 - Isaac Sanders

---------------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 3 (ring, snake, cup)

---------------
Nagini was in a bad mood. She had completely lost track of Igor Karkaroff. Her master said that he was supposed to be around here. Yet he wasn't. Could her master have been given false information? If so, he would be very angry. If she were lucky, he'd send someone over for her to eat in place of Karkaroff.

So far she'd been able to survive on various stray animals in the forest. Although there was a lot of small game out there, they weren't enough to fill her stomach. She needed a bigger meal in a hurry. She would have preferred Karkaroff, as he would probably fill her belly completely and make it so she wouldn't have to eat for weeks. But she would take anything larger than a mouse at this point!

She decided that she would have to go back to one of the rendezvous points she had agreed on with her master. He had told her that every so often he would check various out of the way locations to see if she had either found Karkaroff or needed to be transported somewhere else. She was increasingly convinced that she wasn't going to find Karkaroff in this area.

The nearest rendezvous point was in a field outside the human city of Leeds. She was normally careful with human cities as people tended to be scared of snakes. However, there were times when caution couldn't be afforded. What would her master have done had he not had a full meal for weeks?

Her scent receptors picked something up. Another mouse, she thought. It didn't smell quite like a mouse, though. But whatever it was, it was food. She couldn't be picky.

Cautiously, she closed in on the scent. Then she caught sight of her quarry and was nearly beside herself with excitement. It looked like a mouse, but it was a lot furrier and MUCH bigger. It was white and had a big, fluffy tail. A smaller tail, thin and brown, seemed to extend from around the creature's midsection into the air. What an odd place to have a tail, she thought. Still, two tails would provide more nourishment than one.

She caught another scent maybe fifteen feet away, in a different direction. This scent appeared to be human, so she grew wary. She lowered herself further down into the grass hoping that the human wouldn't see her. She needed to catch this mouse and escape before the human saw her. The thin brown tail, oddly enough, seemed to lead from the mouse towards the human. Perhaps the mouse had tried to run from the human.

Nagini managed to get within five feet before the gigantic mouse noticed. The animal squeaked and suddenly began to run away from her. Bizarrely, its normal tail stayed in place behind it while the
odd, brown tail continued pointing in front of it! It was as if it were running over it own tail! Had she not been so desperately hungry, she would have found it amusing.

She pursued the mouse as quickly as she could. She was about three feet away when she heard a human shout a word -- one of the few human words she recognized.

"SNAKE!"

She spun to face the new sound and saw a very angry human female holding onto the mouse's brown tail. The mouse slithered between her legs, and she picked it up with her paws. She then shouted something at Nagini which she didn't understand:

"You're not eating my ferret, and you're not eating me! I'm calling the park ranger!"

The human seemed angry and threatening. She arched her back to try to scare the human away. It appeared to work, as the human ran away. Unfortunately, the human took the mouse with her. That was not fair. Well, she thought, if there was one big mouse around here, there could be others. She was near the rendezvous point and the sun was not yet at its highest point. She had time to look around for more mice.

She searched for a few more minutes and found nothing other than a couple of inchworms -- big deal. She thought she had detected some humanlike cries but could not see any other humans through the grass.

Suddenly, she heard a sound that she had never heard before. It sounded like an ululating scream, but she had never heard humans make a scream like that before. The grass around her began to flicker with flashing light the color of the sky. Was that an animal call of some sort? Maybe she should hunt this animal instead.

She turned to face the light and saw an object which her master had told her was a Muggle vehicle. There were flashing lights the color of the sky on it and it said three words on it. The words, like any other written human language, were meaningless to her: POLICE, ANIMAL CONTROL.

She had inched a little closer when she suddenly felt something bite her on the side. There was a brief moment of pain. She spun in shock to see what had bitten her -- whatever it was was going to some fangs in their neck! She found herself surprised again as whatever it was appeared to be obscured by the grass! There were a few humans in the distance, but too far away to be much of a problem.

As she looked around, she found that she felt tired all of a sudden. She had to eat, however. She moved forward a little more when something bit her on the other side, in the direction the flashing lights had come from. She was thoroughly confused, but was too tired to do much about it. Within seconds, she had fallen asleep.

------------------

She did not know how long she had been asleep. Her body ached a little from the bites, but the pain seemed to have subsided a lot. She looked around to get her bearings, and for the first time in a long time she found herself utterly confused.

She appeared to be in a glass container of some sort. The container was quite large, maybe eight feet across. However, she was twelve feet long and it didn't fit her all that well. She tried to climb out of the container and found that the container had a lid. She couldn't get out. What was she going to do? Had Karkaroff trapped her?
The container appeared to be in a large room. She looked around the room to see if she could find Karkaroff, but she didn't see him there. Come to think of it, she didn't see ANY humans around. All she saw -- most surprisingly -- were lots and lots of animals. Most of the animals near her were snakes. She was by far the largest snake in the room, though there were still a few maybe six to eight feet long. There were a few birds further away, and an odd animal with a shell sitting in a corner.

Had she entered a kitchen somewhere? Had her master rescued her and brought her to a place where she could eat these animals? It would have made sense except for one fact: if she was supposed to eat these animals, why couldn't she get out of the container?

She looked around the room more closely and found that each animal was in a container which it could not get out of. Nagini found this disturbing. Had these animals done something wrong? She hadn't done anything to warrant being placed in a box she couldn't get out of...unless Voldemort was unhappy she had not found Karkaroff?

Each of the boxes had a piece of parchment on them. The one closest to her, on a box with a seven-foot python in it, said:

**ROGER'S REPTILE HOUSE**
Burmese Python
£139.95
(Food £49.95 Extra)

She couldn't read the writing, so that didn't help much. However, the snake in the box was looking at her curiously. Finally, he spoke.

"Well, hello there, big girl! Who are you?"

Nagini introduced herself. "I'm Nagini. Who are you? Where am I?"

"I'm Bel. We're in a holding area for people to take us away."

"What do you mean, take us away?"

Bel flicked his tongue towards the front of the room. "Every so often, someone walks into this room. Money changes hands, and one of us -- a bird, a turtle, a snake, anybody -- is taken from the room. I don't know what happens to us after that."

Nagini grew alarmed. "I hope we aren't killed. I don't think I've done anything to warrant getting killed. My master seems to like me."

"Your master?"

"Lord Voldemort, Bel. You must know of him. You're a snake."

Bel cocked his head at her. "I can't say that I have. Then again, you're probably special. You're the biggest snake I've seen here in a long time. Why, the little sign says that you're going for £319.95! From what I can tell, that is a lot of money! The people must think you are valuable! I bet they'll tell everybody you're here so someone can get you!"

Nagini liked that. "I hope they do so Voldemort will come for me. But where AM I?"
"I have no idea. However, what I can tell you is that I think the boa constrictor over here has a thing for you already..."

Nagini listened to Bel prattle on about her new home and how half the male snakes told her she was special. She didn't need some seven-foot twerp to tell her she was special! Voldemort had chosen her, and he would get her out of this predicament.

Wherever she was.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #172
-------------
Saturday, May 18, 1996 - 3 DAYS TO NORTH KOREAN COUP ATTEMPT
Sanders Residence
Prescott, Arizona
United States of America
NEXT PoV: 173 - Severus Snape
-------------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 3 (ring, snake, cup)
-------------

The doorbell rang, and Isaac Sanders got up to open it. He suspected from the high-pitched voices outside that he knew who his guests were going to be. Sure enough, he looked outside and saw several children standing on the doorstep carrying a small basket.

The child with the basket smiled nervously and presented the basket to him. "Mr. Sanders, my friends and I want to help fix all the problems in Boston and make everything happy again. We've all decided to give you our allowances so you can use it those people.

Sanders smiled and looked into the basket. There were a few dollar bills in there and a lot of coins. "Thank you so much, boys and girls. How much money do you have in there?"

One of the other children spoke up. "I counted $25.12. That's a lot of money, Mr. Sanders. However, I believe that it's worth giving up something when other people are hurting."

Sanders didn't think that $25 would do much good. However, it was the thought that counted. Shaking each child's hand in turn, he said: "It is indeed worth it, my young friends. It is indeed."

The children paused for a moment. Finally, one of them blurted out: "Can you do a trick for me?"

Sanders shook his head. "I'm afraid not. Although I work for the wizards and can visit Fourth Mesa as much as I want, I'm not a wizard. I'm a Muggle, just like you are. However, next time I see the wizards, I'll see if they can put on a magic show for the children of the area."

The children cheered and jumped up and down. Thanking them once more, he send them off and closed the door.

That $25 had pushed today's donation total up over $15,000. Most of it had come in the form of checks written by ordinary people. The vast majority of these checks had been in the $50-$100 range. However, he couldn't help but be awed at the $10,000 check made out by one of the Phoenix Cardinals football players. Sanders wondered if it was the first time that he could think of where
something good actually came out of a tremendous NFL salary.

In the old days, he would have simply Floo'ed over to Fourth Mesa and given Two Bear the money. However, security had been tightened immensely since the attack on the Four Towns. The Floo Network connections had been completely cut off, and Apparation into and out of Fourth Mesa was made impossible unless the bearer carried a special token. This made Fourth Mesa virtually impregnable. Unfortunately, it also made it impossible for Sanders to make it to work without Wizarding assistance. Even worse, Melissa suddenly found herself effectively out of a job because she wasn't allowed to Apparate while pregnant.

Melissa's unemployment, however, proved to be short-lived. Two Bear, realizing that she wouldn't be able to come to her classes, had realized that the only way she would be able to teach would be for the wizards -- who COULD Apparate -- to come to her. They had already had three lectures in their living room here in Prescott. Sanders chuckled -- at least they had tried to have three lectures. So far, all the wizards had done was gawk at all the "Muggle equipment". The telephone seemed to baffle them, and they all seemed to be hooked on Tom and Jerry cartoons.

Their class had grown drastically. There were now more than fifty people enrolled in Muggle Studies at the Dine Institute of Sorcery and Shamanism, and it had gotten to the point where the two of them had break the class into two halves and have two separate sections, one led by each person. Had they not broken up the class, there would have been no way to fit everybody in the living room. Sanders hated to think what he'd do when Melissa eventually went on maternity leave.

Right now, he was watching a rerun of a college football game. Considering the traumatic events that had taken place over the past few days, virtually all sports events were on hold so that the nation could mourn the dead. ESPN was having multiple interviews with athletes who had started funds to help the wizards rebuild. One of the Seattle SuperSonics players had donated a full $500,000 to a fund started by Fred Rogers, the personality behind the television program Mr. Rogers's Neighborhood. Supposedly the man had nearly fainted when he received the check.

The screen suddenly shifted to a banner reading SPECIAL REPORT. Sanders jumped in surprise: what was this? Did Pitmoss escape? Were the wizards attacked again? He ruled out the second option immediately: had one of the remaining Wizarding headquarters been attacked by vengeful America for Humans agents, he would have probably heard about it through Strong Bear or Two Bear before it made the news.

The SPECIAL REPORT banner vanished and was replaced by the presidential seal. It looked like the president was going to be issuing another speech again. Sure enough, the announcer said that Bill Clinton was about to issue an important announcement.

Seconds later, the president appeared. The man looked like he hadn't slept in days -- which he probably hadn't. Although he fought to maintain a dignified facial expression, it was obvious that he was in shock. Sanders suddenly had a horrible suspicion: Fourth Mesa had been attacked, which would explain a frightened president and no warning from Two Bear and the rest of the wizards.

The president looked into the camera and began his speech. "Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Tuesday morning, when I first informed you about the attack on the cities of Dana and Greenwich, I promised you that I would update you if any important new information came in. I am making this announcement to fulfill that promise.

"The last time I spoke with you, I told you that all of the evidence pointed towards America for Humans being behind the attack. Reverend Pitmoss's arrogant boast on the Internet was a virtual
admission of guilt, and the government has taken steps to make sure that America for Humans will no longer threaten the people of this country.

"What was unknown at the time, however, was whether the operation against the Quabbin was a joint operation of America for Humans and another group. Pitmoss claimed mentioned that a group called the Foundation had helped him plan the attack. We would have mentioned this earlier except that the FBI has no records of any group called the Foundation which would have condoned an attack against fellow American citizens.

"My fellow Americans, the mystery has now been solved. America for Humans was indeed assisted by a group which calls itself the Foundation. The confusion was based on the fact that the group was using the Arabic word for 'foundation': al-Qaeda."

Sanders stared at the screen. Al-Qaeda was involved in this as well? God Almighty! Al-Qaeda support, however, explained one of the aspects of the attack which didn't make sense: how would a newly-formed anti-wizard group like America for Humans manage to get their hands on a sophisticated explosive device like a depth charge? The answer was now obvious: al-Qaeda had given them the weapon. They would never have been able to obtain one on their own.

The president continued. "While Secretary Radner and I were standing in the Rose Garden presenting awards to Witches Kurchatova and de Mornay, the people of Enfield and Prescott were investigating the site of the Greenwich attack. They discovered evidence which astounded them.

"They discovered the bodies of six people. Five of them were Muggles associated with America for Humans. Secretary Radner teleported back immediately after the award ceremony and identified two of the Muggles as Pastor Fred Phelps and Mr. Patrick Dursley-Burgess, two men on the executive committee for America for Humans. This data, of course, is consistent with the theory that America for Humans did it alone.

"The surprise, however, was the identity of the sixth person. The person was dressed in ordinary American clothing, just like you and me. What was unusual about this man was the fact that a wand was found nearby. A magic wand, usable only by a wizard."

Sanders put his hand over his eyes. Was Clinton saying what he thought he was?

"By order of Grand Mugwump Anastasios Dialonis of the International Confederation of Wizards, all wands are registered. This particular wand had been registered to Wizard Mohatma Dameel, an al-Qaeda member and colleague of Damodharan Dilmi. The sixth body proved to indeed be Dameel's, complete with the tattoo on his arm identifying him as a supporter of a British Dark wizard, Tom Marvolo Riddle. Wizard Riddle proved troublesome to the British Isles back in the 1970's and was recently thwarted in an attempt to regain power."

"Here is what we believe happened. Al-Qaeda believed that they could attack the United States and cause our great nation to blame it all on America for Humans. As a result, they insinuated one of their members, Dameel, into America for Humans under the cover of a group called the Foundation. America for Humans, not realizing that Dameel was a terrorist wizard, accepted his help. Dameel then provided the bomb and cast a magic spell which prevented the security around the Quabbin from detecting the attack aircraft as it came in to deliver the weapon. Although the Four Towns were filled with wizards, it had never occurred to them that they could be subjected to an attack with both magical and mundane components.

"The al-Qaeda plan was diabolically brilliant. If the attack were to fail or the government cracked
down heavily on the attackers, America for Humans would take the blame. If it were to succeed and destabilize the country, al-Qaeda would pre-empt America for Humans's claim of responsibility and say that they had used America for Humans as a front. America for Humans, as a local group, becomes a scapegoat and is attacked while al-Qaeda still gets away. Had we not discovered the bodies in Greenwich, it is quite possible that we would have never reasoned out al-Qaeda's involvement.

"There is another piece of evidence which ties the attack to al-Qaeda. One al-Qaeda operative defected to our side after she refused to carry out an order to assassinate Witch Kurchatova shortly before the attack. Needless to say, the death of Kurtachova would have made stopping the flood in Cambridge much more difficult and could have conceivably cost hundreds of thousands of people their homes. It would have made a disastrous attack into a veritable apocalypse. This defector has sworn an oath to renounce al-Qaeda and serve us. The oath was witnessed by Witch Kurtachova and a member of the United States Marine Corps. Just a few hours ago, this defector and Secretary Radner were here in the Oval Office briefing me on these new developments. The nation owes her a great deal of gratitude."

The camera zoomed in on Clinton's face. "Ladies and gentlemen, the involvement of al-Qaeda changes things drastically. Although it is obvious that America for Humans still bears some of the responsibility for the attack, and the people who were rounded up will be put on trial as I had mentioned earlier, the fact remains that we must expand the investigation. We need to strike back at al-Qaeda and avenge these seven thousand deaths using whatever means possible.

"This struggle will be long and difficult. Unlike most conflicts in the past, al-Qaeda is not a nation-state. The group is small and mobile and will be hard to pin down. The fact that they have wizards among them makes our task even more complicated. However, rest assured that we will prevail and avenge the people of Dana and Greenwich.

"My fellow Americans, I do not want this to come to war. I urge nations which harboring al-Qaeda members to turn them over to the appropriate authorities. As of today, the United States government will be awarding a bounty of up to $1,000,000 to anyone who provides information which leads to the capture and conviction of an al-Qaeda operative. This bounty will be available to residents of foreign countries as well. However, I must be frank and admit that some nations may not support us in our quest to destroy the terrorist organization. I would like to give these nations fair warning now: if you refuse to hand over the terrorists within your borders, we are going to come in and get them.

"That is all for now. Thank you for your time, and may God help us all in the months to come."

To be continued...

Post 172.5

University of Chicago, Illinois
May 18th, 1996

Auror Karina Francesca Murray walked across the campus of the university with a purposeful stride. Her long black hair was tied in a sensible pony tail with a blue hair scrunchie, bouncing against the back of her neck and shoulders. Her long, grey trenchcoat flapped in the air as well, billowing out with each gust of wind. She walked to the Regenstein Library, which was on top of the old Stagg Field grounds, and headed towards the back. She pulled a key out a coat pocket, and unlocked a door near the center of the building.
Which would have looked odd to anyone capable of seeing her, because it wasn’t there to be blunt. Anyone who was quick enough would have noticed the tall woman walk and disappear into the brickwork of the building. She walked down a rarely used steam tunnel underneath the building. Anyone who had spotted her go through the Fidelised entrance would have had to have known how to work the next door. She walked down to a blank space of brickwork, free of pipes or wires, and pulled out a wand from the inside of her coat. She tapped four bricks in quick succession, and stood back as the brickwork began rearranging itself, till a door opened up big enough to walkthrough. Inside was a large space, as big as a small warehouse underneath the main building, unknown to the Muggles above. It was bustling with activity as dozens of wizards rushed about, either carrying important papers or other objects to Floo gates or the Reliquary below this room.

One of the wizards was leaning into a Floo gate and talking into it. He soon ended the conversation and stood back up, stretching one way and another to get the kinks out of his back. He was a tall wizard, his hooked nose and pale grey eyes both distinguishing marks.

“Morning Murray.”

“Good morning to you Brooks. Who was that?”

“Philips out in San Fransisco. Seems they have a Giant Squid threatening to wrap itself around the Golden Gate Bridge, and Fourth Mesa have their hands full, what with all this Quabbin business. I believe that Fourth Mesa is now on lockdown, as it’s the only other know wizarding facility in the U.S., to any Muggles knowledge. They’ve had to tempt it away with treats and the like. Can’t say I envy them,” he said rubbing the back of his head. “Oh, Harry wishes to see you.”

“Ah, and this would be involving what now?”

“I don’t know. All he said was to send Murray on down. And you’re not to bother the eagles again. He said that he’s tired of having eagle droppings all over the floor.”

“Fine. Where is he this time?”

“Target range. You known he practices both about this time.”

She sighed. Harry was one of the most powerful wizards in Chicago. He had even temporary been a private detective. Now he was the head of the CWI or Chicago Wizarding Institute, a double agency. It trained a majority of wizards in the Midwest, while also being the local Auror Agency, sending regional Aurors as backup to departmental offices throughout the Midwest. There were four in Ohio, six in Michigan, two others in Illinois, three in Indiana, and so on.

She headed down a long staircase to the sub-basement before the Reliquary itself. From a nearby room she heard several dozen clocks all ticking. Beyond that was a long corridor till the Reliquary stairs in front of her. She turned to the left, and went about six doors past the ticking clocks door. She opened the door she was in front of, and briefly covered her ears. She heard a single voice cry “Incendio,” before a gout of flame burst from a wand at the end of the room, slamming into a metal figure of a vampire, melting it in a fury of heat and flame. Then all went silent.

A tall wizard in a black duster walked over. He held a thick wand in his hand, about the size of washing dowel, which had a small whisp of smoke floating up from the end.

“Auror Murray.”
“Senior Auror.”

He blew out the last of the smoke on the wand, and stuck it in an inner coat pocket. He turned and headed towards the door.

“Come this way.”

They headed back upstairs, and headed towards a windowed office above the main floor of the main atrium. He beckoned her to sit down in one of the high back leather armchairs in the office, while sat on an old leather swivel chair.

“Murray, I’ve got a job for you.”

“Yes sir.”

“There are some things I’d like you to investigate out in our Toledo field office. The Department wants us to bolster regional cooperation with local law enforcement. Remember, we have to keep certain facilities even more secret now that we’ve been attacked. We don’t want another Quabbin. No one does. As you know, some of us have studied Muggles more than other parts of the wizarding world. This institute is one of those groups. Not only do we study them, at times we use some of their technology for our own benefit. Such as the regulation firearms each Auror in this Agency carries. Most other wizards have only a “working understanding” of Muggle technology. We’ve done this because it gives us the best of both worlds, and allows us to understand them better.”

“Yes sir.”

“However, on the subject of your reassignment, I believe they are having magical difficulties out there in Toledo. I’ve sent a note telling them you would arrive sometime tomorrow. Before you go, I have a smaller mission for you.”

“Yes sir.”

“There have been cases of Muggles seeing a strange bat-winged creature in the alleys of our fair city, and the population of the homeless has been decreasing, at an alarming rate. I take it you will take care of our bat problem?”

“Yes sir.”

“Good. Now, after you’ve taken care of that, I want you to bring your car in. I’ll have Philips portkey your car for a one way trip to Toledo, so you don’t have to worry about leaving it behind.”

She started to leave before stopping, before he spoke again.

“It is interesting, that for all our power, we are standing below the area that created the most powerful weapon on this planet. They did it without magic, using their own ingenuity and skills. And some of us would kill them for being so. Even if this weapon was one of the most horrible devices created, it is still a wonder of their world. Murray, we have to work with them to protect this world, lest we not have any to wake up to tomorrow.

She left the office after he bid her to leave, and headed back upstairs. She had read about how above this facility, was the site where in 1942, Chicago Pile-1 had gone active for 28 minutes, signifying
the world's emergence into the atomic age. But her thoughts wandered back to her task for tonight. The people of the city were afraid of the things they thought they didn't believe in. The revelation that magic and wizardry existed has made these fears even more real. She had one job to do today, and that was burn some vampire to cinders.

The South Side, Chicago, Illinois  
9:00 P.M. Central Time Zone

Jim Butcher was lost. He was driving slowly through the street, craning his head to see what the street signs said. He didn't want to end up in some industrial park in the night if he could help it. Which was why he didn't notice the shape darting into the street in front of the car, which he noticed too late, before running into it with his car. He stopped immediately. He hadn't seen it clearly, and he thought it was best to help, or see what he had hit. He gagged briefly when he got out. It smelled of raw meat and blood. Whatever it was, it was leaking a lot of blood from underneath his car.

He turned around as sound of someone falling into some trashcans came from a nearby alley. A tall, dark haired woman stumbled out of the alley, holding a stick it seemed like in one hand, and by her side was an old-time revolver. She shouted at him.

"Get the hell away from that car!"

He didn't understand why, until behind him, he heard a creak and groan as the car was lifted back, till it was almost vertical in the air. He turned and stared at a hideous beast, something like a bat crossed with a man, but more hideous than either could be. It was dripping blood and flesh from its mouth, and its beady black eyes darted over him, before looking back at the woman. It gave a shrill cry and leaped over him, charging towards the woman. It bowled her over, her stick still in her hand pointed at its chest, but knocking the gun towards Butcher. His car was flipped onto its top from this movement, its wheels spinning in the air from the motion. So much for my car he thought.

"Expelliarmus!"

A jet of scarlet light from the stick hit the beast in the chest, knocking it into the air, through a nearby lamp-post, and digging a hole in the pavement.

Butcher picked up the gun, and pointed it towards the creature. Whatever it was, it was tough. It was slowly rising to its feet, or whatever it walked on, and was shambling back this way. Butcher looked away, and squeezed the trigger.

The bullet took away one of the eyes of the creature. It screamed in pain, and began to flail, before falling over on the ground, twitching. Obviously it had entered its brain, and that was the last actions of a dying body.

The woman stumbled over, and picked the gun out of his hand, before turning and squeezing three more shots into it.

"It's dead."

"Not yet it isn't," she replied. "Incendio," she muttered, as a tongue of flame lapped at the body, before incinerating it in minutes, with nothing left but ashes.

She suddenly leaned heavily on his arms.

"Take me to that car over there, behind the wall of trash."
He half dragged, half carried her over there, where an old fashioned car sat idling, though it was surprisingly silent, making only a faint hissing noise. Stamped across the makers stamp was the word “Doble”. She beckoned him to put her in the passenger seat, and he got behind the wheel. The controls were rudimentary, but they were basic enough that he soon got it rolling.

“I’m taking you to the nearest hospital. Where is that?”

Her eyes shot open, and he felt her strong grip on his arm.

“No, take me to Lombard. I have a permanent room at a hotel there, with a friend.”

“You really need help I think you should go to…”

“No, the hotel. Now.”

He wasn’t going to argue. He found a map in on the dashboard, and figured out the best route. Before she fell completely asleep, he asked “What was that thing back there?”

“Vampire, just a vampire. Now drive.”

-------------------

Sears Tower Building, Chicago

Nathaniel Jonathan Marcus Bedford Forrest stared out the large plate glass windows surrounding his office. His features vaguely resembled his Civil War ancestor, with his facial hair stylized the same way, and similar haircuts. He was a legitimate businessman, or so he claimed. It was true to keep the police, and those pesky Aurors off his trail he had the veneer of being a civilized gentleman. However, he was a case of being not only one of the three richest men in the city, but also being connected to the criminal underworld. He considered himself a consulting criminal. If a high risk job needed some backing, he expected to be paid back for his troubles. Many a man who had crossed him, now wished they hadn’t, though that was dependent on whether you believed in heaven or hell. He snorted derisively. Religion was for fools who put someone else before themselves.

Of course, being a member of the magical community had its bonus points. He’d made deals with the vampires, the fay folk, even some of the American creatures not known to the rest of the world. The only group he’d never gotten to side with were the damned Sasquatches. They were too peaceful and intelligent to fall for his ideas. They had sided with the damned Department of Magic. They were like oversized Wookies, only without the energy weapons. But they were just as strong and smart, though thankfully they had a talent for languages, so it wasn’t some sort of one way conversation with one.

Speaking of the Department, he’d been quite pleased about the little raid on their island compound in Lake Michigan last year. They’d had to up sticks, but they’d hidden quite well, so he wasn’t so happy about that. Of course, they’d never connect him to the crime. He’d used too many intermediaries to have a warm enough trail to him. The most they knew him for was illegal potions and drugs running in the wizarding world. Yes, he ran drugs. Splot was one of them. Made any newbie wizards brain become like a cauldron of any hard Muggle drug on the market.

But the Aurors were even more of problem now, but only because those British morons were making it hard for him by drawing attention to the wizarding community even more, ever since the
attack on the Quabbin. To him, he could have stirred up anti-Muggle sentiments better if the America for Humans group had grown bigger, and more of a threat to wizarding society. Then he could have built on that resentment. He was not going to draw attention to himself yet. The Grand Order couldn’t afford that, not when it was so weak. But he had plans, plans that would cement his reputation and power, while embarrassing the Department. Something big.

Update #173
---------
Saturday, May 18, 1996 - 3 DAYS TO NORTH KOREAN COUP ATTEMPT
Hogsmeade Civic Center
Hogsmeade
Great Britain
NEXT PoV: 174 - Harry Potter
---------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 3 (ring, snake, cup)
---------
Severus Snape had never thought he’d see the day where something good came out of Dolores Umbridge's tenure at Hogwarts. Well, he'd been surprised once before, and he had been surprised again.

Shortly after the term began, the ever-so-arrogant Chosen One had decided to take Defense Against the Dark Arts into his own hands. Realizing that theoretical work would not help the students defend themselves against real life Death Eaters, he had started a secret society known as Dumbledore's Army which would conduct practical Defense Against the Dark Arts classes in the Room of Requirement -- though in a different configuration, supposedly, than the one which had held Voldemort's Horcrux. Snape had to admit that Harry Potter was actually competent at Defense Against the Dark Arts, and he eventually found himself in the position of teaching everyone in the class everything that he knew.

The group had started out small, with maybe twenty students people. Most of them had been Gryffindors or friends of Mr. Potter. There had been rumors circulating around the school that the club existed, but Dolores Umbridge had been too busy dealing with the Super Bowl Breach to really get around to disbanding it. While Harry had been under house arrest, Ronald Weasley and Hermione Granger had taken turns giving lessons.

Things had changed drastically, however, when the Dark Lord came back -- those bloody Horcruxes -- and Cornelius Fudge was ousted. Everyone promptly began clamoring for practical defensive magic, and Scrimgeour wisely recalled Professor Umbridge and replaced her with Snape himself. Voldemort's return almost immediately inflated the number of people enrolled in Dumbledore's Army to over fifty people, including several Slytherins. Word of the group spread once Umbridge was no longer to suppress it, and by the beginning of May it was up to over a hundred people.

Snape had once sat in on some of the group's lessons and was actually quite impressed with the dedication of the Dumbledore's Army members. He eventually decided to have each class's Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson consist of a visit to the Dumbledore's Army training center in the Room of Requirement, effectively legitimizing the group. The students appreciated that a lot. Granted, part of Snape's rationale was to try to hide the fact that he'd never taught Defense Against the Dark Arts before and didn't really have a syllabus to base the course off of now that Voldemort had stirred the cauldron once again.

It was at this point that somebody found out about it in Hogsmeade. The mayor promptly started screaming at McGonagall -- who was by then headmistress -- to move the classes over to
Hogsmeade so that ordinary wizards could take lessons. The students of course were all for it as it gave them a chance to visit Hogsmeade. After a brief discussion, the staff had agreed to move Defense Against the Dark Arts over to the Hogsmeade Civic Center. With OWLs just around the corner, Snape had finally managed to badger Harry into letting Snape himself take over the lessons while Harry started cramming for his OWLs. Although Harry hated Snape as much as Snape hated him, he conceded that Snape was probably the best man for the job. After all, he was a former Death Eater.

Membership in Dumbledore's Army had increased explosively as soon as the classes were moved into the Hogsmeade Civic Center. According to the last census -- taken on 16 May -- there were over 2,000 people enrolled. Most of Hogsmeade had joined up, as did many members from surrounding towns. People were supposedly clamoring to get classes like this in London as well.

Snape had found very quickly that there was no way he was going to be able to give all of these students the personal supervision required to master defensive magic without killing each other. He had been forced to break the group up into sections which had classes at different times throughout the day; he would prepare a lesson for the day and then teach the same class over and over again to different groups of students. Shortly after that, he managed to convince Rufus Scrimgeour to start sending over Aurors to help train the people. The Minister had complained that most of the Aurors were tracking Voldemort at this point, but eventually he had caved in and told all of the Aurors who had been assigned to the SAS to take some members of their battalion and teach classes while they were waiting for assignments. Not only did this reduce class sizes to something more manageable, it allowed the Muggle agents to familiarize the citizens of Hogsmeade with Muggle weapons such as guns. He wouldn't be surprised if Voldemort tried to surprise wizards by hiring Muggles to attack them with weapons the victims weren't familiar with.

Snape also realized that this put him in a very dangerous position. Voldemort undoubtedly knew that he was training wizards to fight against him. If Snape had been in Voldemort's shoes, he would have insinuated someone into Dumbledore's Army who would eventually try to assassinate him. A green Avada Kedavra beam would easily be lost in the mixture of Expelliarmuses and Petrificus Totalus beams. Fortunately, he was good at Legilimency and probed prospective students' thoughts before they joined. Not only would that unmask any assassins, but it would warn the student that their own thought could be used against them. This was a perfect segue to Occulumency training. Unlike his first Occulumency student, an obstinate Harry Potter, these students were much more willing to work on their lessons.

He took another look at his schedule. His next lesson was Occulumency with Class B. Class B consisted primarily of Hogsmeade adults ages 25-50. Most of them had been former Hogwarts students. Snape had suspected that many of them had forgotten most of their lessons after taking their OWLs and NEWTs.

Snape chuckled to himself. Occulumency with adults could be quite entertaining, especially if no one in the class was under seventeen. He wondered what he would find today.

There were about fifty people in the room, which is the maximum class size he would allow. He chose one person at random, a woman in her early thirties, and pointed his wand at her. He shouted, "Legilimens!"

The woman squirmed for a while and begged him to stop the attack. Snape shook his head angrily. "This is an attempt to train you to resist Voldemort, Mrs. Parker. He will not relent no matter how much you plead with him. Therefore, neither will I. You must use Occulumency if you want to keep the Dark Lord from finding out your deepest secrets. He will not think twice about using them
against you and revealing them to the world."

Snape then stared at her. Hard. "And therefore, neither will I."

The crowd gasped, and the woman went pale. Snape grinned and slowly nodded. It appeared that she suddenly realized what he was going to do. Snape sensed her defense frantically strengthen, which was a good start. Unfortunately, it was not strong enough to prevent his attack. That was a failure, as far as he was concerned. He knew what the punishment would be. Judging from the look on the woman's face, she did as well.

Snape chuckled. "My, my, Mrs. Parker. You've been seeing that man for what, three months now? You really should tell your husband about this. And you're pregnant? This sounds...intriguing. Let me take a look here..."

The crowd tittered nervously as she shook her head in terror! "No, Professor Snape! Please, NO!"

Snape's response was to roar at her: "Then STOP me! And DO NOT TOUCH YOUR WAND!"

That final threat about revealing the baby's father appeared to do the job, as the woman's will stiffened and she blocked out Snape's intruding thoughts. A slow smile spread across her face as Snape lowered his wand.

"Very good, Mrs. Parker. That is a good start. Not many people manage to reveal only one secret the first time they are subject to Legilimency. Let's see now whether Contestant Number Two will do as well as you did."

He turned his stern gaze on a man in his sixties. The subject gulped as his ordeal began.

An hour or so later, every single student had been probed. The vast majority of them had spilled two or three secrets before blocking his probe. That was roughly average for a typical adult.

He closed the class by Obliviating the secrets which had been revealed out of all of the students' heads -- along with the fact that he had tried to probe their minds. The only thing he let them keep was the experience they had gained with Occulmency. This experience, of course, was the entire purpose of the lesson. And the Obliviation allowed him to pull the same trick on them again.

He figured that it would take a good five or six lessons for this group to actually be able to defend itself against someone as powerful as Voldemort.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #174
-------------
Sunday, May 19, 1996 - 2 DAYS TO NORTH KOREAN COUP ATTEMPT
4 Privet Drive
Surrey
England
NEXT PoV: 175 - Ask Fake Name Generator: Member of the Israeli Defense Forces
-------------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 3 (ring, snake, cup)
-------------
Sirius Black stared at the tiny room under the stairs. "You actually lived in this little hole in the wall?
For over ten years?

Harry nodded. "Yes, Sirius. My aunt and uncle treated me almost as badly as your family used to treat Kreacher. They were embarrassed that I even existed for the most part. That's why I was so excited when you told me I could move in with you on the way out of the Shrieking Shack."

Harry didn't know whether to be comforted or disturbed by the fact that the Dursleys' house was now devoid of Muggles -- and would be devoid of Muggles for a while. Both Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia were in jail on various charges and had lost custody of both children. Dudley had been taken into an orphanage where he had likely found himself the low man on the totem pole. Harry figured it would be a big shock to him.

The empty house meant that no one was going to be ordering Harry around or beating him up. Still, it just felt...dead and empty. Sometimes, silence could be more deafening than the loudest sound.

Sirius put his hand on Harry's shoulder. "Well, you're not going to have to live in there anymore. You've been to my house before, so you already know what's there. As the last surviving member of the Black family, and one who has finally been cleared of all charges, I am now the owner of that building. Once you leave Hogwarts at the end of the year, you and Dudley are going to be moving in with me. It's what a godfather is for, and I'm sure your parents would have approved."

Harry nodded. "Sirius, I just can't tell you how much this means to me. You'll be the father I never had."

"I hope so, Harry. I sure hope so. I still feel like it's partially my fault that your parents are dead -- had I not told James to switch to Peter at the last minute, they wouldn't have been betrayed. This is the least I can do to help atone for that sin."

Harry fought back tears and looked at the clock on the wall. "I wonder how Dudley is going to take it. The people from the orphanage should be dropping him off here in a few minutes. He's never been comfortable with wizards, you know. None of the Dursleys have been."

"He'll learn, Harry. I won't try to use magic around him until he's gotten accustomed to living with a new father. I promise you, Harry, that I'll be as good a father to him as his parents had been, if not better. I must warn both of you kids, however, that I may have to travel on important missions from time to time, so I may not always be in the house. Rest assured, though, that when those times come along, I will make sure that someone will be here to take care of both of you. That person will know to be careful with Dudley when it comes to using magic. However, I believe that the person may be able, in some cases, to impress Dudley with Muggle technology."

Harry stared at him. "Missions? What missions?"

Sirius grinned. "I wouldn't be able to tell you because they're secret. However, you'll find out why when we get to my house -- it's going to be a surprise. A surprise which, I might add, is probably going to improve your cousin's opinion of me a great deal. He'll think I'm cool, Harry. Trust me."

Harry shook his head. "I find that hard to believe, Sirius."

Sirius chuckled openly now. "Harry, even the Muggles are familiar with the organization which will be sending me on missions. Muggle children would be falling over themselves to have me as a father."
Harry wanted to ask him a few more questions about his missions but was interrupted by the sound of a car pulling into the driveway. Sirius brought out his wand as Harry moved to the window and peeked out through the crack between the curtains at the visitors. Turning back to Sirius, he motioned for his godfather to lower his wand. "It's Dudley, all right, along with a person from the orphanage. He seems happy to be home. I get the impression that he didn't particularly like the time at the orphanage."

Sirius arched his eyebrows at him. "I bet he can now relate to what you went through as an orphan."

Harry froze for a moment in shock and then laughed. "I believe you're right, Sirius. I believe you're right."

Motioning for Sirius to stay behind, Harry headed for the front door. He reached it just as Dudley opened it and stepped into the kitchen.

The two boys stood there, staring at each other. For a good ten seconds, neither said a word. Finally, Dudley made the first move. He rushed into the house and gave Harry a huge hug.

"I never thought I'd be saying this, Harry, but it's good to see a familiar face. You wouldn't believe what I had to go through at the orphanage. It was a nightmare."

Harry patted him on the back. "I know all too well, Dudley. I understand."

Realization finally penetrated Dudley's thick skull. "The people in the orphanage treated me the way used to treat you. Having been a bit of a bully throughout my childhood, I never really related to what it felt like to being the person being bullied instead of the person doing the bullying. I figure I should apologize, Harry."

Harry nodded. "Apology accepted, Dudley. You'll never have to go back there again."

Harry heard an odd sound and saw that Dudley was actually crying. "I'd also like to thank you once again for what you did in that underpass last summer. I thought that monster was going to kill me."

"Don't worry about it. Dudley. Anyone with a wand would have done such a thing. Dementors are terrible creatures."

Dudley shuddered. "That black-cloaked figure draining all the joy from my body. Those clammy hands!"

Harry nodded. "I've seen them before, and --"

Suddenly, he cut himself off. "Wait a minute, Dudley. You actually SAW the thing? Muggles can't see dementors!"

Dudley wiped his eyes. "I guess I'm a weird Muggle then. So, who's this Sirius Black they've been telling me about?"

Sirius introduced himself at that point. "That would be me, Dudley. I'm Sirius Black, Harry's godfather and your new father. Is there anything I can do to make the transition easier for you? If you want, I can have you share a room with Harry once we get to your new home."

Dudley blinked. "New home?"
"Yes, Dudley. I've actually got a place of my own which has been in the family for a long time. It's got more than enough space to house all of us. I must warn you, however, that I come from a Wizarding family and that you will see many unusual things in this house. Harry and I have agreed that until you are accustomed to your new surroundings and being around wizards, we will keep our use of magic around you to a minimum."

"You're a wizard?"

"Yes, Dudley. I'm a wizard. However, I'm about to become something else as well, and I think you're going to like it, Dudley."

Dudley whistled. "Do you live in a floating castle or somewhere like that?"

Sirius chuckled. "No, Dudley. I live in large apartment in downtown London. I'll tell you where it is once I've signed all the papers here, met with another wizard named Dumbledore, and sent the representative from your orphanage on the way."

Harry understood immediately what Sirius was doing. Sirius couldn't divulge his house's location to Dudley for two reasons. First, he didn't want the orphanage to know that 12 Grimmauld Place existed. Second, he wouldn't have been able to tell Dudley anyway because Dumbledore, not Sirius, was the Secret-Keeper. Dumbledore would have to do the job.

Half an hour later, everything was signed. Dudley Dursley was now in the custody of Sirius Black. Harry had a most satisfying vision of his aunt and uncle dying of apoplectic shock.

Sirius and Harry spent some time helping Dudley pack up the memories he had left at 4 Privet Drive and putting them in the back of the moving van with all of the possessions Dudley had brought to the orphanage. They then headed to London to meet Dumbledore.

There was some traffic coming into London. Eventually, though, they made it to Grimmauld Place. Dudley's eyes widened when looked up at the street, turned to Dumbledore to be informed that 12 Grimmauld Place existed, and turned back to the street to realize that a building had just appeared out of nowhere. He blinked slowly. "OK...I'll buy that for now..."

Sirius told Harry, Dumbledore, and Dudley to hold back for a second so he could go and tell all of the portraits in the building to tone down their acts so as to not frighten Dursley. As he had feared, most of them promptly started screaming that Muggles were not welcome in their home and that they were only tolerating the ones already there because they represented the British government. Sirius was eventually forced to conjure drapes to cover most of them. Once that was done, he came outside and told everyone it was all right for them to enter.

Dudley was nearly bowled over when he saw Kreacher. The elf, of course, started screaming that Muggles were evil. Sirius promptly ordered Kreacher to obey Dudley as if he were Sirius himself. That shut the elf up.

It took the rest of the afternoon to move Dudley's stuff in. As they did so, Harry noticed a lot of people in Muggle military uniforms gathering in living room. He didn't recognize any of them. He mentioned this to Sirius, and he said that it was all right. They could be trusted to keep secrets. Trusted more than virtually every other Muggle in the kingdom, in fact.

Finally, Dudley's room was ready. Sirius had offered to use magic to clean it up and make it more
attractive so that the transition would be easier, and Dudley had reluctantly agreed. His reluctant
vanished as soon as Sirius cast the spell to spiff up the room.

The group then headed downstairs, into the living room. Harry's curiosity finally got the best of him.
Rounding on his godfather, he asked. "All right, Sirius. Who are these guys?"

One of the Muggles smiled at Harry and responded. "Harry, we're the representatives of Her Majesty's Secret Service. We've come here to watch as he takes the oaths which enlist him as a member of our organization."

Harry and Dudley both stared at each other. Finally, they blurted: "You've become a James Bond!"

Sirius shook his head. "I can't comment on any Secret Service operations, boys. It's classified. I'd also appreciate it if you didn't tell anyone outside the Auror community that I'm a member. However, what I can tell you is that the activities performed by that particular movie character, albeit highly unrealistic and hyped up for movie purposes, are not inconsistent with those performed by members of this organization."

With that, the Muggle who had spoken told Sirius to raise his hand and recite the oaths after him. Once Sirius had done so, the Muggle shook the new agent's hand and presented him with a Walther PPK. Sirius graciously accepted the Muggle weapon with his left hand. Meanwhile, in his right, he lifted his wand.

Sirius looked from the gun to the wand and back again. Suddenly, he chuckled. "I must say, with a gun in one hand, a wand in the other, and the ability to turn into a dog, I'm going to make a really good spy."

Dudley nearly fell over in laughter. Turning to Harry, he boasted: "I LIKE this guy!"

Harry smiled. "I thought you would, Dudley. I thought you would."

Sirius laughed even harder. "Trust me, Dudley, you're going to see lots of British Muggle secret agents around here. HMSS safe houses are believed to be secure, but none of them have the Fidelius Charm to protect them!"

To be continued...

Update #175
------------
Sunday, May 19, 1996 - 2 DAYS TO NORTH KOREAN COUP ATTEMPT
Air Base Gimel
[location classified]
Israel
NEXT PoV: 176 - Samuel

HORCRUXES LEFT: 3 (ring, snake, cup)

Noam Tamir cheered as the announcement was made over the intercom. The powers that be had finally given them the OK to start the attack. The planes had been all fueled up and the training missiles which they normally carried around had been replaced with live ones.

His commanding officer had told him that every single person who had been a member of Esh
Elohim would be activated for this run. Most of them had lost friends or relatives in the attack and were itching for revenge. Now, thanks to the Minister of Defense, they would get their wish.

Noam knew the target area inside and out now. The Hamas headquarters was in a nondescript building in the middle of the West Bank. People probably walked by it every day without realizing the atrocities that its occupants could be committing at that very moment. It looked ramshackle and was likely going to be a soft target.

There were a few wrinkles in the attack plan, of course. For one thing, the building was in a relatively populated area. Noam had the sinking feeling that this attack would likely result in several civilian casualties which would just elicit a counterattack by the terrorists. Supposedly special agents were in the process of going door to door trying to warn the civilians to get out. Those that agreed to come with the agents were hustled into cars and whisked out of the target zone. Those who chose to stay or put up a fight were arrested and turned over to Israeli authorities before they could warn the target.

The second wrinkle involved the fact that what looked be a soft target on the surface could actually be well defended. Noam suspected, as did many of the other people who would be participating in this mission, that there were antiaircraft guns and other defensive weapons placed in the complex and in the buildings around it. Several of the pilots were going to be focusing on taking out ground support while the Esh Elohim victims were attacking the base itself.

The third wrinkle was the one which worried Noam the most: enemy wizards. Hamas had at least two wizards in their midst. He tried to put himself in the shoes of a Hamas operative. You have just executed a major terrorist attack against Israel. Clearly, Israel is going to want to get even, and do so in a big way. What do you do? Well, you've got wizards. You have the wizards attack the Israelis as they come in. The Israelis aren't expecting magical defenses, so you will be able to hold your own more easily against the attackers.

There had supposedly been a heated debate as to whether wizards should assist the fighter planes during the raid on the base. Minister of Magic Michal Oved had eventually decided against it. For one thing, wizards probably didn't realize how powerful Muggle weapons could be. Second, she was concerned that the fighting would escalate into a magical war where both sides began using spells to terrorize people and cause mass mayhem. Besides, wizards were clearly an unconventional weapon. How much of a step was it from wizards to nukes? Finally, how would it look if the Israelis used magic against the base but the Hamas wizards hadn't actually been there?

Noam hoped that Minister Oved had made the correct decision. He'd find out for sure in maybe 15 minutes.

He put on his gear, went through the preflight checklist, and climbed into his plane. The target location had already been entered into the computer. All he had to do was head over there and fire off the missiles before anybody there had a chance to react.

A few minutes later, he was airborne. There were six other planes in on the raid. The four on the edges of the squadron would be taking out ground forces while the three in the center -- all Esh Elohim victims -- took out the base itself.

The fighters stayed as low as they could to the ground. They didn't want the enemy see them coming. On the other hand, they didn't want the exhaust from their engines and possible sonic booms to damage the houses of the civilians below them.
The proximity alarm beeped as the target came up over the horizon. He waited a few more seconds for his HUD to report that the missile had achieved a good lock. Meanwhile, puffs of smoke suddenly began shooting out of the houses near the target. Noam swore -- it appeared as if one of the "civilians" had managed to incapacitate one of the special agents before he could finish making his rounds. The base was likely on alert. He'd have to be careful.

One of the pilots suddenly shouted. "Incoming missile! Everyone, scatter!"

Time for Plan Bet, Noam thought. The planes separated into three groups, one with three fighters and two with two. It wasn't much of a scatter, but no one was going to be leaving his wingman at a time like this.

Noam saw the missile heading towards one of the aircraft which had been on the edges of the squadron. The pilot frantically tried to evade, but the missile somehow managed to keep its lock. Noam had an uneasy feeling that a wizard was helping it out. The missile eventually hit the aircraft, knocking it out of the sky. Its wingman blasted the missile launcher as the pilot ejected and the plane crashed into the ground.

Noam checked the HUD one last time. He had a solid lock. Roaring in fury, he launched his first missiles. The two other Esh Elohim victims did the same. Within half a second, six live missiles were heading towards the compound.

They crossed the intervening space in less than five seconds. Noam risked a glance away from an exploding antiaircraft gun so he could watch them go on in.

There was a big explosion. Noam frowned. Too early, he thought. It was almost as if something had detonated them. He was about to ask his wingmen what had happened when he heard a horrified voice over the intercom.

"They've got a magical shield up! I can see what looks like a heat shimmer! The missiles are impacting on the surface and aren't reaching the ground!"

Shit, he thought. This was going to be bad. He watched in horror as an odd-looking yellow beam suddenly burst out of the smoke from the missile attack, slammed into the plane next to him, and detonated its missiles. The plane burst into flame, forcing Noam to swerve out of the way to avoid being incinerated. Switching to guns, he began strafing the target. The bullets bounced off the shield like hailstones.

His proximity alarm warbled more urgently and reported that a missile had locked onto him. Double shit, he thought. He was probably dead, or at least going to be taken prisoner by Hamas when he ejected. He prepared to eject when suddenly something occurred to him.

There had to be a limit as to how much that shield could withstand. It seemed to be able to defend the compound against missiles fairly easily.

But would it be able to defend against a kamikaze attack?

He yelled into the microphone. "Rafi, try to confuse that missile and have it lose lock. I'm going to try a kamikaze. Say goodbye to Anat for me. I should be dead anyway."

His surviving wingman yelled at him, "Noam, are you crazy? They've got a shield!"
"Against missiles and bullets, yes. However, something tells me they aren't expecting kamikazes, and we're a lot bigger than missiles. Cover me!"

Rafi nodded. "I'll do what I can. You'll receive a posthumous medal for this, Noam."

"I'll eject before I hit. Now, Rafi, GO!"

His wingman closed in a little more in an attempt to distract the missile. Sure enough, the missile started changing course. Yelling in triumph, the wingman aimed pointed his aircraft at the base and ejected. The aircraft made it maybe a couple of hundred feet closer to the base before the missile hit and blew it up.

However, Rafi had done his job. The missile was out of the way. One last nudge on the control stick, and Noam had his plane aimed directly at the base. Satisfied, he activated the ejection seat.

The seat blasted him out of the aircraft. He got his bearings just in time to see his plane, with a few live missiles left, crash through the shield into the base. He caught a brief glimpse of a robed man disappearing just before the shock wave from the explosion would have hit the escaping wizard.

He watched as the planes switched to guns and fired them into the wreckage. That would take out any terrorists still in the building. Against all odds, the attack had been a success.

Or had it? Unless he had been mistaken, that robed man had been Rodolphus Lestrange teleporting himself out of danger. And if one wizard had been able to escape, others could have as well.

Noam had a bad feeling about this as he settled to the ground. The Israeli Air Force had just embarrassed a whole bunch of wizards. Those wizards were going to be screaming to get even.

He didn't want to be there when that happened.

To be continued...
Update #176 through Update #180

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Mislagnissa

Update #176
-----------
Sunday, May 19, 1996 - 2 DAYS TO NORTH KOREAN COUP ATTEMPT
Al-Aqsa Mosque
Jerusalem
NEXT PoV: 177 - Lauren Mistry
-----------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 3 (ring, snake, cup)
-----------
The secretary knocked on the door, and the Kohen Gadol looked up. "Sir, Samuel and his interpreter just walked in and are demanding to speak with you. They don't look happy. If anything, sir, they look resigned."

The Kohen Gadol put his head in his hands. "Let me guess. He's pissed that the Israelis attacked the Hamas headquarters."

"I don't doubt it, sir. However, in all fairness, what else could you have done if you were the Israelis? The Hamas terrorists killed several hundred people. If you compare the size of Israel to that of the United States, the attack on Esh Elohim was probably equivalent to the destruction of the two Wizarding towns. You must have heard the MK's calling for blood, sir. Otherwise, you wouldn't have made that statement asking the Muslims and Jews to stay calm and to not overreact."

The Kohen Gadol shook his head. "And what would Samuel say that they should have done differently?"

"Probably send wizards in to take out the two assassins without risking the lives of civilians. From what Hamas is reporting, a good fifteen people were killed in the attack, many of them noncombatants. Hamas is vowing revenge, of course. Had the Mossad, the Ministry of Magic, or someone like that gone in and taken out the wizards directly, that would likely have been the end of it. Now, we're probably dealing with long series of revenge attacks. This is going to be a mess, sir."

"As if the entire HISTORY of this region hasn't been a mess? All right, Ibrahim. Send them in."

The former imam's face paled when he saw the expression on the two men's faces. Samuel seemed sad, and he had a bleak but resigned look on his face. The interpreter's face on the other hand, bore an expression of absolute horror. It sounded like Samuel had reached a decision, one which likely did not bode well for the human race as a whole. The mere thought of what that meant sent a chill down the Kohen Gadol's spine.

The Kohen Gadol stood to greet his guests. "Welcome, gentlemen. We are honored by your visit. How can I help you?"

When Samuel responded, the words were choked with emotion. Even though the Kohen Gadol couldn't understand what he was saying, the tone was obvious. Samuel had given up. He had returned to accomplish a mission, and he had finally reached the conclusion that the mission had failed.
The Kohen Gadol thought this over for a second and suddenly froze. The Mahdi had come to earth to save it, just as the Prophet foretold. It was obvious that Samuel was the Mahdi, even though he didn't admit it. What did it mean if the Mahdi determined that this world couldn't be saved? Allah help us, he thought. No! It couldn't be...THAT! Didn't Allah swear to Noah that He would not destroy the world again?

He turned to the interpreter, who was shaking with fear. It took the man a good ten seconds to respond. "Holiness, I have come to visit you because I wish to say goodbye. I will soon be returning to Sheol, my mission and hope unfulfilled."

The Kohen Gadol had to draw a deep breath to calm himself before he was able to continue. "Goodbye? Holy One, your mission has just begun! You've made a big impression on both me and John Paul. It will just take time!"

Samuel shook his head. "Unfortunately, you and John Paul are both in the minority. I can tell that both of you are righteous men. Unfortunately, there are far too many wicked men in your society and far few righteous ones. Righteous men existed in Sodom and Gomorrah, but not enough to prevent God from destroying those two cities."

The Kohen Gadol's jaw dropped. "You're saying that modern civilization is like Sodom and Gomorrah? That's impossible! Why, most of the people alive right now worship the One God!"

The look on Samuel's face made the Kohen Gadol cringe. "They may claim they believe in the One God. Perhaps hundreds of years ago, closer to my time, the people of this world actually DID believe in Him. However, even if they do believe in Him, they do not revere Him. They claim to be following His doctrines while they kill each other with terrible weapons, challenge His supremacy through technology, irreparably damage the world which He created for them, and in general conduct themselves in ways which go against everything He said. As if that is not bad enough, the three -- sorry, FOUR -- sects who worship the One God are constantly fighting each other instead of cherishing their shared heritage! I believe that is precisely why God ordained the destruction of the classical State of Israel in the first place. It's exactly the same situation, except this time it is worldwide. And in both cases, the society was too far gone for the prophets of the Eternal to change the ways of the people in time."

The Kohen Gadol tried to say something but it came out only as a stammering croak. Meanwhile, Samuel bored on. "The parallels are everywhere. Consider the Tower of Babel. The people of Shinar very likely started out building the Tower in an attempt to praise and revere God. However, the tower grew and grew, and eventually people became corrupt. The tower eventually became tall enough to represent an obvious challenge to God's rule over the earth. The construction of the tower became society's single most important task. Human beings were discarded and thrown away when they could no longer make bricks, while those bricks were treated with the reverence you give your holy book, the Qu'ran. God could not ignore this challenge. Seeing a unified society gaining power against Him, He disrupted the society and destroyed the tower."

"There are legends I recall which appear to have not survived to your time. They claim that the tower was five hundred cubits tall and could be seen from all over the land. People fought with each other just to make progress on the tower. With this in mind, compare this to what we have today. Not only do we have one five hundred cubit tall building, we have MANY. You have told me there are plans in the works for buildings a thousand cubits tall or more. God disrupted the offenders' society for a challenge even HALF that serious! As for the people fighting with each other just to make progress, that seems the way of life for everyone in modern industry! In both cases, people tried to stop the
insanity, and in both cases they failed.

"Yes, Holiness. The human race is just as it was at the Tower of Babel. And we both know what happened next.

"However, you are also doing things which are challenging God in other ways as well. You have used technology to perform some of the works which only God could have done. That is blasphemous in itself. You compare yourselves to angels and think you should have the ability to fly? You believe that you can outdo God at creation by learning how He created animals and possibly improving what He has done? Not only have you appropriated these abilities inappropriately, you do not even have the wisdom to use them properly! There are even rumors that a wizard in England has created a device which allows people to become immortal! God limited all modern humans' lifespans at 120 years for a reason!"

The Kohen Gadol finally managed to spit out a sentence. "Holiness, Allah can't destroy us. He promised it to Noah!"

Samuel shook his head sadly. "HE may have promised not to destroy us. However, that doesn't say He won't sit back and let us destroy ourselves. Those bombs which destroy cities will be able to do it all by themselves. Either those, or those evil wizards who use their God-given power for evil instead of for good."

The Kohen Gadol and the interpreter both burst into tears. The sounds brought people running in from the outside. The Kohen Gadol, however, shooed them all away. He couldn't let them hear this. It just wasn't right. If the world was going to be destroyed, he would let them die in peace.

Samuel put his hand on the Kohen Gadol's shoulder -- or at least tried to. When he spoke again, he was sympathetic. "Holiness, as long as you are alive, there is still time to remedy the situation. I don't know how much time you have left, but remember all you need is an instant. God will always forgive those who repent.

"Holiness, here is what I recommend. It is obvious that I am too unfamiliar with the modern world to minister to you in this time of crisis. My suggestion is that you create a gathering of all religious leaders and set them to work on the problem of repairing this broken world. They must continue the task I had started of reuniting the Children of Abraham and then eventually use this knowledge to redeem your society. In my opinion, this is the only chance you have. If you do this before the day of judgment, your society will likely be spared. If you do not...well, all I recommend is praying that your end be as painless as possible."

Samuel stood up tall and looked around the room one last time. "Anitel -- you call her Deborah -- is speaking with John Paul at this moment, relaying him this message. I wish you the best of luck in the months and years to come and will pray fervently that your society rights itself in time. Farewell, High Priest."

Sighing, Samuel bowed to the to the Kohen Gadol...and vanished.

The Kohen Gadol and interpreter both started shouting. "Samuel, please! Come back! Samuel, SAMUEL, SAMUEL!"

No response. The two men looked at each other, horror on their faces. Slowly, but surely, it hardened into determination.
The Kohen Gadol called in his secretary. "Ibrahim, listen. I need to talk to the Pope. Now!"

"Which one, sir?"

"BOTH!"

--------------------

Somewhere
Sheol

Deborah chuckled as Samuel entered the area. "That was a clever idea, my former student. The old fire and brimstone speech with a liberal application of Judean guilt. I'm impressed, and people like Moses and Tiqwael would be proud of you. Combine that with the fact that they see us as legends on the same level as Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed and...well, I wouldn't be surprised if this actually does the job."

Samuel stared at her somberly. "I hope so, Anitiel. I honestly hope so."

"What happens if it doesn't work?"

Samuel stared at his feet. "I don't want to think about it. Believe me, Anitiel. I don't want to think about it. This speech wasn't a prophecy doomed to happen, but odds are that disaster will strike them all the same if we fail."

To be continued...

-----------------------------
Update #177

-------------
Monday, May 20, 1996 - 1 DAY TO NORTH KOREAN COUP ATTEMPT
Mistry Residence
11 Osborne Road
G65 4IN
Kilsyth
Great Britain

Next PoV: 178 -- Shimon Peres

-------------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 3 (ring, snake, cup)

Lauren Mistry watched the news. It seemed like the entire world was blowing up around them and no one seemed to know what to do.

President Clinton had suddenly come out and claimed that the attacks in Boston were partially due to al-Qaeda. He had warned Afghanistan that the United States would be forced to occupy the country if the Afghans didn't hand the terrorists over to the United States. Kabul, of course, wasn't cooperating. She had a strong suspicion that the most powerful country in the world would soon be at war. That couldn't be good.

The crackdown on America for Humans was slowly beginning to peter out. Most of the organization's members had been picked up by now, and the rest were fleeing into Canada across the country's porous northern border. Busy with preparations for a possible invasion of Afghanistan, the government had delegated the responsibility for rounding up America for Humans to the state level and to the seven regional Department of Magic offices. The Quabbin was still polluted, and it would
be for a long time. People in Boston were going crazy over the water rationing.

The Middle East looked like it was about to explode. The Israelis had retaliated against Hamas for the attack on the synagogue and had targeted a base in the West Bank with an air strike. Although the mission had been a success, the terrorists had managed to take out over half the strike aircraft. The stricken planes had fallen to the ground and destroyed several civilian homes. One hotshot deliberately crashed his plane into the base to destroy it. The resulting explosion destroyed it -- and two buildings to either side.

Hamas was reporting 50 homeless and 15 civilian casualties. They warned their "Zionist oppressors" that they would avenge these casualties tenfold. Lauren had rolled her eyes at that. As far as she was concerned, the Israeli attack had been justified. She doubted that Hamas would be as philosophical about it, however.

The entire Israeli government looked to be on the verge of collapse. Shimon Peres, whose Labor coalition had already been in trouble, was being harangued by right-wing Likud members for the civilian casualties in the West Bank and for not using wizards to ensure that the civilians weren't hurt. Anonymous sources reported that Likud was debating a no-confidence vote in Peres's government. These internal squabbles would likely just make it easier for Hamas to attempt future attacks.

In other news, there had been an emergency session between the Pope -- well, the real Pope -- and Suleiman I, the High Priest of the Children of Abraham. Suleiman had been the imam in charge of the al-Aqsa Mosque before a ghost claiming to have been the biblical prophet Samuel elevated him to the High Priesthood. The two religious leaders refused to comment on the discussions, but judging from the expressions on their faces they seemed saddened and frightened. They also indicated that Celestine VI was supposed to have been in on the talks as well but he had refused, claiming that Samuel's word was not valid.

Finally, there were rumors of instability in the Koreas. Just what the world needed at a time like this, she thought. The only thing that was missing to trigger an apocalypse would be a rogue wizard taking control of a country. She shook her head when she realized what she was thinking. Tom Riddle had nearly taken control of her own country with that fictitious Alliance for Magic party, and he'd proven to be an evil wizard to boot. Thank God Scrimgeour and that Greek fellow managed to expose his schemes.

She was still ruminating over the future of the world when the doorbell rang. Frowning, she walked over to the door and opened it to reveal an old, robed man with a long beard. She blinked -- this person had to be a wizard if he was dressed like that.

She looked at him skeptically. "May I help you?"

"Indeed you may. I assume I am speaking with Ms. Lauren Mistry?"

Her eyebrows shot up. "Yes, I'm Lauren. Who are you?"

The man shook her hand. "My name is Albus Dumbledore. I am a teacher at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. May I come in?"

Wondering how she would explain this to her husband, she opened the door further and let him in. The wizard walked in and chuckled when he saw the television. "Ah, a television. You Muggles have such fascinating contraptions. I like little gadgets like that."
Lauren couldn't tell whether she should like this fellow or not. Was he making fun of modern technology or was he just making a joke? She was about to say something about this when she looked at his face more closely and saw that all humor had vanished.

The two of them sat down and the wizard leaned towards her. "Ms. Mistry, I need to tell you something very important. Is your husband here? He will need to know this as well."

Puzzled, she went over to the staircase and called for Lucas. She had apparently lucked out and had caught him when he wasn't playing video games. He gaped at the man sitting on the couch, and his jaw dropped even wider once she introduced him as a wizard.

Dumbledore nodded at her husband and then turned gravely towards her. "Do you have any children? They'll need to know too."

Lauren shook her head. "No, Mr. Dumbledore. No kids. We're not expecting either, at least as far as we know."

"Good. That will make things easier. Ms. Mistry, a few days ago the Prime Minister made a public service announcement targeting the people who had been bitten in the Wembley Stadium dog attack. Did you by any chance see that announcement?"

Both Mistries shook their heads.

"No. Well, it's a good thing I came then. What I am about to reveal should not be told to anyone unless there is absolutely no alternative. It will very likely frighten you, and at the very least it will change your life forever. You see, that dog was no ordinary dog."

Lauren chuckled. "I fully agree with you there, Mr. Dumbledore. It was clearly rabid, and I don't think I've ever seen a Great Dane-sized animal go that crazy."

Dumbledore didn't blink. "That animal was a werewolf."

Lauren stared at her husband and then back at the wizard. "Uh...say what?"

"A werewolf, Ms. Mistry. They transform into wolves every month when the full moon rises. They remain in wolf form, attacking other people, until the moon sets, at which point they became human again and have no memories of their violent night out."

Lucas snorted. "That doesn't make sense, Lauren. Werewolves don't exist. And even if they did, why would one of them decide to go to a football stadium just so he could attack people?"

Dumbledore turned to Lucas. "By your logic, wizards shouldn't exist either. Yet here I am. If wizards exist, why can't other so-called fantasy creatures such as werewolves? And we know why he was at the football stadium. It was involuntary. He was sent there by Lord Voldemort -- you know him as Tom Riddle -- against his will specifically to attack people. By the time he realized what was going on, it was too late. The moon had risen and the attacks had begun."

Lucas grunted. "Huh. Now what does this have to do with us? I know my wife was attacked, but she seems to have come out all right. Granted, she's gotten a little more sensitive to light and likes red meat more, but that's minor."

Dumbledore shook his head. "That's not minor, I'm afraid. You see, the reason that Voldemort sent..."
this werewolf in to attack the stadium is that anyone he bites becomes a werewolf as well. The symptoms you are describing, Ms. Mistry, are all consistent with lycanthropy -- that is, the condition of being a werewolf.

Lauren stared at him. "You mean to tell me I've been cursed to turn into an animal once a month?"

"I'm afraid so, Ms. Mistry. You will likely start to feel nausea and experience headaches during the week leading up to the full moon. On the night of the full moon -- the next one is 1 June -- you will transform into a creature similar to the one which attacked you in the stadium as soon as moonlight hits you. You will lose control of your actions and attack everyone you encounter, turning them into werewolves as well. This would include your husband if he's around. If you are lucky, and the sky is overcast that night so the moonlight never hits you, you will not transform."

Lauren was speechless. She didn't want to hurt anyone, let alone her husband. Meanwhile, her husband broke in: "You mean to tell me this is like a pandemic? Something out of a biological warfare scenario?"

"I'm afraid so, Mr. Mistry. I'm afraid so."

Lauren finally regained the power of speech. "This is not good. If I HAVE turned into one of these monsters, what can you do about it? You're a wizard, right? You can fix it."

Dumbledore shook his head. "I'm afraid there is no known cure. I'm sorry. You will be a werewolf for the rest of your life. One of my staff members is teaming up with a pharmaceutical company to try to convert the Wolfsbane Potion, a potion which causes a werewolf to keep his mind when he or she transforms, into pill form so it can be mass-produced to people afflicted with lycanthropy. This will allow the werewolf to lock him- or herself in a room and sleep through the entire night as a wolf without hurting anyone. Unfortunately, the pill is nowhere near ready for public use. It is likely that you will undergo at least one or two transformations before it is even ready for initial testing."

Lauren glanced at her husband. "Should the two of us separate? I don't want to hurt him."

Dumbledore shrugged. "It's up to you. However, if I were you, I would stay together and only separate just before the full moon. Transforming into the wolf shape is painful, and you will need as much emotional support as you can get. You can rejoin your husband once the moon sets."

Lauren shuddered. "Is there anything the two of us can do?"

The wizard nodded and pulled out an odd-looking contraption which looked like an ankle bracelet. "As a matter of fact, there is. First, please don't tell anybody about your condition. That will likely just frighten them and cause you to lose friends. Second, the Ministry of Magic would like you to wear this locator device so they can track your whereabouts and bring you to London before you transform. In addition to tracking you, this device will automatically transport you to a secret location near the Ministry of Magic shortly before the full moon rises. There, wizards like me will witness your transformation and make sure that you do not hurt anybody or spread the pandemic further. Once the moon sets, it will transport you back where you came from. This will happen at every full moon."

Dumbledore handed the ankle bracelet over to Lucas, who nodded and put it on her leg. She had one glimpse of it around her ankle before it suddenly disappeared. She looked back at Dumbledore, confused.
The wizard explained. "The bracelet becomes invisible so you can maintain your anonymity in the Muggle world. Otherwise, Muggles would start discriminating against people with ankle bracelets and think they were all werewolves. We do not want that to happen, as the world is troubling enough as it is."

Dumbledore stood up and began walking to the door. "I have to leave now to brief other attack victims. Do you know anyone else who was attacked who needs to be visited? We're still trying to contact all of the people who were attacked but haven't been able to find three of them: Peter Oglethorpe, James Lovett, and Harrison Cooper. Do you know any of these men? If so, where are they?"

Lauren shrugged. "I've never met any of them. Sorry."

Dumbledore sighed. "I hope they turn up. All we need is one of them to transform and bite twenty more people to continue the pandemic. I've left my card on the coffee table there. Don't hesitate to call me if you have any questions."

With that, the wizard opened the door and disappeared, leaving Lauren and her husband staring at each other and trying to figure out what they were going to do now.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #178
-------------
Tuesday, May 21, 1996 - 3 HOURS TO NORTH KOREAN COUP ATTEMPT
Prime Minister's Office
Jerusalem

Next PoV: 179 -- Choi Yeun

HORCRUXES LEFT: 3 (ring, snake, cup)

Shimon Peres was in over his head.

He'd been having trouble keeping his Labor government in place even before the wizards had been begun popping up. Several of his advisors had privately admitted to him that Netanyahu would have garnered enough MK's to take control of the government before the year was out.

The announcement that wizards lived in their community had caught Peres completely off guard. He had just come back from a staff meeting at the end of January when he nearly ran into a woman he could have sworn he'd never seen before. She appeared to be in her mid-sixties and had long gray hair done up in a bun. Unlike most of the women in the office, she was wearing a bizarre robe with bizarre symbols on it -- and it wasn't a hijab or other type of Muslim modesty garb. She also had an odd-looking rod in her hand.

Wondering how she had gotten past security, he immediately stopped her and asked for her name. She said that she was Minister of Magic Michal Oved and she needed to talk to him immediately.

He remembered his reaction vividly: "Minister of WHAT?" Her response had been to wave her rod, lift him a foot in the air, and put him down again. Needless to say, that attracted his attention. She then told him to go back to his office and close the door so that she could reveal some startling news.
The next hour had completely changed his worldview. Wizards existed and were finally introducing themselves to the Muggles after millennia of secrecy. Peres's State of Israel currently had the honor of hosting an important Wizarding educational institution, the Endor Institute. This Institute had been training wizards and witches for over three thousand years without interruption. As kingdoms and regimes rose and fell over the millennia, the Institute considered itself a servant of whichever kingdom happened to claim its territory. Not that the kingdom knew that it existed, of course. The association with the kingdom would only come into play if the Statute of Secrecy broke down and the world was introduced to the wizards...which it had just been.

By tradition, the leader of the Institute always surrendered his or her name and took the ceremonial name Michael (or Michal, in the case of a woman) the Servant of All. Over time, the All was dropped, and person became Michael or Michal the Servant. In Hebrew, that would be Michael or Michal Oved. When he asked her what her birth name had been, she refused to tell him, saying that once she had been elevated to the leadership post her past became irrelevant and she was just an anonymous Servant of All.

Peres was astonished to hear that a former Michael Oved had actually made it into the New Testament traditions as the Archangel Michael. However, the Obliviators -- the individuals responsible for keeping the wizards secret -- let that slide for two reasons. First, Michael was incorrectly depicted as an angel and not a wizard; and second, the people at the time needed a hero to believe in and an angelic Michael would be therapeutic to the population.

He asked whether many other biblical characters had in fact been wizards. She had shaken her head and refused to answer the question. Supposedly scholars at the Institute had done some research on the biblical characters and had kept it classified, for the most part, lest the world find out that people who supposedly had been blessed by God had been ordinary mortals with unusual powers. All that she would say was that the prophet Samuel had been a wizard. She had told him that she was able to divulge this because the Bible mentioned an Institute official bringing him back as a ghost and only wizards could come back as ghosts. Hence she wasn't revealing anything which would not become common knowledge once the Muggles -- the non-magical humans -- found out about the wizards.

Oved explained that due to circumstances beyond their control, the world had found out about the existence of wizards despite millennia of successful coverups. Realizing that there was nothing that could be done to cover up this particular breach, the wizards had agreed to reveal themselves to the world. As a result, the Endor Institute was Peres's to command.

What the hell was he going to do with a bunch of wizards? He had enough trouble dealing with Likud. He told her he'd contact her if he needed magical help and went back to his daily routine. She told him that she'd warn him if anything unusual happened in the Wizarding world which could have repercussions on the Muggle one.

He never thought he'd actually have to call upon Minister Oved. However, strange things had started to happen over the next few months. The ghost of the prophet Samuel popped up, made the imam of the al-Aqsa Mosque Kohen Gadol, and started screaming that the three Abrahamic faiths had to merge. A schism in the Catholic Church. An evil wizard masqueraded as a politician and tried to take over Great Britain. Some Sri Lankan wizard named Dilmi had knocked off bin Laden and taken over al-Qaeda. The Saudi king had temporarily lost his mind, presumably a side effect of his stroke. Finally, there had been the attacks on the Quabbin Reservoir and Esh Elohim.

Hamas with wizards was probably the only thing worse than al-Qaeda with wizards. Figuring that the only way to defeat a Hamas wizard was with one of his own, he had finally called in Oved and asked her whether wizards should assist with the retaliatory air strike. She had thought about it for a
minute and decided against it. It was too early, and they didn't want this fight to escalate into a more serious international magical war. Wizards were like nukes or chemical weapons in the sense that they were unconventional weapons. In particular, you did NOT want both sides throwing them at each other on a regular basis.

The entire country was screaming for a full-blown invasion of the territories faithful to Hamas. Although Peres wouldn't have minded seeing Hamas humiliated, he couldn't risk overreacting and doing something which Israel's Arab neighbors wouldn't like. Hence the air strike. Netanyahu and his colleagues promptly branded him a chicken, but he figured he had to do what he had to do.

Of course, the air strike had been a disaster. Yes, it had succeeded and destroyed the base. However, it hadn't been as surgical as he had wanted and fifteen civilians had been killed. Even worse, it hadn't knocked out the wizards, only the Muggles. Hamas was going nuts, of course, and Netanyahu was arguing that the decision not to include wizards on the strike showed that Peres was too old-fashioned to work with wizards. There were rumors that a no-confidence vote was on the way. He sure hoped not.

One of his secure phones rang, the strident tone disrupting his chain of thought. He frowned and checked to see which phone it was. It was the Saudi hotline. Peres winced: what had Fahd done now?

He picked up the headset. "Hello?"

"Prime Minister, this is King Fahd. How are you?"

"All right, Your Majesty. I see you are using the secure line. Has something happened?"

"Yes, Prime Minister. We have just concluded an investigation into my odd behavior a while back. It appears that my initial conclusion was correct. Amaram Rikpreet and Lucius Malfoy were Voldemort supporters who temporarily took control of my kingdom by brainwashing me."

Peres frowned. "Voldemort? The evil British wizard?"

"Yes. The reason I am calling is that we have reason to believe Voldemort wants instability in the Middle East. While I was under Rikpreet's control, I was forced to sign documents authorizing his supporters to join Hezbollah and Hamas. I think this is how the wizards got into Hamas, Prime Minister. I just wanted to warn you to keep an eye on them. Send people -- wizards, Mossad, whatever -- into Hezbollah and Hamas to knock them out before this whole place falls apart."

Peres groaned. "Can you order them back?"

"I doubt they'll listen, Prime Minister. For one thing, they must know that I would execute them on the spot as soon as they stepped onto Saudi soil. For another, Minister of Magic Dagher here suspects that they serve Voldemort and were only using me as a pawn to get them into Israel."

"I see. What do you know about these wizards?"

"Judging from the copies I have of the decrees I sent while under Rikpreet's control, we've got six in Hamas and four in Hezbollah. Their leader is Rodolphus Lestrange, the British man who was involved in the attack on Esh Elohim. He was the person who cast fire out of his wand and set the building on fire. That's ten, and there may be more we don't know of."
Peres swore. "TEN evil wizards, possibly more? It sounds like this Voldemort has got wizards all over the place up here! Where is he getting them from?"

"Dagher believes they're being recruited from the Indian subcontinent, Prime Minister. Dilmi was the head of a large cell over there, one that likely dwarfs the original group in Britain now that the British special forces have taken out most of the UK members. Dilmi may be dead, but his cell lives on."

"God help us! Where's Lucius Malfoy?"

"We don't know, Prime Minister, and we need to find out quickly. We suspect he isn't in the Middle East anymore. At any rate, I have authorized Minister Dagher to cooperate with you fully in getting these bastards out of the Middle East. Unless I miss my guess, he's busy talking with Michal Oved right now and giving her detailed dossiers on each of these people. If you need any cooperation fighting Death Eaters, don't hesitate to ask me, him, or her."

Peres breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you, Your Majesty. We'll need all the help we can get."

"Good. I've already warned everyone in my kingdom, and told all my diplomats, to keep an eye out for Lucius Malfoy or anyone else with a tattoo of a snake on his arm. They are to be considered armed and dangerous and need to be taken out by nothing short of a wizard or a black op. Do not try any more airstrikes killing Muslim civilians. They're too dangerous...and most of us here don't like them."

Peres started jotting down notes. "That's a good start, and I'll post similar orders. I'll take it from here, Your Majesty."

"That's all I can ask for, Prime Minister. Good luck, and may Allah be with you."

Peres pressed a button on his phone which would call in Michal Oved. "May He be with ALL of us, Your Majesty. Especially if Voldemort's men have infiltrated our Ministries of Magic."

There was a swear on the other end of the line, followed by: "I didn't even THINK about THAT! I'm going to check that out right now. Fahd out."

To be continued...

--------------
Update #179 [warning: long]
--------------
Tuesday, May 21, 1996
1730 Local Time
Presidential Palace
Pyongyang
Democratic People's Republic of Korea
--------------
Next PoV: 180 -- Lauren Mistry
--------------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 3 (ring, snake, cup)
--------------
"Comrade Chang Sung-Taek"?

Chang Sung-Taek looked up in surprise as he hadn't been expecting anyone. His hand had made it halfway to his gun before he recognized his visitor as Moon Ji Ji, the Minister of Magic.
He still wasn't entirely comfortable around these wizards. However, the Minister's reasoning had been sound. Important North Koreans like him and Kim Jong-Il needed to have Wizarding protection at all times. Otherwise, it could have been possible for the defector Choi Yeun Li to infiltrate the palace and assassinate one of them. Needless to say, the death of either man -- especially when Kim Jong-Nam was too young to take over on his own -- would bring about the downfall of the North Korean regime and its Communist hopes.

He acknowledged the Minister with a nod. "Good afternoon, Minister. How may I help you?"

The Minister looked uneasy. "There's been an incident, sir. We believe that your life may be in danger and we need to get you out of here. Your private helicopter is waiting, Comrade. After you, sir."

Shit, he thought. Who was going after him now? One of the Dear Leader's brothers who felt like he should be next in line? He figured he find out sooner or later. First things first: if the Minister thought there was going to be a problem, he was usually right. He needed to get out of here.

The Minister saluted and stepped out of the way as he walked through the door. He was about to turn around and ask Moon Ji Ji for more information when he heard the man shout a strange word.

"Stupefy!"

Something hit him in the back and he toppled over like a felled tree. Within seconds, he was asleep. The last thing he remembered was the Minister standing over his head with, of all things, a shaver in his hand.

--------------------

1732 Local Time

Lucius Malfoy took another swig of the Polyjuice Potion which would maintain the form of the Muggle he had killed to create the character Moon Ji Ji. Satisfied that his cover was impregnable for at least another hour, he dragged Chang Sung-Taek's inert form into a closet, tied him up with magical bonds, and Fideliused the closet with himself as the Secret-Keeper. That would prevent anyone from finding Chang Sung-Taek.

If the reports from the Death Eater spy in the South's Ministry of Magic were correct, there was about to be an attempt to overthrow the leader of North Korea. The plans were for the South to kill off Kim Jong-Il, allow the North to install Chang Sung-Taek as his successor, and then Imperius the new leader in a way which would make him supportive of the South's goals. This was a chance the Death Eaters couldn't pass up.

If the spy had been fed false information, Lucius would just go back to the closet, revive Chang Sung-Taek, and Obliviate him so he had no idea that anything had happened. There would be no risk to Lucius or any other Death Eater.

If, on the other hand, the spy was telling the truth, Lucius had been ordered to allow the coup to go on just as planned. He was to put up a token resistance, but he was to allow the South to replace Kim Jong-Il with Chang Sung-Taek.

What the South wouldn't realize, of course, was that the person they had elevated to the presidency hadn't actually been Chang Sung-Taek.
Grinning, he collected all of Chang Sung-Taek's hairs, put them in a bag, and stowed it away in his robe. He then Apparated out of the room, his mission accomplished.

-------------------
1745 Local Time
-------------------
Lord Voldemort looked at himself in the mirror and smiled as Chang Sung-Taek's face stared back at him. "You know, it's been a long time since I had hair. Thank you very much, my dear Lucius...or, should I say, Moon Ji Ji."

Lucius bowed deeply. "It is an honor to serve you, my lord. Once you have control of this country, the world will be yours to do with as you please. How are the South's preparations going?"

"The spy is reporting that everyone is moving into position now, my lord. The Death Eaters comprising the so-called North's Ministry of Magic will put up a fight of course, enough to make it look realistic but not enough to prevent the coup. We'll only go after the attackers once you've been raised to the position of Dear Leader. They will likely be so happy that their coup has succeeded that their guard will be completely down."

"Excellent, Lucius. Now, if you would excuse me, I have to head over to Chang Sung-Taek's office. I don't want anyone to miss me."

-------------------
18:00:00 Local Time
-------------------
"Three...two...one...GO!"

Choi Yeun didn't need to be told twice. She turned into space to Apparate over to the Dear Leader's office, a few dozen miles away.

The magic didn't work.

She swore and tried again, also to no avail. Finally, one of the other wizards on the raid shouted, "They've protected the Presidential Palace against Apparation! Either the North's Ministry of Magic has cast some spells to protect high national officials...or they know we're coming."

A third person shook his head. "Let's hope it's the former. All right people, let's go to plan B. Let's see if they're preventing Portkeys as well."

The South's Minister of Magic pulled a shoelace out of his pocket, pointed has wand at it, and muttered "Portus". The shoelace glowed for a second, and the Minister told everyone headed to Kim Jong-II's office to grab onto it with their left hands. Five seconds later, the world disappeared around them and they started flying through the air.

The wizard in charge of the assassination attempt had to scream to be heard over the noise of the Portkey transmission. "Everyone, get out your wand but don't let go of the shoelace. We should be there momentarily. You know what to do!"

-------------------
18:00:17 Local Time
-------------------
Kim Jong-II nearly fell over with surprise when five people suddenly appeared in his office. These people hadn't been summoned, and they were carrying a rope of some sort! This was an assassination attempt, and they were going to try to hang him!
He shouted. "Guards! Kill these people!"

The guards were well-trained. Within seconds, they had pulled out their guns and had started firing on the intruders. Two of them went down, a man and a woman. The woman looked vaguely familiar, but he couldn't place her. He was in the process of ducking underneath his desk when one of them pulled out a wand and pointed it at him.

He reached for his own sidearm. He was a trained marksman, after all, and he'd practiced repeatedly for situations like this.

Unfortunately, nothing could travel faster than light, and the Avada Kedavra hit him before he was able to fire.

-------------------

18:00:21 Local Time
-------------------

The three surviving wizards cheered as the Dear Leader fell. One of the cheers broke off abruptly as a bullet hit the excited wizard in the chest. There were only two wizards left and at least five guards. Choi Yeun was dead.

The two remaining wizards glanced at each other, concern evident on their faces. It was time to get creative. Finally, one nodded and asked the other to cover him.

He hid behind a door and cast the Patronus Charm. Seconds later, a shining eagle burst out of his wand. The guards suddenly squawked in fear and suddenly headed for the door. Trust ghostlike apparitions to clear a room of Muggles quickly.

The wizard who had cast the Patronus dismissed the eagle and cast spells after the guards, knocking them out so they couldn't spread the alarm any further. Meanwhile, the other survivor arranged Kim Jong-Ii's body so that it looked like he had had a heart attack. If everything went as planned, no one would have suspected foul play. He then Obliviated the sleeping guards and sent the shoelace Portkey back to home base to get people to pick up the bodies.

Once that was done, he headed out of the room just as alarms started blaring inside the compound. There must have been a security camera they'd forgotten about.

-------------------

18:00:29 Local Time
-------------------

Lord Voldemort, in his alias as Chang Sung-Taek, suddenly jerked back as the alarms went off in the compound. Even though he knew that the insurrectionists would likely trigger the alarm, the noise grated on his ears. Besides, it had caught him off guard.

Seconds later, a whole platoon of Muggle soldiers raced into the room, followed by virtually half of the North Korean Ministry of Magic. He raised his hands obediently so as to not alarm the Muggles. He kept his wand hidden in the sleeve of his -- well, Chang Sung-Taek's -- uniform.

He stared at the head of the Muggle platoon. "What is going on here? What has happened? Explain!"

The Muggle saluted. "Sir, the Dear Leader has been assassinated. We believe some wizards from the South managed to enter the compound and catch him by surprise. We need to get you out of here. You are, after all, the next person in line for the position of Dear Leader. These men will protect you. Come with me."
Voldemort feigned fear. "You men think you're going to be able to take out a wizard? How?"

The Muggle indicated one of the wizards. "This man is a wizard. He belongs to the Ministry of Magic."

Voldemort stared at him. "We've got a Ministry of Magic? What --"

The Muggle cut him off as gunshots rang out in the distance. "I'll tell you later. Let's get out of here!"

The Muggles and Death Eaters surrounded him with a defensive screen as they herded him through the corridors and over to a helicopter. Voldemort heard gunshots and screams down a side corridor and caught a brief glimpse of soldiers fighting with wizards. Lucius was there, and Voldemort was able to watch the Death Eater take out three of the intruding wizards with one spell. So far, so good.

18:03:25 Local Time

This had gone on long enough, Lucius thought. The soldiers were reporting that Voldemort -- well, Chang Sung-Taek -- had been sent to a secured location and that his succession was safe. Phase one of the operation was over. Phase two had begun.

Slowly but surely, he ordered the Death Eaters to slowly let themselves be beaten back. Muggle soldiers fell for the North, but he didn't care about the Muggles. The conspirators cheered and tried to follow up on their advantage. Finally, Lucius gave the signal, and all of the wizards Apparated out of there. He thanked Voldemort profusely for creating an Apparation spell which would only work for Death Eaters.

18:05:42 Local Time

The last pockets of resistance collapsed as the last North Korean Muggles fell beneath the curses and hexes of the attacking Southerns. The attackers couldn't believe it. Against all odds, they'd pulled it off! They'd killed Kim Jong-II and made it look as if he had had a heart attack!

The leader of the expedition called off the celebration immediately, however. "We're not done yet, people! Obliviate all the survivors, Portkey away the bodies, and modify the video cameras! We don't want anyone to realize that there was a coup. Get those news crews out of here, and figure out where the hell Chang Sung-Taek is! MOVE IT!"

18:06:11 Local Time

The injured DPRK soldier gulped as the Southerner pointed a wand at his face. "All right, soldier. Where is he?"

He blinked. "Where's who?"

"Chang Sung-Taek. You know, Kim Jong-II's successor?"

The soldier smiled. "You're not going to find out. It's a secret location. I'm not letting you murderous bastards anywhere near him."

The wizard smiled at him. "We'll see about that. Legilimens!"

18:10:53 Local Time
The conspirators screamed as they overcame the Muggle guards protecting Chang Sung-Taek's safehouse and raced into the building. They caught the North's wizards completely off guard, killing a few of them and stunning the rest.

Finally, about 13 minutes after the raid began, they had Chang Sung-Taek in their sights. The man backed up against the wall and started screaming for his mother. Grinning, the South's Minister of Magic pointed his wand at the cowering man and shouted "Imperio!"

Chang Sung-Taek stopped cowering at once. A brief struggle contorted his face. Suddenly he smiled and shook his head. "I don't think so, wizard."

And before the South could react, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a wand. The South's Minister of Magic barely had enough time to scream before Chang Sung-Taek suddenly hit him in the chest with an Avada Kedavra.

The invaders suddenly froze in shock. When they regained control of themselves, they found no fewer than seventy wands pointing at them.

Within seconds, every single wizard from the South was dead and the Death Eaters were busy cleaning away the bodies.

19:00:00 Local Time

Voldemort, still in his guise as Chang Sung-Taek, stood in front of the television cameras. Next to him was an official representing the court system. He had the original manuscript of the Juche tradition in his hand. Voldemort thought it was rather ironic.

The official turned to him. "Chang Sung-Taek, raise your right hand and place your left on this book. Repeat the following oaths after me. I, Chang Sung-Taek..."

Voldemort spoke the oaths clearly and precisely. It's not like he was going to abide by them at all. After all, he wasn't Chang Sung-Taek.

The camera flashed as he finished his final oath. The official removed the manuscript and stretched out his hand to shake Voldemort's. "Congratulations, Dear Leader."

Voldemort smiled for the cameras. Outside, he could hear thousands of people cheering and applauding in the square outside.

The world was about to change, he thought.

To be continued...

Update #180

Tuesday, May 21, 1996
0929Z / 1929 Korean Local Time
Outside of London
England

Next PoV: 181 -- Grigori Rasputin
Lauren should have known better than to take the motorway into London. Traffic was backed up as far as she could see. Granted, the meeting was at 12:00, so she had plenty of time. Still, she couldn't stand traffic jams.

She had been doing the dishes a day after the meeting with Dumbledore when she had heard a soft tapping against the window. She had looked up to see a small owl hooting at her through the glass. In its talons was a piece of paper.

She stared at the owl in confusion. The owl hooted once more and waved its leg impatiently. It seemed as if the owl wanted to give her the paper. That didn't make much sense, she thought. Then again, she was living in a world where wizards existed and she was doomed to transform into a monster at the beginning of June.

Skeptical about what she was supposed to do with an owl, she opened the window. The owl flew in and dropped the paper on the kitchen table. It then hooted at her a couple of times and flew away. Curious, she unrolled the paper and saw that it was a small note.

---

Dear Mrs. Mistry,

There is going to be a meeting for all new Muggle werewolves in the Ministry of Magic at noon on 21 May. At this meeting, you will be able to meet other people with your condition and receive a week's worth of a potion which will help ease your transformation. Please make it a point to be there. We will be meeting at a telephone booth outside the Ministry at 11:45.

Sincerely,

Rufus Scrimgeour
Minister of Magic
---

She was a bit nervous about being surrounded by more of these monsters, but she figured she didn't have much of a choice. So, she pocketed the note, told Lucas about the meeting, and continued on with her chores for the rest of the day.

She turned on the radio to get the traffic report. It was the bottom of the hour, so she figured she'd be able to catch up on the news as well.

She caught the 10:30 broadcast in midsentence: "-- oath of office half an hour ago. He's already told the people of North Korea that he has no intention of continuing Kim Jong-Il's policies and has new ways for making North Korea into a great nation."

Lauren stared at the radio. Something had happened to Kim Jong-Il? Just what the word needed at a time like this, she thought: a power vacuum in North Korea.

The reporter yielded the floor to the main announcer. "I hope he can do so, Michael. The president of South Korea has called him and offered his congratulations and condolences on the loss of the North's Dear Leader. He is hoping that the new ruler will be willing to improve diplomatic ties with the South and end the Korean War once and for all."
"For those of you who are just turning in, there is breaking news out of North Korea. Kim Jong-Il, the head of the Communist state and son of its founder, has just died of a heart attack. Preliminary investigations indicate that there was no foul play involved and it was just the stress of leading the country. He has been succeeded by one of his chief generals, Chang Sung-Taek. Very little is known about this man, but from what we've seen so far he seems to be a little more willing than his predecessor to improve the lives of the North Korean people. We think -- now we've got an update from Michael again up in Pyongyang. What's going on, Michael?"

The first speaker came back on. "Chang Sung-Taek has just made a most remarkable announcement. It appears that he is a wizard as well as a capable general. He just made sparks fly out of what appears to be a wand and levitated himself up in the air."

The main broadcaster cut in. "A WIZARD? Like Dumbledore, Scrimgeour, or the dreaded Tom Riddle?"

"Yes, David, a wizard. He's speaking now. Hold on a second...he's saying that now that the Statute of Secrecy is gone, he believes that he will be able to use his magical powers to improve the productivity of the North Korean state and return it to prosperity. And now -- David, you have to see this. He's conjuring gold coins out of thin air and throwing them into the crowd. The people here love him!"

"I should imagine! Did the rest of Kim Jong-Il's cabinet know he was a wizard?"

"I don't think so. They look absolutely stunned, to be honest. However, I cannot deny that a strong ruler who cares for his people would be a welcome change for North Korea. I hope he stays in power, at least if he's...sane."

"Where are Kim Jong-Nam and the rest of the prior leader's family?"

"They're at the funeral home paying their respects to their departed comrade. Chang claims they're going to be there for a while and does not want them to be disturbed. He has forbidden any reporters to get anywhere near there."

The world, of course, had no idea that Voldemort had quietly killed off the rest of the Dear Leader's family to prevent them from staging a countercoup. Lucius and the rest of the North's "Ministry of Magic" had purged most of the former generals after the Dark Lord had taken office and Imperiused the rest.

"I see, Michael. I must say, I do find it a bit disturbing that we've got a wizard in charge of a country. Doesn't that give him a lot of power?"

"He's still going to have to abide by the constitution, David. So far, he seems all right, but I freely admit it's early and this is the honeymoon phase."

"But who's going to be able to punish him if he doesn't?"

"The North's Ministry of Magic, I suppose. Maybe that Dialonis fellow from the Wizarding United Nations or whatever that organization was. I --"
to away from London -- and hoped that if London DID get nuked, it wouldn't be when she was stuck in the Ministry of Magic with four legs instead of two.

It took her a long time to make it through the traffic. However, eventually she reached the rendezvous point. She parked her car and walked over to the designated location.

She counted twenty-five people milling around in the vicinity, including herself. She recognized most of them from the football match where she had been attacked -- they had all been sitting in her section. It appeared that the Prime Minister's word had gotten out. Supposedly there had been twenty-seven survivors, and the Ministry had been able to round up all but two of them. Perhaps they'd be able to contain this pandemic after all.

Most of the attack victims were men between twenty and forty, a typical demographic for a football match. She counted only six women and didn't know what she should talk to them. They appeared to be as scared as she was and started complaining that their husbands/boyfriends/friends were going to dump them because they were going to start turning into monsters. That set alarm bells ringing in Lauren's mind, as she could imagine Lucas thinking like that. She tried to change the subject, and the women promptly started talking about the weather (which was boring) and the North Korean incident (which just made her feel even more nervous).

There was a loud pop nearby. Heads turned all over the place, and Lauren saw that three men had appeared maybe ten feet away. She recognized two of them, Albus Dumbledore and Rufus Scrimgeour. The third had a forbidding expression on his face and greasy black hair.

Scrimgeour bowed to the crowd. "Welcome, my friends. In case you may have forgotten, I'm Rufus Scrimgeour, Minister of Magic. To my left is Albus Dumbledore, Transfiguration teacher and former headmaster of the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. To my right is Severus Snape, professor of Defense Against the Arts at Hogwarts. Prior to his position as the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, he taught Potions. His Potions experience is going to be critical when it comes to helping you through the months and years to come. I'll let Professor Snape explain."

Lauren groaned. Potions, she thought? She couldn't stand the taste of stuff like Robitussin. Now they expected her to drink ground up newt eyes?

The greasy-haired man reached into his cloak and brought out a large box. This elicited lots of awed remarks from the people in the crowd. The reason was obvious: Lauren had no idea how that box had fit in the cloak. The man opened up the box to reveal twenty-seven stoppered bottles.

Professor Snape indicated the bottles. "Ladies and gentlemen, please pay attention. These bottles contain one week's worth of a magical concoction known as the Wolfsbane Potion. Quaffing one dosage of this potion each day between the first quarter moon and full moon will help alleviate most of the side effects associated with being a werewolf. Your headaches will be fewer and further between, and you will only get brief nausea the day before the full moon. You are to drink the last dosage of the potion the day before the full moon rises. When that happens, you will likely change form into that of the wolf. However, you will be able to maintain your mind in wolf form, so you will be able to think and reason like a human. As a result, you will act like you would have had you been in human form. In particular, you will have no desire to bite or attack people.

"Most of you are wearing ankle bracelets so we can track you. If you aren't wearing one, tell us and we'll give you one. During the afternoon of the day before the full moon, the bracelets will teleport you to a secure location so you can be given a mandatory dose of Wolfsbane Potion and transform in a safe and controlled environment. Once the night is over and the moon sets, you will revert back to
human form. Note that there will be two centers for transformation, one for men and one for women. This is because you will have to take off your clothes before you transform. Otherwise, your clothes will tear apart when you switch to wolf form and leave you utterly naked when you return to normal. Once you have reverted back to human form, you will have one hour to recollect your belongings and put on your clothes again. The bracelet will then take you back to the place you were teleported from.

"If you wish to use Wolfsbane Potion for future transformations after 1 June, you should contact one of the three of us between 2 June and 15 June so we have enough time to brew the potion and send it to you. Once we have you on our lists, we will send you a week's supply of Wolfsbane every month until you tell us otherwise. Be advised that Wolfsbane has a few side effects. You should not not use Wolfsbane if you are nursing, pregnant, or may become pregnant. Do not drive or operate heavy machinery while using Wolfsbane. There can also be liver problems. Simple blood tests can check for liver problems."

Snape studied the crowd. Lauren had the distinct impression he was counting people. Finally, he muttered under his breath: "Twenty-five. Wonderful". Aloud, he asked. "One more thing. I see that two of our number are not here. Do either of you know the whereabouts of James Lovett or Harrison Cooper? They were also bitten and we haven't been able to track them down yet."

Everyone shook their head.

Snape grunted. "Well, let's hope they'll show up at some point. All right, I'll hand out the potions now. Don't fight for them -- you'll all get one."

To be continued...
Update #181 through Update #185

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Mislagnissa

Update #181

Wednesday, May 22, 1996
Somewhere
Ukraine

-------
Next PoV: 182 -- Isabel Miller
-------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 3 (ring, snake, cup)
-------

Grigori Rasputin watched the news. He had been absolutely astonished when he had seen the technological progress humanity had made in just eighty years. Men walking on the moon? Devices which did rapid computation? Boxes which allowed people to witness broadcasts all over the world? Aircraft which could cross the Atlantic in one jump? It was amazing!

His first thought upon seeing a television set was that some of the wizards had worked around the Statute of Secrecy and used magic to create these devices. However, he had examined a television set critically through magic and saw for himself that there was no magic involved, only technology.

It had occurred to him that humanity now had access to technology which could perform feats powerful enough to transform the world. Furthermore, the Muggles were still, for the most part, unfamiliar with magic. This put him in a rather interesting position. If he were able to use magic to control these futuristic humans' minds and use their technology to support his goals, how far would he be able to go? For all he knew, he'd be able to control the world and wipe out the remaining Romanovs without having to resort to a death curse!

Rasputin looked around the room. It was definitely doable. He had a good-sized organization around him, one which included many wizards. All of these wizards were present-day humans, so they were familiar with modern technology. If he managed to extract Unbreakable Oaths from them that they agree to help him and not take over the world themselves, things could get interesting.

There was only one minor problem, unfortunately. Some idiot in North Korea might have just stolen his idea, or at least alerted the Muggles that a wizard dictatorship was possible. The man in charge of North Korea had died and his replacement had come out as a wizard shortly after he was sworn in. The new leader, a former general, seemed to be very charismatic and had hidden his magical abilities until he had taken control.

Rasputin didn't doubt for a moment that Chang Sung-Taek had world domination on his mind. The Korean's experience as a general probably meant that he was a shrewd diplomat and military tactician. Add to that the fact that he was a wizard and that he already had supreme control of the country...Rasputin shuddered. Chang Sung-Taek couldn't pass up this opportunity for world power, and if the man was as smart as Rasputin thought he was, he wouldn't.

The big question was: what should Rasputin do about it?

He operated under the assumption that the Korean would make a bid for world power and that the
Muggles would probably try to stop him. There would likely be a short but fierce war which would damage both sides greatly and leave North Korea a smoldering ruin.

Who would win such a war? It was unclear. A wizard could kill a lot of Muggles in ways they couldn't even conceive of -- and in some cases have no way to even defend against. However, the Muggles supposedly had weapons which could destroy entire cities in an instant. What would the Korean do if Pyongyang were attacked with one of these devices? He doubted that even the strongest wizard would be able to survive an attack by a weapon that powerful. Rasputin himself wouldn't have been able to.

Had he been the North Korean wizard, he would have created a Horcrux to ensure that he would stay around until his takeover was complete. There were three problems with that scenario, though. First, was the North Korean a Dark enough wizard to even consider creating a Horcrux? Come to think of it, did Chang Sung-Taek even know HOW to create a Horcrux? Rasputin doubted it. Second, Rasputin suspected that the Muggles would be able to destroy a Horcrux by dropping one of those tremendous bombs on it. Finally, even if the Korean had a Horcrux, what was preventing the enemy from effectively nullifying it by removing one of the components necessary for the ritual to revive someone from a Horcrux? Rasputin still couldn't believe how the Romanovs had knocked out his Horcrux by vaporizing his father's body. That gave him two more reasons to avenge himself on them: one, for removing his Horcrux; and two, for desecrating his father's tomb.

Should he join forces with the Korean? He nixed that immediately. There was no way that either man would be willing to share power. He and Chang Sung-Taek would eventually be at each other's throats, and the resulting civil war would leave the Muggles in a perfect position to obliterate both sides.

He thought about it for a while and eventually made a decision. There was no way he would be able to start on his plans for world domination as long as this Korean was still around. He could have his men try to kill the Korean, but that could have dangerous international implications as the man was the recognized ruler of a sovereign state. This meant that he would have to lie low and wait until the Korean had been dealt before he could stake his own claim as dictator.

The more he thought about it, the more this made sense. Both the Muggles and the North Koreans would have been weakened greatly by the conflict between Chang Sung-Taek and the Muggle world. This would leave Rasputin in the perfect position to take the world by surprise and attack both sides once they had softened each other up. Hell, he might be able to have his men Polyjuice into Koreans and restart the fight between the Koreans and the Muggles by claiming to be Chang Sung-Taek's heirs or something like that. That would just injure both sides further before he came in to sweep them away.

He made his decision. He'd wait until the end of the year and reassess the situation at that time. If everything went as planned, he'd start his takeover attempt nine months after the fall of Chang Sung-Taek.

He immediately set to work planning how to do that.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #182
-------------

Wednesday, May 22, 1996
Britain for Humans Headquarters
Isabel Miller nearly jumped for joy when she heard the news come across the TV screen. Something had actually gone right for a change.

Several anonymous sources were reporting that the wizard who had supposedly been the ghost of the prophet Samuel had vanished along with his sidekick, a woman who either went by Anitiel or Deborah. Supposedly Samuel had finally gotten fed up with trying to reform the world, conceded defeat, and disappeared. That was one fewer wizard she would have to deal with.

What had been even more impressive had been Celestine VI's reaction. John Paul II had informed Celestine that Samuel had left and that there was no longer any reason for Celestine to dispute the Papacy. Would the antipope be willing to step down for the sake of unity? The Pope reminded Celestine that Celestine had promised to would renounce his claim if John Paul stopped listening to Samuel. Samuel was now gone. Would Celestine keep his word?

Amazingly, Celestine VI had indeed stepped down. Isabel didn't know whether that was good or bad. It was good in that it showed that Celestine had indeed been a honorable, pious man fitting of a tenure as the antipope. It was also good in that it had stopped the schism. On the other hand, it left the wizard as the Pope, which was going to be a problem.

The Catholic Church was unified again...for approximately six hours. That was when a Byzantine Catholic clergyman from Sofia, a Roma man named Petar Zhefarovich, took Celestine's place as Pope Urban VIII. Reputedly Celestine had tried to talk him out of it -- going so far that he could conceivably be seen as Petrus Romanus, the pope of the apocalypse -- but it didn't work.

Urban said that he was putting a claim in for the papacy not because John Paul followed Samuel but because John Paul was a wizard. Urban said that the Bible said to not trust wizards, and who were people to dismiss the word of God? He explained that the reason the world had been having so many problems of late was because John Paul had started practicing openly as a wizard. God didn't like that and was warning the world that someone had to get rid of him.

The new antipope quickly became Isabel's spiritual leader. She wouldn't become Catholic, but she would definitely follow Urban's lead on things. The Celestines -- the new denomination still went by the name of the Celestine Church, much to the former antipope's chagrin -- supported him wholeheartedly. That was not a surprise, however. Celestine VI had been in the minority, as he had broken from Rome because they hadn't liked the direction Samuel had been taking the Church in. The vast majority of the Celestines had joined the new sect because they were either against wizards, more conservative than John Paul, or supportive of icons. Urban enthusiastically supported all three of these positions.

The only question now was: who was the more dangerous wizard, John Paul II or Chang Sung-Taek? The fact that a wizard had popped up in charge of a foreign country -- and a bit of a rogue state to boot -- filled her with dread. What would the Korean do? She had disturbing visions of flying tanks and witches blasting the South and drawing the world into global thermonuclear war. Someone had to get rid of that wizard, and do so in a hurry. But who was going to do that? Britain for Humans wasn't nearly powerful enough to do the job, and she doubted most of the members even spoke...
Korean. Going after various people in a church and supporting anti-wizard legislation was one thing. Assassinating foreign heads of state was something entirely different.

She chuckled. If she were lucky, perhaps John Paul and Chang Sung-Taek would destroy each other and leave the world safe with Urban VIII as the sole pope. Maybe Tom Riddle could get involved as well and all three of them could destroy each other. Riddle -- or Voldemort, as he was supposedly called -- certainly seemed the type of person who'd want to take over the world. It was obvious that he'd done some serious planning in his attempt to take over Britain and would have very likely succeeded had it not been for that Greek chap and Rufus Scrimgeour.

She looked at her watch and saw there was a little more time before she had to go to the rendezvous point to meet with the new Britain for Humans members. Membership had gone up drastically over the past few days as members of America for Humans had fled the country and flew over to Britain via Canada to join up with Britain for Humans and seek asylum in England. Shrugging, she turned on the television set.

The TV was airing a live broadcast from Chang Sung-Taek in North Korea. The man was reporting that he wanted all of the wizards to come out of hiding and help him make North Korea prosper. They would be interviewed and have their skills assessed. The best of the best would be recruited by Moon Ji Ji, the nation's new Secretary of Magic. The others were would be issued jobs repairing roads, making trains run on time, improving the productivity of farms, and so forth.

Chang Sung-Taek then issued a call which troubled Isabel. She paid more attention to the speech at that point and tried to ignore the fact that the speaker's lips didn't match the sounds being voiced by the English translator.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the great Korean State, you may be interested to know that there may be witches and wizards among you who have lived out their entire lives as Muggles -- that is, people who do not believe they can cast spells. This is because although for the most part Wizarding ability is hereditary, occasionally wizards come along with Muggles as one -- or both -- parents. It is the duty of this state to make sure that these individuals are not overlooked and are given the training they need to be wizards just like me and the rest of the Ministry of Magic.

"As of today, I am starting a program which will be focusing on the recruitment of Muggle-born wizards. If you are a Muggle-born wizard or you are a Muggle who believe your child may have magical abilities, don't hesitate to register for this program. As an extra incentive, Muggles who have their children register will be given a substantial, I mean SUBSTANTIAL, reward if the children are indeed proven to be Wizarding material."

Isabel -- indeed, the whole world -- had no idea that Voldemort was just going to kill the Muggle-born wizards and use the monetary reward as an excuse to shut the Muggles up lest the reward be revoked and they fall back into the peasantry.

Isabel grunted. This guy was going to be a problem. He was going to create an army of wizards at the rate things were going. He had to be stopped.

Recruiting new Britain for Humans members couldn't hurt at a time like this.

She looked at her watch one last time. It was time to go. Gathering up some brochures, she picked up her car keys and left the house, locking the door behind her.

To be continued...
Nicholas Flamel couldn't help but laugh. "They've only figured out recently that my family, so to speak, has been teaching there forever?"

His wife nodded. "That's what it looks like, Nicholas. In all fairness, though, it was overdue. You've been a godsend to that school and have put its medieval literature department on the map. However, I never expected them to have a major dinner in appreciation of the contribution of you and your 'ancestors'.

Flamel looked at the invitation again. "I see Hugh is invited as well. I freely admit, my love, that I wouldn't be here were it not for him. He helped me learn English back in the 1370's and piqued my interest in English literature. I doubt that the Englishmen would have been as welcoming to me if I had spent most of the time speaking to them in French. Hell, back in the old days they'd have probably killed me on the spot. Is he coming as well?"

"He's getting the car, Nicholas. I figured we'd dispense with the brooms as there could be lots of people in that crowd who don't realize we're wizards."

Flamel nodded and reached for his hat. "Well, I guess we should head off. We shouldn't keep them waiting. After all, we're the guests of honor. It's a pity John and Robert couldn't come."

Both Flamels laughed out loud as Nicholas set the burglar alarm and closed the door on the empty house.

The corporate spy in the pay of Harold-Green Pharamaceutical Corporation hid in the hedges, his binoculars trained on the house. He spoke quietly and urgently into the walkie-talkie.

"They're leaving the house now. It looks like they bought it, Mr. Green. I never thought you'd be able to convince the university to hold a dinner for them."

Green chuckled. "All I had to have the wizard do was show the English Department the old staff directories with all those Flamels in there. They took it from there."

"Clever. All right, their car is pulling up in front of their house. I suspect -- yes, Hugh is driving it. It looks like all three of them are going, which makes things easier for us. Dr. Flamel and his wife are getting into the car right now, and there they go down the street."

There was a pause of about fifteen seconds, followed by. "The car has gone around the corner, and no one is in sight. It's party time."

Green whistled, and the so-called "investigation committee" drove up in front of the house. Five
people got out of the unmarked car, including a wizard.

Green shook everyone's hands. "Gentlemen, listen, and listen well. We've only got an hour or so to do this, and we have to be out of here before the Flamels get back. It's going to be risky, but if we are successful we're going to be filthy rich.

"Our top priority is to get our hands on Dr. Flamel's lab book and photocopy enough of the information to make it possible for Hendrickson here to duplicate the Philosopher's Stone. He's got to have it in the house somewhere -- he wouldn't let it out of his sight. This book will likely be one of the oldest works in the house, and it's probably going to be hidden.

"If you don't find the book, keep an eye out for the Stone itself and take it instead. Of course, Flamel isn't going to take the theft of the stone philosophically. He's going to want it back -- how old is he, at least biologically? 75 or so? When he asks about it, we'll tell him that we've got it and we'll give it back just as soon as he agrees to show us how to make more of them.

"You can ransack everything you want. Open drawers, turn out dressers, and so forth. Hendrickson here has a spell which will clean up after us and make sure that everything winds up in the same place where it started. No one will know that we were ever there."

Green looked around at his fellow accomplices. "Any questions? No? Then let's go!"

The raiding party headed over to the front door. Hendrickson tried the handle, but of course it was locked. He shrugged and pointed his wand at the handle.

"Alohomora!"

There was a click as the lock disengaged. Green led everyone into the house just as the burglar alarm began buzzing, warning the intruder to deactivate it within 60 seconds or it would summon the police.

Green whistled at Hendrickson. "Look around and see if there's a control panel for the alarm. If so, hex it so it shuts up and thinks we've entered the code". Hendrickson nodded and began running through the house. The alarm shut off maybe 20 seconds later.

"Everyone take a room and see if you can find anything. If looks old, be extra careful, both because it may be fragile and because it may be what we want. If it's in a foreign language, summon Hendrickson. He'll be able to check if it's magical or pertains to magic. If it's encrypted at all, do the same thing. Perhaps our pet wizard will be able to decode it.

"We don't know what the Stone looks like. So, I want you guys to check out anything that looks remotely suspicious which you don't recognize. I don't care if it's a paperweight or a glorified snooker ball. Call him over and he will check if it's a magical item. If it's magical, then we'll discuss it. If not, put it back."

Green issued one last warning. "Do NOT touch anything with your hands -- use the gloves. We don't want to leave fingerprints, and we don't want anything activated by human touch to start sounding alarms. Be careful, and good luck."

The raiders spread throughout the house. Green himself focused on the living room. He opened all the cabinets and tossed out all of their contents, looking frantically for books and anything which looked remotely suspicious. He stumbled across a box of what appeared to be bottles. He
unstoppered one of the bottles and bent over to look inside. This proved to be a big mistake as hideous fumes suddenly started wafting out of the opening. He dropped the bottle in shock and was barely able to restrain himself from retching all over the floor. The bottle shattered on the floor and sprayed objects which looked like insect eyes all over the rug.

Near the back of the cabinet he saw something odd. It appeared to be a small object the size of a paperweight. It appeared to be glowing brightly.

Trembling with excitement, he screamed: "Hendrickson! I think I've found something! Get over here!"

Henderson raced into the room, nearly tripping over junk Green had thrown on the floor. "What have you got, Green?"

All Green did was point into the cabinet. Hendrickson frowned and pointed his wand at it. He cast a few spells, and the object glowed different colors. Eventually, though, the wizard grunted and shook his head.

He turned to Green. "That's a glowstone. It's a magical light which never goes out. It can be used to light a room when there's a power failure or something like that, and it's safer than a candle. That's not it. Keep looking."

The wizard ran off as Green returned to the cabinet to continue his search. He was interrupted, however, by a horrible scream from upstairs. Worried that the wizards may have left magical defenses around the Stone, he ran upstairs into Flamel's office.

The man who had been searching Flamel's office was pointing at a huge tome. "I've found his diary. The earliest entries date back to 1345. This guy's at least 650 years old!"

Green glanced at the text and frowned. "Isn't this Modern English?"

The man shrugged. "Yes. I think he's decided to translate it for posterity. He may have a perspective on history that no one else does."

Green grinned, brought out his camera, and took some shots. "Hold on a second. This could be useful evidence to have. Now we can blackmail him and threaten to announce his age to the world. All right, so what happened? Why did you scream?"

In response, the man turned over the diary and leafed through the most recent entries. Finally, he stabbed his finger accusingly at one of the entries. Green bent closer so he could read it. His jaw dropped after three words.

"June 5, 1992. Destroyed the Stone today. It was a difficult decision, one which both Perenille and I knew would end our lives within 20 years, but I believe it was the right one. Dumbledore convinced me that we could not risk the possibility of the Stone falling into Voldemort's hands. During the time I have left, I will translate my diary from French into English while leaving out anything which helps the reader either create their own Stone or identify the Stone as anything other than a run-of-the-mill magical item. Hopefully this translation will help clarify some of the mysteries which confounded the Muggles over the past six and a half centuries."

Green swore, and the man looked at him. "Dr. Flamel was telling the truth the whole time when he said he didn't have it! What are --"
The voice was cut off by another scream, this time from downstairs. This one seemed much more terrifying, and it went on and on and on. The two men in the office could barely make out someone shouting "Hendrickson!" over the howling.

Everyone hustled downstairs and headed towards the source of the sound. Green turned the corner and saw a most remarkable sight.

Two of the Harold-Green employees were fighting with an old book -- a VERY old book. An ominous face on the cover was screaming at the top of its virtual lungs. Seconds later, Hendrickson appeared. The wizard pointed his wand at the book, shouted "Finite Incantatem", and the book fell silent.

Green and the men who had been struggling turned to Hendrickson and shouted almost simultaneously. "What the hell was THAT?"

Hendrickson looked at the book intently. "That's an alarm spell. People use it to protect objects from unauthorized use. My guess is that this book is supposed to be kept secret. Had Flamel been in the house, he'd have been onto us immediately. What's in it?"

The man opened the book. "I can't tell, Wizard Hendrickson. It appears to be in Middle French, which I'm not good at. The only thing I can see is that it's got lots of pictures in it, especially at the beginning. Hold on -- this appears to be a date of some sort. Let me see...I think this say April 8, 1397. Bloody hell, is this a DIARY? Is this man six hundred years old?"

Green stared at the man who had searched Flamel's office. They knew immediately what they had found. Green shoved everyone out of the way and started taking photographs of the pages. "That's it! Hurry! We don't have time to lose!"

Hendrickson stared at him. "What the --"

Green kept on snapping photographs. "This diary has an incomplete English translation upstairs. It says that the English version is like the original one, which is in French, except that the English one has no references to the workings of the Stone. This is the French diary, Hendrickson. This is the original. Judging by that alarm, it's not meant to be seen by other people. I think I know what that means. It means that the instructions for making the Stone are going to be in the section written before 1420 or so."

"1420? How so?"

Green risked a few seconds to glare at the man. "Because he'd be DEAD otherwise of natural causes. The earliest date in the English version is 1345. He must have made the Stone before he hit 100. Assuming he started the diary at 20 or so --"

Hendrickson raced towards the book. "We don't have time for that, Green. Get out of the way!"

Shoving people aside, he pointed his wand at the book and shouted, "Geminio". There was a flash of light, and a second, identical book appeared on the floor. Hendrickson scooped up the duplicate and put it in his briefcase.

"Now let's clean up and get out of here before anyone investigates that noise!"
About fifteen minutes later, Hugh and the Flamels returned home to find several people gathered in front of their house. Nicholas Flamel didn't like the look of this. Were they Britain for Humans people who wanted to pick a fight with him?

Hugh put his hand on Nicholas's shoulder. "Hold on a second, Master. Let me handle this."

Wand at the ready, he got out of the car and addressed the people. "Good evening. What are you chaps all doing in front of our house?"

One of the people spoke up. "There was a brief scream in the house about twenty minutes ago. By the time we came over and knocked on the door, the scream had vanished and the door was locked."

Nicholas got out. "There was a scream in the house? None of us were there!"

The Muggle shrugged. "I heard a scream, all right. I don't know what it was, and to be honest I don't want to know. At least you guys are all right."

Nicholas turned to his wife and Hugh. "Wands out. I have no idea what's going on in there, but I think we'd better be careful."

He opened the door as the other two spellcasters brought out their wands. Flamel was greeted ominously by the sound of silence.

The burglar alarm not had activated. Flamel distinctly remembered arming it before he left. Increasingly troubled, he went over to the control panel and noticed that all the lights had burned out. There was only one thing that could produce such an effect. Magic.

Flamel swore. "Heads up. There may be a burglar in the house, one who is a wizard. Let's find him. Revelio Hominem!"

The spell reported the house was empty. Flamel frowned and continued his investigation. He didn't remember the rooms being this clean. Several of the countertops had been filled with dishes that needed to be put back in the cabinets. Someone -- or something -- had put them away.

Hugh whistled. "I think someone tried to clean up the after break-in and overdid it. The spell was too powerful and put everything away, even though the house hadn't started out completely orderly. I must say, Master, that whoever it was didn't find what they were looking for. Everything is still here."

Perenille scratched her head. "This doesn't make sense, Nicholas. What would a wizard want to steal from us? I don't --"

All three of them suddenly answered simultaneously. "The Stone! Voldemort did it!"

Nicholas marshaled his troops. "Hugh, you go upstairs and check my office. Perenille, check the bedroom. I'll make sure that the original diary is still around. The diary is key, you two. With the Stone gone, whoever went after it won't be able to get much out of it without creating it from scratch, and the original diary is the only thing which has the instructions."

Mrs. Flamel went upstairs with Hugh as Nicholas hurried to the cabinet. Bracing himself for the howling, he pulled out the diary and opened it.
There was no howl.

Nicholas Flamel literally staggered when he realized what that meant. A wizard had entered the house and had done something to the diary to remove the alarm spell. The wizard had seen the diary and must have opened it -- otherwise, he wouldn't have set off the alarm and known to disrupt the spell. He would likely be able to understand all of the diary's contents. If the wizard knew of the Duplication Charm and cast it on the book --

Horrified, he called back his wife and apprentice. The two of them stared at him in shock and immediately asked him what was wrong. In response, he opened the book and pointed at its contents.

"Our worst nightmare has come to pass. The secret is out. Within a matter of months, people will be able to create their own Philosopher's Stones. God help us all if Voldemort finds out about this."

To be continued...

-------------
Update #184
-------------

Friday, May 24, 1996
Slytherin Common Room
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
England

-------------
Next PoV: 185 -- Michal Oved
-------------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 3 (ring, snake, cup)
-------------

Draco Malfoy couldn't do it.

He owed everything to Snape. He even admitted to himself that he admired Snape more than his father in some cases. His father tended to be too harsh from time to time. Snape could be brutal as well, but he seemed always to have had a soft spot for Draco that went far beyond his allegiance to Slytherin.

The more he thought about it, the more he realized that he didn't have the guts to kill anyone. Crabbe and Goyle might, considering their increased self-confidence and machismo simply because they were big. Draco, on the other hand, had his mind as his strong suit.

He wondered if he should ask one of his two bodyguards to kill Snape. That would probably do the job. However, Voldemort probably wouldn't like that as the assassination of Snape was supposed to be Draco's test, not theirs. Both boys would probably start boasting that they'd killed Snape. Voldemort would find out and punish Draco severely for failing the test and deceiving him -- possibly killing him.

He could only envision this going one of two ways. His first option was to defect to Dumbledore's side to run from an angry Voldemort. He dismissed that immediately and there was no honor in that. His second was to do Dumbledore what Snape had done to Voldemort: be a double agent for the enemy. He would send word to Voldemort that he had decided upon something which would further the Dark Lord's goals even further than killing Snape: appearing to defect to Dumbledore while still relaying information to Voldemort.

If everything went as he had hoped, the Dark Lord would accept the double agent role in lieu of
Snape's murder and still promote him to full Death Eater. Draco's new position would likely neutralize Snape almost as much as if he had killed his housemaster as Voldemort would know about all of Snape's moves and counter them before they became an issue.

The big question was what to do about Crabbe and Goyle. Draco would have to appear to have defected in order for this charade to work. This would mean that Crabbe and Goyle would have to beat HIM up, or at least stop being friends with him. The only way he would be able to maintain Crabbe and Goyle as his bodyguards would be for him to explain that they had to be in on the act and would have to become double agents as well. The problem with this, however, was that Crabbe and Goyle tended to talk before they thought and would likely blurt out that all three of them were double agents.

Draco smiled as a solution presented itself. He would request that Crabbe and Goyle get their own individual assignments to further their transitions to full Death Eaters. Both boys were underage, of course. However, they needed to learn that as Death Eaters they might not be able to rely on their friends to support. Draco, Crabbe, and Goyle would eventually have to separate to do the will of the Dark Lord, so they had to start practicing with individual missions. That would make it look like Crabbe and Goyle had "de-friended" Draco. The three boys could get together once again outside of school as neither Snape nor Dumbledore would be able to witness that.

Relieved that he had reached a decision, he sent word to Voldemort and told him that he was planning to become a double agent. Bracing himself, he headed for Dumbledore's office to ask him for asylum. One of the advantages of McGonagall becoming headmistress was that he didn't need a password to go to Dumbledore's office anymore. The venerable wizard was looking at a parchment containing a picture of a ring decorated with an odd symbol consisting of a triangle, a circle, and a line.

Dumbledore stared at him curiously as he rolled up the parchment. "Good afternoon, Draco. How are you doing? You're lucky you caught me as I was about to leave on an important, and dangerous, journey."

Draco drew a deep breath and stared the old man. "Professor, I need some help. I've just been given a most disturbing assignment, one which I don't think I'll be able to fulfill."

Dumbledore frowned. "That is a wise move, Draco, one worthy of a Hogwarts student. I take it that you want to join our side because you wish to protection from Voldemort?"

"Yes, Professor. I'd have to lose Crabbe and Goyle as friends and try to stop saying words like 'Mudblood', but I think I'll be able to manage it. I'm fifteen now, and it's about time I grew up. Don't tell my father, however, or he'll kill me or inform Voldemort."

To Draco's astonishment and great discomfort, Dumbledore gave him a hug. "Thank you, Draco."
Your help will be most appreciated. Come with me to the headmistress so we can tell her."

They headed up to the headmistress's tower, where McGonagall seemed to be busy in conversation with two other people. One of them was Rufus Scrimgeour, the Minister of Magic. The other was a bearded man whom Draco did not recognize -- and whose eyes seemed to be far wiser than any he'd ever seen before...by a long shot. Draco knew that age granted wisdom, but this man seemed to be much wiser than he looked.

The Minister was talking to the bearded man. "I assure you, Dr. Flamel, we'll keep an eye out for it. We don't want Voldemort to get his hands on the book as it would be an absolute disaster. I take it the original has been destroyed?"

The bearded man nodded and glanced at Draco. "Yes, Minister, both the original book and the object have been incinerated. I'd recommend Tabooing the object's name so that you know where the thief went."

The Minister nodded, thanked the stranger, and turned to Dumbledore. "We'll be with you shortly, Dumbledore. I've got to discuss something with McGonagall first."

Dumbledore nodded and stepped back as the Minister turned to McGonagall. "All right, we're done with Flamel now. Now, Minerva, it's your turn. We've rounded up all the werewolves but one, Harrison Cooper. Full moon is a week away, and we don't know where he is. This is bad, Minerva. We may need to get Interpol and Dialonis involved if he's left the country. In the meantime, we'll watch the hospitals in Britain -- he's likely going to experience some symptoms of lycanthropy as the full moon comes closer and he may make an appointment with the doctor. I'll keep you posted if anything happens."

McGonagall nodded. "That would be most appreciated, Minister. I take it the other twenty-six are all under control?"

"They're wearing ankle bracelets which will transport them to the Ministry safe house just before the full moon. They will not be a threat."

McGonagall turned to Dumbledore. "Good. You're doing the best you can, Minister. One werewolf is going to be less of a problem than twenty-seven, and as it is I'm sure the last man will come up. Now, let's hear what Albus has to say."

Dumbledore looked over to Draco. "Lady and gentlemen, I believe Draco Malfoy has something very important to tell you, one which will help make it much easier for us to pursue Voldemort. It appears that Voldemort has ordered Draco to kill Severus. Draco refused to do it and has decided to seek asylum from our side."

Everyone cheered and congratulated Draco. Draco pasted a smile on his face and wondered what they would have thought had they realized his true intentions.

To be continued...

----------
Update #185
----------
Friday, May 24, 1996, after sundown
Ministry of Magic
Israel
Michal Oved was taking an awful risk.

She had initially refused to respond to the magical terrorist attack with a magical attack of her own lest it escalate the already worsening relations between Hamas and Israel. The world was already disintegrating as it was, and a magical war between Hamas and Israel would just make things worse. There had been a coup in North Korea, and the new ruler just "happened" to let slip that he was a wizard. The South was almost certainly going insane. As if that hadn't been bad enough, the British Minister of Magic, Rufus Scrimgeour, had apparently lost track of Voldemort, Lestrange's boss! The feared Englishman had disappeared along with his faithful servant, Lucius Malfoy. Malfoy hadn't been seen in the Ministry of Magic for a couple of weeks now, which was highly unusual and almost certainly a bad sign.

She didn't like the idea of sending wizards along with Mossad members to take out Rodolphus Lestrange and the rest of his thugs. However, it was increasingly obvious she had no choice. Although the attack on the base in the West Bank had succeeded, it had been a hollow victory. None of the wizards had been neutralized, and many Palestinian civilians had lost their lives. Furthermore, the wizards had managed to put a magical shield around the base which required that one of the pilots crash his aircraft into the base to overwhelm it. The Israeli Defense Force couldn't sacrifice various multimillion-dollar aircraft each time it wanted to attack a wizard, and the country in general couldn't risk more civilian casualties on either side.

This meant that they needed a surgical strike which would target the wizards and only the wizards. The surviving Hamas members would probably quiet down significantly once they realized they no longer had any wizards to protect them.

She had spoken with every single agent involved in the mission and told them exactly what to do. The top priority was to kill Voldemort. Although there was no evidence that the evil mastermind was actually hiding out as a Hamas operative, there was no evidence AGAINST that hypothesis, either. Besides, the fact remained that Peres had shown his hand when he had attacked the base. It was obvious that Israel was going to attack Rodolphus again, and the wizard was almost certainly going to call for help. The second priority would be to kill Rodolphus. He was Hamas's primary wizard and the only person who likely knew Voldemort.

Once those two men were out of the way, the wizards were to neutralize any remaining wizards hiding in Hamas. Finally, once Hamas had been reduced to Muggles and only Muggles, the wizards were to back off -- having wizards attack Muggles would be opening Pandora's box for good -- and let the Mossad do the job.

Several of the agents had been offended that they were being forced to work on the Sabbath. She had expected such resistance, however, and told them that this was an emergency and that lives were at stake. All of the traditional customs were suspended in life-threatening emergencies. Furthermore, a Friday night operation would be unexpected, to say the least. This managed to convince them, and they agreed to go.

She knew roughly where Rodolphus Lestrange was hiding out. She had put a Taboo on his name and discovered that most of the speakers were clustered in a small area in Haifa. She had cursed vehemently when she was informed this. Clever bastard, she had thought. By hiding in the middle of
a big city, he had effectively forced the Israelis to rule out another air attack as any such attack would likely knock out whole blocks and kill hundreds of people.

The agents the Mossad had chosen were trained for urban fighting. The people she had supplied were experienced Aurors, many of whom had been forced to kill Dark wizards before. Voldemort and Rodolphus were to be killed on sight; the remaining wizards were to be taken prisoner.

She just hoped to God that this would work.

The wizard grabbed onto Eliezer ben-Dor's arm, and the Mossad agent suddenly found himself flying through space. He panicked for a moment, and he drew in a deep breath to scream. Fortunately, the journey ended before he could let it out.

He was in an empty room. There were a few guns lying against the wall along with some belts of ammunition. He may not know magic, but he knew guns. He headed over the guns and was about to take one when the wizard abruptly called him back. "Hold it, they're booby-trapped. Let me remove the spell. It will take just a moment."

The wizard brought out his wand and cast the spell. The spell accomplished two things. First, it neutralized the spells surrounding the guns so Eliezer could take them. Second, it triggered a nasty disembodied howl.

Eliezer reached for one of the guns...and his hand passed right through it. It was an illusion, apparently. Meanwhile, the wizard swore. "Caterwauling Charm! The guns were bait, and we fell for it! Get that Apparation interdictor up in a hurry! We can't let these guys escape!"

It was only a matter of time before the first enemy wizard came to investigate. Forcibly restraining himself from firing on the man, he ducked behind a desk as a green bolt flew over his head. The Death Eater raced into the room and was about to cast a spell when Minister Oved's wizard hit him with something which knocked him out cold.

The wizard pointed at the door. "Cover me while I grab some of his hairs, change, and drink the Polyjuice Potion! All of you, go ahead! I'll catch up with you!"

Eliezer didn't need to be told twice. Making sure that his gas mask and infrared goggles were fitted firmly on his head and urging his comrades to do the same, he withdrew a sleeping gas grenade from his backpack, pulled the pin, and tossed it into the corridor at the same time the man next to him tossed a smoke grenade. Both weapons went off simultaneously and filled the hallway with smoke.

One of the other friendly wizards took advantage of the momentary confusion to race up to the front and shooting beams of light into the smoke. Eliezer heard the distinctive sound of people falling to the ground just as a wildly-aimed green beam nicked Cohen in the foot. The man collapsed at once and didn't move. Eliezer shook his head. That wasn't fair: he gets hit in the TOE and dies?

The infrared glasses here were critical. Eliezer suspected that the Hamas operatives hadn't had their masks on, and those who had would be unable to see through the smoke. The raiding party, on the other hand, would be able to both breathe and see the enemy's heat signatures.

The wizard was about to urge the men forward when there was a brief burst of light. Seconds later, Davidoff roared, "Kaplan! Behind you!"

The wizard spun, but did so too late to save himself from the newly Apparated Death Eater. The
enemy wizard hit him with one of those green beams, and down went Kaplan. The man then turned
his baleful gaze on the rest of the strike force. One Israeli soldier suddenly went stiff as a board, drew
his pistol, and shot another friendly wizard in the forehead. Eliezer blinked: what the hell? He was
about to shoot the traitor when the wizard who had killed Kaplan toppled and the Death Eater the
raiding party had first encountered came up behind him. The man who had been Imperiused
suddenly blinked and shook his head to clear it. Eliezer had to remind himself that this new "Death
Eater" was actually friendly -- it was the wizard who had drunk a potion to make him look like the
Death Eater.

The Polyjuiced wizard raced into the smoke shouting that the invaders had been caught by surprise
by the man who had just Apparated in. All of the enemy wizards had been caught other than one,
and that wizard had been taken prisoner. The faux Death Eater got about maybe fifty feet when
someone prompted him for the password. Eliezer had been afraid of this. Glancing at the wizard
beside him, he had everyone move forward into the smoke to assist the wizard who was about to be
unmasked.

Eliezer raced around the corner -- weaving around various sleeping people -- and saw that the
Polyjuiced wizard and a man in a fancy Death Eater outfit were throwing spells back and forth. One
of Eliezer's men pulled the pin on another sleeping gas grenade and was about to toss it when a bullet
the grenadier in the head. One of the wizards shrieked a warning, and a Mossad agent picked up the
grenade and heaved it into the room. The wizard fighting the Polyjuiced man blasted the grenade into
oblivion with his wand. Unfortunately, that left him open to the Polyjuiced man, who promptly
incapacitated him.

Realizing that the person who had challenged him was out of the fight, the Polyjuiced wizard tried
the same trick once again. He didn't get very far before someone shot him in the chest, and down he
went.

Suddenly, there was a whoosh and a glow at the other end of the corridor, near where they had first
entered the building. Eliezer's eyebrows jumped as a huge wall of flame started racing towards the
invaders. The enemy wizards probably couldn't see through the smoke, but they knew that Eliezer's
men were there somewhere. Most of the friendly wizards spun to face the flame and started casting
spells to block the fire just as someone let a Kalashnikov loose on the raiding party.

A good half of Eliezer's party went down. He ducked at the last minute as a bullet went over his
head. The man next to him grunted as a second hit him in the middle of his bulletproof vest. More
would have fallen had the machine gun suddenly leaped into the air and started floating towards
Eliezer. The Mossad man grabbed it and start spraying bullets all across the room, starting with the
first man he could see wearing a robe. The enemy wizard went down in a heap, followed by a good
half of the enemy soldiers as the rest of them suddenly ran. Eliezer breathed a sigh of relief --
apparently all of the other wizards were occupied fighting in the corridor. The remaining Hamas
operatives had no wizards to protect them.

The Death Eater mask had fallen off of the face of the wizard Eliezer had shot when the wizard had
hit the ground. A quick glance at the victim revealed that it had been Rodolphus Lestrange. Eliezer
nodded in satisfaction -- one of the main targets had been taken care of.

There was still more to do, however. He continued leading his men into the building.

------------------

Half an hour later, Eliezer was briefing Michal Oved back in the Ministry of Magic. All of the enemy
wizards had been captured except for one, an Indian fellow he didn't recognize. Twenty-five Hamas
Muggles had been killed before the rest of the cell had escaped. Voldemort had not been a member
of the cell, but they had at least taken out Rodolphus Lestrange. Best of all, there had been no civilian casualties and the wizards had Obliviated the neighbors to think that all of the noise had come from a malfunctioning washing machine.

The cost, however, had been grievous. All of the friendly wizards who had been sent on the mission had been obliterated other than three, and a good two-thirds of the Mossad men were dead. Most of the survivors were badly injured. Eliezer himself had taken a bullet in his arm and was wondering if he’d ever get a chance to use it again.

Only time would tell if the raid had been worth it. The only thing he knew would be that Voldemort would be pissed.

To be continued...
Update #186 through Update #190

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Misagnissa

Update #186

----------

Friday, May 24, 1996
Al-Qaeda Headquarters
[location classified]
Afghanistan
----------

Next PoV: 187 -- Ask Fake Name Generator, Hebrew
----------

HORCRUXES LEFT: 3 (ring, snake, cup)
----------

Wizard Arif Maysarah Koury glared at the man speaking at the other end of the table. These guys didn't get it, he thought. Wizards ruled Muggles, not the other way around. When wizards spoke, Muggles listened. The era of the Muggle ruler was swiftly nearing its end.

The speaker was looking around the table and speaking urgently. "Gentlemen, President Clinton knows we were involved. He even sent a warning to the president of Afghanistan that either the Afghans are going to have to turn us in or the Americans will come in and do it themselves. We're going to have to move the base, and do it soon."

One of the other al-Qaeda leaders shook his head. "Shahir, they're not going to find us. We'll just hide in the mountains like we usually do. Furthermore, even if the Americans do come in, what do they expect to accomplish? The Soviets tried the same trick in 1980 and it didn't work out well for them."

"That was 1980. This is 1996. Technology has changed a lot in sixteen years!"

A third man chimed in. "So what? It didn't help the Americans find Osama, did it? And besides, do you seriously think the Americans would invade Afghanistan to take us out? Would they be willing to risk hundreds, if not thousands, of civilian casualties, terror attacks, and increased friction with the Muslim world just to get at us? Killing ten thousand people to avenge seven thousand doesn't make sense."

Shahir rolled his eyes. "They don't CARE about us. As long as they believe they're safe and they have their oil all of us are expendable. You've all heard that the American people are screaming at Clinton for revenge. He's going to have to do SOMETHING to ensure that he gets re-elected in November."

"They can do whatever they want, Shahir. They're going to meet the same fate as the Russians."

Shahir shook his head. "I still think we should move the base as a precaution. They have wizards, and that's how they found us last time. Most of our wizards were taken out in the raid, and Dilmi isn't here to guide us anymore --"

Koury had finally had enough. He stood up and stared at Shahir. "Dilmi may not be here anymore, Shahir. However, I am. I am a wizard, almost as capable as Dilmi was. I may not be as charismatic
as he was, but I will do my best to protect us from any further incursions."

Shahir grunted. "That's what Dilmi said. I remember. In case you recall, his defensive schemes didn't work out very well. Yes, we beat off the invaders, but most of our wizards were killed."

Koury nodded. "I am aware of that. That's why I'm going to do something different. You elected me as your leader for a reason, and I will honor your trust. We're going to make it impossible for them to figure out where our base is."

Shahir chuckled. "Really? This I've got to hear. What are you going to do, make us all invisible?"

Koury nodded, impressed. "Close, but not quite. First thing we're going to do is move the base. Shahir here is correct in that as long as the Americans know where it is, they can attack us again."

One of the other leaders scratched his beard. "And where exactly are we going to put it? The backup plan in Saudi Arabia isn't going to work all that well as Allah knows what lunacy Fahd is going to unleash next."

Koury chuckled. "We're leaving the country, all right. However, we're not going to Saudi Arabia. We're going to be going to North Korea."

Virtually every man in the room started screaming at the top of his lungs. Most of the comments involved derogatory things about non-Muslims and warned Koury that the current leader of North Korea was a general who happened to let slip the fact that he was capable of casting spells.

Koury raised hands for silence. "You don't understand, gentlemen. We can trust the leader of North Korea. I've worked for him in the past."

Shahir scoffed. "You've WORKED for Chang Sung-Taek?"

Koury shook his head. "No. I can explain, however, but I must insist that the information I am about to tell you not leave this room. Will you give your word?"

The men in the room all nodded.

"Good. I have not in fact worked for Chang Sung-Taek. However, I've worked for the wizard who has quaffed a magical potion to make himself look like Chang Sung-Taek. The real Chang Sung-Taek is dead, killed by Lucius Malfoy. The person the North Koreans elevated to the presidency is actually an impostor. Ever found it curious that this general just HAPPENED to be a wizard and no one knew it even though the Statute of Secrecy had fallen FOUR MONTHS prior to the coup? You know the odds that a random person happens to be a wizard are about 1 in 10,000. What really happened is that Chang Sung-Taek wasn't a wizard and was replaced by an impostor who is."

There was a brief moment of silence as the people digested this. Finally, one asked: "If the new ruler is a wizard posing as Chang Sung-Taek, which wizard is it?"

Koury beamed with pride. "Lord Voldemort, Dilmi's mentor. He became my mentor as well shortly after Dilmi recruited me back in Pakistan. That, gentlemen, is the information which must not leave this room. The most powerful wizard in the world is our ally, and he has positioned himself so that he is the undisputed ruler of North Korea. We will be more than welcome there. In fact, we will almost certainly be treated like royalty. Rest assured that Voldemort is sympathetic with our goals, and he will assist us as much as he can in our fight against both the Great and Lesser Satans."
There was a collective gasp and people started talking excitedly. Koury sat down, satisfied. Dilmi had spoken about how powerful Voldemort was and how he had been an excellent teacher. It wouldn't be hard to convince them that al-Qaeda was in good hands.

One of the leaders shook his head again. "Arif, what happens if the potion wears off? People will find out he's an impostor and stage a countercoup."

Koury smiled. "We've thought of that already. Voldemort killed off the former Dear Leader's family, so they won't be coming back for revenge. And yes, the potion will wear off after a while, but he has an ample supply and will drink it as soon as he wakes up each morning. The only problem would have been the original Chang Sung-Taek's wife, who could conceivably have seen Voldemort in his true form if she woke up before him."

Shahir finished Koury's thought. "And that's why she accidentally died in the coup. Chang Sung-Taek is blaming the South, of course, but I can see why Voldemort got rid of her. Clever."

"Indeed, Shahir, and it gives 'Chang Sung-Taek' a personal excuse to attack the South if he finds himself in need of a diversion. At any rate, back to the issue at hand. We will move our base of operations to a location Voldemort and I have agreed upon in North Korea. No one will expect us to go there, after all. Once we arrive, I will cast the Fidelius Charm on our base. This spell makes the location of the base literally undetectable by ANY observational technique, magical or mundane, unless I tell the searcher where it is personally. And I don't think I'll do that to that many people. I'll also Apparate people to Afghanistan and Pakistan from time to time so the Americans think that we're here."

The assembled leaders nodded enthusiastically. One of them replied, "That's devious, Arif, and brilliant. America invades Afghanistan to try to reach us, gets the Muslim world mad at it, and doesn't get anywhere near us. We get to watch under the aegis of Voldemort as we perform attacks and watch America get itself deeper into trouble. World opinion turns against the Great Satan and the country falls from grace."

Koury nodded. "That's the basic idea, my friend. There may be more to come -- I'll keep you posted. In the meantime, let's get started disassembling the base."

To be continued...

-------------
Update #187
-------------
Saturday, May 25, 1996 - 7 DAYS TO FULL MOON
Dan Hotel Tel Aviv
Tel Aviv
Israel
-------------
Next PoV: 188 -- Arif Koury
--------------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 3 (ring, snake, cup)
-------------
It wasn't the traditional Esh Elohim building. But it was better than nothing, and they weren't going to let the terrorists win by allowing the congregation to disappear without a trace.

The ballroom that the hotel management had leased to them for the next two years was a little small,
but it would be good enough. Services would continue, albeit with a fraction of the congregation and with laymen leading the services. The community was fortunate that one of the rabbinical students had been away visiting his friends at the time Hamas had attacked the building.

The attack on Esh Elohim had turned Avner Plaistow’s entire world upside down. Half of his friends had been killed when the wizard and gunman had opened fire -- both figuratively and literally -- on the congregation. The attack had triggered a wave of sympathy for the Esh Elohim victims and a corresponding desire for retaliation against Hamas. Not surprisingly, Peres had authorized an air strike against Hamas's main base. The attacking aircraft were confronted by extremely strong defenses, including some magical shields. Nevertheless, they had managed to destroy the base.

Unfortunately, the destruction hadn't been good enough. Several Palestinian civilians had been killed, and Hamas had immediately vowed to avenge their deaths. Avner couldn't blame them, considering what he had just gone through. Even worse, the wizards responsible for most of the chaos had managed to escape from the base as it was being destroyed.

The news reporters were vilifying Peres for not sending wizards along with the aircraft. Peres had tried to explain that wizards couldn't fly quickly enough to keep up with fighter jets. Furthermore, magic and fancy technology often didn't work well together. Knowing that Peres's coalition in the Knesset was hanging on by a thread, Netanyahu had immediately called for a vote of no-confidence in the Prime Minister. Virtually every Likud member fell into step behind Netanyahu. A good Prime Minister, Netanyahu argued, would not hold anything back when it came to defending the country from terrorists. They had attacked Israel with wizards, so Israel had clear justification to respond in kind.

Peres had done what he could to hold off the Likud onslaught. Last night, the Prime Minister had authorized a second raid on a Hamas stronghold. This second raid had been more successful than the first and had managed to assassinate Rodolphus Lestrange, the chief wizard assigned to Hamas. Unfortunately, rumors were circulating that most of the Mossad agents and Israeli wizards had been killed in the raid and that there could be more Hamas cells out there. Michal Oved issued a statement explaining that the situation was well in hand, but of course no one believed her. There were also rumors of a group called Wizards for Palestinians or something like that consisting of a large group of wizards which supported the Palestinian cause.

Peres had done what he could. However, the Likud spokespeople eventually won the day. A no-confidence vote was scheduled for Monday morning, and most of the commentators thought that it would pass. If that happened, Netanyahu -- a known hawk -- would be elected Prime Minister and the country would be plunged into war. To make matters worse, a collapse of the government would provide just the lack of leadership Hamas needed to be able to carry out more attacks if it so chose.

Avner couldn't understand what everyone was fighting about. He knew several Palestinians and they seemed quite friendly. He suspected that the vast majority of the Israelis and Palestinians would be willing to live together in peace, either as one state or two. The problem was that the minority which disagreed with them proved to be VERY vocal and good at preying on people's fears.

His traditional analogy from the Old Testament came to mind. Jacob and Esau were still fighting with each other even though their father loved them both. It was about time that their descendants stopped acting like jealous teenagers and began behaving like mature adults. Not many people realized that a simple investigation of Genesis would reveal that Esau had grown up to be an honorable, civilized chieftain who fully accepted Jacob's apology for stealing his birthright when both men were young and foolish. Esau eventually went on to rule a large nation, yet he dutifully returned to mourn with Jacob after Isaac died.
Of course Avner wanted revenge on Hamas for killing his loved ones. However, he knew that the revenge would just perpetuate the blood feud further and wouldn't do anything to bring back his fallen friends.

He had spoken with many members of the congregation about whether Israel start a major military campaign against Hamas and the various terrorist organizations in general. About two-thirds of the members were hawks, which Avner more or less expected -- after all, it was their synagogue that had been attacked. He could just hope that the rest of the country wasn't as hell-bent on war.

The service was about halfway through the Torah reading when there was a tremendous explosion outside the building. The ground shook momentarily as Avner heard the sound of breaking glass.

He had been sitting near the back of the room, so he was able to hurry outside before the crowd began streaming out. The man leading the service tried to keep everyone calm, but for some reason that didn't work. He hurried through the lobby to the main entrance to see what was going on. There was a brief crush of people trying to get out the front door, but he eventually reached the street.

There was a large group of people staring to his left -- and up. He followed their gaze and saw a terrible sight: the eleven-story apartment building less than a block away was on fire and had a huge, gaping hole in its side. It looked like a bomb had gone off or something like that. His heart sank as he realized what had happened: Hamas had committed another terrorist attack, this time to avenge the death of Rodolphus Lestrange.

He turned to the man next him. "What happened?"

The man was almost incoherent but managed to explain. "Someone fired a missile and hit the building with it. Thank God it stayed up. I tried to help out but the cops are keeping everyone away while they evacuate the building."

Avner blinked. "A missile? I didn't think these terrorist groups HAD missiles! I thought they used handmade rockets and stuff like that! You're sure it wasn't a rocket?"

"I served in the IDF as well as you did, friend. In my case, I was in the Air Force. It sure looked like a missile, and it had a much greater yield than a simple Hamas rocket. It looks like they've gotten more sophisticated."

"Where did it come from?"

"East, somewhere. That's all I can tell. That probably means West Bank or Jordan."

Avner frowned. "Hamas can deliver a warhead that far? That's ridiculous!"

The man slowly shook his head. "Hamas by itself probably can't. However, it can always try to find a backer such as Iran, Russia, North Korea, or Saudi Arabia which is willing to give them missiles. Besides, God knows what those wizards are capable of doing. For all we know, they have spells which can turn simple homemade rockets into military-caliber missiles."

Avner shook his head as people began muttering among themselves. "This doesn't look good. Aren't our wizards going to do something? That Oved woman is probably going to have to respond SOMEHOW in order to keep her job."
The man pointed. "I think they're doing something now. Take a look."

Avner turned and saw a few small specks floating in formation in midair, a few miles to the east of the city. As he watched, another dot appeared, along the faint sounds of a helicopter motor.

Avner nodded. "It looks like the wizards are putting up some kind of defense, similar to the one the - -"

He cut off his sentence abruptly as a light suddenly blazed over the eastern horizon, heading towards Tel Aviv in a hurry. It definitely looked too fast to be an ordinary Hamas rocket, Avner thought. That had to be a missile.

The helicopter fired a rocket at the missile but missed. A few seconds later, the missile reached the area where the wizards had been stationed.

The weapon exploded in midair, as if it had run into an invisible wall. Pieces of wreckage and flaming debris fell to the ground. The sound reached Avner maybe twenty seconds later, and it was louder than he had thought it would be. That had been one big missile, he thought.

The people in the street let out a weak cheer as the wizards reconstructed their shield and helicopter fired at something. There was an explosion off in the distance, and the helicopter moved to the east to deal with whatever had fired the missile.

That was when there was a brief flash a few hundred feet in the air -- behind the wizards, which had been caught looking the wrong way -- and a third missile appeared out of nowhere. Avner had learned enough about the Wizarding world to realize that could only mean one thing: missile used as Portkey. That would explain their unusual range, he thought bleakly.

The missile slammed into the building which had been damaged in the first attack, this time a little lower down. This was too much for the building to take, and it suddenly collapsed upon itself, pancaking floor after floor. A huge dust cloud raced towards Avner, and he began racing down the street with a whole bunch of other people. He looked up, pleadingly. God, why are You torturing us like this? Have we done something wrong?

For a brief moment, he saw an odd-looking cloud in the sky, one which looked like a skull with a snake protruding from its mouth. Then the dust cloud overtook him and he lost sight of the cloud. He took off his shirt and used it to cover his face so he could at least try to breathe.

How many people had been in that building when it came down? Fifty? A hundred? More? This was like Esh Elohim all over again.

There was no way the dovish Peres would survive the vote tomorrow. Netanyahu was going to win in a landslide, and the country would be going to war.

Israel had fought many wars before and won them all. However, all they need to do was lose one and they would likely be wiped off the map.

Would this be the war where their luck would run out?

To be continued...

-------------

Update #188
Arif Koury looked at his speech. This was the big one, he thought. Several people had argued with him about whether to give the speech, but he figured he'd give it a try. If all else failed, it would increase the odds that the United States would invade Afghanistan and lead the Great Satan on the road to ruin.

The surviving members of Hamas had been skeptical at first of Koury's idea of merging the two groups of freedom fighters into one group which would pool their resources to carry out terrorist attacks. However, Koury had bluntly pointed out that they were down to one wizard and Israel was about to throw everything they had at them after they Portkeyed that North Korean missile into the building in Tel Aviv. If Hamas were to survive upcoming the Israeli offensive, they had to team up with al-Qaeda. Hamas would have to accept al-Qaeda supervision as long as they needed protection from the Israelis. If, at some point, Hamas managed to recruit some more wizards, they would be free to break off and plan their own attacks again. While Hamas was under al-Qaeda's control, Koury would also agree to perform more attacks against Israel to support Hamas's movement. After a long discussion, the Sheikh -- the man in charge of Hamas -- had finally relinquished control of the terrorist organization to Koury on an interim basis. Hamas was now in the process of packing up many of its members and sending them over to North Korea so they could join up with al-Qaeda's members and take shelter under the wing of Voldemort.

Koury's big speech had originally been Hamas's idea. Flush with pride after their successful attempt to use a missile as a Portkey, the Sheikh had gotten cocky and had posed a radical, in fact reckless, new idea. It would be a major bluff, to say the least. However, Koury soon realized that the group was in a very strong position and could very well try a bluff. Al-Qaeda and Hamas had both threatened several attacks and delivered each time. Why would the Israelis or Americans think this threat would be any different? Furthermore, if the Americans backed off, Hamas would be given more time to recoup and complete their move to North Korea.

Koury tried to envision the Americans' response. Assuming that al-Qaeda's security was good enough to prevent anyone from finding out that the threat was in fact nonexistent, he saw no way for them NOT to back off. The ramifications of this prospective al-Qaeda operation were just too significant for them to risk calling his bluff. Particularly after both organizations had developed a track record for delivering on attacks which they had promised.

There was the chance that the Americans would retaliate some other way, a chance which worried Koury a great deal. However, what could Clinton -- or Peres or Netanyahu, for that matter -- possibly do? The base was Fidelised. Even if they wanted to target it, they wouldn't know where it was and wouldn't find it even if they were standing in front of it.

Dropping a nuke or some other weapon of mass destruction on a location which COULD conceivably have been hiding the base would be a non-starter. First, the odds were that they would not attack the right place. Second, even if they DID realize that the base was in North Korea and that no magical spell could survive a nuke, would they be stupid enough to drop a nuke on a country
which had a wizard as its supreme ruler? At the very minimum, the North would invade the South and Voldemort would start Portkeying all sorts of fun stuff into the US. NATO would probably activate, as would Russia and China. Once Russia and the US got involved things would almost certainly go nuclear, at that point it would be all she wrote.

The blunt truth was that the only way America would be able to destroy the base would be with a nuke, and any such attack would immediately trigger World War III. Koury knew it, Voldemort knew it, and he was fairly certain that both Travis Radner and Michal Oved knew it. As long as Koury kept strict control over the people he gave the secret to (and did not die in the process, as that would make them Secret-Keepers, which could make secrecy tricky), the base was absolutely impregnable.

A few hours ago, he had addressed the heads of Hamas and al-Qaeda and revealed his plan. There had been a long and heated argument about it. Most of his opponents argued that although they were all in favor of putting the West in its place, this was going too far. It was way too dangerous, especially if America called their bluff. Eventually, it all came down to a simple vote. The vote was 25-23 in favor, and the speech was on.

Koury looked into the television camera and began to speak.

"Good evening. My name is Wizard Arif Koury, and I am honored to be the new head of al-Qaeda. I was recruited a few months ago by the great Damodharan Dilmi, a man who martyred himself fighting against the Great Satan, the United States of America.

"Word has reached us that President Clinton has determined that we were involved in the attack on the Four Towns in Massachusetts. I would like to admit that this is indeed the case. Mohatma Dameel was one of us, and Dilmi ordered him to insinuate himself into America for Humans and provide them with the depth charge and aircraft used in the attack. If everything went as planned and the Americans responded in with force, we would defer claiming responsibility and watch as America slaughtered its own people. America for Humans had been working for us, though they never realized it at the time. Unfortunately, it was the will of Allah that Secretary Radner would find the bodies of the attackers and tie Dameel to us. Realizing that there is no longer any reason to hide the truth, al-Qaeda is taking the opportunity to come clean and claim responsibility.

"Leaders the West, I have something very serious to discuss with you. There are plans in the pipeline for another attack, one which will dwarf every other operation we have performed in the past -- including the attack on the Four Towns. We are estimating that the death toll of the proposed attack will be between 125,000 and 150,000 people."

Koury looked directly into the camera. "Yes, ladies and gentlemen. We at al-Qaeda have managed to acquire a weapon of mass destruction. The plan is to deploy this weapon against a target in the Western world or Israel within one month. It will be delivered by magic, so there is no way you will be able to intercept it. In addition, you will be unable to stop us as I have cast the Fidelius Charm on our base. For those of you unfamiliar with the Fidelius Charm, it is a spell which makes a target literally undetectable to anyone who has not been told where it is. You could walk right by it and not even realize it was there. As long as that spell is in place, you will be incapable of targeting us. Even an invasion of our homeland will not work.

"We will carry out this attack unless several demands are met. First, the West agrees to all of the demands Dilmi specified in his earlier announcement preceding the attack on the Four Towns. Second, Israel gives up all of the territory it occupied during the 1967 war and returns it to its rightful owners. Third, Israel destroys any nuclear weapons that it currently possesses and does so under the
supervision of the United Nations and two Arab countries. Fourth, Israel immediately halts all attacks on Hamas. Lastly, the United States changes its constitution to make Islam the official national religion."

Koury shook his head. "I urge you to reconsider your actions. No, I beg you. We do not want to have to do this, as all life is sacred to us. Yet we believe that we have no choice. You of the West have not responded to any other form of persuasion. Even the deaths of seven thousand wizards were not enough for you to change your minds.

"Leaders of the West, the fate of a hundred thousand people, and possibly the world, is in your hands. I pray that Allah grants you the wisdom to make the right decision."

President Clinton's face was ashen as he turned off the television set. Slowly, he turned to Travis Radner.

"Mr. Radner, are they telling the truth? Could they have actually gotten their hands on a nuke?"

Radner thought for a moment. "Possibly. However, what I suspect has happened is that they managed to get their hands on a small sample of depleted uranium or plutonium and are going to be using that."

"They can make a bomb out of a small sample like that? I thought that was physically impossible. You need a critical mass to get the nuclear reaction going."

Radner drew a deep breath. "Not if you use magic. You're not going to like this, but we believe that it will be possible for them to create a small fission weapon -- maybe 25 to 50 kT -- with just a small piece of fissionable material if they resort to magic."

Clinton shook his head. "Travis, I sure hope you're joking. Please tell me you're joking."

"I'm afraid not, Mr. President. The terrorist can cast the Engorgio spell to increase the amount of fissionable material provided that they have a seed sample to start with. To detonate the bomb, they cast one final Engorgio to increase the fuel pellet to critical mass. They then compress it to detonation density with a Compressio Maximus spell. That's all they need to do: get a tiny bit of bomb fuel and cast two spells. Not only that, but they can create multiple bombs with Geminio, a spell which duplicates an object."

Clinton put his head in his hands. "I hope they're bluffing."

"I don't know, Mr. President. We'd need more intelligence to ascertain the truth, but what Koury is claiming is at least plausible. Whether he actually has the guts to do it is another thing. I suspect that he had to fight long and hard to get them to buy this operation. We're going to need to somehow break into al-Qaeda and convince people to stop it. We'd need to interrogate people, figure out who the Secret-Keeper is -- which is probably Koury himself -- and force that person to tell us where the base is. Then we take out the base."

Clinton grimaced. "That's a good idea, Mr. Radner. The catch is whether they'll just use the break-in as an excuse to detonate the bomb. How do you think they'll deliver it?"

"They said they'd use magic. That probably means Apparation or Portkey. Most likely the latter as Apparation across national boundaries is prohibited. We have reason to believe that the missile attack on Tel Aviv was delivered by Portkey."
"Could they smuggle it in through Mexico or Canada?"

"Possibly. However, that would require that they get the weapon to Mexico, which is too risky. It's also assuming that the target is in the United States -- for all we know, they could go after Tel Aviv or Paris."

Clinton stood up. "You're the Minister of Magic. Can you quarantine the country somehow and make sure that no one is able to Portkey or Apparate in?"

Radner nodded. "I can, Mr. President. I'll have to twist a few arms to get them to do that, though. We'll have to watch the ports, however, as well as the borders. We don't want it coming in that way, either."

"Good, Mr. Radner. This leaves the possibility of an ICBM or some other weapon. Would it be possible for them to deliver it via a Fideliused ICBM?"

Radner shook his head. "I don't think so. Although the missile itself will be undetectable, its exhaust will be visible as soon as it leaves the missile. NORAD will pick it up and report it to you. We'd be able to track it with magic at that point and Portkey an obstacle into its path. It would hit the obstacle and be destroyed, preferably when it's outside the atmosphere. Furthermore, any launch would almost certainly trigger World War III, which would obliterate al-Qaeda along with everyone else. They wouldn't do it."

"Could a wizard prevent himself from being harmed by a nuclear explosion?"

"No, Mr. President. Wizards are not powerful enough to do that."

Clinton looked out the window. "Numbers, Mr. Radner. What do you think the odds are that they will go through with this attack?"

Radner thought for a moment. "I'd give them maybe a 60% chance of having actually acquired a weapon and a 30% chance of them actually having the cojones to use it. That's 1 in 5, sir. An eighteen percent possibility that a over hundred thousand people will die. The expected value alone is equivalent to three Quabbins."

Clinton stood and began issuing orders. "That's a relief -- I thought it would be higher. Continue with the preparation to send troops into Afghanistan, and quarantine the country so nothing gets in via Portkey or Apparation. We're going to need to take out al-Qaeda in a hurry now. In the meantime, we're going to classify this video as top secret. Let's hope we don't spook them...or that they're bluffing."

Radner saluted. "Yes, Mr. President."

To be continued...

-----------------
Update #189
-------------
Saturday, May 25, 1996 - 7 DAYS TO FULL MOON
m/s Noordam
Near St. Thomas
U.S. Virgin Islands
Harrison Cooper groaned and put his hand on his stomach. "Oh, boy, Courtney. I think something I ate disagreed with me -- I've got myself a headache and a bit of an upset stomach. Let's hope I don't throw up."

His wife looked at him, worried. "Oh? Do you need an antacid or something like that? I'm not sure we brought any, but I'm fairly certain that we'll be able to get one when we disembark in St. Thomas. I expect that they'll allow us to cash traveler's checks there if they don't take pound notes."

"I hope so, Courtney. It's not bad enough for me to stay on board, though. I don't want to miss any of these islands. After all, it's unlikely we'll get a chance to do this again. I wonder what triggered it."

Courtney looked at him pointedly. "I suspect it's all that rare meat you've been eating over the past few weeks. My guess is someone didn't cook it well enough to kill all the germs. I figure what's just going to happen is you'll just regurgitate the bad meat and everything will go back to normal. What on earth prompted this change of diet?"

Harrison shrugged. "My body is probably telling me to eat more protein to help me deal with the aftereffects of that dog bite. That was a BIG dog, Courtney. You wouldn't want to meet one of those in a dark alley. However, what's done is done. Let's head on downstairs so we can go through customs to get onto the island."

They headed over to the elevator and pressed the button. The door opened and revealed two people: a tourist dressed in shorts and a heavily armored man with a gun in a belt holster. The soldier was wearing American military fatigues.

Harrison blinked at the soldier as he entered the elevator and the door closed behind Courtney. "What the bloody hell? They have soldiers investigating the ship at customs checkpoints? What do they expect us to bring in, sand from Half Moon Cay?"

The soldier shook his head. "There's been a change of border security protocols, sir. Rest assured, we will try to be as invisible as possible. Have you seen anything unusual of late? Have people been acting strangely at all?"

Harrison looked at his wife and shook his head. "I can't say that I have, soldier. All I know is that something I ate disagreed with me and I need some antacids. Do you by any chance have any on you?"

The soldier shook his head. "I'm afraid not, sir. However, I'm sure you'll be able to find some downtown in Charlotte Amalie."

The elevator stopped and the door opened. Turning to Harrison once again, the soldier said: "Thank you for your cooperation, and welcome to the Virgin Islands". With that, he left the elevator and headed down the hall.

It took them a good hour and a half to get through customs. He'd been told American customs could be time-consuming, but he hadn't thought it would be this bad. Eventually, though, he and his wife were through and walked down the gangway onto the island.
They bought some antacids and Pepto-Bismol in a convenience store which took traveler's checks. Minutes later, the nausea began to dissipate. That was a good sign, Harrison though. Grinning, he started looking for the tour groups that were going to the national park on St. John.

Derek Michaelson's phone rang. It was probably his daughter, which meant that she was likely going to need a ride back from her friend's. On the other hand, it could be another customer who wanted their software fixed, he thought. He deemed that unlikely as it was Saturday night and he had told the people working overtime to only call him in case of an emergency!

He lifted the handset. "Hello? Let me guess -- Jenna, you want a ride back."

An unfamiliar voice responded on the other end. "I'm sorry to bother you, Mr. Michaelson, but my name is not Jenna. I am Rufus Scrimgeour, the Minister of Magic. How are you doing tonight?"

Derek stared at the phone in puzzlement. What the bloody hell was the Minister of Magic calling HIM for? He wasn't a wizard, as far as he knew.

"This is a bit of a surprise, Minister Scrimgeour. I must tell you, sir, that if you're looking for a wizard, I'm not a wizard. I think you have the wrong number."

"Perhaps. Are you the Derek Sanderson of BioCode Corporation who has a man named Mr. Harrison Cooper as one the people he manages?"

Derek blinked. The Minister of Magic had called to ask him about Harrison Cooper? This had to be a practical joke of some sort. Well, he'd play along for now. Cautiously, he said: "Yes, Harrison Cooper works for me."

"Thank you, Mr. Michaelson. We was wondering if you could tell me where he is. As you may or may not know, he was one of the people bitten by the rabid dog at Wembley Stadium earlier this month. We have reason to believe that this creature may have caused him magical injury and that his life may be in danger. We need to find him as soon as possible. Otherwise, he may become a danger to himself and possibly to others."

Derek frowned. Harrison had mentioned that he'd been attacked before he left on the trip but hadn't thought much about it. Harrison hadn't seemed particularly injured, but then again what did he know about magical injuries?

He turned back to the phone. "I'm not entirely sure where he is right now, Minister. All I know is that he's away on his honeymoon with his new wife. I think he mentioned something about a Caribbean cruise."

The Minister's tone of voice changed abruptly, to one of great concern. "Harrison Cooper is no longer in the country?"

"That is correct, Minister. He isn't."

"Was he aware of the public service announcement that requested that people who were attacked should contact the Ministry of Magic?"

"Perhaps. When was the announcement made?"
"It was made on the 16th, Mr. Michaelson."

Derek grunted. "In that case, Harrison probably doesn't know about it. He was probably on a transatlantic flight at the time -- he left on the 16th."

Scrimgeour's voice softened. "You've been quite helpful, Mr. Michaelson. Hopefully we will be able to save your employee's life in time."

Derek had to know. "What did that dog do to him?"

"It's a magical injury, Mr. Michaelson. That's all we know right now. Do you know which ship he's on?"

"No. Minister."

"When will he be back in the United Kingdom?"

Derek thought for a moment. "I'd say somewhere around the 15th or so of June. Why do you ask? Can you treat him then?"

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Michaelson. By then, it may be too late. Let's hope for the best, sir. Now, if you would excuse me, I have to let you go now to make some arrangements to help Mr. Cooper. Good evening, Mr. Michaelson, and thank you for your time."

------------

Lord Voldemort looked at the letter with surprise -- and pride. "Well, Lucius. I think I underestimated your son. I told him to kill Snape, and your son argued that it would be more in our interests to have Draco serve as a double agent into Dumbledore's headquarters. His reasoning makes sense, Lucius, and I would argue that such a role is difficult and dangerous enough to serve as his initiation rite. As of now, he is to be considered to have full Death Eater status."

Lucius breathed a sigh of relief. "That's good to hear, my lord. Draco is more likely to survive that way, and it provides us with information about the Order of the Phoenix. And Draco's argument is valid in that anything Snape does can be neutralized by Draco's information, effectively taking Snape out of the picture."

"Correct, Lucius. How are al-Qaeda and Hamas coming along?"

"They're settling into their new homes even as we speak, my lord. Hamas is itching to punish Israel for its attacks and the death of Rodolphus Lestrange, and al-Qaeda has bluffed that it would drop a nuclear weapon on the West if its demands aren't met."

Voldemort frowned. "That's a dangerous game, Lucius. They're threatening with nuclear weapons which they don't have?"

"Correct, my lord."

Voldemort thought for a moment. "Well, North Korea does have some small nuclear reactors under construction. I'll see what I can do to help them out."

Lucius nodded. "Very good, my lord."

To be continued...
Bill Clinton looked at the world leaders seating around the Oval Office. "Gentlemen, I'll be frank. We have no idea if al-Qaeda actually has a nuke, but we have to assume that they do. They gave us one month to comply with their demands, which probably means that they're having trouble figuring out how to deliver it. What this means, of course, is that we've got one month to wipe them off the map. None of us can allow terrorists access to nuclear weapons. That's why we all need to form a coalition to go into Afghanistan and do one of two things: take out their wizards or take out their nuke, if it exists. Once we do that, we can mop up the rest of them with our own wizards and troops. Thoughts?"

The French prime minister shook his head. "The one-month delay be a bluff, Mr. President. If they are going to use magic to deliver it, they may have everything in place already and could detonate it early if they are attacked. This is going to be very dangerous."

Clinton shook his head. "Radner suspects that the odds of them using the nuke are going to be around 1 in 5. I tend to concur. Having a nuke is one thing, but having the balls to actually detonate it is another. Killing a hundred thousand people is a hell of a lot different than killing a few hundred. They may say they're going to use it but when they realize the consequences for Afghanistan and the world in general they could very easily chicken out."

John Major frowned. "We can't assume that, though. We have to assume that they've got the nuke and are willing to use it. Can we put more pressure on the Afghan government to turn in the terrorists?"

The German leader shook his head. "The Afghan government has got its hands full with the Taliban siege at the moment. They aren't really in any position to do anything useful. I suspect, however, that if we were to invade Afghanistan to get at al-Qaeda the two sides would bury the hatchet in a hurry in the face of a foreign threat. And believe me, Prime Minister Major, you don't want the Taliban as your enemy."

Clinton grunted. "So we can't rely on help from Kabul to round them up, and if we go in there to do it ourselves we'll have everyone uniting to kill us."

The German looked resigned. "I'm afraid so, Mr. President. If we go in to get them, we're going to have to commit a LOT of troops. We're going to need a full-scale invasion with many, many countries involved. That will spread the risk of nuclear terrorism throughout the army."

The Russian leader groaned. "Chancellor, no one is going to want to commit troops if there's a chance they're going to get nuked. Besides, you saw what happened to us -- well the Soviet Union -- when we tried to invade Afghanistan. We thought we would be able to crush them easily but they
managed to elude us over and over again. Any attempt to invade is likely to become another Vietnam. Besides, for all we know they have multiple nukes. Mr. Radner, you mentioned earlier that they can use the Geminio spell to duplicate an object?"

Radner nodded. "Yes, Prime Minister. This spell exists, and it could be used to duplicate a uranium or plutonium bomb core."

The Russian bored in. "Is there any limit as to how many copies can be created?"

Radner shook his head. "No, Prime Minister. Once they have one nuke, they can create as many as they wish until we take out their wizards. And with their base under the Fidelius Charm, finding those wizards is going to be well nigh impossible unless we track down their Secret-Keeper. The problem is that if I were running al-Qaeda, I'd make sure that the Secret-Keeper never leaves the base. That way, there's no way the location can leak out."

There was virtually a good thirty seconds of swearing in various languages, and Clinton had to raise his voice to be heard over the din. "Gentlemen, odds are that they will be reluctant to use the nukes. Don't get carried away. I'd have probably given in to a few of their demands or at least asked for time if I thought that the invasion wasn't worth it. You wouldn't be here in that case. We've believed that it's still worth going along with the invasion, and I want you guys to help me."

The Japanese emissary turned to Radner. "Secretary Radner, how big a weapon do you think these people have?"

"We're estimating about 25 kT, which is roughly the level of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki attacks. It's a fission weapon, not a fusion weapon."

"But can they make a multistage device if they get tritium? If they've got the fission weapon..."

Radner's eyes widened for a moment in surprise. He gritted his teeth and thought for a moment.

"I'm afraid it's technologically plausible, sir. However, I suspect that it's HIGHLY unlikely that they have a fusion bomb. Fusion bombs are much more difficult to create, and the casualty total they mentioned is much more consistent with a Hiroshima-style weapon than with a multistage weapon which would kill millions."

Clinton looked sternly around the room. "I want you to stop exporting tritium NOW. We don't want them to get a chance to improve their bomb any further."

Everyone nodded. Relieved that an H-bomb terrorist attack was unworkable, Clinton brought the discussion back to the coalition to take out al-Qaeda. Within an hour, everyone had agreed to join and had signed a document indicating that they would classify the al-Qaeda broadcast and attempt to recruit other countries. Mission accomplished, he thought.

As the leaders were getting ready to leave, the German turned to the president. "Mr. President, I've heard rumors that America for Humans is trying to reorganize itself. Is that true? If so, what are you doing to stop them?"

Clinton chuckled. "You'll find out soon enough, Chancellor. You'll find out soon enough."

---------------------

Jackson, Mississippi
The senator stood in front of a large group of America for Humans followers. Many were also members of the KKK, complete with their hooded robes. The senator had never liked the KKK all that much, but at a time like this they could come in handy.

He raised his hands to the sky as he spoke. "That's right, ladies and gentlemen. A wizard has come onto the scene who is a clear and present danger not only to the United States but to the world in general. He has managed to take over al-Qaeda, the terrorist group responsible for the attack in Massachusetts, and transform it into a tool of the Antichrist, Lord Voldemort!

"God wills us into action, men and women of America for Humans. Had He not approved of our movement, He would have had us all rounded up immediately after the attack on the Quabbin. That has clearly not happened, which means that He still has another use for us. Until today, none of us realized what that use was.

"Consider your name: America for Humans. We fight to preserve America, and we fight to get rid of wizards. The Almighty inspired Patrick Dursley-Burgess to choose that name, ladies and gentlemen. Why is that? Because He intended us to join together in the fight against the wizard which is threatening America: the leader of al-Qaeda!

"The recruiting office is just down the street, ladies and gentlemen. Your president is embarking on a crusade to destroy this evil wizard. He has announced that he is willing to offer amnesty to any America for Humans member who enlists in the armed forces and participates in any action taken against al-Qaeda. Those of you who enlist will have all charges against you dropped in exchange for fighting your holy crusade. Those of you who do not will still have to worry about arrest and prosecution when you are exposed by the government."

The senator gestured towards the recruiting office. "Those of you who wish to enlist, follow me. Those of you who do not wish to enlist will have one hour to leave this area before the president's offer of amnesty expires. All right, who's with me?"

The entire crowd cheered and began waving Confederate and American flags. The senator's security detail had its hands full trying to keep people under control as he led them towards the recruiting office. Looking back, the senator saw people running to join the group. KKK hoods were bobbing up and down in excitement.

---------------------

m/s Noordam

---------------------

Courtney stared at her husband in worry. "Harrison, NOW what did you eat? You look a bit green there!"

Harrison grimaced. "It wasn't the meat! I haven't had any red meat for a couple of days now! All I had was some sushi and pizza!"

Courtney threw the antacids at him. "Here, take some more of these. If it persists tomorrow morning, we'll go down into the medical section on A Deck and below and see if we can find a doctor."

---------------------

Gringotts Bank

---------------------

Griphook the goblin looked at the document in front of him. "Yes, I believe you are correct. With Bellatrix Lestrange dead, it looks like we're going to have to rely on Rodolphus's will to determine who gets custody of her vault. Who is the beneficiary, according to his will?"
The other goblin pointed at the parchment. "The Lestranges are survived by no children, parents, or siblings other than Andromeda Tonks, who has been banished. The closest next of kin after that is Draco Malfoy, Bellatrix's nephew."

Griphook frowned. "So what's the problem?"

"He's a minor. He's only 15 or 16."

Griphook shrugged. "Give the key to Lucius until Draco attains his majority."

The other goblin rolled his eyes. "Lucius is missing, Griphook."

Griphook threw his hands up in the air. "Fine. Give it to Draco and have Draco give it to Lucius once Lucius is found. Now let me get back to my wife and kids! It's a Sunday!"

To be continued...
Update #191 through Update #195

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Mislagnissa

Update #191

-------------

Monday, May 27, 1996 - 5 DAYS TO FULL MOON

Knesset
Jerusalem

-------------

Next PoV: 192 -- Severus Snape

-------------

HORCRUXES LEFT: 3 (ring, snake, cup)

-------------

Cameras flashed as the Speaker of the House announced the results of the voting. The vote of no-confidence had succeeded in ousting Shimon Peres from the Prime Minister's office. Judging from the congratulations Netanyahu was receiving, it was obvious who Peres's replacement was going to be.

Netanyahu was thrilled with the opportunity to become Prime Minister. Now he'd be able to punish Hamas for all of these attacks. The people agreed with him and was crying for blood. Peres had done what he could to strike back, but he hadn't been thorough enough. Netanyahu planned a full-scale invasion of the West Bank.

Hamas had been a thorn in Israel's side for several years now. It was about time that someone did something about it once and for all. There would be no more tit-for-tat raids which would continue year after year. Netanyahu wasn't afraid to use everything in his arsenal short of nukes. He'd throw the entire Ministry of Magic against Hamas if necessary to achieve total victory. Israel would never be afraid again.

This was, of course, assuming that he was actually chosen to become the new Prime Minister. Granted, there was always a possibility that some of the Orthodox hardliners had a trick up their sleeve and decided to send the coalition in another direction. On the other hand, the probably of that happening was about the same as the Earth crashing into the Sun in the next couple of months.

A few hours later, it was done, and Peres shook his hand for the benefit of the camera. The former prime minister's face reflected a combination of sadness and relief. Netanyahu had a bad feeling about this. He could understand why Peres felt sad. But relieved? Was there something about the Hamas attacks which Peres had considered so top-secret that no one other than the Prime Minister was supposed to know about it? Something that scared Peres so much that he was actually somewhat willing to relinquish power and hand the problem to someone else?

Netanyahu considered that for a moment. Peres had just come back from an unannounced meeting with the President of the United States. Before he had left, he had seemed puzzled. He had come back, however, absolutely horrified. Several of the MK's had asked him what the problem was and he said that he couldn't comment about it at this time. Netanyahu hadn't even known that there was a security level high enough that even the MK's couldn't discuss it openly.

Well, he was about to find out. Peres had invited whoever the next prime minister would be -- he had probably figured that his tenure was over -- to a confidential security briefing deep in the bowels of
Netanyahu nearly fell over in shock. "You've got to be kidding."

Peres shook his head violently. "I wish I were! Arif Koury, Dîlîmî's replacement as the head of al-Qaeda, made an announcement a couple of days ago that they have acquired a weapon of mass destruction capable of killing over 100,000 people. They said that they would deploy this weapon against a target in the United States or Israel unless the United States and Israel agreed to several ridiculous demands within one month."

Netanyahu blinked. "Al-Qaeda's bothering us now? As if Hamas weren't enough with those damned Portkeyed missiles of theirs?"

"That's right. Koury is demanding that we relinquish all of the territories we acquired in the 1967 and immediately cease all attacks on Hamas. We are also required to destroy all of our nuclear weapons under the supervision of the United Nations and two other countries."

"What? Without nukes, we'd be finished! Part of the reason the State of Israel has lasted as long as it has is because of the threat of nuclear retaliation! Without nukes, the Arabs would overrun us in a matter of decades, if not years!"

Peres groaned. "I am only passing along their ultimatum. You see now why we had to keep this confidential. If any of this leaks out, the entire country will panic. People will flee Tel Aviv and Jerusalem in droves, which will in turn provide just the confusion to encourage Hamas to continue their attacks."

Netanyahu put his head in his hands. "That's awful. However, first things first. Do they actually have a nuke, and if so are they actually willing to use it?"

Michal Oved answered this. "Judging from what Secretary Radner has told me, the US government believes that there is a 60% chance that they have a nuke and a 30% chance that they have the guts to use it. That's an 18% chance of an attack. Almost one in five."

"Where is this nuke, if it exists?"

"No one knows. The base is supposedly under the Fidelius Charm, a powerful enchantment which makes it absolutely undetectable to either wizards or Muggles unless someone infiltrates the facility."

"So we don't we do that?"
The secretary of defense responded. "Al-Qaeda has just announced a hiring freeze. It is no longer accepting any new recruits. This makes good tactical sense, Prime Minister. They'll know that anyone they don't recognize is a potential and will kill them on the spot."

"What if we give the spies Invisibility Cloaks?"

The Minister of Magic cut in. "It won't work. The Al-Qaeda operative would have to be specifically speak to our agent in order to reveal the location of the base. The agent must therefore be visible."

"Can we disrupt their Fidelius Charm?"

"No. There is no known way to do this other than inserting a spy."

Netanyahu winced. "That's bad."

Peres grinned bleakly. "Now you can see why I'm not altogether upset that you've taken over. It's your problem now."

Netanyahu's tone was sarcastic. "Thank you, Shimon. What does Clinton suggest?"

Peres began pacing around the room. "We decided that most of the Western nations are going to be form a coalition to invade Afghanistan and do anything possible to find that base. Once we do that, we find the nuke and destroy it along with any wizards."

Netanyahu frowned. "Wizards?"

"They're going to be delivering the nuke by magical means. Also, Radner believes that wizards may be able to take one nuke and make as many copies as they wish using a simple spell."

Netanyahu's jaw dropped. "Are you telling me that they may have access to a potentially unlimited number of nukes?"

"Correct."

"How big are these nukes? Minister Oved, how bad can this get?"

The Minister answered. "The current estimate is about 25 kT each. That's about the size of the weapons used against Japan. That may not be much by modern standards. However, if you have a lot of them..."

As if that weren't enough, Peres broke in. "Exactly. Oh, and I promised Clinton that we'd stop exporting tritium because Radner isn't convinced that they can't make an H-bomb given enough time...such as possibly a month. And once they have one H-bomb, they can duplicate that and protect THOSE with the Fidelius Charm. And God help us all if Hamas finds out about this and asks for some."

Netanyahu reeled and turned back to Peres. "You're right, Shimon. Forget Hamas. This threat is much more urgent. I hate to think what people are going to say when I start diverting troops and so forth from the Hamas missions over to this one, which would obviously have to be secret as Israel has no overt reason to invade Afghanistan at the moment -- only the US does. I promise everyone that we'll blow Hamas to kingdom come only to find I have to send everyone after al-Qaeda without telling anybody."
Peres chuckled. "Think of it this way: if you get ousted, you can always give the problem back to me."

----------------

Gaunt House
England

----------------

Albus Dumbledore looked at the small ring in front of him. He was tempted to put it on. VERY tempted. However, he knew that Voldemort had packed some awful surprises into his Horcruxes in the past. He still remembered that awful eye and that ghost of Hermione Granger trying to convince him to spare the locket.

He looked at the familiar symbol on the face of the ring: the circle, line, and triangle of the Deathly Hallows. He couldn't destroy it. He just couldn't. This was a famous historical relic. It belonged in a museum. Granted, not many people knew about the Deathly Hallows. However, the few who did know about them would understand its importance.

Voldemort was getting way too powerful and was starting to take over the Muggles. He had to be stopped before it was too late.

Grimly, he cast the Duplication Charm on the ring and placed the duplicate where the original had been, just as Regulus Black had done with the locket. That was becoming standard procedure at this point during the Horcrux hunt. Then came the hard part. Placing the blade of the sword just underneath the bottom of the Resurrection Stone, where it was mounted on the ring, he spent a few minutes sawing it off the top off the ring. The ring howled for a moment, as in agony, and eventually quieted down. Dumbledore cast the soul identification spell to confirm that the Horcrux had been destroyed and was relieved when it indicated that there were no Slytherin souls left in the building.

Satisfied with his work, Dumbledore Vanished the bottom half of the ring and examined the Resurrection Stone. He doubted Voldemort had realized that the gem mounted on this ring was a powerful magical relic. Otherwise, the Dark Lord would have made the Resurrection Stone itself into the Horcrux and not the ring which had held it.

Only two Horcruxes were left: Hufflepuff's cup and Nagini. He knew where the cup was: in Gringotts. But where on earth was the snake? He'd deal with them in a few minutes. However, there was one thing he had to check -- just to be certain. He'd been waiting for a chance to do this for many, many years.

He turned the ring over three times. Seconds later, a ghostly image of a little girl materialized beside him. Dumbledore nearly broke down in tears, yet he somehow managed to blurt out a short sentence:

"Hello, Ariana."

----------------

Hospital Wing
m/s Noordam

----------------

The doctor finished his investigation of Harrison Cooper. "Well, Mr. Cooper, I honestly don't see anything wrong with you. I can tell you've gotten a bit of a headache and have been feeling nauseous of late, but I don't see any obvious cause. Do you have any food allergies?"

Harrison shook his head. "Not that I know of."
"Are you allergic to any animals?"

Harrison chuckled. "Well, I get sick around cats, but that usually takes the form of asthma."

"Have you been asthmatic at all on this trip?"

"No, Doctor."

The doctor thought for a moment. "It's possible you could have picked up a food allergy from something you've been eating of late. Here's what I recommend. I'll prescribe you some stronger nausea medicine and something for your headache. In the meantime, stay away from the red meat -- the cholesterol would be bad for you anyway -- and keep a diary of what you eat. Try a variety of food -- the restaurant on the Lido Deck has a lot of different options for lunch and dinner. If you see any link between a certain type of food and your sickness, inform me immediately."

Harrison stood up and shook the doctor's hand. "I'll do that. Thank you for your time."

"It's my pleasure, Harrison. Enjoy the rest of the cruise."

To be continued...

-------------
Update #192
-------------

Tuesday, May 28, 1996 - 4 DAYS TO FULL MOON
Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor's Office
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
Great Britain

Next PoV: 193 -- Lord Voldemort

---------------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 2 (snake, cup)
---------------

Severus Snape had done a lot of strange things in his Potioneering career before. Incorporating small dosages of Wolfsbane Potion into small capsules which were supposed to be swallowed by a Muggle, however, almost certainly topped them all.

He had tried to convince everyone that the Wolfsbane Potion did not stay potent for very long. They wouldn't listen, however, so he had been forced to improvise by trying to throw bizarre in Muggle concoctions which were supposed to make the pills last long enough to stay potent for months. Snape had no idea what the combination of Wolfsbane and Muggle compounds would do. He had ransacked the Hogwarts library -- including the Restricted Section -- and there was no information whatsoever as to what would happen if Muggle medicine was introduced to a magical potion.

If he had been forced to make a prediction, he would have argued that the Wolfsbane Potion would last two weeks instead of one. That wouldn't do much good if the pills had to be taken over the course of a month. But it was definitely progress. Snape had been surprised when Scrimgeour had offered the new Muggle lycanthropes a week's worth in one sitting -- even he hadn't realized that it was possible to prepare the potion more than one day in advance. Perhaps a combination of the Muggle preservatives and whatever concoction Scrimgeour had cooked up would do the job.

The only thing that he knew was that the "stale" Wolfsbane Potion pills had managed to reduce the headaches that the twenty-six Muggle lycanthropes had been experiencing by a good 50-75%. It
wasn't as good as a freshly-made Wolfsbane Potion, but a couple of the patients who had taken the stale pills had suffered no symptoms at all. That was a good sign.

Placing a fresh dosage of Wolfsbane Potion in a pill by itself had exactly the same effect as an equivalent amount of Wolfsbane quaffed in potion form. Adding some preservative to a fresh dosage of Wolfsbane to a minimal effect on the efficacy of the potion. One person claimed to have had a headache, but Snape and the rest of the Muggle physicians involved with the lycanthropes could not tell whether this was due to the fact that he had become a werewolf or because of a food allergy.

The biggest test would take involve combining Scrimgeour's week-long preservation technique with the Muggle preservatives. As Snape had just found out about Scrimgeour's technique, such an experiment had not yet been conducted.

Pocketing seven or eight of the odd-looking pills, he headed through the corridors to Dumbledore's office. His former headmaster was expecting an update on his progress with the Wolfsbane Pill. He was on the verge of collapse, which only made his normally sour disposition worse. Combining his Order of the Phoenix work, OWL supervision and preparation, and attempt at playing Muggle doctor was taking all of his time. In one sense, he felt relieved that Voldemort had found out about his double agent work. He couldn't imagine where he would have found the time to follow Voldemort's orders as well.

He knocked on Dumbledore's door, and the venerable professor let him in. "Good morning, Severus. How are things going?"

Snape tossed a few of the capsules on the table. "I believe we've made progress, sir. The Muggles will have to take ten of these to receive a complete dosage, but the combination of Minister Scrimgeour's work and mine might actually have a chance of working. Scrimgeour gets it up to a week, and the Muggle preservative doubles the time an untreated potion will last with about a 25-50% drop in efficacy. Assuming the two effects do not interfere with each other, consuming twenty pills two weeks in advance will get the job done. We still need much more testing, though. Assuming both I'm afraid we're going to need a lot more work to get them lasting a month or more. We'll need to wait at least one more month to try it on the group as a whole."

Dumbledore smiled. "That's excellent work, Severus. I must say, however, that I doubt Muggles are going to want to take twenty pills that size in one sitting."

Snape glared at him. "The alternative is worse, Professor. Headaches, four feet, and attacking your spouse are going to get you killed."

"Is there any way one of these pills can prevent the transformation completely?"

"No, Professor. The Wolfsbane Potion only keeps the lycanthrope's mind intact during the transformation. This allows the lycanthrope to refrain from attacking other people. It does not prevent the transformation itself. The only way to prevent a victim from transforming is by locking him in a windowless room the night of the full moon and ensure that no moonlight falls upon him."

"That's good to hear, Severus. How has the search for the missing werewolf been going? I've been out of touch ever since I started chasing that Horcrux."

Snape shook his head. "The news is not good, Professor. We have finally tracked down Harrison Cooper. Unfortunately, he is somewhere where Rufus Scrimgeour cannot retrieve him. Indeed, none of us can."
Dumbledore frowned. "What do you mean? Is he dead? If he's dead, we don't need to worry about him."

"No, Professor. He's alive, though he's almost certainly starting to exhibit symptoms by now. The problem we have is that he is not in the United Kingdom. Our Ministry of Magic has no jurisdiction over him at this point."

Dumbledore stared at him. "You mean this is going to have to become an international manhunt?"

"I'm afraid so. Even worse, he will be constantly shifting countries from time to time over the next few days, straight through to his transformation on Saturday night."

Dumbledore's eyes widened. "WHAT? How can that be?"

Snape stared at the floor. "Professor, Harrison Cooper is currently in the middle of a one-month cruise through the Caribbean on the Dutch-flagged ship m/s Noordam. According to his supervisor at his Muggle job, he and his wife left 16 May for their honeymoon and plan to return about a month later. During this cruise, he will be visiting various islands ruled by various nations on different days. He will be spending the night of the full moon traveling between the Dutch Antilles islands of Aruba and Curacao."

Dumbledore put his hand to his head. "16 May? Wasn't that the day of the Prime Minister's broadcast?"

"Yes, Professor. From what I've heard, Cooper was in an aircraft flying across the Atlantic when the Prime Minister made the announcement. He has likely not received any updates from the United Kingdom since 15 May."

"So he STILL has no idea that he's a werewolf and could be a danger to himself and to others?"

"Correct, Professor. He's probably passing his lycanthropy symptoms off to allergies or the flu or something like that. He may be going to Muggle doctors for treatment, but of course they're going to prescribe the wrong remedies."

Dumbledore kicked at the table. "We need to get our hands on this man, and do so quickly. Can we intercept the boat?"

"In principle, yes, as the boat's route is well-known. In practice, though, the international nature of the cruise makes it difficult for one nation to attempt this operation. I would suggest, however, that the Dutch wizards take charge of the rescue attempt."

Dumbledore frowned. "That means we're going to have to go through Dialonis and the International Confederation of Wizards. All that bureaucracy is going to take time, and we don't have time."

Snape stared daggers at him. "Well, tell him to MAKE time. That boat likely has people from all over the world on it. If he infects them and they are able to leave the ship, we're done for. The pandemic is going to go international, at which point nothing is going to be able to stop it. This is our last chance, Professor, and we need to take it."

Dumbledore reached into his pocket and pulled out the Resurrection Stone. "I'll ask Minerva and Rufus to start that process. In the meantime, I am pleased to report that I have successfully dispatched
the ring Horcrux. In doing so, we may have caught ourselves a break. You see, Voldemort made the ring into the Horcrux and left the stone alone. That is fortunate, because the stone is a powerful magical artifact."

Snape stared at the Resurrection Stone. "I can't say that it looks familiar. What is it?"

"Have you ever heard of the *Tale of the Three Brothers*, Severus?"

Snape snorted. "From *Beedle the Bard*? I have, but what does that folk tale have to do with this?"

In response, Dumbledore gave him the Stone. "Simple. Humor me and turn this Stone over three times in your hand."

Skeptical, Snape did as Dumbledore commanded and was astonished to see a shadowy figure appear to his right. It looked very familiar. In fact --

He dropped the ring in shock, and the figure disappeared. Staring at where the figure had been, he gasped: "That was Lily Evans! But she's dead!"

"Indeed she is, Severus. Severus, meet the Resurrection Stone. I suspect that it could come in handy when it comes to fighting Voldemort."

To be continued...

-------------

**Next PoV: 194 -- Nagini**

-------------

**HORCRUXES LEFT: 2 (snake, cup)**

**ATLANTIS ALERT STATUS: DEFCON 4**

-------------

Voldemort straightened his uniform and looked over the crowd. It was time to deliver his new speech. Dispensing with the traditional microphone, he pointed his wand at his throat and spoke the word "*Sonorus*". This would allow his voice to carry so it could be heard all over the plaza.

"Good afternoon, fellow comrades. I apologize for the short notice, but I believe that you, as fellow citizens of our great land, need to know the information that our intelligence agency has just uncovered.

"I promised you shortly after I took office that I would make a full investigation into Comrade Kim Jong-II's death. The preliminary cause of death was heart attack, and all of the doctors who examined the body were convinced that this was the case. However, it appears that we have all been deceived. I ordered several members of the Ministry of Magic to conduct a more detailed, psychic evaluation. What they discovered shocked me, and should shock you."

Voldemort stared into the crowd. "My predecessor, your Dear Leader, was murdered by South Korean agents in an attempt to take over the North. It is obvious that the capitalists have not given up on their attempt to stop us."

There was a gasp from the crowd, followed by worried muttering.

"Our surveillance cameras captured several shots of a woman named Choi Yeun in the Presidential Palace shortly before Kim Jong-II's death. She was accompanied by several people wearing robes
with whom I was not familiar. The key point here is that Choi Yeun was a witch who defected to the South and returned to avenge herself on her homeland.

"Most damning of all was a hidden video camera which caught the entire episode in Kim Jong-Il's office. The only way I was able to find it was by casting a spell to look for possible traps in the room. This camera revealed the enemy wizards casting curses upon our beloved leader, dropping him like a sack of grain! Our valiant soldiers were able to neutralize many of the enemy wizards, including Choi Yeun herself, whose wand I have taken as a trophy."

Voldemort raised Choi Yeun's wand in the air for the crowd. "The question now is how exactly my government is going to respond to this incident. The most obvious solution is for us to resume hostilities against the South. However, I doubt anyone here wants war. I certainly don't. Many of you may remember the fighting in the 1950's, and you know the horrors which took place over that period. Inevitably, when wars start up, thousands of people are killed and the fighting only stops when a couple of people make an agreement across a conference table.

"My friends, I must be honest with you. Kim Jong-Il may have been a great man. However, he was not a wizard. In order to be a wizard, a candidate must pass rigorous leadership and character evaluations. Considering that our previous leader relegated most of you to the peasantry, I doubt he would have shown the qualities which would have allowed him to graduate a Wizarding school. I, on the other hand, have passed these tests. Whereas Kim Jong-Il could only think of war, I can take a more measured view.

"Here is what I demand from the South in compensation for the assassination of our former president. First, I demand that the South hand over all political prisoners and the equivalent of $500 million, payable over twenty years. This is all for past grievances, and it will help the ordinary citizens of our great nation to rise up out of their poverty. Once that is done, the business of healing can begin. This business of healing brings up my second demand."

Voldemort pointed south. "My second demand is that I and the leader of the South have weekly summits where the two of us could iron out differences and help end all these years of bloodshed. We will speak to each other as civilized adults, just the two of us. If the leader of the South wishes protection during these summits, he may bring as many Muggle soldiers as he wishes. I will bring no more than five members of my Ministry of Magic. The only thing I require is that the South not include any wizards in their delegation. They must understand that many members of my government, including a few in the Ministry of Magic, will be a bit uncomfortable around Southern wizards given what has happened."

Voldemort began wrapping up his speech. "South Korea, that is my proposal. You can answer in one of two ways. Refuse one or more of these terms, and my government will interpret your refusal as a hostile act which will be met with grave consequences. Accept these terms, and we will likely be able to reach a permanent peace! It is up to you, our friends from the South. What do you want, war or peace?"

Holding his hands out to the crowd, he shouted: "What, my friends, is YOUR answer? War or peace?"

The crowd began chanting in unison: "PEACE, PEACE, PEACE!"

Voldemort bowed in acknowledgement to the crowd, and they all screamed even more loudly. Out of sight of the television cameras, he permitted a grin to sneak onto his face. He figured that it would take five or six wizards, including Voldemort himself, to neutralize fifty Muggle soldiers, Imperius
the South's president, and Obliviate the entire Southern delegation into thinking nothing was wrong.

Most citizens of both Koreas were about to get their wish of a unified Korea. What they did not know, however, was that it was going to be ruled not by someone from the South but by one of the most powerful wizards ever to walk the earth, Lord Voldemort.

He wondered how well Lucius Malfoy would do as the military governor of South Korea.

South Korean Central Intelligence Agency
[location classified]
South Korea

Park Hae Seung turned off the television broadcast and frowned. "Something seems very wrong here. We may have a problem."

The head of intelligence service raised his eyebrows. "Oh? What do you mean?"

"Chang Sung-Taek is behaving very strange. Although Chang is correct when he says that most of the North Koreans don't know him very well, our agency does. And I can tell you immediately that he's acting entirely out of character. He's also using lots of colloquialisms which none of our informants ever heard him use. I suspect he's an impostor who never actually spoke with Chang Sung-Taek."

Park paused for effect. "And there's one thing even more significant. Our Ministry of Magic is absolutely certain that Chang Sung-Taek is not a wizard. No one from the Korean Wizarding school -- which impartially serves both South and North, by the way -- had any idea that this man had magical abilities."

The head of intelligence frowned. "Wait a minute. Are you telling me that some wizard has taken advantage of the chaos triggered by Choi Yeun's coup attempt, thrown the real Chang Sung-Taek into a ditch somewhere, and cast a spell to make himself look like Chang Sung-Taek so he could succeed Kim Jong-Il?"

"That is exactly what I'm thinking, sir. The new Minister of Magic has informed me that it is possible for wizards to disguise themselves as other people. The most common method is to use a magical concoction known as the Polyjuice Potion."

The head of the intelligence service suddenly blanched as the implications hit him. "He's trying to get on everyone's good side and has killed off the rest of Kim Jong-Il's family. And he's conveniently reminding the world about the coup just so he can have a casus belli if he needs one."

Park nodded slowly. "That's what I'm afraid of -- he may be thinking unification under HIS rule. We need to talk to the Ministry of Magic and the president. Unfortunately, we have no real way to prove it. It's not like we can just go over there and ask: 'Hi! Are you an evil wizard masquerading as Chang Sung-Taek?' He'll probably just deny it and kill the accuser. Come to think of it, given his popularity, the North Korean citizens will tear the accuser apart before their Dear Leader gets a chance!"

The head of the intelligence service thought for a moment. "Actually, there may be something we can do after all. Our former Minister of Magic explained that all wands were registered by some mysterious central agency. All we may have to do is dig through our agents' recordings of his speeches from inside the press box and find good shots of Chang Sung-Taek's wand. Once we have those, we send those to the Minister of Magic and ask him to forward them to this Dialonis or..."
whatever his name is. That way, we'll be able to identify him."

Park frowned. "What if he doesn't use his own wand?"

"Then we work with the Ministry of Magic to figure out which organization the wand's owner -- or
the owner's assassin, if he was killed -- belongs to and trace it back up to the ringleader, who is
almost certainly the man in charge of North Korea."

Park chuckled. "That's not a bad idea, sir. I'll get to work on it right away."

To be continued...

-------------

Update #194

Wednesday, May 29, 1996 - 3 DAYS TO FULL MOON
Roger's Reptile House, 5:30 PM
Leeds
Great Britain

Next PoV: 195 -- Bill Clinton

-------------

HORCRUXES LEFT: 2 (snake, cup)
ATLANTIS ALERT STATUS: DEFCON 4

-------------

Nagini was getting tired of sitting in this box. She needed to get on with her mission of capturing
Karkaroff, and she needed to get away from the chap in the box across from her who wouldn't shut
up. She was increasingly convinced that Bel was somewhat interested in her. She was definitely
interested in him...but more as lunch than as a possible partner.

The humans clearly didn't like her. Not only had they put her in a box, but they had removed her
venom sacs while she had been asleep! How was she supposed to kill prey without her venom sacs?
She had a very satisfying vision of opening her jaws wide and swallowing the man from the front of
the store in one gulp.

Life in the glass box had become relatively routine at this point. She would be fed mice every day or
so. Although they kept her stomach full, more often than not they gave her cold mice which weren't
even alive! Not only was there no excitement of the kill, but they didn't even taste good! She looked
across at Bel again, who was making the moves on her and wanted to show her his mouse. She
groaned as he started waving a mouse in her face: "Hey, I got a mouse! I got a mouse!"

Whenever a human came in, she would glance at the entrance and check if it was Voldemort or
Karkaroff. Inevitably, it wasn't. Voldemort had assured her, however, that he was aware of her
predicament and would come and get her once he figured out where she was. Nagini hoped that he'd
discover her soon.

There had only been one bit of excitement over the past week. About six days ago, a large group of
humans had entered the store with an odd assortment of Muggle objects. She didn't recognize any of
them and was surprised when they had all walked up to her and began looking at her. She had
looked at them curiously: was one of them going to buy her and take her to Voldemort? After
speaking to each other in their unintelligible language, they had nodded and touched something on
one of the pieces of equipment. A bright light had shone in her face -- just what she had needed
when she was already irritated, wonderful -- as the man from the front of the store began standing
next to her, pointing at her and speaking in his strange language. Thirty seconds later or so, the man had finished speaking and the light had turned off. The Muggles had then dismantled their equipment and then left the store.

She had been extremely puzzled by this and turned to Bel to ask him what had just happened. This, of course, had proven to be a big mistake. Not only did Bel not know what had happened either, but he had given him yet another opening to start talking. And once he started talking, he wouldn't stop.

Peter Pettigrew had never thought that he would be hiding out among the Muggles. He despised the Muggles and considered them to be inferior to wizards. Unfortunately, he had no choice but to live in a Muggle community at this point. Much to his horror, Scrimgeour had somehow managed to figure out that he, and not Sirius, had been responsible for the Muggle attacks over a decade ago and that Sirius had been wrongfully convicted. Parchments with his name and face on them had sprouted up all over Wizarding Britain next to those of Lucius Malfoy and the Dark Lord. Pettigrew lamented the fact that a good, pure-blood wizard like himself was no longer welcome in Wizarding Britain.

At the moment, he was watching television in a room in a luxurious Muggle hotel. Muggle money was not an issue as he had been able to conjure various high-denomination Muggle banknotes while no one had been watching. The hotel had many fewer amenities than even a budget Wizarding hotel, and the few amenities it did have generally required knowledge of Muggle technology which he didn't have. Waste of money, he thought.

He had at least figured out how to turn the television on, so he flipped through the channels to see if he could find an interesting program. He eventually stopped on the Discovery Channel, which was showing a program on magical animals. Pettigrew was amused to find that a good half of the information the show reported on magical creatures was incorrect: basilisks did not fly, dragons did not speak, and thestrals weren't visible to people who were on drugs.

He suspected he knew why the show hadn't been given proper information. Scrimgeour and the rest of the Ministry likely had their hands full searching for Voldemort and dealing with the werewolf pandemic -- just three days to go until showtime. He supposed that Scrimgeour would eventually get around to telling the Muggles the truth. But in the meantime, he could just watch and chuckle.

The broadcast then shifted to a to commercial break. Pettigrew nearly fell over when he saw an advertisement which suggested that people spend 3,000 Galleons for a large moving vehicle which was powered by gasoline. If he had 3,000 Galleons, he'd buy a fancy broom and send any children he eventually had to Hogwarts -- assuming they were in Slytherin, of course.

He was about to turn the television off when a familiar face suddenly came on screen. A very familiar face. Pettigrew dropped his wand in shock when he realized who it was.

It was Nagini. The markings were unmistakable.

The commercial continued, and the view widened to show that she was trapped in glass cage which said that she was going for £319.95. A few seconds later, he saw several other cages filled with animals. There were primarily snakes, birds, and other reptiles.

Pettigrew couldn't believe what he was seeing. Voldemort's familiar had been captured and was being sold in a Muggle pet store! Someone would pay for this treatment of a Death Eater!

The camera panned over to focus on a tall man in casual clothing. The man waved at the camera and began to speak.
"Hello! I'm Roger Uxbridge, owner of Roger's Reptile House, Leeds's finest brokerage for exotic pets. We specialize in reptiles, such as snakes, birds, lizards, and so forth. However, we have several furry friends as well, including a few degus and guinea pigs. You can get cats and dogs anywhere, but where can you get unusual creatures like this? Nowhere else, I promise you that."

He pointed at Nagini. "Take a look at this specimen over here. This is the largest snake in our collection, a twelve-foot female green viper. She was captured maybe ten kilometers away by animal control agents who were told that she had threatened a pet ferret. We tranquilized the animal, brought her here, and removed her venom sacs. She seems to be getting accustomed to captivity now, and you can have her for only £319.95."

Pettigrew frowned. Nagini had been de-venomed? Voldemort was probably furious. The snake's venom had kept Voldemort alive between his demise at the hands of the Potters and his possession of Quirrell six years ago. Voldemort had to be careful either to stay alive or to find someone to possess next time he was incapacitated.

The commercial continued, and the proprietor pointed at the snake nearest Nagini. "This one here is a seven-foot-long python. He is a bit of a joker as he likes to show off his kills for the big snake. He's going for £139.95. Over here, on this side of the room, is a rare scarlet macaw who will almost certainly outlive his owner. He'll go for £999.50."

"Do not fear, however, we've got creatures for every budget. However, if you want an exotic animal as a new pet, don't hesitate to contact us. We're open Monday through Friday from 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM. Our address is 164 High Street, Leeds. Our phone number is --""

Peter didn't even bother listening to the phone number. 164 High Street, and in this town! First thing tomorrow morning, he would rescue Nagini from the pet store and return her to Voldemort. This would atone for all the mistakes he had made! Ideally, he would have just Apparated in there and taken her, but he was still a bit leery of using magic in a place where Muggles could identify him.

He immediately started planning what he would do tomorrow morning.

--------------
Dumbledore nearly fell off his chair when he saw the television commercial. Some Muggles had found a snake which looked a lot like Nagini. She was in Leeds, in a pet store. There was one way to tell for certain, however, if they had found another Horcrux.

He summoned Karkaroff. Dumbledore then walked to his Pensieve, retrieved his memories of the commercial, and showed them to the former Death Eater as he entered. Karkaroff took one look at the snake and nodded. "Merlin's beard, Professor. That's Nagini all right. We've caught a break, it appears. I doubt Voldemort even knows she's there. It's unlikely that he watches Muggle television."

Dumbledore laughed and conjured some Muggle currency for him. "I would suspect so, Igor. The store supposedly opens at 8:00 tomorrow morning. I want you to take the sword of Gryffindor this evening from Minerva's office -- she'll lend it to you as soon as she hears what I'm about to say -- and give it to Sirius Black at Grimmauld Place. Once you've done that, go to the store as soon as it opens and buy Nagini. Tranquilize her before leaving the store and take her to Sirius, who will destroy her with the sword."

Karkaroff grunted. "Why can't I do it?"

Dumbledore shrugged. "The sword is meant to be used by Gryffindors, Igor. I'm sorry, but it's just
not appropriate. At any rate, will you do this for us?"

Karkaroff nodded. "I will, Professor. I swear upon my life."

Dumbledore shook Karkaroff's hand. "Thank you, Igor. Good luck tomorrow."

To be continued...

-------------
Update #195
-------------
Wednesday, May 29, 1996 - 3 DAYS TO FULL MOON
Oval Office
White House
Washington, DC
United States of America

-------------
Next PoV: 196 -- Igor Karkaroff

-------------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 2 (snake, cup)
ATLANTIS ALERT STATUS: DEFCON 4

-------------
President Clinton stood in front of the camera. Deep down inside, he couldn't believe he was going
to be giving this speech. As little as three weeks ago, an announcement like this would have been
unthinkable. However, the world had changed. It was amazing how strongly a couple of people with
an airplane could change the world.

Radner had chuckled when he had mentioned that observation to the world. The wizard had
responded by providing an obvious counterexample: the spur of the moment decision by the
president of Blast Cola to film a Super Bowl commercial in England. Clinton had to concede that the
Super Bowl Breach had more of an impact in that had exposed the wizards to begin with. Were it not
for the wizards, there would have been no America for Humans; had there been no America for
Humans, the Quabbin attack and its aftermath would not have taken place.

He looked into the camera and began to speak. "My fellow Americans, it is my duty to inform you
that I have just taken the first step towards avenging the loss of the seven thousand people killed in
Massachusetts terror attacks. About half an hour ago, I was shaking hands of our valiant troops at a
top-secret air force base as I wished them the best of luck in our attack on Afghanistan.

"Yes, you heard me right. We are going into Afghanistan to dismantle al-Qaeda and ensure that
terror attacks of this magnitude do not happen again. I was hoping not to have to do this, and had
beseeched the Afghan government to hand over the terrorists. They did not do so, however, so I had
no choice but to authorize this operation.

"Over the next three weeks, 550,000 troops will be heading into Afghanistan into harm's way. Most
of them will be American, which is appropriate as we were the people most affected by the attacks.
However, we will not be alone in this endeavour. Germany, France, the Netherlands, Italy, Israel, the
United Kingdom, and several other nations will be helping us. We will be serving as part of a
powerful international coalition whose sole purpose is to keep the world safe for democracy.

"The struggle will be long and difficult, and it is quite possible that many of these brave men and
women will lose their lives in the defense of freedom. However, I assure you that we will prevail.
The Afghan army has exhausted itself fighting a civil war against Muslim insurgents and is currently
not in a position to put up much of a fight. If everything goes as planned, the operation will be finished before Labor Day and all of these soldiers will be home celebrating that holiday with their families.

"Several wizards will be accompanying these troops. They will be dressed like ordinary soldiers but will have wands hidden in their uniforms. Their orders are to only use these wands against enemy wizards. Al-Qaeda has caused a great injustice by allowing one of their wizards, Mohatma Dameel, to attack Muggles. America will not stoop to that level. Furthermore, all of our troops have been ordered to stay away from civilians. Our quarrel is not with the Afghan people. It is with al-Qaeda and only al-Qaeda.

"Some of you may think that we are invading Afghanistan because it is a Muslim nation. That is not the case. Yes, many members of al-Qaeda claim to be Muslim. However, the religious practices these men observe are nothing like what Mohammed preached. Islam is a religion of peace -- ask any cultural scientist, Arab citizen, or scholar. The Allah of Islam is the same god Moses and Jesus worshiped. We are not fighting Islam or Allah, my fellow Americans. Far from it. In one sense, Allah -- or as we say God -- has chosen us to be His instrument of punishment for al-Qaeda. You heard me, my fellow Americans. We are the instrument of God's will.

"I would like to take a moment of silence so we can pray for the safety of our troops and wish them good luck on this mission."

Clinton closed his eyes and bowed his head. He sure hoped that this would work...and that al-Qaeda either didn't have that nuke or lacked the guts to use it. He had debated taking his wife and daughter and leaving for a secure location but had ruled that out fairly quickly: people would ask why, and he would appear to be a chicken. Decisions like this could cost him the election in November.

He opened his eyes and resumed his speech. "When I took office four years ago, I had never even considered the possibility that I would be the one to lead America to war. Had someone told me that I would be supervising an invasion of Afghanistan, I would have laughed in his face. Well, ladies and gentlemen, times change. I freely confess that I am as surprised -- and disturbed -- as you are by this sudden change of events. I can only hope that I will be able to honor the trust you placed in me four years ago and lead the nation with pride during the difficult months to come.

May God bless us, our troops, and the United States of America."

--------------

Ministry of Magic
London

Rufus Scrimgeour pleaded with Dialonis's fish Patronus. "I understand you're busy helping us search for Voldemort, Grand Mugwump! Unfortunately, there isn't much time left to plan here. In three days, Harrison Cooper is going to turn into a werewolf and attack everyone on that boat. By the time the people he attacks transform into werewolves themselves, they will have left the boat and returned home to places all over the world. This is our last chance, sir. There is one werewolf left, and that is Harrison Cooper. Retrieve him, and you've contained the pandemic. Delay too long, and the pandemic may start up all over again as an international incident which will likely drag you into it!"

There was a brief pause, after which the fish spoke with Dialonis's Greek-accented English. "I see your point, Minister Scrimgeour. Much as I dislike the possibility that Voldemort could be doing something behind our backs, the fact that there is a hard deadline here -- June 1st -- makes this a much higher priority than finding a Dark wizard who likely does not want to be found. You have my complete support, Scrimgeour."
Scrimgeour breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you, sir. I really appreciate this, and it's better to get this out of the way now than later when everyone has dispersed all over the world."

"How many nations are represented on that boat?"

Scrimgeour shook his head. "I don't know, sir. It's a Dutch-flagged ship. Which reminds me -- here is what I would recommend. Do you know the Dutch Minister of Magic?"

"Yes, Minister. Neele Schuurman. I've worked with her before."

"Good. Tell her that we're going to need to have the Dutch Ministry of Magic take control of the operation. We've caught a break in that the boat will be traveling between two Dutch Antilles islands the night of the full moon. Since the boat itself is also Dutch, this means that we've avoided some jurisdictional issues as to who oversees the operation. I'd send everyone to either Aruba or Curacao and have them fly on over and grab Cooper before he transforms. How long do you think it will take them to get that done?"

Dialonis thought a minute. "Two or three days: one to convince the Dutch to take over and one or two for the Dutch to organize a rescue party and send everyone over to Curacao. Thank God they can Apparate from Holland to the Dutch Antilles!"

Scrimgeour gritted his teeth. "Can you make it two and not three?"

Dialonis frowned. "I can't make any promises, but I'll do my best. However, I promise you this: if we don't make it in time, the captain is not going to be allowed to dock that boat in Willemstad until all of the werewolves have been taken off and transported to their respective Ministries of Magic. NO ONE IS GETTING OFF THAT BOAT!"

----------
Slytherin Common Room
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
England

"Mr. Malfoy?"

Draco Malfoy -- finally free of the talkative Crabbe and Goyle -- looked up from his OWLs study guide and saw three people standing in front of him. One was Snape, the somewhat-mentor and traitor. Next to him was Minerva McGonagall, the headmistress.

Standing next to Headmistress McGonagall was a goblin.

Draco, who didn't like goblins, frowned. What was a goblin doing at Hogwarts?

McGonagall answered his unspoken question. "Mr. Malfoy, Griphook here has some information which will likely please you a great deal."

Draco looked at the goblin suspiciously. "Really? What is that?"

In response, the goblin reached into his robe and extracted a key to a Hogwarts vault. "You are Draco Malfoy, young man?"

Draco nodded. "I am, goblin."
The goblin glowered at the mild insult but resumed speaking. "Good. I have come to inform you that you have inherited the contents of Bellatrix's Lestrange vault at Gringotts. Rodolphus and Bellatrix Lestrange are both dead, and according to Rodolphus Lestrange's will you, Bellatrix's nephew, are the designated next of kin. Here is the key, Mr. Malfoy. I apologize for the interruption and for bringing up bad memories. My condolences."

Draco nodded. It's not like he spent that much time with the Lestranges. "Er...thank you."

"You're welcome, Mr. Malfoy. Normally, as you are a minor, your father would gain custody of the vault and therefore the key. Unfortunately, he is missing and your mother is dead, so we have no choice in this case."

Draco looked at the key quizzically and put it in his pocket. "What's in there?"

The goblin shook his head. "I have never been in there, Mr. Malfoy. If you wish, you can always go in and look for yourself."

And with that, the goblin turned on his heel and left the room, Snape and McGonagall following closely behind.

To be continued...
Update #196
---------

Thursday, May 30, 1996 - 2 DAYS TO FULL MOON
0705Z
Roger's Reptile House
Leeds
England
---------

Next PoV: 197 -- Neele Schuurman
-

HORCRUXES LEFT: 2 (snake, cup)

ATLANTIS ALERT STATUS: DEFCON 4

---------

The car horn honked just in time for Igor Karkaroff and Sirius Black to jump out of the way. That would have been an awful way for two Order of the Phoenix members to meet their demise: run over by a Toyota Camry while they were just about to destroy a Horcrux. They had known to Apparate to a location maybe ten feet in front of the entrance. What they had forgotten is that ten feet from the entrance placed them in the middle of a busy street.

Karkaroff nodded, and the two of them hustled over to the sidewalk and stood within sight of the entrance. There didn't appear to be anyone else in the area, which caused Karkaroff to breathe a sigh of relief. The only people who would be so adamant to hurry to a pet store first thing on a Thursday Morning would be a Death Eater trying to retrieve Nagini before Order could get its hands on her. Although Voldemort almost certainly did not realize that the Order knew that Nagini was a Horcrux, the snake would be a tempting and easy target for any Order members in the area.

Karkaroff muttered in Sirius's ear. "You've got the sword, right?"

Sirius opened his robe slightly and revealed the sword of Gryffindor hanging in a scabbard from his belt. "Right here, Igor."

"Good. Stay outside here with the sword -- we don't want that robe flipping open in there and scaring the proprietor. If I need help, I'll shoot some sparks out the door. If that happens, drop the sword in the bushes over here and come on in with your wand out."

Sirius grunted. "And what happens if this Death Eater has backup hiding somewhere whose intention is to steal the sword so we can't destroy any more Horcruxes?"

Karkaroff hissed. "OK, come in with the sword, but be careful. Now, just wait out here and...well, act casual."

Sirius nodded and began milling around outside. Taking a deep breath, Karkaroff headed over to the door and opened it.

The front room was filled with all sorts of exotic pets. He saw a few ferrets, degus, and odd furred beasts he'd never seen before. He half expected to run across a few Acromantulas. There was a cash
register near the entrance, currently unmanned. At the back of the room there was a small opening
leading to a second room. This back room had most of the reptiles. He saw a few snakes and a bird.

He saw a bell for service and rang it. A couple of the birds squawked, and the proprietor emerged
from the back room and shook his hand.

"Welcome to Roger's Reptile House, sir. How can I help you?"

Karkaroff smiled. "I'm a bit of a connoisseur on large snakes. I've got a few of them at home, and
was wondering if I could look at the twelve-foot viper you mentioned in your television
advertisement."

The owner chuckled. "Ha! Two of you in five minutes! I never thought she'd be that popular!"

Karkaroff didn't like the sound of this. Cautiously: "Someone else is interested in that particular
specimen?"

"Yes, sir. He hasn't bought her yet, but he's seriously thinking about it and will likely close the deal
as soon as I get back from talking with you. He's here right now. Maybe you two can reach an
agreement as to who gets her. Rest assured, however, we've got several other large snakes in case the
first customer takes her. Which reminds me: since he came in first, he gets first dibs on her. I hope
you understand."

Karkaroff nodded. "I understand, sir. Let's take a look."

The owner smiled and told Karkaroff to follow him. The former Death Eater was heading into the
back of the store with the owner when the owner said, "I'm sorry to bother you, Mr. Pettigrew, but
this man also wants to take a look at the snake". Those were the last words the proprietor would say
for a while as he was absolutely dumbfounded by what happened next.

Karkaroff suddenly froze in shock as heard some rustling near the big cage in the back of the store --
presumably Nagini's -- apparently the customer was turning around to see who the newcomer was.
The rustling stopped abruptly just as the proprietor moved out of the way. For the first time, the two
customers could see each other.

Both men shouted simultaneously.

"YOU!"

Karkaroff's suspicion was right. It was Peter Pettigrew. The only reason Karkaroff was still alive is
that Pettigrew was as surprised as Karkaroff was to see the other person there. Wormtail's jaw had
dropped, but he was reaching into his pocket for his wand.

Behind Wormtail sat Nagini in her cage. The snake was staring at him. Hard. Her forked tongue was
flicking out expectantly. Karkaroff recognized that sign and realized that Nagini had likely been
ordered by Voldemort to kill him. He hoped Wormtail didn't have the wherewithal to break open the
top of the cage so the snake could escape and attack Karkaroff.

The moment of stasis ended, and time restarted.

Karkaroff shouted for the proprietor to get down and started flinging curses at Wormtail. The Death
Eater blocked one of them and hid behind the glass box which held the seven-foot python. Karkaroff
tried another spell and swore as it hit the cage. Part of the front panel shattered, and all three people
ducked to avoid the flying fragments. Karkaroff dove behind a crate and shouted for Sirius at the top
of his lungs.

---------

Nagini stared at Karkaroff and Wormtail. Both of her dreams had come true: Wormtail had arrived to
rescue her, and her first act as a free snake would be to kill Karkaroff. Things couldn't have turned
out any better.

Now if Wormtail could just kill Karkaroff before Karkaroff completed his betrayal by killing both of
them.

Curses began flying as the proprietor ran out of the way. The front of Bel's cage shattered as both
wizards ducked for cover. Bel looked at Karkaroff and asked her: "Uh, what's going on here? Is this
human trying to buy me?"

Nagini screamed back. "Don't move! The human in the back, with hair on his chin -- furthest from
me -- is bad. You can leave the cage! Go kill him!"

Bel reared back. "Wait a minute. I can't eat him! He's too big -- "

Nagini was about to respond as the door front door slammed open and someone bellowed
"Karkaroff!"

Karkaroff shouted something in human and ducked as one of Wormtail's curses flew over his head.
There was a squawk and one of the big birds fell to the ground. The man from the front of the store
yelled something at Wormtail and pointed angrily at the bird. Karkaroff fired at Wormtail and would
have hit had Bel not jumped out of the cage and started chasing after the fallen bird. Wormtail had
instinctively jumped back in surprise when he saw the snake coming, and that jump saved his life.

Wormtail recovered quickly, however, and threw Bel at Karkaroff. Karkaroff shrieked as Bel started
trying to explain to everyone that he didn't do anything and didn't like being thrown around. Nagini
watched as Karkaroff leaped back out of the way of the flying snake, tripped over the corner of her
cage, lost his balance and then fell to the ground as his wand slipped out of his hand. Wormtail stood
triumphantly over him and pointed his wand at him.

That was when an "Expelliarmus" from the front room catapulted the wand out of Wormtail's hand.
The expression on Wormtail's face turned to panic as he turned to face the front room. Nagini didn't
like it. It was two on one and Wormtail had no wand.

Wormtail did the only thing he could do. His form blurred for a moment. Nagini had the distinct
impression that he was shrinking very rapidly. As he shrank, Nagini a glimpse of another person
entering the room: Sirius Black, whose spell had torn through the space where Wormtail's head had
been and crashed into the wall above her cage.

Bel suddenly pounced on something. Probably the bird, she thought. She watched in satisfaction as
both Sirius and Karkaroff's face suddenly contorted with horror. As he shrank, Nagini a glimpse of another person
entering the room: Sirius Black, whose spell had torn through the space where Wormtail's head had
been and crashed into the wall above her cage.

Bel suddenly pounced on something. Probably the bird, she thought. She watched in satisfaction as
both Sirius and Karkaroff's face suddenly contorted with horror. A moment later, Sirius looked at the
floor for a moment, spoke briefly, and made a gesture with his fingers which looked somewhat like a
cross. What was that all about?

There was a brief moment of silence, after which Karkaroff and Sirius began speaking with the man
from the front of the store. The proprietor shook their hands after a few moments, opened the lid of
the cage momentarily (blocking her access to Karkaroff) and injected her with some odd object
which made her very sleepy.

The last thing see saw was Bel waving a dead mouse at her and boasting: "I got a mouse! I got a mouse!" Oddly enough, the mouse had a toe missing and a paw which seemed to be an odd color.

Voldemort did not sound happy.

---------------

The fight was over. Promising to repay the shopkeeper for the death of the macaw, he paid for Nagini and brought the tranquilized snake outside in a box. Nodding at Sirius, they both grabbed a handle of the box and Apparated to a safe location. Once they were convinced no one else was around, Sirius Black brought out the sword.

The end came quickly for Nagini, humanely and painlessly in her sleep.

To be continued...

-------------

Update #197

-------------

Thursday, May 30, 1996 - 2 DAYS TO FULL MOON
Dutch Ministry of Magic
Amsterdam

Next PoV: 198 -- A Citizen of Laputa [huh?]

- - - - - - - -

HORCRUXES LEFT: 1 (cup)
ATLANTIS ALERT STATUS: DEFCON 4

---------------

Neele Schuurman slammed her first on the table and shook her head angrily. Brushing wild gray hair out of her face, she roared. "This is not time to argue, ladies and gentlemen! We have to get that werewolf off the Noordam!"

One of her advisors shook his head. "We can't take a British citizen off the boat, especially in international waters! Ask Scrimgeour to do it!"

Schuurman glared at him. "He can't do it because the Noordam is a Dutch-flagged ship. He and I both spoke with Dialonis about it and we basically agreed to take him off the boat and return him to England where he can be treated for his lycanthropy."

Another advisor gasped. "Scrimgeour has figured out a way to cure lycanthropy? Why haven't I heard about this?"

"He hasn't found a cure, Benno, but he's working with Severus Snape in converting so it can be delivered in pill form. They're going to be giving him Wolfsbane Potion once a month for the rest of his life. Be grateful, people, that this man got infected AFTER the Statute of Secrecy disappeared and not before. Otherwise, we would have had a very big problem."

The first advisor grunted. "I thought were already had a big problem on our hands, Schuurman. Where the hell is Voldemort? I hope he's dead, to be honest. I can't believe Scrimgeour hasn't found him yet. Maybe Dialonis should get rid of him, just as Scrimgeour kicked out Fudge. He shouldn't trying to cure incurable diseases while there are Dark wizards out there with 10 Downing Street in their sights!"
Schuurman put her head in her hands. "I doubt he's dead, Jan. We'd have probably heard about it if Voldemort had been killed. Besides, give Scrimgeour a break. Voldemort is arguably the most dangerous Dark wizard in over a hundred years, possibly ever. The fact that he now has free rein to go after the Muggles makes him even more dangerous. At any rate, back to the point. Who here knows how to take out werewolves?"

No one raised their hand, and Schuurman groaned.

"ANYONE?"

There was an embarrassed silence, followed by an irritated "Neele, I'm not a Care of Magical Creatures teacher! I'm not an animal trainer! I'm an Auror! I go after Dark wizards, and this victim is neither Dark nor a wizard! It's not like we can just kill some innocent Muggle because a werewolf bit him!"

Schuurman didn't like his tone. "This innocent Muggle isn't going to be innocent for long if you don't get to him by the time the full moon rises over Curacao. Unless I hear otherwise, you're all personally going to get a chance to try out for Care of Magical Creatures unless you can find, brief, and deploy a bunch of people who know how to capture and quarantine werewolves within 24 hours. End of story."

There was a brief pause again. Finally, someone raised his hand at the back of the room. "Minister, I think I know someone who may be able to help."

Schuurman breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you, Nicolaas. You're going to get a promotion out of this if you pull this off. Now talk!"

Nicolaas nodded. "It would be an honor, madame. However, there's only one minor problem."

Schuurman gritted her teeth. "Oh? What's that?"

Nicolaas hesitated for a moment, and then winced. "Last time I was on a boat with him, he spent all his time retching over the railing."

-------------

Seoul Ancestral Wizarding Shrine
Seoul
- - - - - - - -

The Minister of Magic nearly choked on his dinner when the huge ball of light abruptly materialized in front of him. His wand was halfway to his hand when he realized that the ball of light was actually an image of a fish. It was Dialonis's Patronus.

His eyebrows shot up. Dialonis wanted to contact him directly, it seemed. The only thing he could imagine the Grand Mugwump talking to him about was the identity of the man running North Korea. And judging by the fact that Dialonis was sending a Patronus instead of a operating through a traditional courier, this information must be extremely important.

The fish opened its mouth and spoke in Dialonis's voice. "Minister Shin Hae Ji, good evening. I have some urgent information for you regarding your case. We on Atlantis deemed it important enough that I contact you directly instead of waiting for ducks and owls to make their way across the ocean."

The Minister saluted. "We appreciate your help, sir. I take you have identified the owner of the wand being wielded by the North Korean leader?"
"That is correct, Minister, and the world owes the South Korean Intelligence Service a great deal of
gratitude for their sharp photography. You see, the wand in question was purchased over fifty years
ago by a British Hogwarts student named Tom Marvolo Riddle."

The Minister's Jaw dropped. "But he's --"

Dialonis finished the sentence. "Yes, Minister. Riddle is Voldemort. The Dark Lord, who had
apparently gone missing in Britain, seems to have crept out of the country and taken over North
Korea. For the first time in centuries, a wizard -- a Dark wizard at that -- is ruling a Muggle nation,
and most of the citizens of that nation are willing to die for him. This is a devastating development,
needless to say. I have just raised the alert level here on Atlantis to DEFCON 3."

[OOC -- the comment from the earlier posting which said that we were at 3 at that point was
assuming that Dialonis already knew Voldemort controlled North Korea. As things worked out,
Dialonis didn't know about it. As a result, those DEF CON reports up to this point should have said
4. Sorry about that]

The Minister stared at him. "DEFCON 3? It hasn't been that high since the Cold War, when the
Americans and Soviets had whole forests of nuclear weapons pointed at each other!"

The fish nodded approvingly. "You know your history, Minister. Very good. Needless to say,
someone's going to have to do something about this. We can't intervene directly yet, but several
people down here are starting to think of contingency plans in case Voldemort gets out of control."

"Are you going to contact the Muggles at all?"

Dialonis shook his head. "We can't contact the Muggle world until we hit DEFCON 2. God willing,
that won't happen."

"But the Statute of Secrecy is gone!"

"I agree, but the law is explicit. No contact with the general Muggle world until DEFCON 2, and no
actual intervention until DEFCON 1. I'm sorry, Minister."

The Minister sat down for a moment and tried to think things over. Troubled, he looked north, where
the deadliest wizard of the modern era could very well be gathering an army to conquer the planet.
Finally, an idea came to him.

"I've got an idea. What happens if we expose him as Voldemort, the man who tried to take over
England?"

Dialonis thought for a moment and replied, "That would be very helpful. What were you thinking?"

The Minister grinned and began explaining his plan to the Grand Mugwump.

---------------

m/s Noordam

Harrison Cooper put his hand to his head. "I've already taken two pills! They're not working, and the
box says you shouldn't take more than two!"

Courtney folded her hands across her chest. "I think we should go home, or at least see a mainland
doctor. We should get off at the next stop and check into the emergency room there."

Harrison nodded. "That might not be a bad idea. What happens if they keep us there overnight and we miss the boat?"

Courtney shook her head. "We go back early. The honeymoon was good while it lasted. It wasn't our fault that you got sick."

Harrison thought for a moment. "Don't give up too quickly, Courtney. I suspect that they'll let us back on and give us some stronger medicine. Besides, it's got to be food allergies -- maybe combined with seasickness. It can't be anything contagious because no one else on the boat is sick -- especially you."

"But this boat is too big to induce seasickness! This is most unusual, Harrison. If they think you should go home or spend extended time in the hospital on the next island, we're following the doctors' orders. End of story. Forget the cruise."

Harrison sighed and nodded. "You may be right, Courtney. What's the next stop?"

Courtney looked at the schedule. "The next stop is Aruba -- we arrive Saturday morning. That's the day after tomorrow. Sunday is Curacao."

"---

Presidential Palace
Pyongyang
Democratic People's Republic of Korea

"Dear Leader, I have some important news for you!"

Voldemort turned to face the official in the audience chamber. "Yes? What is it?"

The official responded by handing over a document. "I am pleased to report that the leader of the South has agreed to hold a summit with you. He has agreed to your terms and wants to do it tomorrow. I'm sorry for the short notice, sir, but --"

Voldemort waved it away. "Don't worry about it, my dear man. Tell the South that I am prepared to do anything necessary to defuse this international tension."

The official bowed and left. Voldemort nearly jumped with joy, as he was about to take control of the South and put Lucius in command down there. His territory was about to double in size.

Taking over his first country had been the hardest task so far. The second had been much easier, especially since he had the first nation's prestige to back him up. Things would likely get easier still from here on in. He was fairly convinced that he'd control most of the world by the time the year 2000 came around. All he needed to do was recruit more and more Death Eaters from Dilmi's old cell in India to serve as military governors.

This would be fun.

To be continued...

"---

Update #198"
Friday, May 31, 297 AG [AD 1996] - 1 DAY TO FULL MOON
Fern Island, Laputa
Galiver Consortium
Pacific Ocean

-------------
Next PoV: 199 -- Ask Fake Name Generator, Dutch
-------------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 1 (cup)
ATLANTIS ALERT STATUS: DEFCON 3
-------------
The dreaded Lamel Galiver had done it again.

Lowne Paolte couldn't think of any explanation for all of the floods over the past few years. His great-grandfather had built this house on the beach, at the south end of the island. His family had lived there for fifty years without incident.

Then came the Flood of 253. A tremendous storm had ripped through Fern Island. The Laputans were accustomed to storms, of course. However, this one had brought both rain and wind and had occurred at an astronomically high tide. Most of the island had been inundated, and the sea level had risen to the point where his house had been filled with a foot of water. It had taken him weeks to clean everything out, even with magic.

The High Priest had told the people on the affected islands that this was a fluke occurrence and that it wouldn't happen again. He was correct in that nothing like it had been seen before on any of the Laputan islands. He was wrong, however, when he predicted that it wouldn't happen again.

The next flood came in 272, almost twenty years later. Once again, Lowne found himself cleaning out the ground floor. Once again, the High Priest insisted that it wouldn't happen again. Yet it did, however. The floods came with increasing regularity: once again in 284, once in 291, and once in 294. The High Priest, finally convinced that something strange was going on, took a look around and made an astonishing observation.

The sea level was rising, and judging from His Excellency's investigation it was doing so faster and faster. What's more, no one in Laputa -- or in the entire Consortium for that matter -- had done it. It was obviously Galiver's fault. Apparently the Dread Muggle had decided that unleashing terrible diseases on the Consortium population back in the years 2 and 3 hadn't been bad enough.

Lowne glared at the ominous waves crashing on the other side of the breakwater. Galiver could do what he wanted, he thought. However, the Muggle wasn't getting THIS house. Lowne had grown up here and was fed up with these damn floods. He wasn't going anywhere. And thanks to his father-in-law, someone who had retired here from the American town of Prescott, he knew a spell which would keep the water away from his house.

He set to work casting a spell surrounding the house. Checking to make sure that the defensive screen was working as designed, he went inside to wait out the storm.

Five hours later, the breakwater failed and the water plowed into Fern Island. The inundation was minor compared to those of 284 and 291. However, it was enough to wreak havoc along the south beach. All of the houses on that side of the island were flooded, just as they had been before.

All except one, that is.

-------------
Korean Summit
Beijing
China

-------------------

Voldemort, Lucius, and a few of the Indian Death Eaters popped into the which served as the welcoming chamber for the Korean diplomats. Cameras -- both wizard and Muggle -- took photographs as the North Korean delegation walked towards the room in which the talks were going to be held.

The Chinese Minister of Magic shook his hand. "Good afternoon, Chang Sung-Taek. I'm Li Wang, and I'm in charge of security here. Thank you for coming, sir. If there's anything we can do to help ease the tension between your two countries, just ask."

Voldemort smiled for the cameras. "That would be most appreciated, Mr. Wang, and I'll tell you if we need help. However, I think we've got everything under control and are fairly certain that there won't be any incidents. Besides, I highly doubt that the South would be stupid enough to ignite an incident so soon after Kim Jong-Il's death."

Wang bowed. "I hope you're right, sir. At any rate, the conference room is all set. It's been booked for six hours, an amount of time the South believes will be enough to get some tentative negotiations going. Is that all right with you, sir?"

Voldemort nodded. "That will be fine, sir. In fact, I think that will more than enough for a first summit. It's not like we're going to be able to solve the entire Korean dispute with one meeting like this. I expect that there are going to be more of them. After all, I did suggest one summit per week."

"Indeed you did, Mr. President. Now, if you wouldn't mind, we'll go through the security procedures. First, we're going to need to take your wands."

Voldemort's eyes narrowed, and he stared at the Chinese security officer. "You can't take our wands, sir. We'll be defenseless against the Muggle soldiers I allowed the South to include in their delegation."

Wang nodded. "I'm aware of that, Mr. President. Rest assured that we disarmed the South's soldiers as soon as they arrived as well. You can see their guns, right over there."

He pointed, and Voldemort turned to see a stack of guns. As he watched, a South Korean soldier walked into the room, was intercepted by another security officer, and had his gun added to the pile.

Voldemort nodded in understanding. If all else fails, he could just Apparate away and rely on Choi Yeun's wand, which he had left at home. "All right, you've convinced us."

Reluctantly, Voldemort surrendered his wand and ordered Lucius and the rest of his party to do the same. "All right, we've given you our wands. Now what?"

The soldier came closer and held his hands out. "We'll need to search your bags. I apologize for the inconvenience, but we believe that such an action will be necessary to prevent suicide bombings and the like. Gentlemen, this should only take a minute."

A little worried, but forced to play along due to the presence of the video cameras, Voldemort and the rest of the Death Eaters handed over their bag. Most of his party had brought their own food because they were afraid of poison. The security agent appeared understand their predicament and...
left the food alone. However, his eyes perked up when he came to the vial containing Voldemort's Polyjuice Potion.

Wang frowned and pointed at the vial. "Mr. President, what's this?"

Voldemort shrugged. "A medication I'll need to take from time to time. Why do you ask?"

The security agent looked thoughtfully at the vial. "The rules are that no liquids may be brought into the conference room because they could be used as possible explosives. I'm sorry, sir, but I'm afraid we'll have to confiscate this."

Voldemort's eyes widened in alarm as another of the people searching their bags found Lucius's Polyjuice Potion container. He reached for his wand to try to Imperius the man -- only to find that the guard had already taken his wand. This could be trouble, he thought. He needed to improvise. "I'd be willing to let you, a neutral party, investigate the vial and check it for explosives. I need that in the room, I'm afraid. You don't want me falling over dead in a room full of South Koreans."

The security agent thought for a moment. "That's a fair request. Please excuse us for a few minutes while we take these vials to be analyzed". And before Voldemort could say anything, the man pocketed the two vials and left the room.

There seemed something strange about this man. Wang had an odd accent which Voldemort couldn't place. He was definitely Chinese -- that was obvious. However, none of the Chinese he had spoken with after his succession to the presidency had spoken with this accent. Suddenly, it came to him. There were two types of Chinese: Mandarin and Cantonese. This man must be speaking with the other accent. He really hoped that the agent would return the Polyjuice Potion soon -- he'd need to take it again pretty soon.

A few minutes went by, and the agent returned with the vials. As far as he could tell, they were undamaged. "Your medicine has been cleared, Mr. President. We apologize for the inconvenience."

Voldemort accepted his vial and gave the other back to Lucius. "Not at all, Mr. Wang. I can understand the need for security."

Wang was about to reply when his Muggle communicator beeped. The guard spoke into it for a while and nodded. Finally, he looked back at Voldemort. "The South's delegation is all set. Wait here, please. You'll be able to enter the room in a few minutes. There's protocol to be followed here, you understand: both of you have to enter at the same time, and the moderator has to come in before you, and so forth. Got it?"

Voldemort smiled. "I understand, Mr. Wang. I've seen this before."

The meeting droned on and on. Whenever people brought up important issues, people tended to either table it or try to think of reasons why it wasn't a problem. No wonder the two countries had been in a state of war since 1950!

Well, a Polyjuice break would help alleviate the tedium. Excusing himself, he reached into his pocket for the vial and headed outside to the bathroom so he could drink his "medicine".

The cameras followed him over to the bathroom, and he pointedly ignored them. He opened the door to the bathroom, and was relieved to find that the reporters were discreetly staying out. Closing the door behind him, he walked to the sink and brought out the vial.
He lifted it to his mouth and tilted it towards his lips. He had gotten out just in time -- he had maybe two minutes left before he'd have changed back to himself. One more application should keep him going for another hour.

Nothing came out. The vial was empty.

Voldemort's jaw dropped. What the hell had happened? He'd filled the vial with enough dosages to last him 24 hours! And there was no way the Muggles would have been able to realize that it was Polyjuice Potion and not some kind of medicine. Besides, the vial was still sealed!

Suddenly, he froze. The South had cheated. They'd brought a wizard along to create a duplicate vial which looked like it had the Polyjuice Potion in it. The Chinese man -- obviously a South Korean Polyjuiced as someone Chinese and therefore speaking with an accent -- had swapped vials with him! No wonder they had been so willing to set up a meeting!

He had to get out of there in a hurry. No, scratch that -- Lucius would probably get worried and investigate, and presumably they'd grab him as well when he changed back to his normal form. Once they realized who Lucius was they'd figure out who their Dear Leader was pretty quickly.

His body suddenly screamed in pain as it began to distort back into his true self. He bent over the toilet in agony as the reporters began calling for "President Chang" from outside the bathroom. Thirty seconds later, the door crashed open and the reporters raced into the bathroom accompanied by a doctor and a security guard.

They stood frozen in shock when they saw a serpentine-looking man staring back at them, the empty vial in his hand.

Voldemort swore fervently. He had a problem. It was time to go back to North Korea, re-emerge as Chang Sung-Taek, and try to convince the world that a British Dark wizard named Voldemort had tried to disrupt the meeting in order to seed chaos throughout the world. This wizard had ensorcelled the Dear Leader and taken his place at the meeting. It was up to "Chang Sung-Taek" to remedy this situation. One of the best ways to punish this capitalist nation would be to invade the South.

One of the guards shouted, drew his gun, and fired. The bullet went through the empty space where Voldemort had been standing a fraction of a second earlier.

- - - - - - -

The man who had fired the shot ran into the conference room screaming. "President Chang is an impostor! He's some guy who looks like a snake -- the TV cameras are all over him and --"

He was interrupted by a huge flash as the entire North Korean delegation Apparated out of there.

To be continued...

------------------
Update #199
------------------
Friday, May 31, 1996 - 1 DAY TO FULL MOON
Dutch Ministry of Magic
Amsterdam
------------------
Next PoV: 200 - Sirius Black
------------------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 1 (cup)
ATLANTIS ALERT STATUS: DEFCON 3

Jorrit Huizing looked around the room at the rest of the werewolf hunters. They were all set and ready to go. All they had to do now was deploy to Curacao with their brooms, get final instructions in the courtyard of the synagogue, and take to the skies when the Dutch satellites had located the boat.

Huizing's team was loaded for bear. All of them were carrying wands, of course. However, several of them had brought Muggle devices which would dispense animal tranquilizer. Since this operation was going to be taking place within sight of Muggles, it wouldn't be particularly diplomatic to be seen attacking a Muggle whose sole crime was that he had been bitten by a werewolf. From what Derek Michaelson -- Harrison Cooper's boss -- had told Rufus Scrimgeour about the man, Cooper was a decent, hardworking person. He had just turned 31 and his wife was expecting. He wouldn't hurt a fly, according to his manager.

The fact that his wife was expecting worried many of the people on his team. No one really knew what would happen if a pregnant woman was bitten by a werewolf. What would happen when she transformed? Would she lose the baby? Would the baby also become a werewolf? There was very little information on the subject, and Huizing hoped that Courtney Cooper, age 29, wouldn't be the first person to find out what would happen. Furthermore, would a Muggle react to werewolf poison in the same way a wizard would? Nicolaas couldn't rule out the possibility that the Muggle wouldn't change at all. Still, it was better to be safe than sorry.

A few Aurors were going to be coming along as well. Since the initial terror attack had been intended to start a werewolf pandemic, Minister Schuurman couldn't rule out the possibility that Death Eaters were hiding on the boat and would be willing to hex the Dutch team to ensure that more people were bitten by the creature. With all of Lupin’s victims either dead or captured with the exception of Cooper, all of the people hoping for a successful pandemic would have their eyes squarely on the Noordam.

The plan was to fly over to Harrison Cooper's stateroom -- which thankfully had a balcony they could land on in privacy -- and simply take the man before he transformed. His wife would come as well, though she would be brought aside while he was transformed and informed of the situation. Once Harrison had reverted back to human form, he would be fitted with an ankle bracelet and returned to the ship.

Normally, Apparation between countries was forbidden. However, Curacao used to be a Dutch colonial possession and still had close ties with the Netherlands. True to bureaucratic form, the Ministry of Magic had never gotten around to preventing Apparation between the Netherlands and the Dutch Antilles. It would take a good twenty minutes to make it all the way across the Atlantic, but twenty minutes was a lot faster than the hours or days it would take using other forms of transportation. Time would be of the essence in this operation as the moon would wait for no one.

Five minutes before they were about to leave, he heard a commotion in the hallway. People were arguing vehemently and pointing at the werewolf capture team. He heard the name "Voldemort" mentioned. Huizing frowned. Had Voldemort been hiding out on the cruise ship? If so, his team was in big trouble. He doubted if any of them were strong enough to take out Voldemort.

The time for departure came and went, and they didn't get the official authorization. This was disturbing, he thought. Something had come up -- presumably involving Voldemort -- which may have been given higher priority than the capture of the werewolf. He had a harrowing vision of the
operation being delayed a couple of days and then reorganized with a whole armada of people to take every single person off the boat. He'd probably have to be taken off as well because he'd be throwing up over the railing the whole time if things really went south.

Eventually, Minister Schuurman came down herself to speak with him. Her face was grim.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I'm afraid I'm going to have to take your Aurors. We have just received word that Voldemort has returned and is in charge of North Korea, with Lucius Malfoy as his Minister of Magic. The man you know as Chang Sung-Taek is in fact Voldemort under the Polyjuice Potion. The real Chang Sung-Taek is missing and is presumed dead. Atlantis is at DEFCON 3."

Huizing swore. "Jesus Christ! That maniac is in charge of a COUNTRY?"

"I'm afraid so, Jorrit. That's going to make things very problematic. The people like him and see him as a hero, and any attempt to kill him will almost certainly restart the Korean War simply out of popular revenge. Once the war restarts, both sides will start calling on alliances, which will almost surely bring the Americans, Russians, and Chinese into the mix."

One of the other werewolf hunters whistled. "Good God. You're talking World War III!"

Schuurman nodded. "That's quite possible, and rest assured that we're doing everything we can to make sure that doesn't happen. Voldemort, of course, is denying everything and claiming that the 'Voldemort' who popped up during the Korean summit was in fact someone masquerading as him; he, as Chang Sung-Taek, had been ensorcelled and Polyjuiced. Most of the North Koreans are believing him. At any rate, our next task is to convince the North Koreans that Voldemort was running their country all along -- we have evidence to back that up as the South has pictures of the North's leader wielding Voldemort's wand shortly after he was inaugurated. I hope the North Korean population will accept our claim, though."

Huizing nodded. "God help us all. I can see why you want the Aurors. Go ahead, take them. We'll do what we can without them, and if all else fails we'll kill the werewolf and anyone he bites."

The Minister nodded, looked at the Aurors, and told them to follow her. Five minutes after that, she gave the signal, and a boarding party half the size it had been half an hour ago turned on the spot and started heading towards Curacao.

"Chang Sung-Taek" had just finished his speech explaining that he had been ensorcelled by "Voldemort" and been prevented from going to the meeting with the South. It was obvious that Voldemort and the British were in league with the South and that the capitalists had no intention of ever making peace with the North. He had warned the people of North Korea that a resumption of hostilities may be on the horizon and that everyone should be prepared.

The people had reacted about the way he had expected them to. They accepted everything he said -- he silently thanked Kim Jong-II for his propaganda infrastructure -- and said they'd sacrifice everything to punish the South. He doubted that most of them were in any condition to actually fight in the army, but it was something to keep in mind.

He was fairly happy with the outcome. However, there was something which troubled him which had nothing to do with North Korea. He toyed with Choi Yeun's wand as he paced the president's office. All of his Death Eaters had been rearmed with wands taken from the South Korean wizards who had overthrown Kim Jong-II in the first place.
Nagini was dead. Normally, he could have always gotten another familiar. However, Nagini had been a Horcrux. That was at least two Horcruxes down: the diary and the snake. Draco had also reported that he had seen Dumbledore poring over a picture of a ring with the Deathly Hallows symbols engraved on its gem.

Could Dumbledore have found out about his Horcruxes? The fact that the snake had been destroyed at about the time Dumbledore had been researching the ring was disturbing. He didn't know how the Order had found out, but it was a distinct possibility. Voldemort knew not to underestimate Dumbledore.

He resolved to send Death Eaters from Dilmi's cell -- along with any volunteering North Korean wizards -- to check on the Horcruxes. He and Lucius were too busy in North Korea to handle this themselves at the moment, and Wormtail -- his next choice -- had been killed in the attack which had taken out Nagini.

He reached into the pocket of his robe and withdrew the message Draco Malfoy had sent him which informed him that Draco had inherited the contents of Bellatrix’s vault. This was a very fortunate turn of events, he thought. The fact that Draco now had the key to the vault would come in quite handy here.

He wondered what he'd do if he found proof his Horcruxes WERE being threatened. He'd have to do something about it, of course. And he'd probably need to find himself a backup plan if his paranoia had been justified.

To be continued...

-------------------
Update #200
-------------------
Saturday, June 1, 1996 - FULL MOON
British Secret Service Headquarters
[location classified]
Great Britain

-------------------
Next PoV: 201 - Lauren Mistry
-------------------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 1 (cup)
ATLANTIS ALERT STATUS: DEFCON 3
-------------------
Sirius Black stood at attention with over two hundred witches, wizards, and Muggles. The people in the room were among the best of the best: high-ranking Master Aurors, British Secret Service agents like himself, American Delta Force commandos, and even a few elite Mossad men who had been called away from the deteriorating situation in the Middle East. He could tell that this was going to be one of the most powerful magical armies ever sent to the field, and it was without question the first one which included Muggle soldiers in its midst.

There were rumors circulating that similar gatherings were taking place in locations all over the world. Supposedly over two thousand wizards were going to be involved and a good eight thousand Muggles. Within a matter of weeks, all ten thousand soldiers would be converging on North Korea. If everything went as planned, the Dark Lord would be eliminated once and for all and everything would return to normal.

For the first time in history, technology and magic would join forces. Fighter jets would be flying in
information with dragons -- sorry, helicopters would be flying in formation with dragons as the
dragons wouldn't be able to fly fast enough. Guns would be fired along with curses, and bombs
would be dropped along with Acromantulas and other nasty creatures.

Rufus Scrimgeour, in full dress robes, stood at the front of the room. His hands were clenched, and
he was shouting at the top of his lungs.

"Ladies and gentlemen, brave men and women of our glorious coalition, listen to me! You have been
given the honor to rid the world of a man who is, quite possibly, the most dangerous human being
ever to walk the face of the earth. He was killed once by a one-year-old boy, yet he still managed to
return. He was hit with a half ton bomb in an explosion which destroyed most of a cemetery, yet he
still persevered! We have learned from our mistakes, fellow soldiers. This time, when we kill him, he
will be gone for GOOD!"

Sirius and the crowd cheered heartily. The sound was absolutely deafening.

"You will be transported to your staging area in a matter of hours. Since Atlantis is at DEFCON 3,
Apparation is still not permitted between countries. Hence you will be forced to use Portkeys. Each
team will be sharing one Portkey so we can ensure that you won't be separated.

"Once you are there, you will have to be able to deploy at a moment's notice. We apologize for the
hurry-up-and-wait timing here, but we are awaiting one final signal before we can start the operation.
Rest assured that I will personally be delivering that signal once we hear final word from an
operation we are planning which will involve the stores in Diagon Alley and Gringotts Bank."

Sirius was one of the few people who realized what this was. The Order had informed him that
Nagini had been destroyed and that there was only one Horcrux left: the Hufflepuff cup, in the late
Bellatrix Lestrange's vault in Gringotts. Until the last Horcrux was destroyed, Voldemort was still
immortal and an attack would be relatively pointless.

"Keep your wands at the ready and weapons armed, for when that word comes our crusade will
begin. Fight for freedom, and fight for the Muggles. Fight for the wizards with Muggle parents, who
will no longer have to worry about Death Eater persecution. Fight for the poor souls of North Korea,
who do not realize that they are being led by a tyrant. And fight for the world at a whole, as we can
only hope that this confrontation does not trigger the Third World War."

Scrimgeour lifted his hands to the air and shouted. "And so let us raise our hands in self-confidence
and justice and shout the chant one more time! DEATH TO VOLDEMORT!"

The crowd immediately took up the chant. "DEATH TO VOLDEMORT! DEATH TO
VOLDEMORT! DEATH TO VOLDEMORT!"

Sirius looked around the room in approval. If this wouldn't work, nothing would. It was the world's
last, and best, chance.

-------------
Horcrux Cave
Great Britain
-------------
Casting a spell to heal the cut on his arm, the Death Eater summoned the boat and sailed off into the
underground lake. He watched the Inferi floating beneath him and was wondering if Voldemort
would summon them in case he needed to take over a country. Although Voldemort had told him
that Inferi wouldn't attack Death Eaters, the Indian was still a bit leery of meeting one of them in a
The prow of the boat bumped into shore of the small island at the center of the lake. The Death Eater got out, tied the boat down, and hurried to the pedestal at the center of the island. The pedestal was filled with a bright green liquid which he wouldn't have wanted to drink on a bet.

Pointing his wand at the liquid, he carefully repeated the words Voldemort had told him to say. The green liquid shimmered for a moment and became transparent. The Death Eater could now see that there was a locket hiding in the liquid. This locket had been invisible as long as the liquid had been opaque.

The Death Eater had no idea what the locket did. However, he didn't need to know. All Voldemort had asked him to do was to check if it was there. And there it was, just as Voldemort had hoped.

Mission accomplished, he headed back to the boat and began the trip back to the surface.

-------------

Presidential Palace
North Korea
-------------

The reporter fidgeted uneasily as she spoke to Voldemort. "I agree that they're being paranoid, Dear Leader. However, they are absolutely convinced that you are Voldemort and that you've been Polyjuicing as Chang Sung-Taek, not the other way around. We need proof that you're not."

Voldemort smiled and handed out Choi Yeun's wand. "And they shall have it. I believe their claim is based on the observation that was holding Lord Voldemort's wand when I was inaugurated."

The reporter nodded. "That's right, Your Excellency."

"That's what I thought. Well, here's your proof. Take my wand -- no, don't touch it, as wands and Muggles don't mix. Drop it in your purse and give it to the British. I suspect that the British will check my wand against Voldemort's and see if they're the same wand. They will find that they're not, and that will exonerate me."

The reporter opened her purse, and Voldemort dropped the wand into it. He had more wands where that came from, and if all else failed he could always borrow Lucius's.

The reporter closed the purse and bowed. "Thank you, Your Excellency. I hope, for the sake of us all, that this is enough to stop their investigation."

Voldemort pursed his lips. "So do I, madame. So do I."

-------------

Main Hospital
Oranjestad
Aruba
-------------

The doctor put down his stethoscope. "I can't make heads or tails of it, Mr. Cooper. I apologize."

Harrison stared at the doctor, and then at his wife. "You must have SOME idea!"

The doctor shrugged. "I'm sorry, but the only thing I can think of is that you've started getting migraines. I can't see how migraines would start popping up while you were on a vacation -- since those are usually caused by stress -- but that's the only thing which even remotely fits the symptoms."
Harrison nodded thoughtfully. "That would definitely explain the headaches and the nausea, and even the overreaction to bright lights like that of the moon. What do you propose?"

The doctor reached for a pad of paper, wrote out a prescription, and handed it to Harrison. "Here. This is a relatively powerful medicine designed to deal with migraines. I suspect that this will work. If it doesn't work within 48 hours, get off at the next island and fly back to England. In the meantime, I don't see why you can't continue on your cruise."

Harrison pocketed the prescription and shook the doctor's hand. "Thank you so much, Doctor. I hope this will work. Now, if you will excuse us, we have to get back to the boat in a hurry. It's getting late, and we have to head off to Curacao."

It took half an hour to fill the prescription. Harrison and Courtney managed to make it up the gangplank onto the boat just in time for its departure.

Harrison smiled. Next stop, Curacao. And a big surprise for his wife when the full moon came out.

----------------

Ministry of Magic
Amsterdam

Nicolaas stared at the report and jumped to his feet. He spun and raced into a meeting between the Minister of Magic and Rufus Scrimgeour. The two politicians turned to him in irritation. "Nicolaas, this is a private meeting -- you can't come in here! What's so important that you interrupt us?"

Nicolaas response was spoken so quickly it was almost incomprehensible. "Ministers! We've just gotten a report from the hospital in Oranjestad! Harrison Cooper just checked himself in for an appointment!"

The two Ministers stared at each other, and then at Nicolaas. When they spoke, they spoke in unison.

"GET HIM!!"

----------------

Main Hospital
Oranjestad
Aruba

The receptionist shook her head and looked through the paperwork surrounding the day's patients. "Yes, he visited us earlier today. However, I don't see any indication that he has been admitted for an overnight stay. I suspect that our staff treated him and let him go."

Jan roared so loudly the woman nearly backed into the wall. "You LET HIM GO? WHERE IS HE?"

The receptionist winced. "I don't know, sir! I'm sorry! He could be anywhere on the island by now! For all we know, he left on one of the cruise ships!"

----------------

West Bank

Eliezer ben Dor was thankful that he was able to participate on this mission even though they had been forced to amputate his arm. He only needed one hand, however, to steer the tank.
Grimly, he stared at the hill upon the horizon. Had he seen a metallic flash out there? Yes, he had. That's where the Hamas shells had been coming from.

The tank rumbled forward into the sunset. Glancing behind him to ensure that the other tank was there, he noticed that the full moon was rising. This close to the horizon, it looked huge -- and had the color of blood. Eliezer hoped that it wasn't a bad omen.

To be continued...
Update #201 through Update #205

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Mislagnissa

Update #201

Saturday, June 1, 1996 - FULL MOON
45 MINUTES BEFORE MOONRISE
Lycanthrope Transformation Center
London
Great Britain

Next PoV: 202 - Harrison Cooper

HORCRUXES LEFT: 1 (cup)
ATLANTIS ALERT STATUS: DEFCON 3

Lauren Mistry was scared, and judging from all of the women around her she wasn't the only one.

The ankle bracelet had teleported her from her home to the Ministry's of Magic's facility a little over an hour ago. She had immediately been given a dosage of Wolfsbane Potion -- no experimenting with pills here now that the transformation was almost upon her -- and ordered to strip. Once she had undressed, she had been ushered into a room where several women explained to her what was going to happen.

The transformation would occur as soon as the moonlight hit the bite victim. It would be extremely painful, and the wizards had provided the victims with Tylenol and other Muggle medications to ensure that the Muggles suffer as little as possible. Once the transformation was complete, each victim would find herself in the shape of a dog whose fur color would match her natural hair color. The dog would look much like the creature which had attacked them at the stadium, with the sole exception being that the animal would be female.

The wizards emphasized that the victims were not at risk of harming themselves or others because the potion would allow them to keep their minds during the transformation. The staff recommended that the victims should go to their specially-prepared cells and take a nap. The doors to the cells would be locked and barred to ensure that no one escaped, and the cells would have padded walls and carpeted floors to ensure that victims would not hurt themselves if they started flailing around while they were transformed.

Although the subjects would still be able to hear and understand human speech, they would not be capable of speech themselves because dogs simply didn't have the vocal capabilities of humans. If they needed to communicate at all with the staff, they would have to do so by barking in Morse Code. Each cell had a poster with the Morse Code key mounted on the ceiling, where the werewolves would not be able to tear it down or damage it.

Usually, victims would be given the option of being sealed in a windowless room for the entire night in order to avoid transformation for a month. However, the staff argued that the victims needed to experience the transformation at least once just to ensure that they understood what it was like.

There were surprisingly few questions after the presentation, and Lauren suspected that everyone
was too frightened to ask anything. One woman complained that she had been yanked from her car in the middle of the highway and her unmanned car had almost certainly crashed into the guardrail. The wizards had winced when they had heard that and spent a few minutes reconfiguring the bracelets to send all of the bite victims -- the women at least -- back to their homes instead of their departure points.

Seeing that everyone's questions had been answered, the patients were led into their cells and locked inside. Each one was maybe 15x15 feet. There was a bed which would be able to serve both humans and dogs. There was a large container of water and an open refrigerator with raw meat in it. The idea of eating raw meat still churned her stomach a little, but she was slowly getting accustomed to it. There were also several kegs filled with water and a few man-sized dog toys, presumably intended for Great Danes or other large canines. The lights were dim, but she could barely make out the Morse Code chart on the ceiling.

She looked out the window and drew a deep breath as the southeastern horizon slowly began to brighten. Several of the women in the cells near her suddenly began praying, and a couple of others began crying. She couldn't figure out whether she should do one of of them or both.

Then the moon peeked over the horizon, and virtually everyone screamed at once. She doubled over in pain as soon as the moonlight hit her. Virtually every nerve in her body started screaming at her, and she soon found herself down on all fours. She felt her head and ears elongating, and her paws started shaking uncontrollably.

She blinked as she realized what she had just thought. Paws? Sure enough, she looked down at where her hands had been. She had paws. The room seemed brighter, and she could see the Morse Code chart clearly on the ceiling. The transformation completed, and the pain had stopped.

The room looked entirely different from the perspective of a dog. It dawned on her that she might be able to take care of her own dogs -- well, the real dogs -- more easily after going through this ordeal.

She heard frantic barking next door. Trying to remember the sequence of barks, she glanced up at the Morse Code chart.

MY HUSBAND IS GOING TO KILL ME! OH, AND I HAVE TO PEE!

Meanwhile, the woman on the other side started complaining about...well, feminine stuff which didn't seem to work well in a wolf's body. Had Lauren still been human, she would have been quite embarrassed. If she had blushed, however, it would never have been visible through her fur.

She remembered the staff members' advice. Wondering how she'd be able to describe this experience to her husband, she curled up in a ball and went to sleep.

--------------
m/s Noordam
Between Aruba and Curacao
45 minutes before moonrise
--------------
The first officer of the cruise ship was jolted back to full awareness when the phone suddenly began ringing on the bridge. The captain grunted, dropped his playing cards -- the ship ran on automatic pilot most of the time -- and went to answer it. The first officer stared at the captain, confused. They weren't expecting any calls, and the last check of the ship's systems before leaving Aruba had not uncovered any problems.
The captain lifted the handset. "Captain deVries speaking. Who's this?" A few seconds went by, and
the man's eyebrows nearly reached his hairline. He drew a deep breath, and said, "Your Majesty, this
is an unexpected pleasure. How can I help you?"

The first officer dropped his own cards and mouthed two words at the captain. "The QUEEN?"

The captain, whose eyes had gone wild, nodded. Turning back to the handset, he said: "Minister of
Magic Schuurman? Yes, I'll hold...Yes, Madame Minister, he's on board. I'll check that out right
now."

The captain put his hand over the receiver. "Bernhard, check the passenger listing. Find Harrison
Cooper's stateroom."

The first officer gaped at him. "Michael, what the -- "

The captain gestured wildly at him to do it, and he complied. The first officer looked through the
databases and nodded. "Yup, I've found him. His room's on deck 5, on a port side balcony. Why do
you ask?"

The captain had held up a hand and relayed the information to the Minister of Magic. Suddenly, the
man's face went white. "He's a WHAT?...This has got to be a joke...he's going to bite MORE
people?...There are wizards en route? God Almighty...I'll see what I can do...Yes, madame...I hope
so too, Minister...I'll be praying as well, Your Majesty. DeVries out."

Visibly shaking, the captain hung up the phone. The first officer stared at him in confusion.
"Michael, what the hell happened? Did this Cooper person bring a rabid dog on board? I didn't think
people were allowed to bring animals on board! What does the Ministry of Magic --"

The captain shook his head to clear it. "We can discuss this later, Bernhard. Trust me, you don't want
to know. First things first -- we've got a problem on our hands. How long is it to moonrise?"

The first officer stared at him. "Sir?"

"Answer the question!"

The first officer looked at his watch and at one of the charts. "Thirty-eight minutes and counting.
Why --"

The captain cut him off. "Where's Harrison Cooper's cabin?"

The first officer pointed it out. "Over here, sir. Port side. It's facing south right now."

The captain muttered something under his breath which sounded like "oh, wonderful, it's going to be
illuminated by the moonlight". The first officer couldn't make sense of this. However, the captain's
next order made even less sense.

The captain headed to the control panel. "Turn the ship about 180 degrees so it's pointing straight at
the azimuth the moon is rising from. Travel in reverse for a while. Whatever you do, do not allow the
port side of the ship to see moonlight. If anyone asks, tell them we're testing a new propulsion
system."

The first officer stood up. "Michael, are you out of your mind? What in God's name is going on
The captain shook his head. "You don't want to know. Trust me. I don't believe it myself, but I don't understand magic. Now turn the boat around! That's an order!"

The first officer, very confused, carried out the order. It would take a good 10 minutes to turn the ship around and a good ten more to get the ship into full reverse. He watched as the shadows began to move around the cabin.

The captain nodded in approval. "Good. Now tell everyone in the medical section to get as much animal tranquilizer -- or equivalent -- as they can get their hands on and bring it up here as soon as possible. Arm yourself, but only use rubber bullets. Once we're all set, we're going down to his cabin on a very unusual mission. Once we get there, make sure no one else enters or leaves that area without our knowledge."

The first officer couldn't believe it. "Someone let a rabid animal on board and we're going to tranquilize it? I don't see how that's even possible! We would have noticed such a creature when it entered the boat!"

The captain thought for a moment, and then nodded. "That's not entirely right, but it's close enough for government work. Now let's get this over with, and whatever you do, don't tell any of the passengers as we don't want them to panic!"

With that, the captain raced out of the bridge, the first officer in his wake. The first officer found it odd that the captain hadn't asked the hospital wing for a large supply of rabies shots, but he assumed that Michael knew what he was doing.

To be continued...

Update #202

Saturday, June 1, 1996 - FULL MOON
5 HOURS BEFORE MOONRISE
m/s Noordam
Between Aruba and Curacao

Next PoV: 202.5 - Courtney Cooper

HORCRUXES LEFT: 1 (cup)
ATLANTIS ALERT STATUS: DEFCON 3

Harrison Cooper looked around the cocktail lounge on the top deck of the ship. Everything seemed to be perfect for his wife's surprise. The singer had agreed to perform the song Harrison had written for her, and the catering staff was going to give provide her with a huge cake for her birthday. You didn't turn 30 twice, after all.

The open-air courtyard outside the synagogue was full of people for the second time today. Four
hours earlier, it had been thronged with worshipers who had just gotten out of Sabbath services. Now, however, it was filled with people their tradition's holy book had warned them against under certain circumstances.

The fact that the courtyard was surrounded by walls meant that it was a perfect place for the wizards to gather. The lack of a ceiling and the fact that the complex was closed to tourists on the Sabbath made it better still.

Tourists milled around outside, completely oblivious, as Jan and the rest of the wizards who had visited the hospital in Aruba rematerialized in the courtyard with a flash of Apparation. Jerrit Huizing didn't like the look on their faces as they walked over to issue their report.

Jan threw his hands up in irritation. "They had him in the hospital, all right, but they discharged him before we got there. He'd been complaining about headaches and nausea, apparently."

Huizing swore. "Lycanthropy symptoms. Shit. It sounds like Muggles aren't immune to the disease."

"That's my conclusion as well, Jerrit. At any rate, we spent some time looking around the island and talking with the authorities, but there weren't any leads. That was a long shot, however, as it was almost certain that if he wasn't in the hospital, he had gotten back on the boat."

Huizing nodded. "I figured as much. So we've confirmed that he's still on the boat?"

"I haven't seen him, Jerrit, but that's the only possibility I can think of. I doubt he'd want to miss the rest of the cruise because he was sick."

Huizing grimaced. "Well, it was a try. All right, we're all here. Let's get on with this."

He raised his voice. "Everyone, gather around. I've got some final instructions here, and you're going to want to listen to them."

----------

90 MINUTES BEFORE MOONRISE
East of Willemstad

Joyce de Waard blinked in confusion as she saw a long procession of specks flying over the Tafelberg. They seemed to be heading due east, away from Willemstad. They looked like birds, but they were way too big to be birds.

An odd thought came to her. Could they be...

She shook her head to clear it. Nah. They probably weren't wizards. What would wizards be doing down here?

Shrugging, she continued driving back towards her house.

----------

60 MINUTES BEFORE MOONRISE
m/s Noordam
Lido Deck

Harrison shrugged. "It's a headache. Big deal. I'm accustomed to them by now. The migraine medicine we got in Aruba is actually helping a lot, but it's not getting rid of it completely."
Courtney breathed a sigh of relief. "Be grateful for that, Harrison. My guess is that it is a migraine and that this will get rid of it completely once you've taken the medicine long enough. Once you run out of the Arubans' medicine, you may be able to get some here on the boat."

"Good thinking, Courtney. Want some of my leftover dinner?"

Courtney rolled her eyes and pointed at the table. "Harrison, it's RAW. I can't imagine ANYONE eating raw meat. I thought the rare meat was bad enough. Besides, the doctor said you shouldn't be eating it!"

"I doubt one more piece will kill me. Besides, I have a VERY strong urge to eat raw meat for some reason. Maybe it's bringing out my wild side!"

Harrison chuckled strangely. It sounded almost like a cross between a laugh and a growl.

-------------
50 MINUTES BEFORE MOONRISE
m/s Noordam
Cooper Stateroom
--------------
The phone rang, and Harrison hurried to pick it up. "Yes?"

"Mr. Cooper, this is the caterer. Your cake's all ready. Do you want us to write something on it?"

"How about 'Happy 30th Courtney'?"

"Fine with us. We'll see you in an hour in the top deck cocktail lounge."

-------------
35 MINUTES BEFORE MOONRISE
m/s Noordam
Cooper Stateroom
--------------
Courtney glanced up from her book at the sky. The shadows had changed, and they were changing in a way which didn't make sense. She stood, dropping her book on the table, and watched the horizon. Sure enough, the sun was moving.

Frowning, she brought the book back inside and turned to her husband. "Harrison, we're turning around."

Harrison blinked at her. His eyes seemed oddly dilated. "What?"

"We're turning around. Something strange is going on here."

Harrison shrugged. "Don't worry about it. There could be a reef down there we're trying to avoid. Trust them, Courtney. They know what we're doing. If I were you, I'd focus on the cocktail party coming up in half an hour. Wear the red dress."

-------------
20 MINUTES BEFORE MOONRISE
--------------
Harrison, dressed in an expensive suit and tie, glanced over to the balcony one last time as he prepared to lock the door and head to the cocktail lounge. Was it his imagination, or was the boat moving backwards? Naw...
Shrugging, and wishing that someone would turn down the lights, he took his wife's arm and headed to the elevator.

18 MINUTES BEFORE MOONRISE

A few hundred feet over the Atlantic, Jerrit Huizing stared wildly across the empty ocean. "It should be here! What the hell is going on? Where is it? It's getting dark -- maybe one of you people can see it?"

Jan shook his head. "I don't see it. Spread out and search! NOW!"

16 MINUTES BEFORE MOONRISE

The two elevators dinged simultaneously. The left door opened, admitted Harrison and his wife, and closed about the time the right door opened to reveal several crew members armed to the teeth with rubber bullets and tranquilizer darts. They immediately filed out of the elevator and began heading towards the Coopers' stateroom.

13 MINUTES BEFORE MOONRISE

The security agent knocked loudly on the stateroom door. "Mr. Cooper? Are you there? Something's come up and we need to talk to you!"

There was no answer.

10 MINUTES BEFORE MOONRISE

Harrison and Courtney settled into their seats in the cocktail lounge. It was full of people -- maybe 50 or 60. Most of them were elderly, but there were a few other honeymoonsers there. They waited for the show to start. Courtney looked outside and saw that the glass windows were showing a good view of the Earth's shadow projected against the sky -- and wake beyond the bow of the ship. Harrison was right. They were facing southeast. They WERE moving backwards.

9 MINUTES BEFORE MOONRISE

The sharp-eyed wizard was scanning the horizon. "There! I see them! That way!"

Jerrit nodded. "Thank God, Richard! Everyone, GO!"

7 MINUTES BEFORE MOONRISE

The first officer looked at his watch. "Seven minutes! We're running out of time! Open that door!"

The security officer brought out the master key, and the door clicked open. They rushed in, ready for anything.

The stateroom was empty. They were about to close it when they saw some specks silhouetted against the setting sun. They were growing rapidly.

The captain whistled. "The Minister was right. Here come the wizards."
6 MINUTES BEFORE MOONRISE
- - - - - - -
Jerrit Huizing shook the captain's hand. "That's enough, everyone. We can do introductions later. Now we need to find that man, and do it within five minutes. Otherwise, there will be hell to pay!"

4 MINUTES BEFORE MOONRISE
- - - - - - -
Courtney and Harrison clapped as the singer came onstage. Courtney's eyes widened as she realized who it was.

"You're kidding. You convinced Holland America to bring her on this trip?"

Harrison smiled. "We caught a break, honey. She was actually going to be flying from Aruba to Curacao at the time as part of a tour, so we managed to make it so she came on the boat instead. I paid most of the fee to change her ticket, though."

"Thank you so much! This is such a surprise!"

Harrison grinned at her evilly. "Trust me, there's another surprise coming. Just wait."

2 MINUTES BEFORE MOONRISE
- - - - - - -
Jerrit swore. "The boat's too damn big! We'll never be able to find him in time. Do you have a P.A. system?"

The captain winced. "It does, but we can only activate it from the bridge. It will take a good five to ten minutes to get up there!"

"Shit! All right, I think we're going to have to call in the backup. There's no way we're going to get to him in time. Have the backup surround the ship, watch the exits, and listen for animal sounds! Get your tranquilizer darts at the ready, and do not use lethal force unless you have absolutely no alternative!"

MOONRISE
- - - - - - -
The singer had just finished her first song when the first rays of the moon broke over the horizon. Courtney was clapping vigorously. Harrison started clapping when suddenly his jaw dropped and he began wincing in pain.

Courtney blinked and turned to him. Was it his imagination, or did he seem to have more hair than he usually did? "Harrison?"

Harrison didn't respond. Instead, he just shook. He put his hand to his mouth and raced for the men's room. Whatever was affecting him was spreading rapidly, and he was barely able to stumble into the bathroom and close the door behind him.

This was not right, she thought. Concerned, she excused herself and began walking towards the bathroom. "Harrison? You OK in there? What's going on?" Meanwhile, the Vietnamese couple which had been sitting next to them turned to her and asked, "What happened to him?"

She shook her head in confusion. "We're not sure, but the doctor thinks it's a migraine. He should --"
That was as far as she got before her comment -- and the singer's music -- was completely overwhelmed by a sound she had only heard once before, in a documentary on Yellowstone National Park in the United States.

It was the howl of a wolf. And it seemed to be coming from the bathroom.

To be continued...

---------
Update #202.5
---------
Saturday, June 1, 1996 - FULL MOON
15 SECONDS AFTER MOONRISE
Top Deck Cocktail Lounge Men's Room
m/s Noordam
Between Aruba and Curacao
---------
Next PoV: 203 - King Fahd
---------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 1 (cup)
ATLANTIS ALERT STATUS: DEFCON 3
---------
Captain Xavier Pendable, USN Retired, looking dapper in his new red shirt, had just sat down on the toilet seat when the door slammed open and some raced into the bathroom. Looking underneath the door, he caught a glimpse of the new person's shadow as he stood in front of the sink. Whoever it was didn't seem particularly happy, judging by the sounds. He must have eaten something which disagreed with him. Xavier sympathized with the poor man: he'd come down with the runs a couple of times himself on international trips and knew that it was quite irritating.

The man started making awful sounds, and Xavier saw the man's shadow writhe underneath the door. Xavier frowned: was the man that sick? If so, he figured he should at least try to help. Taking a moment to pull up his pants, he put his hand on the latch that would open the door.

A piercing howl split the air. It reverberated in Xavier's skull and lasted a good thirty seconds. Xavier froze. That did not sound normal. If anything, it sounded more like a dog than a human being. He wondered if the man was insane. Feeling a bit disgusted with himself that he was too chicken to help the sick man, he sat back down on the toilet seat. He didn't want to come face to face with a madman. Besides, that noise should have alerted everyone in the cocktail lounge that something was amiss. The security agents should come for him soon. Grateful that the door protected him from whoever it was, he waited for the people to pick him up.

Outside the stall, the person -- still on all fours -- started making snuffling sounds. He heard soft footsteps approaching his stall, and he began wondering if the man would be crazy enough to try to get under the door.

The newcomer soon got close enough to the door for Xavier to see the sick man's feet. They ended in doglike claws and were covered in fur. What the hell was going on here? Has the sick man been attacked by his dog? He tried to back up onto the toilet as far as he could.

Outside the stall, the person -- still on all fours -- started making snuffling sounds. He heard soft footsteps approaching his stall, and he began wondering if the man would be crazy enough to try to get under the door.

The newcomer soon got close enough to the door for Xavier to see the sick man's feet. They ended in doglike claws and were covered in fur. What the hell was going on here? Has the sick man been attacked by his dog? He tried to back up onto the toilet as far as he could.

Whatever it was stopped outside. The furry creature sniffed a little more, then suddenly growled. Xavier experienced a brief moment of alarm when the door was struck by a tremendous blow. The latch gave way, and the door opened. For the first time, Xavier got a good look at the sick man...and found himself staring into the drooling face of a six-foot monster. The creature was clad in the
The tattered remains of a cashmere suit.

The former seaman had time for one brief scream, and then the monster was upon him.

25 SECONDS AFTER MOONRISE

The howl was audible throughout the entire front half of the ship. Curious, people began opening the doors to their staterooms and began asking each other what was going on. A few intrepid souls headed for the elevator. They didn't know what had happened. All they could tell is that the sound had come from the top deck somewhere.

Everyone on the top deck heard the howl, bow to stern. Most of the people in the stern began wandering towards the bow in an attempt to see what was going on.

30 SECONDS AFTER MOONRISE

Theo van Dijk recognized the sound immediately, as did every single other member of the backup team watching the ship from above. It was coming from the front of the ship, on one of the top decks. He signaled to his broom and began following the rest of the wizards in its general direction.

35 SECONDS AFTER MOONRISE

The captain heard the howl from the middle of the ship. The first officer looked at him and nodded. "That's what we need to deal with. That's the rabid dog. Listen to that howl. Get your rubber bullets and tranquilizer darts ready, and let's get up there!"

40 SECONDS AFTER MOONRISE

The howl went on and on. Courtney started walking towards the bathroom, worried. She couldn't go in there, but perhaps she could ask Harrison from outside the room if he was all right. Meanwhile, the singer had stopped her performance and was asking everyone to keep calm.

Realizing her intent, the Vietnamese man who had been sitting next to her offered to help. "That must be some migraine. I'll see if --"

That was far as he got before a second scream pierced the room. This one was absolutely human and was filled with terror and pain. It abruptly cut off in a gurgle after maybe five seconds.

The Vietnamese man swore and started heading towards the bathroom. Meanwhile, the singer told everyone to slowly make their way towards the exit. Turning to Courtney, the Asian held up his hand.

"This does NOT sound right. Ma'am, go back to your stateroom and bring back any medicines he's taking. I'll go into the bathroom and check him out -- I have a bit of a medical background and know CPR. Hurry!"

Courtney nodded nervously and raced out of the room, heading for the elevator. Within seconds, she was gone, not knowing that she would be one of the lucky ones. Meanwhile, the man opened the bathroom door and took a look inside. His eyes widened, and he froze in shock.

"What the hell -- "
His remark was interrupted by a loud growl, followed by a bestial charging sound. The Vietnamese had time for one word.

"RUN!"

The crowd screamed and began racing for the exits just as a figure from a horror movie crashed into the Vietnamese man and bit him on the arm. To the great dismay of the people in the lounge, the monster was blocking one of the main exits to chamber. Already injured and deciding to take one for the team, the Vietnamese man body-slammed the monster out of the way of the exit, opening the floodgates. The delay allowed the monster to bite two more people, and the two new screams only exacerbated the crowd's panic.

Sixty screaming people flooded out of the cocktail lounge, followed closely by a werewolf sporting a bloody muzzle and a torn cashmere suit.

55 SECONDS AFTER MOONRISE

Theo made his way around the bridge tower and caught his first glimpse of the bow section of the top deck. The place was an absolute madhouse.

People were screaming and running in what appeared to be a mass exodus from the cocktail lounge. Some of them headed for the elevator, others for the staircase. A few of the older people, who had limited mobility, propelled their wheelchairs as quickly as they could. One of the laggards suddenly disappeared, his wheelchair flying out from under him. Meanwhile, the front ranks of the flood of people ran into the throng who had made their way from the stern to see what had happened. A few of the people from the stern were trampled. The rest were infected by the escapees’ panic and began running along with them.

Theo told everyone to get ready. Harrison -- well, the creature which had been Harrison -- was likely chasing these people and would almost certainly pursue them out of the cocktail lounge into the open. Once he was exposed, the wizards would stun him. They didn't have time for the tranquilizer darts, and they were concerned that the Muggle dart guns weren't accurate enough to guarantee a hit on the werewolf and not one of the fleeing people. Knocking a fleeing person unconscious would just provide Harrison a good meal.

1:10 AFTER MOONRISE

Courtney Cooper unlocked her door and entered her stateroom. She had to hurry -- she had no idea what had happened to her husband. Did the migraine medicine have side effects which caused increased nausea and temporary insanity? She hoped not.

She looked at the box and saw that the instruction were written in two languages: Dutch and some creole dialect which looked somewhat like a cross between Spanish and Dutch. Great, she thought. However, the biggest word on the bottle looked like it was the name of a medicine -- it was one of those typical words which looked like the name of a prescription. She stuck the bottle in her pocket and hurried out the door.

As she left the room, she noticed that the door to the balcony was open. She grunted in surprise: she could have sworn that Harrison had locked the balcony before they had left. Maybe he'd forgotten. Considering the illness he was experiencing, it's quite possible that he had forgotten.

She ran towards the elevator, prescription in her pocket.
1:15 AFTER MOONRISE
---

Theo watched as the werewolf charged out of the cocktail lounge, howling at the top of its lungs. He ordered the wizards to open fire as he sent a Patronus to Jerrit, explaining that all the werewolf was on the top deck and that all wizards should Apparate to the entrance to the cocktail lounge immediately. Muggles and wizards nearest the creature should use their tranquilizer guns, and wizards who were further away should use their wands.

1:25 AFTER MOONRISE
---

Jerrit Huizing turned on the spot and rematerialized on the top deck. However, before he could get his bearings, something slammed into him and knocked the wand from his hand. Spinning to face what had hit him, he saw that he had collided with a fifty-odd woman with glasses who had crashed into him at a high rate of speed. The rush of people from the lounge had more or less stopped, and the flood was starting to head down the stairs towards the deck with the open-air swimming pool. He looked around for his wand -- it was getting dark -- and found it just in time to see the woman fighting with the werewolf. She had her hand in its face and it had its fangs in her arm. This woman wasn't going to be leaving the ship without a bracelet, he thought.

He pointed his wand at the werewolf and cast a Stunning Spell. The beam hit it in the side and pushed it away from the woman. It staggered a little, but it didn't go down. All the beam seemed to do was irritate it. It turned its baleful gaze on Jerrit as the woman screamed and ran off.

Jerrit barely had time to bring up a magical shield before the werewolf reached him. He had a disturbing view of several rows of teeth when the creature's head suddenly crashed into his forcefield. Jerrit was knocked back momentarily by the impact, but the shield had done its job. The animal was now stationary and out in the open, and its progress was now impeded by the shield.

He had to act quickly now. Waving his wand in circular pattern, he cast another spell which trapped the werewolf in a hemispherical force field. The creature howled in frustration as it tried to break through it. However, the field held.

It was only a matter of time now. He watched as no fewer than seven stun beams hit the trapped werewolf simultaneously.

1:40 AFTER MOONRISE
---

Courtney Cooper was astonished to find that the elevator wouldn't stop on the top deck for some reason. It let her out on the ninth deck instead. Hoping that those extra seconds wouldn't cost her husband her life, she headed for the stairs.

1:50 AFTER MOONRISE
---

The captain and the rest of the ship’s security staff burst onto the top deck just as the red beams hit the werewolf. It went down in a lump of fur, grunting somewhat but still alive. The security staff raised their guns to punish it further but hesitated when they saw that a man in a wizard's robes was standing between them and the monster.

The wizard sensed their presence and spun. "Captain DeVries! Thank Merlin! It's over, don't harm him! Sedate the werewolf so he will sleep for the rest of the night. Use an amount of tranquilizer for a two-hundred pound rabid dog! Hurry, as the shield and Stunning Spell won't work for long! We'll
then put him alone in a lifeboat and seal him off until the morning."

The wizard -- the captain quickly realized it was Jerrit Huizing -- moved out of the way as the Muggles brought out their tranquilizer guns. The darts hit home, and soon the grunting stopped and the werewolf fell asleep. No fewer than ten wizards immediately converged on the animal, grabbed onto any part of it they could, and then disappeared. Twenty seconds later, the wizards returned and reported that the animal was safely quarantined in a lifeboat.

The entire incident had taken less than two minutes. However, the damage had been done. A quick survey of the top deck revealed that there were no fewer than ten dead people, primarily senior citizens. The big question, though, involved the number of people who had been bitten. Huizing explained that he had seen one woman bitten himself.

The captain looked around the top deck and checked for people who were bleeding. He saw twelve people bleeding on the top deck alone, all of them with puncture marks which seemed to have come from fangs. One of the wizards reported that there a few more injured people on the lower decks and predicted that the attack had produced between 20 and 25 new werewolves.

The captain and wizards immediately began issuing orders. Every single person injured in the attack -- EVERY SINGLE ONE -- was to speak with a wizard as soon as possible. They would not be permitted off the boat until they had done so. Anyone with any scarring or blood whatsoever would not be allowed to set foot on Curacao until they had first contacted a wizard.

Huizing had a stroke of inspiration. He headed to the main entrance -- the only place where people got on and off the boat -- and cast a spell over the entrance which would prevent anyone with blood on them from leaving unless they had a wizard-made ankle bracelet. Normally, this spell was used to keep patients in hospitals. In this case, however, it would keep everyone on the boat long enough to halt the werewolf pandemic once and for all.

--------------
2:30 AFTER MOONRISE
--------------
Courtney Cooper reached the top deck and stopped in her tracks when she saw what had happened. There was blood everywhere, and most of the beach chairs had been tossed around as if by a tornado. There were no fewer than ten people lying on the ground. Eight were clearly dead, and two were whimpering weakly and clutching various body parts.

She wasn't a doctor, however. She didn't know what had happened, but there wasn't anything she could do about. Perhaps the Vietnamese man would be able to handle it -- he seemed quite capable.

She forced her way over to the cocktail lounge -- a door had been blown off, and she had no idea how that had happened -- when someone in robes stopped her.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. There's been an incident, and we're not letting anyone in."

Courtney stared at him. "Let me in, please! My husband, Harrison Cooper, is very sick. He was nauseous and acting strange, and the last thing I know he ran into the bathroom --"

The wizards looked at the man next to him sharply, then asked: "You're Courtney Cooper?"

Courtney blinked. "Yes. How did you know my name?"

"We're with the Dutch Ministry of Magic. We know why your husband was sick, and we know how
to take care of him. What did the doctors tell you he had?"

"They first thought food allergies, but the pills didn't work. Then they figured he had migraines, and I've got his migraine pills here. However, first things first -- we need to save my husband!"

The wizard hesitated. "I have some good news and bad news. The good news is that he is in a safe place where he will not be a danger to himself or to other people because of his illness. Ignore the pills the Muggle doctors gave you -- their diagnosis was by necessity wrong as they don't know magical diseases. He will not experience any more symptoms for three weeks, and the remaining symptoms will be alleviated with some treatment he will be undergoing for the rest of his life. We only ask that he visit us for treatment once a month at the full moon."

Courtney breathed a sigh of relief. "That's good to know. Where is he now? I'd like to talk to him."

"He's sealed in a lifeboat, Mrs. Cooper. He cannot be exposed to other human beings until tomorrow morning because he will attack them and possibly spread the disease. That's the bad news, Mrs. Cooper. He's got a disease which will be with him for the rest of his life."

Courtney had to know. "What disease does he have?"

"Lycanthropy."

Courtney narrowed her eyes, baffled. "Huh? What's that?"

The first wizard stared at her, hard. "He's become a werewolf, and most of the Western European Wizarding community has been looking for him for a month. Furthermore, anyone who survives his bite will also become a lycanthrope and need treatment. I must ask, Mrs. Cooper: were you bitten?"

She shook her head. "No. I missed all of this stuff when I went downstairs to get Harrison's pills when he started howling and screaming in the bathroom."

"You're very fortunate, Mrs. Cooper. At any rate, your husband is now a werewolf. He will turn into this creature once every month, immediately upon the rising of the full moon. While in wolf form, he will be a danger to anyone around him, including you, unless he follows our treatment rigorously. When he wakes up the next morning, he will be back to his normal self and have no idea what he did while in wolf form."

Courtney stared at him. "What? Tell me everything!"

The wizard complied, and Courtney's life was changed forever.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #203
-------------
Sunday, June 2, 1996
Royal Palace
Riyadh
Saudi Arabia
-------------
Next PoV: 204 - Draco Malfoy
-------------
King Fahd had never expected that he would actually be helping the Israelis. However, he felt that it was his duty to do so. He had been indirectly responsible for getting the Death Eaters into Israel to begin with, so it was imperative that he and Minister Dagher work with Michal Oved to get them out of there.

Many people in his cabinet had mixed feelings about what to do with the Israelis now that most of the Hamas Death Eaters had been taken care of. The Death Eaters had gotten a bit more wary ever since the Israeli raid had taken out Rodolphus Lestrange. There had been a few more instances of magical terrorism -- missiles Portkeyed into buildings, that type of stuff -- but nothing on the scale of what Hamas had been doing earlier with Esh Elohim and the Dan Hotel. Many people figured that Voldemort would be more reluctant to risk his Hamas operatives as he knew that a Hamas without Death Eaters would be easy pickings for a mobilized Michal Oved.

The problem was that with the wizards out of the picture, the old Middle East conflict reared its ugly head once more. Israel still controlled the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and many people argued that the dearth of wizards in Hamas would give Israel the perfect excuse to use its own wizards to take control of the disputed territories for good. Since Hamas had used wizards against Israel, the Israelis would believe that a magical response was justified even though no wizards were left to defend the Palestinians. Fahd was under increasing pressure to scale back his assistance to the Israelis now that the immediate crisis with Rodolphus Lestrange had passed.

Right now Hamas was leading Israel on a merry chase all over the West Bank. The Muggle side of the movement had been reinvigorated by Rodolphus's presence and had become very active since Rodolphus's death. They had begun focusing on low-personnel, high-impact missions which generally involved stolen mortars and tanks. It was only a matter of time until the old animosities flared up again.

Fahd argued that they needed to keep the pressure on Hamas until all of the connections to the Wizarding world were completely gone. For one thing, Voldemort could always resupply the movement with wizards. For another, the wizards could easily go after Saudi Arabia once they destroyed Israel. Finally, any war between Hamas and Israel could very likely plunge the whole world into conflict even without Voldemort's help.

Israel wasn't the king's main concern at the moment, however. He looked at the map on his wall at North Korea. There were disturbing rumors that Voldemort had taken control of North Korea and was impersonating the general who had succeeded Kim Jong-Il. He had seen video footage of Chang Sung-Taek entering a bathroom, after which the camera had followed him in and discovered that he was Voldemort.

The North Korean leader, of course, denied it and argued that he -- the Dear Leader -- had been ensorcelled and Voldemort had attended the meeting in his place. Voldemort obviously worked for the South, the North said. He was British, and Britain was capitalist! The British had promptly responded by arguing that the authorities should check Chang Sung-Taek's wand and see who it was registered to -- Voldemort or Chang Sung-Taek. The general had handed over the wand, of course, and the investigation had concluded that the wand had been registered to a Choi Yeun Li, a North Korean witch who had defected to the South and had been killed in the Kim Jong-Il coup. Chang Sung-Taek praised the result and explained that it was proof he wasn't Voldemort. The British then countered with footage indicating that the wand he had given to the investigators was not his original wand and that he was deliberately using Choi Yeun's wand to throw off the trail. Voldemort
naturally said that the British wizards had faked everything, including the footage. The dispute went on and on.

Dagher had been paying close attention to anything involving the Death Eaters ever since Rikpreet had placed the king under the Imperius Curse. He had examined a great deal of footage of the North Korean leader and was of the opinion that the British were right: Voldemort HAD taken over the country. The Minister had shown him two videotapes taken a few days apart. It was obvious that the Dear Leader had swapped wands with someone else and had replaced his own with Choi Yeun's. Dagher argued that Voldemort certainly had interest in controlling Muggle nations -- Fahd couldn't deny that, as the Dark Lord had nearly taken over England and had effectively controlled Saudi Arabia by proxy for a while!

Fahd was determined to make Voldemort pay for what the Dark Lord had done to him. Although he couldn't attack North Korea directly -- he couldn't risk his soldiers with Israel, al-Qaeda, and Hamas running around -- he was certain that the North Koreans wouldn't be able to do much good against a modern army without a mixture of wizards and Muggles defending the country. Fahd couldn't do much about the wizards. However, he was considering a nasty strike which would cripple the North's Muggle army and make it easier for people to attack Voldemort.

The Muggle army may be well equipped and well-trained. However, it used lots of mechanized equipment such as aircraft, tanks, and jeeps. Every single one of these machines needed lubrication, and the vast majority of them were designed so that they were lubricated with one thing.

Oil.

He wondered whether OPEC would be willing to commit to an oil embargo against North Korea -- and to any nation which supported North Korea. It was a gamble, but something to think about.

-------------------

Hamas Headquarters
[location classified]
Democratic People's Republic of Korea

- - - - - - - - - - -

The Sheikh looked around the room and grinned. "Well, it looks like we've fooled the Zionists. They have no idea we're here, and we're able to tie down many of their forces by sending one or two people over there, driving around in a tank for a while, Portkeying in a few missiles, and returning here. Well done. Now it's time to step things up a notch and try something big while their army is spread thin and the entire Knesset is in an uproar due to the change of Prime Ministers."

The last remaining Hamas wizard nodded. "Makes sense, sir. What were you thinking of doing?"

The Sheikh grinned. "We need to re-establish the primacy of Islam in Jerusalem. This Suleiman I or whatever his name is now betrayed us by opening the al-Aqsa Mosque to non-Muslims. Why? Someone he thinks is the ghost of a biblical leader tells him. That sounds a bit suspicious to me, does it not? Particularly since Samuel's word was for the most part superseded by Mohammed's."

Many of the people in the room nodded. One of them asked, "Sounds reasonable -- we haven't done something big for a while. What were you thinking?"

In response, the Sheikh showed everyone a poster which showed the Dome of the Rock shining on top of the Temple Mount. At the bottom of the photograph was the Western Wall, the last surviving relic of the classical Jewish temple.
The Sheikh pointed at the wall. "Those Portkeys are very good at destroying buildings made of steel and reinforced concrete. They should have no problem knocking down a two-thousand year old wall obstructing Muslim access to the mosque."

-------------------

m/s Noordam
Willemstad
Curacao
-------------------

The first thing Harrison Cooper noticed when he woke up was that the bed was as hard as a rock. What had happened? Had he gotten drunk at Courtney's surprise party and fallen asleep at the bar? He looked around the room to get his bearings, at which point he experienced his second shock.

He was alone in what appeared to be a lifeboat. He was wearing the tattered remains of his cashmere suit, which irritated him to no end because he had spent a lot of money on it. What had happened? Why was his suit torn up, and why was he sitting in the lifeboat?

Suddenly, it occurred to him: someone had identified his disease and determined he was contagious. The last thing he remembered was running to the bathroom in the cocktail lounge and wanting to throw up. The next thing he knew, he was here. There must have been a doctor in the house, and the doctor had treated him, figured out what he had, and told him that he should be quarantined. In the process, the doctor must have given him something to cure the nausea and headaches as both symptoms had abruptly vanished.

But if he was ill, why wasn't there a doctor there with him? The doctor could always wear protective gear while treating him. Something still didn't seem right here.

He walked over to the door and opened it. It wouldn't open. What the hell? He started banging on it and screaming for help.

Eventually, help arrived. However, it was not a doctor. His welcoming committee consisted of no fewer than fifteen people. He recognized his wife. The others, however, looked like a combination of security guards and wizards. Harrison blinked. What were wizards doing on a cruise ship? Did the captain call a wizard so that the wizard could treat him?

One of the wizards pointed a wand at the door and muttered something inaudibly. The door opened, and the wizard entered the lifeboat followed by Courtney. Courtney had an ashen look on her face which Harrison didn't like. Don't tell me this disease is fatal, he thought.

He was about to ask his wife what had happened when he saw three men walk by carrying figure covered by a white shroud. A bloody arm dangled from underneath the shroud. The victim appeared to have been mauled by an animal. The bite marks reminded Harrison eerily of those of caused by the creature which had attacked him last month at Wembley. Don't tell me there are MORE of those creatures around, he thought. If there are, these people need to know about them and how to fight them. My experience could be helpful here.

Courtney saw what he was looking at and understood immediately. When she spoke, it was very carefully. "Yes, Harrison, these wounds were caused by same type of creature that attacked you last month. It's a werewolf, a magical animal. It attacked people at the concert we were as soon as the moon rose."

Harrison swore. "That's terrible! Were there many fatalities? Is there anything I can do? And it's a magical creature? No wonder my injury couldn't be healed easily!"
"All you can do is cooperate with us, I'm afraid. There are eleven dead and 23 bitten."

Harrison whistled and turned to the wizard. "Eleven dead! That's horrible! How did such an animal get onto the boat? I ran into one of them earlier, in case Courtney didn't tell you. One of them bit me in England last month."

The wizard nodded. "I'm aware of that, Mr. Cooper. As for where the animal came from...well, let me explain to you how lycanthropy -- that is, the state of being a transforming creature like a werewolf -- works.

"Werewolves transform into creatures similar to the one that attacked you as soon as the full moon rises. While in wolf form, they will attack anyone in their vicinity with a powerful bite."

Harrison nodded. "That's sounds about right, considering what happened to me at the football stadium. We were lucky we only lost one person there."

The wizard hesitated and shook his head. "On the contrary, in cases like this one could argue that death is preferable to being bitten."

Harrison gawked at him. "WHAT? Why?"

The wizard looked at Harrison, hard. "Because lycanthropy is contagious, transmitted through bites. Any person bitten by such a creature becomes a lycanthrope him- or herself. The victim will start transforming at the next full moon and will become a threat to other people, including those he loves."

Harrison's face went white. "Wait a minute...are you telling me that I turned into the monster and attacked those people? That's impossible! I would never do such a thing even if I did turn into a monster!"

"There's nothing you could have done about it, and given the circumstances no way for you to have known. I'm sorry. What's more, you could not have prevented the attacks because a werewolf will lose his entire sense of self and become a vicious animal inside and out while in wolf form."

Harrison turned to his wife. "Do you want to divorce me? I can't imagine attacking you like this."

The wizard shook his head and held out something which looked like an ankle bracelet. "You won't need to because now that we know about you, we can keep track of you and ensure that you receive treatment. Although we can't prevent your transformation, we can stop the headaches and ensure that you are be teleported -- through magical means -- to a place where you can transform safely. Follow our instructions, and you will never harm anyone again. I promise."

Harrison nodded and put on the anklet. "How long will I be sick?"

"For the rest of your life, I'm afraid. There is no known cure for lycanthropy."

Harrison swore. "It sounds like something I'll have to get accustomed to. What about those people I bit? Will they start turning into monsters as well?"

"Yes, Mr. Cooper. However, we've tracked all of them down -- all twenty-three of them -- and placed bracelets on all of them. We were able to catch them all by casting a spell to prevent the
injured people from leaving the ship and alerting us when they tried to do so. There will be no more untreated attacks after this. No one else will be hurt."

Harrison nodded. "That's good to hear. Now, if you would excuse me, I want to be alone with my wife so I can deal with the tragedy I just caused."

The wizard nodded. "Of course. Please excuse us."

With that, the wizard left the lifeboat and closed the door behind him.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #204
-------------
Monday, June 3, 1996
Slytherin Common Room
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
Great Britain
-------------
Next PoV: 205 - Kohen Gadol Suleiman I

-----------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 1 (cup)
ATLANTIS ALERT STATUS: DEFCON 3
-----------
Draco Malfoy put down the note from "Lisa van Poppel" with a combination of pride and fear. Pride because Voldemort had accepted his double agent role as the initiation rite to be admitted into the Death Eaters. He was frightened, however, when Voldemort immediately began sending him on missions. Didn't the Dark Lord know about OWLs? He was in the middle of OWLs right now and couldn't spend much time doing stuff other than studying.

Lucius, however, demanded that the Death Eater work come first. He argued that when Voldemort took over the world from his base in North Korea, Draco would be given plum positions and high honors regardless of how many OWLs he had achieved. Connections to the Dark Lord would go far during Voldemort's reign, whereas the ability to turn a mouse into a teacup would be pointless.

These two missions, however, wouldn't take long. If things went as planned, he'd be able to go to Gringotts and return in half an hour or less. Looking at the note one last time, he picked up the key to Bellatrix Lestrange's vault, left the castle, and Apparated over to Gringotts once he was outside Hogwarts's defensive perimeter.

Draco's mission involved protecting two of Voldemort's Horcruxes from possible tampering by members of the Order of the Phoenix. Voldemort suspected that the Order may have found out about his Horcruxes and was sending agents out to check to see if they were still there. If they were, they were to be protected using any means possible. If they weren't, Voldemort was to know about it immediately.

Draco had been given custody of two Horcruxes, the Ravenclaw tiara and the Hufflepuff cup. The tiara was in the Room of Requirement, and the cup was in Bellatrix's vault at Gringotts -- which he had conveniently inherited. He would be the only Death Eater who even had access to those.

He presented the key to the goblin at the front desk. The goblin nodded, picked up some noisemaking devices he called "Clankers", and escorted Draco into a magical cart. The cart made its
way deep into the bowels of the earth and eventually stopped in a room with a dragon in it. Draco nearly wet his pants when he saw the dragon. However, the goblin explained that the dragon was afraid of the Clankers and would not attack anyone as long as the Clankers were in the room.

The goblin took Draco's key, walked up to the door of the vault, and performed an odd ritual in front of the door. The door unlocked and opened of its own volition.

It took a while for him to find the cup. Eventually, he did. It was sitting up on one of the top shelves, between a book and a Hand of Glory.

Draco asked the goblin to summon a ladder, and it did. He then told the goblin to leave the room and come back in fifteen minutes. The goblin nodded, left the Clankers with Draco, and left.

Draco climbed up to the top shelves and took down the cup with trembling fingers. He couldn't believe he was holding an object which was a receptacle of the Dark Lord's soul. This was one of the most dangerous -- yet holiest -- magical artifacts on the planet, right up there with the Philosopher's Stone and Elder Wand. As a supporter of the Dark Lord, Draco would protect it with everything he could think of.

His studying for the OWLs had given him a lot of experience with the arcane, and he put it all to good use. First, he cast the Geminio charm on the cup a few dozen times and threw worthless duplicates all over the vault. That would make it more difficult for the Order of the Phoenix to identify the original -- he was certain they would ask him to open the vault for them once they found out there was a Horcrux here and that he had the key. Next, he cast a Disillusionment Charm on the original it which made it virtually undetectable. He also made it Unplottable and Muggle-repelling so that no Muggles would be able to find it.

The last spell was the trickiest one, and he hadn't gotten much opportunity to practice it. Speaking the incantation carefully, he cast the Fidelius Charm and assigned Voldemort to be the Secret-Keeper for the cup's location. There was a burst of magic, and the original vanished from his sight...for about two minutes. Then it reappeared in his hand, only to vanish again.

Draco frowned. What was going on? Had the spell failed? It finally occurred him that he was still able to see the cup because he had been the one to cast the spell. Other people wouldn't be as lucky. A quick magic detection spell revealed that SOMETHING fishy was going on with the cup which hadn't been there before; ergo, the Fidelius had worked. Draco shrugged: maybe he didn't know the spell as well as he had thought. Inspired, he chose one of the duplicates in the vault at random and Fideliused it to Voldemort as well -- it would make a good red herring.

Slipping the Horcrux under his robes, he left the vault, closed the door, and summoned the goblin. As an afterthought, he cast a spell across the entrance to the vault which would prevent anyone other than himself or Lucius from entering it. The goblin saw him do this and actually thought it was a good idea -- they were the only two people who had keys, after all.

Ten minutes later, he was outside Hogwarts, his mission complete. He had the original Horcrux in his possession, and was about to check on the tiara. However, he figured he had to do something to hide the cup first. He couldn't just bring it into his room as anyone could take it, including the traitor Snape. He had to put it somewhere where no one could find it.

He knew the perfect place. Summoning a boat, he rowed out to the center of the lake. After a brief look around to make sure no one was watching him, he dropped the Horcrux into the lake. It sank to the bottom like a stone.
One Horcrux had been saved, Draco thought. It was now time to deal with the tiara.

Grinning, he re-entered Hogwarts, heading for the Room of Requirement. He'd be probably studying for his OWLs again within fifteen minutes at the rate things were going.

-------------------
A FEW HOURS LATER
-------------------

Voldemort was not a happy man.

OPEC had issued an oil embargo against North Korea and provided incontrovertible evidence that he had been masquerading as Chang Sung-Taek all along. Several other countries with powerful Ministries of Magic were following suit and prohibiting commerce between North Korea and their citizens. As if that weren't bad enough, he was fairly certain that if people weren't after his Horcruxes, they would be soon. Thankfully, none had been destroyed yet other than the snake and the diary. However, the simple fact was that Dumbledore had been investigating the ring. That couldn't be good. He had to admit, however, that he liked Draco's plan of throwing the Horcruxes in the lake and planning a few surprises for anyone who tried to go after the tiara and cup. Draco was going to be a valuable Death Eater, just like Lucius. The Dark Lord was going to tell everyone else to do the same thing when he got a chance to the other Horcruxes.

First things first. He needed to get a better wand -- he couldn't use Choi Yeun's anymore -- as quickly as possible because he had to assume that he couldn't rely on Horcruxes for his survival. This meant the Elder Wand. He needed to find the Elder Wand and do so in a hurry. He'd send the Death Eaters out en masse to scour the world for the legendary Deathstick.

He also needed something to distract the Muggles. He told his troops near the DMZ to get ready and increase their alert level. A war with the South would certainly take a lot of the pressure off him. However, it would take a while for Lucius to go through the army enchanting all the tanks and so forth. A war would help for the intermediate and long term. Short term, however, was a different story.

Fortunately, he had a solution for that as well. Making certain the sliver of U-235 was securely inside its lead container, he called over the Sheikh and Koury. Pointing Choi Yeun's wand at a radiation suit behind him, he Duplicated the suit twice and ordered the two men to put on the duplicates. He then put on his own suit and opened the box.

Koury looked at the small sliver of metal and gasped. "Is that what I think it is, my lord?"

Voldemort nodded. "Yes, Arif. It's pure uranium-235 I extracted from one of the North Korean reactors under construction. I'll make several duplicates of this for you so you can use them for your own purposes. I'd say this would make a pretty good distraction."

The Sheikh touched the piece of metal. As he had hoped, it was warm the touch. Praising Allah enthusiastically, he asked: "Thank you so much! How do we turn it into a bomb?"

Voldemort chuckled. "Have a wizard Geminio it a few times so you can have multiple nukes. Carry the sliver to the target in a knapsack, thermos, Portkey, whatever. To detonate the device, cast Engorgio on the uranium a few times to get it over critical and then a Compressio Maximus to get it to chain reaction density. If I were you, I would put a delayed activation on these spells to give you enough time to get out before the bomb goes off."
Koury whistled. "How big a weapon do you think this will be?"

Voldemort shrugged. "To be honest, I don't really know. My guess, though, is that we should get something about the size of the Nagasaki bomb, somewhere around 25 kilotons. It's a small weapon, as far as nukes go, but it will be enough. At the very least, you will have something to show to the West if the world calls our bluff. The only thing that I ask is that you clear any attempt to use a nuclear weapon with me. Is that all right?"

Both Koury and the Sheikh nodded. They'd probably have agreed to anything just to get their hands on the nukes.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #205
-------------

Tuesday, June 4, 1996
Al-Aqsa Mosque
Jerusalem

-------------
Next PoV: 206 - Stanislav Drakul (who remembers who he is?)
-------------

HORCRUXES LEFT: 1 (cup)
ATLANTIS ALERT STATUS: DEFCON 3

-------------
The Kohen Gadol shook John Paul II's hand warmly. "Thank you for coming, Holiness. I apologize for the short notice."

The pope smiled. "Don't worry about it, I figure your mission takes priority. You're ostensibly my boss now, and when ghosts of biblical legends start telling you that the world is about to blow up, I listen."

"Deborah came to you, didn't she?"

"Yes, Holiness. She said something about God giving up any hope that were redeemable and that unless we did something drastic, God would have no problem in sitting back and let us destroy ourselves."

The Kohen Gadol grimaced. "That's about what Samuel said to me. He said that although God Himself promised Noah that He Himself wouldn't destroy the world once again, He did not rule out having us destroy it for Him."

"That was my interpretation as well. Considering that the whole world is coming to pieces around us, it is more important than ever that we start high-level discussions as soon as possible for unifying the three Abrahamic faiths. We have to convince God, or at least Samuel, that we deserve another chance. Have you seen any sign of Samuel or Deborah since they delivered this ultimatum?"

"No, Holiness, and it's starting to worry me more and more. Samuel has been trying to meddle everywhere ever since he showed up at that ghost conference in New York. The fact that he's suddenly disappeared without a trace is very...unnerving. I suspect God has ordered him back because it was useless to continue the fight."

The pope shuffled his feet. "That's what I'm concerned about as well. I don't know about you, but
everyone who's spoken with me is nervous. Monks have been praying around the clock. There are still people who believe that either Travis Radner, Urban VIII, or I must be the False Prophet and that Voldemort has to be the Antichrist. Even worse, judging from what been happening in North Korea, it's almost believable. There are only so many sermons preaching world peace that one can give before it starts to fall on deaf ears."

The Kohen Gadol looked resigned. "I've been preaching world peace as well and encouraging Christians and Jews to worship at the mosque. For the most part, the worshipers are getting along quite well. There are a few hotheads here or there, but I feel like unifying the faiths is doable, Holiness. We have so much tradition in common."

The pope drew a deep breath. "I sure hope it's doable, or we're in big trouble."

"Amen to that. How have your relations with the Celestines been?"

John Paul winced. "Not good. They refuse to speak to me, instead going through the Papal Nuncio. They say that I need to step down, and if I don't step down they'll declare a crusade against wizards and take me out with their first blow."

The Kohen Gadol thought about it. "Maybe you should step down?"

"I can't, Holiness, as it would imply that Urban VIII has won. The man is a bigot, Suleiman, and I can't let him win as it would be defamation of God's name. Celestine VI is a saintly man -- I know him well. If there was anyone deserving of becoming an antipope, it was he. Urban, on the other hand, is going to be a problem. He has completely warped the teachings of Jesus into policies which could only be appropriate for a witch hunt. It's not just about icons anymore. There are doctrinal differences on witch laws, evolution, the Latin mass -- everything."

"Do you want me to take over? Or Celestine?"

The Pope looked at all the people prostrated on the floor of the mosque. Some were wearing tefillin and some were wearing crosses. The vast majority, of course, were wearing Muslim garb. He never thought he'd see such a sight, and it filled him with pride and awe. It was a beginning, he thought, but only a beginning. He wished Samuel could have seen this.

He turned back to the Kohen Gadol and shook his head. "They won't accept you because you're a Muslim. I can tell you that straight out. As for me stepping down and letting Celestine succeed me, I'm thinking about it. The problem is that Samuel won't --"

The pope's comments were suddenly cut off by a scream from outside the mosque. Frowning, both religious leaders turned to look into the main sanctuary. Many of the men had turned to face the back of the room.

Without warning, one of the Jewish worshipers' heads exploded in a spray of blood. The man collapsed, twitching uncontrollably, to the floor of the sanctuary as an ominous shout echoed throughout the building:

"Muslims for Humans!"

It took a good five seconds for the Kohen Gadol to figure out why the Muslims would have attacked their own shrine. They weren't after the Muslims, he realized. They were after the Jews and Christians. They were trying to purify the Dome of the Rock from the touches of the infidels. If they
realized that John Paul II -- a known wizard -- was here and was speaking to a man whose position as Kohen Gadol had been imposed by a wizard. Even worse, the Kohen Gadol had betrayed the True Faith by letting infidels worship in the sanctuary!

He spun to face the pope just as a man with a cross was shot between the eyes. "I'm going down there. I'm not letting this abomination defile the Temple. Do you have your wand? Are your guards here?"

John Paul reached into his robes and pulled out a wand. "The guards are here, Suleiman, and I'll be able to defend myself. However, you must realize that I will not use magic as weapon. The sight of the Pope attacking Muslims would likely shockwaves around the world. All I will do is cast spells to protect people."

The Kohen Gadol nodded. "Good. Let's go and confront our demons."

The sight of the pope and Kohen Gadol racing down the stairs side by side drew cries of shock and surprise from the Muslim for Humans fanatics. There were about ten of them, all armed with guns. He had no idea how they had managed to get through security, but they had. He had a suspicion that one of the guards could have been a Muslims for Humans sympathizer. There wasn't much he could do about that now, though he made a mental note to figure out who that was once this crisis was over.

That brief moment of surprise had been all that the pope needed. Bringing out his wand, he created a force field separating the attackers from the worshipers. Meanwhile, the pope's Swiss guards, having lost a couple of seconds due to surprise on their own part, arrived and turned their weapons on the attackers. All ten men fell to the ground, dead.

As the Kohen Gadol worked, something odd occurred to him. All of the attackers were men. Granted, no pious Muslim woman would enter the men's section --

The men's section.

The Kohen Gadol suddenly froze in horror. No one was watching the women's section! And if the Pope was busy here --

He glanced towards the women's section and saw movement out of the corner of his eye. A gun flashed, and a bullet hit the Kohen Gadol in the chest.

The pope spun, re-raising the shields around him and the Kohen Gadol as soon as he heard the gunshot. He had lowered the shields once he had blocked off the Muslims for Humans attackers.

He watched in horror as Suleiman collapsed. Furious, he cast Expelliarmus in the direction of the gunshot. There was a high-pitched shout of surprise, and a pistol flew out the women's section and landed a few feet away from the Kohen Gadol's fallen body. Some gunshots in the distance marked the Swiss guards taking out the female attackers.

John Paul cast a healing spell on the fallen imam while ordering the Muggle doctors to treat the other victims. The bleeding stopped, but the man was still in jeopardy. The pope scanned the gunshot victim once again and saw that the man had a collapsed lung with the bullet stuck in it. He was in dire straits and needed help immediately. He didn't know how to heal a collapsed lung with magic -- this had to be done by a trained EMT.
Worshipers and Swiss guards surrounded the pope as he did what he could to help the Kohen Gadol. He cast a couple of more spells to stabilize the injured man's condition as much as he could. Finally, Suleiman I's eyes opened.

"John Paul...if I don't make it...make sure the conference comes to pass...unify the faiths...it is the will of God."

The pope cradled the injured man. "Hold on, Suleiman. Hold on!"

---------

The Kohen Gadol did in fact hold on. Half an hour later, he was in the hospital and undergoing emergency surgery. The doctors were amazed at what the pope had done and were convinced that John Paul had saved the man's life. His secretary Ibrahim would serve as acting Kohen Gadol while Suleiman was convalescing. When asked to choose a regnal name, Ibrahim declined, saying that he did not deserve to be Kohen Gadol and that Samuel had never anointed him. He would still go by Ibrahim and not take advantage of his new position.

Only time would tell if this incident would galvanize three religions into ending almost two thousand years of bloodshed.

To be continued...
Deputy Headmaster Stanislav Drakul stood at the podium in the Great Hall of Durmstrang. Much to his surprise, Headmaster Karkaroff had survived and was working to overthrow Voldemort as a member of the Order of the Phoenix. Drakul wished him well and believed that Igor would be a great asset to the good wizards' cause.

However, he had nearly fallen over when he had received his most recent letter from Karkaroff. He thought he had misread it, and looked it over a couple of more times. It seemed to be saying what he had thought Karkaroff was saying.

Voldemort was in charge of North Korea and could be on the verge of unleashing a wave of Dark magic all across the world. Durmstrang was one of the few Wizarding schools which focused on Dark magic as a specialty, including both offensive and defensive spells. This put Durmstrang's graduates in an excellent position for dealing with Dark wizards. Karkaroff and Drakul both took pride the school's traditions and expertise in this area.

Yet if this document was saying what he thought it was, Karkaroff believed it was time to put those skills into practice. He was recommending that all wizards 17 and above -- and optionally wizards of age 16 -- be drafted into summer lessons to prepare them into become a standing army which would protect the world against Voldemort and any future Dark wizards. Now that the Statute of Secrecy was gone, the temptation for a wizard to take control of Muggle nations -- which Voldemort had already done -- would be extremely powerful, especially before Muggles realized what wizards could and could not do.

The letter included a sample lesson plan derived from the classes developed from Dumbledore's Army. Drakul was amazed at what the students were learning up there. Karkaroff had warned him, however, that these were not official classes and that they would likely not be in session for long. If these lessons were to be maintained long-term, they would have to be taught at Durmstrang.

He agreed to adding the new techniques -- including Muggle self-defense tactics -- to the school's program immediately and ordered that students spend an extra month getting up to speed on these new spells. He was reluctant, however, to send any of students into battle against Voldemort. He loved each and everyone of his students. He didn't like the idea of sending them into harms way. Unfortunately, Karkaroff was right. If he didn't get rid of Voldemort now, Voldemort would likely come to him -- with a vengeance.
So here he was, standing in front of the school, about to give a speech which would draft all wizards age 17 and up and optionally recruit all people of age 16. Classes would be terminated early this year so the teachers could join the army if they wished.

Karkaroff would be visiting Durmstrang in a few days to help start up the first Dumbledore’s Army program outside Britain. He had mentioned the program to a few Swedish wizards and they were all ready to join. If Voldemort was indeed going to try to take over the world, he would have to get through many, many people in order to do so.

Dumbledore had told him horror stories about the First Wizarding War. Many of the events that transpired during that war were in fact horrible. However, there were no Muggles involved, and virtually the entire war was restricted to the British Isles. This Second Wizarding War would be far more deadly. At the rate things were going, it could escalate into World War III -- with wizards, nukes, or both.

Drawing a deep breath, he started his speech. For the next twenty minutes, students listened attentively and slowly began to nod their heads. Finally, he reached the end and asked volunteers to raise their hands.

No one raised their hands at first. Drakul was about to chastise the students for their cowardice where the back door opened and a tall, muscular wizard walked into the room. It was Victor Krum, age eighteen, with a top-of-the-line Quidditch broom in his hand. Silently, he walked to the podium and raised his hand. The man looked about as determined as he did during a World Cup match. Reaching out with his right hand, the Triwizard contestant dropped his broom on the floor and put his left hand on his wand. He then announced: "I volunteer".

That opened the floodgates. Hands went up all over the room.

Drakul was stunned by the students' response. None of the seventeen-year-olds had complained, and a good 90% of the sixteen-year-olds had joined. He’d even been forced to turn back a good 60% of the fourth and fifth year students on the grounds that they were likely not experienced enough to be a good soldier. What was even more amazing was the fact that the word had gone out via owls and a good half of the students' families had volunteered to join the army. Most of them were experienced wizards now, and the vast majority had been taught at Durmstrang. He would probably have at least 700 people fighting Voldemort.

He took down everybody's names and sent the list to Karkaroff. He was about to leave when another owl swooped into the owlery and landed next to him. There was a package in its beak with his name on it and a letter from Albus Dumbledore. Drakul reached for the letter and opened it.

Dear Deputy Headmaster Drakul:

As you know, Headmaster Karkaroff and I are working diligently on plans to remove Voldemort from power in North Korea. We are going to focus on magical solutions to the this problem and leave the Muggles to deal with mundane solutions.

What I am about to tell you is considered top secret. If anyone finds out other than possibly Dialonis, we are going to have big problems.

First, a bit of background. You may have heard of the Tale of the Three Brothers. I have reason to believe that this old wives’ tale is in fact true. You see, the Elder Wand actually exists. And I am its
We have reason to believe that Voldemort is looking for the Elder Wand in order to increase his power. It is only a matter of time until he finds it as his spies are almost certainly everywhere. However, I know something about the Elder Wand which may work to our advantage.

Mastership of the Elder Wand is transferred between people through murder and subjugation -- that is, you become the wand's master by killing or subduing its prior one. The important thing is that such an act must be done without using magic as any attempt to duel the wand's master magically will inevitably fail because the Elder Wand will defeat any opponent.

One of the side effects of this is that if a person holding the wand who is not the wand's true master tries to attack the true master with the wand, the attack will backfire and strike the caster. I am the wand's master, and I am going to be joining the coalition against Voldemort.

Here is what I am thinking. In this package is the Elder Wand. I want you to place it somewhere in Sweden where Voldemort might be able to find it. Since he is not the wand's true master, he will not actually be able to do anything unusual with it. When it comes time to attack Voldemort, I will argue that it doesn't make any sense for hundreds of wizards to kill each other. Instead, I will challenge Voldemort to a duel to the death. Voldemort, thinking his wand is invincible, will accept. He will then attack me and destroy himself in the process.

I know, it's a gamble. However, consider it. In a fight like this, we need all the help we can get.

If you choose to go along with this plan, hide the wand and send back a message telling us where you put it. If you think it's too dangerous, state your reason and return the wand along with that note. Although it's your decision, I urge you to go along with it. As long as I myself am not killed -- which I highly doubt will happen as I, quite frankly, am one of the most powerful wizards on the planet -- there is no chance of the wand's mastership passing to a Death Eater.

I look forward to your favorable response.

Sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore

To be continued...

-------------
Update #207
-------------
Monday, June 10, 1996 -- 10 DAYS TO JUDGMENT DAY
169 South Street
Waltham, Massachusetts
United States of America

-------------
Next PoV: 208 - Lowne Paolte

-------------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 1 (cup)
ATLANTIS ALERT STATUS: DEFCON 3

-------------
The opening headline on the morning news broadcast said it all. QUABBIN WATER SAFE TO
Finally, I thought. No more water restrictions! Although they mentioned that drought-level conservation policies would be in effect until the reservoir refilled -- for instance, limited watering of gardens and lawns -- people could use it for bathing, drinking, and showering once more.

Dealing with the water shortages had been difficult. I had slowly gotten accustomed to showering only once a week. What I hadn't gotten accustomed to, however, was the fact that people who didn't shower often tended to smell pretty bad. Deodorant had flown off the shelves as soon as it came in. Granted, even nobles back in the 15th century didn't shower often and didn't have a problem with it. But their society didn't have as much of a fetish for cleanliness as ours did.

Many of the restaurants in Waltham had gone out of business. Cappy's Pizza, at the intersection of South Street and Turner Street near Parametric, had managed to survive by the skin of its teeth. Granted, its food wasn't all that great, but it was one of the lucky ones. A good half of the places on Moody Street had folded, especially chains which figured that they could sacrifice one or two places and not have it make a dent in their profits. Early on, right after the attack, restaurants had tried to survive by taking water out of the Charles and boiling it. Unfortunately, there were things people threw into the Charles -- almost certainly illegally -- which still managed to pollute the water even after it was boiled.

Cambridge was bursting at the seams as people were trying to escape from the areas with the water shortages into the sole city with a functional water supply. Although Cambridge had promised to let the rest of the state use its water, the fact remained that Cambridge got the lion's share of the Fresh Pond Reservoir's supply. They had experienced waterless days only once a week instead of the customary six. House and condo prices in Cambridge -- already sky-high -- went into the stratosphere. Studios were going for $1800 per month, and one-bedrooms were topping $2300. The young adult community which had grown up around MIT and Harvard was in the process of being forced out of the city and being replaced by frantic homeowners from places like Wellesley and Weston. Several Brandeis students who were thinking of moving to Cambridge, such as Erica Schultz, were finding that they were stuck in Waltham for the foreseeable future.

Brandeis students were losing weight in a hurry. Forced to import water -- and in some cases food -- from places like Northampton and Providence instead of the local Shaw's, the food services division the meal prices had gone up drastically. A typical lunch which had cost $4 suddenly cost $7.50. The Stein bar and restaurant had raised its prices to over $10 for a fish sandwich. As if that hadn't been bad enough, the Kosher kitchen had once been desperate enough to bring an unauthorized product into the building to try to service a lot of people in a hurry. The kitchen had lost its Kosher license for a couple of weeks, putting all of the students who kept strictly Kosher -- and I knew many of them -- in a REAL bind. Many of them inevitably wound up going to Harvard and MIT Hillel for food. Judging from what I recalled of the typical non-Friday night MIT Hillel meals, I hoped that they would be all right with simple cold cuts.

Many people had tried to drink water from the Charles or the harbor and had gotten sick. The hospitals were filled with people with diarrhea and other gastrointestinal ailments. One poor fellow who had forgotten to boil his water wound up dying when some parasite in the water began interpreting his digestive system as a food source.

Well, we didn't have to worry about water anymore. The faucets were on, and they were on for good. It was time to take a long shower for the first time in a month.

The news continued, and the announcer mentioned that the Pitmoss trial was finally underway.
There had been some haggling over whether Pitmoss had to be tried by a Wizarding tribunal or by a Muggle court, and eventually the Wizarding tribunal had won out. Unlike in Muggle courts, where photography and recording was prohibited, the wizards encouraged Muggles to see their world and welcomed Muggle camera crews. Besides, both Muggles and wizards had been killed in this attack.

Normally, Pitmoss would have been tried by the Supreme Court of the American Wizarding Community. Unfortunately, the Supreme Court had been in the town of Dana, which meant that it was currently inhabited by fish which weren't particularly interested in conducting a trial. The trial had therefore been moved to the Smoky Mountain Facility, the regional Wizarding headquarters for the Mid-Atlantic.

The courtroom looked like something out of the Thomas Covenant series: glowing green orbs of light illuminating the room and a stern man in a wig presiding over the court. The reporters indicated that they felt depressed, cold, and sad, as if all joy had been leached out of their lives. The wizards explained that it was due to the presence of a creature known as a dementor which was invisible to Muggles.

The trial nearly ended before it began. As soon as Pitmoss entered the room, no fewer than six people short green bolts at him. They crashed into an invisible screen a few feet away from, and the judge banged his gavel and told everyone that he was innocent until proven guilty. Granted, there was no way in hell that he was going to be found innocent, but formalities had to be observed here. The judge warned that if the trial had any irregularities, he would be forced to release the prisoner and order a new trial. The idea of Pitmoss running around once more silenced the wizards in a hurry, and the trial continued without further interruptions.

Most of the Muggles wanted Pitmoss sentenced to the death penalty. The judges explained although that was an option, there was something even worse which Pitmoss could be subjected to. He didn't want to ruin the surprise, however, and said that he'd say what it was after the trial was over. Oddly enough, the reporters all remarked that the room had gotten much colder, more depressing, and more frightening a few seconds after he made the announcement -- even though there had been no visible change in the atmosphere.

The news went on after that with the traditional fires, car accidents, and so forth. Countries were all issuing sanctions against the wizard in North Korea, Israeli tanks were chasing Hamas all over the West Bank, and the first few operations had been conducted in Afghanistan against al-Qaeda. Most of the attacks so far had been ineffective as the wizards and troops had scattered as soon as the threat became obvious. This would be a long, hard-fought battle. Finally, someone had sued a British citizen named Harrison Cooper for -- of all things -- biting him on a cruise ship. I couldn't help but chuckle at that: one person bit another? What could this Cooper have had? Rabies?

The Red Sox had won 7-4, and it would be sunny with a high of 71. Big deal.

I turned off the TV and headed to the bathroom to take a shower. As it turned out, I would have to wait a good two or three days for my long shower. So many people had been thinking the same thing I had -- taking long showers at the same time -- that the water pressure had dropped to the point where almost no one could shower at all.

To be continued...

Update #208

Wednesday, June 12, 297 AG (1996 AD) -- 8 DAYS TO JUDGMENT DAY
Lowne Paolte was the talk of the town. A third of the people wanted to kill him, a third of the people wanted to take him out for dinner, and a third of the people wanted to move in with him.

Most of the people in the first group were those whose houses had been ruined once again by the flood. They had immediately started complaining that if he knew how to prevent the water from getting in, why didn't he save their houses as well? Lowne tried to explain that he wasn't sure that it was going to work to begin with, but for some reason that didn't help. All he could do was offer to help with the magic to clean out their basements.

The rest of the people whose houses had been damaged were offering to pay him large numbers of Galleons to rent them rooms in his house while their houses were being cleaned up. Lowne had to turn most of them down because he simply didn't have enough space to house them all. How could he admit one person and not another? Eventually, he was forced to prioritize the potential tenants by requiring that he visit each of their houses so that he could make sure to admit the people whose houses had suffered the worst damage.

He didn't think that renting out some of the extra guest rooms would be much of a hassle. The house had several extra rooms now that his wife had left him and had taken the kids with her. Although the extra income would be useful -- particularly for alimony settlements -- the sheer fact was that half of these people were slobs! One man had turned his daughter's former bedroom into a bachelor pad where he left junk all over the floor. Lowne was a bit of a neat freak and delicately asked the tenants to clean up after themselves -- otherwise, he'd be raising their rent. That helped tidy the house in a hurry.

Several Laputan news broadcasters had visited his house and had congratulated him on keeping out the water. He said that the spell was easy and that he would be able to teach it to other people once he got it perfected. When asked if he thought that the spell would be able to deal with a hundred-year-flood, he said that he thought it would work but didn't know for sure. Hopefully, he would never get a chance to test this hypothesis.

He had initially considered teaching people the water repelling spell for a small fee. This, of course, had been a mistake as word had leaked out and one of the priests started complaining that he should be doing this as a public service. Taken aback, Lowne had immediately retracted the fee. He figured he'd be able to make money off his new tenants, at least.

Cooking was soon going to be an issue. He could Geminio food, of course, but half of the people had dietary restrictions so he couldn't make one course for all of them and duplicate it to his heart's content. This was a time he really wished he had his wife around.

He was busy roasting a leg of chicken when he heard a commotion outside his house. Dropping the chicken back in the oven, he looked up. What he saw made his eyes widen, and he dropped to one knee.
Hovering in the air a few dozen feet away was the Golden Carriage of the High Priest of Laputa. It was drawn by six pegasi and two thestrals. The thestrals supposedly were there to remind the High Priest that ruling Laputa wasn't all fun and games. Granted, Lowne couldn't see the thestrals, and supposedly the High Priest couldn't either. However, the fact that there was were blatantly obvious gaps in the train between two of the unicorns made it obvious SOMETHING was there.

The door to the carriage opened, and someone kicked out the Ruby Stairs. A few seconds later, the High Priest stepped out of the carriage.

Utlar III was almost six feet tall and in his late fifties. He had gone prematurely bald, but like many High Priests he considered it inappropriate to glorify his body through magic when he could be working to help Laputa.

Lowne suddenly felt uncomfortable. He had a strong suspicion who Utlar wanted to talk to. His suspicion was confirmed when His Excellency and his bodyguards walked over to him and bade him to rise. How the hell was he supposed to talk to the ruler of the realm?

Lowne stood and bowed deeply. "Good afternoon, Your Excellency. How can I help you?"

Utlar shook his hand. "I've come to offer you congratulations and a possible job offer. From what I've been hearing, you've managed to develop a spell which will help protect our homes from these floods as the sea level rises."

Lowne bit his lip. Delicately, he said. "Your Excellency, I'm flattered. However, I have no idea how well this will work against larger floods. For all we know, we will all start relying on this charm only to find that when the Big One hits it will collapse and catch us all unawares."

The High Priest smiled. "Well, something's better than nothing, and we may have time to prepare for the big one. Now to my offer. Would you be willing to surround Laergib City with a force field similar to the one you used for your house? You'll probably have to move to the capital to maintain it, I'd think. If that becomes necessary, I'll pay for any relocation fees."

Lowne didn't know what to say. "Your Excellency, I'm flattered --"

Utlar cut in again. "Oh, and did I mention that if the shield survives the next flood, you'll be elevated to the first level of priesthood?"

Lowne stared at him. The priesthood -- known in other cultures as the aristocracy -- had most of the power in Laputa and were among the few people who would ever get the chance to interact with Muggles. Several high-ranking priests served as representatives for Laputa in the Galiver Senate, where they hobnobbed with giants from Brobdingnag, fairies from Lilliput, and other races. A first-level priest wouldn't be able to do much of that -- it was roughly equivalent to a European knight. However, it would get him into the upper class and make him eligible for future promotions.

This was a very good deal. Smiling at the High Priest, he bowed. "Your Excellency, I'll take it."

The High Priest thanked him profusely and escorted him to the Golden Carriage. Or at least tried to as hundreds of people started screaming him to protect their houses before he left.

To be continued...
-----------------
Update #209
There was a flash of light, and Arif Koury rematerialized in the mountains of Afghanistan. The time
to come to test Voldemort's theory that an Engorgio/Compressio sequence would successfully
generate a nuclear explosion.

They had spent a few days going over the map determining where and when to perform the test.
Koury had issued several strict guidelines for determining ground zero. First, the area within ten
miles of the site had to be uninhabited -- killing Afghans would just earn al-Qaeda, and likely
Voldemort, another enemy. Second, the wind had to be blowing in a direction which would take the
fallout far away from any populated areas. Finally, the explosion had to take place in a location
which would contain the blast and prevent the shock wave from striking the al-Qaeda agents in case
Voldemort had underestimated the device's yield.

After several hours of preparation, the device was ready. The al-Qaeda operatives had melted down
the little sliver of uranium and formed it into a ball, a shape appropriate for compression. The ball had
responded nicely to an Engorgio Minimus spell, doubling in size but still remaining well under
critical mass. Reverting the uranium core back to its original size, the team attempted a Compressio
Minimus. The little ball shrank to half its former size, but its mass didn't change. Its density had
increased, just as Voldemort had predicted. Finally, the team combined the Engorgio Minimus and
Compressio Minimus. The ball's size stayed the same, but its mass had increased by a factor of eight.
The results looked promising.

The test site turned out to be the location of a small, abandoned ghost town. An old sign painted on a
fallen wall read, "Welcome to Seven Hills Mine". Koury looked around the area, trying to find seven
hills. There weren't seven hills. However, there were seven mountains visible from his vantage point.
The town had lain in a valley surrounded by these peaks.

Koury knew that Muggles were always trying to extract bizarre minerals from mountains, and
judging from the equipment left in the deserted city this was a former mining camp. He had a vision
of someone shouting he'd discovered gold, five hundred people rushing to this location, and a few
months later five hundred people leaving the town when they realized there wasn't enough gold to
make extraction profitable.

The fact that there was a deserted town near ground zero would also be helpful. He would be able to
see first hand how buildings would fare against a weapon of this size. He suspected that Seven Hills
would be wiped off the map, completely destroyed by the blast. Although the terrorists' calculations
indicated that some of the buildings on the outskirts would not be vaporized, the fact that they were
half-collapsed to begin with didn't bode well for their survival. Bringing his thoughts back to the
moment, he hurried to the center of town, where the team was gathered around a small knapsack.
Inside the knapsack was the uranium sphere.

Koury had insisted that the test be conducted in precisely the same manner that it would have had
had this been an actual mission against a Western target. The terrorist would deliver the weapon to
the target using a knapsack or Portkey, and the sphere would be encased in lead to ensure that no harm came to the carrier. Once the device was in place, the wizard would Apparate in and start the detonation sequence. Once the bomb was armed, the wizard would clasp the carrier's hand and Apparate them both to safety before the timer expired.

True to form, an agent had delivered the sphere to Seven Hills in a knapsack. Normally, he would have done so alone. However, since this was a test and no one knew what the device would actually do (if anything), a whole team of people had set up video cameras which would record the blast. Some of the cameras were mounted on top of the peaks surrounding the doomed town. Others were mounted outside the cordon hills.

The man who had carried the bomb nodded and turned to Koury. "Well, I think we're all set. The wind seems to blowing in the right direction, and the helicopter doesn't see anyone in sight. I'd say it's a go. It's your call, however. You're the wizard. We can't do it without you."

Arif nodded and turned to face the rest of the terrorists. "May Allah grant us success today. Gentlemen, we proceed. Have everyone other than Rashad and me board the helicopter and get out of here. You know where the base camp is set up -- on the far side of that mountain, twelve kilometers way, where we will be protected from the shock wave to some extent and we won't be hit by the burst of light. Everyone dive into the ditch as soon as they get out of the chopper, close your eyes, lie on the ground, and put your hands over your heads. Do not move until the shock wave passes you by."

The team nodded and boarded the helicopter. A few minutes later, the wizard and Rashad were left alone in the town.

Rashad looked around the city. He seemed nervous. Koury noticed and asked, "Second thoughts?"

Rashad squirmed somewhat. "I must confess, Arif, that although blowing up people with conventional bombs is an honorable way to wage war, this is...well..."

Koury finished his statement. "Overkill?"

Rashad winced, but nodded. "Well, yes. The idea of killing hundreds of thousands of people -- "

Koury needed to cut this off immediately. "Would you prefer that the West continue their crusade against us, destroying our livelihood and religion? I'm sorry, Rashad, but this is war. Hopefully we won't have to use this weapon against the Americans or anyone else. Let us pray that Allah in His wisdom convinces Clinton to pull out of here. Now, if you would excuse me, I've got to arm the bomb."

Hesitantly, Rashad moved away and Koury approached the bomb. Now that the time had arrived, even he was having second thoughts. However, he pushed them out of his mind. What he was about to do would change the world forever. Had Voldemort even considered the possibility that the Dark Lord would wind up ruling a world of radioactive ruins? Koury steeled himself, however. He was a wizard and disciplined man. He would do what was necessary to further his -- and Voldemort's -- cause.

He placed a stasis field around the uranium sphere which would inhibit all spells for sixty seconds after they were cast. Once all that was done, he pointed his weapon at the little uranium sphere, barely visible on a piece of broken asphalt.
"Engorgio Maximus! Compressio Maximus!"

The ball glowed as the stasis field absorbed the spells. Meanwhile, Rashad pressed a button on his wristwatch, and numbers began flickering.

01:00
00:59
00:58

Koury pocketed his wand and grabbed Rashad's arm. "Let's get out of here! Now!"

-----------------

All of the operatives were heads down in the trench. Rashad screamed, "Ten seconds! Brace yourselves! Three, two, one, zero!"

Nothing happened for a couple of seconds. Then all hell broke loose as spells attached to the cameras placed on the mountaintops started screaming tones corresponding to code signals into the trench.

Sensors on camera 1 incinerated.
Sensors on camera 2 incinerated.
Camera 1 on fire.
Camera 2 incinerated.
Camera 3 incinerated.
Camera 4 reports bright light in distance.
Camera 4 blown off its moorings.

Many of the agents screamed in joy when they heard this. Camera 4 was a good five kilometers from ground zero. It would take a hell of a big explosion to knock it out.

Koury yelled at everyone to stay down and wait for the sound. His voice was barely audible over the celebrating people.

Then the shock wave hit. The sound was deafening, and Koury worried his eardrums would burst. Rocks flew everywhere, and the tent which had housed the base camp went flying. Waiting a good ten seconds for everything to subside, Koury told everyone to stay down as he cast a spell of radiation resistance and protection around himself. He had to see!

He stood up and took a peek out of the trench. One of the mountaintops had been sheared off, as if by a giant razor. Towering above the mountains was a roiling mushroom cloud.

He made a quick back of the envelope calculation of the device's yield and came up with twenty-five kilotons, just like what Voldemort had predicted.

They did it! They actually did it!

----------------------

Stephen Pitmoss was alone in the empty room. He had been pronounced guilty and sentenced to an odd punishment he had never heard of before. The judge explained that that the punishment was the most severe one a Wizarding court could hand out, and that it would be carried out at 6:00 AM on the 13th.

Well, it was 6:00 and the room was still empty. Had they decided to spare his life? He couldn't understand why they would have, but perhaps there had been an irregularity in --
Suddenly he felt biting cold. All of his confidence melted away to be replaced with virtually every single negative memory he had ever felt. He screamed in horror. What was this? He couldn't see anything!

Something grabbed his head and turned it so it faced upwards. What was this? Was it an invisible monster? He --

There was a terrible sucking sound, and Stephen Pitmoss ceased to exist.

Anastasios Dialonis's blood drained from his face as he read the report.

"Are you sure about this?"

The courier nodded. "Yes. Absolutely sure. There's been a nuclear explosion in Afghanistan, the nation which is believed to be the headquarters of al-Qaeda. We have it at 23 kT in an uninhabited area. I suspect from the location that it is being used as a test firing."

Dialonis shook his head in disbelief. "Take us to DEFCON 2. I'll be right there."

"Yes, sir."

To be continued...

Update #210

Thursday, June 13, 1996 -- 7 DAYS TO JUDGMENT DAY
Northern Sweden
0342Z

Lord Voldemort stepped into a Muggle bathroom, wriggled his way out of Chang Sung-Taek's uniform, and used magic to unlock one of the supply closets. The door popped open, and he shoved in the uniform. He then waved his wand and conjured a set of Muggle clothing. Grinning, he changed clothes and left the bathroom dressed like an ordinary Korean man in his sixties.

Normally, he wouldn't have left North Korea at a time like this now that things were coming to a head. The United Nations was screaming at him to step down and let a Muggle take over because the sanctions were taking a drastic toll on the population. Voldemort had laughed when he had heard that. The sanctions were worthless as Voldemort could just Geminio everything. These stupid Muggles had no idea what a powerful wizard like himself could do.

Usually, he would have sent Lucius or one of the Indians on this mission. However, this was probably the one thing which he would have to do himself. He had to be the one to master the Elder Wand, not Lucius or anyone else.

He made his way over to the house owned by the owner of the Elder Wand. Even though it was two in the morning, the sun shone brightly. Even the Dark Lord, who was a great wizard, couldn't get himself to believe that there were times of the year where the sun never set.
Making sure no one was around -- which wasn't hard because everyone was asleep -- he pulled out his wand, disabled the burglar alarm, and unlocked the door. Silent as a mouse, he crept into the house and closed the door behind him.

He cast Revelio Hominem to locate his prey, and within two minutes he was standing above a sleeping man in his thirties. The man was alone in the bedroom and clad in a red set of pajamas. Next to him, on the coffee table, was the Elder Wand.

The man had an odd tattoo on his neck. Voldemort took a closer look and saw that it was a Durmstrang symbol warning people that the man was a condemned criminal who needed to be reported to authorities immediately. Apparently the man had managed to escape death row and was hiding out among the Muggles, who would not recognize the tattoo. Clever bastard, Voldemort thought. However, it wasn't going to help him here. Come to think of it, the people from Durmstrang would probably give him a medal for this!

The fact that his opponent wasn't holding the Elder Wand made a messy killing unnecessary. Grinning, Voldemort hit the man with an Avada Kedavra. The green flash subsided, and the man looked exactly the same as he had before, lying there motionless in the bed. Voldemort double-checked that the man was dead and took the Elder Wand.

He may have been powerful before, but he was invincible now.

-------------
NORAD Headquarters
Cheyenne Mountain
0421Z [evening of June 12th local time]
-------------
Bradley Stepp was awakened from his nap by the insistent beeping of his computer monitor. Cursing himself for falling asleep on duty -- he'd probably get reprimanded for this by his manager -- he turned to the display to figure out what had happened.

He froze when he saw the readout. This had to be a malfunction. It had to be. The computer was reporting a small nuclear detonation in the mountains of Afghanistan. It was estimating the weapon's yield to be around 23 kT.

He double-checked the data and was horrified to see that there had been a double-flash signature. There were very few things other than a nuke that could produce a double-flash signature.

Stepp frowned for a moment. No one used nukes that small anymore. Although still terribly destructive, the bomb was about the size of the one dropped on Nagasaki. Who would --

He answered his own question: al-Qaeda. They were based in Afghanistan. They had figured out how to make nuclear weapons and had detonated this one in the mountains as a test.

Or as a warning to any nation who was trying to attack them.

Al-Qaeda had already attacked a site in the US once. If they did it again now that they had a nuke --

Stepp reached for the phone. His manager had to hear about this immediately.

-------------
West Bank
0652Z
Eliezer ben Dor was closing in on the Hamas tank when his communicator began ringing insistently. He swore and activated it. It was just his luck that his commanding officer would call at the moment Eliezer found the tank. The tank was going to get away -- now that he had only one arm, he couldn't use the communicator and drive his own tank at the same time anymore.

He spoke into the communicator. "Ben Dor!"

His manager sounded frantic. "Pull back! Do you hear me? Pull back! Abort!"

Eliezer grunted in surprise. "Abort? Why? I've just about got the guy!"

"It's not just you, Eliezer! We're stopping all actions against Hamas!"

Eliezer swore. "What? Why? Those bastards have been killing our people!"

"I can respond in one sentence, Eliezer. Al-Qaeda just detonated a nuke! And one of their demands is that we stop harassing Hamas."

Eliezer couldn't believe it. "We don't give into terrorism! Has Netanyahu gone mad? Besides, are you certain it's a nuke?"

"We're certain. We've got confirmation from various sources, including NORAD. It's in the mountains of Afghanistan and is about the size of the Nagasaki bomb. The area is uninhabited and it appears to be a test firing."

"Shit!"

"Tell me about it, Eliezer. At any rate, don't be so sure we'll give up. We're just buying time until we can figure out what to do! Now call off the pursuit and get out of there!"

Eliezer nodded. "Yes, sir. Ben Dor out."

He deactivated the communicator and turned the tank around. He didn't like where this was heading. He didn't like it at all.

-------------

White House
0704Z
-------------

The secure phone rang in the White House bedroom, jarring Clinton out of his sleep. Hoping that the sleeping woman lying next to him wouldn't wake up, he grabbed the headset before it could ring again.

He had a scary thought that it was Hillary. If Hillary caught him like this...well, that would be a problem.

Then he noticed the color of the phone. It was the red one. The one that connected to NORAD. His face grew ashen. Emergency calls from NORAD were probably the one thing more troubling than a call from his wife in these circumstances.

He spoke into the phone. "General, what's going on?"
The head of NORAD spoke into the phone. "Mr. President, I apologize for waking you, but there's been an incident. We've detected a nuclear explosion in the mountains of Afghanistan. Estimated yield is 23 kT. We suspect that it's an al-Qaeda bomb."

Clinton was speechless for a good ten seconds. Son of a bitch, al-Qaeda actually had bombs! And they were willing to use them. It appeared that Radner had underestimated how ruthless those SOB's could be. He suspected that Radner's 1 in 5 had just become 3 in 5 or worse.

The general spoke urgently. "Mr. President, do you copy?"

Clinton finally found his voice. "Yes, General. I copy. How confident are you that this is not a false alarm?"

"We've got a double-flash signature, sir. Confidence is very high."

Clinton thought back to the movie WarGames. "Has there been any unusual Internet activity in and around NORAD?"

"We've checked for that, sir. Nothing. This isn't WarGames or a cyberattack. Furthermore, we're getting reports from the USGS as well. They've picked up an earthquake in that area consistent with a 23 kT surface blast."

"Where's ground zero?"

"Ground zero is the site of an abandoned mining town whose translates to English as Seven Hills. The remains of the town have been completely destroyed. We suspect that they did the test there to see how buildings responded to the blast."

Clinton's mind reeled as he tried to figure out what to do. He tried to recall al-Qaeda's demands -- now that they had actually demonstrated the willingness to use nukes, he might have to consider them.

Suddenly, something occurred to him. Al-Qaeda had demanded that he withdraw from Afghanistan. Ordinary troops wouldn't be much good against wizards, and al-Qaeda was known to have wizards. He could just recall the Muggle troops and replace them with a hotshot team of wizards and Delta Force people like the group that was being assembled to go to North Korea. It would be like the operation against Dilmi but much, much larger. And much more devastating. Hopefully the feigned retreat would buy time for people to think of a better option.

There were two problems, however. First, he wasn't sure that he could afford to divert many wizards to Afghanistan while everyone was getting ready to deploy to North Korea. Second, the al-Qaeda nuclear threat was classified, as would be the Delta Force mission to take out the terrorist organization in the aftermath of the Seven Hills nuclear test. This meant that the only thing the Americans would hear about would be a retreat from Afghanistan with nothing to replace it. They probably wouldn't like it. Was he willing to sacrifice the November election for the sake of safety and security of the American people?

He hoped he would not have to make this decision.

To be continued...
Update #211 through Update #215

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Mislagnissa

Update #211
---------
Friday, June 14, 1996 -- 6 DAYS TO JUDGMENT DAY
1900Z
Western Wall
Jerusalem
---------
Next PoV: 212 - Bill Clinton
---------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 1 (cup)
ATLANTIS ALERT STATUS: DEFCON 2
---------
Dressed in the garb of a religious Jew and Polyjuiced by the wizard, the Sheikh joined the throng of people heading for the Western Wall. They searched him -- he had nothing on him other than a camera -- and let him proceed to the foot of the wall. They warned him, however, that he should try to avoid taking photographs out of respect for the worshipers' Sabbath beliefs. Judging from the rest of the tourists' responses, there were still a few people taking pictures. This probably meant he could get away with it, and even if he was escorted out his mission would have been completed anyway.

His mission was to photograph a location to deliver the Portkeyed missile to. The wizard could not create a Portkey without first envisioning the target in his mind. Since the wizard had never been to the wall before, he wouldn't know where to aim. And even if he had a picture, someone had to scout the area out and tell everyone where the Jewish pilgrims were.

He followed the rest of the men towards the wall, letting the crowd take him towards the largest concentration of people. Shortly before reaching the wall, he pulled back and took out his camera. He snapped a quick picture with top-of-the-line digital camera, feigned surprise, apologize to the pilgrims, and left the plaza.

Once out of sight of the wall, he grabbed an old newspaper he had placed in his robe. The newspaper was a Portkey which sent him back to the operation's headquarters ten miles or so away in the mountains. From this vantage point, the Hamas operatives had a clear view of the city of Jerusalem.

He brought out the camera and showed the photograph to the wizard. "There's your target. Throw the missile in there and it will probably knock out the wall, kill off a bunch of the pilgrims, and hopefully drop a few of those big stones on the rest of their heads."

The wizard nodded and gestured to the man next to him. The man walked over to the Disillusioned missile and armed its rocket engine. The charm wouldn't prevent people from seeing the missile's exhaust, but at that point it would be too late for the Zionists to stop it. The wizard then stepped to the weapon, tapped it with his wand, and said "Portus".

The missile glowed for a few moments. Everything was all set. Telling everyone to run for cover, he had one of the Muggles arm the weapon. Asking Allah for luck on this mission, he launched the weapon at the target.
The missile disappeared. Seconds later, it reappeared in midair a few hundred feet away from the wall. The rocket engine fired, and the missile flew into the base of the wall.

There was a tremendous explosion. Blocks of stone flew everywhere, and the Sheikh could have sworn he could hear the screams from here. The missile was likely to take out a good third of the wall and maybe a good fifty or so pilgrims. The operatives congratulated themselves and drove away just as helicopters and fire engines started racing towards the scene.

Al-Qaeda's nuke was going to make things easier for them. Hamas could attack Israel, but Israel couldn't attack Hamas!

The Sheikh wondered at what point they should finish the job, nuke Tel Aviv, and warn Israel that they would keep on nuking cities until the State of Israel agreed to dissolve itself and surrender all its land to the Palestinians.

------------
0042Z on the 15th
Pyongyang
------------

Arif Koury chuckled. "Rashad, that's brilliant. You're thinking of leaking the information about the nuclear test onto the Internet so that we can scare the Israelis and Americans? That will work well with sending the tapes to CNN, Reuters, the BBC, and other locations outside the US."

Rashad nodded. "That's right, Arif. Judging from the ordinary Americans' and Israelis' reaction to the initial nuclear bluff, I get the impression that the governments classified the information. Terrorism won't work all that will if the ordinary citizens don't get terrified. Well, I doubt that Clinton and Netanyahu can block all Internet access, let alone newspapers."

Koury frowned. "Might they be able to use wizards to do so?"

Rashad shook his head. "I doubt it. Remember what happened after the Super Bowl. The information spread too quickly for your people to contain it. Besides, what have we got to lose? We might as well try it."

Koury nodded. "Can't hurt. Do you know someone familiar enough with computers to do such a thing and who has access to the Internet?"

Rashad nodded. "Layali Nahas does. She's got a degree in computer science from Caltech. It's a pity we lost Siddiqui -- she'd have worked as well. However, Allah works in mysterious ways."

"Good. Let's throw the fear of Allah into our enemy."

To be continued...

------------
Update #212
------------
Saturday, June 15, 1996 -- 5 DAYS TO JUDGMENT DAY
0831Z
Oval Office
White House
Washington, DC
United States of America
Bill Clinton was tired. He felt like he hadn't slept for a week. Yet here he was, still at his office at 4:30 in the morning. His body told him that he needed to sleep, yet his duty to his country came first.

The familiar blonde woman usually at his side pleaded with him to go to sleep. His wife did, too. It wasn't often that the two women actually agreed on something. He promised both of them that he'd take at least a four-hour nap at the end of this day.

The situation did not look good. Hamas had just Portkeyed another missile into Jerusalem, knocking out the Western Wall -- the holiest site in Judaism -- and killing 15 pilgrims. Suleiman I, still in the hospital, had issued a fatwa pronouncing a death sentence on the leader of Hamas, the enigmatic man known as the Sheikh, but it didn't do much good. Even worse, much to the horror of American Jews, Israel had only put up a token response. It seemed as if they had given up in the fight against Hamas even though they had the superior military.

Clinton knew why, of course. Al-Qaeda had indicated that both Israel and the United States could suffer nuclear strikes if the West didn't give in to Koury's demands. Judging from what he had heard from Benjamin Netanyahu, the new Prime Minister, the Israeli government had cut back on the pursuit of Hamas so that it could buy time to figure out what to do next. Netanyahu had classified the al-Qaeda nuclear test, however, so none of the civilians in America or Israel could tell why the Israelis had suddenly backed off.

Clinton wasn't faring much better in the United States, either. His announcement that he would stop the flow of troops and materiel into Afghanistan had caused an uproar in the electorate. His approval rating had dropped by eleven points and Bob Dole, his Republican opponent in the November election, was calling him Bill Chicken. At the rate things were going, he would probably be out of a job come January.

He had to do something. But what? If he told the people the truth, the citizens would panic and flee the cities in droves even though there was no indication that al-Qaeda had chosen a target, let alone one in the United States!

There was a knock on the door. Rubbing his eyes, he told the secretary to admit the newcomer. The door opened, and Radner entered the room with the Secretary of Defense.

The Secretary of Defense didn't mince words. "Mr. President, we've got even a bigger problem than we realize. We have uncovered intelligence which ties al-Qaeda and Hamas to locations in North Korea. There is a distinct possibility that all our troops are going after a feint."

Clinton swore. "How the hell are they able to coordinate attacks in the Middle East while operating out of North Korea?"

The Secretary of Magic drew a deep breath. "You're not going to like this, sir. However, the intelligence seems to be conclusive. Both terror organizations are working for Voldemort. It is increasingly obvious that the British wizard is trying to take over the world and he's using the threat of nuclear terrorism to force people to listen to him."
Radner bored in. "Everything is starting to fall into place now. The security cameras covering the Western Wall got a good shot of the most recent missile as it closed in on the wall. It had North Korean markings on it. Voldemort is supplying al-Qaeda and Hamas with both wizards and weapons. And, as we are now unfortunately aware, nukes created by magic and fueled by uranium taken from an experimental nuclear reactor outside of Pyongyang."

"Shit! We need to get rid of that madman posthaste!"

The Secretary of Defense nodded. "I agree, Mr. President. However, I get the distinct impression that any attack on North Korea will be immediately met with a nuclear response by either Voldemort or one of the terrorist organizations."

Clinton tried to think. "We need to prevent that weapon from getting into the country. What's the best way to do that? No, scratch that. If you were a wizard, how you would you do it. Radner?"

Radner grimaced. "Apparation into foreign countries is prohibited. However, there is a loophole which allows for Portkeys. International Portkeys are permitted. I'd send the weapon in through a Portkey. I would also consider Fideliusing the device and sneaking it over the border or into a port. A port would be an ideal location because the terrorist could detonate it if he was captured."

Clinton grunted. "Fidelius is the spell which makes it so you can't see it unless you interrogate the Secret-Keeper?"

"That's right, Mr. President. To be perfectly frank, sir, I'm not sure we'll be able to block it if it's a Fidelius. You're going to have the same problem we have trying to find the al-Qaeda base -- but in this case the object can be transported from place to place. For all we know, someone can discover the weapon in a cargo container in San Diego, have the wizard Portkey it to just outside Denver, and blow up Denver with it before anyone realized it."

Clinton couldn't believe this. "You're a wizard, Radner! Surely you can be able to stop this!"

Radner shook his head. "Without access to the Secret-Keeper or at the very least someone who figured out where the object was before the Fidelius was applied -- and before it was moved -- even a wizard can't do it. The spell was developed to protect top-level state secrets, sir. It was never intended to make stealth bombs. Portkeys were supposed to be means of transportation, not methods of delivering weapons. Geminio was designed for duplicating food and resources, not giving al-Qaeda unlimited numbers of nukes. And Engorgio/Compressio...well, we don't want to even GO there."

Clinton put his head in his hands. "Radner, what's your recommendation?"

Radner closed his eyes in resignation. "All I can do is put a Portkey wall around the country which will prevent Portkeys from entering. They'll bounce off the wall and rematerialize so customs agents can get at them. I'd also recommend stationing wizards from the various regional offices around the border to make sure nothing gets by sea, through Mexico, or through Canada. Although there isn't much we can do about a Fideliused nuke, we can take care of the rest and hope they don't Fidelius a nuke."

Clinton nodded. "Make it so. In the meantime, I want you, Mr. Secretary of Defense, to take everyone we've just shipped out of Afghanistan and send them over to North Korea. We've been planning an operation to get Voldemort out of there for a while now. I want him dead by the end of next week. Period. If you need magical help, talk to Radner. That's an order! No one here is going to
draw his salary until I see his head on this desk!"

Radner winced. "We can't take him out immediately, unfortunately. We're still waiting on the operation to get rid of the Horcrux in the bank in London."

------------------

Slytherin Common Room
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft of Wizardry
Great Britain
0956Z

Draco Malfoy never thought he'd be staying at Hogwarts over the summer. However, he didn't really have a choice. His entire family was dead with the exception of Lucius, who had taken up residence in North Korea. Draco had asked Dumbledore -- who still stupidly believed that he had defected, the man trusted students too much -- to stay with him, and the former headmaster had agreed to do so once Voldemort was defeated and Lucius agreed to return to the light side. Until then, he would have to stay at Hogwarts under Dumbledore's protection. Considering that none of the Death Eaters Draco had known growing up in England were still alive, the man had a point.

Crabbe and Goyle were on missions for the Dark Lord. The three friends' clandestine meetings -- they couldn't meet in the open without blowing Draco's cover -- were still going on. Crabbe was doing pretty well at his job, serving as a bodyguard for an Indian Death Eater. Goyle was still having a bit of trouble with his. At least they were still alive. In times like this, they were the only friends in the area he could trust.

The door to the common room opened, and Draco looked up from his book. Dumbledore entered and sat down next to him.

"Good morning, Draco. I hope I'm not bothering you."

Draco shook his head. "You aren't, Professor. What do you want?"

Dumbledore looked at him. "Draco, I need you to do us a favor. You see, we believe we've identified the location of Voldemort's final Horcrux. It's in a vault in Gringotts which used to belong to Bellatrix Lestrange. We've been told that you have the key to this vault. Would you be willing to give it to us?"

Draco reached under his robes and retrieved the key. "You're in luck, Professor. I have it on me. You're also lucky Voldemort was stupid enough try to get me to kill Snape. Otherwise, you'd be in big trouble."

Draco handed over the key, and Dumbledore pocketed it. "Thank you very much, Draco. You have done a great service today, and I promise that I will protect you if Voldemort ever finds out you've betrayed him."

Draco faked fear. "I sure hope you can, Professor. He's very powerful."

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled. "He is, Draco. However, I've got a few spells up my sleeve which even he doesn't have the ability to counter. Trust me, Draco. You're safe with me."

And with that, Dumbledore turned on his heel and left the room. Once the door was closed, Draco burst out laughing. He couldn't wait to see the expression on Dumbledore's face when they found that the Horcrux wasn't in the vault anymore. That was, if he could even get INTO the vault
considering that the force field on the door wouldn't let anyone pass other than Draco himself or his father.

------------------

Atlantis
1031Z

------------------

Dialonis addressed the ten wizards standing in front of him. "All right, people. We're at DEFCON 2, so I'm permitted to send you out of here to get you into position to attack Voldemort and his minions should we reach DEFCON 1. Remember the spell I've taught you, one which can only be activated by that ring on your finger -- the one with the serpent biting its tail. Once the spell is activated, a shield will appear around you which will allow nothing -- absolutely NOTHING -- to penetrate. Magic won't hurt you short of a direct hit by the Elder Wand in the hands of its master, and mundane technology won't harm you short of a nuclear weapon."

He shot them a warning glance. "One caveat. The shield prevents all gases from passing through. This includes air, so be certain to cast the spell to turn carbon dioxide into oxygen from time to time so you don't asphyxiate. Do you have any questions?"

The wizards were silent. Dialonis nodded and said, "All right, you are authorized to take off. Remember, do not actually interfere with anything unless we hit DEFCON 1."

------------------

Tang Hall
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
1225Z

------------------

Michelle Patterson heard a scream from upstairs. Terrified, the grad student raced up to see what had happened to her husband.

Louis was panting nervously, almost as if he'd run up all 11 flights. He looked as if he had seen a ghost...or dragon.

Michelle stared at him. "Lou! What happened?"

In response, her husband just pointed at the computer screen. "Read it."

Suspicious, Michelle looked at the monitor. It appeared to show a page in Arabic, Hebrew, and English. It showed a picture of an Indian man and a reference to al-Qaeda.

Underneath the picture of the Indian man appeared to be scenes from a nuclear test. Judging from the size of the explosion, the bomb appeared to have been about the size of the weapons used against Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Was al-Qaeda trying to frighten everyone with pictures of footage from the war?

Then she realized that the detonation had taken place in a mountainous region. And there were no signs of civilization in the area. Finally, they were in color.

There were very few photographs of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki tests in color. This had to be a more recent test, then. Increasingly disturbed, she red the caption underneath the pictures.

IMAGES OF SEVEN HILLS NUCLEAR TEST. 25 KT DEVICE DETONATED BY OUR GLORIOUS ARMY IN AFGHANISTAN, 13 JUNE.
She froze. Al-Qaeda had nukes? No! Please, no!

Terrified, she began reading the article underneath the test footage. Seconds later, she was screaming, and the people next door were coming over and checking to see what was going on. She told them. Within three minutes, all of them were screaming as well.

Oval Office
1532Z

The Secretary of Defense barged into the Oval Office, absolute horror on his face.

Clinton could only think of one thing. "Shit. Who was hit?"

The Secretary shook his head. "No one was hit, Mr. President. To be honest, sir, a definite nuclear strike may have better than what just happened."

Clinton stared at him. "What? I hate to think."

In response, the cabinet member wheeled a computer into the room and brought up a page on the Internet. Clinton took one look at it and swore.

"Shit! Al-Qaeda leaked the information onto the Internet! They've completely gotten around our secrecy protocols and spoken directly to the people! We've got to lock down that Web site as soon as possible!"

The Secretary's eyes were wide. "I'm afraid it's too late, sir. The word has already leaked out and is spreading like wildfire all throughout the country."

"You mean --"

"I'm afraid so, Mr. President. Riots, fires, looting, and uncontrolled chaos have broken out in no fewer than nineteen cities, including here in Washington. The mass exodus into the countryside has begun."

Clinton couldn't believe it. Summoning the Secret Service and a helicopter crew, he headed into a helicopter stationed on the White House grounds to take a bird's eye view of the capital of the United States.

From his vantage point 1,000 feet above the White House, he could see at least eight fires blazing. The highways leading out of town were completely gridlocked, and there were cops trying to control a mob on the National Mall. Rubeus Hagrid, the half-giant running the magical creatures exhibit at the Zoo, had apparently hidden a wand in his umbrella and was being pressed into duty as a member of the brute squad. The police were being overwhelmed by all the looters, and Clinton watched someone break into a store in real time. Taking out a portable radio, he turned to one of the FM stations. A familiar REM song was being broadcast.

"It's the end of the world as we know it..."

Unlike the lead singer of REM, Clinton DIDN'T feel fine. He hated to think what happens if the CIA found conclusive evidence as to which cities would be attacked.

To be continued...
Voldemort, once again safely in his disguise as Chang Sung-Taek, looked into the camera and began to speak.

"Good evening. As you know, I have made several changes since I've took office after Kim Jong-Il's unfortunate death. Whereas our previous leader was unable to in combine both Communist values and fair treatment of our nation's citizens, I have succeeded due to my magical abilities. This message is being broadcast all around the world, for I deem it important enough that everyone hear what I am about to say.

"It is well-known that a Communist lifestyle works on a small scale: just look at the Israeli Kibbutzim. In principle, that can be scaled up to managing something the size of a nation. However, in practice, that has proven difficult. I have found, however, that the fact that I am a wizard helps immensely with this task as I am able to use magic to provide resources which Kim Jong-Il would have been forced to work our citizens to death to achieve. This has allowed me to cut back on the quotas for the North Korean people, giving them two luxuries that they never would have been to obtain under the previous regime: a better standard of living and more free time. My staff has spent some time exploring the country incognito and have reported that I am still extremely popular and seen, in some places, as a savior.

"Nations of the world, consider the following. My government has shown that communism and contentment can coexist through the nation. With this in mind, look at your own nations. There is a great inequality between the classes, where the rich subjugate the poor and the powerful intimidate the downtrodden. In a classless society such as ours, the inequalities are smoothed out and everyone is on the same level.

"I can understand your not having adopted Communism given what happened to North Korea under my predecessors. The lives of the lower classes were short and brutal, and many people in the West were grateful they didn't live in North Korea. However, now that the Statute of Secrecy has fallen and that national leaders are allowed to use magic openly, it may be time to give Communism a second chance.

"As a result, I believe it is my duty to offer the following service to the world. North Korea, like all Communist states, is still working steadfastly to rid the world of capitalist domination. From this country's experience so far, militarism has not worked. Well, I propose that I try a different tactic. Instead of using the stick, we will use the carrot.

"With your permission, I will allow some of my wizards to work with your governments into implementing reforms which will help transition your societies like this one, where the people are
content and class distinctions have been abolished forever. Needless to say, an abrupt change to Communist methodologies will be difficult and, even for a wizard, unfeasible. What I will instruct these wizards to do will be to discuss the matter with your governing councils and have each country embark on a program which will combine Communism, happiness, and prosperity. We in North Korea acknowledge that some of you may not choose to follow our advice. However, we hope that you will at least allow one of the North Korean wizards to serve as an advisor to your cabinets and parliaments."

Voldemort didn't tell anyone that these advisors would do the same thing Rikpreet had done to King Fahd: cast the Imperius Curse on the nation's commander-in-chief and turn the country over to Voldemort. Then again, they didn't really need to know that, did they? He continued:

"You may argue: why should I bother having North Korea's wizards in our governments when we have wizards of our own? There are several reasons. First, we in North Korea have more experience with melding Communism and magic. Second, your wizards are likely extremely busy at the moment dealing with problems related to terrorist groups like al-Qaeda. I must confess, the idea of nuclear terrorism scares me, and I've got a bunch of people here dealing with al-Qaeda issues."

That wasn't a lie, of course. However, it was a case where the audience wouldn't realize that he wasn't saying what everyone thought he was saying as the sentence was carefully ambiguous.

"Finally, I give you my solemn word that countries who accept this olive branch will no longer be seen as enemies of the North Korean state even if they are capitalist. Although I don't expect that you will go Communist immediately -- if at all -- the fact remains that accepting my proposal proves that you are committed to peace.

"I vow to you this day that nations which accept this proposal will never be attacked by North Korea militarily, economically, or in any other way. We are only here to help, after all. Nations which reject this proposal will retain their current designation as enemy nations and will have to deal with the consequences. Considering that al-Qaeda is making life difficult for all of us and is stretching all of our resources, I urge you all to consider my request.

"One final comment directed at my colleagues in the South. As you have seen over the past few weeks, we've brought a lot of troops to the border for our protection. You have to understand that we have to take precautions considering that your men sent wizards to kill Kim Jong-II; if that isn't a hostile act, I don't know what is. My friends in Seoul, I encourage you to accept this offer. Otherwise, it's almost certain that these two countries will renew hostilities at some point, and that is a result neither of us want.

"One final thing. I am becoming increasingly distressed by all of the embargoes being placed against me and my people. I haven't done anything to most of you, yet you punish my people because of completely fabricated claims that my intentions are not genuine. If I were you, I would rethink those sanctions."

-------------------

South Side of the DMZ
1308Z

- - - - - - - - - - -

The South Korean lieutenant stared through his binoculars at the strange sight on the other side. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. This had to be a practical joke or a hallucination, he thought. He needed a second opinion. So he handed the binoculars to the man next to him.

The second soldier grunted at him. "You want me to do WHAT?"
The lieutenant pointed across the DMZ at the object in the distance. "Take a look at that big red thing over there and tell me if it is what I think it is."

Skeptical, the man put the binoculars to his eyes. He frowned. "It looks like a big tent of some -- wait, did it just move?"

"Zoom out a little so you get the big picture. You're probably focusing on only a piece of it."

The second soldier adjusted the controls and took another look at the object. For the first time, he could see the thing in its entirety. What he had thought was a tent was actually a wing. It was a flying object about the size of an aircraft. However, it wasn't an aircraft.

The two soldiers looked at each other. The second soldier frowned, rubbed his eyes, and looked at the object again. Slowly, he lowered his binoculars, put his head in his hands, and returned the binoculars to the lieutenant.

The lieutenant prompted him. "Well, is it what I think it is? Am I imagining something?"

The second soldier slowly shook his head. "If you're imagining something, I must be imagining it as well. This can't be happening. This is not fair."

"So you think it's what I think it is as well, right?"

The second soldier nodded. "It's a dragon, all right. God help us all."

-------------
West Bank
1700Z
-------------
Accompanied by Portkeyed missiles and conventional bombs, the Hamas vehicles appeared out of nowhere and began plowing through the West Bank with reckless abandon. Careful not to bunch up and make a tempting target for the Israelis, they started firing on settlements and began reoccupying the land which had been disputed since 1967.

The Sheikh smiled. Israel put up a bit of a fight, but the Zionists couldn't do much with al-Qaeda's nuclear ultimatum breathing down their neck. Al-Qaeda had warned Israel that any nuclear activity or attack on Hamas would put Tel Aviv, Haifa, or some other major Israeli city at risk for a Seven Hills-style nuclear blast.

Al-Qaeda and Hamas working in tandem. This was going to be fun, he thought. It was a shame that Rodolphus Lestrange wasn't around to see this.

What the Sheikh couldn't know was that the Israelis were just stalling for time.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #214
-------------
Saturday, June 15, 1996 -- 5 DAYS TO JUDGMENT DAY
2154Z
m/s Noordam
Fort Lauderdale, Florida
Michael deVries looked in disbelief at the chaos in the terminal from his sanctuary on the bridge of
the Noordam. As a child, he had always envisioned himself playing the role of Noah and sailing a
huge ship across the oceans. However, this was getting ridiculous.

The ship had recently returned from its eventful month-long trip to the Caribbean. Although by far
the most serious event on the trip had been the werewolf attack, the world had gotten more and more
dangerous as the ship made its way back to the United States.

Harrison Cooper had tried to tell everyone that he had no idea that he was going to turn into a
werewolf and that he would have never hurt any of those people had he been given the choice. Most
of the people had been skeptical at first, but they had slowly come around when Jerrit Huizing,
Rufus Scrimgeour, and a veritable who's who of Wizarding figures explained what had happened
and that Harrison should no longer be considered a threat. Within a couple of days, things had
returned to normal. One person, a man who had been injured in the attack -- but thankfully not bitten,
only clawed -- had supposedly been planning to sue Harrison for damages. Considering that
Harrison's psyche had been completely subsumed by that of the werewolf during the transformation,
the British man argued he was innocent. DeVries didn't want to be the judge who would have to rule
on that!

Things had started getting more serious, however, as they had approached the mainland. For one
thing, absolute bedlam had erupted in the Middle East. The Kohen Gadol had nearly been
assassinated, the pope -- well, John Paul II -- had been threatened, the famous Western Wall was in
ruins, and Hamas was making a real mess of things. To make matters worse, two days earlier, al-
Qaeda had detonated a nuke in the mountains of Afghanistan. They had promised the Americans and
Israelis that a city in the West would be targeted if a long list of demands were not met, such as
America pulling out of Afghanistan and Israel for all practical purposes surrendering to Hamas.

There had been no immediate reaction to the Seven Hills nuclear test as the information had been
classified. Everything had changed, however, earlier this afternoon when al-Qaeda, in a devilishly
clever scheme, leaked information about the test to the Internet.

Within the hour, riots had erupted all over the United States as terrified civilians took to the highways
to get away from the cities. Virtually all of the big cities were evacuating, or at least trying to as the
highways leading out of town were absolutely gridlocked. The airports were crammed with
passengers who were willing to pay $2500 per seat or more to get out of town.

In some cases, however, there were other means people had to evacuate. Such as cruise ships.

About 80% of the supplies for the Noordam's next cruise had been loaded on board when a man had
hurried out of the cruise terminal carrying a little backpack and waving at the ship. The Fort
Lauderdale employees gently intercepted him and began to escort him away from the ship.

That was when doors to the cruise terminal crashed open and hundreds of people started racing
towards the ship, many of whom were carrying little more than the clothes on their back.
The cruiseport personnel and the ship's security officers were overpowered within a matter of minutes. All of the guards had been trained well, but numbers made a difference. Within fifteen minutes, at least five thousand people had raced on board. And judging from what he was seeing out the window the flood was only beginning.

Cameras placed throughout the ship showed people everywhere. Although most of them were concentrating on breaking into staterooms and claiming them as quickly as possible, the refugees were running all over the place. Half of them were setting up linen on beach chairs on the top deck, near where the werewolf had ravaged the cocktail lounge. He grimaced as one of the man managed to open one of the artfully-concealed doors that headed into the employees' quarters in the center of the ship and below A Deck. The flood charged into the employees' section and soon found themselves fighting with the Holland America personnel for rights to cots and beds.

For the first time he could recall, the ship was swamped with animals. Dogs and cats were running everywhere, two guinea pigs had broken loose, and at least one snake had escaped its cage. At the rate things were going, he wouldn't be surprised to see pairs of giraffes, rhinos, and hippos trying to make their way up the gangway.

He looked at Bernhard, his first officer. The two men had originally decided to pack up and leave before the crowd got too big. However, it finally dawned on them that the mob wasn't seeing the Noordam as a cruise ship.

They were seeing it as an ark.

It was a difficult decision, but they decided that they would wait until 5,000 people had boarded before they cast off. They would probably have to ration food and water like mad and people would probably get very hungry, but luxury wasn't the issue here: survival was. These people saw the ship as their only means of escape, and who could blame them? Waiting until the ship reached that limit was the right thing to do.

Where would deVries go? Probably out into the Atlantic somewhere. He was debating dropping everyone on Half Moon Cay but nixed that pretty quickly as there was no way the island would be able to support that many people.

All he could do was watch out the window and wait.

Slytherin Common Room
2211Z
---------------------

Draco Malfoy looked over the letter one last time. Seeing that what he had written was to his satisfaction, he attached it to the owl's leg and sent it on its way.

My Lord:

I am writing to inform you that the Order of the Phoenix is planning to raid Gringotts in an attempt to go after the Hufflepuff cup. This raid will take place Monday morning, British time. I have given them they key to the vault, of course, as they think I am on their side. Although the cup is no longer there -- it and the tiara are in the lake near Hogwarts, as you know -- I recommend that you sent a large force of Death Eaters over there to prevent the Order from making it into Gringotts. This will enhance their belief they're on the trail of your Horcrux even though they aren't anywhere near it.

I hope you are doing well, and I wish you luck on North Korea's attempt to detonate an
Engorgio/Compressio bomb underground. Hopefully this test will convince the nations of the world to accept Death Eaters into their service so we can Imperius their leaders and hand you control of their countries.

Send my love to my father.

Sincerely,

Draco Malfoy
Death Eater

--------------------
Headmistress's Office
Hogwarts
2300Z
--------------------

The headmistress's office was absolutely jammed with people. The Hogwarts staff was there. Rufus Scrimgeour was there. Sirius Black was there. At least ten people in British military uniforms were there, including representatives from the RAF, the Marines, and MI6. Secret Service agents were there. It was a veritable who's who of the most powerful wizards and warriors in Britain.

The paintings of the headmasters on the walls were surprised at seeing Muggles in this Holy of Holies. Several of them complained. However, they soon fell silent once they realized what they were talking about.

Professor Dumbledore waved his wand, and a ghostly three-dimensional map of Diagon Alley materialized in midair. Walking through the illusion, he began indicating various features.

"This, gentlemen, is the Leaky Cauldron. That's how the Muggles will have to enter the alley. We'll likely have to demolish the building to get the armored personnel carriers through there, or at the very minimum move it. This store over here is Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes, the newly-opened joke shop. This here is Ollivander's -- everybody grab as many wands as they can and arm as many Diagon Alley denizens as possible. Remember, Muggles cannot touch wands as they will receive electric shocks if they do so.

"It is almost certain that Voldemort is going to find out that we're after the Horcrux -- there is no obvious reason for Muggles to try to break into Gringotts otherwise. As a result, we should assume that there is going to be a substantial effort to prevent us from getting into Gringotts. They will be shooting to kill. If you have to, do so as well. Normally the Unforgivable Curses are forbidden, but in an emergency operation like this the Minister has given us permission to use them.

"Once we're dropped off, the people in the tank should do whatever they can to create a diversion to distract the Death Eaters outside the bank and prevent them from getting inside. If everything goes as planned, Draco here will lead us to the vault, point out the Horcrux, and destroy it."

McGonagall slowly shook her head. "Albus, Draco is a minor. He shouldn't be using magic outside of school! You of all people should know that, considering that you had to go out of your way to prevent Harry from being kicked out of school. And Draco's certainly not trained to duel a Death Eater!"

Scrimgeour spoke in Dumbledore's defense. "I'm not particularly thrilled about it myself, Minerva. However, he's familiar with the Death Eaters and many of their tactics. He has to come along."
"Can't we use Igor or someone like that in this role?"

"I'm not sure, Headmistress. If I were Voldemort, I would have someone alert Gringotts that there is a theft in progress. That may prevent anyone not owning a vault to enter it. This may prevent Igor from grabbing the cup even if he has the key. If that's the case, we're going to need Draco."

The planning committee pressed on and on, deep into the night.

To be continued...

Update #215

Sunday, June 16, 1996 -- 4 DAYS TO JUDGMENT DAY
0003Z
Laergib City
Laputa Island
Laputa
Galiver Consortium

Next PoV: 216 - Jelena Kurchatova

HORCRUXES LEFT: 1 (cup)
ATLANTIS ALERT STATUS: DEFCON 2

High Priest Utlar III and his bodyguards completed their tour around the capital city's waterfront. Lowne Paolte had done something, that was obvious. There was a faint hint of magical energy surrounding the island like a wall. As far as he could tell, the wall was unbroken and was in a perfect position to keep out the water.

And keep out the water it did, as far as he could tell. The tide had risen a few feet since Lowne had installed the wall, and the change in water level was obvious -- so obvious that even a Muggle could have probably noticed it.

The barrier itself was invisible. However, the sheer, three-foot high vertical wall of water on the other side of the barrier was too mind-blowing to believe. He could see fish swimming freely until they crashed into the barrier. For the most part, they either jerked back in shock or were stunned long enough for another fish to eat them up.

He was about to congratulate Lowne when the inventor himself suddenly winced. "Oops."

That was a word Utlar really didn't want to hear. Drawing a deep breath, he asked slowly: "What do you mean, oops?"

Lowne pointed out at the wall. "The wall works, as you can see, and it goes around the entire island. It will protect the harbor up to a depth of 30 feet, which will be more than enough to prevent Laerbig City from flooding again."

Utlar nodded. "I see. What's the problem, then?"

"Your Excellency, how does one of us take a sailboat out to go fishing? Although the sailboat will pass through the wall, it won't work well if it crashes into a vertical wall of water. At the very minimum, the boat will flood if the water level outside the barrier is higher, or the boat will fall into
the surf and damage itself if the water level outside is lower than the level inside."

Utlar shrugged. "We just take the wall down and -- oh right. That three foot wall of water will fall on top of us. I see your point. What do we do about it?"

"Your Excellency, I recommend that we wait until the water level equalizes again, remove the barrier, and then reconstruct the wall on the beach above the high tide marker. That will allow us to get boats out and prevent the floods. I must say, however, this mistake has a silver lining -- it shows that the magic is in fact strong enough to protect the entire island."

Utlar nodded. "I agree. Next time we have a flood and everyone realizes how useful your invention is, we'll get you raised to the priesthood and try selling this service to the rest of the Galiver Consortium. I suspect that the Lilliputians would give a great deal for something like this: what's three feet for us is probably half a mile to them."

--------------------

0059Z
Weapons Testing Ground B
Democratic People's Republic of Korea

--------------

Lucius Malfoy amplified his voice for the benefit of the dignitaries in the room. "One minute to go, gentlemen. Let me remind you that because this detonation is underground, you will not see anything dramatic -- like a mushroom cloud, shock wave, or fireball. However, you will almost certainly feel a small earthquake if the test is successful. The yield of this device should be about 25 kT, similar to that detonated by al-Qaeda and about the size of the bomb dropped on Nagasaki."

Voldemort and the rest of the people in the room nodded and looked at the clock. Slowly but surely, the second hand crept up to hit the 12.

Nothing happened for a few seconds. Then, suddenly, the earth shook. Some of the plaster fell from the ceiling, but that was about it. A few minutes passed while the army's engineers estimated the explosive yield of the device given the intensity of the earthquake and the known distance ground zero. They concluded that the weapon had released 26 +/- 5 kT worth of energy.

There were handshakes all around. North Korea was now a nuclear power, and thanks to the Geminio spell the state had an unlimited number of small nukes like this. Voldemort was fairly certain that people would start listening to him now.

People immediately started pressing him to use the devices on the South. Voldemort was doubtful that he'd actually use the weapons unless there was no alternative, but it was only polite for him to listen to the soldiers. Besides, unless he was badly mistaken, dragons and basilisks would scare the South much more than nukes would.

--------------------

0116Z
Presidential Palace
Pyongyang

---------------

There were a couple of notes on his desk by the time he had returned to his office. One of them was a message from the Chinese government indicating that they would be willing to take him up on his offer. He wasn't surprised: they were Communist and having trouble keeping everyone in line. The idea of Death Eaters controlling China -- with a billion people -- made him lick his thin lips in anticipation.
He was still smiling as he opened the second letter. It appeared to be from Draco Malfoy. The letter was relatively short -- only one page.

Voldemort read through the letter, and his face went red with rage. Bringing out the Elder Wand, he blasted the document to smithereens. He then pressed the Dark Mark on his arm, summoning all of the Death Eaters in North Korea to him. He had managed to recruit some of the Koreans by this point, so within a few minutes no fewer than thirteen men and women -- six Indians, six Koreans, and Lucius -- were standing in his presence.

Voldemort started pacing around the room angrily. "Ladies and gentlemen, we appear to have a problem. It appears that Albus Dumbledore has done something particularly rash."

-------------------
0205Z
Oval Office
-------------------
The phone rang insistently in the Oval Office as the stars were coming out after another long day. Throwing back another shot of coffee, Bill Clinton picked up the phone.

"Hello?"

"Mr. President, this is the head of NORAD. The USGS has picked up an earthquake signature in North Korea which seems to match that of an underground nuclear test."

Clinton closed his eyes. This was not fair. Aloud, he asked: "How big?"

"About 26 kT. The same size, more or less, as the Seven Hills blast. Assuming that al-Qaeda hasn't suddenly decided turn on Voldemort --- from our mouth to God's ears -- it seems that they've told Voldemort how to create backpack nukes. North Korea is, as of this moment, a nuclear power."

Clinton was speechless. This was not right. This was so not right...

-------------------
1011Z
Al-Aqsa Mosque
-------------------
Gunfire blazed, and the Hamas soldiers raced into the mosque and began cutting down everyone in sight with a yarmulke or a cross. Ibrahim, who was standing in for the Kohen Gadol while Suleiman I was recuperating, started screaming at them to stop, but they didn't listen.

The last time, the Pope had intervened with his magical abilities. This time, however, the worshipers wouldn't be as lucky.

Ibrahim collapsed to the ground in a bloody heap as a bullet hit him in the chest. Just before his eyes closed forever, the Hamas assassin shouted that he and Suleiman had betrayed the True Faith by letting infidels worship at the sacred shrine.

Within a span of fifteen minutes, the Hamas flag was flying over the al-Aqsa Mosque. Fluttering beneath it was the banner of Muslims for Humans.

-------------------
1630Z
m/s Noordam
Fort Lauderdale
-------------------
The captain and first officer glanced at each other. Enough was enough. If they took on any more people, they'd probably crush each other to death.

The captain pressed a button and the gangplank began to retract back into the ship. Frantic people jumped for it, missed, and fell into the harbor. DeVries could hear the frantic pleading of the crowd begging him to let more of them on.

There wasn't anything more he could do, however. He started the engines and began moving out of the harbor towards the Atlantic.

The first officer suddenly groaned. Unwilling to take his eyes off the controls, he asked Bernhard what had happened.

Bernhard answered. "They've stenciled a new name on the side of the ship. Noahrdam."

DeVries swore. "Great. Just great."

------------------

1703Z
Coolidge Corner
Brookline, Massachusetts
United States of America

---------

The C line light rail trolley car opened its doors and disgorged platoons of National Guard troops. The captain made a brief assessment of the situation and started deploying the droops.

A good ten men headed into the CVS to go after the looters who were trying to take all of the prescription drugs and food off the shelves. Seven or eight headed down to a nearby church to beat off some Celestine hooligans. Others proceeded down Harvard Street to stop looting clothes from the various boutique fashion stores and food from the supermarkets. Still more headed towards an electronics store where people were merrily running away with television sets and expensive radios.

The doors to the train closed, and it went express to Cleveland Circle, the end of the line. There, more troops flooded out to deal with angry Boston College students and panicking senior citizens. Some of them headed towards a crashing sound which proved to be rioters overturning a car.

The car had people in it and was in drive. Unfortunately, the traffic trying to get out of Boston was at a standstill so it had nowhere to go.

To be continued...
Update #216

Monday, June 17, 1996 -- 3 DAYS TO JUDGMENT DAY
0044Z
Harvard Square
Cambridge, Massachusetts
United States of America

Next PoV: 216.2 - Fred Weasley

HORCRUXES LEFT: 1 (cup)
ATLANTIS ALERT STATUS: DEFCON 2

Normally, Jelena Kurchatova would have been elated at this letter. Not only had she been allowed to stay on in Russian House as the dormitory’s new graduate residence tutor, she had been offered a position to teach 19.00, the introductory level Magical Technology course which would soon become a requirement for all MIT students.

Provided that the world didn’t blow up beforehand, the lecture would make its first appearance in September. She would be teaching in 10-250, one of the largest lecture halls in the school. She had taken several classes in there and hated to think what it would be like to have 500 people or more staring at you in front of the blackboard.

She knew immediately that she would accept this position. Not only was she by far the most qualified person to teach it -- she was, after all, a former MIT student, a witch, and a national heroine -- she would be paid handsomely for her services, far above and beyond her normal graduate student stipend. Furthermore, she would not have to pay MIT rent for her one bedroom apartment in Russian House.

The only problem she had was that there weren’t going to be many TA’s available. Jason had offered to help, but he was still busy with school and didn’t know much about magic. Guinevere had told her that she’d help out from time to time, possibly even serving as a substitute teacher if Jelena herself were to call in sick or be overwhelmed with her normal graduate work. The closest thing the course would be getting to TA’s would be three or four displaced Greenwich residents who had been out of town when the cit had been destroyed. She had asked Secretary Radner for help, but Radner had brushed her off irritably, saying that he didn’t have time to think about September.

Neither did Jelena herself, as it turned out. At the moment, she was standing next to Guinevere in Harvard Square surrounded by a large cordon of riot police. She had already Petrificus Totalused several people breaking into convenience stores and was currently in the process of going after some more. The National Guard troops, realizing that the Petrificus Totalus spell would incapacitate a person without harming them, had immediately holstered their taser guns and rubber bullets and left the two witches to deal with the troublemakers.

Some idiot started playing 99 Luftballons, by Nena, on a boom box. Realizing that the popular 80's song was about nuclear war, both witches aimed their wands at the radio and blasted it to
smithereens. They had enough dealing with panicking people as it was.

0253Z
Diagon Alley

The security guard was jolted out of his power nap by a large number of staccato bursts indicating Apparation arrivals. He counted at least thirty-five of them. Wondering who would be sneaking around in Diagon Alley this time of night, he put his hand on his wand and began warily watching the door.

He never saw anything or heard anything. Half an hour later, he shrugged and went back to his power nap.

0256Z
Diagon Alley

Park Hae Chan, arm still aching from the application of the Death Eater tattoo, looked around the alley and tried to find a good place to hide. He eventually settled upon a location across the street from an odd store called Weasley's Wizard Wheezes. It appeared to be a joke shop of some sort, and some of the things in that shop would probably serve as good distractions in case the Order of the Phoenix started getting the upper hand.

0923Z
Chancellor's Office
Berlin
Germany

The chancellor of Germany never knew what hit him. He had been busy chatting with an Indian man in a business suit. The Indian was trying to convince him that it would be a good idea to at least hear what Chang Sung-Taek had to say. If all else failed, it would at least buy time for the Germans to figure out how they were going to respond to the North Korean ultimatum.

The influential German was caught completely off-guard when a green beam shot out of a cane and hit him in the chest. Kneeling over his victim, the Indian plucked a few hairs off the man's head and put them in a little cup. He then Vanished the body and walked into the bathroom with his cup.

Five minutes later, one of the chancellor's assistants walked into the office, looking for him. Puzzled, the visitor started asking for the chancellor. He was relieved when he heard the toilet flush and saw the chancellor walk out of the bathroom and back into his office.

The visitor breathed a sigh of relief, then chuckled. "Sir, you really shouldn't do that. When I saw you were missing, I suspected the worse. This isn't a good time to be playing practical jokes."

The chancellor slapped the palm of his hand against his head. "That's a good point, my friend. That was a bit of bad judgment on my part. How can I help you?"

The visitor paused for a moment. He didn't think he'd ever heard the chancellor call him "my friend" before. A bit odd. Looking at the chancellor more closely, the visitor saw that the chancellor had a little cup in his hand. Pointing at the cup, he asked: "Sir, I never knew you drank coffee. Ha!"

The chancellor looked at the cup blankly for a moment, then shrugged. "I figured I needed a bit of a pick-me-up given all of the long hours over the past week. At any rate, how can I help you?"
The two men then settled down for their meeting. The visitor had no idea that he was betraying state secrets to a Death Eater.

0941Z
Beijing
China
---------------
The Chinese president admitted the representative from the North immediately. That proved to be a big mistake.

Five minutes later, the man was under the Imperius Charm. In one fell swoop, one-sixth of the world's population had come under Voldemort's rule.

1012Z
m/s Noordam
---------------
Michael deVries screamed into the intercom. "I don't care what you do! Just make sure that they don't do that! We weren't expecting to have five thousand people on board who hadn't eaten before they left!"

The voice on the other end of the line was frantic. "They're terrified, hungry, and are breaking into some of the stores in the center of the ship. It's only a matter of time until they reach the main food storage areas. Once they get all the food, they'll eat like Americans and drain us dry in three days."

"You're not going to let that happen, Geert. Station guards around the entrances and arm them. If necessary, shoot to injure."

1018Z
169 South Street
Waltham, MA
---------------
The phone rang, and I walked into the bedroom to pick it up. "Hello?"

It was my mother. "Pack your stuff, Andy, and tell your boss. We're heading off to Curacao."

I couldn't believe it. "We're about to evacuate? How did you get the tickets?"

"We had to pay $5000 each for them. Thank God we had the money put away. Granted, we're going to have to go through places like St. Louis and Medellin to get there and it will take 24 hours instead of the customary 12. However, the important thing is we're getting out."

"How are we going to meet up? The roads are impassable. I doubt I'll be able to drive to work with all the families trying to pick up the Brandeis students."

"Take the commuter rail in -- walk if necessary -- and hope the tracks aren't blocked. We'll meet at the American Airlines terminal in three hours."

1029Z
The Leaky Cauldron
London
---------------
One minute to showtime.

Reporters were everywhere. Helicopters were flying overhead, still abuzz with the reports that several highly-armed and defended armored personnel carriers were converging on an obscure bar known as the Leaky Cauldron. They were accompanied by no fewer than a hundred soldiers and at least fifty men and women in robes.

The scene seemed to have been taken right out of Ghostbusters. People were either panicking, praying, or cheering on the assault force. Someone even started playing Saving the Day, the song from the movie's soundtrack which was performed when the Ghostbusters were converging on the hotel at the movie's climax.

The proprietor of the Leaky Cauldron had left the building immediately after the assault force had arrived. Fortunately for him, they had not been forced to raze the pub in order to get the APC's through to Diagon Alley. The vehicles in question -- along with their occupants -- were now about the size of toy cars. They had been shrunk so they would be able to enter Diagon Alley without knocking the walls down. They would revert to their usual size -- well, at least to the width of the alley -- once they passed through the door.

Albus Dumbledore looked at Rufus Scrimgeour. Drawing a deep breath, he said, "If this is the last time I get to speak to you, I would like to confess that it's been an honor serving with you."

Scrimgeour shook his hand. "The feeling is mutual, Albus. However, don't worry. We'll get through to the Horcrux. I can feel it."

All eyes were on the clock. After what appeared to be an eternity, the minute hand finally reached the VI at the bottom.

Everyone cheered, and the APC's started up their engines as Dumbledore began searching for the appropriate bricks. Meanwhile, the head of the Muggle forces roared, "LET'S GET READY TO RUMBLE!"

To be continued...

-------------
Update #216.2
-------------
Monday, June 17, 1996 -- 3 DAYS TO JUDGMENT DAY
1029Z
Weasleys Wizard Wheezes
Diagon Alley
London
England

-------------
Next PoV: 216.5 - Park Hae Chan
-------------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 1 (cup)
ATLANTIS ALERT STATUS: DEFCON 2
-------------
Fred Weasley watched from outside Weasley's Wizard Wheezes. There were about sixty seconds before all hell was going to break loose. He longed to help the Order of the Phoenix fight off any Death Eaters and destroy the final Horcrux. Unfortunately, Dumbledore's orders had been explicit. Both he and George -- well, at least one of them -- had to mind the store to make sure that none of
the Death Eaters managed to break in and steal things which would mess around with the Order's objectives. All the Death Eaters needed to do would be to get their hands on things like Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder and the offensive would bog down in a hurry.

Fred had an uneasy feeling that the two brothers hadn't been vigilant enough in their checks. By the time they had completed their inventory assessment a half hour after they had unlocked the doors, they had made the disturbing discovery that a Portable Swamp, a bag of Peruvian Darkness Powder, some Wildfire Whiz-Bangs, a box of Decoy Detonators, five Extendable Ears, three Jumping Snakes, and a whole rack of Shield Hats had mysteriously disappeared. This likely meant that a Death Eater had been watching the store and marched in under a Disillusionment Charm or Invisibility Cloak while both brothers were attending to customers. Fred recalled the Caterwauling Charm going off shortly after the store opened -- they had used the spell as a primitive burglar alarm. At the time, they had passed it off as a false alarm: there had been many of those of late. Now, however, he wasn't sure it had been a false alarm.

Fred hoped people wouldn't pay for this mistake with their lives. He was still contemplating this problem when he noticed an odd discoloration near the entrance to Diagon Alley. Suspicious, he brought out his binoculars to take a closer look.

His jaw dropped when he realized what it was. It was the missing Portable Swamp. And it was blocking the entrance to the alley.

------------

1030Z

- - - - - - -

The Caterwauling Charm went off seconds after the first Order member walked through the door into Diagon Alley. The man stiffened in surprise, which left him easy prey for an Avada Kedavra cast from just inside an empty storefront. There went the surprise, Dumbledore thought. He was in the process of sending the APC's through the opening when he heard an odd splash. The dead man had fallen into a swamp.

Dumbledore blinked. A swamp? Since well had Diagon Alley had a swamp in it? Then it hit him. Either the Weasleys had defected, or (more likely) the Death Eaters had broken into the joke shop and raided the place. He shuddered to think of the possibility that the Death Eaters had pre-empted his joke shop tactic by either taking over the store (and killing Fred and George) or stealing all of the interesting stuff before the Order got there.

There was a shout, and Dumbledore saw Fred Weasley -- or was it George? -- running in his direction and pointing at the swamp in irritation. It was obvious that the brothers had been robbed. Dumbledore was about to ask him how to get rid of it when a green beam hit whichever twin it was in the chest, and down he went. This was followed by an instant flurry of Decoy Detonators from inside the store. Whoever had killed the Weasley boy was distracted by the detonators and started shooting wildly. This gave the surviving twin a chance to hit the man with a red beam, and the Death Eater went down.

The Muggle commander, still in the Leaky Cauldron, took one look at the swamp and swore. "Those trees are in the way, Wizard Dumbledore! The APC's aren't going to able to enter the alley, and we're dead meat if we can't get the APC's in there and batter our way in! Can you disrupt the enchantment, or at least destroy the trees? Meanwhile, everyone get under your Invisibility Cloaks and Shield Cloaks and get out there! Whatever you do, don't get hit by any of those beams!"

Dumbledore moved out of the way and grinned as a curse slammed into the sphere of invincibility provided by the Atlantis Great Serpent ring on his finger. High-ranking wizards who had served on
Atlantis were given these rings but were only allowed to use them in case of emergency when Atlantis was at a level of DEFCON 2 or higher. He never thought he'd have to use it, but this was certainly an emergency and Dialonis had declared DEFCON 2.

The ring would protect only him, however. Furthermore, he would not be permitted to attack while wearing the ring unless Atlantis went to DEFCON 1. The rules, however, did permit him to serve provide cover for someone who wanted to cast a Finite spell at the Portable Swamp from inside the Leaky Cauldron. Five bolts crashed into the shield as the invisible Muggles raced out of the pub and began establishing a beachhead. One of the Muggles let loose with a machine gun, and Dumbledore heard a scream as a Death Eater wearing an Invisibility Cloak was hit.

The man behind him shouted, and Dumbledore veered out of the way to allow a yellow beam to burst through the opening and into the Portable Swamp. The swamp shimmered and disappeared seconds before someone further down the alley shouted "Accio Machine Guns!"

Half the Muggles shouted in horror as their guns suddenly flew out of their hands and into those of the Death Eaters. This was getting ugly, and within a matter of seconds three bullets had slammed into Dumbledore's shield and six of the Order's own invisible Muggles had gone down. However, their luck would change momentarily. Nodding to the Muggle commander, he moved out of the way so that the Muggles could send the APC's through.

The first APC ballooned to its normal size almost immediately after it cleared Dumbledore's shield. The assault team quickly entered formation behind it. Death Eaters shouted in shock and aimed their newly-acquired machine guns at the vehicle, but the carrier's armor was impenetrable. That was when one of the wizards had the idea that he could vaporize the vehicle with a blast from his wand.

The result stunned, and horrified, the Death Eaters. As far as they could tell, nothing -- absolutely nothing -- known to man could disrupt such a powerful spell. Yet the APC shrugged it off without any problems. Unknown to them, Sirius Black had instructed the Muggles to enchant all three vehicles with fields which would convert any magic in them to electricity -- the reverse of the spell which had been used to adapt the computer in Hogwarts to magic. This did nothing to stop the spell, of course, and the APC was struck with a powerful electric bolt with the intensity of a lightning blast. The personnel carriers, however, were hardened against EMP, as was usually the case with military vehicles. The electricity cascaded around the metal sides of the vehicle and into the ground.

There was a howl of terror from further down the street. Several more people fired on the APC, also in vain. That was when the APC opened up with its own machine guns. Death Eaters fell everywhere. Someone shouted something in Korean further down the alley, and the people in the APC reported that their infrared scanners -- which appeared to be picking up invisible people as well no wizard had ever thought of blocking IR before -- were showing the Death Eaters backing up and regrouping.

This was what the Order had been looking for. The lead APC began heading own the alley towards Gringotts, with the assault team members shielded from the Death Eaters by the simple fact that the vehicle took up virtually the entire width of the alley and as a result nothing could get through.

The second APC resumed its normal size outside the doorway. Scrimgeour shrieked an order, and Ministry of Magic personnel began casting spells. Unlike the first APC, this vehicle could be enchanted from beneath. Slowly but surely, the APC gently lifted into the air so it could fire on the enemy without hitting the vehicle in front of it. Perched in the hatch was Sirius Black, HMSS, now familiar with both Muggle and Wizarding military tactics and weapons.
Cheering wildly, the rest of the assault team raced into Diagon Alley now that they were blocked from enemy attack above them, in front of them, and behind them. A third spun 180 degrees and fired in the general direction of the Leaky Cauldron, making sure to not actually shoot through the opening into the pub. The rest started firing wildly into the buildings. Scrimgeour had instructed all of the shops in Diagon Alley to close early, at 11:00, in order to prevent civilians from being hit. Several Death Eaters were caught trying to sneak up behind the assault team and were blown to bits. Three or four more were hit shooting curses out of store windows.

The two APC's moved ahead as the assault team hurried forward to keep up with the defensive screen. A few seconds later, there was another flash as the third APC -- this one fully shielded and containing Draco Malfoy, Severus Snape, McGonagall, and the rest of the actual Gringotts assault team -- reverted to its normal size. The assault team was now completely protected on all sides. As long as they mowed down all the Death Eaters in the storefronts, absolutely nothing would be able to stop them -- presuming that Voldemort's men didn't have some more tricks up their sleeves. Considering that whichever Weasley had been killed had been extremely irritated, Dumbledore suspected that the Portable Swamp had not been the only thing stolen from the joke shop.

The person in charge of the third APC rotated the gun turret 180 degrees so that it would be able to go after anyone who tried to sneak up on the assault team from behind. Slowly but surely, the world's first combined Muggle/magical battering ram made it way down Diagon Alley towards Gringotts.

1032Z
Oval Office
White House

Travis Radner walked into the Oval Office. He didn't mince words.

"Mr. President, the assault team has made its way into Diagon Alley and is proceeding towards Gringotts. They've encountered some Death Eater resistance but so far everything is going according to plan."

Clinton nodded. "Good work, Mr. Radner. I take it they'll have that -- what is it, Horcrux? -- out of the way soon?"

"I believe so, sir. Alert the coalition forces stationed in North Korea and tell them to stand by and go on full alert. As soon as that Horcrux falls, we strike. Meanwhile, I'll go to England and tell Professor Slughorn to send over his surprise package."

Clinton grunted. "Surprise package?"

Radner chuckled. "That is correct, sir. Let's say that our forces are going to get lucky. VERY lucky."

To be continued...

Update #216.5

Monday, June 17, 1996 -- 3 DAYS TO JUDGMENT DAY
1033Z
Diagon Alley
London
England
Next PoV: 217 - Voldemort

HORCRUXES LEFT: 1 (cup)
ATLANTIS ALERT STATUS: DEFCON 2

Park Hae Chan couldn't believe what he was seeing. One of his strongest spells, designed by Voldemort himself, had done no damage to the Muggle vehicle. This was not good. Not good at all. At least Draco Malfoy had gotten the Horcrux out of there before the attack began.

He didn't know what exactly was coming at him. However, whatever it was was HUGE and not particularly friendly. He saw two vehicles working their way down the alley. One of them was floating in midair so that it could fire its weapon without hitting the one in the vanguard of the formation. He suspected that the Muggles he had seen earlier were either in other vehicles or walking behind them.

It was time to regroup and think of other options. He whistled and shouted. "Everybody fall back! It seems that these vehicles are immune to magic! We're going to have to interfere in some other ways. Get Golgomath and the rest of the giants out here! Perhaps they're strong enough to pick up these vehicles or crush them. Dig holes in the ground which will make it so that they can't proceed any further. Get the dragons to breathe on the vehicles. Finally, stand by in Knockturn Alley to lower the glass screen so that the basilisk can see the attacking forces! Remember, once that happens, DO NOT LOOK DOWN THERE!"

He would have loved to allow the basilisk to actually attack the enemy. Unfortunately, Death Eaters were no more immune to the creature's stare as other people, and as a result it had to stay safely in hiding.

There was a squeal of brakes as the lead APC suddenly ground to a halt. Dumbledore, puzzled, ordered someone to send a Patronus up there to see what was going on. A few seconds later, it returned.

Dumbledore shook his head and reported its findings to the rest of the group. "It looks like the Death Eaters have changed tactics. They've excavated a deep hole in the street that the APC can't cross. It sounds like they're either trying to force us down Knockturn Alley -- which I wouldn't recommend -- or trying to make it so we can't go any further."

Sirius, inside the tank, nodded grimly. "Well, we've got an answer for that. Send the second APC out in front to provide cover so that our engineers and wizards can plug the hole. Once that's done, it can go back into position and continue towards Gringotts. Raise a force field to protect the troops, while the APC is not there, and tell the one in the back to focus on threats from above as long as the troops are exposed."

The APC had just completed its maneuver to the front of the convoy when Dumbledore heard some explosions off in Knockturn Alley. He was about to turn his head to see what was going on when he recognized the sound frmo his experience at Hogwarts: Decoy Detonators, one of the specialties from the joke shop. He warned everyone to ignore them. However, several of the Muggles looked down the alley to see what was going on.

That proved to be a VERY big mistake. Dumbledore watched in horror as the people suddenly froze, turned to stone, and exploded in puffs of dust.
Dumbledore recognized the symptoms immediately: basilisk. This was not good.

He screamed at the top of his lungs. "There's a basilisk down that alley! Whatever you do, don't look at it! Sirius, we need help here!"

Sirius's Patronus reported back, "I can't! We've got a couple of giants in the way now here, and they still need to plug the -- Merlin's beard, is that a dragon heading towards us? I'm calling in the chopper! It's a trap! Call in the backup still in the Leaky Cauldron, and tell them to take cover in the stores! We don't want them in the open! Tell them to bring out their RPG's! One of them is to shoot the weapon at the dragon. We need to buy time for that chopper to get over here!"

The Muggles had no idea what Knockturn Alley was, and didn't react too badly at the mention of the basilisk. However, they knew what dragons were. And this one was coming from above while the troops were exposed! Not surprisingly, several of them panicked. Five more of them turned to face the alley and were killed.

Dumbledore grabbed one man with an RPG. "Soldier, listen to me! Aim your weapon down that alley, but aim by looking at the end of the alley, where it meets this one. Do not look down the alley, and assume your target is human sized. Shoot!"

The soldier glanced at his commanding officer, who nodded. He fired the weapon down the alley and was rewarded with an explosion and the sound of tinkling glass. This was followed by a stentorian slithering sound as the basilisk, finally freed from its glass cage, began moving down the alley towards its prey. Wonderful, Dumbledore thought. We just let it out. A couple of wizards instinctively looked to the sound and were killed.

He shouted at the man with the RPG once more. "Fire again! Finish it off!"

The soldier did so. There was a second explosion, followed by an agonized howl which quickly trailed off into a death rattle. A couple of Muggles looked down into the alley and whistled. "What was that, a snake? All I see are pieces!"

The fact that the Muggles had survived was proof enough that the basilisk had been destroyed. He was in the process of congratulating the soldier when two things happened simultaneously. First, there was a horrible, reptilian shriek -- this time from above. Then the sky above the assault team caught fire as dragon breath slammed into the force field protecting the troops. People gasped for breath as the flames consumed all the oxygen. Dumbledore watched in shock as people outside his Atlantis bubble put their hands to their mouths -- he had forgotten about that effect!

He heard someone in the rear APC firing the machine gun at something. The dragon screamed in pain, and the flame subsided. The soldiers could breathe again. Seconds later, the dragon's howl was drowned out by another WHOOSH as someone in the back fired another RPG at it. There was an explosion far above, followed by a huge crash followed by the distinctive sound of crumbling masonry.

Sirius's Patronus materialized in front of Dumbledore. "The dragon's gone. However, it fell between the rear APC and the reinforcements, hitting one of the buildings as it came down. The reinforcements' progress seems to be blocked by a combination of dead reptile and rubble."

Dumbledore swore under his breath. "Tell them to clean everything up as fast as they can and rejoin us!"
Alastair Moody had his own problems at the front of the convoy. Although the hole in the street was just about patched, there were a couple of other obstacles in the way. These obstacles, however, were mobile and over twenty feet tall.

He had thought Hagrid was big. These fellows were around twice his size -- and a good ten times meaner. He looked nervously at those big meaty fists. He wouldn't be surprised if one of those would be strong enough to stave in a side of the APC. One of those things traveling at punch speed would probably pack a serious wallop.

He had tried casting spells on them but they were two strong. Machine guns did little more than irritate them and tell everyone where he was.

He tried to think of what to do as he caught sight of another invisible Death Eater with his magical eye. He pointed sharply, and the gunner swiveled the machine gun in its direction. Down went the Death Eater.

One of the giants thrust his hand into a building. When he withdrew it, he was holding one of the support columns of Zonko's -- a good ten feet long and four feet wide. Zonko's collapsed in a heap as the giant raised it over his head.

Shit, Moody thought. There was only one thing worse than a punch traveling at 50 mph: a two-ton steel rod traveling at 50 mph.

The giant never got a chance to throw it, however. He was in the process of throwing the column when he suddenly exploded. Moody's magical eye managed to catch a brief glimpse of the missile as it had come in. The weapon had come in from above, which probably meant that the chopper was approaching. By the time the smoke had cleared, both giants were down.

Less than 100 feet beyond them was the headquarters of Gringotts. He could barely see it through the dissipating smoke.

Thank God these things had treads, Moody thought. The vehicles continued their steady advance, climbing over the bodies of the giants.

Park Hae Chan swore as the Death Eaters began to get overwhelmed. This was not fair, he thought. They've got rocket launchers, helicopters, and God knows what else! Well, they still had to get into Gringotts.

He told everyone to retreat into Gringotts and prepare for the last stand.

The three APC's reached Gringotts and things began to happen fast.

The first two vehicles spun 180 degrees and positioned themselves to the left and right of the main entrance, firing at everything with a Death Eater mask, scales, or wings. Moody cheered as the reinforcements finished cleaning away the carcass of the dragon and rejoined them. His jubilation turned to horror as two things happened simultaneously: the world went black as someone activated
some Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder, and the reinforcements suddenly started screaming about snakes attacking them in all directions. He just hoped that the reinforcements would get out of this all right. The helicopter reported that it could still see the battlefield through the IR goggles.

The helicopter would take care of this battlefield, he thought. We've reached Gringotts. It's time to proceed to phase two. They had originally planned to go in under the cover of invisibility. Now it seemed that they wouldn't even need to bother with the Invisibility Cloaks thanks to the Darkness Powder!

Moody whistled, and the third APC -- the important one -- suddenly spun around as well and began backing towards the main entrance. Within a minute, all three APC's were in position, creating an impregnable wall which would prevent any Death Eaters still outside the bank from proceeding further.

All of the infantry units immediately hurried into the bank. Moody watched as some of them fell. Eventually, though, they reported the coast was clear as far as they could tell. A few minutes later, they sent back word that they had established a beachhead. It was now or never.

The third APC's rear door opened to reveal Severus Snape, Draco Malfoy, McGonagall, and several other people. Dumbledore joined them, followed by a good half of the Aurors. The way was open.

Draco looked at Dumbledore one last time. "I want to help, Professor. I want my revenge!"

Dumbledore stared at him firmly. "No, Draco. You're underage and will stay in the APC's under our protection. You're not strong enough to fight Death Eaters, even if you know them."

"But --"

"No buts, Draco. This decision is final. I'm sorry. If we need your help in getting into the vault, we'll come and get you."

Draco grumbled for a moment but went silent. He could wait. It wasn't as if they could get in without him, after all. And if all else failed, he could take advantage of any lapse in their security by relaying the Order's plans to the Death Eaters.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #217
-------------
Monday, June 17, 1996 -- 3 DAYS TO JUDGMENT DAY
1043Z
Times Square
New York, New York
United States of America

-------------
Next PoV: 217.5 - Draco Malfoy
-------------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 1 (cup)
ATLANTIS ALERT STATUS: DEFCON 2
-------------
Last night, there had been riots. However, now that it was the beginning of a work week, things were a bit more quiet. The fact that there were riot police everywhere helped a lot. However, there
was something in the area which was even more effective at improving the mood of the crowd.

The gigantic television screen was airing a broadcast from a helicopter a few hundred feet above London. A wizard was on board along with the reporter, and the wizard had made it so that the reporter was able to see places that he would normally not have been able to -- such as Diagon Alley.

The pilot had reported that he may have seen a dragon in the sky over London as he was coming in. However, if there had been a dragon there, there wasn't much left of it after something was fired at it from ground level, blew it up, and sent it crashing to the ground.

The camera showed shots of buildings no one had ever seen before. The wizards pointed out several of the sights and mourned the loss of several others destroyed in the fighting. The reporter got a good shot of people -- probably giants if they could be seen clearly from this distance -- blocking the way and giving some mechanized army equipment fits. There was a squawk in the cockpit, and the helicopter fired a missile. The weapon blew up the giants and allowed the attack to proceed.

Virtually everyone in the area was watching this footage. Battles and things blowing up made for excellent ratings. Battles whose outcome could prevent the end of civilization would do even better.

-------------

1047Z
Presidential Palace
Pyongyang

- - - - - - -

Voldemort was watching the news along with everyone else. Broadcasts from stations like the BBC were a luxury very few in the North had. This broadcast, however, affected him much differently from the way it impacted the people in New York.

The Dark Lord hadn't expected the Muggles and wizards to combine forces so easily. Those mechanized monstrosities had already reached Gringotts and were securing a defensive perimeter. Most of the Death Eaters he had sent to defend the fake Horcruxes were probably dead.

The area around Gringotts went dark -- someone in the Order must have gotten his hands on some kind of concoction which provided cover of darkness. He had seen enough, however. He needed to do something to get the Muggles off the trail of the Horcruxes.

Fortunately for him, he had the perfect distraction. He reached for the telephone and called the Secretary of Defense.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Secretary. It appears that our friends in the South need to be taught a lesson. I've been patient with them, but the capitalists refuse to yield.

"It is time to resume hostilities. Commence Operation Imperial at once. Furthermore, tell the man in charge of the nuclear missiles that he is ordered to fire them at the South if I am killed. I am not going to let the South kill me like they killed my beloved predecessor."

-------------

1400Z
Havana
Cuba

- - - - - - -

Fidel Castro was fed up with people defecting to the United States. He had to think of solutions which would keep himself in power and Communism the dominant paradigm while still appeasing the populace. He never thought he'd be talking about stuff like this with the representatives of North
Korea, but he figured it wouldn't hurt to ask what Chang Sung-Taek had done.

He was no more immune to the Imperius Curse than any of the other world leaders. Voldemort was now in charge of a nation less than a hundred miles from Miami.

A few hours later, nukes were being Portkeyed across the ocean to Cuba for the second time in thirty-five years. Voldemort expected that having weapons so close to the US would help convince President Clinton that he meant business.

1500Z
St. Peter's Basilica
Vatican City

John Paul II, the Dalai Lama, Urban VIII, and the wheelchair-bound Suleiman I appeared together on the balcony in what would very likely their first, and last, joint appearance. All four men preached for peace, hope, and self-restraint. Urban, of course threw, in a plug for the destruction of all evil wizards. Everyone in the crowd cheered at that. Next to him, John Paul rolled his eyes and pasted a smile on his face for the cameras. Suleiman nodded gravely, and the Dalai Lama looked horrified.

1700Z
[location classified]
Israel

The vote was close, very close. However, the measure passed. The Israelis had agreed to retaliate against Hamas and defy al-Qaeda. The premise was Hamas was the bigger threat and al-Qaeda was likely dealing with operations all over the world.

They also agreed to respond with nuclear weapons if Hamas's wizards attempted any copycat attacks nuclear attacks against Israeli cities.

1737Z
Hato Airport
Willemstad
Curacao

The trip had been grueling and had taken me to places I had never even heard of before. However, we had made it. We had reached Curacao with all of our belongings. It appeared we had done so just in time, as the chaos was continuing to spread in the United States.

The car picked us up and we began heading towards my grandfather's house at 63 SBN Doormanweg.

1800Z
Oval Office
The White House

My fellow Americans, I am becoming increasingly concerned about the chaos gripping our cities. Rest assured that we have everything under control and that the Ministry of Magic has contingency plans for this.

As of this moment, I am placing the country under martial law. The riots are to stop right here, and right now. If you do not stop them on your own, the American government will stop them for you.
1830Z
Demilitarized Zone
Koreas
- - - - - - -
The North stormed across the border, the tanks floating above the minefields and protected by force fields. They were accompanied by helicopters, aircraft, dragons, and hundreds of other magical creatures.

Within half an hour, the Korean War had resumed in earnest.

1845Z
Atlantis
- - - - - - -
Dialonis nearly fainted. "What? You can't be serious!"

The assistant nodded. "I'm afraid so, sir. The leaders of China, Cuba, and Germany have fallen to the Imperius Curse or Avada Kedavra. These countries possess large numbers of tactical and strategic nuclear weapons, all of which are now in the hands of Voldemort. One-sixth of the world population is controlled by Voldemort now. The Dark Lord, realizing his Horcruxes have been threatened and that his back is against the wall, has invaded South Korea to distract the Muggles. Fighting has broken out at the border and is spreading rapidly. There are rumors 25 kT mininukes are being transported to Cuba and that a second Cuban Missile Crisis may be on the verge of starting up."

Dialonis closed his eyes and fell to his knees. He knew what he had to do. It was the only option at this point. He just prayed that it didn't go any further.

"Tell everyone to gather for an emergency meeting, and including the head of the prophecy department."

The assistant gasped. "The prophecy department?"

"Yes. Unless I'm badly mistaken, there is now greater than a 10% chance of global thermonuclear war and the destruction of civilization. I'm going to need him to turn the key if that's the case."

"Turn the key? You can't be -- "

Dialonis stared at the assistant, hard. "Yes. If the prophecy department confirms the 10% barrier has been breached, we're going to DEFCON 1. Pray that it doesn't get past 30%, or we're going to have another Judgment Day on our hands. Even I'm not sure what our responsibilities are there -- I'd have to read up on it. After all, there hasn't been a Judgment Day for over 3500 years."

The assistant shuddered but nodded. "Yes, sir."

To be continued...

Update #218
Monday, June 17, 1996 -- 3 DAYS TO JUDGMENT DAY
1100Z
Gringotts Bank
Diagon Alley
The clock in the lobby hit 12:00 just as the cart with containing Snape, Dumbledore, and the rest of
the group tasked with retrieving Draco returned to the lobby.

The place looked as if a Muggle bomb had hit it. Two of the APC's had been destroyed, and one of
them was missing. There were dead Death Eaters everywhere, and no fewer than fifteen fallen
goblins.

The goblin who had driven the cart stared in horror at what he saw. Tears appeared momentarily on
his face, followed by a mask of rage. The short little man vowed to deal justice to whoever had killed
his comrades.

Muggles were walking through the debris, cleaning up the mess and tending to the injured.
Dumbledore headed to one of the commanders and eventually pieced out what had happened.

Two of the Muggle soldiers in the APC's had apparently been Death Eaters under the Polyjuice
Potion. Each wizard brought out his wand and had taken control of his vehicle. One had fired upon
the helicopter, which had destroyed the traitorous APC with a missile. The second APC, the one
with the mortar, had then fired on the third one and destroyed it. The vehicle with the mortar had left,
and the Death Eater reserves had flooded in. Some had headed down into the vaults to go defend the
Horcrux. Others had taken out their rage on the goblins as they tried to secure the lobby. The Death
Eaters in turn had been overwhelmed by Muggle soldiers, including ordinary London policemen and
riot control crews who were starting to swarm into Diagon Alley through the Leaky Cauldron. Men
who had killed goblins with wands had eventually fallen to Muggles with guns.

The battle was over, and Gringotts was secure. The question was whether McGonagall and her team
would be able to beat off the surviving Death Eaters and make their way to the Horcrux -- or at least
hold them off long enough to get Draco down there and have him open the door.

Snape, Scrimgeour, Sirius, Dumbledore, and everyone else called for Draco to come out --
everything was safe now. There was a brief hesitation, and a few a few moments Snape saw a
familiar shock of short blonde hair. Draco Malfoy emerged from behind a shattered cabinet, terror on
his face. No one, of course, realized that he was feigning all of it.

Snape hurried up and spoke with him. "Draco! Are you all right? Were you hurt?"

Draco looked at his body. "I don't think so, Professor. Did you destroy the Horcrux?"

Snape shook his head. "Not yet. There's a faint purple security field blocking the entrance to the
vault which will only allow you or your father into the vault. It appears that you will have retrieve the
Horcrux yourself, bring it out of the vault, and let us destroy it. Are you up for that?"

Draco hadn't seemed surprised when Snape had mentioned the security screen. That troubled him for
a moment, but eventually he concluded that Draco had likely never been in a Gringotts vault before
and would have likely concluded that all of the vaults had screens like this as a matter of common
The blonde boy nodded. "I'll try, Professor. Did you get the Death Eaters out of the way down there? I think I saw a lot of them head down in one of those carts you came up in."

Snape nodded. "We're working on dealing with them as we speak. I expect that the headmistress and several other people are down there finishing them off. The coast will be clear by the time we get down there. Now come, Draco, and let's end this thing."

Draco hesitated for a moment, and then he came out. The goblin took a look at Draco, nodded, and escorted them all back to the car.

--------

Even Dumbledore couldn't help but scream when he saw the results of the battle in the vault. Every single person was dead save for Alastair Moody.

The Death Eaters were lying on the floor in various positions around the room. They surrounded a second ring of bodies consisting of many of the members of the Order of the Phoenix. McGonagall's body had no fewer than five dead Death Eaters surrounding it -- she had proven to be a very difficult target.

It looked as if many of the people had been burned to death. Someone had unleashed powerful flames in the area near the vault. Snape was about to ask Moody who it had been when he saw the huge mass in the center of the room and realized that it hadn't been a who. It had been a what: the dragon, now thankfully also dead.

The purple screen still blocked entrance to the vault. Moody was staring at it in resignation and horror.

Mad-Eye turned to the newcomers and explained what happened. He was badly burned, but he was still alive. "The Death Eaters caught us by surprise at first, finishing off Minerva before any of us could get our bearings. Once they lost the element of surprise, they were finished. We had finished off most of the Death Eaters when...well, everything went to pot."

Snape frowned. "What happened, Moody?"

"The goblin who brought us down here came with Clankers, noisemakers which keep the dragon under control. When he came back with us, he took the Clankers with him."

The goblin in question looked at the noisemakers, sitting in the front seat of the vehicle, and suddenly realized what had happened. He put his hands to his head. "NO! Great gods, NO!"

Moody looked at the goblin sympathetically. "I'm afraid so, sir. Without the Clankers to pacify the creature, the dragon turned on everybody in the room and wiped most of us out with dragonbreath. I'm surprised the goblin who brought the Death Eaters didn't bring a set with him -- I could have sworn there were at least two sets."

The goblin could barely speak. "He was probably Imperiused by the attackers and ordered to get them down here as fast as possible. They probably didn't know enough to ask him to grab a set of Clankers."
The goblin began to cry. Snape, however, cut him off. "My friend, you can grieve later. Now we have to finish what we've come for. Draco, if you would do the honor, step through into the vault. Let's make sure their deaths weren't in vain."

Draco chuckled to himself. He'd like to see the expressions on their faces when they realized they'd been had. Squaring his shoulders, he passed through the purple field. The field disappeared behind him, allowing other people to enter the vault. Draco seemed a bit surprised by that, but he didn't say anything.

Snape looked around the vault. He knew the Lestranges had been well-off. However, even he hadn't realized how much clutter they had accumulated over the years. He hoped that Gringotts had given Draco an inventory when he had inherited the vault's contents. He could catalogue the vault later, however. Right now he was focused on only one thing -- the Hufflepuff cup. He looked around the room and eventually saw the cup. He reached out his hand to take hold of it.

He was about to touch it when someone shone wand light into the room. Sirius voice exclaimed, "There it is! I see it!"

Snape frowned. "Black, I've got it right --". Then he saw something which caused his tongue to freeze to the roof us his mouth.

The light from Sirius's wand was also illuminating a Hufflepuff cup. He looked around a little further, and saw no fewer than thirty-six cups in plain sight! One of them flickered in and out, which looked like a promising candidate. Snape didn't know any spells which could do such a thing, but then again he hadn't been as strong a wizard as Voldemort.

He suspected he knew what Voldemort was trying to do. One of them was the real one. The others were traps which would probably melt people's flesh off their bones if they tried to touch them. Well, he knew a spell which would identify the real one. He lifted his wand and cast the spell which would identify the Horcrux by looking for the piece of soul inside it, just like he had done with the tiara.

------

1111Z

-------

The Horcrux wasn't there.

Curses and flames shattered chandeliers and fractured walls throughout the room which had contained the dragon. A ghost fled, screaming that the end of the world was nigh. Draco, suddenly genuinely terrified about what would happen next, bolted from the vault and headed for the cart. The purple field re-established itself as soon as he left the vault.

Snape shouted at Dumbledore. "It's not there! Someone moved it! We've been had! This has all been for nought!"

Dumbledore's face sagged. "Merlin's beard. God help us!" His sentiments were echoed by virtually everyone else in the room.

Snape looked at Dumbledore accusingly. "Are you sure you got the right place?"

Dumbledore, oddly enough, smiled for a moment and brought out the Resurrection Stone. "Well, we'll find soon enough."

He turned the stone three times over in his hand. Seconds later, an image of the late Professor
Quirinius Quirrell began floating in the air next to him.

Dumbledore didn't have time for chit-chat. "Quirinius, I need your guidance. You spoke with Harry Potter about the Horcruxes, did you not?"

Snape looked at him nervously. "Dumbledore, who are you talking to?"

Dumbledore shushed him as Quirrell responded. "Yes, Professor Dumbledore. I did. One of them, in fact, is in this vault. I take it that's why you came?"

Dumbledore nodded. "Precisely, Quirinius. Unfortunately, it is no longer there."

Quirrell grimaced. "That's not good. That probably means Voldemort realized I knew where it was and moved it. As to who did it, I don't know. What I can assure you, however, is that Voldemort considered the Hufflepuff cup to be absolutely secure and did not warrant being moved because no one else alive knew that it was here."

Dumbledore got the hint immediately. "Harry. The secret was exposed when you disclosed the locations to Harry a few months ago."

"My thoughts exactly, Professor. I would check with the goblins to see who entered the vault between the time I broke the secret and today."

Dumbledore nodded, thanked Quirrell, and pocketed the Stone. The image of Quirrell vanished.

Snape tapped his foot and then pointed at the space where Quirrell had been. "Well? What are you doing talking to thin air?"

Dumbledore glared at him angrily. "I can explain this later, Severus. In the meantime, I need to talk with the goblin here. Sir, have people entered this vault a lot of late? I know it's private, but it's important. The fate of the world may lie on the answer."

The goblin brought out a parchment and consulted it. He then hesitated for a second, but eventually gave in. "No. According to the records, the only person to visit this vault in the past year was Draco Malfoy over there. He's certainly permitted to do so as he owns the vault now, or at least will own it when he attains his majority."

Everyone looked at Draco, who suddenly appeared nervous. Suddenly, it hit everyone. Snape pointed his wand at Draco and shouted, "Legilimens!"

Draco cowered in a corner as Snape read his thoughts. It only took seconds before the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher screamed in horror.

"DRACO'S A DOUBLE AGENT! HE'S BEEN WORKING FOR VOLDEMORT THE WHOLE TIME! HE NEVER ACTUALLY DEFECTED!"

Draco cringed, and the expression on the boy's face gave it away. Dumbledore began shouting at Snape to calm down. However, Snape was furious. "All right, Draco! Out with it! Where is it? Answer me! If you don't, I will be forced to obtain this information by force!"

Draco didn't say anything. He just began sobbing in fear.
Snape turned to Scrimgeour briefly, who nodded. The head of Slytherin House then cast the Imperius Curse on one of his favorite students.

Draco wilted like a flower, and Snape began the investigation. "All right, Draco! I order you to tell me where it is!"

Draco's face was slack as he answered. "I'm afraid I'm not allowed to do so, Professor. You see, the cup's location is protected by the Fidelius Curse, and Voldemort is the Secret-Keeper. I cannot reveal the object's location. It looks like the Dark Lord, thanks to my action as the spell's caster, will live forever after all."

Scrimgeour howled in terror as Snape bored in. "All right, the cup is Fideliused and you can't say where it is. Did you do anything else to it?"

"I made it Muggle-repelling, Unplottable, and Disillusioned. Oh, and it's in a place where there is no way you're going to find it. I'm awfully sorry."

Dumbledore thought for a moment and turned to Scrimgeour. "This is a very serious problem, Lucius. As far as we can tell, there is no way even for Dialonis to extract a Fideliused secret without going through the Secret-Keeper. I remember writing a paper myself that a complete soul is perfect for --"

Suddenly, it hit him. Complete soul.

Voldemort had fragmented his soul. Several of the Horcruxes had been destroyed, which meant that he didn't have much of a soul to hide the secret in. And if the secret was too big for the soul to contain...

He motioned to Snape -- still unable to use wands for offensive magic while wearing the ring -- and asked him to accompany Draco into the vault. Draco walked in, and the screen disappeared behind him. Dumbledore scanned through the various copies of the cup before he saw what he was looking for: one copy which looked as if it had been phasing in and out of existence.

He pointed at the copy in question. Snape nodded. "I saw that as well, Professor. I can't make heads or tails out of it."

Dumbledore had an awful suspicion. "Severus, would be so good as to cast a spell which will indicate what magic that flickering cup is using?"

Skeptical, Snape did so. The investigation returned a result which nearly blew everyone off their feet.

Fidelius Charm.

Dumbledore whistled. "Well, Severus, there is still hope! Fidelius Charms apparently will not work if the Secret-Keeper has split his soul! All we have to do is look for objects which are lapsing in and out of existence!"

Snape groaned. "That doesn't tell us WHERE it is, though."

Sirius motioned to Snape, and they talked quietly for a second. Suddenly, both men grinned -- it looked most unusual. They nodded at each other, and then Sirius asked the Draco a question.
"Does this Horcrux look different at all from the duplicates? How can I identify it? What makes you think we'll never find it?"

Draco's Imperiused response was drowned out by a loud "Legilimens" from Snape. The rest of the assault team looked at the two of them, baffled for a second. Suddenly, Snape chuckled and said: "I know where it is. It's underwater in the lake near Hogwarts. That's all I can tell, however. I can't tell exactly where in the lake it is."

Draco gasped in horror -- a reaction which was tantamount to a confirmation. Scrimgeour whistled. "Wow! How did you do that? Had the secret phased in at the time?"

Snape shook his head. "No, Minister. The key is that I used Legilimens to extract the image of the cup -- in context -- from his mind. The image does not necessarily betray the exact location, so it's fair game. However, I saw Draco's mind wander from Hogwarts underwater to the cup as he was trying to answer Black's question. He was also not forced to speak the secret, which may have helped bypass the Fidelius."

Dumbledore laughed. "Well, Severus! How ingenious! You're lucky he fell for it, though. I doubt that fully trained wizards would have been fooled by this."

Sirius answered with one sentence, a Muggle expression he'd heard in HMSS. "Don't think of a pink elephant."

Ten minutes later, Draco's memories of the interrogation had been Obliviated and the assault team was returning to the surface with the bodies and the true location of the Horcrux. The whole operation had taken less than an hour.

To be continued...

------------------
Update #219
------------
Tuesday, June 18, 1996 -- 2 DAYS TO JUDGMENT DAY
0045Z
Chinese Air Base
[location classified]
People's Republic of China

Next PoV: 219.5 - Harry Potter
--------------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 1 (cup)
ATLANTIS ALERT STATUS: DEFCON 1
--------------
Kuan-Yin Su stared at the message in disbelief. "Is he out of his mind? We can't get involved here as it will just escalate the crisis further!"

Yuan Yu grunted. "I fully agree that it's a ridiculous idea. Nevertheless, we have our orders. North Korea and the People's Republic of China are both Communist nations, and it is incumbent for the two of us to join forces against the capitalists."

Kuan-Yin Su stuffed the note back in his pocket and shook his head. "Who was the idiot who decided on this tactic?"
"Rumor has it that it came all the way from the top. I wouldn't be surprised -- the president has been acting strange over the past few days. He seems to be completely caught up with trying to support North Korea."

Yuan Yu swore and reached for the pre-flight checklist. "I sure as hell hope the United States and Taiwan don't get involved or there will be hell to pay."

0135Z
Northern South Korea

Choi Sung Jung's neighbor was screaming in her ear. "They're coming! They're coming! We've got to get out of here!"

She didn't need to be told twice. Screaming for her husband and her six-year-old son, she told them to get on bicycles and start moving. No, they didn't have time to pack anything other than a few emergency supplies.

Spending a valuable five minutes to make sure everyone was all set, they all pedaled out into the street away from the border.

Her husband turned to her. "Where are we going?"

She shrugged. "Beats the hell out of me. All I can recommend is to go south and then try to find a small village which is out of the way of the main North Korean attack."

Her husband's response was interrupted by a sonic boom. Startled, everyone looked up and saw a fighter plane zooming across the sky. Judging from the craft's configuration and paint job, it looked Chinese.

0430Z
Galiver Senate
Galiver Consortium
Pacific Ocean

Prime Minster Tolidan of Brobdingnag jerked his head up in surprise and almost immediately began swearing as his head hit the ceiling. Rubbing it, he composed himself and turned to Premier Jyntar of the Galiver Consortium.

"WHAT? You've got to be kidding."

Jyntar nodded gravely. "You heard me correctly, Prime Minister. We've just received word from Atlantis. Dialonis has gone to DEFCON 1."

Utlar III put his hand on his head in disbelief. "DEFCON 1? That's ridiculous! What the hell is going on over there?"

"A Dark wizard named Voldemort is trying to take over the world now that the Statute of Secrecy has been revoked. He's already got control of China and is using Chinese resources to assist him in this endeavor. Panic is slowly spreading throughout the Muggle community. War has broken out in eastern Asia."

Queen Liseth II of Lilliput fluttered her wings nervously. "We'll be safe over here, right? Muggles
Jyntar gritted his teeth. "I wouldn't be so certain, Your Majesty. Dialonis cannot invoke DEFCON 1 unless there is a 1 in 10 chance of the destruction of human civilization. The protocols forbid it, and the order to advance to DEFCON 1 must be countersigned by the head of the prophecy department. We're human, so we will likely also be at risk. This is a distinct possibility now that Muggles have developed nuclear weapons."

President Neihym of Houyhnhnm kicked his rear legs in irritation. "What about us centaurs?"

"I don't know, Mr. President. I suspect that anything catastrophic enough to destroy all human life will threaten the centaurs as well."

There was silence for a few minutes. Finally, Neihym nodded. "This is Galiver's work. I'm sure of it."

No one could argue with that.

0900Z
West Bank
---------

The wizard counted down as the Sheikh waited expectantly. "Three, two, one, zero!"

Nothing happened for a few moments. Suddenly, a small earthquake shook the ground under the tent.

The wizard smiled. "Underground test detonation of 25 kT mini-nuke successful. I'd like to see the Zionists try to mess with us now."

0906Z
Jerusalem
---------

Benjamin Netanyahu read the report. "No!"

Shimon Peres nodded. "I'm afraid so, Bibi. Hamas wizards have just successfully detonated a 25 kT nuke underground. I'd recommend that we detonate one of our own underground, preferably of similar yield, to remind them that we will be ready to retaliate in kind if Hamas gets too cocky."

Netanyahu looked out the window. "I don't like it, Shimon."

Peres threw up his hands. "What do you expect us to do, wait for them to blow up Tel Aviv?"

Netanyahu hesitated a moment, and then his shoulders slumped. "Fine. Do it. 25 kT only. Make sure that it's far enough underground to not harm any Israeli or Palestinian civilians or pollute any aquifers with fallout. And make sure that word of these nuclear tests doesn't make it onto the goddamn Internet!"

Soldiers saluted and ran off, leaving Peres and Netanyahu alone.

Peres hesitated for a few moments and then said, "I must say, in retrospect, I should have been grateful you took over before all the shit hit the fan."

---------
Cameras flashed as the head rabbi issued the report. "It is the ruling of this court that the date corresponding to June 21st -- one week after the attack on the Western Wall -- shall be a minor Jewish fast day, from sunup to sundown. I encourage all of the Jews in the world to take at least some time on that day to pray and, if possible, fast."

The news of the fast day spread quickly. By the end of the day, the Dalai Lama, both popes, and the Kohen Gadol had signed on. For the first time in history, one religion's custom would be observed by all faiths around the world.

Clinton nearly fainted when he heard the report, both from shock and from the lack of sleep. Bleary-eyed, he turned to the messenger. "This can't be right. At least I hope it isn't."

The messenger shook his head. "I'm afraid it's not, Mr. President. There are rumors that wizards in Cuba are preparing 25 kT mini-nukes similar to those used by al-Qaeda, Voldemort, and Hamas. I think this confirms our earlier report that Castro has been Imperiused and Cuba has fallen to Voldemort."

"That's what it seems like, sir."

Clinton tried to think of what to do. He didn't like his options. However, he had to do something! Scratching his head, he turned to the messenger.

"Contact the Secretary of Defense. Have him come here within the hour."

The messenger saluted and left. Clinton was going to recommend that one of the air force bases in Miami perform a surgical strike, using conventional weapons only, against any locations which could be harboring wizards. Clinton was not going to use nukes as first strike weapon if he could help it. If, on the other hand, those little nukes started going off in American cities...

Radner had told him that the Portkey barrier was up. He just hoped that it went all around the country and included out of the way places like Florida.

The Sheikh turned to the man walking out the door and looked at him in surprise. "Where the hell are you going?"

The Muslims for Humans man turned back to look at him. "I'm a Saudi soldier, Sheikh. My unit has just been mobilized to head to North Korea to deal with Voldemort. I'm sorry, but I have my orders. And Voldemort is precisely the type of person Muslims for Humans has vowed to destroy."
The Sheikh got up and shook the soldier's hand. "May Allah go with you, my friend. He certainly favors you given your success with Muslims for Humans."

------------
1630Z
Ministry of Magic
London
England
------------
Rufus Scrimgeour breathed a sigh of relief. He turned to Dumbledore and nodded.

"All right, we've just gotten word from Nigel Marcellus. We've got ourselves a submersible equipped with the necessary cameras. Meet us at the lake in half an hour."

To be continued...

------------
Update #219.5
------------
Tuesday, June 18, 1996 -- 2 DAYS TO JUDGMENT DAY
1706Z
Hogsmeade
Great Britain
------------
Next PoV: 220 - Dialonis
------------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 1 (cup)
ATLANTIS ALERT STATUS: DEFCON 1
------------
The mayor of Hogsmeade couldn't figure out which was a more incredible sight: the huge Muggle contraptions flying through the air or the row of blue-robed Atlantean wizards on the other side of the lake.

He had learned about Atlantis fifty years ago, when he had been a student at Hogwarts. He didn't know much about it, primarily because the teacher himself knew very little about it. For most wizards in the United Kingdom, Atlantis was just the home of a nebulous organization which served the head of the International Confederation of Wizards. Although the Head Mugwump technically did have the power to intervene in national affairs, there had been no Atlantean interference for over six hundred years. There were legends running around that the reappearance of the Atlantean wizards would herald the end of the world.

As a child, he had scoffed at the stories linking Atlantis to Armageddon. However, he could not help but admit that the arrival of the Atlanteans at this point in history couldn't be a good sign.

Each Atlantean was surrounded by a shimmering white sphere of invulnerability. According to the document he had been handed, the spheres were generated by special Atlantean rings which could only be worn when the Grand Mugwump had declared an alert level of DEFCON 2 or higher. At DEFCON 2, the spheres were transparent. At DEFCON 1, the spheres were translucent and visible to wizards but not to Muggles.

No one knew what the spheres would look like if Dialonis ever declared Judgment Day. Most of the records had long since been lost, or at least had been classified as top secret by the ICW. The mayor admitted to himself that he would rather never have to find out what the spheres looked like on
At present, the Atlanteans were all watching two Muggle vehicles hovering in midair. The mayor recognized one of them as a large helicopter with two set of rotating blades on top. The British Wizarding community had been exposed to helicopters at least twice already, once during Flying House and once during what was colloquially being called Ragnarok in Diagon Alley. Many wizards were more familiar with helicopters than they were with ordinary airplanes.

The second object hovering in midair was neither a helicopter nor an aircraft. It took a while for the mayor to realize that the helicopter was actually towing the object underneath it to its destination, which appeared to be the lake. The object was red and white and looked to be a cross between a small boat and an upside-down mushroom. There were odd cylinders which looked like cameras all over the surface, and two metallic arms which looked like claws protruded from its front. Mounted above the arms was a small, round glass window which looked like a big eye.

The top of the vehicle -- the red part -- had the word "ALVIN" written on it in white letters. The mayor frowned: was it actually a living being named Alvin created the by the Muggles? He doubted it, but then again how would he know? He didn't know much about Muggles.

Curious, he watched across the lake with a large number of other Hogsmeade residents.

---------------

The Muggle commander gestured wildly at the helicopter as it slowly lowered the submersible to the surface of the lake. Normally, the submersible would be transported to the dive site on a boat. This particular dive, however, would be into a lake with no navigable access to the ocean. As a result, deployment would be much more difficult.

Finally, after a good five minutes, the submersible splashed into the water. Guns came out everywhere when merpeople suddenly started swarming around it. However, Dumbledore told all the Muggles to stand down as the merpeople were normally peaceful people.

A few minutes went by, and eventually the Merchieftainess stuck her head out of the water. She immediately swam over to Dumbledore and got out of the water. Ignoring the Muggles frantically taking pictures of her, she thrust a webbed finger out at Alvin and glared at the former headmaster.

"What the hell is THAT? And who are all these people?"

Dumbledore tried to explain. "Your Majesty, this is a Muggle underwater ship which can be used to search for objects in the lake. We have reason to believe that one of Voldemort's Horcruxes is in the lake and the Muggles have generously allowed us to borrow this ship so we can look for the Horcrux?"

The Merchieftainess looked at the sub warily. "What do you need a ship for? You could have asked us! We can't stand Voldemort either, and we want to help!"

Dumbledore shook his head. "It's not that simple. Muggle technology must be used to find this object. You see, it's under a Disillusionment Charm, which as you know makes the object invisible to the view of living creatures."

The Merchieftainess thought for a moment. "Living creatures? Are you telling me that Muggle machines like this one will be able to view the object when we can't?"

"That is correct, Your Majesty. Whoever invented the Disillusionment Charm never thought that it
would have to deal with machines looking for an object."

The Merchieftainness nodded. "In that case, I'll leave you alone. Don't hesitate to ask if you need any help."

And with that, the mermaid dove back beneath the surface, leaving excited Muggles pointing at where she had submerged. Dumbledore had a troubling suspicion that people would start swarming to Hogsmeade to try to speak with the mermaids. He would have to do something to prevent that -- the mermaids didn't like interacting with air-breathers much, and they deserved their privacy.

A few feet away, the Muggle commander ordered the helicopter to release the cables connecting the sub to the chopper. The helicopter complied, leaving Alvin floating in the waves. It then flew off to the side and promptly found itself trying to keep curious wizards away from it.

Seeing everything in order, the Muggle turned to Dumbledore. "Well, I think we're all set. The sub is ready for use. How exactly are we going to go about doing this?"

Dumbledore gestured to Sirius, and the HMSS wizard came over. "How many people will fit in this submarine? Would it be possible for this man and I to accompany you into the lake?"

The commander looked at the two men and nodded. "It may be a little cramped, but I think it will be all right."

"Good. You're telling me that you have a metal detector on board. Would it be able to find an object made of gold?"

"I think so. Why?"

"Excellent. Here is your mission. We're going to go down into the lake with you and see if we can use this detector to find a golden cup hidden in the lake."

The Muggle stared at him. "Someone lost an heirloom or something like that?"

Dumbledore and Sirius looked at each other and tried to think of how to explain this. Eventually, Sirius answered. "Yes, Commander. The object in question is a relic of the school, once owned by Hogwarts founder Helga Hufflepuff. We need to get it back."

The commander shrugged. "Shouldn't be hard. I think we'll be able to do it ourselves."

Dumbledore shook his head. "Unfortunately, that is not the case. First, you are a Muggle. You will not be able to see it because it has a charm cast upon it which will make it invisible to Muggles. All you will be able to do is pilot the submersible to the location and send up a buoy to mark it. We'll handle it from there. Do you think you can do that?"

The commander shrugged. "Shouldn't be a problem. Let's go."

--------------------

1732Z

100 feet down

--------------------

Dumbledore and Sirius looked with amazement at the wide variety of life teeming in the lake. Very few of the wizards had explored the lake in depth, and certainly none as much as Harry Potter had when he had participated in the Triwizard Tournament. Fish sparkled by in various colors, including
a few magical eels and so forth. They found it difficult to focus on the task at hand.

They were nearing the bottom of the lake. They had contacted the Merchiefatainness one last time and warned all of the merpeople to put their hands over their ears as the Muggles’ sonar pings could be loud.

Dumbledore turned to the pilot. "All right, turn on the metal detector. Let's look for some gold."

The Muggle complied and flicked a switch. Nothing happened for several minutes. Then, three faint pings echoed through the hull roughly one second apart. There was a delay of about thirty seconds, followed by a couple of more pings separated by one second.

The pilot grunted. "That's odd. I've never heard of anything doing that before. One seconds between the pings indicates that it's maybe a couple of hundred feet away, which is plausible in a lake this size. What doesn't make sense is how it keeps on appearing and disappearing."

Sirius explained. "The object has a magical spell cast on it which would have normally prevented even the machines from sensing it. It's called the Fidelius Charm. However, there was a problem using the Fidelius in these circumstances which made it so the cup is phasing in and out of existence. Sometimes we can see it, sometimes we can't."

The pings resumed, and the Muggle turned to the radar screen. "I don't see it, which is kind of odd."

Dumbledore answered that. "It's Unplottable. It will not appear on maps. You will have navigate to it without using maps. Can it be done?"

The pilot nodded. "I think so. It will be cumbersome, but I think we can handle it. Watch and learn."

The pilot then proceeded to move Alvin a few dozen feet in all three dimensions: north-south, east-right, and up-down. He then analyzed the changes in the intervals between the pings to determine if he was getting closer to, or further away, from the source after each motion. It took a while for enough pings to bounce back to get good estimates of the distance, but eventually they had identified a tentative location. Not surprisingly, the triangulation indicated a position on the bottom of the lake.

The water was getting dark -- both due to the setting sun and to the depth -- as they closed in on the target. The intervals between the pings -- which kept on phasing in and out -- dropped from one second to half a second, then a quarter of a second, then further still. Eventually, the pings were blending into one continuous stream.

Sirius put his hand on the pilot's shoulder. "Turn on the floodlights."

The pilot flicked a switch and illuminated the scene in front of the submersible. The vessel was hovering just above the bottom and traveling very slowly. Finally, they reached the target coordinates. No one could see anything, of course, as the Disillusionment Charm prevented it. However, they now knew where it was. All the wizards needed to do now was send someone down there to cast Finite on the area where they thought the cup would be.

Both Dumbledore and Sirius knew who that would be. He'd done it once, and he could do it again.

1904Z

Harry Potter, with a wrapped basilisk fang the Order had picked up in Diagon Alley in one pocket
and an extra supply of gillyweed in the other, headed for the buoy bobbing out in the middle of the lake. By the time he reached it and started heading down the cable tethering the buoy to the surface, it was getting dark. Eventually, the only light he could see came from the submersible's floodlights down at the bottom.

Harry waved at the people in the submersible and waited for them to signal that the half-broken Fidelius Charm had phased the cup back into existence again. When Dumbledore gave it, he pointed his wand at the lakebed and shouted, "Finite!"

There was a brief burst of light. It faded away to reveal the Hufflepuff cup lying in the sand, half-buried. Next to it appeared to be a duplicate of the Ravenclaw tiara, which was at this point absolutely useless. They had caught a bit of a break: apparently the spell had knocked out both the Fidelius Charm and the Disillusionment Charm at the same time. This rendered the cup permanently visible to Harry.

He looked into the submarine and saw Sirius and Dumbledore cheering. Even the Muggle was pointing at the cup, which was evidence that the Muggle-repelling spell had also been destroyed. Slowly and methodically, he unwrapped the basilisk fang.

He glanced at the people inside the submersible. A camera was rolling, and all three men were on their feet.

1937Z

Anastasios Dialonis watched the scene expectantly from Atlantis. Thousands of miles away, Travis Radner watched with Bill Clinton from the White House. Rufus Scrimgeour and the rest of Hogsmeade were observing from the Hogsmeade Town Hall.

Bill Clinton, eyes glued to the television set, had the head of the North Korean assault force on the phone. "Stand by...stand by..."

The Alvin footage was being broadcast all around the world. People dropped everything to see what was going on. Isaac Sanders interrupted his class in Prescott. People stood at attention in Times Square. Workers at the DeLorean headquarters paused work on their Chrononauts to watch. Eric Street postponed a service he had agreed to provide. Rioters in Memphis dropped their weapons to stare into screens in a Radio Shack.

They all watched as a fifteen-year-old boy slammed the basilisk fang into the cup. There was a brief flare of green, and then the cup shattered into fragments.

Clinton screamed "GO!" into the telephone. His command was repeated all over the world as other national leaders relayed the news to their soldiers.

Voldemort was mortal once more. The Last Battle had begun.

To be continued...

Update #220

Wednesday, June 19, 1996 -- 1 DAY TO JUDGMENT DAY
0403Z
Grand Mugwump's Office
It took Dialonis a long time to find it. However, he eventually uncovered it after a good half day of searching. The documentary had been hidden in an old storage room for the simple reason that no one ever thought that they would have ever have to deal with a Judgment Day scenario again.

Finding the document was one thing. Translating the ancient language into comprehensible Latin was another, and making sure that the ancient parchment didn’t disintegrate was yet another. However, he had eventually managed to pull it off.

The first thing he would do after reading this was translate the document into Greek so that future Mugwumps would not have to jump through hoops to understand what it was saying. Furthermore, if he considered the information safe enough to be relayed to the Muggles -- after all, it discussed a historical event which took place over four thousand years ago which had long since been forgotten - he would inform historians so it could be included in Muggle history books. A note next to the document claimed that it dated from around 2200 BC, about the time of the first Judgment Day.

First things first, however. He had to read it. After all, this was the only surviving document of one of the two previous Judgment Days. He might have to refer to this in case he were forced to call a third.

I, Grand Mugwump Noha-Pishtin, have written this document to preserve, for all history, a documentary of the terrible events which have taken place over the past few years. At present, I have no idea if the human race will survive the cataclysm which has just befallen the world. The prophets and seers are divided about this, and some of them bluntly state that the disaster will likely spell the end of all life.

I offered sacrifices to Ptah, Ra, and virtually all of the other gods and asked them for protection and advice. Yet they never answered my pleas. Have we angered Them? Did They choose to destroy our world because of our corruption and sins? It pains me to think that. And if that is the case, even my Judgment Day declaration may not be enough to save us.

I have no idea who you are, dear reader, or whether there will ever be a reader at all. However, as the pharaoh says, as long as you are alive there is still a chance and panicking will just make the matter worse.

The cataclysm began a few years ago, when the pharaoh’s power was at its height. He had presided over our land for what appeared to be an eternity, and people actually began to believe that he could actually be a god. Needless to say, people actually thinking that you are a god tends to cause people to become overly proud and arrogant. This pride and arrogance may have led to our downfall. The king of Egypt is supposed to maintain order and be just. That is the decree of Ma'at, the contract with the gods. Anyone who violates it risks Their displeasure and -- quite possibly -- wrath.

The first signs came when stars began falling from the sky. The astrologers studied these events carefully and concluded that this was an evil omen. The pharaoh did what he could to placate the gods, but the gods had apparently already decided our fate. The falling stars became brighter, larger,
and more numerous. People began to panic, and anarchy began to spread throughout the land. Fields were uncultivated, and the inundation of the Nile came and went without harvesting any crops. The pharaoh tried to calm the people, but nothing he could do could stop the chaos. The man who thought he was a god was shown, for the first and last time, that he was not.

A few weeks before the Hammer of Ra appeared, my astrologers informed me that a great doom befell our civilization and that it was quite likely that Egypt -- and perhaps the known world -- would be destroyed. The prophecies mentioned stories of great floods and prolonged periods of darkness. At first, I couldn't believe it. However, I read the prophecies myself. What I saw chilled me to the bone. I realized that I had to act. As a result, I ordered Atlantis to Alert Level One -- stopping short of Judgment Day -- and told everyone to listen as the astrologers made their recommendations.

The astrologers explained to the people of Atlantis -- and to the pharaoh -- that the entire world as we knew it would be subject to a great flood. They recommended that all nations build boats and sail into the Great Sea, away from the coastline. Those who sailed into the Sea would be spared. Those who stayed behind would be drowned by a wall of water hundreds of cubits high which would cover the land and destroy all life.

The pharaoh, of course, secure in his power, scoffed at us and didn't believe this. I begged him to reconsider, but he refused and continued with life as usual, consorting with women and eating fine delicacies. Horrified, I soon realized that if the most powerful Muggle in the world would not be able to save humanity, it would be up to me.

I summoned all of the wizards and told them to construct three large ships: the Shim, Han, and Iavet. These boats were using the most sophisticated magic known to Atlantis and were thousands of cubits long. Even I was staggered by the immensity of these ships, and was concerned for a moment that the wizard who created them was also suffering from overweening pride and that using the ships would doom us further. The foreman of the construction project, however, assured me that he had spoken with the astrologers and done exactly what they recommended.

Each of these ships could hold eight thousand people and supplies for two years. If we ever ran out of supplies, we could just Duplicate more. It soon became obvious that these ships were intended to ride out the flood, and soon other nations began building their own boats.

The nomadic tribes around us were in awe of the ships and asked what they were for. Although we tried to explain the danger to the nomads, the pharaoh was haughty and said that the wizards were just trying to boast how powerful they were and that there was nothing to worry about. The nomads were frightened by the pharaoh's demeanor and eventually decided not to board the boats.

The astrologers warned us that if we had to board the boats, we would need a sign from above. That sign came a few weeks later in the form of the Hammer of Ra.

The falling stars, which had gotten more numerous over the weeks, were suddenly blasted out of the sky by a huge ball of fire the size of a mountain. The fire was far away, and falling very quickly. It made the sound of thunder as descended through the air and fell below the edge of the world, past the Western Sea. The sound knocked over buildings and killed people all by itself. The fire was so large, and so hot, that people who did not seek shelter quickly were burned by it even though it was far, far, away.

People panicked at the sight of the Hammer of Ra even further. We exhorted them to get on the boat. Some of them did, but others did not. Horrified, I realized that I would need to invoke the Judgment Day protocol to save all these people. After confirming with the astrologers that the conditions for
Judgment Day -- one in three chance of the end of civilization -- had been met, I brought out the Time-Turners, handed them to the wizards, and chose the instant the Hammer of Ra hit the horizon as Time Zero. Using the Time-Turners, the wizards visited every single family in Egypt and the surrounding countries in one instant. Overcoming their reluctance to wield magic against Muggles, they took the Muggles and brought them over to the boats using Side-Along Apparation. Thanks to the Judgment Day protocol, the Hammer of Ra struck the earth with twenty-five thousand people on the boats instead of two hundred.

Dialonis nearly dropped the document in shock. The man was describing something which sounded uncannily like an asteroid impact, where the main projectile was embedded in a swarm of smaller rocks which burned up in the atmosphere! What's more, he recognized the Mugwump's as being the ancestor of the names Noah and Utnapishtim -- and the names of the boats looking a lot like the names of Noah's children. It soon dawned on him that he was reading an eyewitness account of the legend which had been passed down over the years as the story of Noah's Ark! He read on.

Once the boats were filled with people, I ordered them all into the harbor and propelled them with magical speed away from the shore. At first, nothing happened. Then the sun rose over the western horizon, and the people screamed with dread. It was accompanied by a crown of smoke and fire which seemed to grow at every moment. The king of the gods had come to earth to deal justice to the wicked. The fire of the gods threatened to burn down our ships, but I ordered the wizards to raise shields against it.

Dialonis thought about this and soon realized that the writer was writing about the actual impact of the asteroid. Rocks and steam had been sprayed out of the crater -- presumably this was an ocean strike -- and begun to shoot into the atmosphere. A huge fireball had erupted from the crater -- this western sun -- and would have burned the ships to bits had it not been for the magical protection.

Suddenly, it occurred to him. Ocean impact. Egypt's on the water, and the Mediterranean had an outlet to the Atlantic. If it fell in the Atlantic or in the Mediterranean with nothing to block a tsunami...He had an awful feeling what was going to happen next. Who would have thought that the Great Flood had actually been an impact tsunami?

The writer, as it turned out, didn't disappoint him.

Moments later, a great wave approached the ships. The wave was traveling very fast and was a good thirty cubits high. It was also as long as Egypt. A wave of this size could only be created by a god. It passed under our ships, and the ships shook like leaves. The astrologers told us that this wave had spared us but would destroy all civilization.

Dialonis started to weep. A tsunami would have a long wavelength, much longer than an ordinary wave. Normally, in deep water, the wave would be spread out across the ocean surface and would not reach unusual heights. However, as it approached the shore, the front end would slow down in the shallow water and allow the rest of the wave to pile up on top of it, creating a tremendous wave capable of destroying coastlines. Considering that Egypt was probably the main civilization known to Atlantis at the time and that it was on the coast...He wondered if the author would go back to the mainland and find the land completely wrecked.
He thought a little about ancient history and realized that this letter had been written around the beginning of the First Intermediate Period in Egyptian history. This was a period of great decline for Egypt, when there was a lot of chaos and no one was entirely certain what happened. Dialonis soon realized that an impact event followed by terrible climate changes could bring any society to ruin.

How big was the object that had hit? It couldn't be something the size of the dinosaur killer -- ten kilometers or so -- because that would probably wipe out ALL civilization regardless of what the wizards did. However, if it was one kilometer across or so, even an ancient civilization might have a chance if it had wizards working for it. The eyewitness account continued with what could be nothing other than the ship encountering impact ejecta.

There was then a terrifying shock wave and noise, and the Iavet began to take on water. Ra's crown then approached us, and rock and ash fell out of the sky. We all went belowdecks and listened to stones striking the hull. Apparently Ra was not done with us yet, and He had decided to besiege us. We stayed belowdecks for a long time, forty days and forty nights. Eventually, the rocks stopped falling and we came out to see what had happened. The Iavet had been sunk, and we all grieved for the fallen. Praying that there were more people to save, we returned to Egypt to salvage what we could.

Egypt had been completely destroyed. The flood had come just as the astrologers had predicted and wiped out the entire coastline. Not a building was left standing, and everyone was dead. Ra had had His revenge. The pharaoh, of course, had been one of the first to fall.

Yet Ra was still not done with us. He hid Himself from us for a year. The air grew cold, and many crops died. We barely managed to survive on the remaining two boats. The astrologers had predicted darkness, and that is exactly what transpired.

Impact winter, Dialonis thought.

It soon became clear to us that we may very well be the only people left in the world. Would Ra attack us once again, or would He repopulate the world through us? We were all distraught at this, wailed in grief, dressed in sackcloth, and tried to numb ourselves with alcohol. What were we to do?

Life on the boats became difficult, and people began to fight for food. However, the gods in the end were merciful. Just when things began to get out of hand, Ra allowed His light to shine on us again and led us to a safe harbor. We beached the two remaining boats. I called the place Aiden, planted an orchard to feed the people, and told everyone to go forth and repopulate the land.

The survivors praised the gods for their mercy and built a great tower in their honor. Once the tower was complete and the sacrifices had been performed, the people made their departures into a brave new world. I returned to Atlantis to do what I could to watch over them.

I do not know if we will survive this ordeal. If a living person is reading this, you should contact me in Sheol and tell me so I can rest in peace.

Your obedient servant,

Noha-Pishtin
Grand Mugwump
Dialonis was shaking violently when he reached the end of the letter. Eden -- or, as Noha-Pishtin had called it, Aiden -- had come from the legends passed down from the first Judgment Day, complete with its garden. Noah and the Deluge, including Noah's bout of drunkenness. The Tower of Babel and the dispersal of mankind.

Hell, this could explain the flood stories in places like the Americas as well. If the asteroid hit in the eastern Atlantic and managed to inundate the east coast of the Americas with the tsunami...

The world would have to know about this...if it survived.

It was Dialonis's responsibility to ensure that it did.

To be continued...

----------
Update #220.3
----------
Wednesday, June 19, 1996 -- 1 DAY TO JUDGMENT DAY
0526Z
Grand Mugwump's Office
Atlantis
----------
Next PoV: 220.6 - Dialonis
----------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 0
ATLANTIS ALERT STATUS: DEFCON 1
----------
Rodrigo Calderon, the Spanish Minister of Magic, had to jump out of the way as Dialonis marched out of his office with a look of implacable determination on his face. It was clear that Dialonis had made up his mind. Had Calderon stayed where he had been, the Greek wizard would have likely walked right through him.

Calderon raised an eyebrow. "Sir, has something come up?"

Dialonis nodded. "Yes, Minister Calderon. We have some work to do. Finish gathering all of the wizards in the conference room. And while you're at it, see if you can get Astrologer Benevento away from his prophecies long enough to meet with me."

Calderon stared at him. "Are you thinking what I think you're thinking? Do you really think it's going to go all the way? I mean, we haven't had a Judgment Day in over 3600 years!"

Dialonis stared daggers at him. "We haven't had nuclear weapons before. Samuel was right when he warned the Pope and Suleiman about the dangers of having intelligence without wisdom. The human race has achieved great advances in technology and magic, yet it does not have the maturity to ensure that these tools only be used for peaceful purposes!"

Calderon stiffened slightly. "But look what technology has done! It's given us increased lifespans, greater prosperity, ease of travel -- "

Dialonis cut him off mid-sentence: " -- which won't do us much good if we blow ourselves up before we can use them. Now MOVE IT!"
Calderon knew when to pick his battles. No one dared confront Dialonis when he was like this. Backing off a step, he saluted and headed off.

----------
0930Z
Al-Qaeda Base
20 Miles Outside Havana
Cuba
----------

The missiles and fighter jets screamed in out of nowhere, bombarding the base and sending the Death Eaters flying. To their credit, the wizards did manage an adequate defense considering that they were still half-asleep. A couple of yellow beams took down two of the planes, and someone had the presence of mind to put up a big shield around the base. So much for the Fidelius Charm one of them commented. If they already knew where the base was, trying to make it a secret wouldn't do much good.

The shield worked well -- for about five minutes. That was when someone wearing a blue robe and encased in a bubble of translucent light stuck his head out of a helicopter and fired a spell at the shield. The shield went down, and the Death Eaters swore. Someone shot a spell back at the wizard, but it just bounced off the shield. Crap, the Death Eater thought. Atlantis is getting involved. This is bad.

Well, there was more than one way to deal with an Atlantean. He ordered one of his men to hex the helicopter with a Petrificus Totalus. Getting into position so that the beam wouldn't hit the Atlantean’s shield, the spell hit home and caused the rotors to stop turning.

The helicopter fell from the sky like a brick. The Atlantean managed to Apparate away just before the aircraft hit the ground and burst into flames. The Death Eater's jubilation was short-lived, however, as he soon heard a shriek behind him. He spun to see the Atlantean firing his wand at virtually everything he could find. The Death Eaters' colleagues naturally tried to retaliate, but everything just bounced off the shield.

The Death Eater didn't panic, however. Atlantis wizards may be powerful, but he doubted that those damned spheres of theres would keep out something the size of a 25 kT nuclear explosion.

He told one of his colleagues to toss him one of the small balls of uranium. The man threw it over, and the Death Eater caught it like an major league outfielder. He then told everyone else to get the hell out of there so that he could do what he had to do.

The roof of the building exploded, and the Death Eater took the opportunity to duck underneath a desk. The Atlantean lost sight of him momentarily in the smoke from the missile strike, which was a fortunate accident as it gave the remaining Death Eaters a chance to Apparate away.

The smoke cleared in time for the Atlantean to see the Death Eater standing in front of a large ball of metal hovering in midair. Realizing what was going on, he aimed his most powerful spell at the ball. The Death Eater, expecting this, stood his ground in front of the ball, allowing himself to be destroyed. Furious, the Atlantean prepared another spell to finish off the ball of uranium.

He never got a chance to cast it.

----------
0938Z
Guantanamo Base
Levi Ogden saw the mushroom cloud towering over the western horizon. Uh-oh, he thought. This couldn't be good.

-------------------------------
0942Z
NORAD
Cheyenne Mountain
Wyoming
-------------------------------
Bradley Shipp stared at the computer readout again. Not another one. And was he imagining something, or had this gone off very near Havana?

-------------------------------
0943Z
Moscow
Russia
-------------------------------
Fidel Castro stared in shock at the mushroom cloud clearly visible in the direction of the al-Qaeda base. Something snapped in him, and his face twisted in determination. Voldemort had to die. No one detonated nuclear weapons on Cuban soil!

Thank God it wasn't the Americans. The Americans had warned him that they would be attacking the base, and that was exactly where they attacked.

He focused his anger into a pinpoint and tried his hardest to re-establish control over his mind. He jumped for joy as the Imperius Charm lost its grip on him.

He summoned his troops as quickly as he could, told them to suit up with radiation suits, and ordered them to take out the Death Eaters on his island -- or else.

-------------------------------
0945Z
Moscow
Russia
-------------------------------
Boris Yeltsin stared at the emissary. "There's been a nuclear explosion outside Havana?"

The emissary nodded. "Yes, sir. 25 kT. It's about the size of the weapons used by al-Qaeda and Hamas."

Yeltsin swore. "I sure as hell hope it's not the Americans. Didn't Clinton warn us they were going to raid the al-Qaeda base there?"

"Correct, sir. However, I suspect it wasn't the Americans, sir. For one thing, they didn't attack Havana -- they attacked the location of the base. Furthermore, I highly doubt that the Americans would use nuclear weapons on Cuba -- the whole world would likely blow up if America tried to use nukes as a first strike weapon. Finally, it's fairly obvious that Castro has been ensorcelled and the country has fallen to Voldemort. I wouldn't be surprised if the Cuban troops and Americans participated in a joint operation here to oust Voldemort's men."

Yeltsin nodded. "Why did this happen? How did this happen? Come to think of it, how COULD this happen? Cuba doesn't have nukes, and like you said America wouldn't use nukes against Cuba!"
"Correct, sir, and it supports the hypothesis that al-Qaeda was behind it. My guess, sir, is that the wizards found themselves overwhelmed by American air strength and found themselves in a position where it was obvious they were going to die anyway. If that was the case, why not take out the enemy with you? Make it a suicide attack, as it were."

Yeltsin thought for a moment. "I agree. Tell the various air bases to get on alert -- we're going to go after Voldemort as soon as possible. No one is to retaliate with nuclear weapons this close to America. Do you hear me? NO ONE IS TO USE NUKEs!"

---------
0946Z
Oval Office
White House
-
Bill Clinton put his head on his desk. What the hell was he supposed to do now?

He had promised to respond to attacks to Cuba in kind. This would imply that he was to strike a military target in a place far away from civilians with a 25 kT nuke.

He asked the generals to try to find a Death Eater target which would fit this description and could be enclosed in a force field which would prevent the Death Eaters from escaping. The attackers were to use conventional weapons, and only conventional weapons. The nuke was to only be used if nuclear weapons were used once again against American units.

---------
1112Z
Atlantis
-
Astrologer Joao Benevento pointed at the document. "This is the current estimate for the destruction of civilization, Grand Mugwump. As you know, we passed 10% the other day. With the explosion outside of Havana taken into the equation, we are now at 14% and climbing."

Dialonis shuddered. "What's the limit to activate Judgment Day?"

"30%, sir."

"Christ Almighty. Keep me posted."

"Yes, sir."

Dialonis bowed, and the astrologer bowed and left the room. Visions of falling stars burst in his head. Ra could use a nuclear weapon as a hammer as easily as an asteroid.

---------
1321Z
Pyongyang
Democratic People's Republic of Korea
-
Sirius Black had to hide behind a wall. Things weren't looking good.

The coalition had amassed a tremendous force, hundreds of wizards in his platoon alone. However, they were facing not only a good half of the North Korean army -- the second half was busy entertaining the South Koreans -- but several Chinese units as well. The North Korean planes and tanks were bad enough by themselves. Add China's better technology and things became an issue.
The South had not yet declared war against China. They were hoping against hope that China would realize that interfering in the Second Korean War would likely cause the conflict to escalate. Sirius suspected that Voldemort had Imperiused the Chinese president -- the premier's behavior had changed drastically.

Suddenly, there were several flashes of light. They faded away to reveal several people wearing blue robes and wearing Great Serpent rings.

The cavalry had arrived. There weren't many Atlanteans available for combat, but those that were would be invincible. At the very least, the Atlanteans would at least help the coalition battle Voldemort to a stalemate.

He looked to the west, towards his home country of England. Where was that blasted package from Slughorn?

To be continued...

-------------
Update #220.6
-------------
Wednesday, June 19, 1996 -- 1 DAY TO JUDGMENT DAY
1225Z
Northern South Korea

-------------
Next PoV: 221 - Horace Slughorn

-------------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 0
ATLANTIS ALERT STATUS: DEFCON 1

Jung Ho Eun couldn't tell whether the infrared goggles were a hindrance or a help. Without the goggles, he couldn't see a damn thing this late at night. With them, he was able to see things quite well until some bomb or missile exploded nearby and nearly blinded him with its heat signature.

He had never thought that he'd be invading the South. Sure, the two sides had tried intimidating each other across the DMZ, but no one had seriously expected a major war to break out. Both sides were aware that any resumption of hostilities could draw the whole world into it. Considering that the United States and Russia still had more than enough nuclear weapons to wipe out most of the people on the planet, that would have been an unwise decision.

One of the men in his regiment had joked that it would probably take a magic spell to get the two sides to start fighting again. Jung Ho had nearly fallen over in laughter at the time and ordered everyone in his squad a drink.

How things had changed, he thought. The joker was now dead, his femoral artery slashed by a South sniper's bullet. Jong Ho had to administer the coup de grace himself to put the mortally wounded man out of his misery. He got up just in time to see a giant toss a rock onto the shooter's head. That man wasn't getting up again, he thought.

The giants were formidable allies. However, they had one minor weakness in that they were...well, large targets. They were large enough for people to be able to hit them with bullets even without a gunsight. Granted, the bullets generally didn't do them much damage, and several of them -- including the fellow who had tossed the rock on his friend's killer -- wore armor. The giants were finding, however, that although bullets wouldn't hurt them much, direct hits with antitank weapons,
land mines, and rocket-propelled grenades would give them a lot of trouble.

The North's wizards were getting devilishly creative. They were tossing cages filled with pixies into the South ranks. At a predetermined altitude, the door would open, and the mischievous little fellows would wreak havoc among the enemy troops. There were stories of guns being thrown around, people being lifted into the air, tents flying away, and loss of communication on the battlefield. The pixies were small and mobile enough to avoid virtually everything the South could throw at them.

Jung Ho heard a loud slithering sound behind him. Making sure the snake amulet hanging around his neck was intact, he leaped into a foxhole, hid beneath the lip, and put his hands over his head. Unless he was mistaken, that was one of those nasty snakelike creatures whose eyes you Did Not Want To Look At. Chang Sung-Taek, who could supposedly communicate with such creatures, told them that they were notlook anywhere near anyone with a snake amulet. Everyone else was fair game. There was a sequence of muffled explosions ahead as a whole platoon caught sight of the creature and exploded. The animal slowly started back towards the North Korean forces, and Jung Ho closed his eyes more tightly.

There was a tremendous explosion nearby. Rocks and what felt like scales of some sort rained onto him. By the time his ears stopped ringing, the slithering had stopped. He pulled one of the scaly object in front of his face -- still headfirst in the foxhole -- and looked at it. It appeared to be a piece of a snake. He suspected that someone had attacked the snake from the air, in a position where the attacker didn't have to worry about looking directly at it.

The all-clear sounded, and Jung Ho got up just in time to see the enemy troops running from some invisible foe. He whistled: he didn't know that the wizards could summon invisible monsters! Curious, he watched as the army forded a small stream. Seconds after they reached the other side, the river somehow FROZE OVER. He stared in shock: how the hell did THAT happen? Oh, right. Magic.

Presumably the invisible creatures had solidified the river surface so they could cross. If that were the case, those Southerners were doomed. Sure enough, less than a minute later virtually all of them screamed in horror. There was an awful sucking sound, and the cries cut off immediately. The invisible creatures turned upriver to go after some new prey -- at least that's what Jung Ho suspected consider that the water was starting to freeze there as well -- when a good half-ton bomb exploded on top of them. He was thrown back a good half-meter, and his ears started ringing all over again. By the time the dust had settled, all evidence of the invisible monsters was gone.

This was going to be an interesting war, he thought. The South has better technology, but we have wizards. Furthermore, we have all of these monsters and snakes and so forth on our side. A blast of light from above followed by yet another explosion suggested that one of the dragons had breathed fire upon a tank, ignited the weapons inside it, and blown it to pieces. Someone fired a heat-seeking missile at it, but all that managed to do was hit the already-burning tank.

There was another scream a few hundred feet away. He turned to see the people guarding a mortar suddenly turn tail and run ahead of yet another trail of ice. He didn't get a chance to see what happened to them, however, as his commander ordered him to commandeering the mortar now that the enemy troops had deserted it. Grimly, he headed forward into the night.

--------------------------
1451Z
Downtown Pyongyang

Sirius Black chuckled as he watched the Atlanteans fight. Those little bubbles of theirs had to
constitute cheating.

The two witches both encased in globes of white, blasted away at the Death Eaters from the two exits ends of the tunnel. Nigel had told Sirius that urban warfare was ugly, but urban magical warfare was most definitely uglier. He watched as someone tried to hit one of the Atlanteans from behind with a crowbar only to yelp in pain as the makeshift club hit the shield, bounced off, and began vibrating. It would take a hell of a lot more than that to finish the Blue Robes off, Sirius thought.

A few more minutes went by, and Sirius went back to work healing wounded soldiers. They had turned the tunnel into a makeshift hospital and command center and had called upon the two Atlanteans to make sure no one else got in. So far, everything had worked out fine.

However, Atlanteans weren't indestructible, and it was only a matter of time until the North thought of some other tactic. Sure enough, he eventually heard a tank creeping up on one of the ends of the tunnel. The Atlantean dutifully shot at it and stared in surprise as it flashed into lightning, struck the tank, and conducted itself into the ground. Sirius bit his lip -- it appeared that Voldemort had found out about the indestructible APC's used in Diagon Alley and had stolen the idea.

Heads turned towards the tank as it approached the end of the tunnel. The tank was vulnerable to Southern fire from inside the tunnel, of course. However, the Atlantean was in the way. Sirius knew that although nothing could penetrate the shield, momentum had to be conserved. A direct hit by a missile traveling at 500 mph would probably send that bubble flying, exposing the Atlantean to enough g's to kill her without even penetrating the bubble.

Sirius watched as the tank plowed its way towards the end of the tunnel. It was obviously going to try to run the wizard over, and if it wasn't able to run her over simply push her out of the way by brute force. The witch held her ground, and the vehicle ran into her. For several seconds, the irresistible force fought the immovable object. Finally, the Atlantean was knocked off her feet and the tank began shoving the bubble into the tunnel. The white globe wasn't exactly rolling like a ball, but it sure reminded him of a billiard ball making its way down the table.

Sirius had to act, and act fast. Yelling at the woman to levitate her bubble, he grabbed a land mine, Apparated to a few feet behind the staggering woman and dropped it at her feet. Understanding his plan immediately, she floated into the air -- taking the bubble with her -- and backed further into the tunnel so that the tank would hit the mine.

The explosion was deafening in the tunnel. It destroyed the tank, blocking the entrance to the tunnel with wreckage and debris. The Atlantean whistled and told him that had been a close call. Now they had only one entrance to deal with. Thanking him gratefully, the witch headed over to the other side. The injured men were safe at last.

That's when three Death Eaters suddenly Apparated directly into the tunnel from outside.

Sirius swore and began casting curses with his wand. This was not fair, he thought. At least the Atlanteans had allowed the coalition forces to stop the North's advance and force a difficult stalemate.

Merlin's beard, where was Slughorn?

To be continued...
Update #221 through Update #225

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Mislagnissa

Update #221
------------
Wednesday, June 19, 1996 -- 1 DAY TO JUDGMENT DAY
1505Z
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
Great Britain
------------
Next PoV: 221.3 - Voldemort
-----------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 0
ATLANTIS ALERT STATUS: DEFCON 1
-----------
Horace Slughorn stared at the huge room full of barrels. He'd asked Aberforth Dumbledore to send over as many butterbeer shipping crates as he could because Slughorn would need a lot of them in a hurry. Aberforth had complied, and the barrels were all lined up in a row in a storage room. Outside the storage room, in a field near the castle, was a huge vehicle used for transporting cargo. It was empty.

Slughorn had never thought that he'd have to be brew this much of any potion in his entire life, let alone an obscure one like Felix Felicis. He'd run of both his and Snape's stores very quickly and had been forced to Duplicate several of the critical spell components. It had taken a lot of work and more time than he had wanted, but he had done it. He had produced enough Felix Felicis to serve not only the bulk of the coalition forces but most of the South Korean Ministry of Magic as well.

He sure hoped that the South's Ministry of Magic had a location large enough to accommodate the cargo container. He lifted his wand one last time and waved it in an intricate pattern, and he was rewarded when all of the barrels leaped into the air, flew out the window, and landed side by side in the shipping container. Slughorn cast a few more spells, and the barrels were surrounded by protective foam and other buffers which would make sure they wouldn't spill during the container's trip to South Korea via Portkey.

-----------
1511Z
Seoul Ancestral Wizarding Shrine
Seoul
South Korea
-----------
There was a flash of light, and the South's Minister of Magic spun as a British man Apparated into the room. The man fit Dumbledore's description of Horace Slughorn. However, there was only one way to tell for certain.

The Minister stared hard at the newcomer. "What memory did you try to Obliviate away from yourself several decades ago?"

The Brit stared at the minister and then down at the ground, surprised and embarrassed. He had to answer the question, however. "I tried to convince myself that I never told Voldemort about Horcruxes. It didn't work."
The Minister lowered his wand. "It's good to see you, at last. I see Dialonis gave you permission to do an international Apparation -- give him our thanks. I take it you've got the Felix Felicis?"

Slughorn nodded. "That's correct, Minister. I've got full-size cargo container stuffed to the brim with barrels of the stuff. Where do you want me to send it? I don't think you've got enough space in here."

The Minister gestured towards a door. "Follow me. I've emptied out a storeroom for it."

Slughorn heard muffled explosions far overhead as the two men walked deeper into the Ministry. "Good Lord, Minister. Am I imagining something, or is Seoul under attack?"

The Minister threw his hands in the air. "Under attack? It's being pulverized! I suspect we've got at least ten thousand dead Muggles already! We've got a shield up there now, but every few minutes one of the Death Eaters gets clever and does something to knock it out again. People are panicking up there, and there are riots breaking out from time to time because the shields keeping the missiles OUT are also keeping the people IN. Furthermore, some of those guns are shooting VERY heavy bombs at us which even the shields are having trouble with. Where the hell were you?"

Slughorn raised his hands in resignation as the Minister led him into a large room. "I've never tried making this much stuff before! It took longer than expected! There's nothing we can do about it now, however. We've got it, and it's time to use it. How's the fighting going on up in Pyongyang?"

"The North was giving us problems for a while up there. However, that was before Dialonis brought in the Atlanteans. Now we've got more or less of a stalemate right now. It's going to be ugly -- there are rumors of nasty urban fighting up there. Both Seoul and Pyongyang are going to be in ruins before this is done. At any rate, here's your room. Is it big enough?"

Slughorn looked around the empty room and nodded. "It looks big enough, Minister. Send everyone down here so we can start distributing the stuff. And make sure that the North's soldiers don't get their hands on it or we've got even more problems!"

The Minister issued orders, and people began running into the room. "Agreed. Oh, can I make a major request? I'd like Dumbledore to come here -- I haven't been Minister for long, and to be frank I'm quite inexperienced. We need Dumbledore to take charge of the defense of Seoul. I want him down here."

Slughorn hesitated. "But Dumbledore's the master of --"

"I don't if Dumbledore has three mistresses in Pyongyang, Slughorn! I'm in charge of this theater, and I've got the city that's being attacked. Do you want hundreds of thousands people killed? I want Dumbledore in this room, and that's an order!"

Slughorn bit his lip. The Minister did indeed have the authority to issue such an order. Dialonis and Dumbledore would both agree, which meant Dumbledore would have to come south. Slughorn sure hope that he would get back in time to fight Voldemort.

-------------

1553Z
Seoul
South Korea
-------------

The Southern commander stared into the mountains with a big smile on his face. He closed his eyes,
letting the Felix Felicis guide his actions. Slowly, he pointed his finger at a mountaintop. "I think that heavy artillery is coming from over there."

The gunner shook his head. "I don't think so, sir. I think he's over beyond that ridge."

The commander nodded. "He's there, all right. I can sense it."

The gunner stared at him. "Don't tell me you're a wizard as well. Perhaps a Jedi Master?"

"It's going to work, Chung. Trust me."

"Sir, we can't run a military operation based on hunches! All of the information we have indicates --"

The commander was fed up. "Just fire the gun over there, Chung. That's an order!"

Skeptical, the gunner followed orders. He aimed the gun at the commander's target and fired.

Two explosions suddenly blossomed on the mountaintop: the explosion of the South's shell and a secondary explosion triggered by the munitions dump next to the mortar. The gunner was about to say something when some embers from the exploding mortar flew through the air, fell back to earth, and triggered yet another explosion. Incredibly, they had somehow found their way into a fuel supply dump and detonated it, taking a second North Korean gun out of business!

The gunner finally found his voice. "I take that back, sir. You were right. Not only that, we got lucky and were able to eliminate a second mortar with one shot!"

The commander smiled. "Just what I expected, Chung. That's what luck and reconnaissance can do for your forces."

"You can't rely on luck, sir!"

The commander winked at him. "Normally, yes. However, we have magic on our side. Trust me, Chung. Our luck is going to improve big time."

To be continued...

-------------
Update #221.3
-------------
Wednesday, June 19, 1996 -- 1 DAY TO JUDGMENT DAY
1932Z
Presidential Palace
North Korea
-------------
Next PoV: 221.5 - Dumbledore
-------------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 0
ATLANTIS ALERT STATUS: DEFCON 1
-------------
Voldemort stared at the tactical map in disbelief. What he was seeing was absolutely impossible!

The North Korean forces were being routed on all fronts and what had started out as a steady advance less than two days ago had abruptly reversed direction. The Muggles defending Seoul had
somehow managed to take out almost all of the pieces of artillery hiding in the mountains with few losses of their own, and for the first time in the war Seoul was free from attack. The aircraft his Muggle commanders had ordered to pursue the attack were all blasted out of the sky with uncannily lucky shots.

A couple of lucky shots here or there were understandable. However, it seemed like the entire enemy coalition was getting lucky, all at the same time. Voldemort had an awful suspicion that Dumbledore had done something. He needed to find out what it was, and do so quickly.

People were taking out the basilisks by aiming their guns at them at precisely the moment their deadly eyes were blocked from their view by tree branches or other troops. Bridges were failing under the weight of the giants. Dementors inevitably attacked places protected by Patronuses or Atlanteans. Dragons were either turning on the North's own forces, chasing after birds or other prey, or being shot down by airplanes. As if that hadn't been bad enough, some North Korean soldiers who had sabotaged a bridge hoping for it to fall into the river when the Southerns were crossing it found that it held long enough for the Southerners to get across and engaged them. The Northerners had beaten them off and pursued them across the wobbling bridge. The bridge eventually gave way when the last Southerner had stepped off, sending the pursuing Northerners falling into the river.

The unusual luck had extended into the skies as well. North Korean airplanes were experiencing bird strikes. Clouds would appear just as the North's pilots caught sight of the South's air force or troops, and no fewer than five aircraft had reported problems launching their missiles. It also seemed to extend into the seas, as one submarine had sprung a leak, a second had launched a fish which had proven to be a dud, and a third had been destroyed when a Southern torpedo missed it only to have the explosion dislodge a huge boulder from an undersea cliff. The boulder smashed the hull of the targeted ship and that was that.

The situation in Pyongyang was getting desperate. He knew that he was safe, thanks to his Horcruxes and his ownership of the Elder Wand. However, his colleagues weren't taking these problems philosophically. Lucius had been forced to Cruciate several people to make sure they didn't defect. However, the Muggles and wizards were slowly closing in on the Presidential Palace. They'd be on him within hours.

He had to do something. But what?

One of the Muggles knocked on the door. "Your Excellency, we've picked up a large force of Southern tanks which has just crossed the DMZ. Somehow they managed to find the one route through which missed the mines. They seem to be accompanied by lots of wizards and Atlanteans."

Voldemort nodded. This gave him an idea. Aloud, he asked: "Are the civilians gone from the area?"

"Yes, Your Excellency. They've fled north. They're out of the way."

Voldemort smiled. It was about time he gave the South something else to think about. "Good. Nuke them."

The Muggle stared at him. "What? Sir, I don't think --"

"We're not paying you to think, soldier! Nuke them! 25 kT! Wipe them out! That's an order!"

The Muggle saluted stiffly. "Yes, Your Excellency."

-----------------------
1945Z
30 miles north of the DMZ
- - - - - - - - - - - - -
The Southern tank driver pumped his first in jubilation. "Sir! Take a look, the enemy seems to be retreating! It looks like we've caught a lucky break!"

The commander chuckled. "Why am I not surprised? This potion that Slughorn fellow brewed seems to be doing lots of crazy things."

"Should we follow them?"

The commander thought about it for a moment. Although the idea of pursuing the enemy was tempting, this looked too much like a trap. He didn't want to allow the North to dictate where and when the battle was to fought. Then again, who knew? Perhaps he'd get lucky once more.

What were his instincts telling him?

He nodded and turned to the tanker. "All right, here's what we're going to do. We'll go take the --"

The world turned white and the entire tank force was obliterated in a fraction of a second.

-----------------------
1946Z
NORAD
Cheyenne Mountain
- - - - - - - - - - - - -
Bradley Shepp spun and turned to his boss. "Sir! We've got a nuclear detonation in southern North Korea! It's on the surface!"

The commander swore. "Whose nuke? Ours or theirs?"

"I don't know, sir!"

"Well, find out! How big was it?"

"24 kT, sir. The same as --"

"I know! What was the target?"

Shepp looked at the sheet he had been given. "I believe that they've attacked a large Southern tank battalion heading into North Korea. It looks like a tactical strike against armor, sir. Thank God they're not going after civilians and attacking cities -- this is at least somewhat defensible. And it also seems to point the finger at Voldemort."

"It does indeed, Shepp. Get me the President."

-----------------------
1948Z
Oval Office
White House
- - - - - - - - - - - - -
"No, General. I do not want you using nukes. Retaliate using conventional weapons and wizards."

"But -- "
"Those weren't our men, and we don't want this to escalate any further! Besides, it appears to have been a legitimate use for a small tactical nuclear weapon -- blowing up an entire platoon of tanks. This wasn't a war crime, General."

-----------------------
1948Z
Air Force Headquarters
Seoul
South Korea
-----------------------

The Secretary of Defense was about to order a full scale nuclear assault on Pyongyang, one which would almost certainly trigger World War III. He didn't like the idea of retaliating with nukes, but he figured he no choice. If this was a warning that the North was going to nuke Seoul if Voldemort was backed into a corner...

He was so intent on his plans that he didn't see the Atlantean wizard creeping up behind him.

"Imperio!"

That ended the nuclear retaliation. The strategic nuclear strike was replaced with an immense attack by conventional bombers and fighter jets. The Secretary of Defense thought about it for a moment and agreed that bombers would probably do the trick. After all, they had been hitting targets even when the targets had been obscured by clouds!

-----------------------
1949Z
63 SBN Doormanweg
Willemstad
Curacao, Dutch Antilles
-----------------------

The television set in the living room was turned to CNN. "I repeat, there has been a nuclear explosion in southern North Korea. Preliminary reports indicate that it was not against civilians. I repeat, it was not against civilians. The bomb had apparently been deployed to destroy a large force of tanks. President Clinton has issued a statement indicating that he will still not permit use of nuclear weapons even after this blast. He warned everyone, however, that he may reconsider his options if a city full of civilians is actually targeted."

I didn't like this at all. The world was creeping closer and closer to World War III. Although I was far away from the battlefield, on a small tropical island, I figured it was only a matter of time for the effects of such a titanic conflict to spread throughout the world.

I shuddered to think of what would happen to all my friends who had stayed in Boston.

-----------------------
2001Z
Cuba
-----------------------

Clad in state of the art radiation suits, the combined force of wizards and Muggles scoured the site of nuclear explosion for any clues to the whereabouts of the wizards who had detonated the device. There were none.

-----------------------
2010Z
Negev Desert
2000 feet down
The small Israeli nuke detonated as planned, thousands of feet below the sand. The soldiers had taken care to test the device in a location which would not contaminate the groundwater needed for the Israeli and Palestinian civilians living the area.

Netanyahu sighed. "Well, we're committed now. Let's hope Hamas gets the message and backs off."

2031Z
Atlantis

Astrologer Benevento showed Dialonis the latest report. "We're up to 17% now, sir. We've passed the halfway point to Judgment Day."

The blood drained from Dialonis's face. Slowly, he reached into his pocket and brought out a die. He showed it to Benevento and said, "Seventeen percent. That's the odds of this die roll coming out a six. A one in six chance for the end of civilization."

He rolled the die and got a 2. He hoped the world would be as lucky.

2037Z
St. Peter's Basilica
Vatican City

Suleiman I stared in horror at John Paul. "Holiness, you can't go! Billions of people look up to you!"

John Paul II shook his head. "I know. However, the world needs all the wizards it can get when it comes to fighting Voldemort. It is my duty to do what I can to help the people of the world, and if doing so puts me in harm's way, I must act. Jesus didn't back down when he was threatened, and as you know neither did Mohammed."

The Dalai Lama put his hand on John Paul's shoulder. "Holiness, one wizard will not make a difference in this struggle. You will be able to serve your flock better by helping them stay calm and inspiring them to keep faith."

It took a while for the religious leaders to convince him, but John Paul eventually decided to stay put in the Vatican.

2112Z
Pyongyang

The founder of Muslims for Humans roared a battle cry and charged bravely at a man with a Death Eater mask and a wand.

That proved to be a mistake.

2225Z
Half Moon Cay
Bahamas

Captain deVries had to push the Noordam to her limits in order to get to the island before any of the other cruise ships stole his idea. Fortunately, the gamble paid off and soon the ship was docked at Half Moon Cay, the private island owned by Holland America Lines.
The refugees were relieved to get off the boat and stretch their legs. There were three big questions which were yet to be answered, however. First, would the island be affected by the upcoming conflict, if there was one? Second, if it was affected, would it be possible to get everyone back on the boat? Finally, if the end came and the island became one of the few safe places left in the world, would these five thousand random people be able to create their own little city-state and possibly repopulate the world? Only time would tell.

He warned the ship's security agents that they might have to defend their little sanctuary against invading Holland America cruise ships. How ironic.

To be continued...

Update #221.5

Wednesday, June 19, 1996 -- 1 DAY TO JUDGMENT DAY
2255Z
Seoul
South Korea

Next PoV: 221.8 - Voldemort (THIS IS IT! This is the episode Voldemort gets it! Place your bets now!)

-------
HORCRUXES LEFT: 0
ATLANTIS ALERT STATUS: DEFCON 1
-------

The sun was rising over the ravaged capital of South Korea. Yet it was barely visible through all of the ash from the burning house fires. For some reason, the sight made him think of Travis Radner and the Romanovs, but he couldn't figure out why. Another senior moment, perhaps?

The mortars which had been attacking the city had all been destroyed, and all of the aircraft which had been bombing Seoul had mysteriously turned back. Dumbledore suspected that they had either been called back or -- more likely -- had experience various freak mechanical failures due to the Felix Felicis.

In a span of less than 48 hours, a thriving metropolis had been brought to its knees. The great wizard saw immediately that he had come too late for thousands of people. Many were already dead, their bodies crushed by falling buildings or shredded by shrapnel. Others had had their arms or legs blown off, and there was nothing even Dumbledore could do in those cases other than possibly heal the ragged stumps. Dumbledore was a great wizard, but he wasn't Madam Pomfrey.

He had seen photographs of Berlin after the Second World War, and the scene before him looked eerily reminiscent of the ruins of the German capital. There were three major differences, however. First, the signs were in Korean. Second, Berlin had never had to deal with bodies of giants, dragons, and other creatures which had fallen in the streets. Finally, 1940's Berlin didn't have tremendous skyscrapers whose top thirty floors had fallen off, leaving structures which looked like rectangular tree stumps.

The South Korean Minister of Magic seemed to be in shock. It was obvious that the recently-promoted man was in over his head, and that he had made a very good decision to send Dumbledore down here. It was very likely that the Minister was mourning several family members who had been killed in the attack, and as a result he couldn't think coherently. Dumbledore, as an outsider to some
extent, could analyze the situation objectively.

The first thing he did was to make sure that the shield above the city was still intact in case Voldemort had any more surprises in store. It was. He then modified it so that it became permeable to smoke and cast a spell which would allow the smoke to start flowing out of the city, replacing it with breathable air. Filling your lungs with dust and ash wouldn't help much if you were trying to save either yourself or someone else from battle damage.

Dumbledore had initially balked when he had heard Slughorn's comment that the South Korean Minister had ordered Dumbledore down to Seoul. He had protested vehemently at first, saying that the entire plan was based on the fact that Voldemort couldn't kill Dumbledore with the Elder Wand. Why else would Dumbledore have allowed Voldemort access to the wand otherwise? Unfortunately, the Muggles and Atlanteans who were familiar with the chain of command convinced him that the South Korean Minister did indeed have the authority to send him down there. Someone else would have to deal with Voldemort.

What was more important, getting rid of Voldemort or saving a city with a million people in it? Obviously, the Dark Lord was a terrible adversary. If a wizard had to choose between killing Voldemort and saving one random person, Voldemort had to come first. However, how far did that analogy go? Was Voldemort worth the lives of ten civilians? A hundred? A thousand? He didn't know where the line was, but he was fairly certain a million was on the other side of it.

It took him a good hour or so to survey the city, perform emergency triage services, and organize the Seoul authorities enough for them to be able to take care of the rest of the operation by themselves. Finally, shortly before 0000Z, the Southerners said that he could go back to Pyongyang and resume the fighting.

Dumbledore shook the Southerners' hands, donned Harry Potter's Invisibility Cloak (Harry had wanted to come but couldn't because he was underage), and turned into space heading for Pyongyang. It soon dawned on him that he was in charge of all three of the Deathly Hallows at this point: he'd picked up the Stone after destroying the ring Horcrux, was already the master of the Elder Wand, and was currently toting around the Invisibility Cloak. Was that one of the reasons he'd been able to save so many people in Seoul?

He didn't get a chance to think very long before he suddenly crashed into a force field and popped back into real space. Had the Atlantis bubble not absorbed some of the shock, he'd have been flattened. The force field came in handy again a couple of seconds later, when something exploded beneath his bubble and launched both him and the bubble into the air.

Dumbledore swore and cast a spell which cushioned his motions within the bubble. It suddenly dawned on him that he probably SHOULD have been killed, or at least WOULD have had it not been for the Felix Felicis. Safe, at least for the time being, he took a look around. It took him a few seconds for him to realize what had happened.

Voldemort, realizing Southerners were entering the North in droves, had placed his own Apparation barrier across the DMZ. He'd run into the barrier, fallen to the ground, and promptly landed on a land mine. The explosion had blasted him back into the air again, and he was about to hit the ground again. Figuring that wasn't a good idea, he cast a spell so he could hover in midair next to the force field.

Normally, Apparation across national borders was prohibited, so force fields such as this were not necessary. However, Voldemort must have realized that the attacking Atlanteans implied DEFCON
1, and DEFCON 1 meant international Apparation was permitted in some cases. Hence the new
force field.

Dumbledore suddenly made a terrible observation. Without the Elder Wand, he couldn't remove the
shield and get into North Korea to duel Voldemort. This meant that Voldemort would be able to
wreak havoc with the Elder Wand and that no one would be able to stop him.

This was bad. Very bad.

-------------

2311Z
Pyongyang

The enemy forces were closing in on the presidential palace. North Korean civilians were doing
what they could to beat them off, but they were up against trained soldiers and wizards and all that
would manage to do would get them killed. The South was still getting amazing luck: ricochets
bouncing off buildings and hitting wizards, giants hitting their heads on tunnel roofs, and so forth. It
was obvious that Voldemort had to join the fight himself.

He had the Elder Wand. However, he'd been somewhat disappointed with what the Elder Wand had
done for him up to this point. It didn't seem any more powerful than the one he'd procured from
Ollivander's as a child. Perhaps he wasn't using it right. Then again, he hadn't used it much in formal
duels. Perhaps he needed to engage someone in a formal duel in order to bring out the Elder Wand's
powers. He made a mental note to cast the Imperius Curse on Ollivander and order the wandmaker
tell him how it worked.

That was, of course, if he survived this battle.

Surrender was not an option, and he knew it. Although he still had Horcruxes lying around -- at least
as of a couple of days ago -- he had no idea if the Order of the Phoenix had managed to destroy any
more of them since he had last checked. He had to assume, therefore, that if he was killed he
wouldn't be coming back.

It took him a few minutes for him to figure out what to do. It was a gamble. However, he thought it
would be worth it. First, if the Order did what he expected it to do, they would stop attacking people.
This would increase his popularity among the North Koreans if he survived this gamble. Second, the
lull in the fighting would give him time to check to see if his Horcruxes were still intact.

Drawing a deep breath, he amplified his voice and shouted loudly enough for everyone within a
couple of miles to hear him.

"Attention! This is Chang Sung-Taek, and I have a proposal and ultimatum for you. I was hoping
not to have to use nuclear weapons against Seoul, Taipei, or other cities filled with civilians.
However, it appears that our brave citizens had to retreat before the onslaught of the capitalists.

"I would like issue a warning to the people of Seoul, Taipei, and five other major capitalist cities.
You need to know that I have placed 25 kT nuclear weapons in warehouses there. They are all set to
explode if I die, and they are protected by the Fidelius Charm. You will not be able to do anything to
stop their detonation. Furthermore, one fortunate city has merited a 1 MT device which we have
obtained through the black market. That larger weapon will also be set to detonate if I die."

This was a sheer bluff, of course. However, given the circumstances, it sounded plausible.
Voldemort doubted that he'd have been able to get the bombs out of North Korea with the
Apparation and Portkey shields in place.

"I will cast the spell to prevent their detonation under one condition, and one condition only. You are to choose one wizard, a champion which will represent your forces. That wizard will duel me, personally, to the death at 0000Z. I encourage you to consider this offer as it will save millions of lives. Until the duel commences, I order all of my troops to stand down until 0000Z. If the wizard is an Atlantean, he or she must remove his ring of invulnerability before the duel commences.

"I will place a force field around the two of us while we conduct our duel. That way, no one will intervene on behalf of either side."

Voldemort chuckled to himself. He had the Elder Wand, and the other guy would have something weaker. If two people were facing off and no one else could intervene because of the shield, that would almost certainly convince the Elder Wand that this was a formal duel and cause it to bring out its unusual powers.

"If I die, all Death Eaters in North Korea are to put down their weapons and surrender. If the coalition's champion dies, all capitalists are to leave the country within 12 hours. In addition, North Korea will annex the South. If the capitalists do not do so, the nukes will be detonated."

Voldemort was fairly certain he wasn't going to die. However, he had chosen his words carefully. Many of the Death Eaters with the nuclear weapons considered themselves to be associated with al-Qaeda or Hamas and not the Death Eaters themselves. Furthermore, many of them were not in North Korea. Voldemort would have to sacrifice much if, against all odds, he lost the duel.

"You have until 2330Z to choose your champion. The champion and I will square off at 0000Z on the dot, June 20th. If you do not present a champion at that time, I will detonate the nukes.

"I hope you listen to reason and accept these terms. That is all."

To be continued...

------------------
Update #221.8
------------------
Wednesday, June 19, 1996 -- 15 HOURS TO TIME ZERO
2354Z
Presidential Palace
Pyongyang
Democratic People's Republic of Korea

Voldemort could barely hear himself think. Helicopters belonging to news organizations were hovering overhead, and their rotors were making a lot of noise. He saw aircraft from China, Russia, and the South. There were rumors out of the South that virtually all of the news broadcasts around the world were airing the footage taken from that South Korean chopper.

A few of the aircraft had landed and disgorged platoons of reporters. At the moment, the newsies were surrounding one person a few hundred feet away. The subject was presumably the person
Voldemort would be facing in the duel.

He wondered if his opponent knew what he was in for. What chance this person have against the most powerful wizard in the world armed with the Elder Wand? Voldemort was going to win, and he knew it. He would at least allow his opponent a last request before dispatching him as he had no doubt that his opponent would fight with honor. Good wizards were so predictable in that way -- they generally wouldn't cheat.

Whom would he be facing? The only people Voldemort could imagine giving him trouble would be Dialonis and Dumbledore. Dialonis was still an immensely powerful wizard, even without the Atlantis ring. Fortunately for Voldemort, there had been no trace of Dialonis anywhere on the Korean peninsula since the war had begun. With the Apparation shield up around North Korea, there was no way he'd be getting in now.

Dumbledore, on the other hand, was an entirely different problem. The Death Eaters had seen Dumbledore in Pyongyang a few hours ago, but they hadn't seen him for a while. That worried Voldemort. Had he gone invisible? If there was anyone who was clever enough to defeat Voldemort despite the handicap of being opposed by the Elder Wand, it was Dumbledore.

All he could do was wait and see who his opponent would be.

--------

2355Z

-----

Sirius Black didn't like his chances. Even though the Felix Felicis had urged him to volunteer for the duel, he wasn't sure the potion could counteract the immense advantage conferred upon Voldemort by the Elder Wand. Maybe the potion would allow him to get a few curses off before he succumbed.

He spoke with the Atlanteans, and they agreed to have everyone evacuate North Korea in case Sirius fell. Of course, they would just walk across the border, turn invisible, and come back in to renew the fight. Voldemort needed to take more care in phrasing his ultimatum.

Virtually all of the Secret Service people believed that a nuclear weapon dropped on Pyongyang would destroy Voldemort, with or without the Elder Wand. The one on Cuba had actually gone so far as to destroy an Atlantean, which wasn't easy. The problem was that the destruction of Pyongyang would almost certainly trigger World War III. China -- whose premier's behavior showed all of the indications of the Imperius Curse -- would retaliate with a nuclear strike of its own, and everything would go on from there. As if that wasn't bad enough, the Order of the Phoenix couldn't rule out the possibility that Voldemort had issued orders to detonate all of the nukes -- including the big one -- even if he died during the duel. It sure sounded like something Voldemort would do -- the man wasn't exactly trustworthy.

It was the decision from hell: World War III or Voldemort, choose one.

Sirius brought himself back to the present, however, and began to focus on the duel. World War III wouldn't mean much to him if he was already dead.

He let Felix Felicis fill him with ideas. Most of them seemed a bit outrageous and required other people's help. However, one of them actually made sense, and best of all Sirius already knew how to cast the Fidelius Charm. He reached into his robe and pulled out an object. He'd never tried performing the Fidelius Charm on something like this before, but if Felix Felicis said it would work, it probably would.
He toyed around with the object for a moment until it was in the position he wanted it to be in. When he was satisfied, he cast the Fidelius Charm on it, assigning himself to be the Secret-Keeper. The object flashed as it absorbed the spell. Grinning, he restored the object to its original condition and placed it in his left hand.

Due to the nature of the Fidelius Charm, no one would be able to tell he was holding the object. Spells cast by anyone other than him would not affect the object, and other people would see his left hand empty at his side.

He looked at his friends one last time and saluted them gravely. Drawing a deep breath, and reciting a brief prayer, he drew his wand and started walking towards Voldemort.

--------

0000Z

Voldemort's eyebrows shot up in surprise when he saw who his opponent would be. Sirius Black.

He was a bit puzzled by the Order's choice. Why hadn't they sent Dumbledore? Then he remembered reports that Dumbledore had been sent to Seoul to help clean up the city. His former mentor must be stuck in South Korea, unable to participate in the duel. That's why they had sent Sirius.

Sirius was still a skilled wizard, however. Voldemort didn't want to underestimate him. If he was on the same level as Bellatrix and the rest of the Blacks, this could be an interesting duel.

Voldemort nodded as Sirius approached him. "Well, well. It's Sirius Black. Coming to join your pure-blood friends at last?"

Sirius shook his head. "I'm afraid not, Riddle. I'm here to deliver justice."

Voldemort snorted. "Justice? You can't fight me, and you know it. Even Dumbledore couldn't vanquish me."

Sirius grinned. "You got that right, Riddle. All that was needed to finish you off was a one-year-old kid."

Voldemort growled and brought out the Elder Wand. "You're going to pay for that, Black. And I mean it. Recognize this?"

Sirius shrugged. "It's a wand. Big deal. You could use it as a backscratcher if you wanted."

"It's not just a wand, Black. It's the Elder Wand. The Deathstick. The wand that can't lose in a duel."

Sirius tried not show any fear. "That's a myth, Riddle, and you know it. You got that wand in Ollivander's when you were a child, just like me. Do you honestly believe the Elder Wand exists?"

Voldemort laughed. "You'll find out soon enough when I curse you with it. Oh, and did I forget to mention that people have tried to kill me before and it didn't work all that well? Every single time people thought I was dead, I came back. What makes you think that you aren't throwing your life away? Even if I die, I'll come back again."

Sirius's voice steadied. "Not this time, Riddle. We know about the Horcruxes. We've gotten rid of them."
Voldemort didn't want to think about that. However, he doubted that they'd have gotten them all. "Not all of them, Black. My men have confirmed that a few of them are still around. You may rest assured that I will have them better defended next time you come calling. In the meantime, let's say that I will still be able to come back even if you do destroy my current body."

Sirius spat at him. "We'll see about that. En garde!"

The two men walked to opposite ends of the clearing, near where the dome-shaped force field isolated them from the rest of the world. They bowed to each other. Then they began to fight.

Voldemort cast an Avada Kedavra at Sirius. This wasn't time to play around with him. Sirius, however, expected that and dove out of the way. The Dark Lord then followed that up with another green bolt, hoping Sirius's flying body would arc into the beam. It was about to do so when he suddenly transformed into the great black dog. The beam passed right through where Sirius's human head would have been.

The dog leaped into the air and jumped behind a pile of debris. Voldemort backed off warily -- there could be cracks between the bricks and rocks which would allow Sirius -- who had undoubtedly transformed back to human form -- a shot at him. Voldemort realized he needed to clear the debris away in a hurry.

He waved the Elder Wand and rocks flew into the air. However, he wasn't able to clear the rocks fast enough and a green beam launched itself towards him from the middle of the pile. Voldemort roared and fired at the green bolt. The two bolts hit in midair, and unsurprisingly the Elder Wand blast swallowed Sirius's and continued its way towards the pile of boulders. He was certain it was going to find its way through the crack Sirius had shot from but it was poorly aimed -- or unlucky? -- and hit the rocks. Furious, he waved his wand one more time and the rest of the rocks vanished. Sirius cast another bolt at him, which he parried easily with his all-powerful wand.

The battle raged on for a good five minutes. Both duelists were using virtually every trick in their arsenal, yet no one could gain an insurmountable advantage. Sirius was clever, but Voldemort had the stronger wand. It was a stalemate.

Then Voldemort found his opening. Parrying one last blow, he turned the ground under Sirius's feet into a sheet of ice. Sirius slipped and fell on his rear end. Grinning, the Dark Lord cast Expelliarmus on his foe and slowly marched in for the kill. Sirius tried to Apparate over to his wand but Voldemort blocked it. Death Eaters cheered wildly outside the arena while the citizens of the world watched in horror. To add insult to injury, Voldemort summoned Sirius's wand to his own hand.

Finally, Sirius found his back up against the force field keeping out external help. He seemed calm, almost resigned. Voldemort had to admit that he was facing his death with great skill and honor. He mentioned that to Sirius.

"I must say, Black, that you put up a good and honorable fight. You do Gryffindor credit."

Sirius, eyes white, nodded. "Go to hell, Riddle. It isn't honorable for you to have two wands and for me to have none."

Voldemort shook his head. "Unfortunately, I think it is honorable. You see, we both started out with one wand when the fight began. I beat you fair and square. However, since you fought well, I feel like you deserve a final request before I dispatch you. What do you want?"
Sirius's reaction was most unusual. He smiled.

0007Z
--- --- ---
Sirius smiled at Voldemort. The man clearly had no idea what was going to happen. That was one of the weaknesses pure-blood wizards had: they tended to underestimate Muggle technology.

Nodding in resignation, Sirius looked up at his assailant. "As a matter of fact, I do have one final request. I'd like for you to meet my friend Walther."

Voldemort frowned. "Walther? Who's he?"

Still smiling madly, Sirius raised his left hand. As far as Voldemort was concerned, Sirius's left hand was empty.

Sirius knew better, however. For his left hand contained the Walther PPK pistol he had Fideliused before the battle. The gun had been protected so that it could not harm Voldemort and Voldemort could not harm it.

However, Sirius had made one small modification to the weapon before casting the spell; he had removed the bullets. This resulted in a situation where the gun was Fideliused and unable to interact with Voldemort -- but the bullets were not.

Still smiling, Sirius Black pulled the trigger. Voldemort's head exploded like a ripe tomato, and the greatest Dark wizard to ever live collapsed in a lifeless heap on the ground.

Sirius fired the gun a few more times to ensure that the Dark Lord was dead. Once he was satisfied with his handiwork, Sirius removed the Fidelius Charm and showed the gun to the world.

"This is Walther, Riddle. Specifically, Walther PPK. It's a type of gun used by the British Government. I'm sure he'd like to meet you, but considering that you don't appear to be in a position to talk to him right now, he'll have to settle for lying on your smelly hide."

And with that, he tossed the gun onto Voldemort's dead body and left the arena.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #222
-------------

Thursday, June 20, 1996 -- 15 HOURS TO TIME ZERO
0007Z
Ministry of Magic
London

Next PoV: 222.5 - Sirius Black
-------------
ATLANTIS ALERT STATUS: DEFCON 1
-------------
"YES!"

Rufus Scrimgeour threw his hands into the air in celebration. People started cheering throughout the
Atrium, where everyone had stayed until the wee hours of the morning to watch the events unfold in the Koreas. The sound attracted more people, including a few ghosts and a cleaning crew. The celebration proved to be infectious, and soon they were partying as well.

The word soon spread. Voldemort was dead, and the international crisis was finally at an end.

Scrimgeour would never live long enough to realize how wrong he was.

--------

0008Z
--------

Far above the Ministry of Magic, the city of London slept. Floodlights shone on Westminster Abbey and on Big Ben, two of the city's most famous tourist attractions.

At exactly 1:08 AM on the morning of June 20th, something remarkable happened to Big Ben's clock faces. They suddenly snapped to 12:00, as if someone had tried to switch them out of Daylight Savings Time just when the sun hit the solstice.

However, the abrupt motions of the clock hands paled in comparison to the observation that the few guards and night shift workers noticed a few minutes later.

Big Ben's hands had started moving once again. But they were counting backwards.

--------

0009Z
--------

The two little balls of uranium had been sitting in Lucius Malfoy's empty desk for several days now. No one in the Ministry had noticed them. The only which had appeared remotely unusual in Lucius's office was the fact that the potted plant on his desk was dying even though the support staff was watering it dutifully each night. It would not be the first plant to succumb to radiation poisoning.

Had someone been watching the room at 1:08 AM, they might have seen an odd shimmer burst from inside Lucius's desk for a couple of seconds. It would have taken someone with a very sharp eye to see it, but due to the late hour no one was around to notice it.

Voldemort's death curse had been activated.

--------

0021Z
Atlantis
--------

Dialonis read the report. "You're sure of this?"

The Atlantean nodded. "Yes, sir. Voldemort's dead, and a bunch of United Nations personnel are going to be running the North for the time being. Why do you ask?"

Dialonis nodded at Astrologer Benevento. "Joao here claims that the death of Voldemort reduced the odds of worldwide devastation from 17% only to 11%."

The Atlantean frowned. "We're still at 11%? Even with Voldemort dead?"

Dialonis nodded. "Yes. Joao confirms that he took the death of Voldemort into consideration."

"What the hell could cause us problems now, sir?"
Dialonis frowned. "I'm not sure, William, and that's what disturbs me. I think we'll need to find out in a hurry as something here doesn't seem right. Keep your eyes open."

"Yes, sir."

------------
0055Z
Presidential Palace
Pyongyang
-

The parties were still going on. Muggles heading to work had found virtually all of the major routes into the cities blocked by celebrating wizards. At first, they were skeptical that the Dear Leader had been assassinated, and several were angry that the South had tried to kill the one man they liked. However, the wizards reassured them that the United Nations had been made aware of the Muggles' situation and that a group of UN leaders had assumed control of North Korea until a new, democratic leader could be elected by the people.

The Muggles soon realized that their new ruler would have to abide by the will of the people. It was almost certain that for the first time since the accession of Kim Il-Sung decades ago, North Korea would be a country people would be proud to live in.

Very few people did work that morning. They had no idea that many of them would be dead within 24 hours.

------------
0100Z
Firing Station
Nuclear Missile Range A
Outside of Pyongyang
-

There was a flash of light, and Moon Wan Sang reached for his gun. He lowered the weapon, however, when he realized that the man who had entered the office was the Minister of Magic, Moon Ji Ji.

The Minister didn't look happy. On the contrary, he looked furious. Moon Wan had no idea what had ticked the man off, but he knew enough not to mess with wizards. He had to be pretty diplomatic here.

Gently, he rose and bowed to the Minister. "Your Excellency, I apologize, but this is a restricted area. You can't come in here --"

The Minister spoke right over him. "Gentlemen, the Dear Leader is dead. He was killed by a capitalist."

Moon Wan Sang gaped at him. "No! That's impossible!"

"I'm afraid not, soldier."

"Chang Sung-Taek was a man I would have been proud serving! He was a gentleman, compared to Kim Jong-II! Who's the new leader?"

The Minister hesitated for the briefest moment before responding, "I am. I believe Chang Sung-Taek left some orders for you which were to be followed in case he was killed?"
Moon Wan Sang's face paled. "You mean the orders to launch the nuclear missiles at the South? Sir, with all due respect, I don't think --"

The Minister pulled out a wand and pointed it at him. "You're supposed to follow orders, not think. Get your colleague and launch the missiles. Now!"

Moon Wan didn't like where this was going. Fortunately, he soon realized that he had the wizard at his mercy. The reasons the launchers had two keys was to ensure that no one person could launch the missiles. As long as both he and Lee Young Eun both refused to turn the keys, there wouldn't be a nuclear war. The wizard wouldn't be able to turn both keys at the same time.

Lee Young had been as disturbed about Chang Sung-Taek's order to launch the missiles as he had been. Although they had agreed to carry out the order -- it's not as if they had a choice in the matter -- they had both agreed that they would rather die than start World War III.

The furious Minister of Magic stared at him. However, Moon Wan met his eyes and stared him back down. It was obvious neither man was going to yield on this.

Finally, the Minister of Magic nodded. "It appears you leave me no choice, soldier. You have chosen to commit treason against our great state. Unfortunately, I will have to delay your execution by a few moments to do what must be done."

And with that, the Minister waved his wand at the control panel...and turned both keys simultaneously through the power of magic.

Alarms stared hooting as Moon Wan shrieked in horror. Reports about fueling missiles and an irrevocable one-hour countdown blared in his ears as he dove out of the way of a green bolt. The spell crashed into a computer terminal as all the lights went out, shorted out by the spell. Seconds later, the emergency lights flickered on.

Moon Wan drew his gun only to find it blasted out of his hand by an Expelliarmus. Grimacing, he held up his hands and waited for the killing curse. The Minister of Magic -- whose hair had suddenly started to go blonde -- winced in pain and lowered his wand momentarily.

A gunshot suddenly burst out from the far side of the room, and the Minister's chest suddenly exploded. The man's mouth opened in shock, and he collapsed. Moon Wan shot him a few more times to make sure he was dead, and then took a look at the man who had posed as the Minister of Magic.

The impostor appeared to be European and had long blonde hair. He looked to be in his forties and was quite handsome. This was a capitalist wizard, he realized. He didn't know why the capitalists would want to start a war against their own kind. Maybe this particular man wanted to get rid of the Muggles so that the wizards could take over the world.

Lee Young Eun raced into the room and shook Moon Wan wildly. "Are you OK? What was that guy?"

"Some wizard who was masquerading as the Minister of Magic. Looks European."

"Shit. Did he do what I think he did?"

"Yes, Lee Young. He managed to turn both launch keys with a spell. The countdown has started,
and there is nothing we can do to stop it."

Lee Young nodded. "We need to get help. And fast."

To be continued...

-----------------
Update #222.5
-----------------

Thursday, June 20, 1996 -- 14 HOURS TO TIME ZERO
0104Z
Seoul Ancestral Wizarding Shrine
Seoul
South Korea

ATLANTIS ALERT STATUS: DEFCON 1

Dumbledore and Slughorn watched and cheered as he saw the people dancing in the meeting rooms. Voldemort was dead, at long last. The world was finally going to calm down as the crisis came to an end.

Dumbledore couldn't help but admit he had mixed feelings about the death of Voldemort. Granted, Voldemort had been a grave threat to both the Wizarding and Muggle worlds. Yet Dumbledore couldn't help but recall the brilliant student Tom Riddle had been at Hogwarts. Dumbledore often wondered what would have happened if Riddle had never strayed to the Dark side. He would have likely become Minister of Magic someday, and possibly even Grand Mugwump. He would have been a great asset to mankind, and his experience in the Muggle world would have quite helpful if the Statute of Secrecy fell in this alternate timeline as well.

Slughorn noticed the expression on Dumbledore's face. "You're upset he had to die, aren't you?"

Dumbledore thought for a moment, and shook his head. "Not exactly, Horace. I'm upset that he never got a chance to live as the Tom Riddle we had always expected him to become. He would have been a great wizard had he stayed on the good side."

Slughorn nodded, and tears filled his eyes. "I agree, Albus. I heartily agree. I hope I can exorcise Voldemort's taint from Slytherin House."

Dumbledore was about to say something when one of the Muggle telephones rang nearby. He moved out of the way as a Ministry employee walked over to answer it.

The Korean listened intently for a few moments. Suddenly, his eyes widened, and his face went pale. He almost shouted into the receiver? "What? Where? Are you sure! How much time do we have?"

He waited for a moment as the person on the other end replied. "Fifty minutes, plus the flight time? Shit! Who was this guy posing as Moon Ji Ji? Describe him!"

There was another pause, followed by: "OK, let's see if I got it. Caucasian, British accent, haughty expression on his face, long blonde hair, forty-something."

Dumbledore and Slughorn stared at each other. Then they blurted it out at the same time.
"Lucius!"

They had completely forgotten about Lucius in the excitement over Voldemort's death. There were still several powerful Death Eaters out there, including Lucius Malfoy and Arif Koury. And with nuclear weapons in play now --

The person who had picked up the phone jumped back in surprise as the two wizards closed in on him. Dumbledore waved his hand frantically and tried to get the man to listen to him. "I'm sorry, sir, but we happened to overhear your conversation. I believe we are familiar with the man you were discussing."

The Korean nodded. "Really? Who is he? He's done something really rash!"

"His name is Lucius Malfoy, sir, and he is a servant of Voldemort. With Voldemort dead, it is likely that he will be placed in charge of the Death Eaters. Wizard Malfoy is a very dangerous man."

The Korean swore. "He's dangerous, all right! This call just came in from the South's Secretary of War. This Malfoy fellow masqueraded as Moon Ji Ji, broke into one of the North's nuclear missile silos, and used magic to arm the missiles and start the launch countdown!"

Dumbledore stared at him. "What? Where is he now? We have to stop him!"

"He's dead, Mr. Dumbledore. The soldiers controlling the silos shot and killed him on the spot. However, the damage has been done. The Secretary of War claims that nothing can be done to halt the launch. If it can be done at all, it will have to be done by magic."

Slughorn stared at Dumbledore. "I wouldn't be surprised, Albus. Those missile silos are almost certainly going to be well guarded and virtually impregnable to Muggle attack."

Dumbledore nodded and asked for the receiver. "Good evening, sir. My name is Albus Dumbledore and I'm helping out the Ministry of Magic here. What exactly happened here? Who are you?"

The voice on the other end of the line seemed to belong to a Korean man. "My name is Chief Executive Officer Xu, Mr. Dumbledore. I worked for Chang Sung-Taek. I may be a North Korean patriot who has always wanted to control the South, but there's no way I'm going to let a nuclear war start on my watch. That's going too far!"

Dumbledore hoped this man could stop whatever was going on here. Speaking into the phone, he replied, "I won't let it happen, Mr. Xu. Can you give me the details? Where are the silos? How did you find out about this?"

Xu sounded frantic. "I got a call from a couple of people who claimed they worked for Nuclear Missile Range A. They claimed that this Moon Ji Ji impostor broke in and started the launch countdown. They said that the impostor ordered them to turn the keys. When they refused, the intruder turned both keys. A fight then broke out and the intruder was shot. The men in the launch bunker, realizing what had happened, then emailed every cabinet member a photograph of the floor of the missile bunker showing the emergency lights flashing, the launch sequence enabled, and a dead blonde European lying on the floor with a bullet in his chest and a wand at his side."

"That's a good start, Mr. Xu. Where is Nuclear Missile Range A?"
"I don't know, Mr. Dumbledore! That's classified! I work for the Department of Agriculture and wouldn't know!"

Dumbledore looked around at the wizards celebrating in the corridor. He suspected that the wizards knew much more about the North's capabilities than the South's Muggle population realized.

"I'm in the Ministry of Magic right now. Rest assured, Mr. Xu, we'll take care of things from here."

"I hope you do, Mr. Dumbledore. We've got a lot of nervous people up here, and with the chain of command all messed up because of the Dear Leader's death and the deaths of his immediate family we don't have an obvious successor here. By the time we figure out who has the authority to stop the launch, it may be too late."

"Let us pray that is not the case, Mr. Xu. When are the missiles supposed to launch?"

"Judging from what the people in the bunker said, 0200Z. Hurry, Mr. Dumbledore. You may be our only hope."

0124Z

The man in charge of the Patriot missile battery nearly fell over at the news. Staring at his commander, he exclaimed, "You mean to tell me that some maniac in North Korea has started the countdown on a rogue missile launch?"

The commander nodded. "I'm afraid so, Captain. Deploy those Patriot launchers all around the big cities, and do it within half an hour! Meanwhile, I'll have to warn people like Bill Clinton and other nations to make sure that they don't overreact to this. That would be just what we would need after killing Voldemort!"

"Are you going to warn Seoul and the other targets in case the missiles make it through?"

"We already have, Captain. Let's hope they don't panic."

0127Z

Choi Hee Chan had no idea what to do. There was no way she was going to make it out of the city in half an hour as every single route of the city was blocked by either debris from fallen buildings or by gridlocked cars and bicycles.

The doorbell rang, though it was barely audible over the screams outside. She looked through the peephole and saw it was her friend.

The friend had to shout to be heard. "Choi Hee! Our neighbors have a basement which is equipped with a fallout shelter! Can you get over there in time? I've already told asked them to let you in and they agreed to take you!"

Choi Hee didn't think twice. She opened the door and ran out with nothing more than the clothes on her back.

0131Z

The North Korean lieutenant pointed to a location on the map. "I never thought I'd be pointing out
nuclear missile complexes to people working for Agriculture, but there's no way I'm letting the world go up in radioactive fire. That's Nuclear Missile Range A."

Xu nodded. "Good work, Lieutenant. See if you can get your men to try to blow it up."

"I don't think it's going to work -- the soldiers seem to be a bit divided over what to do here -- but I'll try."

----------

0143Z

---------

The fighter planes roared overhead and began dropping bombs on the missile complex. Dust and tiles rained down on the two men in the missile bunker.

Moon Wan laughed bitterly. "Well, they've found us. The only problem is that the defenses around the silos are too strong for them to break through, even with their explosives --"

His eyes suddenly widened as he realized a possible solution. "Open the lids of the silos manually, and not have the computer open them five seconds before launch! Let them drop bombs in! They'll destroy the half-fueled missiles!"

Lee Young raced to the control panel and issued the commands to the computer. The computer beeped, and green lights appeared over the symbols for the silos. The missiles were exposed.

Something occurred to him as he sat down. "You know, those missiles are probably fairly near here. We can't get into the silos themselves, but I suspect that with all that rocket fuel and high explosive running around -- not to mention those loads of uranium balls prepped by the Ministry of Magic -- we're probably going to be blown away when the missiles blow up."

Moon Wan nodded. "It's a risk we'll have to take, Lee Young. The danger is too great. Besides, stay optimistic. This bunker was designed to withstand a lot of stuff. I wouldn't be surprised if we survive the explosion."

----------

0149Z

---------

The reconnaissance helicopter screamed into the intercom. "We've got silos opening up in the ground! I think the missiles are getting ready to launch!"

The man in charge of the raid reacted immediately. "Now's our chance! Where are they?"

"Five kilometers away, heading 211, sir. I see seven hatches opening up."

The commander screamed into the radio. "Attention, all bombers and helicopters! There are seven silos with open hatches five kilometers away at heading 211. Drop your bombs in and get out! We've got ten minutes!"

----------

0152Z

---------

The seven ballistic missiles were just about ready to start their final countdown when the bombs fell into the silos and detonated. The explosions detonated the rocket fuel, destroying the missiles. Five kilometers away, the walls of the launch bunker cracked as the shock wave hit home.

Moon Wan gave his comrade a high five. They had prevented nuclear war, at least for now.
However, Lee Young didn't return it. Instead, he headed off to a console.

"What the hell are you doing, Lee Young?"

Moon Wan cut his sentence short immediately when he realized what Lee Young had done. He had resealed the tops of the silos. Within seconds, all seven indicators were red. When that was done, Lee Young nodded and returned the high five.

"We've saved the world indeed, my friend. Especially now that since the tops of the silos are sealed, the radiation won't leak out."

Lucius's plan had been foiled. However, the world was still not out of the woods. Thousands of miles away, in London, Big Ben showed 10:16. And it was still counting backwards.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #223
-------------
Thursday, June 20, 1996 -- 5 HOURS TO TIME ZERO, 2 HOURS TO LONDON BLAST
1000Z
Al-Qaeda Headquarters
[location classified]
Democratic People's Republic of Korea
-------------
Next PoV: 224 - Hermione Granger
-------------
ATLANTIS ALERT STATUS: DEFCON 1
-------------
The Sheikh didn't like the look on Arif Koury's face. The Pakistani Death Eater, who normally seemed unflappable, looked absolutely horrified. The Sheikh knew that Voldemort had been killed, but the wizards running al-Qaeda were still alive. If all else failed, they could just leave North Korea and go back to Pakistan or somewhere else safe.

He frowned. "Arif, what's going on? What's wrong?"

Koury's response caught the Sheikh completely off guard. "It appears that Dialonis, Dumbledore, and the rest of the world have finally remembered that there are more of us out there other than Voldemort. There are rumors of an international dragnet getting organized to pick up the rest of the Death Eaters. We may be in jeopardy, Sheikh. Let's hope the Fidelius holds here."

The Sheikh shrugged. "Both al-Qaeda and Hamas have worked without wizards before, Arif. We'll do it again."

Koury nodded. "I agree. However, there's only one problem. Without wizards, we have no one way detonate our nukes. And I highly doubt that they'll let us keep our nuclear material."

The Sheikh froze when he realized what that meant. "Are you telling me --"

Koury nodded. "Yes, Sheikh. It's use them or lose them. How many do you have? Do you need more?"

The discussion continued for a couple of hours. Although the Sheikh was happy that Hamas and al-
Qaeda had finally graduated to nuclear terrorism against civilian targets, he was still a bit worried that the world would blow up before either organization reaped the fruit of its labors.

----------

1041Z
Oval Office
--------------

Travis Radner marched into the Oval Office with a look of relief on his face. "Well, Mr. President, it's over. Voldemort's dead, and they're starting to round up the North Korean Death Eaters. Things should be calming down soon, I hope."

Clinton nodded. "That's a relief, Travis. Hopefully the riots will start to cool off as things go back to normal. I'll keep the martial law declaration in force for the time being, however."

"That's a good idea. At any rate, more information has just come in. Lucius's Malfoy's rogue missile launch into the South appears to have been thwarted at the last moment by aircraft from both countries who dropped weapons into the silos in a frantic attempt to prevent a nuclear exchange. Although you already knew that, what you we didn't realize is that we owe two North Korean missile launch technicians a great deal of gratitude. Not only did they stand up to Malfoy and the North Korean government when they were ordered to launch the missiles, but they went out of their way to open the lids of the silos so that the raiding party could get at the half-fueled missiles. Those two men may have singlehandedly prevented World War III."

Clinton looked out the window. "Let's hope that it stays prevented, as things still seem a bit dicey out there. I'm particularly concerned about one person."

Radner raised his eyebrows. "Really? Who?"

"Arif Koury. He's a Death Eater, he's running al-Qaeda, and he's linked to a large cell of Death Eaters somewhere in India. That's the cell which produced Dilmi and Dameel. He must realize that with Voldemort dead and the Death Eaters being hunted down, his back is against the wall. If I were him, I would execute magical and nuclear terrorist attacks -- and do it soon, to make sure that I'm still around to see the results."

Radner's jaw dropped. "Jesus Christ, Mr. President. I hadn't thought about that. You may be right. Hell, you MUST be right. I'll see what I can do."

"That would be most appreciated, Travis. Have you been able to gather any new information as to whether or not Voldemort was telling the truth about those seven 25 kT nukes and the single big one? Do you think he kept his word about calling off the detonations?"

Radner bit his lip. "We may have a problem, Mr. President. You see, I would expect that if Voldemort used the Fidelius Charm, he assigned himself to be the Secret-Keeper and still intends to set the bombs off. That makes sense. However, one of the problems with the Fidelius Charm is that if the Secret-Keeper dies before divulging the secret to anyone, the secret is lost forever and no one will be able to find the hidden objects."

Clinton grunted. "You mean to tell me that they may be impossible to find?"

"Normally, that would be true. However, remember what happened to the cup. The object is likely phasing in and out of existence because Voldemort didn't have a complete soul when he cast the spell. This means that although the nukes may still be vulnerable, they're going to be hard to find."
"When do you think they'd detonate, if they existed? How would he be able to set them off?"

Radner explained. "There's such a thing as a death curse, Mr. President. A wizard can cause powerful magical effects to take place within 24 hours after his death. It's quite possible that those bombs are set to explode through the death curse and will do so within...what is it, 13 hours? Hmm...if that's the case, I'd recommend that you evacuate the White House. I wouldn't be surprised if one of the targets is here...or the remaining two towns in the Four Towns district. Boston may want to be alerted...again."

Clinton nodded. "I'll keep that in mind -- see if you can get more information on where the targets are. Who do you think is getting the big one?"

Radner thought about it for a moment. "Well, it would have to be someone who helped in the attack that killed him: he said as much. The big one would likely be sent after a very hard-to-reach target, one which would likely be a major inconvenience to the rest of his --"

Radner's eyes suddenly widened. "Oh my God! Of course! I hadn't thought about that! It makes sense, though!"

Clinton stared at Radner. "What? What's the target for the big bomb?"

"Atlantis! He's going to destroy Atlantis! Voldemort knows where it is, as do most high-ranking wizards! It's underwater and it's got lots of magical protection! If anyone is going to be able to organize the wizards enough to finish off the Death Eaters all around the world, it's Atlantis! I'm sorry, Mr. President, but I have to get out of here and start warning people!"

----------------
1054Z
Atlantis
- - - - - - - - -
Dialonis was screaming at the rest of the wizards in the room. "I don't care what you do! If that bomb exists, find it!"

One of the wizards offered a suggestion. Dialonis shook his head. "I can't, Karl. I can't go to Judgment Day unless there's a 30% chance of the end of civilization, and right now we're at 12%!"

----------------
1138Z
Ministry of Magic
London
- - - - - - - - -
No one was getting any work done. Scrimgeour had tried to get everyone to go back to work, failed miserably, and eventually given up and turned the Atrium into a huge dance hall so that people could celebrate the death of Voldemort.

Nigel Marcellus, eager to introduce the wizards to Muggle music, had brought a bunch of tapes from the 80's and 90's. The wizards were being entranced by songs like Aerosmith's "Rag Doll", Erasure's "Chains of Love", and Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit".

For the first time in history, Muggle cameras had been permitted into the Ministry of Magic. The reporters were commenting that the scene reminded them of a teenage slumber dance party with everyone wearing pajamas.

Mafalda Hopkirk had been forced to hurry back to her office to find some more makeup. She put it
on as quickly as she could, because the cute guy in the Potions department had asked her to dance. The lower levels of the Ministry were almost completely deserted, and she was alone in the elevator as it made its way back up to the Atrium.

The doors opened to the sound of "Pump up the Jam". Mafalda was in the process of racing out the door when she stepped on something warm, slipped, and fell on her rear end. Wondering what she had stepped on, she looked behind her and saw two little balls rolling across the dance floor. She frowned: she'd never heard of warm metal before.

Then all thoughts of the strange balls vanished from her head as her dream boy came to pick her up off the floor.

1158Z -- T minus 10 minutes

"Round and round...what comes around goes around...I'll tell you why..."

The two balls of uranium, which had been kicked around mercilessly by the stomping feet, had finally had enough. Slowly but surely, they rose into the air and began hovering in the center of the Atrium, up near the decorated roof.

1203Z -- T minus 5 minutes

Reg Cattermole dropped his wife and swore as something hit him on the head. He turned in irritation and picked it up. It appeared to be a thin shell of heavy metal.

He picked it up -- oddly enough, it was warm to the touch -- and showed it to his wife. "Huh! What do you make of this?"

Mary Elizabeth Cattermole shrugged. "Beats me. Looks like lead. Someone probably pulled some kind of prank. Ignore it and keep dancing!"

1205Z -- T minus 3 minutes

Brian Henderson dropped his lunch and stared at the odd cloud formation hovering over the reputed location of the Ministry of Magic. It looked like a skull with a snake coming out of its mouth.

It was the Dark Mark, Voldemort's sign. That couldn't be good. A few blocks away, Big Ben was reporting 12:03. What the hell was going on with that clock?

1206Z -- T minus 2 minutes

"It's the end of the world as we know it..."

The Engorgios activated, and the two balls suddenly ballooned in size to the point where they were visible to everyone else in the dance hall. They weren't visible for long, however, as they were immediately covered with mirrors and turned into disco balls. Colored specks of light began circling the room.

1207Z -- T minus 60 seconds

Nigel Marcellus excused himself and headed back to his office to look for more tapes. He paused, however, when he saw an image of Voldemort speaking to him.
Nigel froze. Had Voldemort survived after all? People would be VERY angry to hear this.

He stopped in front the image and listened to what Voldemort had to say. It took him only twenty seconds for him to realize what Voldemort had planned, and he started running back to the dance hall to warn everyone.

There was only one problem. The elevator wasn't there, and it took more than forty seconds to get to his level.

God save the queen, he thought.

------------------------

T minus 10 seconds

------------------------

No one noticed that the disco balls were glittering ominously above them all of a sudden and that Nigel Marcellus was trying to get in touch with SOMEBODY.

"Send me an angel...send me an angel...right now...right now...right now!"

The disco balls suddenly shrunk to points, and 52 kilotons of nuclear energy suddenly let loose in the Atrium.

To be continued...

------------------------

Update #224

Thursday, June 20, 1996 -- 02:53:00 TO TIME ZERO
1207Z
Granger and Granger Dental Associates
4 miles ENE of the Ministry of Magic
London

Next PoV: 225 - Prince Andrew

ATLANTIS ALERT STATUS: DEFCON 1

Hermione Granger watched as her mother worked on the patient. She didn't want her mind to go to waste during the summer, so she figured she'd get some experience helping her parents' dental practices in the real world. One of the advantage of being a brilliant Muggle-born witch was that it was quite possible for her to get a job either in the Ministry of Magic or as a dentist! After all, both her parents were dentists and she had been thinking of going to medical school before she had been informed that she was a witch.

Obviously, she wouldn't work on the patient herself. Most of the time, she was doing stuff more suited for an intern: filing paperwork and so forth. She couldn't officially work there, of course. However, helping out with her family a couple of times a month in the summer could be quite helpful when it came time for her to find her first Muggle job.

Her mother's office faced east, away from downtown London and the site of the Ministry of Magic. Deciding that it was time for a break, Hermione took a look out the window. The buildings glowed brightly in the sunlight.
She was about to turn back to her clerical work when suddenly the buildings glowed MUCH brighter, as if someone had illuminated their western sides with a giant torch. What the bloody hell was that? Curious, she headed over to the other side of the building to see what had happened.

She was halfway down the hall when she saw the mushroom cloud rising over the center of the city. Ground zero appeared to in the general vicinity of the Ministry of Magic. She had a brief glimpse of what appeared to be a Dark Mark hovering over ground zero before it was obliterated by the roiling cloud.

Someone screamed, and it took Hermione a few seconds to realize that it had been her. By the time she had caught her breath, she could see the shock wave coming at her across the landscape, flattening everything in its path.

She did the only thing that she could think of: jump out of the hallway and into the ladies' room, which thankfully did not have a west-facing window. No sooner had she done that than the shock wave hit the building. She heard the windows shatter, and a fraction of a second later the entire structure visibly shuddered. One of the fluorescent bulbs hanging from the ceiling of the bathroom fell to the floor and shattered on the tiles.

She could not believe it. Voldemort had used his death curse to nuke London and avenge himself on Sirius Black. That was the only explanation she could think of. It explained so many things: Big Ben counting backwards, the Dark Mark hovering over the Ministry of Magic...

Hermione brought herself back to reality with a jolt. Forget Voldemort for now. Right now she had to survive. It suddenly dawned on her that the wind was blowing from the west, and she was located to the east of ground zero. Within a matter of minutes, this area would be overrun with fallout.

She did the only thing she could think of. Throwing caution to the winds, she brought out her wand - no one could fault her for using magic outside of school in a situation like this -- and cast a spell to protect the office complex from outside gas and dust. She had done well on the OWL’s, and was thankful that they had mentioned that spell in the lessons! Figuring that would hold off the fallout for the time being, she raced back into her mother's office to see her and the patient staring at each other in confusion. Her mother said, "What the the bloody hell --"

That was when the patient pointed out the window. "Look!"

Hermione's mother turned to the window and saw the shock wave slowly petering out. Several poorly-designed buildings collapsed, and a couple more caught on fire. She dropped her tooth cleaner in disbelief. "What the hell -- Hermione, what just happened?"

Hermione burst into tears. "Voldemort just detonated a nuclear bomb in the area of the Ministry of Magic! I saw the Dark Mark in the sky over the Ministry just before the mushroom cloud obliterated it!"

Her mother stared at her. "You've got to be kidding. I thought that maniac was dead!"

Hermione could barely continue. "He hit us with a death curse, Mum! He took revenge on Sirius Black -- a Briton -- for killing him!"

Her mother swore, something she normally didn't do. "A nuclear explosion in London with wars going on all over the world. I've got a bad feeling about this --"
Hermione interrupted her. "Mum, we'll deal with that later. I'd recommend getting everyone in the surround area into this building as quickly as possible. You see, we're downwind of the blast!"

The patient stared at her. "Fallout! Bloody God! As if blowing up the whole downtown wasn't bad enough!"

Hermione nodded. "Assuming this building stays up -- I'll have to cast a spell to strengthen it -- I've already cast an enchantment which will prevent gas and dust from entering this office complex. However, you've likely only got a few minutes it starts raining down over here! Hurry! Dress up in those X-ray suits -- that should give you at least SOME protection -- and start gathering people! Does this place have a fallout shelter? If so, get everyone down there! FAST!"

-----------

1209Z
NORAD
Cheyenne Mountain

Bradley Shepp stared at the monitor, which was reporting another nuclear explosion. Current yield estimate was 50 +/- 3 kT. Shit, he thought. It looks like they've figured out how to make bigger bombs. Either that, or they tried blowing up two in one place.

He looked at the coordinates and frowned. The location didn't look good. It seemed to be in Britain somewhere, and the longitude value was just about zero. Bringing up a map of England on his computer, he overlaid the coordinate grid on top of the map.

For the first time, he could see where ground zero had been.

"JESUS, MARY, JOSEPH!"

-----------

1210Z
Oval Office

"Mr. President, this is NORAD. We've picked up a 50 kT nuclear explosion in downtown London. I repeat, downtown London. Preliminary analysis of data indicates a detonation between 100 and 150 feet underground. We're estimating at least a hundred thousand dead, possibly more."

Clinton dropped the phone and fell to his knees. No, please NO! It took him a good ten seconds for him to get off his knees and summon the wherewithal to respond to the general's message.

"You've got to be kidding."

"Negative, sir. Confidence is high, and we've picked up a seismic signature."

"Who did it?"

"I suspect al-Qaeda, sir. They're notorious for using kiloton nukes like this, as you know. Other possibilities are North Korea and Hamas."

"Find out, and do so FAST! And get me Radner and the Joint Chiefs!"

"Yes, sir!"

He sure hoped the world would stay calm enough long enough to prevent World War III. For the
first time in his presidency, he seriously considered evacuating the White House.

He knew one thing for certain, however. At least one of Voldemort's purported bombs had existed. He didn't recall any 50 kT devices, but it suddenly dawned on him that it could have been a fizzle on the 1 MT device. He shuddered to think that it could have been worse...and that Atlantis was busy chasing a red herring.

1210Z
Atlantis

---

Dialonis was nearly overrun by people trying to talk to him at the same time. Had one of them found the bomb? If so, he had to disarm it quickly.

The Grand Mugwump held up a hand and pointed at the nearest courier. "All right, Urszula, report. Did you find the bomb?"

The witch's words tumbled out in one breath. "Not yet, Grand Mugwump! However, we've just received word of a 50 kT nuclear explosion underneath downtown London! We suspect it detonated in the Ministry of Magic! I can't get in touch with Scrimgeour, Hopkirk, Thicknesse, or ANYONE there! I think they're all dead, sir! The reports indicate that the Dark Mark was seen above the Ministry before the bomb went off!"

Dialonis gaped at her. "What? Who did it? When?"

"It happened about a minute ago, sir! We're thinking it's Voldemort's death curse! The other option is al-Qaeda, but I don't see any reason al-Qaeda would want to attack the British Ministry of Magic per se -- they'd have likely wanted to detonate the bomb on the surface or in the air to cause the most damage. I --"

She was pushed out of the way by a frantic Astrologer Benevento waving a sheet of parchment in his face. "25%, sir! One in four! At the rate things are going, we're probably going to hit 30% within the hour!"

Dialonis closed his eyes. Visions of falling stars danced once more in his head. When he opened them, his face was as hard as stone.

"Figure out where the hell those Time-Turners are! I don't care if you have to dig through dust-covered cabinets in the basement for an hour! Find them, and let's hope we don't need them! And keep an eye out for that bomb -- we could be next!"

1211Z
Massachusetts Turnpike
Weston, Massachusetts

---

The news flash interrupted the programming on WBZ. "I repeat, there has been a nuclear explosion in downtown London. We have reason to believe that it may be a parting gift from the Dark wizard Voldemort. I --"

The cars stuck in the traffic jam, which hadn't moved more than a couple of feet over the past thirty minutes, finally gave up. Cars doors opened all across I-90 and people started running for their lives, figuring that their feet would make better progress than their cars.
1212Z
St. Peter's Basilica
Vatican City
-
Both Popes, Suleiman I, and the Dalai Lama all stood on the balcony together, exhorting the faithful of the world to pray once again for peace and forgiveness. Suleiman I, recalling Samuel's ominous last words, wondered if it was too late.

-------------
1215Z
Salem Witches' Academy
Enfield, Massachusetts
-
Persephone Ariadne, Deputy Secretary of Magic, called an emergency session for all the heads of the regional departments of magic. "There's been a nuclear explosion in London. Seal off all the regional headquarters of the Department of Magic and hope that the world doesn't blow up in our faces."

-------------
1215Z
The Burrow
Great Britain
-
Arthur Weasley didn't know whether he should be happy or sad. He was sad that his son had been killed by the Death Eaters. However, Fred's death had forced Percy into taking bereavement leave from the Ministry, saving him from the nuclear blast.

-------------
1216Z
Pyongyang
-
Dumbledore's jaw dropped. "What? What did you say?"

The Korean commander shook, but he replied. "Voldemort just destroyed your Ministry of Magic, and most of downtown London, with his death curse -- two of those little nuclear bombs. If I were the Prime Minister -- or whoever's running the show now -- I'd blow Pyongyang out of the air. I wouldn't be surprised if the retaliatory strike is in flight right now. Can you do something to prevent the city from being destroyed?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "No, Commander. No magic is strong enough to stop a nuclear explosion. We'd have to shoot down the missiles in flight somehow, which means we'd need to know where they are. Can you supply that information?"

"No, sir. We have not yet confirmed a retaliatory strike."

Dumbledore looked around the room. "In the case, I'd recommend that we evacuate to a safe distance and see what we can do to stop an incoming strike."

-------------
1217Z
Oval Office
-
Travis Radner looked at the coordinates and nodded. "Yes, Mr. President. That's the Ministry of Magic all right. God help us all. And God save the queen, Prince Charles, and prime minister -- they were likely all killed in the explosion.

Clinton frowned. "Who's in charge of England now?"
Radner thought for a moment. "Unless I'm badly mistaken, England is now being ruled by a fourteen-year-old boy who just got one hell of a birthday present. I sure hope Princess Diana will be able to serve as regent. As far as the Prime Minister goes, I have absolutely no idea. In all likelihood, the British probably don't know either. Hopefully the confusion at the top will make it hard for them to release their nuclear weapons -- a retaliatory strike is just the thing we need right now to start World War III."

To be continued...

--------------
Update #224.5
--------------

Thursday, June 20, 1996 --*02:53:00 TO TIME ZERO
1207Z
Alert shack, 493rd Fighter Squadron, 48th Fighter Wing, RAF Lakenheath
Lakenheath, Suffolk.
80 miles north of London

--------------*
Next PoV: 225 - Prince Andrew
--------------*

ATLANTIS ALERT STATUS: DEFCON 1

“Dammit, I thought you weren't supposed to jerk it while on alert,” grumbled Captain Jason MacNamara, holding up the Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Edition, which looked like it came from somebody's flooded basement. “Dude, gross. I bet it was one of the maintenance troops,” replied Captain Harry Potsdam. “Naw, they aren't that depraved.” The two looked at each other and said “Ordies” at the same time. Right then, the horn went off. The two pilots jumped up from the desk and slid down the fire pole one after the other. They and their ground crews raced to the F-15C Eagle fighters sitting in the alert hangers. Both had fuel tanks on the wings and belly, four AIM-120A missiles on the sides of the fuselage, and four AIM-9M Sidewinder missiles on the wings, on both sides of the wing tanks. They climbed into their cockpits, and were wheels-up and supersonic within three minutes.

1230Z
Los Angeles-class fast-attack submarine USS Key West (SSN-722)
500 feet below the surface of the Atlantic Ocean
50 miles off the coast of North Carolina

“Sir, this just came off the ELF.” The young communications mate handed Commander Russell Blanchett the print off. “Thank you, son.” He read the message, which ordered him to periscope depth to receive a FLASH message. “COB, take us to periscope depth.” “Aye, sir. Helm, make your depth 7-0 feet, 10 degree rise on the fairwater planes, all ahead one-third.” Amid the acknowledgements from the nineteen-year-old helmsmen charged with maneuvering the $2.5 billion attack sub, Commander Blanchett turned to the radioman. “Jonesy, you ready to receive?” “Aye sir. Sounds serious.” “It's starting to seem that way, Jonesy.” Once the boat reached periscope depth, the transmitters received the radio FLASH traffic and converted it to a form that could be read. The printer printed out the sheet. Communications Mate Jones handed the sheet to the Commander.

FLASH MESSAGE
FROM: CINCUSACOM
TO: ALL USACOM UNITS
CC: NCA, JCS, NORAD, CIA, NSA, SOCOM, AAC, USEURCOM, SIXTHFLT, SEVENTHARYM, USAFE, PACOM

1. IT HAS BEEN CONFIRMED THAT ONE (1) RADIOLOGICAL DEVICE HAS BEEN DETONATED IN DOWNTOWN LONDON, UNITED KINGDOM.
2. CASUALTIES ARE ESTIMATED TO BE ~90,000. RISK OF FALLOUT HIGH.
3. DETONATION OCCURRED ON GROUND.
4. IT IS UNKNOWN WHO CARRIED OUT ATTACK.
5. IT IS BELIEVED THAT THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT IS NO LONGER IN EXISTENCE.
6. IT IS UNKNOWN WHO IS IN CONTROL OF UNITED KINGDOM.
7. UNITS BELONGING TO USSTRATCOM ARE ORDERED TO DEFCON 2 REDINESS.
8. ALL USLANTFLT UNITS CURRENTLY AT SEA ARE ORDERED TO ASSIST BRITISH NAVAL FORCES.
9. ALL USEURCOM UNITS ORDERED TO ASSIST BRITISH UNITS.
10. ALL UNITS CLEARED TO ENGAGE AND DESTROY FORCES ATTEMPTING TO DISRUPT MISSION.
11. ALL UNITS ASSISTING BRITISH FORCES ARE ADVISED TO BE ALERT TO ANY SUSPICIOUS ACTIVITY OCCURING WITHIN YOUR AREA OF RESPONSIBILITY.
12. GOOD LUCK AND GOOD HUNTING.

SIGNED
ADM RW MIES, CINCUSACOM

FLASH MESSAGE
FROM: COMSUBLANT
TO: COMMANDER, KEY WEST (SSN-722)

1. PREVIOUS ORDERS TO TRANSIT TO HAWAII ARE RESCINDED.
2. YOU ARE NOW ORDERED TO STEAM AT BEST POSSIBLE SPEED TO SUBASE KINGS BAY, GEORGIA.
3. RN SSBN HMS VANGUARD IS PRESENT AT KINGS BAY FOR LOADING OF SPECIAL STORES.
4. AFTER LOADOUT IS COMPLETED, ESCORT VANGUARD TO NORTH ATLANTIC.
5. PROTECT VANGUARD AT ALL COSTS.
6. SEND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT THAT THIS MESSAGE HAS BEEN RECEIVED.
7. GOOD LUCK AND GODSPEED.

SIGNED
VADM T. PARKER, COMSUBLANT

“Jesus Christ,” Blanchett muttered. “Give me the 1MC. Now hear this, now hear this. This is the Captain. A short while ago, enemy forces of an unknown origin detonated a nuclear device in downtown London, United Kingdom. The country's leadership has been eliminated, including the Queen. Our orders to sail to Hawaii have been rescinded. We have now been ordered to sail to King's Bay, Georgia at the best possible speed and escort a Royal Navy boomer to the North Atlantic. I have every confidence that the crew of this boat will carry out these orders fully and with the professionalism expected of the United States Navy. Our British cousins are relying on us in their time of need. We cannot fail. Our respective nations are counting on us.” He turned off the PA system and turned to the Chief of the Boat. “COB, dive to 300 feet. All ahead flank.” “Dive to 300 feet, all ahead flank, aye sir! Helm, dive to 300 feet, ten degrees down on the fairwater planes, all ahead flank.”

----------

1250Z
"Flash traffic for you sir," the young Boatswain's Mate said as he handed the message to Commander Nick Kettering. Commander Kettering read the message, then reached for the ship phone. "XO, come to the bridge." Executive Officer Commander Michael Finley walked in.

"Bosun, get the XO some coffee-" "Cream, two sugars-" "And if you run into a Chief, tell him to call the Captain on the bridge." "Aye Skipper." Kettering handed Finley the message. "What do you think of this Mike?" “Dear Lord. When did this happen? This isn't a drill, right? This actually happened?” “Yeah it did. I had one of the radiomen tune into the BBC on the shortwave. Got the Scotland station. It's bad Mike. Hiroshima times ten-and that's because of the population density alone.” “We know who did it?” “No, but we can rule out the Russkies, they've been in shambles after the Soviet Union collapsed, and we would have caught them crossing the GIUK gap. NORAD would have screamed holy hell about any missiles coming over. I think it's related to that warning order we got a few days ago about the "Death Curse." “Damn. Ok, what are our orders?” “Accompany any British ships in the area to the UK and if anybody tries to stop us, blow them out of the water.” “Sounds straightforward enough.” "Damn straight, Mike. Best orders I've ever had. Looks like we're coming up on the Southampton." Kettering turned to the radioman. "Contact the Southampton. Request to pass them close aboard on the port side." The sailor acknowledged and made the transmission.

Letter from a Royal Navy Sub-Lieutenant on the HMS Southampton (D90)
Dated 22 June, 1996
Dear Dad,

Well, we are still out at sea, with little direction as to what our next priority is. We have spent every day since the attacks going back and forth within imaginary boxes drawn in the ocean, standing high-security watches, and trying to make the best of our time. It hasn't been that fun I must confess, and to be even more honest, a lot of people are frustrated at the fact that they either can't be home, or we don't have more direction right now. We have seen the articles and the photographs, and they are sickening. Being isolated as we are, I don't think we appreciate the full scope of what is happening back home, but we are definitely feeling the effects.

About two days ago the junior officers were called to the bridge to conduct Shiphandling drills. We were about to do a man overboard when we got a call from the SPRUANCE (DD963), an American warship that was participating in the exercises with us. They were moored ahead of us in Plymouth and we got together for a cookout on our fantail and made good friends.

Now at sea they called over on bridge-to-bridge, requesting to pass us close up on our port side, to say goodbye. We prepared to render them honors on the bridgewing, and the Captain told the crew to come topside to wish them farewell. As they were making their approach, our Conning Officer announced through her binoculars that they were flying the Union Flag. As they came even closer, we saw that it was flying at half-mast.

The bridgewing was crowded with people as the Boatswain's Mate blew two whistles- Attention to Port- the ship came up alongside and we saw that the entire crew of the American ship were manning the rails, in their dress blues. They had made up a sign that was displayed on the side that read "We Stand By You".

Needless to say there was not a dry eye on the bridge as they stayed alongside us for a few minutes and we cut our salutes. It was probably the most powerful thing I have seen in my entire life and
more than a few of us fought to retain our composure. It was a beautiful day outside today.

We are no longer at liberty to divulge over unsecure post our location, but we could not have asked for a finer day at sea. The United States Navy did an incredible thing for this crew, and it has truly been the highest point in the days since the attacks. After the ship pulled away and we prepared to begin our man overboard drills the Officer of the Deck turned to me and said "I'm staying Navy." I'll write you when I know more about when I'll be home, but for now, this is probably the best news that I could send you.

Love you.

-------------
Update #225
-------------
Thursday, June 20, 1996 -- 02:39:00 TO TIME ZERO
1221Z
Royal Lodge
Windsor, Berkshire
Great Britain
-------------
Next PoV: 226 - Dialonis
-------------
ATLANTIS ALERT STATUS: DEFCON 1
-------------
Prince Andrew couldn't believe what he had just heard. "What did you say?"

The courier shook as he delivered the report. "London has been hit with a nuclear blast, Your Highness. It appears that Voldemort decided to avenge his death at the hands of Sirius Black using a death curse. Ground zero was in the Ministry of Magic, as far as we can tell. The device's yield is estimated to be about 50 kT, and hundreds of thousands of people are dead. There's a bloody big crater where the Ministry was, and the Thames had flooded into it. A tidal wave blasted its way up and down the river and knocked out several bridges miles from ground zero. Fallout is drenching the eastern parts of the city, and people are being evacuated into an office complex which appears to have been protected by the fallout by a magical spell."

Prince Andrew breathed a sigh of relief. "Dumbledore or Scrimgeour. Thank God."

"I don't think it's Scrimgeour, Your Highness. He was supposedly in the Ministry when the bomb went off, so he's gone. Dumbledore is in Korea right now."

"Who cast the spell then?"

"I'm not sure. The first fallout shield went up seconds after the blast. Seconds later, an object which looked like a glowing white otter emerged from the office complex and began contacting people we know to be in Dumbledore's Army. Wizards began teleporting in in a hurry and began enlarging the shielded area. There is probably enough room now to protect fifty thousand people or more, now. Some of the more recent arrivals may have already received some radiation poisoning, but it won't get any worse."

"That's good to know. Where's the center of the shield?"

"The Ravenwood office complex, Your Highness. It consists of the Code Monkey software company, a Food Pantry supermarket, and Granger and Granger Dental Associates. With the
supermarket inside the bubble and wizards supposedly able to duplicate objects, I don't think we're going to have to worry about food poisoning for a while in the fallout zone. And there are already reports that X-ray suits designed to minimize radiation exposure are reproducing like rabbits."

Andrew nodded approvingly. "Whoever cast that initial spell and organized the response is getting the OBE for it and possibly a royal title. All right, let's hear the rest of it. Where are the Queen and John Major?"

"They're both gone, Your Highness. They were in Buckingham Palace and 10 Downing when the bomb went off. Prince Charles was in Buckingham as well."

Andrew went down the list of succession, and something slowly dawned on Andrew. "If he had custody of the kids at the time and the kids were in Buckingham Palace --"

The courier shook his head. "The kids are all right, Your Highness. They were out with Di on one of her land mine crusades in Vietnam. William has the throne."

Andrew grunted. "William is fourteen -- there's no way he can serve as acting monarch. Harry is even younger. Guess that means I'm going to have to take charge for the time being. Would you be willing to accept me as William's regent for the time being? I suspect Diana will be the official regent once the crisis is settled -- after all, she's the King Mother -- but she's got no military experience."

The courier nodded. "That makes sense, Your Highness. A wise decision."

"Thank you -- you can tell the citizens of the kingdom that they're in good hands. Now we need to figure out who gets to be Prime Minister. Once we choose the PM, I'm going to make some recommendations to him. He may not like them, but I'm not going to let the queen, Major, and a hundred thousand Londoners die in vain."

---------

1223Z
Ho Chi Minh City
Vietnam

Prince William was bored. Granted, he liked to travel and hang out with his brother. However, he didn't know that many people out here, and he was sick of hearing his mother talk about land mines.

There was suddenly a commotion outside his room. His mother was talking to a whole bunch of guards and Vietnamese officials, and everyone seemed shocked and frightened. What had just happened? Did one of the mines blow up in one of the humanitarians' faces?

Finally, his mother walked into the room with a haunted expression on her face. "Children, I need to talk to you. There's been an explosion in London. Many people have been killed, including your grandmother and father."

Both kids looked at each other for a moment, and then they started crying. Diana couldn't blame them. Hell, she couldn't stand Prince Charles anymore, yet she still wasn't happy he was dead. She hugged both of them, and then lowered her voice. We're going to have to head over to a safe location. Hurry up and let's go."

William looked at him in confusion. "But with the queen gone, who's going to be in control of the --"

Suddenly, his eyes went wide. He knew what the answer would be.
Diana looked at him intently. "You are, Your Majesty. Long live King William V."

William looked at his brother. Harry looked as stunned as he was. He knew he'd become king, but --

Diana went on. "Andrew and I are going to help organize a regency committee since you're underage -- we'll take care of everything. I'm sorry, children, but it looks like you're going to have to grow up a little more quickly than we had hoped."

-------------

1226Z
Haifa
Israel

-------------

The three balls of uranium appeared out of nowhere, evenly distributed above the city. They
suddenly expanded to about ten times their original size, then vanished.

The city was still intact, however. This was not due to a defect in the spellcasting. The wizard
assigned to Hamas had done everything properly, and there had been no unusual shields protecting
the city from attack. This was because instead of the Compressio spell to trigger the nuclear
explosion, the wizard had applied an Evanesco spell to dissolve the balls into a spray of atoms and
spread them over a wide area.

The vast majority of people never noticed the balls appearing and disappearing over the city. For a
good five to ten minutes, nothing happened. People went about their normal routines, occasionally
listening to news reports of fighting in Jerusalem and evacuation drills in Tel Aviv.

However, their peace was short-lived. Ten minutes after the balls disappeared, Geiger counters
started crackling all over the city. It didn't take long to realize for the residents of Haifa to realize that
the city had just become the first populated area to be hit with a large-scale dirty bomb.

-------------

1230Z
Royal Lodge

-------------

Michael Heseltine, having just been elevated to prime minister by the Regent, spoke to the people in
the war room. "Prince Andrew has just released one nuke -- I repeat ONE nuke -- for a punitive
operation. They attacked us and killed hundreds of thousands of people, and we're going to retaliate.
I want you to send a message to Pyongyang. Either they stop the war against the South immediately
and start paying us reparations for Riddle's attack or we're going to respond in kind. I want you to
ready a 50 kiloton nuke -- one nuke, and ONLY one -- and launch it at Pyongyang when I give the
signal."

One of the other cabinet members tried to talk him out of it, but Heseltine would have no part of it.
"That's why we're using ONE nuke, Richard. ONE. Had we wanted to start World War III, we'd
have glassed the entire country!"

-------------

1233Z
Beijing
China

-------------

The premier of China, prompted by the Death Eater Imperiusing him, nearly jumped out of his shoes
when he heard the report. "What? Britain is thinking of nuking Pyongyang back, even though the
man who triggered the bomb is dead? We can't let that happen to our Communist ally, and we need
to convince those madmen in what's left of London to not start a nuclear war! Well, I know how to handle that. Send a message to Heseltine. Tell them to back down. If they back down from their missile launch, we'll leave them alone. If they don't, and choose war over peace, then they'll get war. They nuke Pyongyang, and we'll spray the whole Western world with nukes of our own. Surely they won't be stupid enough to launch with us breathing down their necks! There was a reason Mutually Assured Destruction could have been seen as Mutually Assured Deterrence!"

-------------

1247Z
Atlantis
-

Dialonis raced into the room, but it was too late. Joao Benevento was dead, killed by his own curse. In his hand was a small slip of parchment dated 1244Z.

It had one number on it. 30.2%.

Dialonis swallowed. For the first time in 3600 years and the third time in the history of the human race, the 30% barrier had been breached.

Judgment Day was upon them.

The blazing Hammer of Ra had returned in the form of balls of uranium, plutonium, and tritium.

Benevento had probably killed himself because he didn't want to see what would happen next. Dialonis sympathized with him completely. However, Dialonis did not have the luxury of suicide. The fate of six billion people would very likely hang on the decisions he would make in the next few hours.

To be continued...
Update #226 through Update #230

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Misagnissa

Update #226
-------------
Thursday, June 20, 1996 -- 02:10:00 TO TIME ZERO
1250Z
Atlantis
-------------
Next PoV: 227 - Bill Clinton
- - - - - - - -
ATLANTIS ALERT STATUS: JUDGMENT DAY IMMINENT
-------------
Karl jerked back in shock as a blaze of magical fire burst from the Room of Prophecy. He wasn't alone, as virtually the entire room reacted in surprise or horror. Five minutes earlier, Grand Mugwump Dialonis had burst into the room to figure out what had happened to Astrologer Benevento. Dialonis had initially reacted in shock to whatever it was. There was a brief delay, where Karl could have heard a feather drop.

Then the fire broke out. Smoke issued from the room, yet Karl was astonished to notice that it didn't seem to have any effect on his ability to breathe. Staring into the smoke, he saw a wall of flame touching a piece of parchment. The parchment, surprisingly, did not catch on fire. All Karl could see was one number on it. 30.2%.

Karl fell to his knees when he recognized the symptoms from the legends. This fire would harm anyone or anything related to corruption, Dark wizardry, or evil. Good wizards, people who worked for good, and their equipment would not be touched.

That ability of the fire to selectively consume fuel, however, was nothing compared to the implications of the display. As far as Karl knew, there was only one object in the magical world known to be able to produce such an effect: the Grand Mugwump's Great Serpent ring after a declaration of Judgment Day.

Judgment Day. Son of a bitch. God help us all.

Karl looked around the room. Since all of the wizards were working for good, he didn't see any changes. However, the stories claimed that Atlantis bubbles for people other than the Grand Mugwump changed form once Judgment Day was declared. Instead of being transparent (as at DEFCON 2) or simply translucent (DEFCON 1), the bubbles supposedly became one-way mirrors when confronting an enemy. The wizard could see out, but the enemy would just see his own reflection being consumed by flame. The bubbles would behave just like their DEFCON 1 counterparts when facing friends or allies.

Dialonis's ceremonial blue robes had turned slate gray, indicating the impartiality of justice. The man had a look of determination -- and power -- on his face Karl had never seen before. Indeed, no man had seen such a facial expression for the past 3600 years.

When Dialonis spoke, his voice was amplified to the point where Karl's ears rang. "Ladies and gentlemen, our worst nightmare has come to pass. We have just breached the 30% barrier, according
to the late Astrologer Bevenento. Judgment Day is upon us. The current estimates have a 60% chance of global thermonuclear war and a 50% chance that such a war would end civilization. That's 30%.

"As of this moment, all conversations are being recorded for posterity. History must know what will happen this day. If, as we hope, the human race survives this crisis, this knowledge will be transmitted all over the world."

There was a long pause. Karl heard one woman sobbing behind him.

Dialonis turned to Karl and spoke out of his corona of fire. "First things first. Karl, what's the story with the Death Eater who took over in China? I thought we agreed to get rid of him and mounted and attack against him. We can't have him firing on the British if Heseltine tries to retaliate against North Korea."

Karl had to look away from the flames -- they were blinding. Drawing a deep breath, he said, "Sir, we've got a problem. The Death Eater appears to have foreseen the possibility that either us or Dumbledore would go after him. He has warned us that he will use his death curse to detonate the 1 MT nuke Voldemort hid here in Atlantis. He said that he will also detonate the weapon if we attempt to interfere with his plans."

Dialonis hissed. "Shit! Nuclear blackmail!"

"That's what it looks like, sir. We're still looking for the bomb and haven't found it yet."

An awful thought came to Karl. Hesitantly, he asked: "Sir, can the Judgment Day protocol still be executed if Atlantis is destroyed?"

Dialonis's eyes shook his head. "No, Karl. It can't. We need all the resources down here, at least up to the time we start the 30-minute final countdown."

Karl didn't like this. "Does that mean we can't execute Judgment Day? What happens if we don't execute Judgment Day?"

Dialonis responded with one word. "Apocalypse."

A woman screamed as Dialonis continued. "Not executing Judgment Day is not an option. As of this moment, everyone here is expendable. The only thing you are to think about is getting us into position to execute the Judgment Day protocol."

"What do we do?"

Dialonis thought for a moment. "I'm formulating a plan as we speak. Rest assured that one of the pieces of this plan is going to be the evacuation of all non-essential personnel from this city. If we're going to be destroyed, we're going down fighting. The ordinary civilians leave the city while the Judgment Day skeleton crew does what it has to do."

"What happens if they have a bomb?"

"If they destroy Atlantis, DEFCON 1 rules will apply indefinitely for all the evacuees. You can attack anyone with anything, period. If you need to sacrifice your lives in order to save humanity, you are to do so, and that is an order. Read up on your death curses."
One of the witches raised her hand. "Sir, how are we all going to evacuate? Apparating through thousands of feet of water is not easy!"

Dialonis nodded grimly. "I'm aware of that. That is why I am activating the Emergency Ascension scenario."

Karl couldn't believe it. "Emergency Ascension?"

"Yes, Karl. Atlantis will see sunlight for the first time in over two thousand years."

1300Z -- 02:00:00 TO TIME ZERO
New Delhi
India

The government didn't stand a chance. Had Atlantis sent a few wizards there, the Indians may have been able to put up a better defense. As it was, however, they were caught completely unprepared.

In one fell swoop, the entire Indian Death Eater cell materialized in New Delhi. Eleven hundred Dark wizards, realizing that it was only a matter of time until they were rounded up by the Atlantean dragnet branching out from Voldemort, needed to secure as much power as they could to fend off the vengeful Atlanteans.

Less than ten minutes later, the Indian Ministry of Magic and the seat of Muggle government had been taken by Damodharan Dilmi's organization. The Death Eater flag rose over the parliament building as wands cast beams of light in celebration.

Across the border, in Pakistan, a Muslims for Humans chapter went absolutely ballistic. They would not tolerate wizards in India. India was bad, and wizards were bad. Indian wizards ruling a country? You couldn't get much worse than that.

1302Z -- 01:58:00 TO TIME ZERO
Presidential Headquarters
Cairo
Egypt

Hosni Mubarak flinched as Haydar Dagher and Michal Oved materialized in his office. Jumping to his feet, he asked: "Who are you? What is the meaning of this?"

Dagher didn't mince words. "We are wizards, Mr. President. Judgment Day has arrived, sir. As the modern day equivalent of the pharaoh of Egypt, your presence is required on Atlantis to activate the Judgment Day protocol and save the world from a possible nuclear holocaust. There are four keys necessary to activate the magical Time-Turners: your key; the Sumerian key, now controlled by Saddam Hussein; the Head Astrologer's key, now controlled by Astrologer Ndukaku; and the Grand Mugwump's key, now controlled by Anastasios Dialonis."

Mubarak hesitated for a moment, and sweat broke out on his face. "What are you talking about? I've never heard of some kind of pharaonic key to stop the end of the world."

Oved looked sharply at Dagher and then back at the Egyptian. Delicately, the Saudi asked, "Do you at least know where it is?"
Mubarak shook his head. "Can't tell you. If it's old enough to involve the pharaohs, I'd recommend looking in the museums. You don't expect that we keep 3500-year old relics within easy reach! What does it look like?"

Both wizards put their heads on their hands. Dagher looked up at the ceiling and said: "This is not fair."

Michal Oved was about to respond when suddenly a Patronus raced into the room and started babbling something incoherently in Hebrew. The Israeli woman swore furiously and disappeared. Dagher sighed and looked back up at Mubarak with desperation on his face.

"Mr. President, we need to find that key, and do it NOW. I am going to ask Dialonis to provide you with as many wizards as you need to find it. The longer we wait, the more likely it is that the world will blow up before we manage to save it."

To be continued...

-------------
Update #227
-------------
Thursday, June 20, 1996 -- 01:49:00 TO TIME ZERO
1311Z
Atlantis
-------------
Next PoV: 228 - Dialonis
-------------
ATLANTIS ALERT STATUS: JUDGMENT DAY IMMINENT
-------------
Bill Clinton stared at the Secretary of State in horror. "You're kidding."

"I'm afraid not, sir. A large group of Indian Death Eaters -- over a thousand, we believe it's the rest of the cell which produced Dilmi and Dameel -- has taken control of the government in India. At this moment, over two billion people are being ruled by Death Eaters."

Radner grimaced but nodded. "It makes sense, Mr. President. The Death Eaters are almost completely rounded up in Korea, and the Atlanteans are hurrying to track down the leads as fast as possible to make sure no one escapes. The Indian cells know that time is running out, so they're trying to make sure that they're in as strong a defensive position as possible before the Atlanteans get to them. The same is true for the wizards running Hamas and al-Qaeda as well, sir. The death of Voldemort has effectively forced all of his minions to go for broke all at the same time. The Hamas attack on Haifa and the takeover of India is part of the Death Eaters' last stand."

Clinton glared at him. "A last stand which could destroy the world!"

Radner shook his head. "We hope not, sir. And in fact, Dialonis has authorized a transition to Judgment Day, the highest alert level they have. This level can only be reached when there is a 30% chance of the destruction of civilization, and it has only happened twice before in history as we know it."

"What happens under Judgment Day?"

"The wizards get to use much more powerful spells which are normally classified, including a spell which will incapacitate all enemy wands. It is designed to save the world through what you Muggles"
will likely consider a deus ex machina. Perhaps one of the most unusual -- and distinctive -- features of a Judgment Day operation involves the use of specially-equipped Time-Turners."

"Time-Turners?"

"Devices which allows a wizard to travel through time. This is normally discouraged as an untrained operator can cause time paradoxes. However, a skilled operator can do amazing things with Time-Turners. Judgment Day is also the only scenario I know of where the Statute of Secrecy, had it still been in effect, would have been waived to save the world. Suffice it to say, the Judgment Day protocol is effectively Atlantis's nuclear option. The Atlanteans see themselves as the caretakers and guardians of the human race as a whole, sir. Normally, if humanity isn't threatened, they stay out. However, in situations like this, they have to interfere."

Clinton's eyes narrowed. "A Judgment Day declaration could be abused. What would happen if someone like Voldemort were to declare Judgment Day?"

"The magic would destroy any evildoers, including the declarer. Besides, only the Grand Mugwump, in conjunction with three other officials, can declare Judgment Day. I've met Dialonis, and he doesn't have a corrupt bone in his body. Only an upright man can be elected Grand Mugwump, let alone invoke Judgment Day."

Clinton sighed. "I hope he can do something, because the world surely needs it. The Doomsday Clock just hit 11:59. I don't think it got that late even during the Cuban Missile Crisis."

The Secretary of State's pager rang, and he took the opportunity of the president's conversation with Radner to answer it. The man swore and turned to face Clinton. The expression on the Secretary of State's face was grim, and the conversation stopped immediately.

The Secretary of State relayed the bad news. "Sir, we have an urgent update. And it's not good."

Clinton braced himself. "What is it?"

"Hamas just nuked Tel Aviv."

The president trembled in shock as Radner shook his head in resignation. "They've got to use the nukes before the wizards are eliminated. I'm concerned we're going to see a lot of this, Mr. President. I sure hope they don't try nuking Atlantis, because if they do the city is going to be destroyed. No magic can withstand a nuclear explosion, sir. Which reminds me -- although the Portkey and Apparation barriers are up, I would recommend that you evacuate the White House and head to Cheyenne Mountain. Al-Qaeda hasn't responded yet, and I'm concerned they may have a trick up their sleeves."

Clinton thought for a moment, then finally nodded. "All right, let's start making the necessary preparations. One more thing. What happens if Atlantis is destroyed before they attempt this Judgment Day action?"

Radner shrugged. "The end."

-------------

1318Z -- 01:42:00 TO TIME ZERO
Haifa
----------
Michal Oved was doing her best to coordinate the recovery effort. However, it wasn't working well. About half of the residents of Haifa were fleeing the city by any means possible, be it by boat or hikes up Mt. Carmel. Several of the trees downtown were dying, and hundreds of people were already showing signs of radiation sickness.

The Israeli wizards -- accompanied by several from Jordan, Turkey, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia -- were doing what they could to cater to the needs of the stricken town. Taking the cue from whoever had responded to the fallout in London, they started by creating shelters into which gas and dust could not enter. They then herded all the people into the shelters and started passing out the second half of the London rescue effort -- Duplicated radiation suits and dental X-ray gowns.

The main difference between here and the London fallout scenario was that the radiation had entered the shelters in this case before the shield had gone up. This meant that some people were going to get sick no matter what. The best the wizards could hope for would be to make sure no more radioactive material got into the shelters.

The rescue efforts were hampered to some extent by all of the people trying to flee the city. Many of the people were stuck in crowds, unable to head towards the suburbs or the shelters because of the sheer masses of humanity running around. Cars were backed up forever. Minister Oved eventually had to summon more wizards to start turning buses into Portkeys and Portkeying people away en masse.

There was one thing she was concerned about, however. This had been a major attack, and virtually all of the Israeli wizards were here. However, why hadn't Hamas hit Tel Aviv with this attack? It didn't make sense. Tel Aviv would be a much more effective target, especially since a dirty bomb in Haifa would likely carry some of the radioactivity into Lebanon given the wind direction. Fortunately, with all the wizards here --

She suddenly froze as the thought sank in. All the wizards and doctors were here.

Tel Aviv was unprotected.

She was about to start giving orders to send a few people back to watch Tel Aviv when a lookout on Mt. Carmel screamed into a microphone and began to cry. Increasingly troubled, she Apparated to the top of the mountain to see what he had seen. From the mountaintop vantage point, she could see far into the distance.

The top of a mushroom cloud was barely visible over the horizon.

She screamed. "NO!"

-------------
1323Z -- 01:37:00 TO TIME ZERO
Jerusalem
-------------

Benjamin Netanyahu was furious. "Who did it? Hamas?"

The aide nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Nuke the bastards! I repeat, nuke them! 25 kT, just like this one!"

The aide bit his lip. "We can't use nukes against a terrorist organization, sir. They're too diffuse to be destroyed with a nuke!"
Netanyahu swore. The man was right, of course. Hamas needed to be hit with several thousand one-ton bombs spread over a large area with pinpoint accuracy, not with one big one.

Fortunately, there was another option, especially since the wizard who had given Hamas the nukes had been one of Voldemort's underlings. "Find the biggest warhead you have and aim it at Pyongyang. If you can't deliver it all the way there, get a wizard. Don't fire until I tell you! And FIND THAT DAMN HAMAS WIZARD! Keep 30% of the people in Haifa, send 60% to Tel Aviv to help rescue people, and send 10% to go after that damn Hamas wizard!"

-------------

1324Z -- 01:36:00 TO TIME ZERO
HMS Victorious
Mediterranean Sea
90 miles from Santorini
---------

The submarine's captain stared in disbelief at the FLASH message. "Son of a bitch! Hamas just blew up Tel Aviv with a nuke! The Haifa attack was a feint to get all the Israeli wizards out of the way!"

The executive officer swore. "This is not good. First London, now Tel Aviv. I'd say we've got at least 2:1 odds we're going to get a nuclear exchange out of this. Do we have authority to use our weapons yet?"

The captain shook his head. "No, XO. We have not received permission to use our nukes. However, we can torpedo anything which threatens us. We got at least that leeway from the government. I --"

The sonar operator suddenly clasped his hand over his ears and turned to the captain. "Sir, we've got a contact. It's about -- no, that's impossible."

The captain and XO both headed over to the console. "What is it, Jones?"

"We're detecting something 1000 meters down, and it's not making any attempt to hide itself. And it's rising slowly."

"Analysis, Mr. Jones."

The sonarman stared the monitors in disbelief. "I've never seen anything like this before, sir. Whatever it is, it's now at 980. Still coming up at an apparently constant rate."

The officers stared at each other and back at the sonarman. "Constant? That can't be natural. It's got to be a deep-water sub of some sort. How big is it? What's its profile like?"

The sonarman crunched more numbers, and his jaw dropped. He repeated the calculations and got the same result. "This is impossible!"

"What is it, Mr. Jones? Tell me!"

The sonarman looked at the captain helplessly. "Sir, we're estimating that the object is elliptical, maybe half a kilometer high and a good ten kilometers across. It's got to be an anomaly of --"

The sonarman's report was interrupted by the radio operator, who spun to the captain. "Sir, we're getting a message! I don't know how we managed to receive it down here, but we got a message!"
The captain turned to look at the radioman. "Peterson, what is it?"

The radioman looked at the display. "Attention, HMS Victorious. This is Grand Mugwump Anastasios Dialonis of the international Wizarding city of Atlantis. Our community of 20,000 wizards has been made aware of the nuclear threat to the human race and will be working to end this threat. We will be surfacing in a matter of moments to cast some potent magical spells and deploy some of our people. Do what you can to ensure that no Muggles interfere. Dialonis out."

The rest of the bridge crew looked at each other. Finally, the captain started issuing orders. "Helmsman, put us on the roof! I want to talk to the commander. I have no idea who this guy is, and I need to know if I should be shooting at him or for him."

The helmsman acknowledged and keyed in the order as the XO looked at the captain. "Sir, I suspect that this is a friendly. He wouldn't have warned us otherwise."

"I'll be the judge of that. Let's see what the government has to say. And get out of the way of...whatever it is!"

There was suddenly a loud snap, and everyone spun to look at the empty space behind the captain. A space which was empty no longer, occupied by a powerful-looking man protected by a large bubble ringed with flames which -- oddly enough -- seemed to do no harm to anything on the boat.

The visitor bowed. "Good afternoon, gentlemen. I am Anastasios Dialonis. I am here to answer any of your questions."

To be continued...

-------------------
Update #228
------------
Thursday, June 20, 1996 -- 01:34:00 TO TIME ZERO
1326Z
Atlantis
------------
Next PoV: 228.5 - Ask Fake Name Generator

ATLANTIS ALERT STATUS: JUDGMENT DAY IMMINENT
------------
Dialonis returned to Atlantis, which was a few minutes away from reaching the surface. He had spoken with the British submarine’s captain and convinced him to help keep the Muggles away from the city. The captain also agreed to ask his commanding officer for more help if necessary.

He had barely set foot in the city when he was accosted by Karl. "Sir, there have been some developments you ought to be aware of. First, we've received a confession by one of the North Korean wizards which were rounded up by Dumbledore and his men. The wizard has admitted, under Veritaserum, that Voldemort's nukes do not exist. There is no 1 MT bomb in Atlantis. The Chinese threat has no teeth."

Dialonis breathed a sigh of relief. "That's good to hear. Carry on with the surfacing operation. We still need to pick up the two Muggle leaders, for one thing. We also should continue with the evacuation so we don't alert the Chinese to the fact that we've called their bluff. In this case, however, we'll tell all of the civilians to start chasing those damn keys. With twenty thousand wizards looking for them, we should be able to find them very quickly."
"Very good, sir. However, we've got more problems. Hamas has detonated a nuclear weapon in Tel Aviv, having lured the wizards out of the city with the dirty bomb attack in Haifa. Eighty thousand people are reported dead already, and fallout is heading towards Nazareth. Israeli wizards are readying a nuclear weapon Portkey to be sent towards Pyongyang."

Dialonis swore. "Warn Dumbledore in Pyongyang! Send people over to Jerusalem or wherever it is to stop them! And start the attack on the Chinese Death Eater!"

---------------
1327Z -- 01:33:00 TO TIME ZERO
British Sub Command
- - - - - - - - - - - - - -
The communications operator spun and faced his commanding officer. "Sir, we've just gotten a message from the Victorious. They've been contacted by a wizard named Anastasios Dialonis. An underwater city of 20,000 wizards is rising to the surface and is going to need protection. Dialonis has told the crew to tell us that any protection from the Muggles while they are carrying out their attempt to stop the fighting would be most appreciated."

The commander stared at the communications operator for a few moments before regaining control of himself. "Alert all NATO members with bases near the Victorious's last reported position and have them send surface ships. We need to give these guys a chance."

---------------
1329Z -- 01:31:00 TO TIME ZERO
HMS Victorious
- - - - - - - - - - - -
On the surface at last, virtually the entire crew was standing on the roof of the submarine. They were all watching to the east, where the water was roiling vigorously. A couple of helicopters and fighter jets were watching the area as well.

Suddenly, something broke the surface of the Mediterranean. It was a translucent, softly glowing white dome. Its radius of curvature hinted that it was enormous, a good ten kilometers across.

The anomaly continued to rise, and the dome widened rapidly. The leading edge of the anomaly raced towards the submarine, but the captain wasn't worried. He'd spoken with Dialonis and was sure that the sub wasn't going to be hit by the city as it rose. The thick plume of smoke and ash rising from Santorini was visible behind the dome.

That's when someone with binoculars reported something under the center of the dome. "It looks like a building, sir. Make that two -- there's a whole metropolis down there! Why the hell didn't we know about this? I see a flag, sir!"

The captain turned to him. "What nationality is it?"

"It's hard to make out, sir, but it doesn't look like anything we've seen before."

"Is it the Dark Mark? I'll be really pissed if we just helped out Voldemort's men."

"No, sir. It looks to be a golden serpent biting its own tail on a blue background with rays emanating from it. It looks sort of like a sun."

---------------
1330Z -- 01:30:00 TO TIME ZERO
Beijing
The Death Eater didn't have a chance. Before he had a chance to react, fifteen robed men surrounded him and blasted green beams at him.

Within a matter of minutes, the Chinese premier was shaking his head in confusion and issuing orders to belay all nuclear strikes. The troops which were in Korea were to be sent to assist the Atlanteans.

----------
1334Z -- 01:26:00 TO TIME ZERO
Storage Vaults
Istanbul Archeological Museum
Istanbul
Turkey
----------
The curator was making his rounds when he saw a soft glow emanating from one of the rooms. Curious, he opened the door and had to cover his eyes as golden light seared them with amazing intensity.

One of the artifacts, a small key, was glowing brightly. They had never figured out what it was for, but they had assumed it was Assyrian given the bearded lion on the end. Puzzled, he went over to pick it up. An electric shock suddenly coursed through his body, and he dropped it. The key clattered to the floor as he rubbed his hand.

What the hell?

----------
1337Z -- 01:23:00 TO TIME ZERO
Moscow
----------
Boris Yeltsin gaped at the courier. "Hamas blew up Tel Aviv?"

The courier nodded. "That's right, sir. Netanyahu is furious and is readying a Portkey nuke to be deployed against Pyongyang."

Yeltsin didn't know what to do. "I'm going to call him. We need to calm everybody down!"

----------
1339Z -- -- 01:21:00 TO TIME ZERO
Commander, US Washington Battle Group
Near Bosnia
----------
The commander swore and turned to the rest of the bridge crew. "Plot a course for Santorini! Full speed!"

The helmsman gawked at him. "Sir? That's going to take a while! What --"

"That's an order!"

"Yes, sir!"

----------
1340Z -- 01:20:00 TO TIME ZERO
Death Eater Safe House
[location classified]
Arif Koury nodded grimly. "The time for our revenge has come. Send the two balls of uranium over,
separated by a couple of minutes so that we can knock out any enemy wizards who try to clean up
the mess after the first one goes off. Destination, New York."

---------
1341Z -- 01:19:00 TO TIME ZERO
St. Peter's Basilica
Vatican City
---------
John Paul II stared at his aide and then at the other religious leaders next to him. "What are you
talking about?"

"I'm sorry for bothering you at a time like this, Holiness, but something odd is happening in one of
the storage rooms filled with historical relics. One of the relics is glowing, and I don't know why. I
figured you might know because you're a wizard."

John Paul's forehead furrowed while Urban VIII grunted in irritation. "I've never heard of such an
effect before, Monsignor. What is it?"

"It's a small golden key, Holiness. Its handle is decorated with the crown of Lower Egypt. We've
never been able to figure out where it came from, and it wouldn't melt down when we tried to
convert it to bullion a few hundred years ago."

The Pope grabbed a sheet of paper and jotted down some notes. "I'll ask Dialonis about it. Can you
bring it over?"

"No, Holiness. I can't touch it. It shocks me when I try to do so. It sounds like it's meant for wizards -
or perhaps for one specific person."

To be continued...

-----------------
Update #228.5

-----------------
Thursday, June 20, 1996 -- 01:15:00 TO TIME ZERO
1345Z
St. Lawrence River
Near Ogdensburg, New York
United States of America

-----------------
Next PoV: 229 - Me

-----------------
ATLANTIS ALERT STATUS: JUDGMENT DAY IMMINENT
-----------------
Mary Carroll was out in her sailboat, fishing for trout, when she was thrown from her feet when the
boat slammed into an invisible wall about halfway across the river. Pulling bait out of her hair, she
looked around in confusion. What had she hit? The only thing that she could think of was that
Radner or Rousseau -- the Canadian Minister of Magic -- had put up some kind of shield around
their country's border. After all, the border between the United States and Canada was in the in the
middle of the river.

She surveyed the scene, but couldn't see any "normal" obstacles in sight. The only things she could
see was the town of Prescott, Ontario, maybe two miles away; and Ogdensburg, her home, about four miles away. Nothing.

She was about to dismiss the incident as a hallucination when the invisible wall suddenly flared blue for a second. She blinked as silvery ball the size of a softball materialized out of thin air, bounced off the wall, and splashed into the water back on the Canadian side of the border. The closest boats were a two hundred feet away.

What the hell was this? Was someone trying to hit a baseball across the river? And what was --

She was incinerated before she could finish the sentence.

---------
Downtown Ogdensburg
---------

Henry McCoy was reading the paper when a bright light suddenly illuminated the far wall. He turned around just in time to see the explosion level Prescott and send a wall of flame, steam, and debris in his direction.

The windows blew in, and Henry collapsed as a shard of glass half a foot long sliced into his leg and slashed his femoral artery. Seconds later, his house collapsed and the bricks added several thousand new pieces to the jigsaw puzzle.

---------
Minto Place Suite Hotel
Ottawa
Canada
---------

The tourists looking out of the skyscraper were taken aback by the mushroom cloud glowing over the southern horizon. It looked like a nuclear explosion, but what the hell had the bad guys been aiming at? There wasn't anything of any significance over there. Had someone aimed at Buffalo and missed? Had someone tried to destroy Ottawa and missed? The tourists doubted that Ottawa was under attack as Canada hadn't done anything to antagonize off Voldemort, Hamas, or al-Qaeda.

The general consensus was that some chemical plant or gas station had gone up in flame and produced a large explosion. A large conventional explosion closer in could produce the same effect, after all.

---------
Prime Minister's Office
Ottawa
---------

Prime Minister Chretien stared out the window in disbelief. "Merde! Get me the Minister of Defense and Bill Clinton!"

---------
1346Z -- 01:14:00 TO TIME ZERO
Air Force One
---------

Bill Clinton stared at Radner and then back at the speakerphone connected to NORAD. "What did you say? I couldn't have heard that right!"

The speaker responded, "There's been a 25 kT nuclear explosion on the US/Canada border. Ground zero appears to be in the St. Lawrence River near the town of Ogdensburg, New York. Current casualty estimate is about 7,000. Al-Qaeda has claimed responsibility. It looks like we have another Quabbin on our hands."
Clinton turned to Radner. "This makes no sense! Why would they attack up there? Do you have anything there, Radner, which would warrant such an attack?"

Radner shook his head. "No, Mr. President. What I suspect happened is that someone tried to Portkey in a bomb and it bounced off the barricade I put up before reaching its target. This caused it to detonate as soon it hit the border."

Clinton looked at a map and swore. "The Canadians will be pissed. The detonation was maybe 50 miles from Ottawa. They're bound to see the mushroom cloud from there and think they were the target."

The man from NORAD spoke up. "Mr. President, we're fairly certain Ottawa was NOT the target. The scenario we've come up with is something very similar to what Secretary Radner proposed. We've figured out what the intended target was. New York City."

Clinton put his head in his hands. "How certain are you of this, General?"

"Very certain, sir. If you were sending a Portkey from Pyongyang to New York and had it follow the shortest path -- a great circle route -- it would first cross America's borders four miles from Ogdensburg. Although the deaths of 7,000 people is a great tragedy, just imagine what would have happened if that bomb went off in the middle of a work day in New York City. It's 9:46 over there and those skyscrapers are going to be packed."

Radner frowned for a second and pointed at the map. "The Canadians aren't going to be very happy that we were an unwitting accomplice in an attack which leveled Prescott, Ontario. Had we not had that shield up, no Canadians would have died."

Clinton winced. "Christ. It's the mother of all tough questions: what's more valuable, a few hundred thousand Americans or 2,000 Canadians? All right, Radner, can you send some people up there to help with the cleanup?"

Radner nodded. "I believe so. The standard procedure that the wizards have come up with to dealing with the explosions is to Geminio anything that can be used to stop radiation -- such as dental X-ray shields and full radiation suits -- pack up the wizards, and send them up there. First order of business will be to have some of the wizards put out the fires and tend to the injured while others go downwind to prepare fallout shelters for the regions which are going to be irradiated."

The NORAD man grunted. "We're going to need a lot of fallout shelters, Mr. Radner. And we're going to need the Canadians involved here as well. You see, it looks like most of the casualties aren't going to be in Ogdensburg. If the wind holds up, we're going to have an even bigger problem in a few hours?"

Clinton didn't like the sound of that. "Oh really? I hate to think. How could that be?"

"Because the fallout cloud is heading directly towards Laval, less than five miles from downtown Montreal. Our models are predicting a 90% chance that Montrealers are going to need to seek shelter."

Everyone swore when they heard about that. Radner got up. "Excuse me, gentlemen, I believe I need to get going. I'm going to have to tell Ariadne to coordinate the defense of Ogdensburg and get the Canadian Minister of Magic, Jesper Etoile, up to speed so he can do something about Montreal."
The NORAD general spoke up. "That's not a bad idea, Mr. Radner. Good luck. And speaking of fallout, that's another bullet we dodged by having the shield up. You see, the wind in New York would have blown the fallout cloud right onto Boston. By sheer bad luck, the line from Ogdensburg to Montreal is directly parallel to the one from New York to Boston."

Clinton shook his head in disbelief. "In a span of 24 hours, we've got nuclear explosions in London, Tel Aviv, Korea, and now upstate New York. What is the world coming to?"

The NORAD man's response was blunt. "Apocalypse, if we don't do something fast."

With that, the meeting adjourned and everyone headed off to clean up Ogdensburg. They had no idea that their problems had just begun.

1347Z -- 01:13:00 TO TIME ZERO
Vatican City

Dialonis's fish Patronus stared at John Paul in shock. "What did you say? You've got a relic up there which just started glowing?"

The Pope nodded. "Yes, sir. It appears to be a small golden key decorated with what appears to be the crown of ancient Lower Egypt. It was in a storage room and believed to be over three thousand years old."

"Can I see it, Holiness?"

"No, sir. No one seems to be able to pick it up, even me. Even more perplexing, we can't even manipulate it through an intermediary such as a towel or book. The only explanation I can think of is that only one person -- perhaps you -- is allowed to use it."

Dialonis breathed a sigh of relief. "If it's what I think it is, we need to get Hosni Mubarak there in a hurry."

"Hosni Mubarak? The president of Egypt? What does he have to do with this?"

"Everything, Holiness. Everything. The question now is how we can get our hands on Saddam Hussein and that other key. I'd expect the other one is going to be glowing as well. Tell everyone to keep their eyes peeled."

Everyone looked at each other in shock. Finally, one of them voiced their concern.

"Saddam Hussein? Whose idea was it to put the fate of the world in the hands of Saddam Hussein?"

The fish groaned and explained. "Most likely Grand Mugwump Noha-Pishtin of Egypt, over four thousand years ago. The protocol requires that the king of Assyria, or in the case of the destruction of Assyria its conqueror, take the responsibility of turning the key. At the time, it made sense because Assyria was one of the world's superpowers back then. It's not that much different from you requiring that the US and the Soviet Union both agree to any radical operations in the Muggle world during the Cold War. Unfortunately, times change, and since Iraq now controls Assyria's territory that means Saddam Hussein. We apologize, but there isn't much we can do about it. All we can do is hope and pray."

----------------------
Deputy Minister of Magic Danielle Durand nearly fell off her chair when she heard the news. Swearing vigorously, she got up and raced out of the room.

Sophia Stevenson nearly dropped her cup of coffee when the televisions in the conference room went blank and suddenly began playing the Emergency Alert System broadcast tone. She looked at her coworkers in concern. There had been several nuclear weapons detonated over the past few hours, but none of them had been in the United States. Had America's luck run out?

The television began scrolling text down the screen. "Attention, citizens of the United States of America. There has been a nuclear explosion near the town of Ogdensburg, New York. It is located on the St. Lawrence River, near the border with Canada. The casualty total is currently estimated at 7,000, with tens of thousands wounded and two towns seriously damaged. The yield of the weapon is estimated at 25 kT, similar to those used by al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda has claimed responsibility for this attack.

"If you live along the St. Lawrence downstream from this location, you need to seek shelter immediately as a cloud of fallout may be heading in your direction. Do not panic. If you have a fallout shelter within five minutes traveling time, head there. If not, close all of the windows, seal them as well as possible, and head into the lowest level of your home. Stay away from any windows if at all possible.

"The Ministry of Magic will be assisting the government in setting up emergency fallout shelters and passing out protective gear such as radiation suits and, although less effective, medical X-ray protection equipment. Potassium iodide tablets are being Portkeyed to regional command centers as this message is being broadcast. These tablets will help prevent thyroid cancer and should be ingested by all people within the affected areas.

"The area threatened by the fallout covers roughly the course of the St. Lawrence all the way up through New York and into Vermont. Do not enter this area if at all possible. The Canadian government has also shut down Montreal's airport because there is a strong possibility that Montreal will be hit with fallout as well.

"If you know anyone who lives near Ogdensburg, either in the US or Canada, do not try to contact them. All phone lines out of the area are nonfunctional. The best thing you can do is pray for them. Further information will be posted as it becomes available.

"Al-Qaeda has leaked information onto the Internet which claims that more bombs are on the way. Do not panic, as odds are that your city will not be targeted. The President is en route to Cheyenne Mountain right now for his own safety.

"If a nuclear weapon goes off near you, duck and cover as soon as you see the flash. Move low to --"
There was huge flash outside her window, but Sophia didn't have much of a chance to duck before the entire building was destroyed.

------------

1351Z -- 01:09:00 TO TIME ZERO
NORAD

Bradley Shepp stared in horror at the two dots on his screen. One appeared to be in Seoul. The launch had come from a Nuclear Missile Range D, just over the border. It looked like a rogue launch to him, probably some North Korean soldier who had been pissed that the South had killed their popular Dear Leader. He had been told that there were Patriot missile batteries in the area, but they had either missed the target or not gotten enough notice to shoot the missile down. The wizards were focusing all of their attention on missiles coming and out of Pyongyang and had completely forgotten that there were still Muggle soldiers down there who weren't particularly fond of the South.

However, he couldn't worry about that right now because the second dot was right in the middle of downtown Manhattan. It was a 25 kT airburst over Wall Street, if he read it right.

This was going to be bad.

------------

1353Z -- 01:07:00 TO TIME ZERO
Air Force One

The entire senior staff was screaming at each other. Clinton had to slam his hand on the table to get everyone's attention. "Radner! What the hell happened?"

Radner stared at the floor in shame. "It seems that al-Qaeda did exactly the same thing to us Hamas did to Israel -- send all of the wizards up to the first explosion in Ogdensburg and leave the door open to a followup attack on New York, their primary target. During the chaos surrounding the Ogdensburg attack, I completely forgot that the nuke there would knock out the Portkey shield in that area. I'm sorry, sir."

"Get half of the wizards in the remaining Department of Magic offices over to New York on the double. Re-establish the shield around the country and tell the remaining wizards to set up watches over all major cities. And tell one of the subs to blow up Pyongyang with a nuke with a yield no greater than 75 kT."

Radner stared at him. "Sir, the wizards -- "

"Do it! We can't let them attack the US like this!"

Radner whistled. "Yes, sir."

To be continued...

-----------

Update #229

-----------

Thursday, June 20, 1996 -- 01:05:00 TO TIME ZERO
1355Z
63 SBN Doormaneg
Willemstad, Curacao
The Curacaoan news station was broadcasting scenes of chaos and confusion in downtown Willemstad. No fewer than three Holland America cruise ships -- the Veendam, Oesterdam, and Volendam were stubbornly refusing to leave port. Instead, they had disgorged all of their passengers and told them to stay on Curacao until the current nuclear crisis had been settled. Most of the passengers were Americans, and they were concerned that there wouldn't be an America to go to when they got back. Ever since the Noordam had claimed Half Moon Cay as its own personal fiefdom a few days ago, cruise ships were being turned into arks and being sailed wherever the captains could reach them. Half Moon Cay, Holland America's private island and the most obvious sanctuary for the cruise line, had actually been the site of a minor firefight where the crew of the Noordam had to resort to bullets to keep the Prinzenendam's passengers away from the island. There was only just so much food and water to go around there.

The anchorman suddenly cut in, overriding the reporter at the Otrobanda cruise terminal. "We're sorry to interrupt, ladies and gentlemen, but we have an urgent news bulletin here. Things have just gotten a whole lot worse."

The anchorman reappeared on the screen. "Ladies and gentlemen, it is my solemn duty to report that New York City and Seoul have been hit with nuclear weapons. In addition, a nuclear weapon has detonated on the border between Canada and America, near the towns of Ogdensburg, New York and Prescott, Ontario. President Clinton has just declared war against North Korea, and anonymous sources are claiming that he has authorized a nuclear strike against Pyongyang. Al-Qaeda has claimed responsibility for both attacks on American soil. The attack on Seoul appears to have been a rogue launch by a North Korean Muggle general, angered at the South's attack on his country. This brings the total number of nuclear detonations against civilian targets to five: London, Tel Aviv, Seoul, New York, and Ogdensburg. There's also the dirty bomb attack on Haifa, lest we forget about that."

My entire family looked around the room in horror. We immediately all started thinking about friends and family who had been killed in New York and Tel Aviv. I had no idea where exactly Ogdensburg was, but it was probably a decent-sized city.

"The attacks on Ogdensburg and New York, however, are going to have more far-reaching consequences. Although both weapons had yields of only 25 kT -- roughly the size of the Nagasaki bomb -- the al-Qaeda operatives detonated it right over Wall Street. The entire financial district was wiped out, including the New York Stock Exchange. In one fell swoop, one of the main pillars of the United States economy has been blown away. The seat of the United Nations has also been taken out, and both World Trade Center towers have collapsed.

"The Americans and Canadians are summoning all of the wizards they can find to help with these two attacks. However, authorities are warning that the wind direction is such that two other major cities are likely going to be subject to radioactive fallout: Montreal, Quebec, form the Ogdensburg attack; and Boston, Massachusetts, from the New York attack."

Everyone started screaming simultaneously. Although I wasn't as close to most of the friends in New York -- I only knew a couple of them, though one of them I'd known since nursery school -- virtually EVERYONE I knew lived in and around Boston. Many of my friends were still at MIT or Brandeis.
For the first time, I started experiencing survivor's guilt. However, I had to admit that I was grateful that my parents had actually been paranoid enough to spend $5000 on airline tickets for all four of us...and that we had somewhere to go to.

"Events are still unfolding at the other attack sites. Israel has yet to react to the Tel Aviv and Haifa strikes, though most of the pundits are suspecting that when the Jewish state does react, it will be with nuclear weapons. The South Korean capital is a large city, and although the area of immediate destruction covered only a small segment of the community, fallout, rioting, and fire damage is going to be plaguing Seoul for hours to come.

"John Paul II, Urban VIII, Celestine VI, Suleiman I, and the Dalai Lama are all at the Vatican asking people to pray for help. At least one prayer has been answered, however: a large, previously unknown city of wizards, the undersea city of Atlantis, has emerged from the Mediterranean to offer its assistance in these troubled times. Several surface vessels, including a British submarine, are in the area and are protecting this city of 20,000 people. Most people are convinced that this city is friendly. The only exception, however, appears to be the chancellor of Germany, who is firmly convinced that Atlantis works for Voldemort and has come to avenge its master's death.

"At the moment, there is no threat to Curacao or any of the other Dutch Antilles islands. However, I will keep you posted if anything changes."

We all looked around the room at each other. We had the feeling that we would be in living in Curacao for a long, long time.

------------

1358Z -- 01:02:00 TO TIME ZERO
USS Alabama (SSBN-731)
Somewhere in the North Pacific Ocean
- - - - - - - - [Note -- this update is courtesy of Penguin]

Lieutenant Commander Frank Callaway, Executive Officer of the Alabama, summoned the young officers who had labored to decipher an Emergency-Action Message forward to the Captain's chair.

The first one was an increase of the readiness level to DEFCON 1. This one was a "valid nuclear-control order that authorizes the release of three of Alabama's missiles." One was targeted on the 125th Machine Factory in Pyongyang. Another was targeted on the military rocket launching site in southern North Hamgyong Province. The last one was targeted on a naval base on the western coast of North Korea. The two young officers, Lieutenant (junior grade) Thomas Kenna and Lieutenant Harry Connery, finished reading the message. "I concur," Connery said after reading the message. "I concur, Captain," Callaway said next. Expect for the four men at the conn speaking in hushed voices, the control room was silent. Callaway and the Captain, Commander Fred Cervenik, had top-secret code books, manuals, and binders spread out over the lip of the railing.

Cervenik finally repeated "I concur."

Kenna spoke. "Request permission to authenticate." Callaway and Connery both concurred, so Cervenik ordered "Very well, authenticate."

"Authenticate, aye," Kenna responded. He broke open the sealed code card that contained a randomly arranged row of letters and numbers that consisted the Sealed Authenticator System. The same code was printed on an identical card at USSTRATCOM, which was broken open and written down on the launch order. Kenna read off the row of letters and numbers on the card. The code on the card matched the code in the EAM.

Kenna said "The message is authentic."
"I concur," Connery said.

"I concur," Callaway said.

"I concur," Cervenik said. "The message is authentic."

Cervenik ordered Callaway to prepare the sub for launch. "Control, Executive Officer. This message requires battle stations-missile. Man battle stations-missile. Chief of the watch, sound the General Alarm. Spin up missiles four, twenty-three, and ten."

Over a speaker in the missile-control room, Cervenik's voice boomed. "Set condition One-SQ for strategic missile launch. This is the Captain. This is not a drill."

Weapons Officer Jack DiPasquale repeated the order in the missile-control room.

After the missiles got their bearings, the arming keys for missiles 4, 23, and 10 were inserted and turned, the Weapons officer inserted his tactical-mode key into the launcher panel, and the Captain gave his permission to launch through a device called the captain's indicator-panel key, they were launched on their terminal trajectory to the designated targets. These missiles, like their land-based counterparts, could not be recalled once sent on their way, unlike the bomber component of the Nuclear Triad.

-------------------
1359Z -- 01:01:00 TO TIME ZERO
Long Island Expressway
Long Island, New York
-------------------
The traffic jam went on for miles and miles as everyone was trying to escape from New York. Inevitably, one person realized that it would be faster to run than to drive, so he got out of his car and began walking. This, of course, blocked up everybody behind him, so they all started running as well.

Meanwhile, the mushroom cloud slowly started heading towards the east-northeast.

-------------------
1400Z -- 01:00:00 TO TIME ZERO
Montreal
Quebec
-------------------
Danielle Durand had to scream to be heard. "Everyone, listen to me! Get into these shelters as quickly as possible! They're safe! Trust me! Don't try trying to drive away because you'll start traffic jams and no one will get anywhere!"

-------------------
1401Z -- 00:59:00 TO TIME ZERO
Ministry of Magic
Ankara
Turkey
-------------------
Minister of Magic Dalan Demir picked up the telephone. "Hello?"

"Minister Demir, I'm sorry for bothering you, but we've got something odd here at the archeological museum in Istanbul?"
Demir gritted his teeth. "I don't have time for this, sir. In case you haven't noticed, the world is --"

"I think it's important, sir. You see, one of the relics in our museum has just started glowing. No one can touch it, it appears. We've never seen this happen before."

Demir rolled his eyes. "That's very nice. Unless it's a small golden key, I'm not interested and it can wait. If they blow up Ist--"

"Minister, it is indeed a small golden key. How did you know?"

Demir's eyes widened. "Really? Describe it!"

"It's made of gold and it's got a bearded Assyrian lion on the end. We believe it dates back to the third millennium BC. Is this the key you were referring to?"

Demir whistled. "It fits the description all right. Make sure it doesn't go anywhere. I'm getting the Grand Mugwump. You're right, sir. This is indeed more important than a possible nuclear attack on Istanbul, believe it or not."

-------------------

1404Z -- 00:56:00 TO TIME ZERO
Presidential Palace
Cairo
Egypt

-------------------

Hosni Mubarak leaped into the air once again as Wizard Dagher Apparated into the room. Irritated, he asked. "Now what do you want? I told you, I don't know anything about this damn key you're talking about. In case you're wondering, Israel is --"

The wizard interrupted him. "We've found the key. However, we can't touch it. We believe you're the only person who can. Come with us. You're the only person who can save the world, believe it or not."

Mubarak looked shocked for a moment. Suddenly, a sly smile crossed his face.

"I'll do this for you if I get the Negev and Gaza."

Dagher threw his hands in the air. "Who cares about the Middle East at this point? Forget Israel! I'm working together with the Israelis on this, in case you haven't noticed! That woman who was here last time was Michal Oved, the Israelis' Minister of Magic! She left early because she had just been told about the attack on Haifa! For goodness sake, let bygones be bygones and come with us!"

Mubarak thought for a moment and then realized what he had done. Bowing his head in embarrassment, he nodded. Dagher then grabbed onto his arm and turned into space.

-------------------

1406Z -- 00:54:00 TO TIME ZERO
Storage Vaults
St. Peter's Basilica
Vatican City

-------------------

Mubarak emerged back into real space and was nearly blinded by a bright golden glow. The glow seemed to be emanating from a spot on the floor. He looked down and saw a small golden key lying there.
John Paul put his hand on Mubarak's shoulder. "Mr. President, would you be so good as to pick that up for us?"

Mubarak looked at the Pope suspiciously. Warily, he bent down and lifted the key off the ground. He stared at it for a moment, then put it in his pocket. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief, and the wizards outside the corridor began conjuring Patronuses.

Seconds later, the Patronuses were sent out with one message. "Mubarak has the key! We're heading back to Atlantis!"

------------------
1408Z -- 00:52:00 TO TIME ZERO
Nazareth
Israel
------------------
People huddled underground in the city of Nazareth, hoping that the town's most famous resident would deliver them from the fallout spreading their way from Tel Aviv. Only time would tell if their prayers would be granted.

------------------
1409Z -- 00:51:00 TO TIME ZERO
Fallout Shelter
Seoul
South Korea
------------------
Choi Hee Chan was screaming. She wasn't the only one.

One of the walls had cracked when the bomb had gone off. The lights had gone out as well, but thankfully the shelter had some emergency lights and flashlights in it. Candles wouldn't work because in a confined space like this they would just set fire to things.

There had already been a few fights over food. She hoped things wouldn't get much worse.

------------------
1410Z -- 00:50:00 TO TIME ZERO
Pyongyang

Sirius was the only person left defending the city at this point. The other wizards had all headed off to help defend Seoul and several other possible targets. Before Dumbledore had left, he had used the Elder Wand to place a protective shield over Pyongyang. Normally, spells didn't have a chance against nukes. However, Dumbledore was the master of the Elder Wand. If anything could save the city, it would be this.

He was hoping to not find out, however. He watched the skies thoroughly for any sign of a ballistic missile. His wand was at the ready, and he was prepared to shoot anything down.

There was only one minor problem. He had completely forgotten about submarine attacks from the east. He had expected any attacks to come from the south or west.

The 100 kT Trident from the submarine exploded on the other side of the city, maybe 5 miles away. Sirius barely had time to put up a personal shield before the shock wave hit him. As it was, he was slammed against a cliff face and knocked unconscious. Rocks cascaded around him but bounced off the shield.
Eventually, the fireball faded away. The city was badly damaged, but thankfully it had not been destroyed. The Elder Wand-enhanced shield had attenuated the blast enough to cause it roughly the same amount of destruction as the 11 kT nuke dropped on Hiroshima.

Sirius, however, would pay the ultimate price. He had already received a fatal dose of radiation, but he did not know it yet.

-------------
Update #230
-------------
Thursday, June 20, 1996 -- 00:49:00 TO TIME ZERO
1411Z
Atlantis

-------------
Next PoV: 231 - Dalan Demir

-------------
ATLANTIS ALERT STATUS: JUDGMENT DAY IMMINENT
-------------
Orders were fickle things, Dialonis thought. He had originally intended for Atlantis to surface so that he could pick up Mubarak and Hussein and let the civilians get away from the possible 1 MT nuclear device left behind by Voldemort. Then the plan changed to offload all the civilians and have them find the Judgment Day launch keys. Now, they had changed again. He turned to his staff.

"All right, change of plans. The evacuation is now optional since there is no nuclear threat to Atlantis. However, evacuees with Great Serpent rings MUST use all of their magical abilities to assist with the rescue efforts of one of the cities hit with the nuclear bombs. Make sure to remind them to use their Great Serpent rings if have them to prevent the fallout and noxious gases from hurting them. If they don't have rings, they can help out with humanitarian aid."

The wizards nodded and hurried off. Dialonis barely had time to catch his breath when someone shouted, "Sir!" The Grand Mugwump turned as the Saudi Minister of Magic, Heydar Dagher, escorted a wide-eyed man into the room.

Dagher pointed to his guest. "Grand Mugwump, meet Hosni Mubarak, president of Egypt and keeper of the Pharaonic Key. Mr. President, would you show him the key please?"

Mubarak, still a bit skeptical, mentioned something about this being completely surreal. However, he reached into his pocket and brought out the key. Now that it was in the hands of its rightful owner, the glow had faded away.

Dialonis shook Mubarak's hand vigorously. "Thank you for coming, Mr. President. I'm sorry for the inconvenience, but as Heydar has probably told you this is urgent. All we need now is to bring in Saddam Hussein with the Assyrian Key and we can get started."

Mubarak stared at him. "You're looking to Saddam Hussein for help? Sir, that's not a very good...oh, wait, you're wizards. You may have a chance then."

-------------
1412Z -- 00:48:00 TO TIME ZERO
Buchel Air Base (Luftwaffe)
Germany

-------------
Maximilian Kluge stared his commanding officer in disbelief. "They want me to attack Atlantis? That makes no sense! Atlantis hasn't done anything, and from all that has happened so far they're just
trying to help!

The commander nodded. "Personally, I agree with you. However, these orders come directly from the top. The chancellor is absolutely convinced that this is a Voldemort hideout and wants it either back underwater or destroyed before that maniac's associates can start wreaking havoc again."

Kluge grunted. "Hopefully that bubble they have around them will prevent our missiles from destroying the city."

The commander shook his head sadly. "These are nukes we're dealing with here. The orders say specifically that if conventional missiles won't penetrate the shield, you are to use one small nuke. That shield the British wizard put up to defend Pyongyang still allowed the city to be partially destroyed when the nuke came in from the sub."

The commander put his hand on Kluge's shoulder. "Son, I feel for you. I really do. However, the chancellor does have a point in that we have no proof that Dialonis is on our side yet. There are rumors he's kidnapped the president of Egypt, after all."

The commander thought for a moment. "Perhaps you can tell everyone that you thought your weapons were making better progress than you did so you didn't want to bother with the nukes. I'm willing to put myself on the line for this, Maximilian. I promise. I'm going to help you out here. After all, can you imagine what happens to NATO if a German nuclear weapon takes out a British nuclear submarine and a bunch of American ships?"

Kluge looked at his commander with concern. "Is it my imagination, or has the chancellor been acting a bit out of character of late?"

The commander grunted. "It's not your imagination, and several people are getting nervous up in Berlin. Not to mention places like Paris and Moscow."

-----------------

1414Z -- 00:46:00 TO TIME ZERO
Tel Aviv
Israel
- - - - - - - - - -

Karl, protected by his Atlantis bubble, rematerialized in the middle of hell. There were fires everywhere, disfigured and deformed people, piles and piles of bodies, and rubble that made the bombing his father had endured during the Second World War pale in comparison. The few standing walls had negative images of people burned into them by the detonation, just like in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Michal Oved appeared next to him, her face ravaged. "Thank you for coming, sir. Please, follow me. There's a lot to do here."

Karl nodded and allowed the Israeli woman to lead him through the rubble. As he walked, he saw Saudis, Jordanians, Egyptians, Syrians, and even a few Palestinians helping out. Many of the Arabs were swearing vehemently and shuddering at the extent of the devastation.

He turned to face Michal Oved. "Minister, I've noticed that you've got a lot of volunteers from other Middle Eastern countries here helping out with the rescue effort. Dare I hope that this disaster may help bring the countries of the Middle East closer together?"

All Michal did was point at one of the triage centers. Karl turned and saw a man with a Hamas
insignia on his uniform helping out. The man had apparently managed to survive this long from
Israeli retribution in Tel Aviv because he was a wizard. The man had tears on his eyes and was
saying that he would never do this again. Both the Minister and Karl could tell that the man was
sincere.

Karl whistled. "Hamas had one wizard left, am I correct? And if he's just seen the light, Hamas is no
longer a nuclear threat."

Michal nodded. "That's correct, sir. Let's just hope they don't find someone else to replace him."

-----------------
1415Z -- 00:45:00 TO TIME ZERO

Presidential Palace
Baghdad
Iraq

Saddam Hussein dropped and went for his gun as soon as he heard the snapping sound. He had no
idea how the intruder had gotten past his guards, but he'd deal with that later. He fired, and the bullet
bounced off a shield of flame and bounced onto the carpet.

Hussein fell to the ground and prayed when he looked at the protective bubbles surrounding the
newcomers and saw himself being consumed by fire. He prayed that Allah be merciful to him.
Granted, he had committed a laundry list of atrocities over the years, so he didn't have much of a
chance. However, the All-Merciful might know something he didn't.

One of his visitors spoke. "President Hussein, I'm Minister of Magic Dalan Demir from the Republic
of Turkey. I'm sorry for the interruption, but there's something I need to speak with you about."

Hussein's jaw dropped. One of those wizards was in his office? Wizards were evil -- the Prophet was
against them. The fact that they had tried to show him burning in Hell was proof enough for that. He
had to be careful to not listen to anything they said and to make sure they didn't try to hex him.

"I'm sorry, wizard, but we don't have anything to talk about. I know you're really a demon, just like
my colleagues in Muslims for Humans have told me. I know not to listen to you."

The demons' eyes had widened in shock when he mentioned his affiliation with Muslims for
Humans. No one moved for a few minutes. Finally, one of the demons said to Demir, "Can we
Imperius him and have him come with us that way?"

Demir shook his head. "Dialonis warned us that an Imperiused man will not be able to turn the key.
It's a built-in safety protocol to prevent one person from turning all four keys by proxy. He has to do
this voluntarily."

Hussein pointed at the second speaker as he a pressed a button to bring more guards into the room.
"There! Your colleague just mentioned that he was considering trying to hex me. What say you to
that?"

Demir sighed and handed his wand to the demon next to him. "Mr. President, let me explain to you
what is going on. If you wish, I can be your hostage. See? I am now unarmed. It is important that
you listen to me!"

Hussein snorted. "So the guy next to you can shoot me twice. Big deal."
Demir rolled his eyes and began speaking. "Let's start at the beginning. In case you haven't noticed, the world is going to hell."

Hussein nodded. "Correct. And it's probably because of demons like you."

Demir raised his eyebrows. "What if you were given the chance to save the world? You're the only person who can do it."

Hussein shook his head. "Sounds like temptation by Shaitan to me."

Demir raised his hands in supplication. "I'm Turkish, sir! I'm a Muslim, just like you! I swear in Allah's name that what I'm telling you is true! Had I been a demon, would I have been able to speak Allah's name without flinching?"

Hussein froze. Demir had a point. He couldn't be a demon if he spoke Allah's name without being harmed. Still very wary of the wizards, the Iraqi lowered his gun slightly. It's not as if he'd be vulnerable for long -- the guards would be in here momentarily to trap the wizards. "All right, you've got five minutes."

Demir breathed a sigh of relief and began to speak. "Thank you, Mr. President. As you've noticed, the world is currently threatened by a nuclear holocaust. The prophecies are predicting, as of this moment, an 78.3% chance of a full nuclear exchange and a 39.1% chance of the end of human civilization. The wizards have a plan in place to help prevent this disaster. However, there are two Muggles -- that is, nonmagical people like yourself -- who have roles to play as well. These two Muggles are Hosni Mubarak and yourself."

Hussein shook his head. "Prophecies? There haven't been any valid prophets since Mohammed. And why the hell would the wizards need me and some Egyptian to save the world?"

"I can answer both these questions, sir. The prophecies were made before the arrival of the Prophet, and nothing Mohammed said contradicts any of these. As a result, they are still in force. As to why you were chosen, it is because you are the heir to the kingdom of Assyria."

Hussein blinked. What did an ancient Mesopotamian civilization have anything to do with the problem at hand? Demir noticed the expression on his face and chuckled slightly.

"Sir, I understand your skepticism. The point is, the protocol needed to save the world was developed thousands of years ago, when Egypt and Assyria were the superpowers. The kings of those two nations were given keys to trigger Judgment Day, the wizards' nuclear option when it came to saving civilization. As the ruler of the land which was formerly Assyria, the spell considers you to be the ruler of Assyria. You are the only person who can retrieve the key, turn it, and help save the world with it."

Hussein hesitated for a moment. This Demir was not a demon, he knew that. If what the Turk was saying was true, Hussein was in the perfect position to be able to blackmail a wizard into getting whatever he wanted. Very interesting.

Nodding slowly. "I'm...flattered, gentlemen. Perhaps Allah has chosen me to help lead the world in this time of crisis. I'll be willing to help out...on one condition."

Demir looked at him sharply. "Name it!"
Hussein smiled. "I get control of Kuwait. It is our lost province, after all. And you guys conjure as many chemical and nuclear weapons for me as I wish."

Demir stared at him in disbelief as Hussein heard the guards running towards the room. "I can't grant those wishes, Mr. President. We cannot allow the spread of unconventional weapons given what has happened, and I do not have the authority to rule on Kuwait, a sovereign state."

Hussein smiled as the guards raced into the room and pointed their guns at the wizards. "Then it appears we are at an impasse."

To be continued...
Update #231 through Update #235

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Mislagnissa

Update #231
---------
Thursday, June 20, 1996 -- 00:40:00 TO TIME ZERO
Presidential Palace
Baghdad
Iraq
---------
Next PoV: 232 - Bill Clinton
---------
ATLANTIS ALERT STATUS: JUDGMENT DAY IMMINENT
---------
Stalemate.

Dalan Demir and Saddam Hussein looked at each other. It was obvious that neither man was going to budge. And as long as Saddam didn't move, that key was going to stay in the museum in Istanbul.

The atrocities were continuing to spread. There were rumors that some of the Cuban Death Eaters who detonated the bomb near Havana had escaped before the blast and had just hit Miami with another 25 kT nuke. Clinton was going ballistic and readying a nuke for Cuba -- much to the irritation of the Russians. Meanwhile, the British had executed their counterattack against Pyongyang, hitting the city with a nuke. The second weapon finished off what was left of the North Korean capital. Sirius Black, yesterday's hero who had supposedly been on guard to defend Pyongyang, was presumed dead.

Demir shuddered. If the Americans nuked Cuba and that drew the Russians into it...God in heaven. For the first time, he began to believe the possibility that there was an almost 40% chance of the end of human civilization. Who would have thought that nuclear war would come because of some Muslims for --

Suddenly, something occurred to him. The Iraqi was a Muslim, albeit a non-practicing one, and Demir knew what the Atlantis bubbles looked like to enemies. It was time for a bluff.

He turned to Hussein. "Mr. President, I'm hesitant to say this because normally we can't discuss the nature of prophecies and magic with the Muggles. However, I must warn you that the image you see before you in our protective bubbles is what will happen to you if history continues without our intervention. I don't know what you're seeing, but judging from the reaction you had when I came in, it can't be good. Judging from what you've done to the Kurds over the years, it's understandable. There is only one way to stop yourself falling into the hands of Shaitan forever, Mr. President. You have to help us here! You have to give us that key, and do so out of your own free will! Allah has given you one last chance! Yes, you have killed thousands of people in Iraq and triggered a war by invading Kuwait. But that would pale in comparison to the billions of people saved by a prevented nuclear holocaust! Mr. President, please! This is our last chance! What do you want, paradise or damnation?"

The Iraqi president was thrown off his feet by the Turk's speech. There was a long pause. Finally, Hussein put the gun down. "All right, Wizard Demir. You've won. Let's see what we can do to
Saddam Hussein shook his head to clear it as he rematerialized in the storeroom. All he could see was a golden glow. Confused, he turned to Demir.

Demir pointed at the source of the glow, a key lying on the floor. "There it is, Mr. President. Go ahead and pick it up."

Making a mental note to ask for Kuwait later on when the crisis was over -- he deserved a reward for this, after all -- he bent over and picked up the key. The glow dissipated as it fell into his pocket.

The wizards all started chattering excitedly...and with trepidation. They finally had all four keys. Having the keys was good. Realizing what they were about to do with them was not.

Maximilian Kluge's fighter flew through the air, headed towards Atlantis. The planes next to him were armed with all sorts of bombs and missiles. He, on the other hand, was carrying the heavy ordnance: one of the most powerful bombs in existence short of a nuclear weapon. Much to his relief, the government hadn't gotten permission to get the nuke through NATO nuclear power-sharing, so his worst nightmare was not coming to pass.

Still, the bomb he was carrying was extremely powerful. He prayed to God that he would not have to use it.

Dalan Demir, with Saddam Hussein in tow, Apparated into the city and found himself in the midst of absolute chaos. There were reporters -- both Muggle and Wizarding -- everywhere. How they had managed to get into the city was beyond him, but there they were. He saw representatives from CNN, Al-Jazeera, the Daily Prophet, one of the BBC's satellite offices, and organizations he'd never heard of before.
There were cameras flashing everywhere, half of which sprayed purple smoke all over the room when they went off. People tried to get into his way to try to interview him, but he just bowled them over with his Atlantis bubble and explained that he didn't have time to talk right now. They promptly followed him deeper into the city.

He headed for the command center, where he saw Dialonis, Astrologer Ndukaku, and a still very much confused Hosni Mubarak. Hussein took one look at Mubarak and greeted him warmly. Demir watched as the two leaders spoke.

"Hosni, do you have any idea what the hell is going on here? How did you get involved in this?"

The Egyptian shook his head. "Beats me, Saddam. This Dagher fellow showed up and told me I needed to give them this key, so there I went. Something about the end of the world if I don't do it."

Dialonis overheard this and cut in. "That's absolutely right, Mr. Mubarak. Now, if everyone would pay attention for a second and bring out their keys, let me explain to the world what is going to happen."

News cameras flashed and swerved to look at Dialonis. "Ladies and gentlemen, we are about to execute the Judgment Day protocol. This protocol, which was last executed over 3500 years ago, is the wizards' last defense against the demise of human civilization. It involves some extremely powerful, and dangerous, magic. Do not panic, ladies and gentlemen. If you are supportive of peace, the Judgment Day activities will not harm you. If you are not, beware!"

Dialonis then lifted his key and showed it to the cameras. "In order to activate the protocol, four keys need to be turned simultaneously. This is a security measure which is similar to those used in your nuclear missile silos. There are four keys: the Atlantis Key, which I am currently holding in my hand; the Astrologer Key, held by Astrologer Ndukaku over there; the Pharaonic Key, just delivered by Hosni Mubarak; and the Assyrian Key, linked to Saddam Hussein.

"You may wonder why those two Muggles were chosen. The reason is simple. The protocol was created thousands of years ago, when Assyria and the Egypt were the superpowers of the era. As a result, any attempt to trigger Judgment Day had to get the approval of that era's equivalent of the United States and the Soviet Union/Russia. The magic is ancient, and it has no idea that Egypt and Assyria are no longer superpowers. All that it cares about is that the leaders of Egypt and Iraq -- the modern nation controlling Assyrian territory -- are here to turn the keys.

"In a moment, we are all going to head over to the control panel and turn the keys together. This will start a 30 minute countdown to Judgment Day. Once the keys are turned, Judgment Day cannot be halted. Although I cannot tell you what exactly the plan is lest Death Eaters be listening, rest assured that we will get the job done.

"This the third Judgment Day in the history of the human race. There are virtually no records of the second Judgment Day, which triggered your legends of Atlantis and the link between Atlantis and Santorini. However, records exist of the first Judgment Day. Although I don't have the time to go into it right now, it involved at least one asteroid impact around 4500 years ago."

Dialonis looked around the room. "Two things will happen when the keys are turned. First, bright spheres of magical energy will start hovering a couple of miles above every single Ministry of Magic on the planet. All aircraft should keep away from these spheres. Although they are not meant to harm anyone, the spell dates to a time when the wizards never thought Muggles would master the secrets
of flight. These spheres are meant to warn everyone in the area that the Judgment Day countdown has begun."

"When the countdown hits zero, strange things will happen. You may see some unusual lights, but rest assured you will not be harmed. Now, if you would excuse me, we have some work to do. Everyone follow me over to the control panel."

A mob consisting of no fewer than eighty wizards (some flying above the crowd), fifty reporters, Dialonis, Ndukaku, and the two Arab leaders made its way over to a control panel which was starting to glow brightly. Dialonis indicated the four keyholes and that each of them had a different symbol on them. One had an eye, one had a sun insignia, one had a bearded lion, and one had the crown of Lower Egypt on it. It was obvious who was supposed to go where.

All four people inserted their keys into the slots as cameras flashed wildly. As soon as the fourth key was entered, a warning buzzer sounded and the glow grew brighter still. People began to murmur in excitement.

Dialonis looked at the clock. It read 14:29:45Z. "Gentlemen, when that hits 14:30:00, turn your key. In the remaining fifteen seconds, pray to whatever god or gods you believe in for deliverance."

The second hand slowly made its way up to the top. Everyone took a deep breath.

Finally, the second hand hit the 12. All four keys turned simultaneously. The control panel suddenly glowed like the sun and Sumerian numerals began hovering above it as alarms started howling all over the city. Very few people knew Sumerian, but those who did could identify them:

30:00
29:59
29:58

The countdown had begun. Within half an hour, people would know their fate.

To be continued...

-----------
Update #232
-----------
1428Z
Thursday, June 20, 1996 -- 00:32:00 TO TIME ZERO
Oval Office
Washington, DC
United States of America
-----------
Next PoV: 232.5 - Jelena Kurchatova
-----------
ATLANTIS ALERT STATUS: JUDGMENT DAY
-----------
President Clinton couldn't believe what he was hearing. Not only had Miami been hit with a Cuban nuke, but now the man in charge of Ramstein Air Force Base in Germany was screaming that one of his BLU-82 Daisy Cutter superbombs had disappeared! And as if that weren't bad enough, Boris Yeltsin was warning him of dire consequences if he were to attack Havana to try to go after the people who had attacked Miami!
Meanwhile, the general was screaming at him over the phone. "I swear, Mr. President! It was there, and then all of a sudden it flickered and vanished! I think we've got a Death Eater here in Germany! And judging from the strange behavior we've been seeing out of the chancellor, he's probably Imperiused the chancellor! This is like Saudi Arabia and China all over again!"

Clinton couldn't take much more of this. Radner would have probably been able to help here, but he had been sent to Miami as soon as he had come back from organizing the rescue mission for New York. Well, the president was accustomed to not having to rely on magic to get things done.

"Ask the people in the air base if they saw anything unusual around the time of the bomb's disappearance. Also, are there any locator devices on the bomb? Maybe that can tell you where it is. Meanwhile, alert the police and the German Ministry of Magic and have them take out that Death Eater!"

There was a hurried conversation on the other end of the line, followed by some swearing. Finally, the general came back and he sounded horrified.

"We think we've found the bomb, sir. It's in the air right now, and it's heading towards Atlantis on a Luftwaffe bombing run. The chancellor has apparently convinced someone that Atlantis is a Voldemort base and that it needs to be neutralized using any means possible. Sir, this is not good. If Atlantis is destroyed, the Death Eaters win and we've likely got World War III. Even worse, a bomb that big will likely take out several surface ships and a British nuclear submarine. NATO is going to fall to pieces."

Clinton growled angrily. He had thought that having Voldemort around was bad enough. It hadn't occurred to him what would happen if Voldemort were to die and lose all control over his underlings! "Shit. Tell all of those surface ships protecting Atlantis to keep those bombers away from the city! Do it, now! And send some of your own planes into the air to chase them down! Something carrying a weapon that large can't fly all that quickly, I'd suspect. Tell them it's a rogue launch! If the Germans shoot down their own aircraft, we might get away without antagonizing the rest of NATO!"

"Yes, sir!"

--------------------

1431Z -- 00:29:00 TO TIME ZERO
Outside the Quabbin Reservoir
Massachusetts

"Good God! What the hell is THAT?"

Jared O'Rourke, who had been guarding the reservoir with thousands of other troops, spun and shouted and pointed at the water behind him. For decades, the part of the lake behind him had been hiding the hidden Wizarding town of Dana. All that was left of Dana, as far as O'Rourke could tell, were thousands of skeletons and a few wrecked buildings.

However, it appeared that something had survived. What else could explain a whole section of the reservoir suddenly glowing with an eerie blue light?

The blue light brightened and became more distinct, as if something was rising out of the depths. Finally, it broke the surface, and everyone had to cover their eyes.
It was a huge ball of energy as bright as the sun. O'Rourke had never seen anything like it before. Some people fired their guns at it, but the weapons had no effect. He watched as the object floated higher and higher into the air. At an altitude of about a mile, it suddenly flared red and began pulsing. Strange symbols which looked like wedges -- looking almost like ancient cuneiform writing -- began floating in the air above it, changing each time the object pulsed. The pulses seemed to be occurring about once per second. Most of the pulses were accompanied by removals of wedges from one of the ends of the symbol.

O'Rourke shuddered for a moment. That slow and steady removal of wedges looked a hell of a lot like a countdown.

The man next to him activated his intercom and began reporting the anomaly to his supervisor. It looked like the lost town of Dana still had one more card to play.

-------------------

1432Z -- 00:28:00 TO TIME ZERO
US Washington Battle Group
-------------------

The coalition of ships surrounding Atlantis was screaming curses and orders in unison. About sixty seconds ago, a huge ball of blue light had emerged from Atlantis and started rising majestically into the air. It suddenly burned red and began pulsing.

This ball was a good four kilometers across. Everyone in the eastern Mediterranean would probably be able to see it, given its altitude and distance.

-------------------

1433Z -- 00:27:00 TO TIME ZERO
Above the Mediterranean
-------------------

Maximilian Kluge stared in disbelief at the horizon. Several malevolent red globes of light were visible from his cruising altitude of 35,000 feet. They were all pulsing in unison and seemed to be situated in different countries. The largest one of all, towering a good two miles over the others, was the one hovering above Atlantis.

Was Atlantis mounting a defense against him? Did the wizards know he was planning on attacking them?

Suddenly, his radio activated. Wondering what was going on, he activated the speaker.

"Kluge, get the hell out of there! We have reason to believe that the chancellor's been Imperiused, and that Daisy Cutter you guys are toting around was NOT, I repeat NOT, authorized for this mission! Abort the mission! I repeat, abort the mission! That's an order! Attacking Atlantis is exactly what the Death Eaters want you to do! If Atlantis is destroyed, the Death Eaters win and likely trigger nuclear war!"

Kluge breathed a sigh of relief. No one would have to die today by his hand. Looking around the sky at the weird balls of red light, he toggled the intercom.

"Acknowledged, sir. Returning to base."

-------------------

1436Z -- 00:24:00 TO TIME ZERO
Sanders Household
Prescott, Arizona
-------------------
Sanders watched the news along with a whole gaggle of wizards and reporters. Virtually every single news station was covering the strange balls of light rising from the various Ministries of Magic all over the world. His jaw dropped when the station broadcast Dialonis's report about the Judgment Day protocol from inside the fabled city of Atlantis.

The wizards in the room stared at each other. Finally, Strong Bear shook his head and said, "Judgment Day. God help us all!"

-------------------
1437Z -- 00:23:00 TO TIME ZERO
Ministry of Magic
Brobdingnag
-------------------
Prime Minister Tolivan wasn't getting very far in keeping the civilians under control. One of the problems of living in a land where you're basically bigger than everything else is that you're not accustomed to things bigger than you attacking you.

Riots broke out in the light of the blazing new red sun. Tolivan immediately ordered riot control brigades over deal with the problem.

-------------------
1438Z -- 00:22:00 TO TIME ZERO
St. Peter's Basilica
-------------------
Suleiman, Celestine, Urban, the Dalai Lama, and John Paul II were leading the world in an impromptu interfaith prayer service. Unfortunately, not many people were paying attention because most of the news broadcasts were covering the red balls, nuclear explosions, and activity around Atlantis.

Pulsing red light flared into the courtyard, bathing the members of the congregation in an aura the color of blood.

-------------------
1439Z -- 00:21:00 TO TIME ZERO
New Delhi
India
-------------------
Elaiyaraja Prabakaran ordered all of the Death Eaters to stop celebrating as soon as the blazing red sun rose into the sky above New Delhi. Most of the people didn't know exactly what it was. However, having Imperiused and Legilimensed the Indian Minister of Magic, he knew exactly what it meant.

His eyes suddenly widened in horror. He turned to the Death Eaters around him with a frantic expression on his face.

"Dialonis has declared Judgment Day! Yes, Judgment Day!"

The Death Eaters stopped waving their wands -- abruptly as realization dawned on them. They had heard stories of Judgment Day and legends about what wizards tended to do during Judgment Day -- and the types of people that they tended to do it to.

Prabakaran could only say one word. "RUN!"

The wizards needed no encouragement. They started Apparating out of the Ministry of Magic and New Delhi, trying to spread out so at least one of them would be able to restart the cell.
Ten minutes later, the Indian government and Ministry of Magic were back in Indian hands. Five minutes later, half of the Indian wizards were chasing the Death Eaters while the others were fishing out their Time-Turners.

-------------------
1442Z -- 00:18:00 TO TIME ZERO
Atlantis
-------------------
Alarms hooted as people ran like maniacs throughout the city. The four keyholders raced down to the cellar, in a room which had not been entered for millennia. The keys turned in unison once more, and the door opened. Blowing dust out of his face, Dialonis reached for the boxes of Time-Turners and began passing them around.

-------------------
1444Z -- 00:16:00 TO TIME ZERO
St. Lawrence River
Between Ogdensburg and Montreal
-------------------
Ferocious storm clouds began rising in the path of the fallout from the Ogdensburg and New York City blasts. Something needed to get the fallout to rain out of the sky as quickly as possible. Meanwhile, in Ottawa, Jesper Etoile nearly collapsed from exhaustion.

-------------------
Westboro, Kansas
-------------------
Civil war had broken out in the founding chapter of America for Humans. Half of the members had suddenly started voicing their support for Dialonis. That was all that it had taken.

-------------------
1445Z -- 00:15:00 TO TIME ZERO
Granger and Granger Dental Associates
London
-------------------
Hermione Granger was no longer alone. Wizards from all over Europe were converging on London to help out with the radiation. Hundreds of thousands of X-ray vests with the Granger and Granger logo were being distributed all over the stricken city. For the first time since the bomb had gone off, Hermione was able to relax -- and immediately collapsed from the relief. She stayed awake long enough, however, for no fewer than seven people to recommend her for the Order of Merlin, First Class.

-------------------
1446Z -- 00:14:00 TO TIME ZERO
Tel Aviv Rescue Headquarters
-------------------
The captured Hamas wizard, still sobbing, pointed to the location on the map. "That's it, Minister Oved. That's the location of combined Hamas/al-Qaeda base. Here's the password to get in. Now that Voldemort's dead, I'm a Secret-Keeper, so I can tell you this. Koury cannot be allowed to detonate any more nuclear weapons."

1446Z
Thursday, June 20, 1996 -- 00:14:00 TO TIME ZERO
Near Cornwall, Ontario
Canada
-------------------
Next PoV: 233 - Ask Fake Name Generator. THIS IS IT! You've probably been waiting for this moment for a LONG time...let's hope I can make it worthwhile!
Jelena Kurchatova could barely see. The radiation suit obstructed her peripheral vision, and the fact that she wasn't particularly tall made it so that she couldn't see over the heads of the other wizards controlling the storm. As if that hadn't been bad enough, the clouds were so black and the rain was coming down so heavily that there were times when she was lucky to see a quarter of a mile through the downpour.

The fallout was coming out, all right. Leaves were starting to fall off trees, and the plants were starting to turn brown. All of the people in the area had been Apparated into shelters in the area or out of harm's way before the operation had begun, so no human lives were at risk. She wasn't sure where exactly all of this contaminated water was going to go, but she figured that Radner knew what he was doing.

1447Z -- 00:13:00 TO TIME ZERO
Long Island Sound

Thunder nearly deafened Guinevere as she continued to help wringing every single piece of radioactive material out of the air. The scene looked like something right out of the Noah's Ark story, and dead fish were popping up all around the boat. She just hoped that the containment boom would keep all of the radioactive water from leaking out into the ecosystem.

1448Z -- 00:12:00 TO TIME ZERO
Air Force One

Clinton was screaming into the microphone and trying to shove aides out of the way at the same time. "That's right! Call off the missile strike against Cuba, and tell Yeltsin we've relented! Get out of the way and let the wizards handle it! Judging from those damn flaming orbs flying all over the place, they've probably got something really big planned!"

He looked out the window and thought he could see the fiery red ball over Chicago off in the distance.

1449Z -- 00:11:00 TO TIME ZERO
Tel Aviv Rescue Command Center

The Hamas wizard shook his head. "I'm sorry, Minister Oved. I can't do it. It would be hypocritical for me to send one of the nuclear weapons back at Koury's base after I've seen the horrors one of these things can unleash. Had the base been on an isolated mountaintop somewhere, then I'd considered. However, it's in a city, so I can't detonate the bomb without killing thousands of civilians. Besides, there are people there who are focusing more on the civilian side of Hamas -- social welfare and that type of stuff. It would be inappropriate to kill them off with the wizards."
Michal Oved nodded and turned to Netanyahu. "All right. I guess we'll have to go back to the original plan. Bibi, call off the nuclear strike against Pyongyang -- the city's been already hit with two bombs anyway, so there isn't much left to destroy -- and let the Atlanteans clean everything up when it comes to al-Qaeda and Hamas. From what I've heard of Judgment Day, this is going to be something people will be writing about for millennia to come. I think our services would be better spent helping the people of Tel Aviv and Haifa."

Netanyahu nodded. "I agree -- make it so. How much more time do we have until that damn ball overhead lets loose?"

"Ten minutes, forty-two seconds."

"Is there anything we should do to warn the citizens? Do they need to get underground at all?"

Michal Oved shook her head. "No, sir. It will be harmless to all Muggles."

"What about wizards?"

Michal put up a sly smile. "When those things go off, they'll generate a magical EMP which will disable all wands not registered to the worldwide Ministries of Magic for thirty minutes. The wizards themselves won't be harmed by the EMP, of course. However, the Dark wizards are going to find it quite difficult to defend themselves when their wands suddenly stop working."

The red sun glowed overhead, cuneiform numerals flickering and pulsating.

-----------------

1451Z -- 00:09:00 TO TIME ZERO
Muslims for Humans Safe House
Pakistan
-----------------

The vote was unanimous. The chapter agreed to stop agitating for an attack against the wizards in charge of India. Although they still weren't particularly happy that the Indians controlled too much of Kashmir, they didn't want to get in the way when the entire world was going nuts. Besides, a government of Muggles was far preferable to one of wizards.

-----------------

1452Z -- 00:08:00 TO TIME ZERO
South Florida
-----------------

Lee Mozes was stuck in traffic on I-95 trying to get out of what was left of Miami. Thankfully, the wind direction had blown the fallout out to sea. However, she hadn't gotten the luck she needed in getting out of the bombed city.

The cars stretched on before her. Twenty minutes ago, a woman wearing a robe had appeared on television and told everyone to head for the light -- namely, the giant red ball hovering over the Ocala National Forest. The wizards in the forest were busy preparing emergency shelters for people whose homes had been destroyed in Miami.

She wondered how long it would take to get over there. Magic would come in pretty handy here, but she doubted that the government had enough wizards to go around to take care of a simple traffic jam like this.

-----------------

1453Z -- 00:07:00 TO TIME ZERO
The rain was coming down so hard that the people huddled in the shelter could hear it coming down even from inside the shelter. An ominous, pulsating red light crept in through the crack in the wall of the shelter.

There was a flash, and a robed man entered the shelter. He explained that everything was under control, and that the evil wizards would be dealt with in a matter of minutes. He told everyone to stay put until he gave the all-clear, duplicated some of the dwindling foodstuffs and energy supplies, cast a spell to prevent radiation from entering the shelter, and disappeared.

1454Z -- 00:06:00 TO TIME ZERO
Half Moon Cay
Bahamas

The chaplain of the m/s Noordam asked everyone to bow their heads in a moment of silent prayer. The television in the snack bar on the island started reporting that the red orbs' pulsations had begun to increase in intensity and that there were six minutes left on the clock.

1455Z -- 00:05:00 TO TIME ZERO
Chicago Wizarding Institute

It wasn't hard to find the Chicago Wizarding Institute. It was right under the glowing red ball, and the wizards had removed the spell hiding it from the Muggles for the duration of the emergency.

Eric Street barked an order, and a good two thirds of Wizarding Services Corporation began offering their assistance to help with the crisis. Cats were left in trees, rooms were left dirty, and DeLorean Chrononauts were left half-built on the assembly line.

Meanwhile, Auror Francesca Murray threw a Time-Turner around her neck and prepared herself to join the fray.

1456Z -- 00:04:00 TO TIME ZERO
Ukraine

Grigori Rasputin felt VERY relieved that he hadn't gotten involved. He was a strong wizard, but there was no way he was going to survive a Judgment Day.

Thank God no one knew about him. Yet.

1457Z -- 00:03:00 TO TIME ZERO
63 SBN Doormanweg
Curacao
Netherlands Antilles

I had seen some strange things before. However, I never thought I'd see anything like this. Right at the bottom of the hour, all of the lights in the house had flickered off and the TV shorted out. Suddenly, the entire living room had been surrounded by a vibrant blue glow. It had felt warm on my face.
The glow had abruptly vanished, and by the time my eyes had cleared, I had looked around the room. Everyone had stared at each other, confused. Then my sister had pointed outside, where the porch was being illuminated by a bright blue light.

We had all run outside and realized that the blue light which had surrounded us had risen into the sky. As we watched, it had turned red and begun flashing.

About twenty-five minutes had gone by since the ball had appeared. Lots of people had gotten out of their cars and were staring up at the odd sight. That was when an oddly-dressed man walked out of the little shed in my grandfather's backyard. He seemed to be dressed like a wizard. Had there been a Wizarding hideout in my grandfather's backyard?

The wizard came over to me and shook my hand. "Good morning, Mr. Capriles. I apologize for the inconvenience, but this is urgent. You see, we've got one of the secret entrances to the Dutch Antilles annex of the Ministry of Magic here, and that's where this ball is coming from. We'll be done with it shortly."

I was barely able to stammer out that I was Mr. Capriles's grandson.

--------------------
1459Z -- 00:01:00 TO TIME ZERO
Atlantis
--------------------
Cameras flashed everywhere. The symbols hovering above the control panel had dropped down to one set of cuneiform scratches. Sixty seconds to go.

The conference room was filled with wizards with hourglasses around their necks. The Time-Turners glowed brightly, and many of the reporters couldn't even focus their cameras on them.

Dialonis was on his knees, praying. Finally, with ten seconds left, he stood.

"God speed, ladies and gentlemen, and may God forgive us for what we are about to do."

The countdown continued as the reporters filmed every moment.

Four scratches, three scratches, two scratches, one scratch.

Zero.

Wild cuneiform scribblings flared in the air, and the Time-Turner-wearing wizards disappeared.

Time Zero had arrived, and the First Age of Mankind had come to an end.

To be continued...

--------------------
Update #233
--------------------
1459Z
Thursday, June 20, 1996 -- 00:00:24 TO TIME ZERO
Judgment Day Command Center
Atlantis
--------------------
Next PoV: 233.2 - Ask Fake Name Generator
ATLANTIS ALERT STATUS: JUDGMENT DAY

Dan Rather had to force himself to remain calm as he spoke into the microphone. "There are less than thirty seconds left now -- look at the timer on the bottom of your screen, and the crowd is getting increasingly excited. There must be at least five hundred wizards with those hourglass necklaces around their necks, all standing at full attention, and all of them are staring up at the Grand Mugwump. Fifteen seconds to go. You can see Dialonis addressing the wizards in the other room. You can't hear it well over the microphone, but he's wishing them godspeed and is hoping that the Almighty will forgive them for anything they have to do today. Five, four, three, two, one!"

There was a blinding flash of light, and the entire crowd gasped in shock. Rather was shoved aside for a moment and had to ask some of the people who had stayed behind to get out of the way so he could continue with a report. "They've all started glowing -- good lord, they've vanished! Where did they all go? They -- oh, now there's another flash! The wizards are back, I repeat the wizards are back! I'd say there are at a couple of hundred men in there, and they're talking to ghostly images of animals. They seem to be arranged in neat lines for the most part, with a few dozen people out of position, slightly behind the man in front of them.

"I think I see Dialonis there in the front. Looks like he's going to be in charge of this operation. Behind him is..."

Rather's eyes suddenly bulged. What he was seeing was impossible. He had to struggle to continue reporting impartially.

"Good God, this is unbelievable! We appear to have two Dialonises here! What's even more amazing is that Dialonis appears to be talking to...himself! Ladies and gentlemen, this is magic at its very best! I doubt even Houdini could mimic this feat! At any rate, on the right side of the room we have Dialonis talking with...himself. Next to him is...good lord, a THIRD Dialonis! That's three Dialonises! In fact, now that I look around the room, it seems that ALL of these people are clones of the Grand Mugwump! This is sensational! The clones are talking to the ghosts in front of them and to their brothers! If this isn't --"

There was another, much smaller flash. Rather turned to look at the source and continued his reporting. "There's been another flash, and it looks like one of the Dialonises has disappeared. I don't know where he went, but let's hope he's safe. Now -- hold on, one the clones next to the man who vanished is pulling that hourglass necklace out of his robe. It looks like this particular clone has finished talking with the ghostly image, as that ghost appears to have vanished. He appears to be doing something with the pendant, perhaps fiddling with the hourglass and -- good God, he just disappeared! What a marvel! Now we have several more clones holding their pendants as well, and they've all vanished as well. I'd say we're down to maybe 170 people at this point, and there are still more flashes going on as the Dialonises start reaching for their hourglasses."

Rather suddenly heard a stampede behind him and turned to see the BBC crew trying to trample their way towards the front to see what was going on. The wizards who had stayed behind tried to calm everybody down. Rather was forced to ask one of his associate cameramen to cover the altercation. By the time he had brought is attention back to the main hall, there were only ninety or so Dialonises left.

By 1525Z -- a scant twenty-five minutes after the start of the operation -- all of the Dialonises were gone except for two. One of them reached for his necklace and vanished. This left one man standing in the center of the room.

- - - - - - - -
Rather continued his report. "We're back down to one Dialonis now. I don't know if he's the original, but whoever he is, he looks exhausted. Now he appears he's motioning to the wizards in back room, and they're running out to with chairs and cushions. Dialonis is stumbling over to the cushions, and -- he just collapsed. The wizards -- who I assume are doctors or nurses -- appear to be huddling around him, and I can't see anything right now. In fact, I can barely hear anything given the excited murmuring of the crowd. Let's see if anyone here can explain what is happening."

He looked around and headed for the nearest witch. "Excuse me, madame. What is going on over there?"

The witch shook her head. "I'm not sure. However, I suspect he's receiving medical treatment or a brief pick-me-up. He just did a lot of work, after all."

"Is this the original Dialonis, or one of the copies?"

The witch smiled. "There were no copies of Dialonis. There was only one."

Rather couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Only one copy? Then where did the others come from?"

The witch's smile broadened. "Time travel, sir. I believe your culture has a movie called Back to the Future where someone travels through time and makes multiple copies of himself?"

Rather was about to ask the witch more when there was an uproar at the front of the room. He turned and saw an extremely tired Dialonis entering the room. The man was immediately barraged by questions. Dialonis nodded and spoke simply three words."

"It is done."

The reporters tried to press him for more information, but the wizards whisked the Grand Mugwump away before they could get any questions off.

------------------

Five, four, three, two, one, zero.

The wizards' Time-Turners activated, leaving Dialonis alone in the room. He wasn't alone for long, however. Less than five seconds after the wizards' departure, a sheep Patronus suddenly materialized in front of him.

The sheep spoke to him. "Sir, we've got a problem. The Death Eater in charge of Germany is threatening to detonate a nuclear weapon in Berlin if we don't let him go. Is the weapon there, or is this another bluff?"

Dialonis didn't know the answer...yet. However, his future self might, as the wizards got more information in to him. Sure enough, he felt a tap on the back. He turned around and saw himself looking at him.

His doppelganger shook his(!!) head. "He doesn't have a nuke. We sent someone over to check out the site and it's all a bluff. You can get rid of him."

Dialonis nodded and turned back to the sheep. "The man is bluffing. Neutralize him and make him tell you everything he knows."
The sheep nodded and vanished. One crisis solved. However, there would be more. Armed with this new information, he walked a few feet away from his original position and activated the Time-Turner.

There was a flash, and the Time-Turner brought him back to Time Zero. The reporters were once again taking photographs as if there were no tomorrow. He found himself face-to-face with a pig Patronus. Next to the pig, on Dialonis's right, was a copy of himself talking to a sheep.

The pig started complaining that Arif Koury was being a pain in the neck. Dialonis told the pig to kill Koury if the Death Eater proved intractable. The pig saluted -- somehow -- and vanished. Satisfied, Dialonis moved over one more position, activated the Time-Turner once more and returned to Time Zero.

Two down, God knew how many to go.

-------------
1500Z
Thursday, June 20, 1996 -- TIME ZERO
Mediterranean Sea
US Washington Battle Group
-------------
Next PoV: 233.5 - Ask Fake Name Generator
-------------
ATLANTIS ALERT STATUS: JUDGMENT DAY
-------------
The pulsating red ball which had been hovering over the now-submerged city had begun to glow brighter and brighter as the end of the countdown approached. The captain had ordered all of his men belowdecks, concerned that whatever that thing was going to do wasn't going to be good for his crew.

The clock hit 1500Z, 11 AM Eastern Daylight Time. There was only time for one chime to sound before the world blew up.

The ball pulsed one last time and suddenly exploded noiselessly. He was shocked as he witnessed a visible blast wave speeding through the air far faster than the speed of sound. Within less than a second, it had disappeared over the horizon.

The captain had no idea what the ball had done. However, whatever it had done had not harmed himself, his ship, or his crew. He could not help but be impressed. Dialonis had managed to harness a tremendous amount of energy yet release it in a way which would not cause any collateral damage.

He had ordered most of his ships into a protected harbor where they would be able to ride out any tsunami or shock wave triggered by the red sphere in the sky. He, unfortunately, was ultimately responsible for the safety of his fleet and would have to watch the explosion to alert the crew that it was safe for them to come out.

The size of those balls seemed to indicate that this was one hell of an operation. The captain could just hope that it had taken out all of the nuclear terrorists and all of the remaining servants of Voldemort.
-------------
Al-Qaeda Headquarters
Arif Koury had been busy planning his next attack -- a mini-nuke against Paris -- when there was tremendous flash and the entire room erupted into flame. As if that had not been bad enough, his wand had suddenly jerked as if it had been hit with an electric shock. He dropped the wand in surprise, then hurriedly picked it up when he saw that the room had turned into a nightmare.

Everywhere around him, he saw images of himself being consumed in flame. He saw his eyes melting out of their sockets, reforming, and melting again. He screamed in horror and brandished his wand in front of him. Someone here had to be casting a spell, and he had to stop it.

He never got a chance to cast it as a booming voice roared "Expelliarmus". Koury tried to cast a Protego spell, but for some reason the wand just flared a couple of blue sparks and did nothing. This left him open to the Expelliarmus, and the wand flew out of his hand -- along with a hand grenade, a gun, and a knife. Koury's jaw dropped -- he didn't know that Expelliarmus got rid of Muggle weapons as well!

The man who had cast the Expelliarmus spoke in a voice which seemed have come from the mouth of God. The word "Imperio" cut through the air, and Koury's mind suddenly went blank. He suddenly decided that drinking the Veritaserum was an awfully good idea, and before he realized what he was doing he had consumed the truth-telling potion.

The voice ordered him to sit down as he looked wildly around the room. He found himself on the floor before he even noticed it. He could see none of the other Death Eaters, only nightmarishly deformed images of himself. Why weren't they helping him? And how did the Atlanteans manage to break his Fidelius?

The voice lost some of its rancor. "Thank you, Mr. Koury. Now, we'd like to ask you a few questions. First, we'd like the names of everyone who reports to you, and we'd like the locations of the remaining uranium balls. Tell them to us, and do it NOW. Imperio!"

Koury, slack-jawed, started running off the list of names and sites. Something deep down inside him told him that wasn't a good idea, however. Midway through the list, he realized what was going on. Gathering willpower he didn't even know he had, he somehow managed to overcome both the Imperius Charm and the truth-telling potion. Glaring in the speaker's general direction and forcing himself not to flinch at the horror, he hissed and shook his head. "That's all for you, swine. I'm not falling victim to the Imperius/Veritaserum trick! I'm not as weak-minded as some people!"

He heard voices start speaking urgently and quietly to each other. Somewhere in the background he heard two of his Death Eater comrades screaming. He had a brief glimpse of a Patronus -- a pig, of course, the man was obviously a swine -- disappearing into the air.

That was when the same voice suddenly burst from behind him and shouted two words. "Avada Kedavra!"

Koury blinked. How could this man be in two --

The flash from the Apparation disappeared, and Heydar Dagher cast the Disarmament spell on Arif Koury at the same time that Dagher's doppelganger materialized behind the powerful Death Eater with a wand pointing at the man's back.
Koury tried to defend himself with a Protego spell, but the man's wand had been shorted out by the magical EMP triggered by the exploding balls and did not work properly. The Expelliarmus hit home, and weapons of all sorts landed on the floor in front of Koury. Being careful not to interfere with his doppelganger's work, Dagher watched as his clone cast a spell to Accio Koury's weapons to safety.

Relieved that the EMP had worked, Dagher breathed a sigh of relief. However, the encounter was far from over. Although Dagher could hear the remaining wizards disarming the Death Eaters in the same way he had disarmed Koury, there was still a lot of work to do.

Dagher needed to know where Koury had sent all his nuclear weapons and underlings. The goal was to dismantle al-Qaeda from the top down, interrogating each level one at a time and sending time travel doppelgangers back to Time Zero in each of those locations so that all of the members of al-Qaeda could be picked up in unison, without time to warn each other.

He stared hard at Koury. "Thank you, Mr. Koury. Now, we'd like to ask you a few questions. First, we'd like the names of everyone who reports to you, Muggle and wizard, and we'd like the locations of the remaining uranium balls. Tell them to us, and do it NOW. Imperio!"

Koury started rattling off some names and locations, and the man next to him started taking notes in rapid shorthand. Dagher was amazed at how extensive the al-Qaeda infrastructure had been. It would take a while to get everyone. From the perspective of the world, it would take less than half an hour. From the perspective of an individual wizard participating in the Death Eater operations, it could take hours of subjective time, perhaps days.

Koury had divulged a good parchment and a half of secrets before he realized what he was doing. Furious, he shook his head to clear it and glared at Dagher. "That's all for you, swine. I'm not falling victim to the Imperius/Veritaserum trick! I'm not as weak-minded as some people!"

Dagher frowned. He had been afraid of this. Worried, he told the man who had been taking notes to cover him as he sent a Patronus, a pig, to Dialonis to ask what to do with Koury. He had never understood why he, as a Muslim, had managed to have an unclean animal as a Patronus. Maybe Allah had a sense of humor.

A minute or so later, the Patronus returned and recommended that Koury be killed if he proved intractable. Nodding in satisfaction, and making sure the note taker was still covering him, he moved behind Koury and activated his Time-Turner to go back to Time Zero. Perhaps he would be able to kill the Death Eater while Koury was busy dealing with Dagher's first incarnation.

Everything went off without a hitch, and the Death Eater was caught completely off guard by the Avada Kedavra beam. However, just as a precaution, he grabbed Koury's weapons using Accio spells before casting the spell on him. He really didn't want one of those weapons -- especially the Muggle ones -- suddenly do something strange when Koury was attacked. Thankfully, the weapons remained inert as the Death Eater fell to the floor, dead.

The Dagher next to the note taker walked around in his direction, brought out his Time-Turner, and disappeared. With the doppelganger out of the way, Dagher told the note taker to get this information to Dialonis and to start having Atlanteans track down the locations and people on the list as soon as possible.

----------

1500Z
The Caterwauling Charm went off, and Minister of Magic Aditya Gurumurthy spun to see what had happened. The pitch of the tone indicated that it had come from a district a few kilometers away. He checked the map of that area, and the dot on the map indicated the point at which the alarm had been triggered.

Well, well, well, he thought. It looks like somebody didn't manage to Apparate out in time. The bad guy wasn't going anywhere now, he thought. One of the first things he had done as soon as Time Zero had arrived was to raise an Apparation Interdictor across most of the big cities which would allow only members of the Ministry of Magic -- or people with Atlantis rings -- to Apparate.

He donned his Invisibility Cloak and Apparated over to the location identified on the map. Sure enough, there was a man staring at his wand and shaking it as if something was wrong with it. Gurumurthy understood immediately what had happened: the suspect had tried to Apparate, failed, and tried doing something with his wand to figure out what was going on. The wand, of course, had also failed, and he was busy trying to play with it to see what had happened. Suddenly, he looked into the shadows down the street and started running in that direction.

Gurumurthy smiled. Looks like he'd bagged himself a Death Eater. The suspect was in his mid-thirties and had a thick, bushy mustache. He sent a Patronus over to Atlantis and told them to send over an Atlantean to determine the man's intentions. If the suspect was spooked by his reflection on the surface of the Atlantean's defensive bubble, the man was obviously evil. Dialonis said that he'd have one of the reserve wizards head over there at Time Zero. Gurumurthy chuckled -- this meant that the Atlantean had likely already been there at the time the Caterwauling Charm had gone off.

The Minister of Magic brought out his wand and prepared for combat. He was prepared to do more or less anything at this point to help bring down the Death Eaters who had taken over the government temporarily. What happened next, however, was completely unexpected.

The suspect suddenly emerged from the shadowy alley, talking to the Atlantean. The man didn't seem scared at all, and the Atlantean wasn't even pointing his wand at him. If anything, the Atlantean was trying to keep the fellow covered by his bubble!

Gurumurthy winced and put his hands on his head. The man had been a civilian, and he'd seen the glow of the Atlantis bubble in the alley and run to the Atlantean for help. He could hear the two men speaking as they got closer, and the Atlantean was saying that he would do what he could to make sure he and his wife didn't get hurt.

The Atlantean turned to Gurumurthy and shook his head. "False alarm. This man is a civilian -- he's a potioneer. He apparently didn't realize that we'd put up the interdict."

Gurumurthy blushed in embarrassment as the man rolled up his sleeve to show that he did not have the Dark Mark tattooed on it. The Minister of Magic apologized profusely and was about to offer the man some monetary compensation when someone cried out further down the alley. All three men
turned to look down the alley and saw a man with a horrified expression on his face. The man was wearing a robe, and pointing wildly at his wand. He was saying that his wand wasn't working and needed to borrow someone else's.

The Atlantean looked sharply at Gurumurthy. The man may have had an EMP'ed wand, but the horror on the man's face when he had first seen the Atlantean was a smoking gun. Telling both men to get behind him, the Atlantean started walking down the alley towards the new suspect.

The suspect soon realized that the authorities realized he was a Death Eater. He tried to Apparate again and failed. Finally, he started running down the alley, away from the Atlanteans.

The Atlantean whirled, produced a Patronus, and sent it on its way. Seconds later, the running man suddenly stopped in his tracks and put his hands up. Gurumurthy instantly realized what the Atlantean had done: he had told Dialonis to send backup over to this location at Time Zero to get into position at the end of the alley and make sure the man didn't escape when he started running away. The help had hidden in the shadows from Time Zero until now and just walked into the open as soon as the man began running. The man was now trapped in the alley.

Gurumurthy shot a hard look at the Atlantean. "This fellow is mine. He and his friends took over my government and Imperiused half my men!"

The Atlantean nodded and brought out his wand. A Petrificus Totalus hit the man in the back, and he toppled to the ground like a felled tree. The two Atlanteans converged on him, forced his mouth open, and poured in some Veritaserum. They then forced him to swallow it and pointed both their wands at him. Gurumurthy and the civilian watched from behind the Atlantean's protective bubble.

The potioneer looked at the prisoner and grunted in satisfaction. "This is the man who was bullying me around and scaring me. That's what made me try to Apparate away from him. I thought I'd manage to lose him."

The second Atlantean waved his wand, woke the man up, and began the interrogation. "All right, friend. Roll up your sleeve and see what we've got here."

The man shook his head. "You think I'm a Death Eater? You must be crazy!"

The interrogator's eyebrows shot up. This man was smart -- he hadn't told a lie, but he hadn't told the complete truth. However, the questioner knew his profession. Lowering his wand for a moment -- not that the suspect could escape with the two bubbles blocking the alley -- he shrugged. "You know, perhaps you're right. There are probably hundreds of civilians for each Death Eater in this area -- we already picked one up here, the guy with the mustache. We apologize for bothering you, and we'll let you as soon as you make an Unbreakable Oath and swear that you have never been a Death Eater and are willing to die if you have ever joined that order."

The man's eyes widened, and he licked his lips. "Unbreakable Oaths? I don't like Unbreakable Oaths!"

The interrogator shrugged. "You can't lie with the Veritaserum, and I can't argue with your stance on the Oaths. All right, how about this? Answer me this question: have you ever been, or are you, a member of the Death Eaters?"

Gurumurthy smiled and showed the suspect his teeth. The suspect was trapped, and everyone knew it.
Finally, the suspect shrugged and rolled up his sleeve, revealing the Dark Mark. Gurumurthy immediately brought out his wand to kill the man, but the Atlanteans both raised their hands to stop him. "No, Minister. We've got to interrogate him. We need to figure out where the rest of the cell went! We've already figured out that they scattered when they found Dialonis had declared Judgment Day!"

Gurumurthy frowned. He didn't like deferring his revenge, but he couldn't fault the man's reasoning. Drawing a deep breath, he pocketed his wand as the Atlantean continued to explain that the prisoner had to betray the cell.

The suspect's eyes widened further. "I can't betray the cell! They'll kill me if I do!"

Gurumurthy showed him his wand. "We'll kill you if you don't, and we're here and they're not."

The suspect suddenly smiled shrewdly. "In that case, I won't tell you. If I'm going to die anyway, I might as well protect my friends."

The Atlantean next to Gurumurthy swore and muttered something quietly to the Minister. "This guy's smart. We're going to have to be careful. However, I think I know how to figure this out."

He turned to the suspect. "All right, how about this? You take an Unbreakable Oath to serve us and renounce Dark magic, and we will protect you from the Death Eaters. You'll also get substantial monetary compensation for your desertion. It's your choice, but I don't think you're going to get a better deal. Oh, and did I mention that the deal will expire in five seconds? Four, three --"

That did the trick. The man immediately consented to take the Unbreakable Oath, and the civilian and Gurumurthy served as witnesses. Finally, the man's shoulder slumped. "You'd better help me now, because I'm going to be hunted down and killed."

The interrogator nodded. "We will, my friend. How about if you start by telling me where the safe house is? There IS a safe house, right?"

The suspect's head nodded involuntarily. The Veritaserum was still working.

"Well, where is it?"

-----------------------------

Primary Death Eater Safe House
New Delhi
India
-----------------------------

No fewer than seventy clones of the same person materialized in the safe house at Time Zero and took everybody out. Normally, that would have been virtually impossible. However, the Death Eaters had lost their two primary means of defense, their wands and the ability to Apparate. The agents then ransacked the place looking for the membership list, code words, and the locations of other safe houses.

That was all Atlantis needed. It took a good two hundred wizards jumping back to Time Zero for hours of subjective time to round everyone up, but they eventually did it. By 1511Z, 2,431 of the Indian subcontinent's 2,438 Death Eaters had been arrested.

-----------------------------
Fidel Castro was in over his head, and for the first time in a while he half-heartedly considered going back to one of the evil wizards and having them take control of his mind again.

He had thought that dealing with the nuclear explosion outside of Havana would be bad enough. However, the panic which had followed that blast paled to what had happened when Miami was hit with its own 25 kT bomb and the Cuban Death Eaters had claimed responsibility. Clinton, of course, had gone berserk and threatened to hit Cuba with a nuke.

Thankfully, no nuke had been launched, and in all honesty Castro doubted that Clinton would actually use such a weapon against a populated area -- especially when it was obvious that the Muggles hadn't been responsible for the attack. The Cuban leader highly doubted that an evacuation of Havana would be necessary, as ordering an evacuation given the circumstances would be a recipe for disaster.

Unfortunately, all hell had broken loose when the tremendous red ball had suddenly appeared out of nowhere at the bottom of the hour and begun hovering above the city. Naturally, everyone had screamed at the "covert American weapon", and within seconds the exodus had begun. Pablo Ruiz, his Minister of Magic, tried to explain to the citizens of Havana that it would be harmless and was intended to be used against the wizards who had attacked Castro. That hadn't done any good, and the exodus continued. Castro frantically tried to call everyone back, or at least if they were to leave to not head in the direction of the nuclear blast. No one listened, however, and eventually Ruiz had had to put a force field up physically prevent the refugees from heading into the danger zone.

At the moment, Castro and Ruiz were watching a television broadcast from Atlantis. The camera was currently focusing on the control panel with the four keyholes, where bizarre, wedge-shaped symbols were flickering above it. A caption underneath the image was translating the cuneiform writing into numbers: 9:31, 9:30, 9:29...

The telephone on Castro's desk rang, and the Cuban leader picked it up. It was Bill Clinton, and Castro put it on speakerphone.

"Mr. Castro, we've decided that we're going to have the wizards take out the Death Eaters. If what Dialonis says is correct, we've got about nine more minutes before all of them are hit with something of biblical proportions. Radner here tells me that the wizards are going to be able to do what both our governments were hoping to, and do so with a hell of lot less collateral damage. As a result, we've called off the nuclear attack and recommend that you get all your people out of the way so that the wizards can do their job."

Both Cubans breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you, Mr. Clinton. I was hoping you'd be sane about this. Unfortunately, everyone here is panicking because of that damn red ball Pablo let loose over the city. They think it's some kind of American weapon."

Pablo shook his head. "It wasn't me, sir. It was Dialonis. Every Ministry of Magic automatically
releases these balls when the final 30-minute countdown starts. And yes, Dialonis is right. These balls produce magical EMP's which disable enemy wands. Muggles will not be affected in the least."

Clinton broke in over the speakerphone. "That's exactly what Radner's telling me as well. We had short-lived riots in Chicago when the CWI's ball went up, but Wizards Morgan Dresden and Francesca Murray handled that, along with a large group of members of Wizarding Services Corporation. We should be grateful for WSC's help as most of the high-ranking wizards are dealing with the nuclear fallout at this point, creating giant rainstorms to quench the fires and precipitate out the fallout before it reaches Montreal or Boston."

Castro felt much better. "It sounds like everyone is in agreement on this. All right, here's the plan. Pablo, is there anything you can do to wave your wand and calm everyone down? I want everyone back in this city."

Pablo frowned. "I doubt it, sir. They're probably spread all over the place by now. However, that ball is going to disappear in...eight minutes, forty-one seconds...and leave the city unharmed. I suspect that if Deputy Ibanez and you stand out in the open and show everyone you're all right, everyone will come back."

Castro had stared at Ruiz in surprise. "You want Rosario Ibanez to do it and not handle it yourself? That's odd. What are you going to be doing?"

In response, Ruiz showed him the hourglass around his neck. "Taking out the Death Eaters. This object is called a Time-Turner. When that countdown reaches zero, I'm going to disappear for five or ten minutes. When I come back, all of the Death Eaters infesting this island will be dead or redeemed back to the light side."

Castro stared at him skeptically. "¡Madre de Dios! You're going to find all these Death Eaters and deal with them all in a few minutes? I would expect that would take hours!"

Ruiz nodded. "You're probably right. It will take me a few hours, I suspect."

"Then how can you say you'll be back in five minutes and they'll be all converted?"

Ruiz winked. "It's magic."

The countdown continued. Clinton wished everyone luck with a couple of minutes to go and hung up. Finally, Time Zero arrived. There was a big flash, and Ruiz disappeared. Six minutes later, he returned. In his hand a was bag containing no fewer than twenty-five wands.

Castro stared at him. "What the hell? You killed twenty-five wizards in six minutes?"

Ruiz chuckled. "It took more than six minutes, sir. However, yes, we did kill off all twenty-five wizards. Cuba is now free of Death Eaters."

Castro gritted his teeth. "How can you say it took more than six minutes? You were here six minutes ago!"

In response, Ruiz showed Castro a wristwatch the Cuban leader had given him as a gift. Before Time Zero, both men's watches had read 11:59 AM. Castro looked down at his watch, which now read 12:06. His eyes widened when he looked at Ruiz's.
Minister of Magic Jorg Eichmann had a problem. He had thought that he'd be able to get away with killing off the Death Eater Imperiusing the chancellor. What he hadn't anticipated, however, was the possibility that the chancellor would shout that he'd detonate an atomic bomb in Berlin unless he was let go. There was no one else in the room, and his magical eye could not detect any invisible Death Eaters.

A big complication, only a second after he had arrived. He suddenly had an awful suspicion and summoned the chancellor's canteen to Eichmann's hand. He took one whiff. Polyjuice Potion. Horrified, he hit the impostor with a Petrificus Totalus.

This was going to be a problem. First things first -- he needed to know if this wizard did in fact have a bomb in the city. He asked one of the men near him to start looking for it. Meanwhile, he sent his Patronus -- a sheep -- over to Dialonis and asked him if the Grand Mugwump had heard anything about a bomb in Berlin.

Dialonis reported that the man was bluffing and that he could be taken out. Unfortunately, taking out this Death Eater was going to be difficult. Unless he missed his guess, the country's real chancellor was dead. Eichmann couldn't just wave his wand and bring the chancellor back! Who would replace him?

He needed to interrogate the impostor and get more information. He forced Veritaserum down the man's throat and began questioning him.

The Death Eater admitted that he had impersonated Kohl and had killed him after taking enough hairs to provide a year's worth of Polyjuice Potion. He then pointedly reminded Eichmann that people would get very suspicious if Helmut Kohl were to suddenly die, particularly during Judgment Day.

Eichmann smiled and shook his head. "Not if he has a heart attack at age 66 due to all the stress from Judgment Day. An Avada Kedavra would be very good for faking that, as your colleague Osama bin Laden found out. However, perhaps we'll spare your life if you tell us where all of your accomplices in Germany are."

The Death Eater, caught completely off guard, started to sing like a bird. Eichmann jotted down all the names and put the list in his pocket. This would be a list to start the investigation with.

Eichmann turned back to the Death Eater and smiled. "Thanks for your help, Death Eater. I've only got one more request for you."

The Death Eater cocked his head at him. "And that is?"

In response, Eichmann pointed his wand at the man's chest. Realizing what was coming, the Death Eater backed up and eventually came up against the wall.

Eichmann smiled evilly. "This request is simple. When you meet Hitler in hell, tell him one of my
Dialonis was getting tired. He estimated that he had been putting out fires and offering assistance to the Judgment Day agents for a good two hours, and he doubted he was even halfway down the line. He told the Patronus speaking with him to -- once again, Dagher's pig -- to hold on for a second when he yelled to the wizards in the neighboring room to ready some pick-me-up potions for him. He hoped that he'd get a chance to consume some of those potions at some point during the operation, but he wasn't optimistic about his chances.

The wizards nodded and immediately set to work on the potions. Hoping that he'd catch a break, he turned back to Dagher. "All right, Heydar. What's going on this time?"

When Dagher spoke, Dialonis could hear the satisfaction in his voice. "Sir, we just got the Sheikh."

Hamas Safe House
[location classified]
West Bank

The Sheikh got one glimpse of himself burning in eternal torment. He would have gotten a better view had two green beams not hit him in the chest less than a second later.

Michal Oved spat in the dead man's face. "It's about time we got the bastard. He was bad enough even before Rodolphus Lestrange tied the organization to Voldemort."

Dagher stared at her in surprise -- he hadn't expected to see her there. Delicately, he asked: "Minister, shouldn't you be helping out with Tel Aviv and Haifa? I could have handled this myself, and he wouldn't have had any obvious reason to attack me!"

Michal glared at the dead terrorist leader. "I wanted to help finish him off myself. Besides, Hamas's humanitarian wing is already helping rescue people from both Tel Aviv and Haifa. Palestinians are pouring out of the West Bank to help assist with relief efforts. Although it's too late to install a radiation-proof shield around what's left of Tel Aviv, people are Geminioing dental gowns and radiation suits by the hundreds. Would you believe that the ideas of Geminioing the dental gowns and creating radiation-proof zones was supposedly developed by a sixteen-year-old Muggle-born prodigy witch outside London?"

Dagher blinked in disbelief. "I'm not sure which sounds more far-fetched: everyone following the lead of some teenager with acne, or Hamas's people actually helping the Israelis. I suspect that simply knowing that the humanitarians were helping the Israelis would have likely killed off the Sheikh.
even before we got here! Allah take me, the entire idea of having the Saudis and Israelis working together would have probably done it all by itself!"

Michal Oved nodded. "You're probably right, Minister. At any rate, here's the update on Tel Aviv. The rain is coming down so hard now that there would have been very serious flooding had the wizards done some work to improve the sewer and irrigation systems. There are still a few stubborn fires which aren't going out, and many of the trees are dying. However, we're fairly certain now that we're going to be able to get enough fallout out of the air to prevent the contamination of cities like Nazareth."

"That's good to hear. What about Haifa?"

"There's a rain cloud up there as well, Minister. We don't have as many wizards dealing with Haifa at this point, which makes sense given the severity of the attack on Tel Aviv. However, there's some talk about the Haifa team messing with the wind direction to push all of the radiation out to sea. The Lebanese government, interestingly, is helping out as well up there."

Dagher nearly fell over in laughter. "Rodolphus Lestrange makes peace in the Middle East by allying everyone against a common foe and making everyone feel sorry for Israel! Who would have thought it?"

Michal Oved gritted her teeth. "Let's hope it stays peaceful, Minister -- we're going to have to ram peace down everyone's throat in all likelihood. At any rate, the Lebanese went up in flames once they realized Hezbollah had been infiltrated by wizards who had allied with Hamas. They immediately saw themselves as accomplices in the Tel Aviv and Haifa attacks. The fact that the radiation from Haifa was heading into Lebanon also helped, of course."

One of the Muggles who had accompanied the two wizards raised his hand. "Speaking of radiation, may I recommend that we start searching for any remaining Hamas bombs? Although they don't have any wizards anymore, those bombs could still be used as dirty weapons similar to the one that hit Haifa. I've got a Geiger counter here and think we may be able to track them."

Dagher nodded. "That's a good idea. Take the Hamas wizard -- he's sworn an Unbreakable Oath to work for us now, so you can trust him -- and have him lead you to the stash of bombs. Although most of them were in North Korea, he said that there was a backup supply in here. Once we have those bombs and finish off the rest of the terrorists associated with Hamas, we'll be all set."

The Israeli and the Muggle stepped aside as the Hamas wizard entered the room and gestured. "This way, and don't touch anything without me removing the enchantments from it first."

Dagher nodded. "That's a good plan. I'll join you momentarily after telling Dialonis we've just taken out the Sheikh."

-------------------------
Al-Qaeda Safe House
[location classified]
Afghanistan
-------------------------
Maowlawe Abasin Yousufzai held up his hand as green beams flew all over the room. "Damn it, don't kill them! Just arrest them and turn them over to Muggle authorities! They're Muggles, for crying out loud! They can't do much in jail!"

Minister of Magic Rahmat Niazi looked at the Afghan cleric. He could understand why a Muslim
holy man would be reluctant to condone killing. Unfortunately, these men were too dangerous to be kept alive. Gently, he said, "I'm sorry, Holy One, but I don't think we have much of a choice. This organization has been the bane of most of the Western world for a long time, and I think in this case lethal force may be justified. You've heard of stories of people breaking out of jail, haven't you? All we need is for one of these people to escape and everyone who is even remotely interested in terrorism will be drawn to him like a magnet."

The cleric didn't like it all that much. However, he seemed to understand the need. Muttering something about there having been already too much killing, he turned his back and tried to look intently at the far wall.

Niazi, who had no fewer than six doppelgangers of himself attacking the hideout at the same time, made fast work of the Muggles and sent information on the locations of their allies and subordinates back to Dialonis. Once that was done, he told the man with the Geiger counter to lead the way towards the world's final stash of golf-ball sized mini-nukes.

Even Niazi paled when he saw the pile of little balls: there were at least a hundred of them there. The potential for hundred nuclear explosions, or at least dirty bombs! Detonation of scarcely ten had nearly triggered the Third World War. A hundred? Allah help us!

He turned to the Imperiused and Veritaserumed Al-Qaeda operative next to him. "All right, Karam. That's all of them, right?"

The operative nodded. "That's it, Minister. That's all of them outside North Korea."

Niazi considered what to do with them. He couldn't just Evanesco them, because doing so would effectively detonate a hundred more dirty bombs. It took him a few minutes, but he eventually came up with an ingenious solution. Making sure his radiation suit was on securely, he waved his wand and conjured a lead suitcase out of thin air. He worked his magic again and watched as all of the little balls dropped into the suitcase. He then levitated the suitcase with yet a third magic spell and left the room with the the suitcase full of uranium floating merrily after him.

Yousufzai cocked his head and looked at him. "What are you going to do with all of those? Confiscate them?"

Niazi shook his head. "Nope. To be honest, though, I had thought of confiscating them at first. However, I figured that it would be more appropriate to dedicate them to a more peaceful use."

Yousufzai looked at the suitcase with suspicion. "Really? And what would that be?"

Niazi grinned. "Who here wants a new nuclear reactor?"

-------------
1500Z
Thursday, June 20, 1996 -- TIME ZERO
Slytherin Common Room
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
Great Britain
-------------
Next PoV: 235 - Bradley Shepp
-------------
ATLANTIS ALERT STATUS: JUDGMENT DAY
-------------
Draco Malfoy lifted his head from his book when he heard the door open and admitted Severus Snape and a slowly-healing Alastair Moody.

Both men seemed troubled, and Draco suspected he knew why. As far as he could tell, the cup Horcrux was still safely hidden in the lake outside of Hogwarts. Granted, he had seen people searching for it meticulously, but he knew that there was nothing anyone could do to find it without going through Voldemort for help. Draco, of course, knew where it was, having dropped it in the lake himself. However, he couldn't speak the location to anyone.

He remembered the details of the fight in Diagon Alley vividly. However, there was one noticeable exception. For some reason, he had forgotten much of the stuff which had happened in front of the vault in Gringotts. He remembered seeing an angry Snape and McGonagall dead in on the floor. The next thing he knew, he was outside the building and helping everyone clean up the mess the assault team had made in Diagon Alley.

He hadn't seen much of anyone over the past couple of days. Madam Pomfrey had looked at him and claimed that he could have been Obliviated, but he couldn't imagine Snape doing that to him. Despite all that had happened, he still respected Snape and was grateful that Voldemort had accepted his double agent role in lieu of the assassination of his housemaster.

He doubted Snape and Moody would torture him to try to determine how to extract the cup from the lake. They weren't reckless enough to do that, of course. Besides, what good would torture do if they wouldn't have been able to break through the Fidelius anyway.

What were they here for? And where was Dumbledore? Usually Dumbledore -- and sometimes even Scrimgeour -- were involved in important conversations, and judging from the look on the men's faces this was going to be a delicate, and tricky, discussion.

Snape drew a deep breath and started speaking. "Good afternoon, Draco. I hope we're not disturbing you."

Draco shook his head. "You aren't, Professor. Is something wrong?"

Snape was silent for a moment, and then turned to Moody. It was obvious he didn't want to say what he had to. Moody, however, didn't have any qualms about discussing it. Mad-Eye looked down at Draco and grinned.

"Mr. Malfoy, it's over. Voldemort and the rest of the Death Eaters are all dead. Every single one of them. Snape pressured Dumbledore to spare you because you are underage, and Dumbledore agreed."

Draco stared at Moody in contempt. "You seriously accept me to believe that? The Dark Lord is the greatest wizard of all time! Besides, he was in charge of a Muggle nation last time I checked, with my father as his deputy! How could he possibly be overthrown that quickly?"

Snape responded with two words. "Judgment Day."

Draco looked at him blankly. "Huh? What's Judgment Day?"

"Judgment Day is an emergency contingency plan available to Atlantis. It involves quite possibly the most powerful magic known to mankind, including the use of Time-Turners. Why do you think the Ministry of Magic had a Time-Turner in the building to give to Miss Granger three years ago? It was
part of a stash intended to be used in the remote chance that human civilization was threatened with extinction."

Draco snorted. "I highly doubt the Dark Lord would destroy all of humanity. His goal is to rule the Muggles, not destroy civilization!"

"That may have been the case, Draco. However, the removal of the Statute of Secrecy brought the Muggle world into the nascent Second Wizarding War. Muggles were drawn into the fight, and for the first time in the history of our species magic and technology were used in concert to produce truly monumental...yet terrifying...results."

Snape paused for a moment, then finally managed to continue. "Draco, most of central London is gone, destroyed by an extraordinarily powerful Muggle explosive device. It's not the only city, however, which has been attacked. Pyongyang has been hit. Seoul has been hit. New York. Tel Aviv."

Draco jerked back in shock. "You're lying! That's impossible! Nothing can destroy entire cities like that!"

Snape shook his head. "Look at my face, Draco. Do I look like I'm lying?"

Draco examined Snape's face further. The man looked haunted -- and horrified. Snape was almost to the point of tears. Draco had never seen him like this before in his entire career at Hogwarts. For the first time, the Hogwarts student started to feel uneasy. Had Voldemort gone too far and attained so much power that the Muggles had to resort to emergency measures to destroy him?

Moody continued. "Those weren't the only cities hit, Mr. Malfoy. Miami was also attacked. Weapons like that have also exploded in southern North Korea, near the capital of Cuba, and on the border between the United States and Canada. The death toll is estimated to be over a million people, possibly two million. The destruction of New York and London have toppled economic markets all over the world, and there are those who believe that the Muggle world is headed into an economic depression and period of extreme political instability. For all we know, England itself may be affected. All of this because of the actions of one man: Voldemort. The man who fled from death will likely go down in history as the man who killed millions of people and likely would have killed billions had it not been for the prompt, courageous work of Anastasios Dialonis."

Draco's eyes widened. As far as he knew, there weren't even two million wizards on the entire planet! The deaths of two million people, to him, seemed...inconceivable. Multiplying that by a thousand just blew his mind. Shaking his head skeptically, he said, "I don't believe you! This is impossible!"

Snape looked at Moody and nodded. He reached into his robe and pulled out a bag. Dipping his hand into the bag, he pulled out an odd garment and handed it to Draco.

Draco stared at the garment in confusion. "What is this?"

"It's called a radiation suit, Draco. We're going to take you to see the remains of London so you can witness the destruction for yourself. For your own safety, we must wear these suits to protect ourselves from harm in the attacked areas."

Increasingly troubled, Draco put on the suit. By the time he was finished, the two adults were already dressed. Nodding in approval, and warning Draco to be prepared for a shock, Snape led Draco and
Moody out of Hogwarts and off the grounds so they could Apparate to London.

What Draco saw would give him nightmares for the rest of his life. He rematerialized in a world of driving rain, punctuated by flashes of powerful lightning. All around him were ruined buildings and corpses, and everything which was still standing was very badly burned. Off in the distance, he could barely hear screams for help and howls of pain over the sound of the downpour.

Several of the walls which were still standing had odd, human shaped silhouettes of unburned material imprinted on them. He didn't know how that had happened, and in all honesty he didn't want to know. Although he couldn't tell where exactly he was due to the destruction of all of the obvious landmarks, he had the distinct impression that the Thames had widened into an oddly circular lake in this area. This lake hadn't been there before. He was sure of it. Dead fish and bloated bodies were floating in it.

Draco heard a scream behind him and spun to see a man trying to run in his direction. His body was very badly burned, and hair was falling out in droves. He asked Draco pleadingly for his radiation suit. Snape looked sharply at Moody, who nodded and hit the injured man with an Avada Kedavra. Mad-Eye had to explain to Draco that the man had been killed out of mercy, not malice. Radiation poisoning was a terrible way to die.

Draco's knees buckled, and he fell to the blackened ground. "No, Dear God, NO! Where's the Ministry? Tell them!"

Moody bored on mercilessly. "The weapon exploded in the Ministry, Draco. Virtually every single member of that organization is dead, as are the queen, heir apparent, and the Muggle Prime Minister. Albus Dumbledore will almost certainly be elevated to Minister of Magic, albeit against his will, because he's frankly the only living wizard left in Britain with the experience and wisdom to even consider for that position."

Draco looked at the man Moody had just killed and retched. He couldn't help it. Snape looked at Moody, and Moody grabbed onto Draco's arm. Seconds later, they had Apparated back to outside Hogwarts.

Snape told everyone to remove their radiation suits and destroy them. Once that was done, he put his hand on Draco's shoulder.

"I'm sorry you had to witness that, Draco. However, you needed to see for yourself. This is what happens when an evil force mixes Muggle technology mixes with wizard magic. Magic is, as you know, a tool. Combining it with technology allows for fantastic power, but that power is also morally neutral. The human race needs learn that power like this must be used for good and only for good.

"You now understand why all of the Death Eaters had to be killed. Had they been allowed to achieve their mission, Voldemort may have conquered the world only to find that every single person was dead."

Draco suddenly realized something. Trembling, he looked at Snape. "Are you going to kill me? I was elevated to Death Eater status, but I didn't get the tattoo."

Snape shook his head. "No, Draco. You are underage, and I believe that there is still good in you. I saw that you were ordered to kill me earlier, and you had the moral fiber to refuse to kill a man you saw as a friend or mentor. Use your ambition and power to serve the world instead of harm it, Draco. The Death Eater movement is dead -- you're going to have to give up on that. Living in the past is
just going to make you feel worse. Just like as at the end of the First Wizarding War, evil has turned upon itself. You are the only living Death Eater left, Draco. There is no one you need to be afraid of anymore. You can do whatever your conscience tells you now and no one will try to attack you for it."

"What will my father say?"

Moody knelt down next to Draco and spoke to him gently. "Your father's dead, son. He was killed after trying to launch a weapon similar to the one which caused the devastation in London at a city in South Korea. I'm sorry, Draco, but it's true."

This was coming at Draco way too fast, and he suddenly felt light-headed. Soon, he was surrounded by people such as Madame Pomfrey and several people from Hogsmeade. They did what they do to console him, but it did little good.

He looked pleadingly at Snape. "Where are Crabbe and Goyle?"

"They're safe, Draco. They've agreed to stop fighting. They know when enough is enough."

Draco burst into tears: he couldn't help it. "I agree as well. This is too much! This is too much! What's going to happen to me now that my parents are dead? Who will take care of me? I'm an orphan!"

Snape, astonishingly, gave Draco a hug. "I'm your godfather, Draco. From now on, you will be my son."

To be continued...

-----------------------
Update #235
---------
1502Z
Thursday, June 20, 1996
NORAD
---------
Next PoV: 236 - Bill Clinton
---------
Bradley Shepp found it difficult to keep his eyes on the console in front of him. He had to make sure that no missiles were launched or any other misbehavior took place now that the countdown had ended. However, he couldn't help but glance at the monitor displaying the broadcast from CNN every so often.

The reporter was finding it hard to keep up with everything that was going on. Right now, he was talking with Devasena Sharif, the Deputy Indian Minister of Magic.

"Good afternoon, Deputy Minister. Have I been imagining something, or have there been flashes of light popping up all around Mumbai and New Delhi for the past couple of minutes? People all over have been seeing strange flashes of green and gold ever since those balls disappeared, and one person has even reported seeing two copies of the same individual blasting a Death Eater with their wands simultaneously!"

The Indian woman spoke quickly. "I don't have much time to talk. I --"
Suddenly, she broke out in laughter and patted her necklace. "What am I saying? I've got a Time-Turner! I can always go back and make more time! With that in mind, I think I can spare you a few moments."

"Thank you, Deputy Minister. What exactly is going on here? What are all those lights, and is there any truth to the rumor that you have been able to clone yourself?"

The woman hesitated for a moment, and shrugged. "I think I can explain -- I'll always be able to go back and make sure the Death Eaters and terrorists are picked up before they can act on the information. We aren't able to clone ourselves, sir. However, this device, known as a Time-Turner, allows us to travel through time. It's only used in emergencies like this one. This allows multiple copies of ourselves to exist simultaneously. It's very much like the scenes from Back to the Future where Marty McFly encounters his alternate self and takes care not to interact with himself."

"That's amazing! You're using these devices send other copies of yourself back in time to help round up Death Eaters, ensure the element of surprise, and enhance your manpower?"

"Correct. We take care to not interfere with our doppelgangers, as we call them. And the Death Eaters can't kill us during this mission because of the protective barrier you see around me. Besides, those big red balls you saw deactivated most of the world's wands for thirty minutes when they exploded. They're magical EMP devices."

"Are time paradoxes which can destroy the universe possible then?"

Sharif laughed again. "You've been watching too many science fiction movies, sir. Time paradoxes are possible, but they kill the time traveler at the instant he first activates the Time-Turner. This spares the world from the ripple effects of the paradox. That's why Time-Turners aren't used except in emergencies. In this case, however, the Grand Mugwump has determined that the threat to humanity is extreme enough to authorize the use of Time-Turners."

"I see. Do you think you're going to be able to get all of these evil wizards?"

"I'm fairly certain we'll be able to get them all, sir. After all, we have all the time in the world thanks to these Time-Turners. Not only that, we're going to be arresting every single member of al-Qaeda and reduce Hamas to their humanitarian divisions. We're also planning on confiscating all nuclear material left in the terrorists' hands."

"Hamas does humanitarian work?"

"Yes. Although they're best known for their attacks on Israel, they also do a lot of work helping improve the lives of the Palestinian people as a whole. Now, if you would excuse me, I've got more work to do. If you want, you can see me activate my Time-Turner."

The camera backed off as the woman pulled her hourglass necklace out of her robe, played with it for a minute, and tapped the hourglass. There was a big flash, and she disappeared.

Shepp whistled. If the wizards had the ability to travel through time and catch people by surprise, they might be able to pull this off in a matter of minutes, perhaps even seconds. For all he knew, the Death Eaters had already been rounded up.

He prayed that none of the wizards was named Biff Tannen. If people started abusing those Time-Turners...
Michael Heseltine -- who had been whisked by a wizard to the Royal Lodge so he could be with Prince Andrew -- listened attentively to the most recent reports.

"The fires are almost out in London now, sir. The deluge is knocking down the fallout and dousing the flames at the same time. I can't believe this, but I suspect that we'll be able to discontinue the fallout emergency beyond maybe 15 miles from London. People closer in, however, and downstream on the Thames will still need to be careful, however."

The PM whistled. "That's good news. How many people were killed?"

"We're guessing 200,000 dead immediately, 300,000 once the radiation takes its toll on the population. I know, sir, the fallout's been taken care of, but it's going to come too late for a lot of people. I must say, sir, that teenager who had the foresight of setting up that fallout shelter in that dentist's office likely saved a good 25,000 to 50,000 lives -- and possibly as much as half a million, consider that her tactics were copied all over the world when the bombs went off. Granger and Granger Dental Associates is going to get a lot of advertising out of this, at the very least because their logo is on virtually every single dental gown the affected area."

"Can you give me a rundown of the list of cities which were attacked?"

"Yes, sir. We've got the 50 in London. The following cities got 25: a small town on the US/Canada border which happened to have bad luck with geography, New York, Miami, Tel Aviv, and Seoul. Pyongyang was hit with two nukes, including a 100 kT Trident from an American sub. A 25 went off maybe twenty miles from Havana, but thankfully the wind blew the fallout out to sea. We're estimating the worldwide casualty total, including people from radiation sickness, to be around 2 million."

Andrew swore. "Two million killed in three hours. Bloody hell."

"We were always afraid of nuclear terrorism, Your Highness. Who would have thought that a nuclear crisis could be triggered by some snake-faced wizard who had aspirations of being Prime Minister? At any rate, it could have been a hell of a lot worse. If Dialonis hadn't done what he did, the US would have almost certainly nuked Havana. The Russians would had gone berserk and almost certainly entered the fray. One the US and Russia start shooting at each other, goodbye world. I'm starting to see why Dialonis acted: rumors are circulating that there would have been a good one in three chance that human civilization would have been destroyed completely had he not intervened."

The anchorman couldn't hide his amazement. "I repeat, we have reason to believe EVERYTHING has been cleared up during the past thirteen minutes. I don't know how they did it, but they did. Almost all of the Death Eaters in India are dead, and al-Qaeda and Hamas have both been completely destroyed. All of the terrorists' nuclear material has been confiscated, and rainstorms have erupted over the cities which were attacked to quench the fires and remove the fallout. It looks like..."
Boston and Montreal may get out of this without any immediate problems.

"However, we're not out of the woods yet. Millions have been killed in a span of three hours, many nations are devolving into anarchy, and the NYSE had fallen a good 20% between the time London was hit and the time Wall Street was destroyed. The economy is has been dealt a very serious blow here, and the world has undoubtedly been changed forever."

Everyone looked at me. I had just started a new job four months earlier. Would I be let go when the economy tanked? And what about my friends in New York and Israel? Had they managed to escape?

I wondered how Clinton and Dole would respond to this. After all, there was only a little over four months before the presidential election.

-------------------

1529Z
Atlantis

Astrologer Ndukaku, with reporters following him in a flood, pushed open the door and barged into Dialonis's hospital room. "I'm sorry for bothering you, sir, but we've got the latest numbers from the prophecy department."

Dialonis sat up. "Well, did it work?"

Ndukaku smiled. "Sir, we're down to 2.7%. We did it! Merlin's beard, we did it!"

Dialonis nodded. "That's good news. However, it's higher than I thought it would be. What are the latest threats?"

"It's unclear, sir. There are indications that another magical threat may be on the horizon, but it seems far off and inconclusive. However, the fact is that the world is still in shock right now and quite unstable. The destruction of all those cities, combined with national isolationism as countries try to take stock of what happened, could disrupt the economy a great deal. We may be on the verge of a second Great Depression, and you know enough about Muggle history to know how the Great Depression helped bring Hitler to power."

Dialonis nodded. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. In the meantime, congratulate everyone for a job well done. Keep Atlantis on the surface for the time being -- to remind everyone that we're watching -- and go to DEFCON 3. Right now, we're going to take a deep breath and relax. Inform the world that we will be going back to laissez-faire mode for a while."

"Yes, sir."

-------------------

1532Z
Ruins of Pyongyang
Democratic People's Republic of Korea

Sirius Black slowly came back to consciousness and found that he was aching all over his body. He tried to turn his head, but every move triggered waves of pain. Half his body felt burned, and ugly-looking welts went up and down his arm.

He tried to remember what had happened. Someone must have attacked Pyongyang from the north or east, so he hadn't seen the weapon come in. He must have been caught by the blast and knocked
unconscious. At least he was still alive.

However, he needed help in a hurry. He scratched an itch on his head and was horrified to find his hair starting to come out. Suddenly everything clicked, and he realized what had happened to him.

Radiation poisoning. Big time. The shield had prevented the shock wave from hitting him, but the radiation had hit him before he got the shield up. Even wizards couldn't make anything move faster than light.

He wondered how much time he had left. He needed to get back home to Britain, and do so very, very fast. With 12 Grimmauld Place almost certainly destroyed, the only alternative he could think of was Hogwarts.

To be continued...
Update #236 through Update #240

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Mislagnissa

Update #236
-------------
1531Z
Thursday, June 20, 1996
Air Force One
-------------
Next PoV: 237 - Stanislav Drakul
-------------
Bill Clinton couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Are you telling me that in a span of thirty minutes, the wizards destroyed all of al-Qaeda, wiped out every single Death Eater, and reduced Hamas to its humanitarian service divisions?"

The speaker on the other end of the line responded rapidly. "That is affirmative, sir. We're getting confirmations from all over the world. Most of the enemies were taken out in a span of five minutes from 1500 to 1505Z."

"Jesus Christ! What are they, Jedi Knights?"

The man on the other end of the line chuckled. "For all we know sir, they could be. Regardless of where they get their power from, it's obvious that Dialonis and his men are extremely powerful and truly do have the interests of the world in mind. Amazingly, they both have power and the discipline to use it wisely."

Clinton grunted. "If they're so powerful and willing to help, why didn't they prevent things like the Second World War, the Black Death, and so forth?"

"They're only authorized to act if there is a clear and present danger to the human race as a whole, sir, not to any individual state. Usually, Atlantis is completely neutral in world affairs. Besides, the Statute of Secrecy was still in place until about five months ago."

"Regulations be damned! Surely SOMEONE down there must have considered bending the rules a little to save millions of people from tyrants such as Hitler and Stalin. If all else failed, they could have just Obliviated everyone after they had done the deed!"

There was a pause on the other end of the line. "Mr. President, you're not the only person to wonder about that. Something tells me that at some point, Dialonis is going to have to justify the Holocaust to the Jews, the virgin soil pandemics to the Native Americans, and the Black Death to most of Europe. And believe me, sir, I don't want to be in his shoes when those lawsuits come out."

-------------
1553Z
St. Peter's Basilica
Vatican City
-------------
Church bells rang in celebration all over Rome. Against all odds, the wizards had pulled it off. Even Urban VIII had to concede that were it not for the wizards, the world would not have come out as well as it had.
Sounds of music and celebration -- not to mention prayers of thankfulness -- pervaded the Vatican. Someone even tried to hand John Paul a bottle of champagne, but His Holiness declined, saying that it would be inappropriate to be drinking alcohol with Suleiman in their midst. However, the pontiff definitely recommended fruit juice for his little gathering.

The evil wizards and nuclear terrorists had been destroyed. However, the repercussions of Judgment Day would be felt for years. There was panic in downtown Rome as the Italian stock market, jolted by the loss of two of its major trading centers and a fear of national isolationism, had fallen 30% in the last few hours of trading. Only time would tell if an international depression would ruin the world as thoroughly as nuclear terrorism.

Celestine VI, who was looking out the window at the crowd celebrating below in the square, suddenly whistled and began scratching his beard. "Very interesting. I'd never thought of that."

Suleiman rolled his wheelchair over to the former antipope. "Thought of what?"

In response, Celestine pointed out into the crowd, where several people were helping to hold up a big sign. The sign read. "THE WIZARDS ARE OUR ANGELS."

Suleiman understood immediately. Troubled, he turned to John Paul. "Could it be? Could all of the angels mentioned in our holy books have been wizards? We know wizards can fly and that they can do very unusual things. You're a wizard, Holiness. Do you have any idea? That would revolutionize all of our religious teachings, to say the least. And I can't help but think that the asteroid impact Dialonis mentioned in passing could explain cataclysms such as the Deluge. If that rock fell in the ocean and triggered a global megatsunami..."

John Paul stared thoughtfully out the window. "I don't know, Suleiman. I honestly don't know. And to be honest, if I did know I wouldn't be willing to tell the people. It would probably just upset them too much, especially given what they've just gone through. However, we definitely know wizards appear in the Bible. After all, we've met one of them ourselves."

The Dalai Lama's eyes widened. "Samuel!"

Celestine and Urban rolled their eyes, but both John Paul and Suleiman nodded. "Yes. Samuel. His ghostly form could easily have been mistaken for an angel, and ghosts wouldn't have been seen very often given the Statute of Secrecy. You may want to prepare your congregations, gentlemen. There may be a lot of surprises about to come out which the world may not yet be ready for. And judging from what Deborah was saying, there's a lot of stuff which may have been lost to history but will resurface one the wizards start explaining their world to us."

"Such as?"

John Paul stared thoughtfully out the window. "For one thing, she claimed that Samuel was the bastard son of Eli and Hannah. For another, she was assassinated as a feminist by the male-centered authorities of the time."

There was a long silence. Finally, Suleiman drew a deep breath. "Inshallah, Samuel won't come back. He told us he'd given up on trying to redeem us and basically told us all to go to hell. However, I cannot help but think that Allah in His wisdom has given us another chance by inspiring the wizards to save our world. If Allah thinks that we still may be salvageable, Samuel is going to come back and resume his ministry. And we know that both he and Deborah have big mouths and
aren't shy about speaking their minds. If he suddenly blurts out that Moses, who had only lived a hundred or so years earlier from Samuel's perspective, had been a wizard..."

Everyone jerked back in shock. That would be BAD. VERY bad.

-------------------
1603Z
Havana
Cuba

Fidel Castro couldn't believe that he was having this conversation with Bill Clinton. Judgment Day makes strange bedfellows, he thought.

"Yes, Mr. Clinton. We'd appreciate humanitarian aid here -- at the very least, we're going to need to get all of those frightened people back into Havana. However, may I highly recommend that my government take care of all direct interaction with the people? They're not exactly fond of Americans down here, after all."

Clinton agreed over the phone. "That makes sense, Fidel. And you'll be sending people over to help clean up Miami?"

"Absolutely, sir. I can't help but think it's somewhat my fault that Miami was hit. Had we caught those Death Eater infiltrators in time, none of this would have happened. However, I'd appreciate it if everyone we sent over to help in Miami came back to Cuba when the mission is complete. As we both know, people who leave Cuba for Miami generally don't come back."

"That's an understandable concern, Fidel. I'll see what I can do."

-----------------
1741Z
Tel Aviv

The reformed wizard who had formerly been associated with Hamas had to use magic to keep the two sides apart. Turning to the Israelis who had thrown the rocks, he roared, "Enough people have been killed already! Can't you tell that they're trying to help you?"

The Israeli spat at him. "I don't listen to you, terrorist! You attacked my homeland and killed my sister!"

The wizard glared at him. "I don't listen to you, terrorist! You attacked my homeland and killed my sister!"

The wizard glared at him and gestured sharply at one of the buildings nearby, where the Palestinians were helping the Israelis distribute clean food and water.

To be continued...

-----------------
Update #237

-----------------
1811Z
Thursday, June 20, 1996
Durmstrang Academy
Northern Sweden

Next PoV: 238 - Urban VIII

"We did it, Stanislav. The Death Eaters are no more, and I've come back."
Stanislav Drakul spun when he heard the familiar voice. Sure enough, it was Igor Karkaroff. The man seemed very relieved. Drakul could understand why: the world was at peace once again -- albeit for the time being -- and the headmaster no longer had to worry about the Death Eaters hunting him down.

Drakul turned and shook Karkaroff's hand. "That's good to hear. What's Dialonis's take on the future of the world? I'd be shocked if the prophecy department reports a number greater than two percent after everything that's happened."

Karkaroff grunted. "2.7%. A little higher than I would have wanted, but I'll take it. It's a lot better than 39.1. Atlantis is now at DEFCON 3 and is once again going back to its old laissez-faire style of control."

"What's the major threat this time according to Dialonis? Don't tell me it's another nuclear war."

Karkaroff shook his head. "I don't think so. For some reason, the prophecies are indicating that the threat will come from the Ukraine. It's too early to tell for certain, however. There is also a vague sense that the Romanov line may be in jeopardy, as many people in Atlantis believe that the war triggered a prophecy recently uttered by a witch in the United States which claims that particular line will fall within six years. It's called the Dawn Ash Prophecy, if you want to look it up. And don't get me started on St. Malachy."

Drakul hissed. "The Celestines. It's got to be the Celestines -- Celestine announced his claim to the papacy there. The human race has always been fond of religious warfare, and we don't have Samuel trying to force his hippie crusade down our throats anymore. As far as the Romanovs go, Ukraine and Russia have never exactly been best friends."

Karkaroff nodded. "I suspect you're right. However, if the threat is real, it's far enough away that we've got time to prepare. Let's hold off on it for now. How is everyone faring here?"

Drakul hesitated, but finally his shoulders slumped. "The school is all right. We're still planning on having classes next year as usual. However, several underage students were killed in the fighting. Several adults were as well, including the man who was most likely our most famous graduate, Viktor Krum."

Karkaroff stared at him in horror. "Krum's dead?"

"Yes, Headmaster. He gave his life evacuating Muggles from the wizards fighting in and around Pyongyang. The Felix Felicis, his skill as a Seeker, and his experience in the Triwizard Tournament made him almost impossible to bring down. Eventually, though, his luck ran out after no fewer than 75 successful missions."

Karkaroff bowed his head, removed his hat, and made the sign of the cross. There wasn't really anything else he could do.

-------------------------
1931Z
Near Montreal, Quebec
-------------------------

Danielle Durand rounded on Jesper Etoile. "What? You mean we've still got a problem? I thought you knocked all of the fallout out of the sky with that rainstorm!"
The Canadian Minister of Magic nodded in exasperation. "We did. However, we forgot one thing."

"Really? What's that?"

"Rivers always flow to the sea, and the St. Lawrence is no different. Guess where all the fallout went once we knocked it out of the sky."

Danielle suddenly realized what had happened. "You mean all we've managed to do is make it so the fallout hits Montreal by water instead of by air?"

"I'm afraid so, Danielle. We're going to need to do something about this, and do it fast. We've got a lot of dead fish in the Cornwall area. A LOT of dead fish."

1952Z
Geneva
Switzerland

The head of the United Nations couldn't believe what he was hearing. "The Koreans are about to start fighting again? After all of this?"

"I'm afraid so, sir. We've got a lot of generals who lost friends in the nuclear explosions, and they want revenge. The Koreas may have just gone from a magical war to Muggle blood feud."

The head of the UN swore. "Tell the South's Minister of Magic to send people there in a hurry! And warn the committee running the North. We don't want this to start up again! Have someone declare martial law if necessary! I take it we can't ask Dialonis to help us anymore now that they've gone to DEFCON 3?"

"That is correct, sir."

The head of the UN rolled his eyes. "Asinine regulation, if I should say so myself. Well, if he doesn't want to play, we'll do it the old way. You have your orders."

"Yes, sir."

2000Z
Granger and Granger Dental Associates
London
England

Hermione Granger looked into the flood of cameras and began to speak. "Good evening. I'm Hermione Granger, a student at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry who will be beginning her sixth year this September. Although I freely acknowledge that it had been my idea to protect the area with a radiation shield and start duplicating copies of my parents' dental gowns to save people, I would like to admit that I could not have done it all by myself. All I did was manage to put the operations in motion."

One of the reporters raised his hand, and Hermione nodded to him. "Miss Granger, are you aware that your triage techniques were adopted all over the world for dealing with fallout from the explosions? How do you feel when you realize that you probably saved millions of lives today?"

Hermione stared at him. "Other people copied me? I had no idea! Did it work for their cases as well?"
I may be a bright young woman who knows a lot of spells, but I'm only sixteen. Surely there must be other people more qualified than me for this. What about Dumbledore?"

The reporter shrugged. "Dumbledore may be a stronger wizard, but he isn't a Muggle-born. The point is, we're suspecting that only a Muggle-born witch would have known enough about fallout to do what you did. Muggles wouldn't know how to eliminate the radiation, and the wizards wouldn't have known what type of defense to set up because they wouldn't have understood the nature of the threat. Had you not been a Muggle-born witch, the world would have responded to the attacks much, much differently -- and much less effectively. By demonstrating that Muggle-born wizards can benefit from both a mundane and magical education, your work has destroyed the Death Eater movement once and for all by showing that the Death Eaters' arguments are groundless."

Hermione nodded. "That's quite possible, sir, and I certainly hope so. After all, the Death Eater prejudice is nothing less than racism, classism, or any other form of discrimination."

To be continued...

------------
Update #238
------------
Friday, June 21, 1996
Demilitarized Zone
Koreas

------------
Next PoV: 239 - Harry Potter
------------
The United Nations peacekeeping forces were in over their heads. Although Voldemort was dead and the Death Eaters destroyed for good, the strikes on Pyongyang and Seoul had shocked and angered many people on both sides of the DMZ. Several of these people had stars on their lapels and armies at their disposal.

With all semblance of centralized command gone up in nuclear fire, each general and warlord had tried to stake his claim in the new Korean order. If necessary, he would defend his territory and motives against anyone -- or anything -- which got in his way. Both countries had fallen into anarchy and chaos within hours of Judgment Day, and both the United Nations and the South's Minister of Magic petitioned Dialonis for help.

The Grand Mugwump's response had been shocking. He had explained that by law, Atlanteans had to remain neutral and could not directly intervene in human events -- Muggle or Wizarding -- unless the threat to humanity was such that Atlantis was at DEFCON 2 or higher. With the now-surfaced city at DEFCON 3, Dialonis had to decline any intervention. However, he did organize an emergency summit which asked wizards all around the world to ask for volunteers to help separate the combatants.

The first people to volunteer were organized into the First Battalion of the Wizards' Standing Army. Although they came from all over the world, including far-away places like Niue, the vast majority consisted of people who had honored Stanislav Drakul's request at Durmstrang. Although the Durmstrang forces had taken several casualties during the fighting in the Koreas, over half of them agreed to be redeployed. Although Dumbledore's Army -- now rebranded as the Second Battalion -- would have normally jumped at the opportunity to help, they were too busy cleaning up London to spare any time for the Koreas.

Stanislav Drakul -- carrying the First Battalion's triple emblems of the Atlantis Rising Sun, the
Durmstrang seal, and words "Remember Krum" -- Apparated with his charges into the middle of the war zone. With Karkaroff back in his role as head of Durmstrang, he felt that it would only be appropriate for him to enlist in the army as well.

He lost a couple of people immediately when one of them Apparated onto a land mine. Resisting the temptation to eliminate all the land mines -- as all that would do would make it so the two sides could send ground forces across the DMZ more easily -- he ordered everyone in his unit to join together and erect a powerful force field separating the two sides. The force field extended across the entire peninsula and extended a good ten kilometers into the air. The field would prevent anything artificial from crossing from one side of the peninsula to the other.

The spell was incredibly difficult, and the parents of the Durmstrang students had to do a lot of the work. Creating a shield that high and that wide required the assistance of virtually every single wizard in the group, and Drakul was barely able to spare people to serve as lookouts and prevent the wizards from being attacked while they were casting the spell.

The South Korean Minister of Magic had offered to do what he could to help out. Drakul, however, had to turn down his request as it had to be obvious that the shield was being installed by a neutral party whose sole intention was to stop the fighting.

Finally, the shield was in place. Bullets crashed into thin air and plummeted to the ground, causing the wizards to have to jerk out of the way to avoid being hit by the falling projectiles. The bullets were then followed by a South Korean helicopter which collided with the wall, lost its rotors, and fell to the ground. Drakul grieved for the chopper's crew and hoped that the world would get the message -- and get it quickly.

The only thing Drakul was concerned about was the possibility that ballistic missiles would be able to be fired over the barrier. He figured that the odds of that happening were remote, however. For one thing, anything remotely resembling a nuclear strike would immediately be shot down. For another, destroying Seoul or other cities wouldn't do much good if your troops weren't able to get through the shield to occupy them.

----------------------------------
St. Peter's Basilica
Vatican City
- - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -
Everyone was fasting. EVERYONE.

Originally announced one week earlier to commemorate the destruction of the Western Wall and adopted by many of the world's faiths as a day of somber reflection, the fast had suddenly taken on an entirely new meaning after the events of Judgment Day.

Houses of worship were jammed all across the globe. Several people were thanking God for delivering them from the danger, while others were beseeching Him to save them from future attacks. According to the news broadcasts, a good 20% of the people all across the planet were fasting. Such a turnout was absolutely unheard of.

June 20th had been made a religious holiday in all three monotheistic traditions. The Hebrew date of the attack, 3 Tammuz, fit in nicely with the traditional three-week Jewish mourning period between 17 Tammuz and 9 Av commemorating the siege of Jerusalem which had eventually resulted in the destruction of at least one of the classical Jewish temples. Many congregations were advocating extending the three-week mourning period to five weeks. Whether it would catch on or not was still to be determined. The new holiday was to be called Yom Din Sheni -- the Second Day of Judgment.
The first day, of course, was Yom Kippur, 10 Tishrei, which would always be the most serious day in the Jewish calendar.

The Kohen Gadol decreed that the secular date of June 20th become a fast day where the faithful observed the customs appropriate for Ramadan. Should June 20th occur during Ramadan, believers would have to skip the evening meal that day in order to distinguish it from the rest of the days in that month.

The various Christian denominations were still unsure as to how to observe the holiday. Although John Paul was leaning towards personal retreats for introspection, reflection, and personal growth similar to the lifestyle of a monk (though with no eating, only drinking), he wasn't entirely sure what a Judgment Day religious service would be like. One thing he did know, however, was that he wasn't going to allow any frivolous Midsummer's Day festivals for many, many years to come. Both Celestine and Urban agreed with that wholeheartedly.

Granger and Granger Dental Associates
London

Hermione Granger, flanked by Ron Weasley, Harry Potter, Fleur Delacoeur, and Ginny Weasley, spoke into the camera. "Witches and wizards of Europe, we Britons beseech you to help repair the damage to London and the other attacked cities. Two years ago, our esteemed headmaster Albus Dumbledore organized the Triwizard Tournament to help improve communication and the relationships between the Wizarding schools of our continent. People forged new connections and friendships that day and told each other that they will support each other in times of crisis."

Hermione glared into the camera. "Ladies and gentlemen, we at Hogwarts intend to hold you to that promise. Beside me here are Harry Potter and Fleur Delacoeur, the two surviving champions from the Triwizard Tournament. They are here. Where are you?"

Outside of Montreal
Quebec, Canada

Jelena Kurchatova inevitably found herself in charge of the engineering aspects of the operation. She tried to explain that she wasn't an engineer, but the people shushed her and told her that even a non-engineer from MIT probably knew more about this than a wizard who hadn't gone to that school.

She looked down at the river. Identifying the area with the contaminated water was all too easy -- just look for the dead fish. Well, she'd built a dam once before. It was time for her to help build another one.

The big question was: where was all the water going to go? She couldn't just back up the St. Lawrence because everything upstream would flood. Furthermore, adding a dam wouldn't work because any attempt to remove the dam would result in a tidal wave which would knock out Montreal as easily as the radiation would have.

She wondered if it would be possible to call upon her MIT connections to ask some nuclear engineers or physicists for help. Naval engineers and civil engineers would also come in handy.

To be continued...

Update #239
Friday, June 21, 1996
Shores of Lake Scrimgeour
London
England
-------------
Next PoV: 240 - New Character
-------------

Once again, Harry Potter found himself surrounded by paparazzi. This time, however, he wasn't the star of the show. He had to admit that he was grateful. On the other hand, the tragedy that brought him out there more than compensated for the fact that he was no longer the center of attention.

Over of a span of less than twenty-four hours, Hermione Granger had become one England's biggest teenage celebrities. The girl who had once been called an insufferable know-it-all had applied all of her knowledge of magic and technology to do something no pureblood wizard would have ever thought of doing before: using magic to turn a large swath of London into a tremendous fallout shelter. Her prompt action had saved tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of lives.

Right now, he and Ron were accompanying Hermione and Prince Andrew into the ruined area closest to ground zero. The wizards were doing what they could to evacuate people trapped in collapsed buildings so that Muggle doctors could do what they could to deal with any radiation poisoning the victims had incurred immediately after the explosion. Although the radiation was gone now -- the tremendous rainstorm summoned by the wizards had washed the vast majority of it out of the air -- the people closest to the Ministry of Magic would have still absorbed a tremendous dose and need medical attention as soon as possible.

Ground zero itself, of course, was completely inaccessible. The underground explosion in the Ministry of Magic had caused the parts of London closest to the detonation point to either be blasted into the air or fall into the vaporized areas underneath them. Normally, this would have excavated a large crater a mile or so across and that crater would have become a major feature of the landscape. In this case, however, the fact that the explosion had occurred near a river had caused the crater to begin flooding almost immediately. Most of the ruins were already flooded, and the scientists expected that the water level would keep on rising for a while. When all was said and done, there would be a new lake in the center of London, one which had been created in a span of seconds. It had been unanimously been named Lake Scrimgeour, after the late Minister of Magic.

Harry watched as Hermione brought out her wand and shouted "Revelio Hominem". As usual, each of the people in the group was limned with a small magical aura. He could see the auras, of course, but the Muggles couldn't. Either that, or every single cameraman -- not to mention Prince Andrew -- was disciplined enough to not react to them suddenly starting to glow.

Suddenly, Ron shouted and pointed at a rubble pile. "Over there! There's someone alive in there!"

Prince Andrew whirled and looked in that direction. "I don't see anyone. Where?"

Hermione explained. "Your Highness, the spell I just cast will cause all living humans to emit magical auras which can be detected by wizards. It's normally used to make sure there aren't eavesdroppers around, but in this case the spell can be used for peaceful purposes."

The prince grunted for a second. "I'm emitting an aura right now?"

"Yes, Your Highness. It's invisible to Muggles and it's completely harmless."
Andrew chuckled. "Wait until the SAS finds out about this!"

Harry cut in. "We can talk about this later, Your Highness. In the meantime, let's rescue that person."

Andrew, his guards, the paparazzi, and the wizards all hurried over to the designated rubble pile. Ron waved his wand, and blocks of concrete flew into the air. Seconds later, a badly injured man climbed to the top of the pile. He was badly burned and needed medical attention immediately. Harry suspected that he wouldn't have lasted more than a day or so had Hermione not found him.

A large number of EMT personnel immediately converged upon the victim. Seconds later, they were joined by Madam Pomfrey. Harry watched as the victim was whisked away for treatment. The group was about to head over to rescue another person when a communicator started chirping on the belt of one of the prince's guards.

The guard looked at it, whistled, and turned to Andrew. "Your Highness, I think we're going to have to cut this short as Diana has just arrived with the children. I believe we've got a coronation to attend."

--------

Berlin
- - - -

Wolfgang Schäuble's jaw dropped. "What do you mean, Kohl's dead? I spoke with him yesterday, and I highly doubt that those wizards would have been stupid enough to kill him during those Judgment Day activities!"

Jorg Eichmann gritted his teeth. "The man you spoke to wasn't Kohl, Herr Schäuble. He was a wizard masquerading as the chancellor. The Death Eaters did the same thing to Germany that they did the Korea: kill the person in charge and take his place using the Polyjuice Potion."

"That's the concoction which lets you look like someone if you steal some of his hairs, right?"

"Correct, sir. The Death Eaters seemed to have used two different methods to take over countries: kill the leader and masquerade as him, which is what happened here and in North Korea; or brainwash the leader and have him or her do the Death Eater's bidding. That's what happened in Saudi Arabia, China, and Cuba, though the Saudis eventually managed to figure out what was going on and killed off the Death Eater. Unfortunately, the damage had already been done: Voldemort managed to insinuate his men into the Middle East under the auspices of the Imperiused King Fahd. Had the Saudi Minister of Magic figured out what had happened a little earlier, the entire mess in Israel wouldn't have happened. India was a little different, as the Death Eater cell managed to overthrow the government in a coup. Fortunately, nothing came of that as the cell was destroyed during Judgment Day."

Schäuble grunted and looked around the chancellor's office. "I'd always wanted to be chancellor, but I never thought that I'd be taking office after a nuclear crisis triggered by some wizard whose men assassinated Helmut Kohl. I'll see what I can do to set up an emergency government -- send for Angela Merkel and Gerhard Schröder when you're done here."

Eichmann nodded. "Yes, sir. I'll do that."

Schäuble looked northwest, towards England. "What's going on in England right now, Jorg? I'm hearing crazy stories about Prince William, Prince Andrew, and Princess Diana running the country. There are also rumors that some high school student saved a few million people. Who's the Minister of Magic now up there?"
"The rumors are true, Herr Schröder. The queen and Prince Charles were killed in the blast, which left the throne to Prince William. He, his brother, and Diana were out of the country at the time the bomb went off, and they immediately started heading back to Britain when they heard what had happened. Since Prince William is a minor -- he turned fourteen today -- the palace has set up a regency board headed by Prince Andrew and Princess Diana. Andrew helped keep things under control immediately after the attack, and now that the fighting is over Diana will likely take over as the chairwoman of the board. She's already started touting nuclear disarmament as well as the removal of land mines, and her crusade against nuclear weapons has been taken up by a former juvenile Death Eater by the name of Draco Malfoy. I get the impression that he was shocked when he saw what had happened to London and decided to return to the light side of the Force. One more thing -- John Major was taken out in the blast, and Michael Heseltine is now Prime Minister."

"That's good to know, Jorg. Were there any other Death Eaters which have worked to redeem themselves?"

"Yes, Herr Schäuble. The man Voldemort had insinuated into Hamas switched sides when he saw what had happened to Tel Aviv. This defector played a key role in betraying Koury and the al-Qaeda headquarters to the wizards. He is currently helping the Israeli authorities rescue people and clean up in Haifa and Tel Aviv. As far as the other rumors go, the story about the teenager is in fact true. The teenager in question is a girl named Hermione Granger, a brilliant young witch familiar with both the Muggle and Wizarding worlds. She's become quite popular over there."

Schäuble grinned. "Let me guess. They made her Minister of Magic."

Eichmann shook his head. "She's underage and is certainly not experienced enough for that position, sir. However, I wouldn't be surprised if she does wind up Minister of Magic at some point when she grows up. Scrimgeour, as you surmised, is dead. The two major candidates at this point are Cornelius Fudge, Scrimgeour's predecessor; and Albus Dumbledore, headmaster of the Hogwarts Wizarding school. Public opinion is firmly with Dumbledore at this point, but Dumbledore has never really wanted to leave his ivory tower. I suspect, however, that he'll change his mind once he realizes that there aren't many other options left. After all, virtually everyone who was anybody was killed when that bomb went off in the Ministry and turned downtown London into a lake."

To be continued...

-------------
Update #240
-------------
Saturday, June 22, 1996
Oil Tanker Big Texas
Central Atlantic Ocean

-------------
Next PoV: 241 - Albus Dumbledore
-------------

Captain Henry Carson didn't know what to do. He had left the Middle East a few days ago with his hold full of black gold. The plan had him delivering it to one of the major ports in downtown Manhattan.

That had been, of course, had been before all hell had broken loose and his destination had become part of Wall Bay. The evil wizard who was running North Korea had been destroyed, which had been good. Unfortunately, all of his underlings had panicked upon hearing word of his death. As if that hadn't been bad enough, some of them were in control of nuclear weapons, and several cities
had been nuked before the wizards did SOMETHING to clean everything up.

Carson ran down the list of destroyed cities in his mind. Although the nukes had been small -- roughly equivalent to one or two Hiroshima bombs -- and killed a few hundred thousand people in each target, most of the cities which had taken hits were in chaos and would take a long time to recover.

The targets which would have the greatest impact on the world would unquestionably be New York and London. In a span of three hours, a large portion of the world's financial markets had been knocked out and the economy was already heading into a freefall. Furthermore, the unusual underground detonation of the London bomb had opened a crater in central London which had immediately filled by the Thames and become an artificial body of water now known as Lake Scrimgeour.

The vast majority of the attacks had been Portkey groundbursts. Miami had lost most of the Miami Beach neighborhood and had suddenly found itself with a Dialonis Cove. Tel Aviv hadn't suddenly developed a new waterfront, but its downtown was still a disaster zone. Pyongyang had taken two nukes, including a 100 kT one. Seoul had taken a nuke after a tremendous artillery attack from the North had softened it up. Several other bombs had gone off as well, including one near Havana which had, incidentally, managed to start thawing the deep freeze between the United States and the Communist nation.

Several bombs had detonated in more unusual areas. Two more bombs had gone off in North Korea, there were rumors of a new Lake Prescott in the middle of the St. Lawrence River, and there were stories of radiation in Haifa. Carson suspected that more information would come out as it became available.

The wizards had done SOMETHING at 4:00 London time. Carson wasn't sure what. However, whatever they did had been VERY thorough and VERY effective. There were rumors about time travel and multiple copies of individuals. What had Atlantis done, dug up a DeLorean?

Carson looked to the future. What the hell was going to happen now? He had no idea. Would he keep his job? Who was going to buy this oil with the economy in a shambles? He'd have to dock at some point simply to get more food!

He eventually decided to deliver the oil to Boston and have them offer it to the survivors of the New York attack free of charge. It would cost him a lot of money, but it was the right thing to do.

His train of thought was suddenly interrupted by the phone in the bridge. Startled, he picked it up. "Hello?"

It was one of his crewmen. "Captain, you're not going to believe this, but we've stumbled across something very odd: a few people on a raft."

Carson frowned. "People on a raft? What do you mean?"

"I mean exactly what I said, Captain. There appear to be two adults and a child, and they're dressed in rags from what we can tell with the binoculars. The raft seems to be made of wood. It looks like something you'd expect with Cubans defecting to the United States."

"How would Cubans get into the middle of the Atlantic?"
"I don't know, Captain. However, it looks like they want us to help. They're waving frantically at us and jumping up and down. I think we should rescue them. It's the right thing to do."

Carson didn't hesitate. "Make it so. Can you estimate a course?"

"They're about two miles away at 215. I don't know how they've managed to make it out this far without drowning, and I don't want to have them trust their luck much longer."

Thankful for something to break up the tedium, Carson turned to his first officer and told him to set a new course and take control of the ship. He then hurried down to the lower levels to meet with the person who had reported the raft.

The man with the binoculars pointed, and Carson looked out into the ocean. Sure enough, there was the raft. It was visible to the naked eye now and growing as Big Texas closed in. It was rectangular, 20 feet by 10 feet. The refugees had some food with them, but the captain couldn't imagine it lasting more than three or four days. It was only sheer luck that they had stumbled across his vessel.

The two adults appeared to be in their mid-thirties and the child, a little girl, was probably eight or so. All of them looked like they had had very hard lives. Their clothes were threadbare and tattered, and they were very emaciated.

All three refugees began jumping up and down and hugging each other once they realized they were being rescued. Excited -- and somehow managing not to capsize the raft in the process -- they started hollering at Carson and his crew. He didn't recognize their language at all. That ruled out the possibility that they were Cubans -- he knew Spanish. The relief and excitement on the refugees' faces, however, did need any translation.

The refugees' reactions changed somewhat as his ship came up alongside the raft. Although Carson didn't really understand what the refugees' culture was like, he could have sworn that they were completely caught off guard by the sheer size of the tanker. What the hell was this? They'd never seen a tanker before?

Hoping that the castaways knew sign language, he told them to sit tight and threw a life preserver over the side of the boat. The castaways looked at it for a second in confusion. The woman pointed and looked at her husband. The husband shrugged his shoulders, and suddenly Carson realized that they had no idea what a life preserver was, either. Where the hell had these guys come from, the 12th century?

It took a while, but eventually he managed to explain the use of the life preserver to the castaways. The father, figuring he needed to risk the life preserver first in order to encourage his family, swam over to the life preserver and got in. Carson pulled him aboard as the two other castaways hugged each other and watched.

Carson's eyes widened as the man came on board. He appeared to have a huge tattoo on his head, some kind of symbol. He had no idea what it meant. The captain quickly lost sight of it, however, as the man fell to his knees before the captain and bowed gratefully. He got up momentarily, bowed a few more times, and promptly started chattering away in his unintelligible dialect. Opening his hands wide in a gesture even Carson could recognize ("I have no weapons, you can trust me"), he stepped forward and kissed the captain on the forehead. Carson nodded his head in acknowledgement, and the refugee promptly started shouting at him and pointing at the life preserver around his waist and the two people still on the raft.
Eventually, all three refugees were on board. The mother reacted more or less the same way the father did, with lots of bows, open hands, and kisses. The little girl looked scared, but eventually came around when the mother spoke to her soothingly.

All three of them had identical tattoos on their forehead. Was it a clan name of some sort? He looked more closely at it and didn't recognize the symbol whatsoever. It wasn't Chinese or from some other alphabet. Frowning, he drew the symbol on a piece of paper and showed it to the father. All three refugees shuddered and started talking quickly and fearfully.

Who the hell were these guys? Where had they come from?

Within an hour, he had managed to convince the newcomers -- with difficulty -- to go below deck and set up shop in some empty quarters. They looked absolutely elated at the beds and immediately jumped into one of them. All three of them wound up sleeping in one bed, which seemed most unusual to him.

Pocketing the piece of paper with the symbol, he headed back to the bridge and brought the ship back on course for Boston. He then activated the radio and told the Coast Guard about his new guests. They said they'd bring some supplies and a rescue helicopter over as soon as possible.

To be continued...
Update #241 through Update #245

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Mislagnissa

Update #241
----------
Saturday, June 22, 1996
Hogsmeade Town Hall
Hogsmeade
Great Britain
----------
Next PoV: 242 - Ask Fake Name Generator, American
----------
Albus Dumbledore had told the Ministry officials over and over again that he didn't want to leave Hogwarts and become Minister of Magic. He loved working with the students and he didn't want to get bogged down with bureaucratic paperwork. He had always argued that there were many other people as qualified as he was to take the job.

This time, however, everything was different. They had asked him once again to succeed Scrimgeour as Minister of Magic. However, in this case there WASN'T anyone else even remotely qualified to take the job as most of the senior Ministry officials had been killed in the nuclear explosion. The only people left were the Flamels, the Order of the Phoenix, and Cornelius Fudge, who happened to have been in Togo at the time the bombs had gone off.

Cornelius Fudge was not an option as he didn't work well under pressure. The Flamels tended to be introverts, working behind the scene. Although Nicholas would have been an excellent Minister of Magic due to the wisdom he had gained over six centuries of existence, he didn't have the temperament for Minister.

There weren't many options among the Order of the Phoenix, either. McGonagall was dead, Sirius was dying, Lupin was dead (and had been a werewolf as well), Hermione was underage, Arthur Weasley was too low-level, Snape was too controversial, and Kingsley Shacklebolt had been caught in 10 Downing Street with John Major when the bombs had gone off. There was Alastair Moody, of course. However, Mad-Eye had freely admitted that both Dumbledore and Dr. Flamel would be better candidates.

Dumbledore hated to leave Hogwarts at a time like this. However, it was obvious that it was the right thing to do. Besides, it wasn't as if he wouldn't be around to check on Hogwarts from time to time. The Order of the Phoenix, along with Michael Heseltine and a few members of King William V's regency committee, had agreed to set up the new Ministry of Magic in Hogsmeade. All Dumbledore had to do was walk a little and he'd be able to look in on Hogwarts.

The students were going to be stunned at the way the staff had changed over the past year. Snape would be headmaster, Aberforth would be teaching Transfiguration, Slughorn would be back at Potions, Mad-Eye would be running Defense Against the Dark Arts, and Wilhelmina Grubby-Plank would be in charge of Care for Magical Creatures.

Perenille Flamel had been convinced to teach History of Magic, replacing the hugely unpopular Professor Binns. Although she wasn't exactly a major authority on magic, the simple fact was that she was...old. There was actually another, more important, reason for her assignment, however.
Nicholas was convinced that the instructions for creating the Philosopher's Stone were in the open now, and he couldn't rule out the possibility that some devious Muggles would try to kidnap or threaten to harm Perenille unless Nicholas helped them create a Stone. Dumbledore had an awful suspicion that the mass production of Philosopher's Stones would trigger a crisis even worse than the one Voldemort had.

However, the biggest surprise would be the new Muggle Studies teacher: a University of Cambridge anthropology graduate student named Megan Baldwin. Who better to teach Muggle Studies than a Muggle? The woman was in her mid-twenties and quite attractive. Dumbledore chuckled when he envisioned former Death Eaters suddenly deciding to like Muggles in a hurry when they saw how cute this woman was.

He couldn't think about the future right now, however. At the moment, he was accepting congratulations as the new Minister of Magic. Anastasios had come, of course. This had proven to be a mistake, as the Grand Mugwump had immediately been mobbed by grateful Britons (both Muggle and Wizarding) as soon as he had appeared. He had eventually been forced to order his bodyguards to move everyone out of the way so he could talk to Dumbledore.

Dumbledore smiled for the cameras as the ceremony completed. He then drew a deep breath and gave his first speech as Minister of Magic.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I am flattered by your trust in me. Although I freely admit that I believe that I would be better as the headmaster of Hogwarts than as your Minister, I will do everything I can to follow the high standards set by my predecessors. As of today, I am resigning my position as Transfiguration Master at Hogwarts. You may rest assured, students of Hogwarts, that you will still have Professor Dumbledore teaching Transfiguration next year because I have convinced my brother Aberforth to step in and teach the class. The Hog's Head Tavern will be run by his assistant.

"Citizens of Britain and the world, we are living in an unprecedented time in human history. The world has been exposed to magic for the first time and has realized that magic can be an amazing source of power for good and for ill. Magic has been used to heal...and to harm.

"Most of wizards are like you and me, simple and honorable people hoping to live a happy and peaceful life. Unfortunately, there are those like Lord Voldemort who use magic's immense power for evil. In a span of three hours, millions of people have been killed and several great cities have been reduced to ruins. The fact that I am issuing this speech from Hogsmeade instead of London serves as a grim reminder of what happened to London. The Ministry of Magic, at least what is left of it, now lies entombed under the water of London's new Lake Scrimgeour, the site of a 50 kT nuclear explosion which served as Lord Voldemort's parting gift.

"Judgment Day -- 20 June -- has wracked the world. Trying to piece everything together after such a global catastrophe will be extremely difficult, and I doubt that even my immense experience as a wizard will be sufficient to do it all by myself. My friend Anastasios Dialonis, unfortunately, is not in a position to help because the entire human race as a whole is not under threat. It is up to us, and us alone. We will need to band together to survive in the new world we have suddenly found ourselves in.

"To this end, I have decided to appoint a very wise, and experienced, man as my Deputy Minister. His name is Nicholas Flamel, and he has more wisdom and experience dealing with the world than anyone I can possibly imagine. Those of you who enjoy Chocolate Frog cards may have heard of him. In addition to the accomplishments listed on Dr. Flamel's Chocolate Frog card, which I can't get into here, he has also served as a professor in a Muggle institution. As a result, he is perfectly suited
for working in a world where Muggles and wizards will be forced to interact on a more regular basis."

Dumbledore gestured towards Flamel, who was standing next to him. "Ladies and gentlemen, here is Dr. Flamel. He will be at my side the whole time as we face the new future together."

Cameras snapped, and Flamel nodded in acknowledgment. People started peppering him with questions, and Flamel delicately deflected the questions, saying that Dumbledore was the important person here.

Dumbledore continued. "My first decree as Minister of Magic will be to add some additional restrictions to the use of Time-Turners in Britain. Judgment Day has shown the world that time travel is possible and capable of working amazing wonders. Like any form of magic, the consequences could be disastrous if Time-Turners fell into the hands of someone like Voldemort. To that end, I am requiring that all Time-Turners currently in use in Britain be returned to the Ministry by 1 July. This will prevent them from falling to the wrong hands. People can choose to request a Time-Turner for further study, but all requests will have to have the permission of the Minister of Magic, the Deputy Minister, and the head of the Auror Office. I believe that this will prevent any mishaps involving time travel."

"We have a lot of work to do, ladies and gentlemen, so let's get started."

To be continued...

-------------

Update #242
-------------

Saturday, June 22, 1996
Rodgers Residence
Montgomery, Alabama
United States of America

Next PoV: 243 - Harrison Cooper
-------------

Judith Rodgers knew the truth. The wizards were still a threat, and Anastasios Dialonis was the exception that proved the rule -- or was he? Sure, Dialonis had been instrumental in limiting the casualty totals from Judgment Day to the millions instead of billions. However, what were his motives? She highly doubted that he was as altruistic as he claimed.

The fact that Dialonis had the ability to change the entire world order in an instant was deeply disturbing to Rodgers. She had been completely convinced that Voldemort was the Antichrist -- her friends in America for Humans had assured her of that. However, it was fairly obvious now that Voldemort couldn't have been the Antichrist -- he had fallen too quickly for that to happen, and although the cataclysm he had triggered had been devastating, it hadn't escalated to the point where it set the entire world ablaze.

She now knew why. Pitmoss had been wrong, and God had silenced him for his mistake. Pitmoss had claimed that Radner was the False Prophet and that Voldemort was the Antichrist. However, he'd only gotten half of the equation right. Yes, Voldemort had been one of the people mentioned in the Bible, but he had been the False Prophet and not the Antichrist himself. That title unquestionably went to Dialonis.

Everyone was telling her that Dialonis seemed nice. She tried to remind them that the Antichrist's
reign would start off with him being a relatively benevolent ruler who would just turn on the world later. Some people had come around to her point of view and joined her new Revelation Party. Others, however, couldn't handle the truth. She considered them lost and prayed that God would be merciful in His judgment.

She needed to spread the word, and she needed to do so quickly. Otherwise, Dialonis would catch the United States completely unprepared for the catastrophe to come.

She had never intended to go into politics. However, she figured that might have a receptive audience here. Her husband Jack had served in the Koreas with a conscripted America for Humans chapter and had been decorated for bravery. A trained sniper who had originally honed his skills for hunting, he had been one of the few Muggles to actually kill more than one enemy wizard. The fact that she was 31 and quite attractive wouldn't hurt her cause, either. If everything went the way she hoped, she might be in a position to get into the Senate and possibly even run for President -- or be nominated for Vice President -- in 2004 or 2008.

She admitted that her group would almost certainly just be a fringe party until Dialonis actually started making a mess of things. However, she could tell that the support was there. Many more militant America for Humans members were defecting to her banner now that the America for Humans staff in Kansas had been forced to concede that good wizards existed.

It wasn't that America for Humans had outlived its usefulness. Far from it, in fact. America for Humans had shown its patriotism in the Judgment Day War and had embarked on an extensive recruitment campaign trying to find people who would continue the Judgment Day War against demonstrably evil wizards in the United States. Westboro had forsworn brute force terror attacks, now that it knew that some wizards used their powers for good. The headquarters had decreed that it would only go after wizards which had used magic to harm American citizens.

Rodgers thought that was quite nice of them. They had the right idea. However, they were tackling the problem at the wrong level. America for Humans was trying to stave off the Apocalypse by attacking the low-level operatives of the Devil. Rodgers intended to strike at Lucifer's head, and ONLY at Lucifer's head. There would be no terror attacks against people in the United States because that would kill civilians and tip her hand too early. She didn't want the government rounding her people up like they did with America for Humans after the Quabbin attack.

There was only one problem she could think of, however. She had to consider the possibility that Dialonis was in fact the False Prophet and someone even worse -- who actually WOULD take over the world when he first appeared -- was waiting in the wings as the Antichrist. If that were the case, God would strike her down for going after the wrong people. She decided that if she were to fall that way, she would tell St. Peter that her actions couldn't have made anything any worse. The major argument that she could think of against Dialonis's candidacy was the fact that he didn't rule a Muggle nation. A powerful wizard with an island city would be one thing. A powerful wizard ruling a country like Russia or the United States, however, would be something entirely different.

There wasn't much she could do at the moment, however. All she could do was sit back, prepare, and watch for Dialonis to make his move.

-----------------
Seoul Ancestral Wizarding Shrine
Seoul
South Korea
-----------------
missile launch from Pyongyang completely intact. It had been situated a good eight kilometers from ground zero and had been hidden a good two hundred feet underground. The only evidence of the nuclear explosion had been a few rocks dislodged from the ceiling.

The president of South Korea had been whisked to the Ministry shortly after the North Korean mortars had started shelling the city. He had initially resisted evacuation, but his aides eventually convinced him to leave. That evacuation had undoubtedly saved his life.

He couldn't help but jerk back in surprise when the Bulgarian wizard Apparated into the room. It would take a while for him to get accustomed to that, he supposed. But he would. After all, it was part of the new world order.

The new arrival was none other than Stanislav Drakul, the wizard in charge of the forces separating the two Koreas and stopping the war. The man had a look of amazed surprise on his face as he walked over to the Korean president and bowed.

"Sir, we've got a some interesting updates from the DMZ. It appears that hundreds of people are trying to make their way across the border now into South Korea. They seem to be taking advantage of the lack of organization up in the North and are defecting in droves. We're letting them across the border provided that they are not carrying weapons or are acting suspicious in any way."

The South's president nodded. "That's a good idea. Have you run across any would-be terrorists?"

"None, sir. We've cleared a five-foot-wide path through the land mines and put a checkpoint in there. We interview people thoroughly before we let them pass, and we haven't had any problems yet. The five-foot-wide path was chosen to allow one civilian at a time through and no mechanized weapons like tanks."

"Do they have any news from Pyongyang?"

"They do, sir, and very interesting news, in fact. Although Pyongyang is in ruins, there are reports of people all over the country clamoring for Voldemort's democratic reforms to stick. The few generals and warlords still in command up there have their hands tied, sir. They want control, but they don't want to share it with anyone else and they certainly don't want democracy. And they don't have anyone to fight now that we've sealed off the DMZ."

The South's president thought for a moment. "Very interesting. It sounds like the citizens of the North are going to be looking to us more and more for inspiration and leadership. Would you agree with that assessment?"

Drakul nodded. "Yes, sir. I would agree with that."

There was a long pause, after which the president's eyes widened. "You know what? This could mean reunification! North Korea's capital has been nuked, the nation has fallen into absolute anarchy, and everyone is defecting. No one is supporting the old regime now -- China is apologizing to the world for being Imperiused, and the Russians aren't touching North Korea with a three-meter pole. North Korea is alone and completely isolated. There is nowhere for the old guard there to turn to, and the few members of the old guard who had any power to defy us any longer were killed by Voldemort. Am I imagining something here, or is Korean War over at last?"

Drakul thought for a moment. "You may be right, sir. You may be right. Peace at last after almost fifty years. It's a pity it took an international cataclysm to bring us to this point."
The South's president nodded emphatically and summoned his aides to discuss this new development.

To be continued...

--------------
Update #243
--------------
Sunday, June 23, 1996
Cooper Residence
England
--------------
Next PoV: 244 - Me
--------------

Harrison Cooper stared at Albus Dumbledore. "What? You've got to be kidding. How the bloody hell was I supposed to know that I was going to turn into a monster?"

Dumbledore stared at the floor and shook his head. "There's nothing you could have done, Harrison. We've made it a point to restrict knowledge of dangerous creatures from the Muggle world whenever possible, and that includes knowledge of werewolves. We even went so far as to be very ambiguous about the nature of the condition contracted by the people bitten by the monster at Wembley when we made the public announcement -- we only told the victims that they had become werewolves when they were all together. You had the misfortune of being out of the country at the time the announcement was made, and it was our fault that we didn't get to you in time. As the head of the Ministry of Magic, rest assured that we will be providing you with a £1,000 subsidy each month to compensate you for our negligence."

Harrison nodded. "I appreciate that, Minister. However, I'm going to need a hell of a lot more money if this lawsuit goes to trial and I get convicted. How much do you know about the plaintiffs so far?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "The suit is in an Dutch Muggle court, where I don't have any jurisdiction and as a result am not privy to all the information. However, from what I've been told you bit this man while in werewolf form."

Harrison winced. "Shit. Are you telling me that one of these people is suing me for turning him into a werewolf?"

"It appears so, Harrison. Needless to say, this is a horrible miscarriage of justice. Had this been a Wizarding court, you would almost certainly not have been held liable for damages unless you were aware of your condition and had a means to control your transformation. Unfortunately, the attack occurred on a Dutch-flagged cruise ship in a Muggle area. This means that the Netherlands's Muggle laws apply. I'm sorry, Harrison, but there are several precedents for dealing with legal jurisdiction in Wizarding and Muggle affairs."

Harrison threw up his hands. "What a month. I turn into a monster on my vacation and get home just in time for the world to blow up. Now someone sues me for turning HIM into a monster. Is there any way either you or one of your people will be able to testify on my behalf?"

Dumbledore nodded. "We plan to, Harrison. Furthermore, we have already decided that if you lose the case, we will be paying any fines or penalties. It is not your fault, regardless of how the Muggles rule."
Harrison's eyes suddenly widened as he thought of something. "Wait a minute. How can someone sue me for being a werewolf in a Muggle court? Muggles don't have werewolves!"

Dumbledore chuckled. "No, Harrison they don't. Unfortunately, it appears that they're using laws pertaining to attacks by animals. The closest thing they could find was a case where the defendant's pit bull went wild and began attacking other people. There are also references to laws involving permanent disfigurement -- which lycanthropy certainly qualifies as -- and emotional and social trauma. Since you're a werewolf yourself, you can certainly see how someone can be traumatized by such an attack."

Harrison grunted. "Tell me about it. I've lost several friends even though I've told them over and over again that it was an isolated incident and that the Ministry will be summoning us to London to receive our -- wait a minute, what's going to happen to us now that London and the Ministry has been destroyed?"

Dumbledore nodded. "An excellent question, Harrison. Although the headquarters of the Ministry of Magic was destroyed and flooded by Lake Scrimgeour, the Ministry has reorganized itself and reconvened in the Wizarding town of Hogsmeade, near Hermione Granger's Wizarding school."

Harrison nodded. "The young woman whose parents were dentists. I know her story, Minister. Clever lass, she is. And very brave. I know at least a couple of twenty-somethings who are counting the days until she turns eighteen. What's more, King William supposedly has a crush on her as well."

"Miss Granger is indeed clever, Harrison. I know her well, as I was headmaster of the school at the time the Statute of Secrecy fell. As far as His Majesty having a crush on her...well, we'll see how things unfold. However, back to business. There will be a building set aside for the werewolves, and you will be transported over there where you will be able to transform in safety. Rest assured, Harrison, that you will never have to worry about harming people ever again."

Harrison nodded. "I'd appreciate that, Minister. Will my wife be able to accompany me?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "I would argue against it, Harrison. Although I am completely convinced that you will not have any problems with this next transformation, it's always best to be careful when it comes to situations like this. Besides, your wife is pregnant, and no one really knows what will happen to the fetus if a pregnant woman is bitten. We have no intention of turning your wife or your daughter into a magical experiment."

Harrison winced. "Uh, Minister, are you aware that many Muggle couples prefer not knowing the gender of their child until the baby is born?"

Dumbledore put his hands on his head. "Oh dear, Harrison. I'm sorry, I forgot. Ever heard of the word 'Obliviate' before?"

---------------
Immigration Facility
Boston, Massachusetts
- - - - - - - -
Brenda Snowe had heard people speaking many strange languages before. However, she'd never heard anything sounding remotely like this. She'd summoned several linguists and brought them to speak with the three refugees, but none of them could make out heads or tails of what they were saying.

It had taken a lot of prodding and experimentation for the Boston customs agents to figure out the
refugees' names. She suspected their last name -- or at least clan name -- was Syrdan, because the man had pointed to all three of them and said the word Syrdan. Presumably the tattoo on their head was the clan's insignia. The man's name was Xoprit, the woman's Ux'zo, and the daughter's Pi'unt. Snowe immediately Anglicized them into Alexander, Ursula, and Petunia Syrdan. It took another half hour to figure out their ages: 37, 35, and 9 respectively.

The crew of the Coast Guard helicopter which had brought the refugees off the oil tanker had been absolutely astonished at the refugees' reactions. They had first seemed extremely frightened of flying, shaken their heads vigorously, and pointed at the symbol on their heads. The crew had eventually been able to calm them down, reassured them they were safe, and brought them on board. The family had then gotten all excited when they actually took off. At one point, the little girl had held her hands in front of her sort of like a wizard flying a broom. The two adults had laughed at that and patted her affectionately on the shoulder.

The evacuation had nearly met with catastrophe when one of the adults tried to open the door to look outside. Fortunately, the door had been locked and the man apparently didn't know how to open the lock. The captain told his passengers to put on their seat belts and told one of the crewmen to demonstrate. The refugees didn't like that AT ALL and start pleading in tones which screamed "don't do this to us!"

By the time the helicopter had landed, the crew had pieced together enough to tell Snowe that the refugees had apparently run from something and didn't want to get caught. They appeared to be aware of current events, for Petunia's behavior seemed to imply that they knew that wizards existed. No one had any idea how they had found their way into the middle of the Atlantic, far away from any land. Furthermore, the captain suspected that they were escaped peasants or slaves or something like that as they had gone absolutely bonkers when they were told to put on restraining belts. It was unlikely that they were prisoners as he couldn't imagine a culture cruel enough to imprison a nine-year-old girl.

Well, they didn't need to worry about imprisonment anymore. As of today, they were refugees granted asylum in the United States of America, and Snowe would figure out a place for them to live as soon as she determined where exactly they had come from.

To be continued...

--------------
Update #244
--------------
Sunday, June 23, 1996
63 SbN Doormanweg
Willemstad
Curacao, Dutch Antilles
--------------
Next PoV: 245 - J. K. Rowling
--------------
Three days had elapsed since the momentous events of Judgment Day, and I still couldn't wrap my head around the fact that the world had changed forever. Although Boston had been spared a direct hit by either a nuclear weapon or by the fallout from the New York explosion, it was obvious that civilization would not be recovering from Thursday's events for a long, long time.

People would be talking about June 20th for a long, long time. Millions of people had been killed, magic had been used on a worldwide scale, and a large part of the Western economy had gone down the drain. Scientists had gone ballistic when they had heard Dialonis claim that an asteroid had struck
the Mediterranean less than five thousand years ago. Religious figures, already driven closer together by their shared ordeal, were thunderstruck when rumors came out that the story of the asteroid impact had inspired the biblical story of Noah and the wizards actually had a written account of the event by the real-life Noah himself...and the record did not match either the Bible OR the epic of Gilgamesh.

The phone lines into New York and Miami were alternating between down and completely overwhelmed with people trying to get in touch with their loved ones. My sister had lost one of her friends in the attack, and a grade-school friend of mine who had been living in the Upper West Side had been forced to spend a couple of days in a bomb shelter. Jon was supposedly on his way back home right now on a bus. The buses, of course, were overpriced and packed as Amtrak service had been disrupted by the attack. My mother's ex-roommate from MIT, Lee Mozes, had been sent off to some magical facility in the middle of the Ocala National Forest in central Florida. The facility was so overcrowded that people had been forced to cut down a few trees to make room for emergency shelters. Reports were coming in that the evacuees would be allowed to return to Miami in a couple of days. People who lost their homes in the attack would be allowed to return to Ocala if they so wished.

Although the Ocala staff's gesture was undoubtedly the right thing to do, the Muggles' invitation caused some complications. For the first time, Muggles were given extended access to a large facility dedicated to the study of magic. Kenneth Franco, the man in charge of the Ocala facility, had blocked off some of the more classified sections of the facility and urged people to not touch anything they weren't supposed to. Nevertheless, a good ten to fifteen percent of Ocala's spell components and magical items had mysteriously disappeared, and three Muggles had gone insane when antennae had apparently popped out of their heads for no obvious reason.

Normally, the highlight of this trip would have been the amazing discovery that my grandfather's house had hosted a secret entrance to the annex of the Curacaan office of the Dutch Ministry of Magic. How could I have known that little iguana-like totekis scampering around my grandfather's backyard were actually Dutch wizards hiding their existence from my Muggle family?

I had played a lot of Dungeons and Dragons and read fantasy novels in my youth. I had controlled wizard characters a lot in D&D and figured I knew a lot about what wizards would be like. That, however, had been before that big blue globe of light had enveloped us and a wizard had come to speak to my family in person.

By the time the wizard had finished explaining what had happened, my grandfather's house had attracted a large number of paparazzi. Inevitably, someone asked the wizard if he would be willing to show us around his domain. He hesitated for a moment, then threw up his hands when he realized that people would probably find their way in anyway. Figuring that a trip with a wizard chaperone would be a hell of a lot safer than one without it, he led us all into the backyard and over to the little shed behind my grandfather's house.

The wizard pointed at the first room, which I had been told belonged to my mother's family's old housekeeper. "This room here was an apartment for the Squib who kept an eye on the entrance to the annex, making sure no Muggles accidentally made it in. The middle room here is actually the entrance itself."

I blinked. As far as I could tell, the middle room had a washer and dryer in it.

The wizard walked over to the washing machine and tapped his wand four times on the door. The door sprang open, and the wizard turned to face the rest of the crowd.
"Ladies and gentlemen, here is the entrance. All you have to do is stick your head in there and you'll be sucked through into our magical world. Don't worry, it's completely safe. Give me a few moments, however, so that I can prepare the staff for your tour. It shouldn't take long."

With that, he stuck his head into the washing machine and vanished. People muttered excitedly, and I took out my camera. With all the engineers in my family, I figured that someone from MIT would want to take a look at this.

---------------
Cornwall, Ontario
---------------

Jesper Etoile looked around the hospital. It could have been a hell of a lot worse.

Most of the contaminated water in the St. Lawrence had been stopped at the dam and eliminated by Sorceress Kurchatova and the rest of the rescue team. However, some of it had made it into Cornwall's water supply, and a lot of people had checked into the hospital with mild symptoms of radiation poisoning.

Realizing what this meant, Etoile had told Prime Minister Chretien to distribute bottled water all along the St. Lawrence between Lake Prescott and the site of the dam.

It looked as if the vast majority of the sick people were going to survive. However, just in case, Etoile helped distribute iodide capsules to the patients, casting the Duplication Charm on them when they ran out.

It would be a long, long time before the people of Ogdensburg and Prescott would be able to return home. The few people who had survived the explosion were now living in Toronto or Buffalo -- depending on their nationality -- and would be doing so for the foreseeable future.

---------------
Oval Office
---------------

Cameras -- both Muggle and Wizarding -- flashed as Grand Mugwump Dialonis lifted what was once the Sumerian Key into the air. The key was ancient, and had not seen use in over three thousand years. That had been, of course, before June 20th.

It was the Sumerian Key no longer. Instead of the bearded lion on the handle, the key sported a bald eagle. Admitting that the world had changed during the 3600 years since the last Judgment Day, he decreed that it was time to reassign the two Muggle Judgment Day keys to the two major superpowers of the modern era: the United States and Russia.

Boris Yelstin had already accepted the Pharaonic -- now known as the Romanov -- Key. Now, it was Clinton's turn to take responsibility for the American Key.

Clinton thanked Dialonis gravely for the key and ordered that it be sent to the NORAD facility at Cheyenne Mountain and placed under extreme protection. That way, there would be no possibility of people losing track of it again.

To be continued...

---------------
Update #245
---------------

Sunday, June 23, 1996
J. K. Rowling had always thought that she would have been a good fantasy writer, especially when it came to stories about wizards and magic. She doubted that any of her books would have become bestsellers, but who knows -- she could always get lucky.

Nevertheless, nothing in her wildest fantasy imaginations could have rivaled what she was doing right now. She and a technician were currently crammed into a small submersible diving into the lake outside the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Having been ordained the Daily Mail's primary columnist on magical affairs shortly after her interview with Harry Potter, she was heading down into the lake to conduct an interview with the Merchieftainess, the enigmatic woman who had appeared during the raid on the cup Horcrux. Her star had risen rapidly after she announced that she and Harry Potter had reached a deal to write a seven-book series about the young man's experiences at Hogwarts. These documentaries would introduce the Muggle world to the lives of young British witches and wizards.

The first book was going to be called Harry Potter and the Magical Orb, and it was scheduled to be released in May 1998. It would likely be followed by Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, and Harry Potter and the Super Bowl Breach. All of the proceeds would go to charitable funds dedicated to the reconstruction of London, New York, and the other cities which had suffered nuclear explosions during the Judgment Day War. Neither Harry nor Rowling knew what the sixth and seventh years would be like -- after all, they were still in the future.

She was very lucky to have survived the attack on London. She had been busy covering the Bentley Pegasus -- which was slowly starting to come into production -- when the bombs had gone off. Most of the Daily Mail staff had been killed in the blast, having gone to the Ministry of Magic to interview celebrating wizards. She was fairly certain, however, that she would find employment somewhere in the post-Judgment Day world. And judging from the long lines of overworked people, unemployed people, and people who had taken pay cuts, that was a great accomplishment.

She couldn't focus on Harry Potter or her future, right now, as the submersible's headlights were revealing a small underwater city. Merpeople stared at the submarine in confusion, and started asking each other what the hell it was. One of them tried poking it with a trident, and the technician had been forced to retract the Alvin's claws to make it appear less threatening to the inhabitants.

The merpeople seemed to be civilized and clearly intelligent. They didn't seem particularly happy that the Muggles were visiting. Then again, what were they supposed to think when something or someone they had never seen before was barging its way into their city?

Finally, the loudspeaker broadcasting into the water picked up the Merchieftainess's voice. "All right, Muggles. That's about far enough. This is a first contact situation, and we don't want to scare anyone here. I'd recommend that you turn off your torches as they are frightening the locals. Have you seen enough of the city to report it to the rest of your world?"

Rowling reached for the intercom as the technician turned off the lights and gasped as the city below was illuminated by faint green phosphorescence. "Yes, Your Excellency. You have a wonderful community down here. You should be proud of it."
"Thank you, madame. I'm glad to hear that you're not one of those people who frown upon nonhumans."

Rowling nodded. "Rest assured, Your Excellency, most of us are not like that. How many of you live here?"

The Merchieftainess paused for a moment. "About two thousand, at last count. We have diplomatic ties with the wizards of Hogsmeade and Hogwarts, and I have spoken to Headmasters Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Snape several times."

"Have you interacted with Muggles before?"

"We have traditionally tried to avoid them, madame. The Statue of Secrecy forbade interaction, of course. However, there are times when we try to rescue drowning victims, and when we do so we take the form of dolphins."

Rowling's eyes widened. "Dolphins? You mean dolphins are actually wizards?"

"Not necessarily, madame. Although all disguised merpeople look like dolphins, not all dolphins are merpeople."

"Fascinating! I see that your species is humanoid. How closely are you related to us?"

The Merchiefness paused. "It's strange, madame. As far as we can tell, we have no common ancestor. It appears that we just happen to look similar and are both intelligent."

"Can you breed with humans?"

"Yes, but the offspring always dies before age 2."

"Can you breathe air? Are you amphibious?"

"We can breathe air, but not very well. We generally can't stay out of water more than a couple of hours at a time, and when we do we have trouble walking around as our feet were not meant for land use."

There was a lot of stuff Rowling wanted to ask her. However, she had to get back to her major questions. "Your Excellency, were you aware of what has just happened on the surface?"

"Yes, madame. From what we've been told, there was a global crisis which necessitated the declaration of Judgment Day. Apparently this crisis was precipitated by the actions of the evil wizard Lord Voldemort. We would like to offer our sincere condolences to anyone who was affected by those tragic events."

"Thank you, Your Excellency. You're familiar with Voldemort?"

"Yes, madame. He was a student at Hogwarts many years ago, and a brilliant one at that. It is a pity that he turned to evil -- he would have made a great asset to society."

Syrdani Council Chamber
Syrdasch
Supreme Chancellor Ortelu looked at the two other members of the ruling committee, Siatnan and Vixar. Vixar had a troubled look on his face, and Siatnan looked as if she wanted to punch somebody in the nose.

Ortelu drew a deep breath. "So what you're telling me is that during the chaos of Judgment Day, several Muggle slaves managed to disappear?"

Vixar nodded, and he didn't look happy. "Yes, Ms. Ortelu. As we had feared, there was a mass breakout among the yahoos while the wizards were occupied with the Judgment Day protocol. The overlords reported 325 Muggles escaped. We've combed the island and the waters offshore looking for the escaped slaves. We were very thorough, and we got a complete head count."

Ortelu had a bad feeling about this. "Complete head count? How many did you find?"

Vixar bit his lip. "322. Three of them are still missing, two adults and a little girl. All of our magical defenses seem to be unanimously reporting that they are not within 50 miles of Syrdan."

"Did you check underwater? Perhaps some of the animals ate them."

Siatnan nodded. "We checked underwater, and they weren't there. There also weren't any new human bones in the area, so the animals couldn't have eaten them. There is only one possibility left that I can think of, and it's very disturbing."

Ortelu grunted. "And that is?"

"They managed to escape to a Muggle ship which had happened to approach Syrdan a few days after Judgment Day. The Muggles didn't see the island, of course. However, if the three missing slaves escaped on a raft -- which wouldn't be the first time someone tried to do that -- and the Muggles saw the raft..."

Ortelu understood immediately and swore. "The Muggles would find out that we've been enslaving their colleagues. They wouldn't be happy about it. Are you sure that the defenses around the island are still warding off any Muggle intervention?"

"Yes, Ms. Ortelu. However, I'm not sure that will hold now that the Muggles and wizards are starting to mingle. And may the gods help us all if Nestor decides to wade into this and side with the Muggles against us. Markali has been looking for an excuse to fight with us again for a while, and she'll probably jump at anything. We do not want angry veela running all over the place here again."

Ortelu shuddered. "That's just what we need. Wonderful. First a Judgment Day, then a bunch of Muggles mad at us for enslaving the yahoos decide to ally with Nestor. See what you can do to find those missing slaves. If they're on the mainland, get them back fast. If necessary, kill them. And hope the Muggles don't have anyone who speaks Syrdani."

The other two chancellors nodded. "We'll do that, madame."

To be continued...
Update #246 through Update #250

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Mislagnissa

Update #246
-------------
Monday, June 24, 1996
British Werewolf Rehabilitation Center
Hogsmeade
Great Britain
-------------
Next PoV: 247 - David Hendrickson
-------------
This time, Harrison Cooper wasn't taking any chances.

He had hoped that Minister of Magic Dumbledore had been mistaken and that his transformation on the ship had been an isolated incident. Unfortunately, the headaches had started up once again, just as the wizard had predicted. He was still a werewolf, and on July 1st -- the next full moon -- he would once again turn into a dangerous monster.

He had immediately followed Dumbledore's advice and headed over to Hogsmeade -- a town he had never known existed -- to pick up some of the bizarre potion which would mitigate his lycanthropy symptoms. Originally, the werewolves were to have been treated in a secure area near the Ministry of Magic. Voldemort's nasty surprise had wrecked those plans in a hurry, however, so the wizards had to make do with what they had. This posed a problem for the Muggles, however, in that the Muggles had no way to get to Hogsmeade.

Dumbledore and his staff had circumvented that problem, however, and done so in an ingenious way. They had placed Portkeys -- magical transportation devices -- at specific addresses in Manchester, York, the surviving areas of London, and several other large cities. They were designed to transport the Muggle bite victims -- and ONLY the Muggle bite victims -- to Hogsmeade for treatment. They would then send the victim back to where he had started with his medication and any information he needed.

Harrison found the experience of traveling by Portkey frightening at first, but eventually he got accustomed to it. It occurred to him that this invention could revolutionize transportation throughout Britain -- and possibly the world. It wasn't quite Star Trek transporter beams, but it was close.

The only problem with Portkeys is that they often provided the traveler with hard landings. The Hogsmeade staff had anticipated this, however, and Harrison found himself falling into a pile of cushions as the magicked paperweight fell out of his hand.

He got to his feet and looked around the room. The room seemed to be a laboratory of some sort, with beakers filled with strange liquids bubbling on fires. At the far side of the room stood two people: a woman he recognized from the football match and a man with greasy black hair. They appeared to have been discussing a good-sized vial in the man's hand.

Both people turned to him as he stood up. The woman looked at him curiously and frowned. "This is odd. I recognize you from the football match, but I don't remember seeing you last month."
The greasy haired man nodded. "Indeed, Mrs. Mistry. Unless I am badly mistaken, we have finally brought Harrison Cooper into our midst."

Harrison nodded. "Yup, I'm Harrison Cooper. I've come here because I've discovered I'm a werewolf and someone here can help me."

The man nodded. "That would be I, Mr. Cooper. I am Headmaster Severus Snape of the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. This woman here is Lauren Mistry, another new lycanthrope. Both of you were bitten by Remus Lupin in the football stadium."

Lauren looked at him curiously. "If you were bitten and weren't here last time, how'd you manage the transformation last month? Were you immune to some extent?"

Harrison winced and shook his head. "Don't remind me. I never found out until it was too late, and the full moon occurred when I was on my honeymoon in the Caribbean. I transformed on a Dutch cruise ship and bit several people, possibly even killing a dozen. When I found out, I was absolutely horrified. Thankfully, the wizards caught me before I could do too much damage. They apparently tranquilized me and sealed me in a lifeboat the rest of the night. I've been having nightmares ever since. Thank God I remember nothing of it."

Lauren stared at him in amazement, and Snape drew a deep breath and nodded. However, Harrison wasn't done yet. "Oh, it gets worse. You see, one of the people I bit on the boat is suing me for emotional and physical trauma. Since the attack occurred on a Muggle cruise ship, it is going to be handled by the Dutch Muggle court system using laws pertaining to animal attacks."

Snape swore. "Mr. Cooper, that is going to be a problem. Although I can tell you for absolute certainty that you would be acquitted in a Wizarding court, the fact that you are being tried by Muggles is going to make things complicated. At any rate, I am afraid that I must complicate things even further. You see, one of the people you bit was a British citizen. This means that you will very likely be meeting her here during the upcoming week."

Harrison's face went white when he realized where Snape was going. "She probably isn't going to like me very much."

Snape reached into his robe and withdrew a necklace with an odd symbol on a pendant hanging from it. "Hardly, Mr. Cooper. She's threatened to attack you as soon as she sees you. As a result, we have determined that you are going to need special protection for your own safety. This pendant will prevent Muggles from harming you as long as you are within Hogsmeade. Put it to good use."

Harrison thanked the wizard and put on the necklace. He didn't feel any different, but he assumed the wizard knew what he was talking about.

Snape nodded, opened up a briefcase, and withdrew a vial similar to the one he had seen earlier. "Now, to the business at hand. All werewolves are going to receive vials like this. They contain six doses of the Wolfsbane Pill. I am afraid that you will have to take eight tablets a day to ward off most of the symptoms, and there will likely be side effects as the pill has not yet been perfected. If you have any side effects, tell one of us immediately."

"It is possible that the pill may not work as planned. If that's the case, come back and we'll brew Wolfsbane Potion for you manually each day. The Wolfsbane Potion is going to work, but its efficacy wears off after about 24 hours. The pills are an attempt to make a version of the draught which will not have an expiration date."
Harrison accepted the vial and put it in his pocket. He was not going to go through that ordeal on the ship again. No way. He'd kill himself before that.

Boston Stock Exchange
Boston, Massachusetts

The New York Stock Exchange was gone. However, the citizens of Boston and Philadelphia had done yeoman work in preparing their stock exchanges to handle the influx of investors and traders who had been working on Wall Street.

About 30% of the traders had been killed in the blast. The remaining 70% had been split between Boston and Philadelphia until a permanent solution could be found.

Bill Clinton had closed the stock market immediately after the destruction of New York and told the country that trading would be suspended until Monday. The Dow Jones had been at 5938 at the moment trading had been halted on the 20th.

The Undersecretary of Magic had come to open the trading session herself today. However, even Ariadne couldn't do anything about what had happened next. By the time 1:00 had come along, the Dow Jones had fallen to 3727. That was a 37% drop in a span of a few hours.

Markets were reacting all over the world. There were stories of stockbrokers jumping before trains and falling from bridges. People were running on banks. It was like the 1929 stock market crash all over again.

Far away, in the Oval Office, the president wondered if his entire re-election bid depended on how he handled this sudden cultural, military, and economic crisis. The world had changed in a span of three hours, and Clinton’s entire career depended on his response.

St. Elizabeth's Hospital
London

The surgeon looked at the readouts showing Sirius Black's vital signs and shook his head. "This is not good. Not good at all."

His assistant nodded grimly. "I concur. He's too far gone -- he absorbed too much radiation from those blasts in Pyongyang. It's a miracle he's alive at all."

The surgeon shook his head. "He may be a wizard, but there are probably things even a wizard can't handle. I recommend that we hand him off to Dumbledore or someone else in the Ministry of Magic. The Ministry is the only chance he's got, and I suspect they'll accept him given the fact he's a wizard and a national hero to boot."

The assistant nodded and began preparing the papers to present to Dumbledore. In the meantime, the surgeon wheeled Sirius out of the room and wheeled in the next patient.

To be continued....

Update #247

Tuesday, June 25, 1996
David Hendrickson mixed the ingredients carefully, following the instructions in Flamel's text to the letter. He had to call upon several of his friends in the Charleston annex of the Ministry of Magic to provide some of the spell components, and he had been forced to spend exorbitant sums of money buy magical objects "liberated" from the Ocala National Forest facility by the Miami residents who lived there after the bomb had gone off in Florida.

He wasn't worried about the money. If everything had gone according to plan, he would soon be in a position to produce gold out of lead. Mr. Green, realizing the repercussions immediately, had gone out of his way to spend a few thousand dollars buying large quantities of lead. The premise, of course, was that he was going to be conducting a study about the dangers of lead in plumbing and piping systems.

Very few people other than himself and Harold-Green's executive committee knew about the Philosopher's Stone project. Hendrickson wasn't out of the woods yet, though. For one thing, he had no idea if the Stone was actually going to work -- he suspect Flamel had spent a lot more time working on the Stone than he himself had. More importantly, however, was the obvious fact that the British government knew that something was up and that the Stone was in danger of coming out.

Hendrickson had been horrified to hear that Flamel was now the Deputy Minister of Magic. That seemed totally out of character for the ancient wizard, who generally shunned the limelight and preferred to teach medieval literature to Muggles. The only explanation was that Dumbledore -- his friend and now Minister of Magic -- had convinced him to come on board because both men knew what would happen if the Stone got loose.

For the first time, Hendrickson began to worry whether he was opening Pandora's box by trying to recreate the Stone. If the wisest man in the world -- in least in terms of age -- had recommended that the Stone be destroyed, he may have a point. Samuel's warning about mankind not having the wisdom to use power wisely resounded in his head, particularly after the events of Judgment Day.

Unfortunately, he had already agreed to undertake this task for Harold-Green. In an economy which had suddenly gone into a nosedive, Hendrickson couldn't risk doing anything which could undermine his professional career. He had to make the Stone -- and, if necessary, make sure that it was used wisely.

Drawing a deep breath, he tilted the final flask and poured the final ingredient into a tube the size of a soda can. Sparks flared everywhere, and the room was filled with acrid smoke. The fire alarms went off, and he heard people hurrying through the halls as they began to evacuate the building. He stayed where he was, however. After all, there was no fire, and he was able to eliminate clear the air with a wave of his wand. If anything, the evacuation would make sure that no one saw what was supposedly growing in the bottom of the tube.

He took advantage of the opportunity to sneak into a nearby laboratory, done a protective suit, and steal one of the Norway lab rats which had been used in a biological experiment. This particular rat was very sick, having been infected with a tricky influenza strain. It spent most of its time sleeping and trembling, curled up in a little ball. He doubted that it would last more than couple of more days. He had no idea if the rat would make him sick, but he figured it wouldn't hurt to wear the bunny suit
at a time like this.

He placed the cage with the rat on his work table and waited thirty minutes for the tube to cool off. He then looked over the instructions one last time and saw, to his dismay, that it would take thirty minutes for the Stone to form. This put him in a difficult position. He'd have to leave the building, or at least make himself invisible, because the fire wardens and the fire service would want to check out the alarm -- and they would be MOST unhappy at seeing him, along with a sick experimental rat, still in the building. Hoping that no one would steal his idea, he threw an extra hospital gown over the tube, book, and the rat and hurried out into the parking lot with the rest of the staff.

He rushed back into the lab as soon as the all-clear horn sounded. He was troubled when he saw that the had removed the gown and exposed the tube, rat, and book. Fortunately, everything seemed to have been undisturbed. The only thing which appeared to have changed was that the rat had managed to limp its way over to the other side of the cage.

It appeared to take forever. However, eventually the clock on the other side of the room reached 30 minutes. Gingerly, barely able to breathe, he walked over to the tube and poured its contents into the sink. A huge, ugly brown mess came out with a large lump in the middle.

Hendrickson's heart sank. This did not look like a Philosopher's Stone. If anything, it looked like vomit.

Furious with himself, he opened the faucet to wash away the evidence. His anger turned to hope, however, when he saw that the brown goo had been covering a red stone the size of a golf ball.

Hendrickson looked at the stone in anticipation. Was this it? There was only one way to check.

Hurrying back to Flamel's manual, he mixed a few more potion ingredients in a flask, picked up the red stone with tongs, and dropped it into the liquid. He then covered the flask with a grating to block out impurities and turned it upside down. Slowly but surely, a brilliant white liquid began draining from the flask. He captured some of it in a test tube and filled an eye dropper with a small dose of it.

It wasn't much. However, rats weren't big animals.

He hurried over to the cage with the sick lab rat and withdrew the animal's water bottle. Gingerly, he injected the white fluid into the bottle and stirred vigorously so it dissolved into the water. He then focused his attention on the rat, whose behavior had suddenly changed.

The rat had been lethargic and lackadaisical ever since Hendrickson had brought the cage into the room. Now, however, it was stumbling to make its way over to the water bottle. It had paid no attention to the water bottle prior to that moment, Hendrickson realized. Something had changed which had attracted the rat's attention, and Hendrickson had a strong suspicion he knew what it was.

In obvious pain, the rat made it all the way over to the tube dispensing the water and took a drink. Hendrickson noted the time and jotted it down in his lab book.

For the first five minutes, nothing really happened. The rat continued to drink, and drink, and drink. Hendrickson figured that the animal knew that the water was good for it and wanted to consume as much as possible.

He left for the bathroom at that point. By the time he had returned, the rat had totally transformed. Hendrickson couldn't believe what he was seeing.
The animal was no longer shaking. Its eyes were open, and it seemed significantly stronger. Some of the bald spots on its body were starting to regrow downy fur.

Hendrickson took several photographs to document this experiment. It was obvious that the rat was healing, and healing rapidly. Excited, he removed the water bottle -- much to the rat's chagrin, as the animal seemed to want more -- and sealed it for future experimentation. The rat began running around the cage, chasing the water bottle. It tried to climb the bars running along the walls to get at the water bottle, but it was to no avail. Irritated, it finally started running in its wheel.

Hendrickson put away the red stone and the water sample, put on a fresh set of gloves, and lifted the rat out of the cage. The animal had gotten very feisty, and Hendrickson could have sworn that it was happy that it felt better. Gingerly, the wizard picked up a needle and drew some of the creature's blood. The rat whimpered a little and tried to escape, but he was still able to get a sample.

He sent the blood sample off to one of the other labs in the building and asked it to report on how much of the influenza virus was present in the rat's blood. The lab had reported that before the experiment, the rat had 1.23 units of influenza inside it. No wonder the animal was sick.

He could barely work while the lab processed the second blood sample. Finally, however, the door opened and the technician handed him the results.

0.007 +/- 0.0006.

Hendrickson screamed in delight and threw his arms around the poor woman, telling her that he had made an amazing discovery. The woman congratulated him, but then frowned.

"Mr. Hendrickson, are you sure that's the same rat? There's no way someone can get rid of that much of the virus in a matter of twenty minutes!"

Hendrickson looked around the room. "Trust me, Lindsey, it's the same rat. Do you see any other rats in this room?"

Lindsey shook her head. "No, I must confess that I don't. However, from what I know this rapid a recovery is impossible! Yes, I know you're a wizard, but from what people have told me even wizards can't cure a disease that efficiently and that quickly!"

Hendrickson grinned. "They can now, Lindsey. They can now. And unless I'm very mistaken, everyone else will soon be able to as well...for a fee which will make every member of Harold-Green Pharmaceutical Corporation very, very rich."

Lindsey grinned. "That would be wonderful. Let's hope that the results of the rat experiments work out on dogs, chimpanzees, and humans. I doubt we'll make a lot of money if we've just discovered something which work only on rats."

Hendrickson nodded. "Believe me, I'm going to start working on the other animals as soon as possible. However, I must confess that this is a very, very good start."

Lindsey nodded and looked over to the work table. Frowning, she picked up the Philosopher's Stone. "Where'd you get the paperweight?"

Hendrickson was barely able to keep himself from laughing.
"Mr. President, they want to do it! They're serious about it this time!"

The president of South Korea spun as Stanislav Drakul materialized in the Ancestral Wizarding Shrine. As the man in charge of the peacekeeping force separating the two Koreas, he had been chosen to be the intermediary as the two Koreas discussed the repercussions of the events leading up to Judgment Day. The fact that he was not a Korean -- and he was a wizard to boot, where the wizards had little experience with Muggle politics -- made him an excellent choice.

The president smiled for the first time in a long while. "They're starting to ask for reunification with the South and an end to the fighting after all these years?"

"Yes, sir. A brief poll my men from Durmstrang conducted around the country shows 84% of the country in favor of democracy and 53% in favor of reunification. The old government up there has completely collapsed, and the few remaining warlords left are killing each other off. The UN is starting to assert more power, and people are continuing to flee south in droves. We've had to clear away more land mines to prevent them from waiting too long at the border."

The Minister of Magic, who had been listening to the conversation, breathed a sigh of relief. "Ancestors be praised. The Korean War, over at last. It is a pity that it took a nuclear holocaust to trigger a permanent peace."

The president nodded. "I can't agree with you more, Minister. I can probably speak for a lot of people here when I tell you that I lost many friends in Seoul during the initial artillery barrage and the final nuclear attack."

No one spoke for a while after that, and several people bowed their heads in grief. Eventually, the Minister of Magic collected himself and turned back to the president.

"Sir, what would you recommend for the next step? We can't just annex them. For all we know, they may be content to have a truly democratic state of their own with a rebuilt Pyongyang as its capital."

The president nodded and turned back to Drakul. "That's a good point. All right, Wizard Drakul, here's what I think we should do. Get in touch with the UN forces running what's left of the government and tell them to meet with us. The goal is to hash out a unification, democratization, and/or relief plan to be announced no later than the first of July. Yes, we've got one week to do it. I'd start with having the North vote on a referendum on whether to stay communist or become capitalist. If they decide to become capitalist, then we'll discuss the possibility of reunification."

Drakul nodded. "That's a good idea, Mr. President. I'll see to it right away."
Saddam Hussein was amazed at the way his luck had changed over the past week. A week ago, he was one of the most hated men in the world. Now, he was one of the two Muggle leaders who had helped make Judgment Day a reality. He and Hosni Mubarak -- who had never really seen eye to eye after the Egyptian forces had helped defend Kuwait in the Gulf War -- had managed to bring the world back from the brink of nuclear war.

The world owed both him and Mubarak a great deal for their participation in the Judgment Day protocol. Mubarak was already thinking of asking for the Sudanese to recognize Egyptian control of the Habibi Triangle. The Egyptian had toyed with asking for Gaza and parts of the Negev but had decided against it as most of the world had been sympathizing with Israel ever since that bomb had gone off in Tel Aviv.

Mubarak's idea of occupying some disputed land put an interesting idea into Saddam's head. The Iraqi leader still firmly believed that Kuwait was a province of Iraq. He had tried to liberate the sultanate back in 1991 and had been rudely rebuffed. That was then, however. This was now. Certainly the United Nations would give him SOME part of Kuwait for his troubles!

He considered whether another invasion would be warranted. The British and the Americans would probably stay out of it as they were busy licking their nuclear wounds.

The big question marks would be Iran and the Saudis. Saudi Arabia and Israel were growing closer together as Fahd felt somewhat responsible for the attack on Tel Aviv. If those two nations formed a military alliance, a threat to Saudi Arabia -- such as an invasion of Kuwait -- would likely draw Israel into it. With Tel Aviv already in ruins, Israel would probably be VERY angry. Saddam couldn't rule out the possibility of the Israelis getting away with a nuclear strike as a just response for what happened to Tel Aviv.

Iran, of course, was a different matter. Saddam hadn't heard much from the Iranians over the past week. Were they thinking of resuming hostilities? The country had a deep magical tradition, which likely meant they had wizards running around. Iran had already fought Iraq once. Would they try to take advantage an Iraqi advance into Kuwait by sending some wizards into the fray?

Saddam wondered if it was time for him to try drafting wizards into the country's army. There had to be wizards around here somewhere, after all. Maybe he could see if he could talk to the Minister of Magic, if such a man existed.

That was a worst-case scenario, however, and he doubted that would be necessary. The most likely scenario would be for him to try to be allowed to take over a little piece of Kuwait, wait a while, then grab another. And another. And another. By the time the Kuwaitis figured out what was going on, their country would be part of Iraq.

Saddam set to work on figuring out how to make that happen. Deploying troops would be too obvious a strategy. Deploying invisible troops, however, would be a much smarter thing to do. Sure, they wouldn't be able to see each other, but they would be a very big surprise to anyone on the other side if they took their Invisibility Cloaks off.

He needed to find a wizard, and do so quickly. He wondered if some of the Death Eaters who had been members of al-Qaeda or Hamas needed some protection.
The doorbell to the Burrow rang. Ron Weasley opened it and was astonished to see most of the Order of the Phoenix there. The main exception was Dumbledore, who was presumably executing his duties as the Minister of Magic.

Tonks nodded and spoke. "Ron? Good -- you're going to want to hear this as well. I need for you to bring Harry and Dudley here quickly. Something urgent has come up, and you're going to have to come with us. Hurry, there's no time to lose."

Ron didn't like the look on the people's faces. What had happened? Had something happened to Dumbledore? Concerned, he went up and retrieved the other two boys. Harry was busy studying for his belated OWLs, and Dudley had distracted himself with a Walkman.

Ron was disturbed to see his guests' faces become even sadder when Harry walked into the room. Clearly, they were trying to get in touch with Harry. It must be Dumbledore, Ron thought. Harry and Dumbledore are very close.

Harry looked at his guests, and his eyebrows shot up. "Where are Professor Dumbledore and Sirius? Should Hermione come with us too?"

Snape answered this. "Professor Dumbledore is currently executing his duties as Minister of Magic. Princess Diana, the Queen Mother and member of the Regency Committee, is busy trying to reach Miss Granger, who has been kept busy by her duties as one of most popular witches of Britain. You will want to have her with you as well, Mr. Potter, for you will need to be strong for this."

It took a second for Harry to realize what Snape was implying, but when he did he gasped. "It's Sirius, Headmaster! Something's happened to Sirius!"

No one spoke for several seconds, and many of the Order members looked around awkwardly. Finally, Moody put his hand on Harry's shoulder and spoke. "Harry, I don't know how to say this, but...Sirius is dying."

To be continued...

Update #249

Wednesday, June 26, 1996
United Nations Building
Geneva

Next PoV: 249.5 -- Fake Name Generator British

Flashbulbs went off in droves as Dialonis walked to the podium. In his hand were two sheets of parchment. The first was the text of the speech he was about to deliver going into the details of the Judgment Day operations. The second was a copy of Noha-Pishtin's account of the first Judgment Day, translated into English.

In theory, he was not supposed to intervene in Muggle affairs since Atlantis was at DEFCON 3 -- and likely to go to DEFCON 4 now that it seemed increasingly obvious that the world was slowly
starting to return to normal. However, he figured he could make an exception because the world had just gone through a Judgment Day. Besides, he wouldn't be dictating any policy here.

He lay the paper with the prepared speech on the podium and told everyone to be seated. The crowd complied, and he began to speak.

"Good morning. My name is Anastasios Dialonis, and I am the Grand Mugwump of the International Confederation of Warlocks. The ICW is an international organization dedicated to the study of magic and international diplomacy. You can think of it as a combination of an elite Wizarding research and development center and the magical United Nations.

"I come from the magical city-state of Atlantis, which until recently was hidden by the waters of the Mediterranean Sea. Now that the Statute of Secrecy has been lifted, Atlantis has resurfaced and will be staying above ground for the time being. I am currently involved in discussions to allow Muggles to tour the facility and meet several of the city's inhabitants.

"As Grand Mugwump, I am the highest-ranking wizard on the planet. The Judgment Day protocol was enacted under my authority and that of Head Astrologer Ndukaku. I have called this press conference to explain what exactly happened on the afternoon of the 20th and to provide some more information on an earlier Judgment Day declaration almost five thousand years ago.

"First, let me explain the conditions required for Judgment Day. Judgment Day can only be declared if the Head Astrologer agrees that there is a greater than 30% chance of the end of civilization. It is, in effect, humanity's last chance at rectifying the situation before society falls apart. At the time the Judgment Day events actually took place -- 1500Z on the 20th -- this value was 39.1%. The actions taken by the people of Atlantis reduced that value to under 3%.

Everyone clapped and cheered at that. Dialonis had to wait a good thirty seconds before he was able to continue.

"That 39.1% consisted of roughly an 80% probably of a full nuclear exchange and a 50% probability that the exchange, should it occur, would cause the downfall of civilization and send the world back into the Stone Age. Had civilization collapsed in this manner, we estimated that a good 85-90% of the people on the planet would have perished by the year 2020.

"As I mentioned before, this is the third Judgment Day in the history of the ICW. The first, declared by Grand Mugwump Noha-Pishtin around 2800 BC, was taken in response to an asteroid impact and ensuing global tsunami and impact winter. We have reason to believe that this impact made it into the Bible as the Deluge and that Noha-Pishtin was the man we know as Noah and that the Sumerians knew as Utnapishtim. The document each of you received on the way into the room is Noha-Pishtin's account of this event. You will notice the origins of the Deluge, Tower of Babel, and Garden of Eden stories in his report. Yes, it is hard to believe. However, I assure you that it is the case. What's more, as a former Grand Mugwump, his portrait hangs in the Hall of Portraits in Atlantis so the current Grand Mugwump can consult him for advice. If you wish, we can set up an interview so you can speak with him yourselves. Be advised, however, that you will need an interpreter as he speaks an archaic form of Egyptian."

There was an audible gasp as Dialonis continued. "Atlantis does not have as much information on the second Judgment Day, which occurred around 1600 BC. However, we have reason to believe that the threat consisted of a plague or other worldwide pandemic and that the Grand Mugwump at the time could be the man behind the legend of Asclepius."
"Now, let's get to the matter at hand -- a more detailed description of the events of the 20th. We on Atlantis had expected that Voldemort's death would alleviate most of the threat to civilization. However, we were wrong, and as you know many great cities were hit with nuclear weapons as Voldemort's death curse struck and the remaining Death Eaters and terrorist groups panicked. London was done in by Voldemort's death curse -- as you know, he was British -- and most of the other cities were attacked when al-Qaeda and Hamas realized that they would lose the ability to deliver nuclear weapons when the Atlanteans rounded up all of the Death Eaters supporting their organizations.

"Those red balls you saw hovering over various cities were part of the Judgment Day protocol. Their purpose was to disable all unauthorized wand use for thirty minutes once Time Zero -- 1500Z -- arrived. They were introduced to make the operation safer for the men and women tasked with the duty of saving the world. The balls were released and the countdown initiated at 1430Z, when Saddam Hussein, Hosni Mubarak, the Head Astrologer, and I turned the keys over in Atlantis.

"The primary strategy for saving the world involved the use of Time-Turners, devices which allow the user access to limited time travel. I have reason to believe that the Deputy Minister of Magic of India told you about these devices, albeit somewhat against regulations. The particular Time-Turners used for Judgment Day were constructed so that they can send the operator back to Time Zero over and over again in order to take advantage of new information which has come in from the Judgment Day rescue team.

"If any of you have seen the film Back to the Future, you can get a sense of what this will do. This will provide the Ministry of Magic, in effect, infinite manpower at Time Zero as all of the operators will have multiple copies of themselves -- known as dopplegangers -- in action at the same time. These copies can interact with each other provided that they do not interfere with each other's activities. If they were to interfere, that would create a time paradox which would kill off the traveler as soon as he first activated the Time-Turner.

"The fact that all of the operations occurred at one instant gave all of the wizards involved in the operation the advantage of complete surprise as well as the knowledge obtained by all of the other operatives. It is a most powerful, and effective, use of magic. It is also highly controversial and used only for Judgment Day."

Dialonis turned the page. "Let me explain to you what Judgment Day looked like from my perspective as head of the operation. When 1500Z hit, all of the wizards disappeared to go after the Death Eaters and terrorists. A few seconds later, a wizard came to me and asked for advice. As it turned out, I did not know how to respond. However, my future self had managed to obtain that information. Knowing that my present self didn't have it, he sent a doppleganger back. The doppleganger tapped me on the shoulder and provided me with the information, allowing me to deal with the problem. The wizard and doppleganger then disappeared, leaving me alone momentarily.

"By this point, it was roughly 1501Z. This left me out of position by a minute. I moved over a few feet as to not interfere with doppleganger which would interact with that first wizard and triggered the Time-Turner, sending me back to 1500Z. I arrived back at 1500Z and spoke with another wizard while, next to me, my doppleganger spoke with the first wizard. It was most confusing, to say the least.

"I had more than 150 consultations during the Judgment Day operations. I could tell immediately how many people I had to talk to as my dopplegangers -- whom I would eventually become -- were all lined up in the room. Although it took only half an hour real time, from my perspective it took a good 10 hours. After finishing my last consultation and acquiring all of the knowledge I would get, I
began traveling back to 1500Z once again, providing that information to my dopplegangers. This would allow the dopplegangers to answer any questions they had not been able to the first time around. Once I was done with that, I was finished, both mentally and physically. I nearly collapsed when I was done with the operation, but we got the job done, and that's all that matters."

"I'll open up the floor now for questions."

To be continued...

--------------
Update #249.5
--------------
Wednesday, June 26, 1996
Experimental Physics Building
Oxford University
Great Britain
--------------
Next PoV: 250 -- Harry Potter, followed by HALFTIME
--------------
Innes Taylor looked at the gravimeter in front of him. This couldn't be right, he thought.

Normally, the gravitational constant in the area was a standard 9.80655 m/sec^2. Yet for some reason it was now reading 9.80658.

He looked around the room to see if there was something nearby which could have increased the mass in the area. There wasn't anything particularly unusual, however. Granted, there was the magical wand formerly owned by Remus Lupin and collected when Wizard Lupin had transformed into a werewolf and attacked patrons in Wembley Stadium. However, he doubted that weighed more than 500 grams. A mass that low couldn't have that much of an effect on a gravimeter reading.

People had been performing various experiments on the wand for a good month. No one seemed to know how it worked, and virtually everyone who had tried to pick it up had received an electric shock...with the sole exception of Taylor. For some reason, the wand seemed to like Taylor. He had undergone a battery of tests to determine why the wand liked him, but none of them had revealed anything other than the fact that he needed to lose a little weight. Taylor made a mental note to talk to the wizards about this later.

Meanwhile, he stared at the malfunctioning gravimeter. This was very puzzling. His office was on the ground floor, so he couldn't be dealing with a case where someone moved a heavy object directly underneath him. The only other possibility was that a heavy object directly on the floor above him had been removed, which prevented its mass from reducing the force of gravity in the area.

He called up to the lab above him and asked him if they had done any remodeling or moving of heavy equipment over the past few days. They reported that they had not -- nothing had changed up there.

Taylor could only reach one conclusion: the gravimeter had experienced a fault or defect and needed to be repaired. Fortunately, the lab had many such machines. Shrugging, he began rolling the table with the gravimeter over to the far side of the room so he could put it away. He was surprised to see readout abruptly switch to 9.80657 halfway across the room.

Figuring that this must have been a side effect of the table's motion, he halted the table and checked the readout again. 9.80657. Odd, but not entirely unexpected if the actual value in the system was
something like 9.8065751 -- the system rounded to the nearest 10 microgals.

He started pushing the table once more towards the far side of the room. He was a couple of feet away from the far wall when the display shifted to 9.80656.

Taylor froze. You couldn't get from 9.80658 to 9.80656 using a rounding error. Something very strange was going on here. Scratching his head, he began moving the gravimeter back in the direction it had come from. The value on the screen jumped to 9.80657 and then back up to 9.80658.

His jaw dropped when he realized what this meant. This wasn't noise. There was a mass in the area attracting it, and judging from the fact that a short distance had a palpable effect on the readout it had to be nearby.

There was nothing massive enough to accomplish such a feat. He was about to pass it off as a coincidence when he suddenly looked at the adjacent table and saw Lupin's wand sitting on it.

Could Lupin's wand be affecting the gravimeter reading? He couldn't see how it would have, but if there was no other explanation, it would have to do. Besides, it would be an easy experiment to try.

Leaving the gravimeter where it was, he walked over to the table and picked up the wand. He headed back to the gravimeter and watched the display as he approached with the wand.

9.80659
9.80660
9.80661

The maximum value, 9.80662, was reached when the wand was sitting next to the gravimeter.

Taylor stared at the wand and at the gravimeter in shock. This had to be a mistake...or a breakthrough. Turning the gravimeter so that it faced the other way, he picked the wand back up and walked past the machine.

9.80661
9.80660

Taylor's eyes widened. Could magic be powered by gravity or something like that? It would explain a lot!

He jotted down his observations and tried moving the wand in various directions, concluding that the direction the wand was moved in had no bearing on the results. He tried the same experiment with a second gravimeter and got the same results, which showed that the original one hadn't been defective. Finally, he put the wand back on the table and tried carrying around an object of equal mass. The display remained locked at 9.80659.

Magic was powered by gravity. He was sure of it. He needed to run some more experiments to make sure. Then again, if that were the case, wouldn't the presence of the wand cause the gravitational constant to DECREASE as the wand consumed gravitational energy? There was a lot of stuff he needed to find out here.

--------------------------
Hogsmeade Medical Facility
Hogsmeade
Great Britain
Harry, Dudley, Ron, and Hermione stared in shock at the man lying in the bed. Had the name BLACK, SIRIUS not been written on the bed, none of them would have recognized who he was.

All of his hair had fallen out, and he had strange burns and blisters all over his body. His eyes were closed, and Harry could tell that he had suffered internal bleeding. Horrified, he turned to the doctor and asked what had happened to him.

Hermione answered. "It's acute radiation poisoning, Harry. It was one of the main causes of death for the people who initially survived the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bomb blasts. He must have absorbed it when the bombs went off in Pyongyang. I'm sorry, Harry. The Muggle doctors couldn't do anything about it, so they sent him here."

Harry turned to the witch tending Sirius. "You're a witch, aren't you? Can't you do something?"

The witch shook her head. "I'm afraid not, Harry. He's too far gone, and furthermore we have never had to deal with radiation poisoning before, especially on such a grand scale. The sickness, after all, is in effect a Muggle condition as radiation has never been worked with in the magical world. We'll have to do research to figure out how to cure it, but I don't think we're going to be able to save him in time. I'm sorry."

Harry nearly choked. "How much..."

The witch answered his unspoken question. "A couple of hours, I'd say. If that. You're his godson, aren't you?"

Harry fought back tears. "Yes, ma'am. I am. My parents are dead. Who will I be able to turn to now?"

Ron put his hand on Harry's shoulder. "We'll adopt you, Harry. You're already a member of the family in all but name. Trust me, this won't be an issue."

Harry, frantic, turned to Hermione. "Hermione, you're smart! Can't you --"

Hermione shook his head. "No, Harry. I'm not a qualified healer or expert on anything other than teeth. There's nothing we can do other than...say goodbye."

Tears began to well up in Harry's eyes. Turning to the unrecognizable man in the bed, he stammered: "Sirius, can you hear me?"

Amazingly, the patient turned his head to look at Harry. It was clear that he was in obvious pain and that he was doing all he could to prevent himself from crying out. Finally, in a weak voice, Sirius responded. "Yes, Harry. I can hear you."

"Sirius, I -- I don't know what to say. Don't go! You've been the closest thing to a father that I've ever had!"

Sirius gasped and shook his head. "There's nothing they can do at this point, and I can...feel my time is close. You've done me and your parents proud, Harry. All three of you have. You are serving as...the perfect representatives of Gryffindor. You have truly avenged...your parents' deaths."

Hermione was sobbing as she spoke. "Is there anything we can do to help?"
Sirius forced a nod. "Yes, Hermione....When I go...bury me next to Lily...and James. They're in Godric...Hollow. The Black estates...are now yours, Harry. 12 Grimmauld...would have been as well...but Voldemort blew...it up. Also...you get ownership...of Witherwings as well."

Hermione frowned and turned to Harry. "Witherwings? What --"

Harry understood immediately. "Buckbeak. They changed his name to make sure he wasn't killed."

Sirius nodded and choked for a moment. Drawing a deep breath, he said: "Yes...Hermione. Now, remember...your Gryffindor bravery. It's time for you to be brave...and..."

He never got the opportunity to finish the sentence. His eyes rolled back, and his breath rattled in his throat. Alarms hooted, and the witches shoved everyone out of the way to try to tend to him. Muggle EMT's ran past the three children and were soon powering up their defibrillation equipment. A tone sounded, and someone shouted "Clear!". There was jerk in the other room as the equipment started charging up again.

The three kids waited in the hall. Ten minutes later, the activity in the sickroom abated and halted. The nurse came out, sought out Harry, and came over to him.

She put her hand on his shoulder and shook his head. "I'm sorry, Harry. I'm truly sorry, and I wish I could have been as brave as he was, dying in an attempt to protect a city from a nuclear attack."

To be continued...

------------
Update #250
------------
Thursday, June 27, 1996
St. Michael's Church
Godric's Hollow
Great Britain

-------------
Next PoV: HALFTIME SHOW, sponsored by Guinevere's Flying Carpets, the Order of Aes Sedai, and Ziggurat Labs (which will all appear in the second half)
-------------
The church was packed as people from all over the world to pay their final respects to the man who had killed Lord Voldemort and given his life to try to protect the people of Pyongyang after the evil wizard had placed the entire city in danger.

Most of the Regency Committee was there, as were Dumbledore, both Flamels, and the remnants of the British Ministry of Magic. Al Gore was representing the United States, and Kofi Annan had come in to represent the United Nations. Dialonis was not permitted to attend with Atlantis at DEFCON 4, and as a result the magical city-state was represented by Head Astrologer Ndukaku, who had brought along a nonfunctional copy of the Astrologer's Key. Hogwarts was represented by Snape, Aberforth Dumbledore, Slughorn, and Filch. King William and Prince Harry were both there, as was a whole division of His Majesty's Secret Service and the SAS. Prime Minister Heseltine was there as well, and the back of the church was filled with reporters and cameramen.

Lost in the crowd were the three Hogwarts students seated in one of the front pews: Harry, Ron, and Hermione. All three were dressed in black, and Harry was crying softly and doing his best to accept condolences from the rest of the dignitaries in the room -- and Dudley, who had been growing closer
to Harry and the Weasleys once he had found himself in surroundings much different from those he had grown up in. King William had come to talk to them personally, and Ron had been surprised to discover that they weren't that much older than he was.

It was obvious that William had been caught completely off guards by the unprecedented events of the past week. He admitted that he hadn't really interacted with wizards before and congratulated Hermione on her defense of East London after the bombs had gone off. He looked as if he wanted to ask her something else, but he decided against it and said that it could wait a few months. When she asked him what it was, he said that he didn't want to ruin the surprise.

Several of the people tried to interview Hermione, who had become almost as popular as Sirius. Hermione, not surprisingly, refused to answer any questions until the funeral was finished.

Sirius's coffin lay at the front of the church, near the speaker's lectern. Normally, the lid would have been open so the Visitors could look upon him one last time. However, Harry and the rest of the people in charge of the ceremony agreed that they didn't want to have the mourners' last view be of a hairless, disfigured man. As a result, they kept the lid on the coffin.

Harry had been initially horrified when he heard that Draco Malfoy had come for the funeral. He was stunned when Hermione told him that Draco had turned his life around, renounced his Death Eater past, and used his Slytherin ambition to start crusading for nuclear disarmament along with Princess Diana. Hermione suspected that Draco had decided to attend the funeral because Sirius had died from radiation poisoning.

He looked around the room and saw the wizards and Muggles talking to each other. Sirius would loved to see this, he thought.

Finally, it was time for the service to begin. The minister stepped to the podium and began to speak.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we are gathered here today to mourn the passing of a great man, Sirius Orion Black III. Imprisoned for years for a crime he did not commit, he managed to escape from his predicament and serve as a role model for the magical House of Gryffindor, whose members have been renowned for their bravery.

"Sirius grew up in the House of Black, a Wizarding family which taught that pureblood witches were superior to those with Muggle ancestry. Disgusted with his relatives' elitism, he struck out on his own and stayed true to his beliefs even though when he was disinherited from his family and his image was erased from his family tree.

"He went to the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, where he was sorted into Gryffindor House and proved to be a brilliant wizard. He was close friends with James Potter, Remus Lupin, and Peter Pettigrew, all of whom are now deceased. The legendary Hogwarts Marauders have been united once again in Sheol.

"Fourteen years ago, Pettigrew betrayed his friends and turned to the service of the Dark Lord, Voldemort. When Sirius confronted him, Pettigrew faked his death and successfully framed Sirius for a crime Black did not commit. Sirius was placed in Azkaban, the Wizarding prison, where he languished for over a decade knowing that he was innocent.

"Three years ago, Sirius discovered Peter Pettigrew's whereabouts, took advantage of his shapeshifting ability, and escaped from Azkaban to avenge his imprisonment. Sirius's case was reopened once it became obvious that Pettigrew had survived, and he was eventually exonerated and
given a substantial pension to compensate him for his time served.

"Sirius continued working for justice after his exoneration. He continued his crusade against evil wizards and Death Eaters, and he eventually joined His Majesty's Secret Service as a special agent. He destroyed several of Voldemort's Horcruxes, adopted James Potter's son Harry along with Harry's cousin Dudley, and drove an armored personnel carrier down Diagon Alley in the service of the forces of Light.

"He volunteered to go Korea during the Judgment Day War to bring down Voldemort's regime. He served as the champion of the coalition forces during the duel with Voldemort, where he caught the Dark wizard off guard and shot him with a cleverly concealed pistol. He then stayed behind when the bombs started going off, determined to do what he could to protect the people of Pyongyang from attack. Unfortunately, there was no way for him to have known that the city was going to be attacked by sea. As a result, he was caught out of position as an ally's weapon exploded over the city, exposing him to a fatal radiation dose. Both Muggles and wizards did what they could to help, but they arrived too late. Even the Deputy Minister of Magic, Dr. Nicholas Flamel, a man familiar with obscure and controversial magical methods of healing, agrees that nothing could have been done as no magical healing techniques have ever been developed to deal with a condition which was only discovered in 1945, well after the Statute of Secrecy fell into place.

"We lost a great man yesterday, and the world will be in his debt for many years to come. I will now open up the floor to other people who would like to say a few words."

There was a rustle behind Harry, and he around to see Dumbledore standing up. The Minister of Magic walked up to the podium and nodded graciously to the minister before addressing the crowd.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I knew Sirius well. He was a brilliant man and one of the bravest people I have ever met. However, even I was caught by surprise when he emerged as the champion to bring down Voldemort. You see, the original plan had been for me to fight Voldemort, as Voldemort had always been leery of confronting me directly. Unfortunately, I was in Seoul at the time the Dark Lord issued his challenge and was not in a position to fight him. This could have been a disaster, as I had arranged for Voldemort to obtain a powerful wand which would have defeated any opponent in a duel other than myself, the wand's rightful master. Had it not been for Sirius's Muggle weapon, that confrontation would not have been a victory.

"As Minister of Magic, I would like to ensure that Sirius's name live forever. To that end, it is my pleasure to announce that the building in Hogsmeade that will serve as the new headquarters for the British Ministry of Magic will be named Black Tower, after Sirius. A portrait of Sirius will be placed at the entrance so that everyone will be able to remember what this man did for the world."

Everyone cheered at that. Dumbledore bowed and stepped aside as Snape came to the podium. Harry braced himself -- he had no idea how Snape was going to react.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I am Severus Snape, headmaster of Hogwarts. Although Sirius and I never saw eye to eye on everything, I can confirm everything Minister Dumbledore said. Sirius was a fierce warrior, and he was an integral member of the Order of the Phoenix, the group of wizards dedicated to defeating the Death Eaters and bringing down Voldemort.

"Sirius was virtually unique among the Wizarding community in that he served both openly as a wizard and Muggle special agent. Wizards who wish to interact with Muggles will likely be more common in the years to come. As a result, it is my pleasure to announce that starting in the fall of 1997, there will be a fifth house available to first-years at Hogwarts: Black House. It will be
dedicated to wizards who wish to serve the Muggle community."

There was a universal gasp of astonishment among the wizards, including Dumbledore, who had apparently been caught completely off guard. However, the surprise was apparently welcome, and everyone came to their feet. Harry couldn't believe it. The House of Black had changed from a clan which hated Muggles into a community which respected them.

Snape wasn't done yet, as he chuckled and shook his head. "Rest assured, ladies and gentlemen, that any members of the Black family who survived Judgment Day will have all had heart attacks when they heard that proclamation. I don't think we'll have to worry about them anymore."

There were scattered chuckles around the room as Snape bowed and sat down. He was followed by several more speakers: Prince Andrew, Kofi Annan, the head of His Majesty's Secret Service, a man named Banks from the SAS, and Al Gore.

Suddenly, Harry found himself coming to his feet and walking to the podium. He found himself at the lectern before he even realized that he didn't have a prepared speech. He just had this tremendous urge to get something off his chest.

He drew a deep breath and looked at Ron and Hermione for support. Bowing to King William, he tried to get out what was on his mind.

"Ladies and gentlemen, Sirius was the father I never had. I lost my parents when I was an infant and was raised by Petunia and Vernon Dursley, the couple who founded Britain for Humans and were imprisoned for discriminating against their magical nephew. I was his godson, and he supported me in everything he did. He went out of his way to do things for me, and his love for me had no bounds.

"I don't actually have a prepared speech right now. However, I just wanted to say goodbye to one of the best friends -- and greatest men -- I ever had the honor of meeting. Rest assured, Sirius, that I will be naming one of children after you. Rest in peace, godfather. And thank you for everything you have done. Thank you."

Harry's eyes welled up at that point and he couldn't speak anymore. The minister, sensing his distress, came back to the podium and told everyone that they would be carrying the body to the cemetery. Harry, Dumbledore, Prince Andrew, Heseltine, Dudley, and Ndukaku were to serve as pallbearers.

It would take Harry a long time to recover from the momentous events surrounding Judgment Day. He knew that the world had changed forever and that it was useless to dwell in the past. Harry had no idea what the future would bring, but he would do his best to be prepared for it.

To be continued...
Update #251 through Update #255

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Mislagnissa

Update #251
--------
Thursday, June 27, 1996
Grand Mugwump's Office
Atlantis
Mediterranean Sea
--------
Next PoV: 252 -- Michael de Vries
--------
Once again, Dialonis was at the podium to make a surprise announcement to the Muggles. Although he was certain he was doing the right thing, he had to do a lot of talking to convince the rest of Atlantis to agree with this plan.

Atlantis was now at DEFCON 4. Ndukaku had reported that the current odds of apocalypse had dropped to 1.8%, which was still higher than Dialonis would have expected but he was more than happy to take it. He suspected that the abrupt economic depression triggered by the nuclear attacks on the Muggle cities probably had something to do with it. Ndukaku agreed with this assessment, though he warned his boss that there were telltale signs that the latest threat would likely manifest itself in Russia or the Ukraine -- and neither of those countries had suffered nuclear strikes. The fact that Sorceress Kurchatova had issued a prophecy mentioning the destruction of the House of Romanov loomed heavily in Dialonis's thoughts.

He couldn't worry about vague threats to Russia at the moment, as he had a gut feeling that he'd have to spend a lot of time handling immigration issues to Atlantis.

He nodded to the reporters and began his speech. "Ladies and gentlemen, good evening. I am Anastasios Dialonis of Atlantis, and it is my distinct pleasure to announce a new initiative for the people of Atlantis and for the world in general.

"Now that the Statute of Secrecy has been discarded, Atlantis will be staying on the surface for the foreseeable future. The exposure of Atlantis to the Muggle world, coupled with the deaths of several Atlanteans in the Judgment Day War, has given the Muggles an unprecedented opportunity to live with, and interact with, wizards.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to announce that starting on January 1st, 1997, Atlantis will open its borders to Muggle inhabitants for the first time. Atlantis is going to be responsible for taking care of the Wizarding world in the months and years to come. It would be remiss of us to not include Muggles in our discussions when we do so. This implies that the wizards have to interact with Muggles on a daily basis to break down any prejudices or misconceptions each side has about the other.

"Muggles will have two options when it comes to deciding where to live. Homes belonging to people killed in the war will become available for habitation provided that the victims did not deed the properties to children or loved ones in their wills. These homes will be in areas surrounded by wizards. The second option will be a new Muggle district which will be constructed over the next few months at the edge of the city."
"There is currently space for only 3,000 new residents. Applicants must put their names forward by October 1st, and if there are more than 3,000 candidates the winners will be chosen by lot.

"We believe that this program will help ease the Muggles into Wizarding society and vice versa. I urge other Wizarding cities to monitor the progress of this initiative and adopt it if it succeeds.

"Thank you for your time, and now I'll take questions. Be advised that at DEFCON 4, I am not permitted to intervene in Muggle or Wizarding politics."

---------------------
Oval Office
Washington DC
---------------------
President Clinton watched as the reporter described the chaos in the Boston Stock Exchange. The Dow Jones was now under 3200, and many prognosticators suspected that it would be below 3000 by the end of the year.

Business was starting to dry up rapidly as people began noticing that almost half of their stock portfolio had just flown out the window or disappeared in nuclear fire. This was just making a bad situation even worse, and people were starting to panic. Runs on banks were becoming commonplace, and businesses were already starting to discuss laying people off and imposing pay cuts across the board.

Clinton needed to do something, but he wasn't sure what exactly he should do. He suspected that the world was overreacting to the events of Judgment Day -- a good 90% of the world's markets were still intact. The big question was whether this overreaction would trigger a full-blown depression.

He doubted raising taxes would help at this point as the government still was more or less solvent. Maybe a national tax holiday would work, one which would spur business for a month or so with taxes reduced by 50%? He'd need to talk to Greenspan and people like that about this.

One thing he did know is that with the world in chaos and the US still reeling from three nuclear strikes -- well, two and a half -- the US couldn't really afford to be as involved with world politics as it had been before Judgment Day. Sending money overseas wouldn't be a good idea at a time like this. Thankfully, he would be able to bring some of the troops home from the Koreas now that the wizards were overseeing the reunification process. That would save money to some extent.

---------------------
Five Tree Plantation
Outside Syrdasch
Syrdan
---------------------
Wizard Master Altri stared in shock as he heard someone Apparate into the reception room behind him. Spinning on his heel, he was about to call for his yahoos to restrain the visitors when he recognized his guests. His eyes widened, and he found himself frantically trying to figure out how on earth he was supposed to interact with Foreign Minister Bareshtno and Chancellor Siatnan.

Hoping he was doing the right thing, he shook both women's hands. "Ladies, what a surprise! What exactly brings you to my neck of the woods, and how can I help you? Do you need anything?"

Siatnan shook her head. "No thank you, Master Altri. We actually don't have much time, but we've got an important message to deliver to you -- and you're not going to like it."
Altri frowned: had he done something wrong? Granted, a bunch of his slaves had escaped during the events surrounding Judgment Day. The vast majority had been recaptured and punished accordingly. Six of them were still missing, but he was certain that they'd be returned at some point.

He hoped that his slaves hadn't done something rash and hurt some politicians. Slaves who attacked wizards were killed on the spot without compensating their masters, and good slaves were hard to find. Granted, the missing ones had always been troublemakers, though the Sen-Altri couple had cooled off a little ever since they'd had their little girl, Piunt.

Aloud, he asked: "Madame Chancellor, what's wrong? Have I or one of my missing yahoos done something wrong?"

Siatnan looked at the Foreign Minister and drew a deep breath. "You haven't done anything wrong, Master Altri. However, we have reason to believe that your six escaped yahoos may not be returning to you anytime soon."

Altri swore. "Damn! I can't just lose six slaves like that! I only have fifteen of them! What happened to them? What did they do?"

Siatnan and Bareshtno looked at each other -- clearly SOMETHING unusual had happened. Finally, Bareshtno gritted her teeth and began to speak. "Master Altri, we found three of them dead. Apparently they tried to escape Syrdan on a small raft and they drowned. I'm sorry, sir."

Altri grunted. "That explains three of them. What about the other three?"

There was a long pause at this. Finally, Siatnan spoke. "Master Altri, we have reason to believe that they not within 100 miles of Syrdan at the present time. Furthermore, the merfolk in the area have reported that their bodies have not been found. Finally, we've done some extensive searches and haven't found them on land, either."

Altri stared at him. "What? How can that be? Were their bodies destroyed?"

Bareshtno answered this. "Master Altri, we have reason to believe that they may have tried to escape on a raft of their own and been picked up by a Muggle ship headed to the continent which is home to the United States, a powerful Muggle nation which has been deeded one of the Muggle Judgment Day keys. There may only be a matter of time until the Muggles find out that we're here."

Altri swore. "You mean to tell me a powerful Muggle nation is about to discover our culture and that we enslave Muggles?"

Siatnan nodded. "That's a distinct possibility, Master Altri. Rest assured, we are going to do everything we can to find these individuals before they can expose us. Although the Muggles can't visit Syrdan, the United States's wizards certainly can. And if Nestor finds out and opens diplomatic relations with the United States, we could have veela and Muggles all over the place here with their city-wrecking explosives."

Altri nodded. "Madame Chancellor, that doesn't sound good. That sounds downright bad, to be honest."

"I fully agree. Here is what I recommend. The name of the vessel in question is the Big Texas. Here's what it looks like so you can Apparate there. I'd recommend that you head on over to the ship and pick up those slaves as soon as possible if they're on board. You can punish them however you
wish."

Altri kicked irritably at the wall. "They'll get punished, all right. What happens if they're not there?"

Siatnan's face grew grim. "We need to make it that they can't expose us to the world. If necessary, we're going to have to go over there and kill them."

To be continued...

-------------
Update #252
-------------

Friday, June 28, 1996
m/s Noordam
Fort Lauderdale, Florida
United States of America

-------------
Next PoV: 253 -- Wizard Master Antri
-------------

Michael de Vries guided the Noordam back into the cruise port in Fort Lauderdale. It would take a long, long time for the utility crews to clean up the ship after this expedition.

The crew quarters were a mess, and there was trash littering the hallways. Although the janitorial staff had done what it could to tidy things up, there were simply too many people -- most of whom were panicked refugees instead of seasoned travelers -- for them to do much good. A few windows had been broken, and many of the luxurious pieces of art Holland America had been counting on to welcome future mariners had mysteriously disappeared. The top deck's cocktail lounge now looked as if two werewolves had rampaged through it, not just one.

The passengers had overwhelmed Half Moon Cay's meager resources within a matter of hours. Fights had broken out over the little colorful cabanas on the beach, and the yellow one was now marked with a bloodstain. Three of the kayaks had disappeared, as had a few of the bikes. The television set in the snack bar was missing, and there was virtually no food remaining on the island. The staff in Amsterdam couldn't decide whether to scream at him for wrecking the ship and the island or honor him for going out of his way to rescue frightened Floridians.

He had been looking forward to getting all of the refugees off the boat. Unfortunately, it looked as if he was going to have to hold onto a few dozen for a little while longer. He really didn't WANT to do it, but it was the right thing to do.

Most of the passengers were in the process of going through customs so they could disembark and get back to what was left of their lives -- and their homes. However, about 50 of the refugees had hailed from Miami, and they had learned that their houses had been destroyed by the Cuban Death Eater's nuclear attack. He needed to keep them on board until he found someone, or somewhere, willing to house them. Perhaps he could put them to good use and have them help clean the ship up while they were there. Unlike most of the people who frequented the cruise line, a large number of them were in their 30's and 40's and therefore much better qualified for physical labor.

He had a suspicion that the ship would be heading to Atlantis at some point, as word had leaked out that Atlantis was in the process of constructing a district for Muggles to live in. The Wizarding city had houses, and the Miami refugees needed some. A good forty of them had already filled out the paperwork necessary to get them into the lottery. De Vries doubted that any of them would actually get in -- supposedly there were already 50,000 people who had expressed interest in the magical city.
However, he figured that Dialonis would expand the Muggle district when he realized the demand, which meant his passengers would probably wind up there at some point.

He wouldn't be heading to Atlantis for a while, however. His next stop was going to be Key West, where the mayor had offered to provide temporary housing for the refugees. Had Judgment Day occurred in the winter, the Keys would have been thronged with tourists and there would have been nowhere to put them. It was summer, however, and as a result there were lots of rooms available down there.

The last passenger disembarked, and de Vries turned the ship around and started it on its journey to Key West. He knew the cruise terminal there well, as it was a common Holland America tourist destination. However, this wasn't a pleasure cruise, and there wouldn't be any champagne brunches or glass-bottom boat tours awaiting his passengers there.

-----------------------
Office of the President
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Charles Vest stared at the blueprints and whistled. "I must say, Ms. Kurchatova, that's definitely...different."

The Russian House chuckled and looked at Guinevere. "I thought you'd say that, sir. It's not often that you see blueprints which include magical supports in their construction."

Vest frowned. "I sure hope we don't have any engineers in the area who are going to be wondering what's keeping that part of the building up."

Kurchatova rolled her eyes. "We both know there aren't that many course 4 students anymore -- all of them are course 6. Actually, sir, I would suspect that the architectural engineers would be intrigued by this. They could probably make a name for themselves by using magical supports in their designs. It's certainly different, as you said. And it lends itself to more unusual building designs."

Vest looked more closely at the design again. "I've noticed the low-rise is going to be hovering over a reflecting pool and a little park down there. How are the plants down there going to have access to sunlight?"

Guinevere smiled. "Magic. Trust me, they'll grow. One of my friends in the SWA was a gardener."

Vest stared at the two women skeptically. "I must say, ladies, that if you pull this off in two months I'll be very, very impressed. You're sure you can do it?"

Kurchatova raised an eyebrow. "The two of us probably can't. However, we've got a lot of friends who are willing to try. Besides, the alternative is...what? You expect to rebuild half of MacGregor, No. 6, and a piece of Burton in two months WITHOUT magic?"

Vest nodded. "I get the point. What's the Ar-38 gas for?"

"It's to prevent the magic from interfering with the electronics. Believe me, sir, most MIT students would take technology over magic every day. You should visit Next House, where the world stops for Star Trek: The Next Generation."

The president of MIT thought for a moment, and finally smiled. "Well, I say try it. If all else fails, we
could put them in a hotel."

Cooper Residence

Harrison Cooper had a headache. This time, however, it wasn't because it was getting close to new moon. He had gotten it from reading the newspaper, which was currently in his wife's hands.

Courtney read the headline of the article in shock: "Noordam Widow Joins Suit Against British Werewolf, Charging Him with Her Husband's Murder"?

Harrison nodded. "Now you see why I have a headache. This isn't going to be good, particularly if they ask for the death penalty. Oh, and did I mention that I'm going to turn into that monster again in a few days?"

To be continued...

Update #253

Saturday, June 29, 1996
Syrdasch
State of Syrdan

Next PoV: 254 -- David Stern

Altri checked the defensive spells around him one last time. He'd never had to deal with free Muggles before, and he had to assume that the escaped yahoos would ask the people on board the ship to help them fend off any attempt to recapture them. Chancellor Siatnan had introduced him to some nifty spells which would conjure strong force fields which would shield him from the nasty projectile weapons, called guns, which were favored by Muggle enforcement officials.

He had his alibi in place. The tattoos on each yahoo's forehead was a symbol representing the police in their homeland: Iceland. They were escaped prisoners who were armed and dangerous and needed to be returned to custody. He, Altri, was going to pose as a police officer and would ask for them to be rounded up.

They were almost certainly on the boat, he thought. Muggles needed fairly complicated contraptions to fly, and he doubted that the boat had any of them on it. Granted, it was a very large boat. However, there were no obvious flying machines visible from the sky, and it wouldn't make any sense for Muggle flying machines to take off from inside the vessel.

Drawing a deep breath, he turned on the spot and lurched through the air. Seconds later, he was standing on the deck of the ship. Seeing no one in the immediate vicinity, he cast a spell which would identify if the tattoo appeared anywhere in the area other than on his robe. It was a common slave-catching technique.

Not surprisingly, he got a positive response somewhere near the front of the ship. Oddly enough, there was only one response. What had happened? Had two of the slaves drowned and only one made it to the ship? That didn't make sense. The only explanation he could think of was that Siatnan and the rest of the government officials had made a mistake casting their spells. It wouldn't have been the first time the government had screwed up, he thought wryly.

Wand in hand, he made his way over to the structure which the spell had indicated held the slaves.
He suspected it was the bridge of the vessel. The captain would certainly want to help out a police officer, wouldn't he?

It took him a while to figure out how to enter the structure. Eventually, though, he found the door and encountered his first free Muggle.

The man stared at him in surprise and confusion. A wary expression appeared on the man's face, and he muttered something...in an incomprehensible language.

Altri swore to himself. He hadn't considered the possibility that these people wouldn't speak Syrdani! He then thought about it and kicked himself again. Of course they wouldn't speak Syrdani! They were Muggles! The Muggles didn't even know the island existed!

This was going to be difficult. Trying to improvise, Altri pointed at the crest on his robe to see if the person recognized it. Judging from the man's reaction, the Muggle did indeed recognize it. His eyes widened, and backed off and shouted something into the hallway behind him.

Altri didn't know what the man was saying. Hoping against hope, he tried to ask him what was going on, using sign language whenever he could. Not surprisingly, the man looked at him blankly, shook his head, and said something.

A few moments later, three other people raced into the hallway and looked at him. They were also free Muggles, as far as Altri could tell. He was about to launch into his alibi as a police officer when all four men reached into their pockets and pointed objects at him which looked like projectile weapons. All four of them shook their heads in unison and said something in a threatening tone.

This didn't look good at all. Obviously, at least one of the yahoos was on this ship. The yahoo had apparently managed to get across the fact that he was trying to escape from a slave master, and the Muggles on the ship had decided to protect him. At the very least, they weren't going to tell him where the fugitive was.

Altri knew what to do in situations like this. He'd dealt with irritated yahoos in the past, and had a lot of experience dealing with slaves. He brought out his wand and shouted "Expelliarmus", and all of the weapons flew out of the Muggles' hands and clattered to the floor. Simultaneously, all of the lights went out all across the bridge.

Kicking the projectile weapons aside, Altri looked at his wand in astonishment. Merlin's beard, what happened? He didn't tell them to turn the lights off! He looked up just in time to see one of the Muggles try to jump him. The attacker crashed into his defensive shield, grunted, and fell to the ground. Meanwhile, someone else suddenly hollered down from somewhere else in the bridge.

This was getting out of hand. He cast a sleep spell on the Muggles, followed by a Revilio Hominem to see where everybody else was. He had to find that fugitive as quickly as possible, and he would likely have to Obliviate everyone once this was done to prevent the world from finding out about Syrdan.

The question now arose as to what to do with the sleeping Muggles. Suddenly, the answer came to him. He had lost at least three slaves, possibly six. These fellows looked pretty strong. They'd be good servants and would make up for the people who had escaped. If he modified everybody else's memories to not remember these four existed, he might be able to get away with it! He would then bring these four back to Syrdan and incorporate him into his household along with any fugitives on the ship.
In the meantime, though, he couldn't let the fugitive escape. Realizing suddenly that magic appeared to interfere with the Muggles' technology, he cast some spells which would wreak enough havoc to mess with the ship's power supply temporarily. He was not going to let this ship get to the United States or wherever its destination was with that fugitive on board. If these Muggles wanted their ship back, they'd need to hand over the fugitive and allow themselves to be Obliviated to remove any mention of Syrdan.

------------------------
America for Humans Headquarters
Westboro, Kansas

------------------------
The idea spread like wildfire. Although most of America for Humans had agreed that magic could be used for good in some cases and that good wizards existed, the only way to ensure that magic was not abused was to force the wizards to police themselves.

The vote was virtually unanimous, as the majority of the right wing America for Humans members had defected to Judith Rodgers's Revelation Party. Hours later, the new head of America for Humans was making a statement agreeing to halt all attacks on wizards agreeing to police themselves by taking Unbreakable Vows to obey the laws of the land. Wizards who took vows would be welcomed into society, whereas wizards who did not would be persecuted.

Only time would tell if this would work. But it was better than nothing.

------------------------
Weird Sisters Recording Studio
Mould-on-the-Would
Great Britain

------------------------
The eight men in the Weird Sisters rock band agreed that there wasn't much use trying to popularize their music among the Wizarding community anymore. After all, the whole English-speaking world knew about them.

The Muggles, however, were an entirely different story. The Muggles didn't know about the band's music, and they would likely be blown away by all of the magic which accompanied a typical performance. From the Muggles' perspective, a Weird Sisters evening would combine aspects of a circus, magic show, and concert.

It was time for a world tour, with benefits going to charities helping the cities attacked during Judgment Day. That would give the band greater visibility among the Muggles, and it would leave the members rolling in Galleons -- or pounds -- once they performed their second tour.

To be continued...

------------------------
Update #254

Sunday, June 30, 1996
Sanders Residence
Prescott, Arizona
United States of America

------------------------
Next PoV: 255 -- Fake Name Generator, US Coast Guard

Isaac Sanders had mixed feelings when Strong Bear informed him that he would be able to return to
Fourth Mesa for work again. Two Bear, finally realizing that the emergency had past, had relaxed some of the restrictions surrounding entry into the Wizarding headquarters. Outsiders were once again allowed to come in via Floo powder, which in turn meant Sanders could go back.

He had liked working from home. However, the wizards had to go out of their way to come over to his house, and some of them weren't particularly thrilled about it. A couple of the women were actually pregnant, and they hadn't been able to Apparate at all. Melissa -- who was definitely showing by now -- could relate to that. Furthermore, Dine Institute students who were underage hadn't been able to talk to him at all the whole time the quarantine had been in effect. Sanders couldn't help think that there had been a lot of impromptu baseball games and Quidditch matches during those free periods.

The phone rang, and Sanders picked it up. "Hello?"

The caller surprised him. "Izzy? It's Dave. How have you been?"

Sanders whistled. He hadn't heard from David Stern for a long time. They had spoken a few weeks ago, but then Judgment Day and Blast Cola's new aggressive advertising campaign had gotten in the way and both men had become quite busy. He wondered what was going on.

"All right, Dave. I'll be allowed to return to Fourth Mesa pretty soon as they've relaxed some of the security restrictions over there. Melissa is definitely starting to show, and she's convinced it's a girl. I don't know how she knows that, though. Maybe she's a wizard."

Stern laughed. "I wouldn't be surprised. At any rate, I was wondering if I could do you a favor. I think I'm going to need to look for a new job."

Sanders froze. "What? A new job?"

"Yup. We had a meeting at work on Friday and were told we're going to have to take a 10% pay cut because the economy is starting to tank. Some of the advertising promotions are going to have to be cut back, and I'm worried my job may be on the chopping block. Needless to say, introducing new products is not a particularly good idea during a freak economic depression. You work for the Department of Magic now, don't you? Part of the Muggle outreach program?"

"Yeah. Melissa and I teach Muggle Studies in Fourth Mesa, though for the most part we've been having classes here of late because the facility's been in lockdown most of the time."

Stern's request surprised Sanders. "You need any help? I wouldn't mind helping out the wizards, particularly since I apparently helped film the commercial which captured that kid on the broomstick in the first place."

It took a second for Sanders to wrap his head around what Stern had said. When he did, however, his eyebrows shot up. "You don't remember...of course! You were Obliviated!"

"That's what I'm suspecting, Izzy. I certainly could imagine myself trying to protect the wizards' secrets once the news came out. However, if one of those Oblivators panicked and wiped me before the Statute of Secrecy fell --"

"That's exactly what happened, Dave. Strong Bear told me that he got you at the Super Bowl and was on the verge of getting me as well but changed his mind once he realized the cat was out of the bag. Thinking long term, he deliberately disobeyed orders and brought me on board to help get the
wizards accustomed to interacting with Muggles. As it turned out, that was the right move."

Stern grunted. "I figured as much. Well, what do you think? Do you need some help?"

Sanders thought about it. "I'm sure the wizards will be more than willing to accept your help, Dave. I'm just wondering where they'll station you. Would you be willing to leave the state? If I were Two Bear or Radner, I'd send you to a place which doesn't already have a Muggle representative."

There was a pause on the other end of the line. "If necessary, I'll do it. What about that place in Sedona?"

"Sedona falls under Fourth Mesa's jurisdiction, so they may be relying on me. However, it's not out of the question. There are six other locations, however, which may need help. Well, four -- Claire Cox got involved with Big Thicket, and I suspect Guinevere de Mornay's boyfriend and her popularity are taking care of the Northeast."

"I recognize Guinevere -- she was one of the two chicks who saved Boston -- but who's Claire Cox?"

"She was a Muggle attacked by America for Humans after they thought she was a witch. She was nearly killed."

"Ah! I remember that incident. Radner supposedly healed her and recruited her to help improve the wizards' public image."

"You've got a good memory, Dave. She's been helping us ever since, and she's been assigned to Big Thicket as a Muggle Studies teacher."

"I see. Tell Strong Bear that I'm willing to relocate if necessary and that they probably owe me a big time for wiping my memories after I supposedly tried to save their asses after I caught that kid on film."

"Will do, Dave. Will do."

There was a pause on the other end of the line. Finally, Stern chuckled. "You know, Izzy, I was half expecting you to pull the 2001 joke on me again there."

"I'm sorry, Dave, I'm afraid I can't do that? Not under serious circumstances like this!"

-----------------------

Britain for Humans Headquarters
-----------------------

Isabel Miller stood in front of the television cameras and addressed the crowd. "Yes, ladies and gentlemen. I would like to confirm that we of Britain for Humans will be willing to stop persecuting wizards if they agree to police themselves through the use of Unbreakable Vows. We believe that America for Humans is doing the right thing here, and we would like to thank Muslims for Humans for signing on as well.

"Britain for Humans is willing to lay down its weapons as long as 50% of the wizards adopt these vows by the end of the year, 95% of them adopt them by the end of 1997, and 100% adopt them by the end of 1998. Now that we know that magic can be used for good as well as for evil, it is our fervent hope that wizards will be able to ACT like humans and serve the greater good, much as Dialonis has."
Oil Tanker Big Texas

Altri was pissed. He'd looked all over the place, and recruited other wizards from Syrdan to help him with his search. They had spent a long time, deep into the night, going through every single nook and cranny on the ship.

He had debated summoning some of his yahoos to help with the search. However, it seemed too dangerous -- the yahoos could easily try to rebel here with all the Muggles around.

Besides, since when did people actually try to conduct a serious international search with a YAHOO?

The Muggles had been right. It had taken a while for the two sides to get the message across, but all were now in agreement that the yahoos were no longer on the ship.

Furious, he pointed out one of those quaint Muggle maps the crew had on the bridge (the Pacific looked so empty!) and managed to ask the bridge crew where the slaves had gone. No one answered, of course, so he was forced to Imperius someone to point out the location on the map and Obliviate him when he was done.

The man's stubby finger stabbed out and pointed at a location on the map. Altri asked him what the name of the country was, and every single Muggle's eyes shot up. Finally, one of them said, "United States of America", followed by some snide comment which Altri didn't understand.

Altri moved over to the map and jotted down some of the Muggle words near the place where the man had pointed.

UNITED STATES
LEXINGTON, KENTUCKY

Satisfied, and relieved that apparently all three escaped slaves had been on the boat, he Obliviated everyone into thinking four people had fallen overboard when a rogue wave struck the ship, collected his four new slaves, and left with the rest of the wizards. The Muggles then set to work repairing their ship and reporting the loss of their four seamen.

Altri would have had apoplexy had he known that the Muggle was only pointing out the country on the map and wasn't paying attention to which part of it his finger had landed on.

To be continued...

Update #254.1

Saturday, June 29, 1996
Study of Surface Arts
Xukwudiz manor, downtown Roqteratl.
City-state of Roqteratl, Indian Ocean (East of Seychelles)

"She said WHAT??" Jere Xukwudiz has never seen his wizard colleague so angry, shocked, and...hurt, as now. Such a temper...if he hadn't known better, he would have mistaken Theun Lentjes for a fellow merman, instead of the usually stoic Spedarnian scholar.
"Answer my question, Jere, what did your unsatiable slave driver call my work?" Theun was so close to the syren, he could clearly see his own reflection, complete with throbbing vein on the forehead, in Jere's amused eyes.

"Geez, Theun, calm down. It won't do you any good to disrespect Elder Ritva Xukwudiz as loudly as you just did. Besides, your work was excellent, it's my fault this little demonstration didn't turn out as well as intended."

The wizard stepped back, and spent a couple of minutes just regulating his breathing, and no doubt pondering the subtle warning his friend has given. It was common knowledge that Roqteratl awaited guests with hospitality, but it was also common knowledge that insulting a high-ranking native was quite hazardous to one's health. Of course, being a wizard, he could take on the whole House's guards in a fair fight...but as everyone living in Roqteratl for a sufficient length of time knew, the local political atmosphere did not favor fair fights- and even the most powerful wizard has to sleep sometimes.

Finally, the air-breather sighed. "Fine, Jere, then tell me how it was your fault?"

It was the merman's turn to look down in embarrassment. "Well, did you know that this study is not only permanently air-bubbled, but also has a much stronger floor than what my people traditionally build?"

"Now that you say it, I've noticed that all structures in this bubble are sturdier than the rest of the mansion...but that's just because here is no buoyancy, right? And how is that relevant, anyway?"

If possible, the syren looked even more embarrassed. "Well, it turns out the mosaic floor in the Great Hall is purely ornamental, and can't support a metric ton of walker prototype..."

Theun winced. "What did you break?"

"My right feet sank right through the 'Elder Keijo Xukwudiz drives out the invading feral hordes from Urowgar Colony' mosaic composition...then I've lost my balance, the walker fell flat on its back, ruining some more of the mosaic, and I couldn't stand back up!"

The wizard was smiling smugly now. "Well, in context, she was right. It's really as bad as a raging whale stuck in a coral reef! But let's tell the good news too, you said my work was excellent!"

"Well" Jere said. "It really did follow and amplify my movements. I could hold the glass orb without breaking it, and I lifted that rock without any problems...that is, if you ignore that first they had to cancel the first bubble, help my walker back on its feet and out of the Hall, and have Mage-Architect Xavius make a second bubble on solid rock."

"So your design has to lose weight, and otherwise we're ready?"

"It's not so easy, Theun. My design is as light as it'll ever be. The legs can't be any shorter or I won't be scaling any of your stairs. The container is as streamlined as possible, any less water and I'll breathe it anoxic faster than the filter refreshes it. And we need every bit of the force amplifier system to stay within parameters...Poseidon help me, I'm out of ideas. The Amplified Surface Mobility Platform is ready, but it's as heavy as a giant, and not half as dextrous as the Elder wants it. And I too wanted it to be as good up there as any surface dweller, to be able to run, jump, walk in forests and climb mountains...not a lumbering behemoth that crushes floors..."

Jere was really desperate, and the human couldn't help but feel sorry for him. He reached out and patted the grim merman on the shoulder. "Cheer up, man, if it's like a giant then it's cool to go on diplomatic missions wherever giants can go. It's not like us surface dwellers could move so gracefully down here as your folk, even with magic to help us."

A tiny voice suddenly joined the conversation. "Daddy, can I ride on Fuzzy again? Please, please, please?"

The source of the voice was Jere's five year old daughter Ariel, standing at the doorway as upright as she could on her tail. Well, technically not only on her tail, as with her left hand she leaned on the doorframe, and the right affectionately grasped a leg of Fuzzy, the wolf-sized Acromantula young, who distinctly looked like he'd rather be elsewhere. The wizard knew why- the ocean visible across the windows of the study unnerved even him, and he wasn't an aquaphobic arachnid. Also, the kid could be fairly annoying...she was just learning to speak when he and the young spider arrived there, and instantly named the monster and became attached to it, neither knowing nor caring that it was
sentient, and about to grow really big. That is, if it survived long enough—although he made it clear that harming Ariel in any way will get the spider thrown out the airlock, the girl sometimes was really pushing it. Or rather, at the moment, pulling—the delicate hair on Fuzzy's leg.

"Fine, go on!" waved dismissively Jere, and in a moment the girl was sitting on the spider's back, holding onto fistfuls of hair, racing away on the corridor. When they were out of earsight, he turned to the human. "Please remind me, Theun, why do I tolerate that monster in my home?"
"Because it's my sentient, obedient pet and I need his poison. Your daughter is safe with it, and she isn't underfoot this way. Now, back to the topic of engineering, this walker needs better weight distribution. It has to touch the ground with a greater surface."
"Yes," snapped irately the merman, "and if I give it even bigger feet it will be even more clumsy!"

At this moment, they heard a crash from the corridor. Already angry, the syren practically shouted: "Ariel, how many times do I need to tell you, hold on tight to Fuzzy when you make it climb the...wall." As he said the last word, he found that he's face to face with the wizard, and from the look in his eyes, he guessed he just got the same idea.
"Well, my friend, if my idea works, your pet has just proven more useful than ever."

To be continued...

Update #254.5

Sunday, June 30, 1996
Greater Council Chamber, Roqteratl
City-state of Roqteratl

"Truly, the ancestors had extreme foresight", thought The Eldest of Roqteratl, as he looked around in the room stuffed full of visitors. Indeed, rebuilding the Greater Council Chamber at it's original size after the Hammer of Ra fell has seemed a very optimistic choice at most of the times, and the great hall has been used far more frequently as a theater or sports stadium instead of a place for diplomatic gatherings, but now, it was once again full of ambassadors as it was designed to be. For the first time in thousands of years, the Shining City* has sent messengers to all merpeople cities, and as an equally rare thing, their calls were actually heeded.
The chamber was round, sinking towards the middle, where a single great podium towered above all others. To accomodate the majority of the guests, the building was filled with seawater, the air-breathers used Bubble-Head Charms or Gillyweed to attend the meeting. As it also caused a marked difference in mermish speech's quality, they didn't complain for the inconvenience.
Most air-breathers in the room were quite used to being underwater, they were diplomats routinely dealing with Roqteratl after all. On the other hand, most of the foreign merpeople in the room have never spoken a single word with surface dwellers. "Well, that's about to change...and only time can tell if it's changing for better or worse", he thought. Delegations were still arriving and taking their seats in the hall, and The Eldest squinted, trying to identify them. As he concluded that old age has really taken it's toll on his eyesight, he turned to his aide for help. "Senja, dear, please tell me who we have here today!"
"It looks really good, Sir, many has come. I see all the city's Great Houses and Guilds are present, and the doormen confirmed what the messengers said: all of our kin's towns sent delegations as soon as they heard the news. Hell, even the feral tribes have sent envoys, and we all know they usually stab first, and never ask any questions. Do you really think the news are so important, my lord?"
"You still have much to learn, child...but you'll get your answers soon. Now tell me about the surface dwellers, who they sent?"
"I see the usual group from the Galiver Consortium, then there's a handful of grim humans in furs and leathers with a wolf banner, they must be the Luggnagian delegation, next to them are a group of yellow-skins, I think they are the Balniken envoys, and a group of strange dark men with painful-looking facial scars have just arrived...my lord, I've never seen anything like them!"

"Black, with facial markings, you say? Those can only be the Tsalal...I didn't really expect them to show up. They are the most secretive isolationist group I've ever seen. Remind me to tell about how I met them back in my young days, when this meeting is over."

As the last of the Tsalal took their seats, The Eldest signed to the guards to close the doors- this was not an open meeting, and what needed to be said was not for the common people's ears. He inhaled to calm his nerves, and swam on top of his podium. The Chamber was built in such a way, that even without magic, his voice was heard by all.

"Strangers from distant waters, friends of all! You've been summoned here to answer the threats of the Muggle World, or as some of you call it, Galiver. What all of you know, is that ten days ago, strange magical lights interrupted the night all around the globe. What most of you know, is that it was the signal that the ancient Wizard protocol known as Judgement Day was enacted. What I'm about to say is only known to a handful of you.

Two days before Judgement Day, a Muggle submarine, an underwater ship entered Lake Hogsmeade, Scotland, and was allowed to see Merpeople in their true form. Five days after that, it did so again, to scout the local Merpeople town and interrogate the Merchieftainess of that town. One of you witnessed both interactions. Jarno of Lake Hogsmeade, swim forward and brief us exactly what happened there!"

The audience kept it's calm until the mention of Muggles seeing merpeople, but by now, confused murmuring grew into outright shouting. Chaos was imminent. As a young merman, a fine specimen of Scotland Selkies complete with greyish skin and green hair swam up to the podium, he could but look around confused, unsure of what to do. The Eldest shrugged, then turned to his other aide, a wizard of the Architect Guild, and nodded. One Sonorus later, his voice outshouted all in the hall.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I humbly remind you to obey the traditions of this meeting and listen to the actual speaker. Jarno, say what you have to say."

"Thank you, sir. Ladies and gentlemen, all of us have heard and most of us have known already that the Muggles are experimenting with underwater ships. What we didn't know, is that they have ways of detecting charmed objects, that are hidden even from wizards! They claimed their machines could now see things protected by Disillusionment Charms! They claimed to be searching for one of the dark wizard Voldemort's artifacts, a Horcrux they said. We don't know what that means, but decided to be cautious and stay away from the ship.

Five days later, the ship returned looking for us. We stood against it and asked it to stop at the edge of our town, but it's seen most of it anyway. We didn't see any weak point on it, and it visibly tried to look less menacing, so when the Muggle woman on board started asking questions, my Chieftainess answered them truthfully. They displayed complete ignorance, but also what looked like surprising degrees of well intentioned curiosity. They asked about our numbers in the town, about our ability to take the shape of dolphins, our ancestry, likeness to humans, ability to interbreed with humans, and if we can breathe and move on the land. They also wished to know if we know about Judgement Day. From what she told it's apparent that all the Muggle world knows about our town now, and they know about the wizards too- and the wizards let it!

The room exploded into a cacophony of shouts and wails, and once again The Eldest required wizard assistance to restore order.

"Thank you, son. Now, as you've all realized, the Muggles are about to discover all of our cities, and nothing we can do will stop them. But why the desperation? Wizards living among Muggles have thrown away their Statute of Secrecy almost half a year ago, and yet they were not chased down. I say, if we start respecting Muggles as people, and here I mean you Mr. Centaur and Mr. Festand", he looked pointedly towards the Galiver Consortium delegation, "we might even benefit from all this change! Not all of you know, but there was a time thousands of years ago, before the Hammer of Ra
fell on us and floods covered the lands, when Muggles, Wizards and all other people lived together, including us... and we, merpeople, prospered! The legends claiming that there were other cities as magnificent as this one are true, people, and it was trade with the land-dwellers, all the land-dwellers that made them rich. Bear this in mind when you establish contact with the Muggles."

But as he looked around, he saw that not all guests agreed. While most merpeople looked up to him waiting for further advice, the air-breathers had other opinions: the Galiver Consortium envoys were bickering among themselves, and the Tsalals tried very hard to earn his attention. He turned to his wizard aide, and gestured toward the Tsalal delegation. The Sonorus-enhanced announcement, "Chair recognise Tsalal ambassador", managed to quiet all down. The diplomat swimming to the podium looked familiar to The Eldest, and it didn't take long for him to recognise the man. He kept his voice down:

"Zhyrr, old friend, long time no see! You have time for me once this meeting it over?"

"I'd rather see you on a happier occasion, Hessu, but I always have time for you." Came the whispered answer in strangely accented Galiver, then the black man stepped up on the podium to speak to the assembly.

"Ladies and gentlemen, while I know what the Eldest says is true, I have to remind you all of the darker side of Muggles. My country exists, and exists under two miles of ice becouse some powerful Muggle factions tended to be completely ignorant and prejudiced in the past, forcing their faith and traditions on each other and persecuting my people. For centuries, they actually believed that muggles whose skin isn't white are soulless animals. For all we know, Muggles who have believed so and acted accordingly are still in power in their world! We should proceed with caution, extending one hand in greeting to the Muggles, but holding our best weapons in the others...and gods help them if they force us to use those weapons!"

The assembly erupted in cheers at this- they could all relate. While The Eldest, along with many other leaders, favored peaceful solutions, peace through power had a very strong allure to the younger ones. The old merman rose to speak once more.

"I agree with the Tsalal's standpoint, and this is why, if you look around, you don't see anyone from the Muggle lands, or Atlantis. Dialonis seems confident, but the fact remains: breaking the Statute of Secrecy nearly plunged the world in an apocaliptic war in less than half a year. I say, we don't go to them, but wait for them where we are...and when they come to us, we stand united and strong, so that they'll never again have the courage to hunt any of us! What say you??"

The crowd's responses were undividedly affirmative, so he ventured on:

"Brothers, sisters! Let a treaty commemorate our unity, saying that all of us are obliged to help each other against unjust Muggle aggression as much as we can! Who's with me??"

As it turned out, all the attendants were willing to be part of such an alliance, and so the negotiations could proceed on to the details.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #255
-------------
Monday, July 1, 1996
Coast Guard Station
Boston, Massachusetts
United States of America
-------------
Next PoV: 256 -- David Hendrickson
-------------
Commander Michael Mershon stared at the report in surprise, then turned to the other Coast Guard officer. "You've got to be kidding. A rogue wave hit the Big Texas and knocked four bridge officers overboard?"
The other officer nodded. "Affirmative, sir. In all fairness, though, I can't imagine how any wave could be massive enough to cause serious damage to an oil tanker."

Mershon frowned. "I can't fathom how the wave could have taken out bridge officers and only bridge officers. For one thing, I find it hard to believe that people would be washed overboard unless they were out in the open, and I wouldn't expect the bridge crew to be dawdling around on deck."

"Yes, sir. I can't argue with your logic there. I find it hard to understand myself, particularly since we were able to get a radio response from the ship -- several hours later, but we got one. Think about it, sir. The main radio station is located on the bridge. If the bridge was flattened by a rogue wave, how did they send the signal?"

Mershon's frown deepened. "You know, Lieutenant, that's a very good point. Something very strange is going on here. Did any EPIRBs go off in the area?"

The other officer shook his head. "No, sir, which is also surprising. You'd have expected a wave that big to knock some of those into the water and activate them. However, there's even a more obvious piece of information which doesn't seem to make sense."

"Oh? What's that?"

"Sir, there's no oil slick. You'd expect any damage to an oil tanker to cause a major oil slick. Yet none of the satellite images over the past 24 hours show any sign of an oil slick in the area. What's more, the most recent satellite image still shows the ship heading for Boston. It's a little behind schedule, but it's still en route. And it doesn't seem to have any obvious damage."

Mershon didn't like this. Something fishy was going on here, and he intended to figure out what it was. He suddenly realized he'd discussed this particular vessel earlier: it had been the one which had stumbled across three people on a raft which didn't speak any language known to anyone at either Harvard or MIT.

The communication barrier with the Syrdan family was still formidable. However, it was now obvious that they had been running from something and had been treated very badly by whatever it was. Had the entity chasing the refugees done something to the ship, thinking they were on board? If so, was it going to follow the refugees to the American mainland?

This did not sound good. Not good at all.

His train of thought was interrupted by the arrival of another man who saluted, handed him a document, and left. Puzzled, he asked the officer he was speaking with to wait a moment while he read it.

URGENT BULLETIN: FIVE (5) BODIES PULLED FROM WATER FIVE MILES FROM JEKYLL ISLAND, GEORGIA. THREE MALES AND TWO FEMALES. ALL WERE CARRYING WANDS. REPEAT, ALL WERE CARRYING WANDS. PRELIMINARY INDICATIONS SUGGEST WIZARDS ATTEMPTING TO PORTKEY INTO THE COUNTRY BUT FAILING TO GET THROUGH THE PROTECTIVE BARRIER AND MATERIALIZING IN THE OCEAN. ALL FIVE PEOPLE HAD DISTINCTIVE DRESS SIMILAR TO THAT USED BY WIZARDS, AND ONE OF THEM HAD A SYMBOL ON HIS ROBE SIMILAR TO THAT TATTOOED ON THE HEADS OF THE PEOPLE RESCUED FROM BIG TEXAS.
Mershon's eyebrows shot up. This sounded like a Wizarding manhunt or a possible invasion. This was worse than he thought. Whistling, he handed the document to the lieutenant, and the lieutenant stared at the paper in shock.

"Good God, sir. Are you thinking what I'm thinking? We've got wizards trying to get into the country and chase those refugees down?"

Mershon nodded. "That's what I'm thinking, Lieutenant. Voldemort probably had a secret base hidden somewhere in the Atlantic. These fellows we picked up probably tried to escape or warn us, and the Death Eaters are on their tails making sure they don't succeed. Where are the Syrdans right now?"

"Public housing in Dorchester, sir."

"Good, so they're still in the area. Get in touch with them again and bring them in. Send a plane out to check on that tanker. And tell Radner, or at least Ariadne if Radner is busy. Make sure a wizard is here for the next interview, at the very least to help translate if necessary. At the rate things are going, we'll probably need a magic spell to figure out what these guys are saying."

Fourth Mesa

Strong Bear groaned. "David Stern. Well, well, well. I remember him very, very, well. Unfortunately, I doubt he remembers me."

Sanders grunted. "You Obliviated him, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did. Granted, it was just after I saw the commercial on the television monitor in the arena, and I panicked a little. He's a good man, Mr. Sanders. I realized that Obliviating him had been a mistake shortly after recruiting you, but at that point there was nothing I could have done."

"Will you be willing to take him on?"

Strong Bear nodded fervently, but Two Bear thought for a moment. "Although it behooves us to bring him back and compensate him for what we did to him, I don't think he'll be able to do much good here at Fourth Mesa. After all, we've already got a Muggle Studies professor here -- you. It would make more sense to send him somewhere which doesn't currently have a Muggle representative."

Sanders nodded. "I told him that. Do you have somewhere in mind?"

"Yes, Mr. Sanders. Unless I'm very badly mistaken, Diana Simmons of the Mt. St. Helens facility does not yet have a Muggle ambassador. Would he be willing to move up there?"

"I'll ask him. However, I can tell you already that he loves to travel. I suspect he'll take the job."

Werewolf Rehabilitation Center

Hogsmeade

The Wolfsbane Potion was a godsend, Harrison thought. Although he still had urges to bite people, he at least knew what he was doing and was able to restrain himself.
He knew what to expect now, and this time wasn't taken by surprise when he transformed into the monster. It still hurt, of course, but he knew that the pain wouldn't last long.

Looking at the Morse Code chart on the ceiling, he barked a message to the humans thanking them for creating the Wolfsbane Potion. Content, he curled up in a ball, put his tail between his legs, and fell asleep.

To be continued...
Update #256

-------------
Monday, July 1, 1996
Harold-Green Pharmaceutical Corporation
Charleston, South Carolina
United States of America
-------------
Next PoV: 257 -- Me
-------------
David Hendrickson looked at the little note scribbled in the margin of Dr. Flamel's manuscript. He didn't know whether to be worried about it or amused.

"Do not change lead into gold, or Our Lord Jesus Christ will punish you for your greed. I grew weak, lost my hair, and felt the burning touch of the Lord's wrath. If you must do so, use mercury, and do so under the following conditions. First, let it sit for two weeks, douse all open flames, and then siphon off the top one percent..."

The note went on for a while, and Hendrickson eventually grew tired of reading it. For one thing, he didn't have any mercury to play with, only lead. Furthermore, Mr. Green was getting impatient and wanted to hear an update as soon as possible. Finally, Hendrickson doubted that Flamel had actually suffered a supernatural punishment as a result of his experimentation. He'd probably gone bald, that's all. It happened to most men.

Still, it didn't hurt to be cautious. Putting on something the Muggles called an X-ray suit -- which was probably overkill -- and additional protective gear, he picked up his wand and walked over to the bar of lead sitting on the workbench. He followed the instructions to the letter, placing the Stone on top of the lead and drawing the appropriate mystical symbols around it. Finally, when all was ready, he tapped the Stone with the end of his wand and shouted, "Aurify!"

There was a flash of light and a brief burst of heat. When it had subsided, a bar of gold was sitting on the workbench. It was surrounded by a narrow corona of silvery powder, which slowly began to turn gray as he watched. The powder's behavior reminded him a lot of the elements lithium and sodium. However, this powder was doing things neither lithium nor sodium did, such as disappearing before his eyes and changing color.

He barely had time to register surprise at this when alarms started hollering all over the lab. A few feet away from Hendrickson, a large machine started crackling wildly. What the hell? He looked around the room to see what was going on and saw the other technicians staring at flashing red sign with three triangles on it. Underneath it was the word RADIATION.

Seconds later, people were shouting and stampeding out of the room. Hendrickson shook his head and turned back to the workbench, where most of the powder had disappeared. He was about to examine the gold further when one of his coworkers grabbed him by the arm.

"David, get out of here! There's been a radiation leak!"
Hendrickson stared in confusion as the technician let go of his arm and ran towards the exit where -- much to Hendrickson's dismay -- a large metal door was slowly sliding shut. Although he figured that these particles wouldn't interfere with his spell work, he couldn't afford to take any chances, and he didn't want to risk whatever disease the man had been screaming about without magic to protect him. Making up his mind a hurry, he placed his hand on the gold bar so he could put it in his pocket and show Mr. Green his work on the Stone was complete.

He shrieked in surprise, and the bar fell from his gloved hand. For some reason, it was very hot. Praying his wand still worked, he used a Summoning Charm to bring over a small box, pushed the bar into the box with his wand, and closed the lid. He then sprinted for the door and managed to make his way out of the lab just before it sealed off the room.

What the hell was that all about?

Shrugging, he was about to head off to show the bar to Mr. Green when he realized that he should probably capture some of that powder before it all disappeared. Turning back towards the door, he tried to push it open. However, it wouldn't open. Worse still, the Alohomora charm didn't seem to do much good as there wasn't a lock on it. And judging from the looks the other technicians were giving him, opening that door at this point would probably be a Bad Idea.

One of the other scientists looked at his suit, and the man's eyes widened. Pointing at a readout on Hendrickson's suit, he shouted: "Jesus Christ! That's one hell of a dosage! It's probably survivable if we act fast enough. Let's get to the hospital, stat!"

Hendrickson was dragged along by the flood of people heading towards the infirmary. What the hell was the man talking about?

-----------------------
United Nations Building
Geneva, Switzerland
-----------------------

Anastasios Dialonis knelt at the center of the room. In his 75 years of existence, he had never thought that he'd be in a situation like this.

Dialonis had been raised Greek Orthodox. However, he had no idea that the Church even had knighthood. Furthermore, in all of the confusion surrounding Samuel, the two popes, and the Kohen Gadol, he had completely forgotten that Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem was still around.

Apparently, someone in the Church had decided to knight him. So, they'd brought out the Patriarch, told Dialonis to kneel, and announced that he was now considered a Knight of the Holy Sepulchre. Dialonis had no idea what to say. He personally thought that Suleiman I was much more deserving of such a title than the he (Dialonis) was, but it seemed as if the Muggles were going to insist on this as a reward for saving the planet during Judgment Day.

People cheered for a good five minutes as he knelt there on the ground. Dialonis had no idea what he was supposed to say, and just knelt there, speechless. Still on his knees, he watched as the Greek
representative stepped forward and put a big medal around his neck. Cameras -- both Muggle and Wizarding -- flashed everywhere. The Grand Mugwump thought it was a nice gesture, but he wasn't sure what exactly do with the thing. Perhaps he could make it part of the Grand Mugwump's formal attire for his successors.

Finally, Kofi Annan walked to the podium and told Dialonis to rise. The Secretary-General of the United Nations spoke three sentences, but he brought everyone in the room to his or her feet.

"Wizard Dialonis, we would like you to join the United Nations as the ambassador to, and representative of, Atlantis and the Wizarding community. Now that the Muggles and wizards will be interacting once again, it is imperative that this body take the advice of the wizards into consideration when determining how exactly the world is to be run. What do you say, Sir Anastasios?"

Dialonis was floored. He wasn't entirely sure how well he'd be able to handle this, but if anyone was capable of fulfilling this role, it would be he. He was about to have a few Muggle ambassadors in Atlantis's governing council, after all. It was only fair for the wizards to return the favor.

He nodded, and the crowd roared its approval. Dialonis made it a point to nominate Dagher for the next Grand Mugwump and have Dagher's deputy take over as the Saudi Minister of Magic. Ndukaku was better known, but he was inexperienced -- having just been elevated to Head Astrologer just before Judgment Day -- and his elevation would force the Astrologer's Key into the hands of Ndukaku's deputy, someone whom Dialonis thought was not yet up to the task.

---------------------------------
Salem Witches' Academy
---------------------------------

Persephone Ariadne looked at the report. Refugees with tattoos arrive, speaking strange languages and appearing seemingly out of nowhere in the middle of the Atlantic. They're granted citizenship and asylum in the United States. A little while later, other people with tattoos trying to break into the country in pursuit of the refugees. This second group crashes into the Portkey barrier and drowns itself in the Atlantic.

There was only possible explanation. The United States had stumbled across some Syrdani, and it was only a matter of time until Clinton found out that some of the wizards kept slaves.

This was going to be ugly.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #256.1
-------------

Monday, July 1, 1996
Study of Surface Arts
Xukwudiz manor, downtown Roqteratl.
City-state of Roqteratl

Refreshed after a good night's sleep, Theun Lentjes entered the study visibly reinvigorated. It was about time he got some rest, after spending three days in a row debating ideas with Jere in the siren's workshop with virtually no shut-eye. Speaking of which, he saw a lot more equations on the numerous blackboards hanging from the walls, and he had to step over ankle-high piles of papyrus scrolls full of sketches as he progressed towards the table. There, surrounded by an extremely large and apparently chaotically arranged mass of scrolls and tomes, lay the study's owner, who, from the
looks of it, succumbed to fatigue in the middle of reading an obscure Syrdani record detailing animated statues...and snoring in a decidedly unhealthy tone.

Sighing in resignation, he grabbed the sleeping merman and dragged him to the nearest paper-free spot on the floor, then pointed his wand at Jere's face and yelled: "Aguamenti!"
The Xukwudiz scholar woke with a start, and looked around wildly with surprised and panicked eyes. His gaze settled on his friend, and after swallowing a mouthful of refreshing water, he gathered himself and calmly addressed the Spedarnian, but his voice was audibly hoarse.

"And a good morning to you too, Theun. Did I fall asleep again?"
"Damn right you did, my friend, and I'm starting to feel concerned for you. You sound really dry when you sleep, and now even awake."
"Believe it, I feel really dry too."
"Why don't you take a swim outside? You've stayed inside the bubble for what, two days now?"
"One day, twenty-two hours and seven minutes. I'm still good to go."
"The hell you are! Your designs will wait for you, and I'll too- in fact, I refuse to work with you until you take a swim!"
"Alright, alright, but just because you insist." With that, the siren moved out of the study, and made his way towards the nearest airlock.

"Damn bull-headed workaholic, he'll end up suffocating or starving to death someday...but not while I'm watching over him", the wizard said to no-one in particular, as he picked up a parchment from the table. At first, he couldn't make heads or tails of the drawing on it, then the wizard realised he's looking at a close-up of a mechanical spider's leg- a heavily upgraded spider's leg. He counted at least two blades, a hook, and even what appeared to be folded swimming webs, which were concealed in the appendage according to the design. Hearing his friend's return, he turned towards him, and was relieved to see how even such a short time in the sea refreshed Jere.

"You like my work?"
Theun gestured around the room. "You've been most productive last night. But do you really think it's necessary to arm a civilian vehicle so heavily?"
"Those aren't weapons, just tools. If my calculations are correct, I'll be able to climb rocks and trees with them."
"If you say so...but you can't use those in the Ambassador model, some cultures don't value concealed weaponry on diplomats like yours."
"My friend, just tell me, why would I need to conceal a puny five-inch blade in the walker's leg, when it's grip can shatter bones?"
"Redundancy, for one."
"Fair enough", smirked the siren. "Tell me, are the calming runes still working?"
Instead of answering verbally, Theun put a box on the table, and opened the lid. Inside, there were two Chocolate Frogs, one of them with miniature symbols adorning it's back, the other unmarked. The latter one jumped out just a heartbeat after it looked around, and tried it's best to get away. The marked one looked around too, but it stayed in place, and only jumped away when the wizard reached towards it- and once it jumped into a safe distance, it stopped moving again.

"It works, and it will stay this way until the seal is removed. Of course, the animation charm will wear out soon, but another seal will make it permanent just like that. Your perfect mechanic riding spiders will be mobile and tame forever this way."
"Brilliant. One detail just bugs me, though. What happens if the seal is broken by damage?"
"The spell it preserves will go away harmlessly, why?"
"Well, while I insist those tools in it's legs are not weapons, I'd rather not be close to an animated mechanic Acromantula equipped with them when it's calming charm dissipates."
"Point taken, I'll combine the enchantments so if one seal is broken, the other one automatically dissolves. This way instead of going on a rampage, it'll just shut down. Harmless enough for you?"
"Fine, you draw up the combined seal, while I assemble the prototype. I'll be at the forge if you need me."
"Right, I'll join you there, this won't take too long. Please try not to fry yourself while waiting for
To be continued...
--------------
Update #257
--------------
Monday, July 1, 1996
169 South Street
Waltham, Massachusetts
United States of America
--------------
Next PoV: 258 -- Persephone Ariadne
--------------
I dragged my suitcase up the stairs and back into my apartment in Waltham. I had only been in Curacao for a couple of weeks, yet the entire world had changed in the meantime.

Several cities had been hit with nuclear weapons, including New York. Jon Tatelman, who had been living in the Upper West Side, was stuck at his parents' house in Newton for the time being because his apartment building had taken some damage and was waiting for federal (and magical) inspectors to make sure that it was safe for him to return home. He had been shielded from the blast and initial radiation pulse itself by being in a building and had suffered minimal radiation exposure. He had been very, very lucky. His mother, of course, was acting like a traditional Jewish mother and was trying to make sure he wasn't out of her sight, something which irritated him to no end.

My father lost a few distant cousins in Tel Aviv, and a couple of people in Haifa had run for the hills as soon as the dirty bomb had gone off. I hadn't know these people all that well, however. Some of my mother's friends had been killed in the Miami blast, though Lee Mozes had managed to escape to the Ocala National Forest Wizarding facility. The wizards had tried to do what they could, but she had been placed in cramped quarters and was happy to leave. She wished she could have taken some of the magical artifacts, but Kenneth Franco -- the man in charge of the facility -- explained that the artifacts had to stay put until the wizards determined how safe they would be in Muggle hands. Judging from the bizarre -- and amazing -- things I had seen in the annex behind my grandfather's house, I wasn't surprised.

No one had yet determined how exactly magic worked. Supposedly several wands, brooms, and packets of Floo powder had made it into scientists' hands, and the physicists were working with them around the clock. There was an unconfirmed that wands tended to cause the gravitational constant around them to increase at a rate significantly greater than that expected from another object of the same mass. Could magic be exploiting a new physical process or law which neither Newton or Einstein had noticed? For the first time in a long time, I regretted having switched from physics to computer science -- had I stayed in physics, I would have been in the forefront of this new development.

The events of Judgment Day had altered the world's geography. There were now several lakes on the map which hadn't been there before the 20th, most notably Lake Scrimgeour, in the center of London. They had altered the world politically as well, as Israel was in absolute chaos and North Korea had virtually ceased to exist.

Word had just come out that the South had organized a plebiscite which would allow the people in the North to vote for an interim president and to determine whether the country wanted to stay Communist or transition to democracy or some other form of government. The vote had been
scheduled for August 1st. In the meantime, the First Division of the Wizard's Standing Army was separating the two sides and serving as a mediator. Saddam Hussein had been allowed to occupy a small disputed piece of land in recognition of his help with Judgment Day, and he had issued a statement stating that he would welcome all Muslim wizards into Iraq. Meanwhile, Hosni Mubarak had been given control of the Habibi Triangle, a disputed area near the border with Sudan.

The idea of Saddam Hussein welcoming in Muslim wizards worried a few people, including many of my friends. Although the vast majority of Muslims were peaceful -- the one man I knew from MIT who supported the Palestinians said that although he was Palestinian, he wasn't crazy enough to get involved in the West Bank -- everyone knew that several of the Indian Death Eaters had been Muslim. What would happen if Saddam found himself ousted -- or Imperiused -- by the surviving Death Eaters? Judging from the fact that the price of gas was now $3.16/gallon, it sounded like several oil speculators were rather nervous about this possibility. The fact that a rogue wave had struck an oil tanker in the middle of the Atlantic -- killing four crewmen -- hadn't helped.

I was more worried about my job than the situation in the Middle East. People were being laid off in droves, and the stock market was down 37% since before Judgment Day. As a new employee -- having been at Parametric less than five months -- I could very easily be the first to go. If all else failed, I could go back and finish my PhD at Brandeis. Hopefully that would keep me occupied until the dust settled.

The girl I knew from Russian House had continued to do things I couldn't believe. She had apparently decided to celebrate her graduation by saving a few million people from radioactive fallout and helping plan a newly renovated MacGregor. Dede Janitch had supposedly been dispatched on a peacekeeping mission, as had been Deena Disraelly. And most amazing of all, the idea of producing force fields to create fallout shelters had been developed by a sixteen-year-old girl from England, one who supposedly had caught the eye of Prince William -- now King William V!

I figured I'd start heading back to work tomorrow. I wondered how many people would be there: 80%? 90%? Aaron was going to be coming in, as was Matt. However, I suspected that people had gone home to New York during as the fighting with Voldemort had been winding down. If they didn't come back...well, we'd know for certain.

I headed to the supermarket to stock up on some groceries and was surprised to see that the prices had gone up drastically. I had a decent salary now -- much better than the one I had had as a PhD stipend -- but the discovery still made me a bit uneasy. Presumably it was a combination of the high oil prices, the world instability, and the disruption of the supply, road, and rail networks caused by the nuclear explosions. The place was packed, as it appeared that several people had had the same thoughts my family had and were just coming back to see if their houses were OK.

There were rumors among my Brandeis friends that several people I knew may have been killed in Tel Aviv and New York. I didn't know for certain, but I figured I'd find out soon enough when everyone came back to class in September. My friends had lucked out during their stay in Israel during the Gulf War, as they had been studying in seminaries in Jerusalem when SCUDs were falling in Tel Aviv. I had a suspicion that they wouldn't be as lucky this time.

I was more than intrigued about Grand Mugwump -- now Ambassador -- Dialonis's declaration that there would be a lottery which would allow 3,000 Muggles to move to Atlantis. Judging from what I had seen in the Wizarding annex, I figured I'd have liked it. However, odds were that even if I did enter my name, I wouldn't be chosen -- supposedly already 500,000 people had entered. Oddly enough, many of them had been from the Ukraine, of all places. That didn't really make all that much sense, as that nation had not taken any nuclear hits. The world works in mysterious ways, I mused.
And it would continue to do so -- how else would the Boston Coast Guard manage to pluck a bunch of foreigners out of the middle of the Atlantic, with no land in sight?

Shrugging, I headed to the checkout line to buy my goods.

To be continued...

-------------

Update #257.5
-------------

Monday, July 1, 1996
Border Zone
City-state of Rooqteratl, Indian Ocean (East of Seychelles)

The last rays of the setting sun shined through the pristine waters of the Indian. Below the ocean's gentle waves, giant strands of tropical kelp reached towards the surface from the dim depths, slightly rocking to the wave's rhythm. For many of the myriad animals living on and around them, it was just a silent, ordinary dusk.

For the lone tiger shark swimming slowly but purposefully along the edge of the underwater forest all day, it felt like something more...something tasty. It's fine-tuned senses picked up a good-sized body's erratic moves, along with the distinctive aroma of blood in the water not five minutes ago. Being the apex predator of these waters, the fact that he (for it was a male) had never before swum in this forest didn't concern him- his exceptional senses were more than enough to let him sense his surroundings, and no prey was foolish enough to fancy itself the hunter of a mature tiger shark. "Hearing" the irregular splashes closer and closer, and smelling more and more of the alluring scent of blood, his already simple mind's tracks narrowed down to the question of food. He came at last to a small clearing between the strands of macro-algae, and his sharp eyes finally confirmed what his other senses told him since what felt like an eternity in tantalizing hunger: a lone dolphin, seemingly injured or ill, resting just below the surface, visibly having trouble even just staying there. Focusing on his prey, the shark's senses picked up several other dolphins, unmoving, hiding in the kelp at the edges of the clearing...but they didn't stand in his way, so he didn't care.

Had he been a marine biologist, he'd have wondered why they left their fellow pod member to suffer alone.

Had he been a smaller shark, he'd have considered the hiding dolphins a threat.

Had he been a decent tactician, or Erik Bauersfeld, he'd have screamed "It's a trap!" at the top of his lungs...but he was neither, and he didn't have lungs. Being just a big, hungry shark, he slowly circled in the darkening waters, so his striped body hid him from the unsuspecting prey, and as the darkness of night finally took over, he began his ascent behind the dolphin's tail.

For the Red Squad of Rooqteratl Border Defense, the dusk was neither silent nor ordinary. If all went according to plan, their trainee, Toni Kexitalo (code name Red 2), had his initiation this night. Completely inaudible to human, tiger shark, or most animals for that matter, the border waters were full of quick, high-frequency clicks. The noises were those associated with regular dolphin sonar, but these had a different pattern, somewhat similar to human Morse Code. Translated, they would be like this:

<This is Red 6, intruder spotted, copy that?>
<Copy that, Red 6, does it match with the sightings?>
<Positive, Red Leader, mature tiger shark, male. It seems it took the bait, it's definitely swimming your way.>
<Whoa RL, I see it too, won't it be too big for Kexy?>
<Stay professional Red 1, he's Red 2 on duty, and he'll do it alright!>
As the shark finally burst up toward his prey, several things happened in short succession: the struggling dolphin, aka Red 3, darted sideways away from the shark. At the same time, a so far apparently hiding dolphin, aka Trainee Toni Kexitalo, aka Red 2, lunged toward the back of the shark, shapeshifted to merman, and slashed the left gills of the shark clean through with a knife, evoking a quick <Good hit, Red 2> from another "dolphin". Momentum carried the shocked predator on, over the surface- only as it's mouth caught empty air instead of flesh, and agonising pain shot through it's body, did it realise it's in trouble. As the shark fell back in the water, already dazed from it's injured respiratory organ, it say dark red mist all around him, and over that, hazy images of dolphins coming forward, changing shape to humanoids holding pointy sticks, throwing them at him...then nothing.

It was midnight when Red Squad's shift ended, and they began their journey home to their barracks in the outskirts of Roqteratl. They swam slowly with their burden- along with the very dead tiger shark, they carried several smaller ones, speared to death as the big one's blood lured them in the area. With the sole exception of some blood in a tightly closed jar given to Yellow Squad to repeat their stunt, they left nothing behind. It would have been a sin to waste any of that good meat, sharkskin, and teeth, they'll get good money for those in the market tomorrow. But first things forst, they had a feast tonight, celebrating the successful initiation of Toni Kexitalo, Red 2, full member of Red Squad.

To be continued...

----------------------
Update #258
----------------------
Tuesday, July 2, 1996
Coast Guard Headquarters
Boston, Massachusetts
United States of America
----------------------
Next PoV: 259 -- Radner
----------------------
Persephone Ariadne had had to scour the Salem Witches' Academy, followed by half of Enfield, to find someone fluent in Syrdani. The Syrdani were generally very isolationist, and for good reason. Most of the other Wizarding nations frowned upon what they were doing to the Muggles, after all. Ariadne wondered how Muggles all around the world would react if people found out about the centaur state in the Pacific which discriminated against virtually all humans.

She thought back briefly to the history of Syrdan. Supposedly the inhabitants of Frisland had been in relatively poor condition when the wizards had first arrived, and the wizards had naturally taken it upon themselves to see what they could do to help out. Eventually a feudal government developed, with the Muggles in the position of the serfs and the wizards in the position of the lords. The Muggles were soon accustomed to higher taxes in exchange for magical services and tools which they had never even dreamed of.

Time had gone by, however, and the wizards had become corrupt, appropriating more and more power from the Muggles. The final blow had come in 1277, when a Muggle revolt prompted the wizards to enslave the Muggles for good. There had been a few uprisings since then, and all of them had been squelched before they could gain enough traction to overthrow the government. At this
point, the entire country's way of life was based on slavery and it would be difficult to undo the damage caused by centuries of servitude.

The door to the supervisor's office was open, and she knocked on the wall to announce herself. The man had a short black beard and a military bearing. His uniform had the name MERSHON on it. He stood up and shook her hand. "You must be the delegation from the Quabbin. I'm Michael Mershon, the head of this facility."

Ariadne nodded. "I'm Persephone Ariadne, Deputy Secretary of Magic. I work for Travis Radner. The man next to me here is Leonard Perman, someone who specializes in unusual languages."

She had deliberately refused to make any reference to Syrdan at this point and convinced the interpreter to do the same in his translations as long as there were Muggles in the room. What the Muggles didn't know couldn't hurt them, after all, and it would be a major diplomatic faux pas to expose a Wizarding location to the Muggles without permission. The only people who needed to know would be Radner and the president, who would keep the information classified.

Furthermore, both she and the interpreter were dressed in Muggle clothing. She figured that if they were Syrdani, they would be frightened of wizards and try to run if that were the case. They would carry their wands in their back pockets, however, just in case.

Mershon looked at the interpreter and nodded. "I must say, Mr. Perman, you're going to need it. No one here seems to have gotten anywhere without extensive use of sign language. All we've been able to tell so far is that they appear to have been running from something and that their names are unpronounceable. To that end, we've given them American names which sounded remotely like their real ones. I'd recommend that you address them by these names to get them accustomed to life in the United States."

Perman approved of this. "That's a good idea. What are their names?"

"The man's name is Alexander and the woman's name is Ursula. They're in their mid-thirties. The kid's name is Petunia. She's nine and doesn't want to let that doll out of her hand. We've given them the last name Syrdan, as that appears to be the name of their clan."

The two wizards looked at each other sharply. Mershon noticed this and raised his eyebrows. "Do you know these people?"

It took Perman a good three seconds to figure out what to say. "I think I'm familiar with the clan. It's a very obscure Wizarding family and there's no way you could have known. Fortunately, I know enough about that family to speak their language."

Mershon whistled. "Are they royalty or something like that? If so, what were they doing dressed in rags and running from stuff? Was there a coup in their country? If they're wizards, where are their wands? And what were they doing in the middle of the Atlantic?"

Ariadne shrugged. "They're not royalty -- they appear to be commoners. They also appear to be Muggles, not wizards."

"Muggle commoners and wizard rulers, eh? That makes sense: all three of them have tattoos on their foreheads, and we dragged one fellow with the same symbol on his -- wait a minute! Are they Death Eaters? I've heard that Death Eaters have tattoos. If that's the case, you're going to need some backup."
Perman shook his head. "No, Mr. Mershon. The tattoos are tribal in origin. I wouldn't worry about it."

Ariadne needed to cut this off in a hurry -- the man was getting too curious. "Listen, we're a bit pressed for time, so if you don't mind we'd like to start talking to these people. From what you've told us, it's increasingly likely we'll be able to get through to them."

Mershon nodded. "I hope you can. Follow me."

The officer then led Ariadne and the interpreter down the hall towards an empty lounge. Looking over his shoulder, Mershon asked, "If it's all right with you, I'm going to listen in on the interview."

Ariadne shook her head. "No thank you, but I don't think it will be necessary. We can take care of it."

Mershon shook his head. "You probably can, Ms. Ariadne. Unfortunately, I have my orders, and believe me when I tell you that a lot of people -- including the President -- are curious about these three. Besides, they trust me now."

Ariadne grunted. They'd have to be pretty careful here. Saying that she'd think about it, she followed him into the lounge, where the three refugees were sitting on a couch.

She cursed to herself. They were Syrdani, all right. She recognized their garments as tattered slave clothes. She didn't recognize the tattoo on their foreheads, but that was understandable as there were thousands of slaveholders on that island -- their owner could have been one of the less affluent wizards. She was about to introduce herself when there was a flurry of movement on the couch. Seconds later, all three of them were lying prostrate at Perman's feet and whimpering!

Mershon stared at the refugees. "What the hell?"

Ariadne had to improvise. "They think we're royalty, apparently. I can't get into that much detail, but the wizards appear to be the upper class in this clan. Lenny, could you do us a favor and tell them to calm down?"

Perman nodded and barked something unintelligible at the refugees. They stared at him in astonishment, then skepticism. The woman then pointed at him, said something, and put her head back on the ground. The interpreter swore, reached into his back pocket and noticed that the top of his wand had been sticking out of his pocket. Turning to Ariadne, he said, "They realize we're wizards and don't trust us! Throw away your wand! They think you're going to hurt them!"

Ariadne reached into her pocket, withdrew her wand, and threw it across the room. Both wizards then opened their hands to show that she was unarmed. Meanwhile, Mershon stared at the wizards in shock.

"God Almighty! Not only do you speak their language, but they don't trust wizards! What happened over there? Were they running from Death Eaters? Were they tortured by Voldemort's men, enslaved, forced to worship wizards as their kings, and somehow managed to escape?"

Ariadne gritted her teeth, which gave Mershon the opportunity to press on. "That's it! Voldemort had a secret base in the Atlantic, and his men are using it as a final hideout! They've taken control of the area and are subjugating all the Muggles! We need to tell the President about this! Tell them we're
going to get all the rest of their family members out of there! Is there anything you can do about it?"

Ariadne and Perman looked at each other, clearly disturbed. Syrdan was still anonymous. However, Mershon had concluded, correctly, that a facility existed in the Atlantic which enslaved Muggles. Needless to say, he'd inform the President, who would want to send in the Coast Guard. The President would likely order Radner to take the base out, possibly with a nuke.

Mershon excused himself and raced into the command center. Ariadne reached into her pocket for her wand to stop him, and her fingers closed on empty air. It took her a second to realize that she had thrown the wand to the floor to calm the refugees. By the time she had retrieved it, Mershon was gone.

It was only a matter of time. American forces were almost certainly going to Syrdan on an emancipation expedition. The fact that Voldemort wasn't there was irrelevant -- for all the Muggles knew, the Syrdani aristocracy consisted entirely of Death Eaters.

This was going to be a problem, she thought. Voldemort's actions may have just indirectly triggered a war between the United States and Syrdan.

To be continued...

Update #258.5

Tuesday, July 2, 1996
Outskirts of Roqteratl
City-state of Roqteratl, Indian Ocean (East of Seychelles)

The rays of the midday sun, filtered by water, were mixed with the kaleidoscope of hundreds of magical light sources, illuminating almost every corner of the city to a level equal to board daylight on the surface. Jarno, envoy of the Lake Hogsmeade town, could clearly see why Roqteratl was called the Shining City. The young selkie spent his third day in the city, and still couldn't help but feel lost in it's vastness. His hometown had 2000 inhabitantst, and neighbouring tribes weren't bigger either. He has known all of them by face, if not by name. Roqteratl, on the other hand...even when he swam up to the surface, he couldn't see the end of that mass of towering spires and domes. He heard the city had over 100000 citizens, and that was just the merpeople with a house in the town, not counting the crowds of ever-present merchants and the tens of thousands of air-breather...guests. It was a magnificent place, with numerous undercurrents- Great Houses, Minor Houses, Guilds, commoners, air-breathers... His homewaters had a saying: "When in Roqteratl, keep your eyes wide open, your mouth shut close, and your hands near your dagger and your purse."

This day, he decided to look around on one of the local markets before the Council's evening session, hoping to buy some of the fabled magical products, or at least some souvenirs. His hosts had given him enough instructions to find the market, and as he checked again and again, his money was still with him. Unknown to him, he was as safe as he ever were: the identification armband he recived in the Greater Council Chamber had deterred any pickpockets and other criminals: it was common knowledge in the city that harming foreign diplomats in any way is bad for business, as it inevitably provokes investigations and raids from the guards.

Red Squad moved towards the marketplace at a leisurely pace, carrying the shark carcasses skewered on poles. Toni and one of his squadmates, a smallish merrow-selkie hybrid female were carrying one
of the smaller ones, right behind the four guys bearing the five meters long tiger shark.

For Red 2, life was good: symbolising full squad membership, a necklace of freshly harvested tiger shark teeth hung from his neck, a good night's...well, rather, morning's sleep helped his hoarse throat recover from last night's endless and very loud singing, his belly was still comfortably full after the feast held in his honor, and from where he swam he could effortlessly see the homongous former owner of his necklace and check out Red 6, alias Kima's flowing bright green hair, smooth bluish-grey skin, and small but nonetheless attracting figure while she swam before him holding the other end of the shark-pole.

The girl's exotic beauty was alluring, that much all squad members agreed on, but Toni found himself thinking that some things about her just didn't add up: a delicate woman like her, choosing an openly violent job instead of partaking in the subtle intriques of House politics? For all he heard, she's been in the squad for years, and proved over and over again that she is more than bright enough to earn a high place in some House, or in the City Guards if she liked -theoretically - politically neutral brainwork like being a detective. Border Defense was an unusual choice for women: it was a place for hardened mermen who loved the thrill of hunt and battle, or ambitious youths like him who wanted to prove they have the balls before climbing higher in society...and sometimes, for merpersons whose superiors wanted them out of the way. He never heard anyone talking about her past before Red Squad, so, could she be one of those?

Had he been a little more insightful, he'd have thought about why an attractive woman nearing 30 is without a husband, boyfriend, or lover...the week-long shifts didn't stop other squad members from having relationships.

Had he been a little more observant, he'd have noticed that all other members of Red Squad, Kima included, were currently ogling a pair of siren ladies wearing elaborate tattoos which accentuated the curves of their body...

To be continued...

--------------

Update #259
--------------

Tuesday, July 2, 1996
Oval Office
White House
Washington, DC
United States of America
--------------

Next PoV: 260 -- Dagher
--------------

Travis Radner hurried into the Oval Office. Clinton wanted to speak with him, and judging from Ariadne's latest report the wizard was fairly certain as to what the conversation would be about.

The Secretary of Magic had been intrigued by Two Bear's recommendation that all seven regional offices of the Department of Magic adopt at least one Muggle instructor in their Wizarding School, preferably to teach Muggle Studies. So far, only two of these positions had been filled: Isaac Sanders in Fourth Mesa, and Claire Cox was in Big Thicket. He made a mental note to ask Ken Franco to get a few of the Muggles from Miami to stay behind in the Ocala facility after the city had been cleaned up.

Radner's first thought was to send David Stern to Mt. St. Helens along with significant financial
compensation for the Obliviation. The Secretary recognized the name from before the Super Bowl Breach, when Strong Bear was busy trying to chase down the Blast Cola employees who had filmed Harry Potter in London. Strong Bear had explained that Stern had been more than willing to help contain the breach before it had taken place, and that it had been a mistake to Obliviate him during the panic immediately after the commercial had been aired in the stadium.

He had no idea if Stern would be willing to move up north. Then again, with the economy about to tank because of the partial destruction of New York and London, people would probably travel anywhere to get a job.

It occurred to Radner that Stern might not have to move at all. Sanders's house was already connected to the Floo Network so he could go to Fourth Mesa. All American fireplaces were linked to the network, which meant that all Stern had to do was head over to Sanders's house -- maybe a 45 minute commute -- and hop into the fireplace. It was something to think about.

And it was far less important than the discussion he was about to have with the president.

Clinton shook Radner's hand and bid him be seated. There was the obligatory small talk for a couple of minutes, and then the grilling began.

"Mr. Radner, I've just received a rather...unusual note from the man in charge of the Coast Guard. It appears that our old friend Voldemort has established a secret base in the middle of the Atlantic, hidden it from Muggle eyes, and had his Death Eaters enslave and torture the Muggles. Had it not been for those three refugees and the fact that someone in Enfield spoke their language, we would never have known. What are we going to do about that?"

Radner hesitated for a moment. Although he wasn't particularly fond of what Syrdan did to its Muggles, they were certainly not Death Eaters. They weren't inherently evil as much as misguided. From the little he knew of that nation's culture, a good 15-20% of the wizards didn't have slaves at all and another 25% didn't force them into squalid conditions. Abolitionist movements even crept up from time to time, but trying to wean Syrdan off of slavery was about as effective as trying to wean the Muggle world off of oil.

He had to be very careful here, as he had no choice but to reveal Syrdan's existence at this point. Thankfully, his audience would be someone who would be able to classify this information as top secret and not let it spread further. The country would go bonkers if it discovered that wizards were enslaving people a couple of time zones away.

Bracing himself, he began to explain. "Mr. President, we're familiar with the location in the Atlantic the Coast Guard is referring to. Rest assured, sir, the refugees did not escape from a Death Eater base."

He paused for a moment. "Sir, I request that what I'm about to tell you be classified."

Clinton nodded. "Fine with me. What is it?"

"Sir, they are from the hidden State of Syrdan."

Clinton eyes widened. "State of WHAT? Isn't that their last name?"

"Their last name is actually Sen-Altri, sir. Syrdan is an island which lies in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, on an exposed portion of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge in the tropics. The reason you have never
heard of it is because it is invisible to Muggles. The Statute of Secrecy necessitated its...removal...at the time as it is a Wizarding stronghold."

"Invisible to Muggles? You've got invisible islands out there?"

"Yes, sir. You already know about Atlantis, after all. This one is similar."

"Jesus Christ, Radner. How many of these places do you guys have?"

Radner shook his head. "I can't tell you, sir. If others do exist, I would not be permitted to reveal them to Muggles without their explicit permission. It would be a serious diplomatic faux pas. They'd have hidden themselves for a reason, after all. The only reason I'm bringing Syrdan up is because we may have to start interacting with them."

"I see. What can you tell me about this place?"

"It's a feudal society, sir. It's been isolated from the Muggle world for a while, so its culture has stagnated. It consists of about 10,000 wizards and 140,000 Muggles. The capital is Syrdasch, and it has 50,000 people. The wizards are the upper class and the Muggles comprise the peasantry. It's ruled by an Executive Committee of three chancellors which rotate on a three-month basis and serves for three years. Geologically, Syrdan is a lot like Iceland, with lots of geysers."

Clinton frowned. "Let me guess. Those three refugees we picked up were people who didn't like their master and tried to escape during the chaos of Judgment Day. The man with that symbol on his robe we dragged out of the Atlantic was their master, who had tried to sneak into the country to take them back."

Radner nodded. "That's correct, sir. The reason they panicked when they saw Ariadne and Perman was because they thought that they'd been caught by Syrdani wizards and were about to be sent back to their master."

Clinton whistled. "This reminds me a lot of the antebellum South where all the slaves were trying to escape to the North."

Radner didn't want to admit it, but he had to. "It's something like that, sir. Complete with all of the debate as to what to do with fugitive slaves captured in the North."

Clinton hesitated for a moment. "I suspect that these Syrdani are going to want these people back."

"That is likely, sir."

"Do they want to go back?"

"No, sir. Absolutely not. They risked their lives to get away from the island, after all."

Clinton folded his arms across his chest. "Well, they're American citizens now, and we'll protect them. To be honest, I find it a bit disturbing that serfdom still exists, especially with Muggles being enslaved by wizards. If America for Humans finds out about this -- or surviving Death Eaters, for that matter -- they'll go berserk. Speaking of Death Eaters, are there any on this island? Is it in fact ruled by Death Eaters who are taking advantage of the feudal society to rule Muggles?"

Radner shook his head. "I would expect not, sir. Syrdan's style of government may be backwards,
but feudalism is not intrinsically evil."

"That's good to hear. Is there anything we can do to help the people of Syrdan? I must admit, as an American leader I find the idea of people being forced into serfdom because they're Muggles a bit...well, disturbing."

"I'm not sure if there's much we can do, sir. They're a sovereign nation, albeit a strange one. Trying to remove serfdom from their culture is trying to remove democracy from ours. It will take a long time. Remember that this...peculiarity is more cultural than anything else."

"How about a special ops team? I must say, embarking on an expedition to free Muggles from serfdom would look good during an election year."

Radner rolled his eyes. "Not if it fails, sir, and I'd expect the survivors in Ogdensburg, New York, and Miami would beg to differ. Besides, what exactly would they do? They can't go in without wizards, and in all fairness they would likely be placed into servitude with the other Muggles. You've also got 10,000 wizards on that island. That's more than Voldemort's entire army of Death Eaters. You'd need a full invasion force -- against a magical opponent which knows the terrain -- and with the economy in a freefall we can't risk another war."

"Can we try to reform them from the inside? Support the abolitionist groups, perhaps?"

"Possibly, but I doubt it would succeed. It would be like trying to switch the United States over to Communism by supporting the American Communist Party. Think of these guys like the Wizarding version of North Korea -- well, before North Korea fell to Voldemort."

Clinton stood and looked out the window. "I still feel obliged to act here. It just feels right. We can't just stand by in a situation like this. Am I correct in assuming that these Syrdani probably know we're aware of their existence now? They tried to come over here and get the refugees, after all."

Radner bit his lip. "I would agree with that. We don't know for certain, but we should at least consider that as a possibility."

Clinton turned and faced Radner. His face was grim. "Then we have to act now, before they can do something to make it harder to free the serfs. We need to act before they get organized."

Radner drew a deep breath. "Sir, this would be an unprovoked attack. Syrdan has not done anything to the United States."

"They tried to abduct three of our citizens, and for all we know that rogue wave the oil tanker encountered was a Syrdani attack. That wave killed four crewmen."

Radner shook his head. "You don't know that the wave was a Syrdani attack, and at present all three refugees are still safe in Boston."

Clinton thought for a moment then nodded abruptly. "Send a message to Syrdan. Tell them we'll compensate them for the loss of their serfs, in gold. Obliviate Mershon and anyone else who knows of those three people's background. Finally, get them to learn English so they can blend in with society better. This should serve as a good diplomatic first step. Meanwhile, we can think about trying to save those poor Muggles from serfdom."

Radner nodded. It was indeed a good first step, but what happened if the president changed his mind
a few months later...or, worse still, someone from Nestor found out and decided to ally with the United States against Syrdan? If Clinton were given enough wizards to make an invasion of Syrdan an option...

The Secretary of Magic shuddered. Rumor had it that Clinton liked younger women and that he was having an affair with one of his interns. If some Amazon from Nestor walked into his office...

To be continued...

------------------

Update #259.5

Tuesday, July 2, 1996
Market District of Roqteratl
City-state of Roqteratl, Indian Ocean (East of Seychelles)

The butcher's store room was almost proven too crowded for Red Squad, but after some jostling they all fit in. In the middle, there was a massive table, with the equally massive tiger shark on it. The smaller ones were already gutted, skinned and put on hooks near the walls, with their entrails packed out, searched, and catalogued with nothing extraordinary so far. Famed as the ocean's dustbin, the tiger shark was left to the end, so the butcher's men could take the others out to the shop's counter fast.

The shop's owner, a burly siren with a bald head took a look at the beast's mouth. "I see he has no teeth left, so, who did you guys initiate this time?"
"That would be Toni, right here. He teared it's gills apart, too."
"I see that, it's either a masterful or a very lucky cut, son, it alone would have killed the bastard. Y'know, it's tradition that you get to search your first on-duty kill, and keep anything you find inside", he said as he passed a huge dagger to the rookie. Toni took it in his hand, measured it's shape and weight distribution, and when he was satisfied with his grip, he plunged it in the shark's underside near it's tail and pulled it all the way to it's neck. Swimming above to have a good look at the slit, he noticed something...glistening, in the shark's guts. Plunging his hand in, he felt metal, and pulled- only to let go with a startled yelp, when it was revealed to be an ornate ring, still on a severed, half-digested hand.

For a minute, everyone in the room froze. Hardened men looked away and struggled to keep their lunch down. Kima was the first to speak, and although her voice was a bit shaky and her complexion a lot greener than usual, she sounded like she knows exactly what to do.
"Everybody, keep your calm. Butcher, please stop the water filtering immediately, and leave the room. Make sure no-one comes in unless it's the Guards. Squad, leave everything where it is, and go call the City Guards, tell them we have a possible murder victim. And Red 2, leave your necklace here, as of now it's considered evidence in a criminal investigation. Speaking of it, you picked up the thing, SOP says you'll be quarantined, so do everyone a favor and stay here without touching anyone."

The stunned mermen did exactly as she said, and hastily swam away, leaving only two merpersons in the room, pondering how big a crap they got into, on their leaves of all times. The silence was only broken by Toni's desperate question: "Even if I lose that necklace, I'm still full squad member, right? Right?"

To be continued...
Heydar Dagher was now Grand Mugwump, and he didn't have the foggiest notion where to begin. He didn't think he was qualified for the position, and he was still relatively young, in his late fifties.

He understood why Dialonis had chosen him. Elevating Ndukaku would have put the Astrologer's Key in the hands of Rašo Slanc, who, until recently, had been a mid-level astrologer and not particularly qualified for controlling the key. Dumbledore, the prior Grand Mugwump, was now British Minister of Magic and probably had his hands full cleaning up after London. Radner would have been a good candidate as well except that his country had been hit with three nukes and was about to fall into a depression. Guess who that left.

He had to admit, though, that his promotion to Grand Mugwump would gain him a lot more public exposure, which could benefit the world in another way. He was a devout Muslim, and his faith had developed a bad reputation due to the heinous acts of Muslims for Humans, the Hamas militants, and al-Qaeda. All three groups claimed that they operated in the name of Allah, whereas in practice He condemned virtually all of their actions. It was about time someone showed the world what a true Muslim was like, with all the good deeds, charity, and dedication to the community.

He found the idea of unifying the monotheistic faiths intriguing. Whether Christianity was still considered monotheistic was debatable -- what with the Trinity and all -- but Judaism certainly was. He had to admit that if Samuel (who hadn't been seen for a long time), Suleiman I, and John Paul could pull it off, it would be a big step to eliminating religious warfare on the planet. He personally doubted that this initiative would succeed. Then again, Allah worked in mysterious ways.

He had read through the most recent reports before heading into the briefing room for the latest press conference. Saddam Hussein was attracting Muslim wizards all over the world, Dagher was worried that the Iraqi leader was taking advantage of his participation in Judgment Day to try to bolster his own country's power. Granted, Mubarak had gotten the Habibi Triangle out of the deal, but Saddam was a much more unstable man. No one really knew what was going to happen with him. The fact that he had nearly refused to participate in Judgment Day without getting Kuwait out of the deal chilled Dagher to the core, and Dagher didn't want to think about what would have happened had Saddam managed to defy Demir.

Over half a million Muggles were now entered in the lottery to move to Atlantis. They came from all over the world. Oddly enough, a good 150 came from the Ukraine, and most of them were devotees of the Black God. He found that a bit odd, but he figured that they were probably being discriminated against in their homeland wanted to find a place where they would be able to practice their faith safely. None of them seemed to be particularly dangerous, and the background checks reported that they had no prior criminal record or link to terrorist groups or known evil wizards.

Something about Russia and the Ukraine didn't make sense, however. The Romanovs were convinced that Judgment Day had started the six-year countdown towards their extermination, assuming they had interpreted Kurchatova's prophecy correctly. Ndukaku claimed the greatest portion of the threat to civilization -- now steady at 1.8% -- came from the Ukraine. The only thing he could think of was a coup or series of assassinations in Russia of the various Romanovs leading to
There was one other possibility as well, but it was so remote as to be relegated to the back burner for a while. The Romanovs seemed to believe that Grigori Rasputin had possessed a Horcrux and had been revived earlier in the year. There had been a whole series of strange events involving Rasputin, including a fight over his father's grave. The problem with this theory was that from Dagher knew about history, Rasputin seemed to like hobnobbing with the rich and powerful. One would have expected him to have announced himself, or at least made an appearance in public, before now. Yet neither of those events had taken place, and Tsar Alexei himself was starting to wonder if he had overreacted to the theft of the Mad Monk's music box a few months ago.

Pushing Rasputin out of his mind, he made his way to the podium with the necklace containing the Atlantis Key around his neck. Cameras flashed as he introduced himself and explained his background. Eventually, he got to the point. Looking into the crowd, he made his important announcement.

"Ladies and gentlemen, it has come to Atlantis's attention that most of the World for Humans organizations are willing to cease their terrorist acts if the Wizarding community learns to police itself. They realize now that magic can be used for good as well as for evil. It is nothing but a tool, after all.

"With this in mind, it is my duty to announce that beginning with 1997-1998 school year, all Wizarding schools will be required to administer psychological examinations to all applicants. These will be designed to ensure that future generations of witches and wizards will not only be skilled at magic but have the maturity and integrity to use it wisely. Applicants who fail these examinations will not be admitted.

"I believe that such a test would have caught Voldemort as a child. As my esteemed colleague Albus Dumbledore has explained, the young Tom Riddle had stolen other children's toys at his orphanage and enjoyed using his power to intimidate people. Decent people don't do such things, and the test we have in mind would have failed Voldemort as soon as that information came to light."

Dagher looked into the crowd. "Rest assured, ladies and gentlemen. There will be no more Volkemorts, ever again."

Britain for Humans Headquarters

Isabel Miller couldn't believe that the America for Humans executive committee had fallen for it. Sure, preventing people like Voldemort from attending Wizarding schools would be a very good first step. However, what was there to prevent an evil wizard's parents from teaching him or her magic outside of school? What was Dagher going to do to address the possibility that there were other adult evil wizards hiding out there, biding their time until the furor over Voldemort had died down and Atlantis had relaxed its defenses?

She walked to the microphone and made the point clearly and concisely. She explained that although she appreciated Dagher's gesture, it wouldn't be enough. Britain for Humans demanded Unbreakable Vows, and nothing else would suffice.

Revelation Party Headquarters

Judith Rodgers was barely able to keep up with processing the new applicants. They agreed with her that Dagher's concession wasn't nearly enough. Sure, it would probably help ensure responsible use
of magic in the year 2010. However, that wouldn't do much good if the world blew itself up between now and then.

To be continued...
Brian Huckaby looked at the dollar bill and memorized the serial number: K 28667621 F. Hoping that this trick would work, he flattened out all of the creases and put it into the vending machine.

The mechanism whirred and sucked the bill in. Less than a second later, the little display over the bill entry slot changed to show that he had deposited a credit of $1.00.

That was all he needed to know. Knowing that there weren't any problems with the bill -- after all, he'd gotten it as change from from lunch at a Muggle rest stop a few hours earlier -- he put it back in his pocket and opened his wallet. He rummaged around among the bills until he found the one he wanted. It, too, had the serial number K 28667621 F.

It looked very similar to the bill Huckaby had inserted into the vending machine. He could see a couple of imperfections here and there, but those would almost certainly be overlooked as spots of dirt or ink.

He stepped back up to the machine and inserted the second bill into the slot. Once again, the display reported that he had deposited $1.00.

Well, well, well, he thought. The United States was very good at detecting counterfeit currency. It was a pity that they had never considered the possibility that wizards would attempt to duplicate bills using the Geminio spell. All of those years living under the Statute of Secrecy were going to come in handy.

Grinning, he pushed E5 on the display and the bottle of Diet Coke tumbled into the dispenser at the bottom of the machine. It appeared that the 5% pay cut he had taken at his Muggle job as a factory foreman wasn't going to have as much of an impact on his life as he had feared.

Cortex Medical Technologies
Mayfield Heights, Ohio

Mary Stone looked at the rest of the people on the executive board. "I don't have any idea what Harold-Green has done, either! First they claim that they have no money, and now all of a sudden they're spending money as if there's no tomorrow!"

The president frowned. "Have they done anything strange of late? Have they introduced any new products?"

"Not that I know of, Mr. Fernwell. However, I can't rule that out. They've recently acquired a large amount of lead, presumably to test antidotes to lead poisoning or something like that. Perhaps they're
on the verge of patenting a medical breakthrough in this field."

Fernwell shook his head. "That doesn't make sense, Mary. How could they be selling something which no one knows exists?"

Mary shrugged. "I don't know, sir."

Fernwell thought for a moment. "Maybe we can figure out what they're working on and see if we can get in on the action. Rebecca, you've got a bunch of contacts over there. Have they made any other unusual purchases?"

Rebecca Harrison nodded. "Believe it or not, they have. They've placed an order for a few dozen flasks of mercury, with a special note to focus on distilling it so that only the lightest isotopes are there. Furthermore, they've picked up a large number of radiation suits."

Fernwell gaped at her. "RADIATION SUITS? What the hell would they be doing with radiation suits?"

Mary shrugged. "Perhaps they're trying to think of a cure for radiation poisoning as part of this experimental project. After all, Sirius Black, the man who killed Voldemort, succumbed to radiation poisoning when we attacked Pyongyang. He won't be the first, I'm afraid."

Fernwell grunted. "I don't buy it, but I can't think of a better idea. Now what about the mercury? Why would they only want the lightest isotopes? Those are pretty rare, if I remember correctly."

"Not sure, sir. I'm not big on nuclear chemistry."

"But won't all isotopes act the same way?"

"In theory, yes. However, melting and boiling points can change slightly from isotope to isotope. The differences are minor, but they're there."

Mary shook her head. "I doubt the differences are enough to warrant all of the extra work necessary to separate out the lightest isotopes. Either that, or there's some kind of bizarre physical property they've discovered which only applies to the lightest isotopes. Rebecca, have they issued any other press releases since the one where they said they were going to buy all that lead?"

Rebecca nodded. "Yup. They've announced that they're looking into becoming a supplier of hydrogen, deuterium, and tritium for medical purposes. This came out shortly after my contacts claimed they purchased the flasks of mercury. There are rumors they've found a supply of lithium as well, but not as much of it."

Fernwell whistled. "Tritium? I must say, that explains the radiation suits. It sure sounds like they're trying to make some kind of super-cure which will handle various types of poisoning: radiation, lead, and mercury. Can you think of any other explanations?"

No one could, which was disturbing. One drug which would handle all types of poisoning would be an extremely valuable commodity.

Fernwell grunted. "They're taking a major risk here, spending money like there's no tomorrow just as the economy is falling into a recession. They must be pretty confident that this is going to work. We need to get involved here, I'd say. Maybe we can cash in on this."
Rebecca chuckled. "Speaking of cashing in, I'd recommend that we buy into whatever gold mine or magical spell those characters invoked to get all that money."

Suddenly, her jaw dropped. Magical spell.

She hesitated, then finally spoke. "Good God: did they hire a wizard? That would explain a lot of stuff."

Fernwell nodded. "I agree. We should look into getting one as well."

----------------------------------------

Parametric Technology Corporation

I looked at Matt Ender in horror. "I don't like this, Matt. I really don't."

Matt rolled his eyes. "A 10% pay cut is a hell of a lot better than being laid off, wouldn't you say? If it makes you feel any better, the entire company is going to be taking the same cut. Hopefully we'll be able to reinstate it when the economy turns around."

I thought about it for a second and realized that it could have been a hell of a lot worse. I was only a few months out of graduate school, and $44,000 a year seemed like a ridiculously high salary to me. Furthermore, I was still accustomed to living like a graduate student, so I could just revert back to that.

I did know one thing for certain though. It didn't look like I'd be moving out of Waltham anytime soon, and if I did I would probably be forced to get a roommate.

Little did I know, that in an alternate timeline where the Super Bowl Breach did not occur, I would have already started looking for new apartments, eventually moving to Brookline in 1997. For the first time since the Blast Cola commercial had first been aired, the Super Bowl Breach had caused a major structural change in my life.

To be continued..

--------------------

Update #261.5

--------------------

Wednesday, July 3, 1996
City Guards HQ, Roqteratl
City-state of Roqteratl, Indian Ocean (East of Seychelles)

The members of Red Squad waited excitedly for the briefing to begin. Hunting intruders, mundane ones more often than not, was fun for them, but it got repetitive after a time. Also, Toni has passed all examinations just fine, and was allowed out of quarantine back to them, which improved team morale. Their general consensus was that being involved in some mystery puzzle was a refreshing change for once, and being the ones to kill and open the shark in which the hand and the ring was found, involved they were.

The City Guards present in the room were less enthusiastic - they were professional detectives and investigators, for them, this was just everyday work. Nonetheless, they still stood at attention and forced a mix of discipline and interest onto their faces when their chief swam in the room and took his place at the podium.
"At ease, ladies and gentlemen. We have a weird case on our hands, but I'm confident you can handle and solve it as professionals. Now, on to the case: the coroner's report about the hand says it most likely belonged to an adult human male, estimated age thirty-forty, red body hair, pale white skin with mild sunburns. Finely manicured nails and overall good skin condition indicate higher class with little or no manual labor, but there are some old scars, mostly heat trauma at the back of the hand. It had been severed from the body by an extremely sharp tool which cut clean through it...making it relatively painless for the victim, who was definitely alive at that time, about two and a half days before now."

"We found two pieces of evidence with the hand, a piece of clothing and a ring. The clothing is the sleeve of a dark brown cotton robe, cut between the wrist and the elbow with something very sharp in one motion- which is consistent with the wound on the hand. It is unmarked, unlike the ring: I have to say, it's a really garish piece of bling. It's apparently 24 carat gold with a yellow gemstone, probably topaz, but given that it's inscribed with runes and it's magical I wouldn't be 100% sure of it's composition. Our resident magic analyst says it has at least half a dozen enchantments on it, so far he identified some sort of luck charm, and at least four things I won't even try to pronounce, but are passive defenses against heat, kinetic effects, cutting magic and enchantment cancelling."

"My thoughts are that our victim is or was a wizard. The attack could have occurred anywhere within a day as the shark swims, but given that it was found in a shark, it happened outside the city, so it falls under Border Defense jurisdiction, and knowing your boss, he'll say whoever found it takes the case. Hey, Kima, look at that- guess I was wrong when I said you'll never again do any detective work...have fun finding out what happened here." With these final words, the Chief smirked smugly at the amused hybrid. "Dismissed!"

-------------------------------
Meanwhile, somewhere in Roqteratl
-------------------------------

The room had no door and no window, and almost no furniture either. The only source of light was an enchanted gemstone on the table in the corner, it's usually bright light toned down. It faintly illuminated a chest, a bed in the other side of the room, and the shadowy human-sized individual in baggy clothing sitting on it with his head resting in his left hand. There was a loud crack, and a smaller figure appeared. It bowed towards the bigger person, knelted before it and gave something in it's left hand, then began to speak in a piping voice:

"Master, Floppy has found Master's wand in the ocean, but there is no trace of the ring even after two days of search! Floppy has failed Master, bad Floppy, bad, bad..." the house-elf, because she was one of those, started to bang her head on the rock floor near her master's feet.

"Enough! My servant, you've done well. You need not punish yourself. For with wand in my hand again, I'll retake what's rightfully mine, and have my vengeance on those backstabbing vermin!"

To be continued...

Update #262
------------

Wednesday, July 3, 1996
Sanders Residence
Prescott, Arizona
United States of America
Isaac Sanders nearly dropped the book in shock. He had never thought that something out of a fantasy novel could actually apply to real life. Then again, no one had expected that stories about magic or wizards would apply to real life, either.

He had always been a big fan of Robert Jordan's Wheel of Time series. Set thousands of years (and two Ages, from the series's perspective) in the future, most of the action took place in a world which was familiar with magic and had several organizations and protocols in place which were intended to cater to working with wizards.

Several thousand years before the main plot line commenced, human civilization had combined magic and advanced technology to created a flourishing, almost utopian civilization. All of that was undone, however, when an evil god found a way to interfere with the world and plunge the utopia into war. Although humanity was eventually able to seal the god back in his prison, the god's counterstroke drove all male spellcasters (known as Aes Sedai in the series) mad. The uncontrolled misuse of magic triggered a cataclysm which destroyed civilization and restricted magic use only to women.

Jordan went on to explain that shortly after the cataclysm, the Muggles -- so to speak -- refused to trust the surviving spellcasters given what had happened last time they had tried to use their power. This forced the surviving organizations of female Aes Sedai to adopt the Three Oaths, three unbreakable vows each candidate had to accept in order to be accepted into the magical community. Satisfied that the witches would be able to control their behavior through the Oaths, the Muggles began to trust the Aes Sedai once more and the two groups started to work together to help rebuild a shattered world.

Sanders could not help but think that the world's current situation was very similar to that which the characters in Jordan's series had faced after the cataclysm. In both cases, magic had been used irresponsibly on a large scale, causing terrible destruction and causing the Muggles to distrust the wizards. Furthermore, the vast majority of the spellcasters who survived the cataclysms -- the Breaking of the World in the Jordan series and Judgment Day in real life -- were good people and would be great assets in dealing with the changed world.

America for Humans had argued that they would only trust the wizards if they agreed to police themselves.

Muslims for Humans agreed with America for Humans. They would also put down their weapons and cease all terrorist activity if the wizards behaved.

Britain for Humans was thinking along the same lines as well. However, they argued that Unbreakable Vows would be necessary to keep the current crop of wizards in line and that psychological screening would be introduced to prevent future Voldemorts.

People had been wondering how exactly the wizards would deal with this situation. Strong Bear himself had told him that the wizards were divided about this, and Atlantis was still too busy cleaning up the mess from Judgment Day to give it much thought at the international level.

Sanders looked at the book on the floor. Could Robert Jordan have solved their problem for them? At the very least, could Jordan's solution appease the various anti-wizard factions long enough to find a permanent solution? He knew that it was possible for wizards to force Unbreakable Vows
upon people as easily as the Oath Rod forced them upon people in the Jordan series.

He rummaged through the Wheel of Time books until he came across the exact texts of the three oaths which each Aes Sedai apprentice (Accepted, in the Jordan lexicon) would be forced to swear when she graduated the White Tower, the main Wizarding school in the series.

"Under the Light and by my hope of salvation and rebirth, I vow that I will speak no word that is not true."

Sanders doubted that this would work. Unlike in the fantasy series, wizards would die if they violated an Unbreakable Vow. Furthermore, there could be cases where a wizard would be forced to lie to save lives. This seemed too strict, and the punishment was too severe for the crime.

"Under the Light and by my hope of salvation and rebirth, I vow that I will make no weapon for one man to kill another."

Sanders whistled when he thought about that. Nuclear weapons transmitted as Portkeys certainly counted as weapons with magical support. Had this vow been in place, a million lives could have been spared...and Judgment Day would have likely been averted.

"Under the Light and by my hope of salvation and rebirth, I vow that I will never use the One Power as a weapon except against Shadowspawn or in the last extreme of defending my life or that of my Warder or another sister."

The third Aes Sedai oath basically amounted to a promise to restrict military use of magic to self-defense or defense of an ally, and in that case only as an absolute last resort. This oath, which would be waived for fighting Dark wizards and evil creatures, combined with the second oath to make it virtually impossible to wield magic as a weapon, either directly or indirectly.

Sanders smiled. He suddenly had a vision of wizards taking various Aes-Sedai like Unbreakable Vows and being given the honorific "Sedai" -- for instance, "Strong Bear Sedai" or "Dialonis Sedai" to show the world they were trusted. Although he suspected that the vows would first start out as optional, it would only be a matter of time until all of the wizards took them. After all, if you had a choice between a wizard who had taken the Unbreakable Vows and one who hadn't, whom would you want to do business with?

He thought about how well the Three Oaths worked in the books. The primary problem with the Oaths was that there was no Oath preventing an Aes Sedai from renouncing an Oath. This allowed several characters in the story to become Black Ajah, Jordan's equivalent of a Dark witch. He'd have to plug that hole if he wanted to make a truly useful set of vows.

He scribbled on a piece of paper for a few moments. When he was done, the paper read as follows.

-----------------
I vow that I will make no weapon for one sentient being to harm another, either physically, mentally, or emotionally.

I vow that I will never use magic as a weapon except against Dark creatures, Dark wizards, or in the last extreme of defending my life or that of another sentient being.

I vow that I will obey the laws of the land, and its head of state, justly and impartially, unless the laws require me to violate one of the other four vows.
I vow to do my utmost to ensure that the custom of taking these five vows is transmitted to the next
generation of witches and wizards.

I vow that I will not renounce any of these five vows.

-------------

Sanderson put down the pen and looked at what he had written. It was five vows, and not three, but
he doubted that would matter. It was a start, and it would offer the Wizarding world a way out of its
current predicament.

He nodded, thrust the paper into his pocket, and headed over to the fireplace. Seconds later, he was
in transit to Fourth Mesa with an idea which would eventually change the world.

To be continued...

-------------

Update #263

Wednesday, July 3, 1996
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
Great Britain

Next PoV: 264 -- Bill Clinton

From: E. Megan Baldwin (noterin@hogwarts.uk)
To: rec.music.ethnic, alt.fan.wizards
Cc: hermione@grangerdental.com, hermione@hogwarts.uk, embaldwin@oxford.edu
Subject: WIZARD ROCK CONCERT 7/7!

Hello, Usenet! I've just wanted to tell you about a VERY cool event which is about to take place in
four days at Manchester United's football stadium. The Wizarding rock band known as the Weird
Sisters is going to be throwing a free benefit concert for the people affected by the Judgment Day
attacks!!! Although admission is free, the band members will be accepting contributions for the
United Nations fund which has been set up to help the victims of the nuclear attacks.

Yes, you read that right! A wizard rock band! It appears that the wizards have picked up enough of
our culture over the years to realize that we like rock and have graduated from Gregorian chants and
church music over the past few hundred years.

Hermione Granger -- you probably recognize the name -- had some of her friends here at Hogwarts
capture footage of the band's concert at Hogwarts for New Year's 1995. Albus Dumbledore (our
Minister of Magic, who was headmaster at the time) hosted a major international magical tournament
at the school during the 1994-1995 school year, and the Weird Sisters were more than happy to come
for this special occasion.

Hermione herself was unable to pay much attention to the music at the time because she found
herself spending most of her time snogging the late Quidditch player (and tournament participant)
Viktor Krum, whom she had a bit of a crush on. However, her classmates at Hogwarts did and were
hooked. Hermione became interested as well when she listened to the concert after the Ball had
concluded.

Hermione played me some of the footage from the concert. These guys are COOL! Despite their
name, they're all men in their early twenties. They're all wizards, and I think several of them are
GORGEOUS! They seem to focus on heavy metal and can put on a REALLY good show. Best of
all, they actually USE MAGIC AND RIDE UNUSUAL ANIMALS IN THEIR SHOW!
Sometimes they fly through the air and ride hippogriffs -- weird animals which are sort of like a cross between a bird and a horse.

You REALLY should go see these guys. If you like wizards, music, and want to learn about wizard and other unusual cultures, head on over to that football stadium. You're not going to regret it. I promise you!

Hermione is already planning on going if her schedule permits. Her two friends, Ron Weasley and Harry Potter, will also in attendance. In case you recognize Harry's name, he's the kid who destroyed Voldemort's last Horcrux and was caught flying his broom in the Blast Cola commercial. If you're lucky, you'll be able to meet him as well!

We may be in for yet another surprise. There are rumors that King William himself may be attending this benefit concert. Supposedly he's been talking with Hermione (I think he has the hots for her!!!) and she showed him the footage. He seems to like this group as well. If you want to meet the king, now's your chance! It may be remote, and he may be surrounded by people like Dumbledore and Tarzan, but who knows? Maybe Hermione has something up her sleeve!

Megan

P.S. Yes, we have a computer here at Hogwarts. We got one as a gift shortly after the Super Bowl Breach. Hermione taught Dumbledore (who was still headmaster) to use it. Someone apparently broke it shortly after it arrived, but the government eventually shipped over another one and the new one is still working. It looks like I've got our Potions master, Horace Slughorn, hooked on a few of the games!

---------------------
E. Megan Baldwin -- DON'T CALL ME ERIN!
Oxford University Anthropology Department
PhD Candidate, Hopefully By 2000
Home Town: Doolin, Ireland
embaldwin@oxford.edu

Hello! This is Hermione. I'd like to follow up on Professor Baldwin's post with my own view of the band. I think she's hit the nail right on the head. I was raised as a Muggle, and I was blown away by what I saw. Trust me, people. You're going to like these guys.

Sincerely,
Hermione Granger

P.S. Yes, the King's coming. And no, I did NOT spend all my time snogging Viktor Krum (who, I might add, died a hero's death fighting in Korea).

Syrdani Council Chamber
-----
Ortelu stared at Travis Radner. "You're telling us he wants to keep our yahoos and repay us with
Radner nodded. "Yes, Madame Chancellor. The yahoos have asked for asylum in the United States, and the Muggle President has granted it."

Vixar growled. "We own them! They can't do that without permission!"

Radner shook his head. "Unfortunately, sir, the Muggles don't see it that way. They are assuming the yahoos are refugees and that, as such, they are entitled to refugee status. And judging from the fact they escaped no a raft, you can't blame them. I'm sorry, but this is a Muggle government you're dealing with, and one which doesn't endorse slavery. Believe me, sir, this is probably the best deal you will be able to get without exposing your existence to the Muggles."

Siatnan put her hand on her chin. "You didn't expose us? We're VERY grateful, Mr. Radner."

Radner nodded. "That is correct. The only person who knows about you for certain is the President, and he has ordered the information classified. The people who interacted with them on the oil tanker have been Obliviated."

All three chancellors breathed a sigh of relief, at which point Ortelu said "Phew. That was close. All we have to do now is bring back Altri and this issue will be closed."

Radner bit his lip. "Altri, unfortunately, is dead. He was caught trying to break into the country illegally to smuggle the slaves out. I'm sorry, Chancellors."

Siatnan stared at him in shock. "You executed him for trying to get his property back?"

"He crashed into the Portkey barrier, madame. It was his own fault. Next time you want to visit, ask for permission and don't use Portkeys."

Vixar grunted. "Good riddance, from what I've been told. He was an absolute jerk and he abused the yahoos a great deal. Send the gold bullion over to his widow. I don't think he'll need any slaves at the moment -- he seems to have a full complement. And he's got a pretty small planation, at that."

Siatnan shook her head. "I wouldn't be so sure. The four new slaves he picked up can't speak a word of Syrdani. I wonder where he got them. They're not veela, Xylend, Dalernic, or from anywhere in the Galiver Consortium."

Radner suddenly had an awful suspicion. He had to be diplomatic about this. "Keep an eye on him and make sure he doesn't abuse these new ones. When did he get them?"

Ortelu shrugged. "A few days ago. Why?"

Radner closed his eyes. "I hope he didn't take them off the oil tanker. If so, I may be ordered to investigate, and that may not be pretty."

To be continued...

-------------
Update #264
-------------
Wednesday, July 3, 1996
Independence Hall
Bill Clinton had nearly fallen over when he realized the implications of what Radner had told him. There may have been a very good explanation for the disappearance of the four oilmen from the Big Texas, one which didn't involve a convenient rogue wave hitting the bridge at just the right time.

Wizards from Syrdan had likely kidnapped the oilmen. If Radner's theory was right, the Syrdani serf catchers had managed to track their prey to the tanker, gotten irritated that they had lost three of their serfs, and grabbed four of the people on the boat to take their place in serfdom. What's even more frightening is that there was no way that the United States would have known about it had it not been for the Syrdani chancellor's offhand remark that Altri had picked up four new serfs. He had sent Radner and as many Syrdani-speaking wizards as he could over to the island to ascertain the truth. If those feudal lords had indeed abducted American citizens, heads were going to roll.

He couldn't think about that right now, because his attention was focused entirely on the upcoming debate with Bob Dole. Dan Rather had been chosen to be the moderator. The world may have changed, but even Judgment Day would not have been enough to stop the next presidential election.

Clinton had done everything he could to prepare for the debate. However, he had to admit that the country had suddenly found itself in a situation which had caught Americans completely off guard. A mere month ago, the world had been at peace for the most part and the country had been focused on the Quabbin terrorist attack. The president remembered thinking that at the time, it would likely be the most deadly terrorist attack for years to come.

Seven thousand people had died that day in the Quabbin. Seven hundred thousand had died during Judgment Day in the United States alone, and God knew how America would deal with $3.50/gallon gas prices and a major economic slowdown which had, for all practical purposes, appeared out of nowhere.

He looked around the room. He stood at the left end of the stage, and Senator Dole stood on the right. Dan Rather, the moderator, stood between them. Each man had a podium in front of him, and as far as he could tell all three of them had come with reams and reams of notes.

Rather had explained the format of the debate to them. People in the audience would raise their hands, and Rather would call upon them. The audience members would then ask questions, and both candidates would have a minute to respond. It was an interesting way to handle it in that the American people truly felt as if they were participating. The downside of it was the simple fact that neither candidate had any idea what they would be asking. Clinton was a bit nervous, and judging from what he saw at the other end of the stage Dole didn't like it that much either.

People had been flown in from all across the country. There had been a nationwide lottery for spaces in Independence Hall, and the winners had been awarded a Fourth of July weekend in Philadelphia punctuated by participation in the debate. There were men and women, rich and poor, red and blue. Everyone was there.

Rather looked at both candidates and saw that everything was ready. He then introduced himself to the crowd and explained the rules of the debate. He advised the audience that each person would be allowed to submit one question and only one, so they should think carefully about what they wanted to ask.
The first person to raise his hand was a twenty-something named William Dorn from Arlington Heights, Illinois. "Gentlemen, what is your view of wizards? Do you trust them? What do you think of America for Humans's demands that they police themselves?"

Rather thanked the man for the question and turned to Clinton. Prior to coming onstage, Rather had flipped a coin to determine who would provide the first answer to the initial question. Clinton would answer the odd-number questions first, and Dole would answer the even-numbered questions first.

Clinton thought this one was pretty easy. "As president of the United States, I've worked with many wizards. Rest assured, that the vast majority of them are decent human beings, and I would trust them to do the right thing. Just look at people like Jelena Kurchatova, Hermione Granger, Guinevere de Mornay, and Dr. Radner. As far as policing themselves go, I would argue that they do a good enough job already. Voldemort appears to have been an anomaly, and we don't want to punish the entire Wizarding community because of the actions of one madman."

Rather nodded and then turned to Dole. Dole admitted that he had not interacted as much with the wizards as Clinton had. However, he could attest to the fact that the vast majority of the wizards were trustworthy. He differed from the president, however, when it came to America for Humans's demands. Looking directly at Dorn, he said, "Although 99% of the wizards are good, it takes only one wizard to cause an incident like Judgment Day. If I am elected president, I will work with Secretary Radner to develop a new screening protocol which will make sure we don't get any more Voldemorts. After all, safety and security are crucial, especially in times like this. We've gotten accustomed to security checks at airports, and I'm certain the wizards will be able to get accustomed to these new rules."

The next question came from Javier Sechrist, from Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina. Sechrist was a little older than Dorn, but not much. "How are you going to deal with the economic downturn? My wife lost her job a couple of days ago, and we have a three-year old son."

Dole took this one first. "If I'm elected president, I'm going to reduce taxes and pledge to not add any more taxes. Read my lips: no new taxes! I'm going to cut corruption and wasteful spending in the government and put the money back in the pockets of the American taxpayer. That should improve consumer confidence and get the economy back on a solid footing again."

Clinton had a different idea. "I believe the economy is still structurally sound and that people are in shock over the events of Judgment Day. A good 90% of the market is still there, and the New York Stock Exchange has been split between here and Boston. It's only a matter of time until everything returns to normal and people start returning to their jobs. I'm planning on issuing a two-month holiday from federal taxes to help jump-start spending. Finally, I plan to pursue a more isolationist foreign policy, where we don't spend all of our budget on defense."

Pamela McBryde, from Roan Mountain, Tennessee, was next. "How are you going to combat Islamophobia in the heartland? I know several people in my town seem to think that all Muslims are terrorists who are members of Muslims for Humans, and I'm fairly certain that is not the case. Keep in mind, though, I'm not very familiar with Islam, and there aren't many Muslims where I come from."

Clinton knew what to say here. "Islam is a faith of peace, and has been like that for over a millennium. Jihad means internal struggle against personal problems, not military action. If you want to see a Muslim, just look at Suleiman I, the Kohen Gadol -- that is, the man chosen by Samuel to become the High Priest of his Universalist movement. He is a Muslim, and he risked his life to
Dole agreed with most of Clinton's remarks. He added that he would make a concerted effort to focus on discrimination against Muslims, Celestines, and Samuelists in the United States. He also brought up the story of Saladin, the man who was seen as the hand of the devil during the Crusades but who was in fact one of the most honorable and chivalrous men the Crusaders ever encountered. If anything, the Crusaders were likely more barbaric than the occupants of the Holy Land.

The debate went on for a while. As far as Clinton could tell, both sides had held their ground. He supposed he couldn't have expected anything else.

He thought back to his comment about increased isolationism. If he attacked Syrdan and got bogged down there fighting wizards, that could turn on him in a hurry. Isolationism was still a good idea, and Clinton thought a Syrdan campaign would be a relatively brief affair as the wizards knew nothing about Muggle weapons. Then again, so had a bunch of European nations in 1914.

To be continued....

-------------
Update #265
-------------

Thursday, July 4, 1996
Fort Thompson
Crow Creek Reservation
South Dakota
United States of America

Next PoV: 266 -- Fake Name Generator, Sioux

Amitola Proud Bison stood in front of the video cameras, determination in his voice. If the wizards were allowed to do it, the Native Americans should be able to as well.

"That's right, ladies and gentlemen. We of the Sioux demand that the Secretary for Indian Affairs be elected directly by the First Peoples tribes, not appointed by the federal government. We believe that someone who is a full-blooded Native American would be better able to serve in this position than someone who simply studied Native American culture.

"We admit that this is an unusual proposition. If it would make the federal government more comfortable, we would be willing to vote for this cabinet member provided that the federal government commit to installing whoever we elected.

"Think about it for a second. You are all familiar with Travis Radner, the American Secretary of Magic. Who elects him? The wizards. Does the President dispute or override this selection? No, and Mr. Clinton has even admitted this. Why does he do so? Undoubtedly because he is less familiar with the Wizarding world than the Muggle world and as a result trusts their judgment better than his own.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the United States, the vast majority of you are not Native American. Do
you really consider yourselves qualified to elect someone who is supposed to manage Native American affairs? Mr. President, I urge you to allow us to elect our own cabinet members. It is only fair, and we need at least some compensation for the appropriation of our land by the white settlers in the nineteenth century. To be perfectly frank, I wouldn't mind our ancestral homelands in the Carolinas back, but we will start with this for now.

"Some of the First Peoples may argue that it would not be appropriate for a Sioux to be elected Secretary of Native American affairs where this great country contains Apache, Dine, Hopi, and many other First People cultures. As a result, I offer a second option. Replace the Secretary of Indian Affairs with a body similar to the United States Senate, where each Native American community has a say. This Native American Senate will serve as the Secretary of Native American Affairs, with the majority leader given the formal title of Secretary. This committee can serve to represent our people as well as one individual person can."

----------------------
Angoon Satellite Office, Mt. St. Helens Wizarding Facility
Angoon, Alaska
United States of America
- - - - - - - - - - - - -
Tlingit Elder Shaman Shxoosteen Tsaateeneidí looked into the camera. "I'd like to emphasize that I do not consider the wizards to be superior to Muggles. Do we consider Native Americans superior to the white folk?

"Nevertheless, I urge the federal government to pass a law which will ensure that all Wizarding communities be guaranteed full autonomy, and possible independence, by the United States of America. Prior to the fall of the Statute of Secrecy, we lived entirely independently and had a thriving culture of our own. As a Native American, I know all too well what happens when a powerful majority culture makes inroads into the smaller minority ones: the minority cultures tend to be assimilated and are either destroyed or watered down to the point where there is very little left of our proud way of life.

"Mr. President, I urge you to not interfere with our way of life and not be tempted to make us dependent on Muggle culture. We are accustomed to working on our own, and we do not really need extensive external intervention. Rest assured that we will always respect your culture, and I expect you to do the same thing for ours.

"I believe you Muggles have a science television show called Star Trek which discusses something called the Prime Directive. Can you see how this applies here, particularly to small communities like our own?"

----------------------
Kodiak Island Trading Post
Kodiak Island
- - - - - - - - - - - - -
Cameras flashed as Second Citizen Liostra of Xylenda tried to explain her predicament to the astonished Muggles. "You heard me right, ladies and gentlemen. We of Xylenda have managed to establish a small trading post colony on Kodiak Island, where we have been helping the Inuit and other local peoples from both the United States and Russia. Life is difficult for Muggles out there, and all we want to do is help. We provide them basic foodstuffs and Wizarding services, and they provide us with fish and simple Muggle technology. Rest assured, the treaty between Xylenda and the Inuit people ensures that no military technology or weapons are transferred. Wizarding elders among the Inuit ensure that this is always the case.

"At any rate, we hoping to secure the independence of this trading post. The area we have occupied
is completely uninhabited by Muggles, and if the federal government wants some of its resources such as wood or oil we will be more than welcome to provide them if we do not need them.

"We've been there for a long time, ladies and gentlemen, and lived there peacefully. We have never seen any Muggles other than the Inuit, and only want to be left alone. Can't we be independent, or at least autonomous?

"If you wish, we will purchase this portion of the island from you. Your economy in trouble, and you need this money."

Oval Office

Clinton stared at the report. "Second Citizen Liostra of WHAT?"

To be continued...

Update #265.5

Thursday, July 4, 1996
City Council Chamber, Roqteratl
City-state of Roqteratl

In another wing of the same building housing the Greater Council Chamber, a somewhat smaller room was now filled with a murmuring crowd of Roqteratl's finest. Some of them, such as the leaders of the Great Houses and the general staff of the Border Defense& City Guard have known about the global council in the other hall, but the majority, like the Minor Houses, the Architect Guild*, the Banking League, and the various trade unions influential enough to be invited have only heard the rumors... although those were frightening enough on their own. The fiery birth of another lake between Ontario and the sea, the mysterious illness striking those downriver from it, and even wild tales about the Statute of Secrecy's end sounded like the ramblings of madmen or junkies- but if they were true, they meant changes, and hardly for the better.

Like the Greater Chamber, this room also had a podium in the middle, from where The Eldest addressed his city's people. This time, he did not need Sonorus- as soon as he swam to his place, everyone in the room fell into curious silence.

"My fellow citizens, I'm here today to announce you some important news. Some of you already know what's going on in the world around us, and I've decided the time has come to dispell my people's ignorance. Most of the gossips you've heard are true. There was a Judgement Day two weeks ago, and the surface realms have seen weapons of unprecedented power in action. One of those had smitten the river connecting Lake Ontario with the sea, blowing a crater more fitting for a god's punishment than a petard, and apparently poisoning the river. From what our wizard guests and friends tell us, there is no spell capable of such a feat- so we must assume the logical conclusion, that it was the work of Muggles. We already know they are a force to be reckoned with, with their steel boats and giant harpoons, and their careless spilling of oil and poison, but still, this is unprecedented. Both more worrying and reassuring is that these weapons seem to be available to Muggles since decades, and they didn't yet destroy the globe with it. I know this sounds ridiculous, but there is a very good explanation how we could have missed this. Head Astronomer, please present it for us."

An old siren woman rised to the podium, accompanied by a wizard, who conjured a miniature 3D image of Earth, about ten meter in diameter, floating above the gathered people. Red dots blinked
into existence in various blue-covered parts of the map, each accompanied by Mermish text- date and classifications.

"Gentlemen, what we see here are all the recorded great explosions of the last two century. As most of you've heard, there were much more falling star impacts and volcanic eruptions in the past 50 years than before- or so we thought until recently. We have the luck to see our nomadic cousins visit the Great Council, and listening to their stories, I began to see a pattern. These explosions, " here, some of the red dots* turned into a bright bluish white - "were recorded in tribal legends as coming without warning quakes and poisoning the water around themselves. Some of these people suffered horrible diseases and eventually death, in the exact same manner as those who fell ill while swimming in Ontario's river: hair falling out, weakness, nausea and vomiting, fevers, blood vomiting, and in more serious cases, bleeding from lesions on the skin and from all orifices. For decades, those stories were treated as stupid tales of superstitious savages. But now, we see that those must have been the previous detonations of these horrible Muggle weapons- and judging by the size of these explosions, some of these were far greater than the ones unleashed on Judgement Day."

"Thank you, Head Astronomer." The Eldest looked around in the room, watching the assembly's reactions. Some were silent and deathly pale, others visibly sceptical. "My fellow citizens, you see the proof that Muggles have reached and exceeded the power of Wizards, whom we thought were the most powerful beings living on our planet. However, unlike with wizards, we don't know much about them, we have no treaties, embassies or any connection at all with them. Worse still, they know about us: their interviewed the Merchiefness Murcus of Lake Hogsmeade. While she didn't tell them of settlements other than her own, Wizards know about us, and now Muggles appear to have free access to their knowledge. We must prepare to contact them, and we must show our best side to them. We must show power, wisdom, beauty, courage... and unity. To this end, I, the Eldest of Roqteratl now declare a Wartime Truce, valid from effective immediately until further notice. Your precious Game stops now, and we mobilise all our forces to be ready at a moment's notice. Spread the word- any and all infighting from now is to be ceased under threat of grave punishment. Ladies, gentlemen, thank you for your time."

Looking around in the room, he saw at least a third of the participants visibly disagreeing with his decision, but according to the law, they didn't oppose him- yet. The Eldest, once known as Hessu Snurbevon, was no fool...he knew the rules of Roqteratl, the rules of the Game, and he recognised the promise of assassination attempts in people's eyes when he saw it. Then again, being the target of such attempts was anything but unusual for him- it kind of came with the job.

-------------

Meanwhile, in the Xukwudiz manor, downtown Roqteratl.

-------------

"That's marvelous, Theun! It feels like riding the golem and being one with it at once...I have LEGS! And power, so much power...does being a giant feel like this? I wish you could try this too..." Jere Xukwudiz was walking all around the study in the now completed and fully operational prototype spider walker, displaying agility comparable to a real acromantula and strength comparable to a giant. During the last few days, the two scholars worked out all the issues of the machine, combining quality metalworking with arcane arts. The result was everything they were tasked with, and it has shown plenty of further potential - they had hardly begun adding enchantments and specialized extra parts to the golem.

"You know, it wouldn't take much to modify it for human use. In theory, I could squeeze myself in there even now, but it would require breaking my legs in a couple of places...but I could pilot it just like you."

"Hahh...look at that! I can use the blades I added as some of your furry terrestrial predators use their
claws...it seems whatever I added, the golem mind accepts it as a proper part of the body, even if no spider has such parts. Just think about the possibilities, my friend!" The siren willed the machine spider to lift one of it's legs, extend the knife concealed within, and skewer a piece of fried fish lying on a half-emptied dinner plate on the table in front of him, gently enough to leave the plate intact.

"I have to admit it's impressive. But I think you still have more important work to do than fooling around with my food, Jere. We have to make a backup model to prove the design is reliable and fit for production. Thank God we can do much of the work by Geminio this time, but I'll still have to repeat all the enchantments, replenish all magical substances, and you'll have to check and if necessary, readjust every rune, gear and spring in the copy to make sure there are no imperfections remaining when it's turned on."

"You're right...but as soon as we do that, we can finally collect our reward from my Elder, and from the look of it, you'll promptly get another, even better contract for further research."

"My thoughts exactly. To work, then!"

--------------------------------------

Meanwhile, somewhere in a dank, dark room

--------------------------------------

The door opened with a small creak, letting in dim light. For the prisoner, the voice was unbearably loud, the light blinding even through the blindfold covering her eyes. Whimpering in pain, she tried to lift her hands to cover her ears and eyes, and fought the sense of vertigo caused by even such a small movement. As she heard the soft, cautious steps and the unintelligible words of several creatures, her fogged mind realised what's about to come, and did her best to compose herself and face the suffering and humiliation with all the pride she could muster. She tried to stop wincing when she felt them grasp her with their spidery fingers, tried to stop fidgeting when they held her down, and tried not to scream in agony and anger when they plucked strand after strand of her hair...she tried, but failed, miserably, just like every time. As her scream ended, her tormentors grabbed her jaw and forced the usual hideously tasting liquid down her throat...then everything went black.

To be continued...
Update #266 through Update #270

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Mislagnissa

Update #266
-----------

Thursday, July 4, 1996
United Nations Building
Geneva, Switzerland

Harry Potter had taken a long look at the letter when the owl had come in. He had read it and reread it several times, yet it always seemed to say what he thought it said. Grand Mugwump Dagher had invited him and Dudley to Switzerland to participate in a ceremony in the United Nations building along with Ambassador Dialonis. What was going on? Why had they been selected? He remembered turning to Ron, but the redhead had no idea -- and neither did Ron's parents. He turned to Dumbledore, figuring that the Minister of Magic would know something about what was going on. However, the former headmaster winked at him and said it was going to be a surprise.

Flummoxed, he had turned to Hermione. Amazingly, Hermione had also been invited, and she didn't know what was going on either. Dumbledore proved to be as evasive with her as he had been with Harry.

Ron had initially been incensed that he hadn't been invited. However, Dumbledore had addressed his concern immediately when he explained that the invitation covered both Harry and Hermione's immediate families -- including their parents and guardians -- since both children were under 17. This meant that the Weasleys would be tagging along as Harry's adoptive parents. Hermione's parents would also be heading to Geneva.

In the old days, everyone would have focused their attention on Harry -- the Chosen One. Nowadays, however, Hermione had stolen the spotlight. Both Muggles and wizards were trying to get a hold of her and ask her for autographs. Eventually the bedlam had reached the point where Dumbledore had been forced to provide her with an Auror to serve as a bouncer and Secret Service agent. Her parents helped, of course, but as Muggles they couldn't do much about intrusive wizards.

Neither the Weasleys nor the Grangers had ever been to Switzerland before, and both families were excited to take a tour. Not surprisingly, the Grangers focused on nature and important Muggle historical and cultural sights. The Weasleys tended to focus on famous Wizarding locations. Ron and Hermione promised to compare notes and exchange pictures once their trips were over.

Right now, though, Harry couldn't think about what a canton was or where Swiss cheese came from. To be honest, he couldn't think at all because he was about to be introduced to quite possibly the two most important Wizarding politicians of the age: Grand Mugwump Dagher and Anastasios Dialonis. He barely knew how to address the king or members of the Regency Committee. Now they wanted him to talk to even more powerful world elders?

It took him a while to get through security, but eventually he made it through. Curiously, they didn't let Hermione go with him. That puzzled him for a while, but Dumbledore said that he shouldn't worry about it. Oddly enough, Dudley was supposed to go with him as well. If Harry was nervous, Dudley was absolutely petrified.
Haydar Dagher appeared to be his late fifties. He was bald, but made up for the lack of hair with a salt and pepper mustache and an unruly beard which rivaled Hagrid's. He was wearing glasses. Harry saw that he was wearing traditional Arab headgear, and he was wearing what looked almost to be a Bedouin robe under his formal wizard's attire. Supposedly Dagher had been the Saudi Minister of Magic before his elevation to Grand Mugwump, and he had been instrumental in deposing the Death Eater who had been Imperiusing Fahd.

Dagher seemed very young for a Grand Mugwump. However, it was understandable as his predecessor had been promoted -- amazingly -- to Muggle ambassador. If there was a man who looked like what a Grand Mugwump should look like, it was Dialonis.

Dialonis was in his seventies, and he looked a lot like Sean Connery in Hunt for Red October. That full head of white hair, regal mustache, and neatly trimmed beard looked positively regal…and wise.

Dagher spoke to him first. "Good evening, Mr. Potter and Mr. Dursley. We're glad you were able to come for this ceremony."

Harry was barely able to stammer out a response. "It's an honor, Grand Mugwump. To be honest with you, sir, I don't think we deserve --"

Dialonis smiled. "Don't worry about it, kids, you won't have to do much. You see, we've invited you to this ceremony as the representatives of Sirius Black. You are, after all, his next of kin."

Dudley finally found his voice, and Harry braced himself. "We came all the way over here to represent Sirius Black?"

"Yes, Mr. Dursley. Someone has to, and unfortunately he is not able to represent himself."

Harry cut in. "What do you want us to do?"

Dagher told him, and Harry nearly fell over in shock.

Hermione Granger, making sure to wear Muggle formalwear, walked into the reception hall of the United Nations headquarters. People naturally tried to interview her and take photographs of her in the cocktail dress, but the Auror shooed them all away.

She asked the Auror if he knew what was going on. He said that he did, but he didn't want to ruin the surprise. Hermione had already had enough surprises during the fight with Voldemort, but the Auror was adamant about this. He told her, however, that she didn't have anything to worry about. If anything, she would likely appreciate the surprise.

The usher escorted her to the front of the auditorium, where seats had been set aside for her and her family. The organizers had placed her, not surpassingly, next to the Weasleys. Curiously, she saw Ron in the Weasley section but no Harry. Where was Harry? She'd find out soon enough, she figured.

Her parents naturally took a liking to the Weasleys, especially when Mr. Weasley he showed off his George Cross and told them that he was involved with the Bentley Pegasus project. Not surprisingly, they promptly started complaining about the commute to work -- which the explosion hadn't particularly helped with -- and asked him for updates on the Pegasus. Arthur eventually had to explain that a lot of the stuff he was doing was classified and that he could not say much beyond what was released when the Pegasus had made its test flight a few months earlier. What he could.
say, however, was that it was not going to be cheap -- possibly as much as a half a million pounds. The Weasleys, in turn, found it interesting to interact with a Muggle family on a friendly basis.

Hermione chuckled silently to herself. At the rate things were going, they'd be in-laws at some point. Then again, she had never considered the possibility that King William would actually have a crush on her. A date with the king would be…interesting, to say the least.

The plates with the hors d'oeuvres were taken away and everyone sat down for the presentation. Hermione still had no idea what was going on, and Harry had not yet appeared.

Ambassador Dialonis walked onstage, and everyone promptly rose in unison and applauded. The former Grand Mugwump dipped his head in acknowledgment and introduced the night's main speaker, Grand Mugwump Dagher. The Grand Mugwump also got applause as well, but not as much as Dialonis for the simple reason that the world didn't know him as well yet.

Dagher shook his head when the Secretary General tried to give him a microphone and amplified his voice with the Sonorus spell. Grinning apologetically, he began to speak.

"Ladies and gentlemen, Muggles and wizards, I have called this gathering to introduce a new award which will be given every year to an outstanding witch or wizard who has made breakthroughs in the world of Muggle relations. In order to be eligible for this award, he or she must have gone out of his or her way to improve the lives of Muggles around the world. This award will be presented for the first time today, and every year thereafter it will be presented on Judgment Day, June 20th."

Everyone clapped at this. Hermione suddenly had an awful suspicion she knew who was going to get the award.

"This is a time of historic change in the Wizarding community. The Statute of Secrecy which forced us to hide from the Muggles has fallen, and we can finally use our magic to help the world. We are in debt to the world for allowing the Dark wizard Voldemort to nearly bring down civilization. It is our responsibility to perform good deeds to undo the damage caused by Voldemort."

Hermione's parents' eyes widened, and they looked at her. They appeared to have the same suspicion she did. She personally thought that Dialonis was more suited to an award than she was. However, it occurred to her that he'd already been showered with Muggle awards. Besides, he'd already introduced the Grand Mugwump as the main speaker, so it would likely be inappropriate for him to suddenly get it.

Dagher continued. "Allow me to introduce two new guests. One of them is a wizard you have already met -- indeed, you met him well before you met any of us. His name is Harry Potter, and he is a sixth year student at Hogwarts. As it so happens, he was the wizard filmed during the Super Bowl commercial. Ladies and gentlemen, Harry Potter."

Harry stepped out onto the stage in full Muggle formalwear, and Hermione's eyes widened. The most logical other guest would be Ron, but Ron was sitting next to her! Who --

Dagher continued. "Our next guest will be Harry Potter's Muggle cousin, Dudley Dursley. Although Dursley comes from a family which tends to look down upon wizards -- in fact, his uncle founded America for Humans and his father helped found Britain for Humans -- he has accepted his brother's status as a wizard and has started to turn his life around. We can all hope the rest of us are able to bury our prejudices in this way. Ladies and gentlemen, Dudley Dursley."
Hermione's jaw dropped as Dudley walked onstage and stood next to Harry. DUDLEY? What did Dudley have to do with this? Harry looked excited, but Dudley looked very nervous.

Dagher nodded to the two boys and resumed his speech. "I have invited these two young men here to represent their late adopted father, and Harry's godfather, Sirius Black. As many of you may know, Sirius shot Voldemort with a pistol in North Korea, a brilliantly unorthodox move which evaded the power of the Elder Wand. Prior to his service in Korea, he was a member of His Majesty's Secret Service and defied his family's pureblood tradition by entering Gryffindor House and being supportive of Muggles. He was one of the bravest men I have ever encountered.

"With that in mind, it is my great pleasure to introduce the Black Medal, a decoration which will be awarded to the wizard who did most to help Muggles and ease Wizarding/Muggle relations."

The Grand Mugwump waved his wand, and the small box's lid popped open and something which looked like a military decoration -- ribbon and all -- floated into the air. Waving his wand once again, the Grand Mugwump enlarged it so that everyone could see it better.

The medallion at the bottom appeared to be made of metal. There was a ring of gold around the perimeter a couple of rubies embedded in it, one on each side. The obverse of the medallion showed Sirius Black's face on top and his dog form on the bottom. Along with these were the words 20 JUN MCMXCVI -- NEVER FORGET. The reverse showed a robed man and a uniformed man shaking hands. Underneath it were the words WIZARDS AND MUGGLES, PEACE ON EARTH.

Dagher explained. "The rubies represent the blood spilled during Judgment Day. The dog on the front is actually Sirius Blacks Animagus form, as he…appears to have been an unregistered Animagus, or a wizard who can take the form of an animal."

Dumbledore, who was sitting a few rows away, chuckled at this. Hermione did as well.

Dagher winked at Dumbledore and continued. "You recognize the date 20 JUNE MCMXCVI, of course. I suspect people five hundred years from now will be reading about what happened in their history books."

The Grand Mugwump pointed at the metal. "The metal used in this inaugural Black Medal comes directly from the events of Judgment Day itself. Specifically, Sirius Black's gun, the one used to kill Voldemort. It was melted down and turned from a weapon of war into a symbol of peace."

Everyone clapped at that.

Dagher finished his speech. "That, ladies and gentlemen, is the Black Medal. It is now my great honor to present the 1996 Black Medal to a young witch who used her Muggle background and Wizarding skills to create an innovative defensive mechanism which protected millions of people from illness and possibly death as a result of the nuclear explosions detonated on Judgment Day. Her bold work proves, once and for all, that Voldemort was mistaken in his belief that pureblood wizards are superior to those with Muggle ancestors."

He looked at Harry, and Harry took the medal from him. Ron's eyes suddenly widened, and he started kissing her effusively. She did what she could to get him to stop, but there wasn't much she could do. Those pictures would probably get all over the news and possibly into the Daily Prophet. She had barely managed to fend him off when Dagher finished the last sentence.

"The 1996 Black Medal goes to the British witch Hermione Jean Granger."
The crowd roared and cameras flashed once more as Hermione -- still unsure how to react -- got up and headed towards the stage. Her first thought was: God, I hope I don't screw this up. Her second one was: Harry may be a very nice friend, but if his HAND touches my chest instead of that medal I'm going to turn him into a toad…

To be continued…

Update #267

Thursday, July 4, 1996
Oval Office
Washington, DC
United States of America

Radner didn't like where this was going. First Syrdan abducts some American citizens, forcing him to tell the president that the island nation existed. Now that crazed woman in charge of Xylenda reports that it had been interacting with the Inuits for years and wants to buy up part of an Alaskan island. He doubted Clinton would agree to that. Radner was troubled by this as well, at the very least because Xylend implied that they had been messing with the Inuit since before the fall of the Statute of Secrecy!

Clinton asked him once again. "All right, Radner. What the hell is this Xylenda? Is it an organization of some sort? If it is, it's damned peculiar that I've never heard of it. Is it another hidden island like Syrdan? I want to know, and want to know NOW!"

Radner took a deep breath and explained. "Xylenda is another hidden nation, situated in the North Pacific. It has a Communist form of government, which actually works in this case because the wizards help keep corruption in check and the nation is small enough to prevent the state from developing the overhead and bureaucracy that did in the Soviet Union."

Clinton nodded. "Sort of like an Israeli kibbutz then."

"Yes, sir. It's got about 20,000 people, all wizards. They are led by the First Citizen, and their cabinet staff are given the title of Second Citizen."

Clinton whistled. "In other words, we just got a message from their Secretary of State."

"Yes, sir. It is a standard diplomatic audience for the Xylends."

Clinton looked at him, hard. "Let me guess. They're going to try to enslave us too if they get a chance."

Radner shook his head vigorously. "No sir, they won't. Syrdan is unusual in that regard, and it's just bad luck that we ran into them first. Most Wizarding nations respect Muggles, or at least have a live-and-let-live foreign policy with Muggle states. I must say, sir, that if there's anything unusual I see here, it's the fact that they've managed to set up a trading post well before the Statute of Secrecy fell. From the little I know about the situation, I get the impression that they interact with the Inuit tribal shamans and the tribal shamans pass off the magic as gifts from the gods, thereby preserving the Statute of Secrecy. That may have changed, though."

Clinton nodded. "Makes sense. Now supposedly they're getting Muggle technology and food in
"Yes, sir. I'm not sure what they're sending over, but I'm almost certain it's benign: medicine, maybe a few cars, a computer or two, stuff like that. Their treaty forbids the exchange of weapons."

"That's good to hear, Radner. Maybe we can learn from them since they've probably had a few years trying to meld magic and technology. Here's what I'm thinking: they've already got a post there, and they want that land. I'm not giving them the land, of course. However, I AM thinking of having that territory be set aside as the Xylend embassy and national cultural landmark. If they want to start diplomatic relations, we'll consent. We should also send some anthropologists up there to spend more time with the Inuit and these guys. Who knows, maybe we can get these guys to beat up on Syrdan with us."

Radner froze. Xylenda almost certainly knew about Syrdan's peculiar customs and would almost certainly want it eliminated. The question is whether they would be willing to go to war -- and drag the entire Galiver Consortium along with it. If they got involved, you could get a Hidden Nation world war. Considering what had happened over the past few weeks, a war involving large numbers of wizards all around the globe was not a good idea.

Cautiously, he said: "I doubt they'll agree to a war, sir. They're on the other side of the globe, and as you can tell they're much more pacifist than the Syrdani. From what I've been told, they even provide magical services to Russian Inuits in eastern Siberia during the Cold War."

Clinton's eyebrows shot up. "Wow. Thank God Stalin or someone like that didn't find out about that, or we'd have had BIG trouble. If the Statute of Secrecy had fallen in 1950…"

Radner grunted. He didn't even want to think about that.

Clinton changed the subject. "Change of subject. That Granger girl -- the one who created those fallout shelters. I was wondering if she'd like a little gift."

---------------------

Geneva

--------------------

Hermione was going to need a new robe at some point, she thought. Right now, she was wearing enough medals to overwhelm a metal detector. The Black Medal was hanging from her robes now, next to the George Cross and the Order of Merlin First Class. There was also a little golden pin which none of the wizards recognized, and for good reason.

It had been a gift from the king.

He was clearly interested in her, and she was intrigued by the possibility of being a princess. But what was she going to do with Ron? Krum would have been a possibility, but he was dead. Lockhart had been cute but twice her age...and now didn't know who she was.

Someone tapped her on the shoulder -- it was the American representative. "Excuse me, Miss Granger, but I hope you've got more room on that robe for another award. You've just been awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom along with another witch named Jelena Kurchatova. You know her? We were hoping you'd be able to head over to the US when you're done here."

---------------------

Mt. St. Helens Facility

--------------------

David Stern looked around the facility and smiled. "All right, Diana. I think I'll take it. I'll be here in
a couple of weeks. You're sure I'll be able to commute from Arizona?"

The head of the facility nodded. "That's correct, Mr. Stern. You can just head over to the Sanders' house if you don't have a fireplace in your own home, and if you do you can commute directly. Tell us, and we'll set you up."

Stern nodded. "Good idea -- I'll tell you where I live. I'm looking forward to this, and it's not just for the pay raise."

The head of the facility shook his hand. "I'll look forward to working with you…Professor Stern."

To be continued...

--------------
Update #267.5
--------------

Thursday, July 4, 1996
Market District, Roqteratl
City-state of Roqteratl

Red Squad was currently gathering around a two-storeyd building, taking up dolphin shape to go over the plans one more time before the action. In another part of the city, unknown to them, the Eldest has just announced the halt of the power struggle between Great Houses and a general mobilisation, meaning that barring a skeleton crew investigating major crimes that landed in their jurisdiction, all Border Defense personnel were to report for duty at the HQ to be assigned on patrol and scouting missions. Currently, their investigation was considered a relatively insignificant one: no merpeople citizen's life was in danger, and every foreign diplomat or sanctioned wizard of the Guilds were accounted for- meaning the human who's hand they found was a nobody, a wizard working illegally with no oaths taken. The situation will be radically different when they report back to HQ half an hour later…but for now, they prepared to look around in the jeweller's shop one of Kima's old contacts advised to them.

"<Red 16 here, target building looks clean, no costumers inside>" Came the report from a squad member, as he emerged from the building wearing- or rather, not wearing- civilian clothes, and morphed into his animal form. "<One of our kind down at the counter, he says top floor is workshop with a couple of goblins there. Top floor is aired, with several stairs and airlocks, no sign of any underground parts.>"

"<Copy that, Red 16. Listen up, guys, we're about to get started. Proceed according to Plan Barracuda, Red 1 to 5 guarding back door, 6 to 10 entering through front door, 11 to 20 staying up here with me watching out for the airlocks. Red 6, at my signal!>"

Following the signal that meant all exits are secured, Kima and 4 of his squadmates changed into merpeople shape and entered the shop. The only one they saw was the shopkeeper, a visibly bored middle-aged Siren woman. "Greetings, lady and gentlemen, to Bagronk's. How may I help you?"

"I'm Kima from Border Defense. We are gathering information about this enchanted ring we found." The shopkeeper took a close look at the jewel and told them it's goblin work, they should go upstairs and ask Mr. Bagronk if he can tell anything about it.

-----------------------
moments later, upstairs
The five merpeople waited in the airlock till their breathing grew accustomed to the dry, hot air of the workshop. This floor had several small rooms, they stood in the big one with the forge and various instruments in it. So far, they saw only one goblin, an elderly male with a high-quality, but moderately sooty protective clothing.

"Greetings. My name is Bagronk, and you are...?" His face was steady, his manners collected but also a bit smug, his accent flawless Galiver- interrogating this fellow was proving to be challenging.

"I am Kima from Border Defense, and we are here to ask you some questions about this ring." The goblin took a quick look at the jewel, showing very well-masked signs of surprise, then asked the woman: "What, no family name? An oath-taker? How could this little ring be so important to your people that they send high-rank officers to my lowly store?"

"I'm asking the questions here, goblin. Do you have any information about the ring?"

"Well of course, it's no doubt fine goblin work, and enchanted too. I have some very detailed records of such masterpieces of my people, if you allow me to take it to compare it to the pictures, I'll be back with an answer in no time."

"Fine, but I come with you." Came the cautious answer from the mermaid.

"There's no trust in you folks these days, is there? Fine, we shall go, just wait till I change my clothes lest I soil the paper." Quickly getting rid of the apron and gloves in favor of a long-sleeved robe, the Goblin showed the way for Kima into one of the small rooms, this one packed full of book cases. The jeweller climbed up a ladder, looking over dozens or even hundreds of old, heavy, leather-back books, murmuring under his breath: "...necklace, bracelet, ring...silver, gold...magical, with gemstone, here we go, only 3 volumes to check...Officer, would you please help me getting these down? They are quite heavy..." As he lifted book after book, putting the ring down on the top shelf, he kept murmuring, probably reciting the content of each book...then, as he made sure the detective was occupied with the books, he reached into one of his sleeves, and very softly murmured something different: Geminio. Another ring appeared next to the original. satisfied with the result- it was close enough to be identical to the unaided eye- he quickly dropped it onto one of the books, and pocketed the real one when the merperson was looking away.

After a good half an hour of turning pages, they finally found what they were looking for: quality drawings and detailed descriptions of the ring- unfortunately, in Gobbledygook. Though the goblin appeared to be happy to help, Kima couldn't help but hear her intuition screaming for her to be cautious.

"This is it, without doubt: the Lucky Ring of Bogrod, mistakenly known to your kind as the Ring of Naztheros, forged and enchanted by Bogrod the Bearded in 1549, sold to the Syrdani wizard Karkun Naztheros in 1550, lawlessly usurped by his family after his death in 1597. Since then, those thieves had it, and after they were exiled from Syrdan thirty-five years ago, they probably brought it here to Roqteratl. Sadly, they met their end thirteen years ago, when the House they worked for fell from grace. My people searched their possessions, but no trace of the ring was found- until now."

"Thank you, that's a lot of useful information. Now, please let us borrow this book, so our experts can verify your claims...and of course I need the ring back. Now is not the time to decide whether it should go back for the goblins"

"Of course, officer. I'm proud to help the police of this glorious city. Just give me a minute, so I can
do the necessary paperwork. Gorbag!" One of the small doors opened and a younger goblin came in. The old one wrote a receipt, and gave it to the other one, changing a few words in their unintelligible language, then the apprentice left towards the back door. "Forgive me, he only speaks Gobbledygook. Now, is there anything else I can help you with?"

downstairs, back alley
--------------------------
The back door opened and a goblin, attempting to walk on the pavement, breathing with the help of gillyweed, suddenly found himself at spear-point in front of five merpeople. Paling in fright, it took him a while to compose himself and use rudimentary sign language to explain them everything is all right, and they should let him pass...and he probably would have been successful, had a house-elf not apparated above him. This way, though, he stumbled under the weight of the creature, and was forced to side-along Disapparate from the scene...but not before something fell out of his clothing, and on the ground. Stunned by surprise, Toni didn't need much time to recognise the item. "Hey, the little bastard tried to smuggle my ring out!"

upstairs
--------
"Here is the book, the waterproof carrying bag for it, and with this receipt you could access all reports detailing Naztheros financial activities in our local bank. Anything else I can do for you, Officer?"
"No, no, this is very good. I cannot think of any other questions for you at the moment. Thank you for your help, Bagronk...I wish everyone in this city would be so helpful with us."

As Kima said goodbye to the artisan, and made her way to the airlock, his four companions flanked him protectively- as if she was their boss. It was then that she heard Toni's shouting coming from the back door: "6, pay a bit more attention, one of the little #&@#s tried to smuggle my ring out!"

For a moment, everyone froze. Kima's group looked down at the ring in her hand, then at the goblin. Bagronk looked directly into the mermaid's eyes, smiled sadly, shrugged, and with the same movement, whipped a wand out of his sleeve.

The guard standing closest to him had barely enough time to yell some obscenities and reach for his spear, when a cutting curse cleanly bisected him at the chest. Then, as the detective shouted "TAKE COVER!", the goblin answered with hurling an Incendio their way, and turning to face Toni, who by now overcame his initial shock and lunged at the spellcaster.

Two things happened at once: a slash appeared on the merman's face, right through both eyes, and his spear was embedded into Bagronk's chest. As they both fell bleeding to the floor, the conjured fire dissipated, allowing the slightly parched survivors of the first group to approach the fallen foe.

Bagronk was still alive, but just barely. His wand fell from his hand, and the weight of many grasping arms and tails crushed his appendages to prevent any further tricks. With blood rapidly filling his lungs, he still found the strength to say his last words: "Foolish...*cough* pawns of ... wizards... my death is...just...a...set...back..." Then his eyes glassed over, and he spoke no more.

To be continued...
James Oliver Rigney, known to the science fiction and fantasy community as Robert Jordan, was working on the latest Wheel of Time book when the call came in. He was already well into the series and expected that it would take more than ten books of more than 600 pages each to finish the plot as he saw it.

He was fairly certain that he'd get an opportunity to finish all of the books. The ones which had already been published had proven to be strong sellers, and the Wheel of Time had started to develop a strong following among the fantasy community.

One of the defining features of the series was its unusual system of elemental magic. Wizards -- primarily women in the series -- cast spells by manipulating, or "weaving", elemental magic. Unlike most fantasy novels, where the wizard just casts a spell, a Wheel of Time witch would follow an intricately detailed (and usually prescribed) recipe for mixing the five magical elements to provide the desired result. It was also unusual in that men and women accessed the five elements in different ways and one could not learn magic from someone of the opposite gender. It was also possible to enhance a wizard's power with magical artifacts or permanently remove a wizard's spellcasting ability as a punishment.

He had been thinking about how exactly to continue the series when the phone rang. Hoping he wouldn't lose his train of thought, he walked over to the phone and picked it up. "Hello?"

An unfamiliar voice answered him. "Good evening. Is this James Rigney I'm speaking with?"

"Yes. Who is this?"

"Secretary of Magic Travis Radner. A Muggle friend of mine named Isaac Sanders has helped me set up a conference call with the Grand Mugwump, Heydar Dagher, who is currently in Geneva for a conference."

Rigney blinked. What on earth did he have to do with the Secretary of Magic, let alone the Grand Mugwump. "I'm honored, gentlemen, but I think you've got the wrong man. I'm a former soldier and fantasy writer, not a wizard."

"That's precisely why we've contacted you, sir. You are the author of the Wheel of Time series, using the pseudonym Robert Jordan?"

Rigney wondered where this was going. Were they going to complain that his depiction of wizards was inaccurate? Other authors had complained that the wizards were starting to meddle in places they shouldn't have. "Yes, I'm Robert Jordan. How can I help you?"

The answer caught him completely off guard. "The Grand Mugwump was wondering if you could explain how the Amyrlin Seat imposed the Aes Sedai oaths on the surviving spellcasters after the Breaking of the World."
Rigney's jaw dropped. The Secretary of Magic had called him to ask him about his series? This made no sense! Cautiously, he said: "I'm sorry, Mr. Secretary, I can't say. You'll have to read and find out in case I decide to include that information in a future book. I'm flattered by your appreciation of the series, though."

Radner's response surprised him even further. "Actually, we're calling for a different reason. Are you familiar with the anti-wizard group Britain for Humans?"

Rigney scratched his beard. "I'm familiar with America for Humans. Are they related?"

"Yes, Mr. Rigney. In fact, from what we can tell the man who founded Britain for Humans was the brother of the man who founded America for Humans. At any rate, let me bring you up to date on what has been going on. As you know, the emergence of the wizards over the past few months has changed the world drastically. People have known that people can use magic to do great wonders for society…or destroy it."

Rigney shuddered. "I'm aware of that, sir."

"We all are, Mr. Rigney. Well, the various Something for Humans groups said that they would continue to attack wizards until the wizards took decisive action to police themselves. The Grand Mugwump has required that psychological tests be administered to all future Wizarding candidates, which was a good start. However, Britain for Humans said that it was not enough. They are demanding that in order to regain the Muggles' trust, wizards must swear Unbreakable Vows to use their magic responsibly."

Rigney nodded. "That makes sense, sir. In fact my --"

The man known as Robert Jordan suddenly realized something, and he almost dropped the phone. They couldn't be thinking what he thought they were thinking…could they?

He had to ask. "Are you telling me that you're trying to start a real-life order of Aes Sedai out of the wizards, complete with the Three Oaths from the Wheel of Time series?"

"That is correct, Mr. Rigney. The first step will be requiring that all wizards take all five of these vows as a requirement for graduating any Wizarding school. Needless to say, forcing an Unbreakable Vow on someone will be controversial, so that's why we want your advice here. How did you do it in your story?"

Rigney didn't want to disappoint them, but he had to. "I've always assumed it was a fait accompli, gentlemen. The Three Oaths have become an accepted part of the landscape by the time the main plot line commences. I never thought much about it other than the fact that they were introduced to convince the world that wizards could be trusted again."

Dagher cut in. "Which exactly the case here, Mr. Rigney. Most wizards are not insane, like your male spellcasters; or evil, like Voldemort. We believe we can do a lot to help the world, but we need to regain their trust. We've agreed that some sort of Unbreakable Vow is probably necessary -- unwanted, but necessary. The question is what these vows should be, and as it turns out Mr. Sanders is a fan of your series and used the Aes Sedai vows as a starting point."

Rigney didn't know what to say. "I'm flattered once again. I'm not sure if the copyright office will let you use the term Aes Sedai, however. You may want to check on that. Also, keep in mind that although the Three Oaths work for the most part in the story, there are still evil witches in the Wheel
of Time universe. Furthermore, the simple fact is that the Wheel of Time universe is a fantasy. Real life will almost certainly not mimic that."

"It's the best we have right now, however. Would you like to hear the vows?"

"Yes. I'm curious where the other two come from."

"The first vow is a prohibition against magic except in self-defense, defense of another sentient being, or against Dark forces. The second one is a prohibition of creating weapons which can be used to harm another sentient being either emotionally, physically, or mentally. This includes working for a defense contractor. Those are taken from your books, are they not?"

"Yes. There is also another one which prevents lying."

"Sanders told us about that, Mr. Rigney, but we cannot use it because the punishment for violating an Unbreakable Vow is death, not inability to commit the act. The fact that a little white lie can kill you makes it too dangerous."

Rigney nodded. "I see. What are the other three?"

"The third one is to swear to follow the laws of the land and its ruler fairly and impartially, unless those laws force the wizard to violate one of the other vows."

Rigney nodded. Elaida's Fourth Oath, even though it hadn't even been introduced yet.

"Number four is to train future generations of witches and wizards to take these vows."

Rigney approved of that. In the books, the Three Oaths had been custom for so long that people never thought of not introducing them to prospective witches. Here, however, the world had to initiate that custom. Therefore, it needed another oath.

"Finally, number five: a prohibition against renouncing any of these oaths. There we have it, Mr. Rigney. Five Unbreakable Vows."

Rigney whistled. "I like that last one a LOT, and the fact that it is possible to renounce an oath in the Wheel of Time series opens the door for evil witches. If we plug that hole from the start, it will help a lot. I must say, gentlemen, that this is a very good start. I don't know if it will work in reality, but you can always have some people take the vows as an experiment."

"That's exactly what we intend to do, Mr. Rigney. The current plan involves making Aes Sedai status optional. Although this will not prevent evil wizards from continuing to harm people, it will set a major precedent for taking the Vows. All we have to do is to have one company -- such as our Wizarding Services Corporation -- require Aes Sedai status for employment. Once we have some wizards taking vows and other wizards not, whom do you think the Muggles will trust enough to hire?"

Rigney chuckled. "I see your point, sir. Very clever. What are you going to do with people who don't think Unbreakable Vows will be necessary for the wizards to police themselves? After all, things like fines are much more humane. What happens if a country declares forced adoption of the Five Vows unconstitutional, so to speak, in that adoption should be left to each individual nation?"

Dagher sighed. "I hope that doesn't happen. If it does, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it."
Oval Office

Clinton couldn't stand by any longer. The Syrdani had abducted American citizens and needed to be punished. Furthermore, as long as that slave nation was over there, they could just abduct other people. Radner wasn't here to talk with him, however -- he said he had to talk with some kind of fantasy author -- so he figured he'd start making plans by himself.

He couldn't disclose Syrdan's existence yet. However, he could make a speech announcing an initiative to countering forced labor and poor working conditions. People would assume he was talking about the United States, as that would make sense for his new isolationist foreign policy. He couldn't mention Syrdan by name. However, if these Xylends found out about the speech and decided to join in on the fun the United States could support the Xylends with a black op and retrieve all freed American hostages as the Xylends overthrew the government.

He suspected that the operation would be complete by November. If it succeeded, he could trot out the freed hostages and buy himself some votes. If he failed, he could just keep it top secret.

Little did Clinton realize that the speech would attract the attention of a country other than Syrdan… and it wouldn't be Xylenda.

To be continued...

Update #268.5

Friday, July 5, 1996
Greater Council Chamber, Roqteratl
City-State of Roqteratl

The Eldest's belief that his people still had a long time to handle this crisis was shattered this morning, when a mixed contingent of merpeople and wizards arrived unexpectedly through the portkey network. The wizards, claiming to be from Xylenda, said to the guards that they had come to this gathering with urgent news. The mortified faces of the merpeople accompanying them was more than enough for the guards to direct them straight to him, lest they cause panic in the assembly.

When they told him about their first contact with the United States of America, and the details of their proposal, he had been shell-shocked and even furious: it turned out the merpeople living near the coasts of Alaska knew about Xylenda's meddling with the Eskimo tribes, but chose to keep him in the dark about it.

What's worse, they showed him maps, displaying Muggle political borders in the seas. Those nearly caused him to fell over- with the exception of Roqteratl and some of the Sargasso Alliance's deep cities, and a few towns seasonally inhabited by semi-nomadic hunter tribes here and there, all significant settlements of his kind lay in Muggle territory, and no one even knew it. Hell, even some of Roqteratl's territories were claimed by the Muggle nation of Mauritius. He had to tread softly here, lest chaos broke out.

Now, standing before the gathering, he only hoped he can do what his Oaths demanded and act for the greater good of his beloved city, and to obey his conscience and act for all of his kind around the world.
"Brothers and sisters, my friends, I have urgent news for you. Yesterday, the planet's most powerful Muggle nation, the United States of America, was contacted by Second Citizen Liostra of Xylenda, who proposed the establishment of a trade outpost between the two nations on the island they call Kodiak."

"More accurately, they proposed sharing the outpost with the official government of the USA, as they secretly been trading with local Muggle tribes for years or even decades before that. This was a clear violation of the Statute of Secrecy...but, as you can all see, I'm no wizard, and this is no place for enforcing an outdated law. We never had anything bad to say about the Xylenda, and they did this to aid sentient beings in dire need for help. We all remember how they helped out our brothers and sisters, when the waters on those very coasts were poisoned by black oil seven years ago. Their altruistic actions are inspirational for all of us."

"They also were kind to warn us that the Muggles, completely ignorant of our existence, have claimed vast areas of the oceans for themselves. Before you think anything bad about it, I repeat: they did not know about our settlements in those areas. I'm confident that with good diplomacy, we can remedy the situation without bloodshed."

"However, our Xylenda guests admit that Muggle governments have a bad record when it comes to treating less powerful groups with honor. To avoid such incidents, I propose we go to them as one, united group. We will contact them just like Xylenda did, using the same outpost to do so."

"My city has a lovely tradition of Wartime Truces. For those of you unfamiliar with the expression, it means the mobilisation of all armed forces and the ceasing of internal conflicts between the Houses of Roqteratl. Today, I propose we expand this: let all our people cooperate, and muster our strength together! Now, ask your questions, if you have any...but please, one at a time!"

The first one was of Roqteratl, Ritva the Elder of House Xukwudiz. "Honored Eldest, my question is in fact a proposition. Tomorrow morning, my best researchers showed one of their projects to me. It's a mechanical suit of armor, enabling us merpeople to walk the ground with more agility than creatures born there, and gives us the strength of giants. It runs on magic, and can be built by us in adequate numbers. Though research is still ongoing to further improve the walker, I believe the current model is more than enough to show our power to these Muggles...not to mention it's a lot more comfortable than crawling on the frozen ground of that frigid northern island."

The Eldest was pleased with this. "Thank you, Elder Xukwudiz, I like your thinking. I'll take a look at this project as soon as possible. If it's really as promising as you made it sound, I'll need many of these machines, along with the method of their creation...naturally, you will be bountifully compensated for sharing it. Next?"

The Tsalal envoy spoke up: "You can't seriously turn yourselves in! These Muggles can't be trusted. They'll oppress you, kill your way of life bit by bit, and you'll never be able to stop them!"

"I know it's a real danger, but let's face the facts: the Statute of Secrecy is gone. There are wizard records about us and our cities, and sooner or later the Muggles will read those and come searching...after they learn that much of our people is disunited and weak. We cannot win a war against them, but we can make a good first impression, and secure our safety with diplomacy. Next?"

And the meeting continued...

---------------------------

elsewhere, in a hospital room
The members of Red Squad gathered around Toni "Red 2" Kexitalo's hammock as soon as the witch medic allowed them to visit. The meeting was bittersweet: though Trihs "Red 8" Kenafin was killed in action, and five others injured, Toni's quick reaction prevented further losses. True, he lost his eyes for that stunt, but they were already making plans to help with that.

Red Leader asked the boy: "Well, how is the luckiest guy I've ever seen feels today?"

"Tired. Doctors kept me awake till they were sure there is no brain damage. That curse should have splitted my damn head in half, but somehow it didn't. The eyes are a goner, though. Looks like I'll have to go dolphin if I ever want to see in any way. How are the others?"

"6, 7, 9 and 10 had some burns, but nothing serious. Curse wounds, mind you, so their scars can't just be healed, but seeing they'd have been burnt to crisps had you been a bit slower, it's nothing to cry about. And about your eyes...we came up with a plan to give you another set...a better one."

Toni has obviously thought about that before, and discarded the idea: "No way my family can afford those fancy magical eyes. Ours is a small House, with little money to spare at the moment...and my carreer is hardly a priority for my Elder. Best I can do is staying permanently in dolphin form, and go feral...I would see well enough with sonar for hunting. Better than burdening my House."

"We aren't speaking about your House, 2. It's Wartime Truce now, the army gets all the funds it needs. Of course they can't waste it on temporary rookies like you, but what you did in there is enough to earn you some promotions...what do you think about taking the Oaths, son?"

----------------------

meanwhile, secret location
----------------------

Gorbag slowly woke with a killer headache, and found himself tied to a chair in a darkened room. For a moment, he didn't know how he got there, then the memory came back to him: he was delivering the Ring of Bogrod to where it was desperately needed, when he was first held up by merpeople guards, then whisked away by someone else...they probably Apparated and it stunned him on arrival.

"Master, it's awake!" said a screechy, high, feminine voice. A human wearing a hooded robe walked into the goblin's field of vision, pointing a wand at him threateningly. The wizard began asking him questions:
"Where is my ring?" The goblin's answer was "Va't", which in his native language roughly meant "I don't understand".
"My ring, you little creep, my f@#king RING! The one your little friends pulled off my severed hand!"
"Va't!"
"Oh, don't play the innocent, we've tracked your band, you're the one we're looking for."
"Va't!"
"You're trying my patience. Where are you from, s#%tbird?"
"Va't!"
""What" ain't no country I've ever heard of. They speak Galiver in What?"
"VA'T!"
"Galiver, motherf###er, do you speak it?!!?
At this point, Gorbag didn't even bother to answer- so far, the fool apparently believed he can't cross
the language barrier. The wizard's next words chilled his blood. "All right, I gave you the chance to do this in a civilized way. But now, the gloves come off. "Legilimens"!

To be continued...

-------------
Update #269
-------------
Saturday, July 6, 1996
Grand Mugwump's Office
Atlantis
Next PoV: 270 - Ask Fake Name Generator, Exotic

-------------------------------
The high-level bureaucrats had argued late into the night, along with Isaac Sanders, several other Muggle representatives, and the man known as Robert Jordan. Dagher realized very quickly that getting people to take Unbreakable Vows was not going to be as easy as he had hoped.

In principle, everyone agreed that the wizards should take SOME kind of vow, similar to the way Muggle doctors did with the Hippocratic Oath. However, once the wizards realized that they would actually have to SWEAR the vow themselves, they suddenly became much less enthusiastic about it. Sanders claimed that a Muggle expression neatly encapsulated this situation: NIMBY, or "Not In My Backyard".

Both Jordan and Dagher were astonished to discover that it was possible to swear an Unbreakable Oath in a way similar to the Three Oaths in the Wheel of Time series. That is, wizards would be physically incapable of violating them, in this case due to excruciating pain which spells could not counter. Once Jordan heard about this, he immediately reintroduced the first Wheel of Time oath, the one against lying, as the Sixth Vow.

The wizards had gone ballistic when he had done so. Most decent wizards wouldn't manufacture weapons and would be more than willing to use magic in self-defense, particularly in a world where wizards were still somewhat of a mystery. A blanket prohibition against lying, on the other hand, would be much more difficult to deal with.

Jordan argued that although the prohibition against lying would not do anything to make it harder for evil wizards to emerge, it would make it much easier for the world to trust wizards as a whole. Distrust of wizards, and not Dark ones like Voldemort, were the biggest issue the world had to deal with at this point. Besides, if people knew wizards would keep their word, they could serve as impartial diplomats and judges.

The text of the Sixth Vow currently read as follows.

"I vow that I will always tell the truth unless doing so would place a sentient being in danger or force me to violate one of the other Five Vows."

One would still be able to lie to save one's life. Furthermore, sarcasm would still be permitted. Jordan joked, however, that people who adopted all Six Vows should probably stop playing poker.

The talks dragged on and on. Eventually, however, Dagher was able to ram them down Atlantis's collective throats. As of today, there would be three classes of wizards
1. ordinary wizards, who had taken just First and Third Vows -- the ones against offensive magic and violating the laws of the land,

2. Accepted, who had taken the original Five Vows but not the Sixth, and

3. Aes Sedai, who had taken all Six Vows.

The First and Third vows were made mandatory, and Dagher demanded that all Ministers and Secretaries of Magic ensure that 50% of the wizards in their domains be sworn in by the end of the year and 99% of them be sworn in by the end of 1997. Each wizard would be issued a Silver Card, a document which would provide official certification that he or she had taken the vows. Wizards who had taken Accepted vows would be given the honorific "Accepted", as in "Accepted Dagher". Aes Sedai would be given the traditional Wheel of Time title Sedai, as in "Dagher Sedai".

Needless to say, there was still a loud protest against the mandatory First and Third Vows. Although Dagher and the International Confederation of Warlocks had formally voted on and approved them, not everyone liked the idea of shackling themselves to vows. Dagher sure hoped he'd be able to enforce them in real life.

He needed to set an example. And he knew what he needed to do in order to do so.

Summoning all the reporters to his studio, he asked Anastasios Dialonis to administer the Unbreakable Oaths to him. The former Grand Mugwump agreed, and with cameras flashing and Robert Jordan mentioning that the entire moment seemed too surreal to be believed, Dagher became the world's first Aes Sedai. He spoke all six vows precisely and clearly:

"...I vow that I will always tell the truth unless doing so would place a sentient being in danger or force me to violate one of the other Five Vows. So help me Allah."

People clapped as he finished the sentence and Dialonis removed the spell that made future vows unbreakable. Shaking his hand and that of Robert Jordan, Dialonis smiled.

"Congratulations, Heydar Dagher Sedai."

-------------
Delarosa Residence
Spartanburg, SC
-------------
Sixteen-year-old Louise Delarosa saw the latest issue of Seventeen as soon she opened the mailbox. Excited, she grabbed it and ran upstairs to her room to check out all the latest fashions.

She didn't recognize the new girl on the cover. She wasn't exactly sure how such an ugly girl made it there, particularly since she didn't seem tall enough to be an actress or a rock star.

She looked at the caption next to the girl's picture. "HERMIONE GRANGER, THE TEENAGE WITCH."

Underneath that, it said: "Breaking news! Learn magical fashion secrets and ask your local wizard to fix your hair and teeth with spells! Turn to page 17 to see how she traveled through time!"

She turned to page 17 and saw a most amazing sight: a dynamic photograph of this Hermione Granger modeling a bunch of barrettes and other fashion accoutrements! Louise could actually see her putting barrettes on, shaking her hair out, and so forth! Excited, she showed the magazine to her
mother.

Her parents looked at each other. Finally, her mother asked: "How did that girl get into the magazine so quickly? Magic?"

Both parents were silent for a few moments. Then, finally, her father admitted it. "I wouldn't be surprised."

-------------------

Presidential Council Chamber
Nestor

President Andrea Markali whistled as she read the report. "Very interesting, Caroline. You're thinking that the Americans have found out that Syrdan has been enslaving Muggles and aren't happy about it?"

Foreign Secretary Caroline Pintruli nodded. "Yes, Madame President. Their president has just made a major speech about an initiative to for the American Wizarding community to help the Muggles stop slavery and forced labor."

"But how do you know that refers to Syrdan and not America itself?"

"It's an interesting coincidence, ma'am. Remember that this is happening right after Xylenda has just contacted the Americans. If I were the American president, I would immediately ask Radner or the Xylend ambassador to provide a list of Hidden nations. They may know about us, ma'am."

"I see. You're thinking that Radner was forced to tell everyone we exist because the Muggles started clamoring to know what Xylenda was and why this mysterious organization wants to buy up half of an island in Alaska."

"Exactly. Combine that with the fact that four crewmen appear to have disappeared from an American ship and people with tattoos have been seen in the area…"

Markali stared out the window thoughtfully. "The Americans realize Syrdan has their men and are sending this message as warning to the Syrdani."

Pintruli nodded. "A distinct possibility, ma'am."

Markali thought for a moment. "This could be interesting. Atlantis won't be able to help us, and the Galiver Consortium isn't going to get involved with something in the Atlantic. I've been in office for six years already, and I've always wanted to do something about that eyesore there over in Syrdan."

Pintruli chuckled. "You wouldn't be the first leader to think that, ma'am."

"I'm aware of that, Caroline. Do you think the US will want to help us attack Syrdan? I doubt the Syrdani are expecting a Muggle attack, and at the very least the Americans may be able to foment a slave revolt by providing the yahoos with Muggle weapons."

Pintruli grunted. "It's a possibility. However, I doubt they'll be all that willing to get into another Wizarding war given what the wizards did to them last time."

Markali stared at her, hard. "Find out. They always tout themselves as the land of liberty. I want to see if they're willing to put their money where their mouth is, as the Muggles say."
Once again, the Veela prisoner's ears picked up the painfully loud noise of approaching footsteps. Just as well- she'd been trying to calculate a pattern in her mind, as slowed by drugs as it was. What she knew was that the hair-plucking was periodical, compared to the administration of the damned drug concoction- and since they needed to keep her incapacitated at all times, that meant a well-organized system. Those bastards clearly had a plan...she just had to figure it out, perhaps then she could escape...

This time, however, a most unexpected sound came with the door's opening: a loud crack, followed by startled yelps of goblins, a human male voice saying Protego then a quick pair of Stupefys, and at the same time a high, piping voice screaming "FOR MASTER NAZHEROS!", accompanied with the characteristic sound of magic discharging and several bodies hitting the wall with bone-jarring speed...then, silence.

"Floppy, search them, collect their wands, and tie them up. I'll take a look at the prisoner, alert me if anyone arrives!" The words sounded like salvation for the girl, but then a thought took her smile away: Naztheros...that sounded awfully like a Syrdani name. The wizard evidently noticed her reaction.

"Relax, Veela, I'm not here to cause you harm. I'll remove your shackles and blindfold now, please don't attack me. And please tell me wheher you feel better or worse when the drug starts to wear out-your life may depend on it."

To say the girl was surprised was a gross understatement. Her only response was: "Is this a... dream? A... vision? Why would my subconscious manifest as a Syrdani?"

The wizard sighed. "I can assure you, I'm real. I legilimensed one of your captors. And he didn't know for sure which of two drugs you got, and one of those kills you on withdrawal. So please do us all a favor and tell me, is it better or worse when it starts wearing out?"

This caused the blonde to sober up a bit. "Better, I hope...the headache and sensory overload is like a bad hangover, but my head gets cleaner and my strenght returns...is that good enough for you?" By now, he finished cutting away her chains, and at last removed the blindfold to reveal her bloodshot, frightened, and painfully wincing blue eyes, that somehow still managed to be stunningly beautiful...no, blue is such a plain word, azure is more fitting...

"AIEEEE! Master, watch out, it's a Veela!" The house-elf dropped a limp goblin and jumped between them. "Master should be cautious! They are the enemy! They bewitch men, enthrall them! Master must never look them in the eye!"

"Chill, Floppy, this is not the war and she's not our enemy. Go finish preparing the goblins." Turning to the sitting Veela, he asked: "Milady, yo will live. Now, are you able to walk? We're about to leave."
As she struggled to get up, the red-haired wizard reached out and helped her on her feet despite her weak protests. "What's wrong with accepting my help?"

"My mother taught me not to accept help from strangers, syrdani." Though still drowsy as if heavily drunk, the Veela was visibly recovering—starting with her arrogance.

"Oh, right, I forgot. Samanar Naztheros, at your service. May I ask who you are?"

"You may." The Veela was staring coldly at her...then at once, her face went all red and she cast her eyes on the ground in shame. "Forgive me my manners, good sir. I am Myrtille Trépanier, from Nestor, and I'm thankful for your rescue...it's just those drugs clouding my mind, making me say things I don't mean."

"No need to apologise. Let's get over to my servant, so we can leave this place...after that, you could help me find out what to do with these goblins we caught."

---------------------------

Kodiak Island Trading Post, coastal area
Kodiak Island
--------------------------------

The gathered journalists and reporters, drawn here by the Xylenda Second Citizen's announcement, watched with interest as hundreds of merpeople came to the surface, some clinging on the horse-like head of giant but so far docile sea serpents. They appeared here half an hour ago, moving around and making noise to announce their presence.

Suddenly, the swimming crowd parted in two, and in the middle, a single beautiful mermaid appeared from the water, followed by a human and six...things, shiny metallic centaurs with arachnid lower bodies, that formed two lines and carried a huge dark stone pillar. The siren lady, leaning heavily on a staff while sliding forward on her tail like a snake, motioned to the human and said a string of words in a horrible, screechy language. The man turned to the reporters and translated it to oddly accented English:

"Greetings to you, ladies and gentlemen. We are the representatives of the City-State of Roqteratl, but we also speak for every single merpeople on this world. This lady is Eldest's aide Senja of House Duskryn and I am Kleef Madsen from the Healer Guild of Roqteratl. We came here today to send a message to your government."

"Mutually profitable trade relations once existed between humans and merpeople. Long ago, we worked and prospered together. We are ready to renew those relations, as long as we are treated as equals."

"To show our sincerity and good intentions, we present our gift for your president: the authentic copy of our city's oldest relic, an obelisk recording and depicting Roqteratl's founding and first golden age."

To be continued...

-------------------

Update #270
------------
Shaman John Peele stared at the report from Atlantis in amazement. "What? Atlantis wants us all to start swearing oaths? This is wrong. Very wrong."

The other witch doctor grunted. "Wrong? What's wrong with it? You don't have anything to hide now, John, do you?"

Peele rolled his eyes. "You know I don't, David. I fully agree that we need to police ourselves more. However, Atlantis can't just start decreeing that we have to take Unbreakable Vows like this!"

"Why not, John? We follow their lead, after all. They recommend customs, such as the old Statute of Secrecy, and the wizards follow them--"

Peele cut in. "-- and do so without having to resort to Unbreakable Vows. I don't know if it's just me, David, but it seems that Atlantis trying to tighten its control over us. At the very minimum, something this serious should probably be decided on country by country, not by some bureaucrats down on an island which doesn't have to deal with Muggles all that often."

"Atlantis has invited Muggles to move to in, John. Dialonis is the ambassador to the Muggle United Nations, for the spirits' sake, and I doubt he's going to abandon all ties to Atlantis. You know Dialonis, and you know he'll do the right thing. Besides, Britain for Humans has a point. Dagher can discuss psychological screening as much as he wants, but people are going to make it through the cracks and cheat here and there. An Unbreakable Vow may very well be the only thing which will prevent another Voldemort incident."

Peele snorted. "That is, assuming everyone actually TAKES the Vows. Besides, you saw the list, David. The one about telling the truth is optional, as is the one about not renouncing the vows later on. What good are the vows if everyone is going to just change their mind later?"

David frowned. "I see. You're thinking that the Unbreakable Vows will be ineffective, and even if they do work they could do more harm than good."

"Exactly. Besides, what happens if someone doesn't feel like taking the vow and does something which is not technically Dark magic? How is someone going to deal with him if he can't use offensive magic against the troublemaker?"

"I see."

"Oh, it gets worse. Introducing Unbreakable Vows sets a bad precedent, in my opinion. Atlantis could use this incident as an excuse to implement Unbreakable Vows for less…benign power grabs. Furthermore, I don't think Dagher realizes that this could spread well beyond the Wizarding community."

"Oh really? How?"

"Unbreakable Vows work on Muggles, provided that a wizard is there to cast the spell. I'll be frank, David. I'm seriously thinking of not taking those two vows just to make a political statement. You know me, and you know that I wouldn't break the law or attack people even without taking a vow."
David thought for a minute. Then, he drew a deep breath. "You know, you may be onto something here. I don't need a vow to tell me not to kill anyone or break the law. I wonder if there's anyone else who thinks that the vows are overkill and all they will do is set a bad precedent for minimal gain."

Kodiak Island Trading Post
Kodiak Island
Alaska

Second Citizen Liostra shook her head vigorously. "I'm sorry, Secretary Radner. Although most of us over here in Xylenda aren't exactly thrilled at the way the Syrdani mistreat their Muggles, we can't intervene. First, Xylenda is a pacifist nation, where everyone helps each other for the sake of society as a whole. It just wouldn't be right to help in an invasion, particularly of a country in the Atlantic. Second, if we were to attack Syrdan, the entire Galiver Consortium could be dragged into this because of the mutual defense pact. Finally, I'd hate to think how the centaurs would react to this. If we start giving people the impression that we've started a crusade against slavery..."

Radner whistled and finished the sentence. "...the Consortium would split, or at very least provoke the Houyhnhnms into doing something rash. Even worse, Clinton would inevitably find out that the Houyhnhnms are even worse than the Syrdani and would feel compelled to invade. I must admit, Second Citizen, that the idea of a war between Syrdan and the United States is disturbing, considering all of the experienced wizards on that island. That would be nothing, however, compared to what would happen if the United States attacked the Houyhnhnms and Neihym forced the rest of you into the fight on the Houyhnhnms' side through the defense pact -- particularly since these are Muggles attacking you."

Liostra shuddered. "The most powerful nation in the Muggle world, holder of one of the Judgment Day keys, versus the entire Galiver Consortium. I don't even want to THINK about that."

Radner gritted his teeth. "Neither do I. Particularly if Syrdan decides to open a two-front war by making noises in the Atlantic. All right, Second Citizen. I'm convinced. If war does break out with Syrdan -- and I personally hope it doesn't, at the very least because Clinton can't afford overt foreign adventures given the current economic crisis -- the Consortium stays out of it. Besides, it would probably only be a matter of time until Nestor tried to get involved."

Liostra nodded. "You're a sensible man, Secretary Radner. Besides, you're a member of a Muggle defense pact yourself, are you not? You know how those work."

Radner's eyes widened. "Good God, I hadn't even thought about that. United States vs. Houyhnhnms could evolve into Galiver Consortium vs. NATO through those alliances. This reminds me of what led up to the First World War in 1914, where a small fight in the Balkans became a major conflict because of a tangled web of international alliances. I'm not sure if you know much about the 1914 war, but rest assured that we do NOT want to repeat that."

Liostra nodded. "I'm aware of that war, Secretary Radner. I agree, if we can avoid another World War I that would be most beneficial. However, let's get back to your second recommendation -- the visit of Muggle anthropologists. I spoke with the First Citizen, and she agreed to it."

Radner smiled. "At least something good came out of this. You'll let Muggle anthropologists onto the island to study your way of life in a nondestructive manner?"

"Yes, Secretary Radner. In return, we'll send some of our people over to the United States to study..."
"Fair enough, Second Citizen. When do you want to send them over?"

---------------------

Manchester, England

---------------------

King William was cheering at the top of his lungs. He'd heard of rock concerts before, but this was above and beyond anything he'd ever seen before.

The Weird Sisters -- all men, strangely enough, a fact which made the name Weird Sisters more than appropriate -- would likely have gotten popular simply because of their style of music. However, these fellows were wizards who cast spells during the show, flew through the air on strange winged beasts, and did things no one else had dreamed of before! Even better, the concert was free, though most people were paying large sums of money -- in excess of £500 in a few cases -- to support the reconstruction efforts in London and the other stricken cities.

These guys were going to be good, he thought. One of the people a few rows behind him was talking about trading in her Green Day tickets for Weird Sisters ones. He wondered if he could get Hermione some free tickets to their upcoming tour. He looked around to see if he could find Hermione in the front rows, but the television cameras (some of which were pointing at him) blocked his view.

To be continued...
Update #271 through Update #275

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Mislagnissa

Update #271
-------------
Monday, July 8, 1996
National Zoo
Washington, DC
United States of America
-------------
Rubeus Hagrid looked up in surprise when he heard the knock on his door. Hoping that Grawp hadn't done something rash again -- he'd been getting better of late -- he walked over and opened it.

Three men walked into the room, and Hagrid's eyes widened in amazement when he realized who they were. Secretary Radner was there, as was Albus Dumbledore. A pretty formidable delegation, he thought. This couldn't be good. The only thing which was even remotely favorable was the fact that neither man appeared to be particularly angry.

He didn't recognize the third man at all. However, he could tell one thing. The man was almost twelve feet tall and had a neatly trimmed beard. He was wearing an ornate fur stole, which seemed oddly out of place in the middle of July. This man had to be a giant or half-giant, he thought.

What were other giants doing in the middle of Washington DC? He sure hadn't seen any, and he'd been in town long enough for any giants in the area to figure out who he was. He'd find out soon enough, however.

He shook everyone's hand. "Good afternoon, gentlemen. I must say, Professor Dumbledore, you've been quite active of late."

Dumbledore chuckled. "Indeed I have, Hagrid. You may not know this, but I am now Minister of Magic."

"Minister of Magic? But I thought you'd never leave Hogwarts!"

Dumbledore's grin faded abruptly. "I was the only high-level diplomat left in London after Voldemort's bombs exploded in the Ministry. As a result, I wound up getting the job more or less by default. The only other remotely-qualified man, Nicholas Flamel, is my deputy. Cornelius Fudge was around, but both of us agree he is better suited for Togo than the Ministry."

Hagrid scratched his head. "Flamel? Why Flamel?"

Dumbledore looked briefly at Radner and nodded his head at the giant. Radner smiled. "He knows, Minister. Chief Anak here is the foreign secretary, so he's been familiar with what's going on with the Stone."

The giant responded in a deep voice. "Indeed I have, Secretary Radner. Unless I'm very mistaken, Dumbledore here has managed to convince Flamel to join the government to give Harold-Green a rather nasty surprise in case they do wind up producing a Stone."
Dumbledore nodded. "Correct, Chief. Everything is all planned out. No one seemed to have paid much attention to my selection of Dr. Flamel as Deputy Minister. As soon as Harold-Green, or anyone else, produces a Stone, I will tender my resignation and return to Hogwarts. Snape will replace Slughorn as Potions master, Slughorn will retire...and Harold-Green will suddenly realize that the creator of the Stone has become Minister of Magic and is now the most powerful Wizarding politician in Britain. Not to mention, of course, that as Minister of Magic he can always ask the Grand Mugwump for assistance."

Anak grinned evilly. "I would love to see Mr. Green's face when he finds out about THAT."

Dumbledore nodded. "So would a lot of people, Chief. At any rate, here is why we've come. No, it has nothing to do with Grawp. How is he doing by the way?"

Hagrid smiled. "His manners are improving greatly, and he's almost reaching the point where I can take him out to see Muggles. I'm proud of him."

"That's good to hear, Hagrid. Now, as to our visit. Brace yourself, as you're going to be in for a surprise."

Hagrid rolled his eyes. "As if having two Ministers and a giant in my room isn't enough of a surprise."

The giant chuckled, then turned serious. "Mr. Hagrid, you've been nominated to be the British ambassador to Ietalis. I ran the idea past the High Chief, and he fully agrees that you would be a good candidate."

Hagrid blinked. "Ambassador to WHAT?"

"Ietalis, Mr. Hagrid. It's one of the Hidden nations, though it's not very well known. It's located in the remote islands of the Canadian north and is the source of the American and Canadian legends of Bigfoot. It's populated by half-giants for the most part."

"How did they get up there?"

Anak explained. "You're familiar with Brobdingnag, are you not?"

Hagrid nodded. "Yes, Chief. It's the homeland of the giants."

"Several hundred years ago, well before the creation of the Galiver Consortium, Brobdingnag had a particularly nasty Gurg who persecuted the shortest castes of giants. Many of them fled Brobingnag and headed north to found their own nation in a place free from both Muggles and other giants. Under the wise leadership of High Chief Ietus, they made it over to the mainland and eventually settled up in the islands of the Arctic Ocean. The nation was named Ietalis, after our first High Chief."

"As time went by, more and more short giants began joining us from Brobdingnag. Cross-breeding with the tiny Muggle communities in the area reduced the average height even further. Nowadays, most Ieti are between 9 and 12 feet in height. You'd fit right in."

Hagrid suddenly realized something. "Ieti? That sounds like one of the American terms for the mythical creature Bigfoot!"

Anak nodded. "The preferred term in our language is 'Sasquatch', Mr. Hagrid. Nevertheless, the Ieti
are indeed the creatures known to Muggles as Bigfoot. We left footprints in the tundra when we crossed from Brobdingnag to Ietalis. That, combined with occasional unconfirmed -- or Obliviated -- sightings of our citizens, gave rise to the Sasquatch and Bigfoot myths."

Hagrid didn't know what to say. "I'm flattered, gentlemen. However, I don't think I'm particularly qualified --"

Dumbledore cut him off. "You've been getting along very well with Muggles here, Hagrid. Furthermore, you can relate to giants as well. You're a very good candidate, in my opinion."

Hagrid grunted. Dumbledore had a point. "Do they speak English?"

Anak answered this. "Their primary language is a distant cousin of ancient Brobdingnagan, which has now gone extinct in that it has been replaced by Galiver. They do, however, speak Galiver for the most part as a second language, and as you know that language is distantly related to 18th century English. You should be able to pick it up in a few months."

"What about Grawp? What happens to him?"

Dumbledore smiled. "He goes with you, of course. However, it's possible he may have a bright future. He likes Muggles too, from what I've been told, and his manners are starting to improve. Keep on working on him, Hagrid, and tell us how he's doing. If his social skills improve to the point where he becomes someone like you, he could wind up becoming ambassador to Brobdingnag. They've started getting a lot better at accepting shorter giants in the community. They're far more civilized than the people you've encountered here in Britain."

Hagrid whistled and was very intrigued by this. Who would have thought one year ago that he'd have been a possible ambassador to a nation he'd never heard of before in North America? He still had a couple of more questions. "If I leave here, who is going to take over the Zoo?"

Radner answered this. "If you accept this position, we'll start talking with people in the Smoky Mountain facility. You've done yeoman work getting the magical creature wing off the ground, and we expect that an ordinary American Care of Magical Creatures teacher will be able to keep the momentum going."

"Should I announce Ietalis's existence to the British Muggles yet?"

Anak scratched his beard. "We're working on that, Mr. Hagrid. Xylenda caught us all off-guard when Liostra revealed that nation, and we're scrambling to figure out what to do. The High Chief is in favor of exposure, at the very minimum to try to get the Canadians or Americans to back us in case Brobdingnag starts getting aggressive. Rest assured, you won't have to leave this position until exposure takes place, if that does in fact happen."

Hagrid sat down in his chair and looked out the window. "I'll think about it, gentlemen. I'll think about it."

To be continued...  
-------------------
Update #272  
-------------
Tuesday, July 9, 1996
Clinton couldn't believe what he was hearing. "A bunch of mermaids walked out of the water near that woman's trading post in Alaska and presented you with an obelisk?"

The man on the other end of the line nodded. "Yes, sir. They claim to be from some country I've never heard of before. It depicts their golden age, supposedly, which ended five thousand years ago. The thing is huge, sir. They've apparently built some kind of spiderlike machine to help transport it."

Radner, who had been already in the capital for the presentation of the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Hermione Granger earlier on the day, whistled. "That's consistent with Roqteratl, sir. They are an ancient underwater civilization whose traditional homeland is in the Indian Ocean. They're traders, from what I've been told."

Clinton's eyes widened. "Let me guess. Some other country I've never heard of before. How many of them are there?"

Radner nodded. "About a dozen, sir. You already know about Syrdan and Xylenda. However, this one is completely underwater so you probably won't have to worry about Muggles routinely interacting with the merpeople. Sir, it sounds like they want to start diplomatic relations and trade with us."

Clinton, still dazed, nodded. "That wouldn't be a bad idea, Travis. They've probably got access to resources in the deep ocean floor which we can't get at, and we've got stuff on land which they can't find in the ocean. This could be mutually beneficial to both sides."

"I agree, sir. At the very least, it will help us explore the ocean depths more easily."

Clinton spoke back into the phone again. "Captain, what are those machines like?"

The man from Kodiak chuckled. "They look like something out of Terminator or Star Wars, but as far as we can tell there aren't any weapons on them -- it's transportation only. They're pretty interesting, sir."

Clinton frowned and turned to Radner. "Are you sure this isn't a Trojan horse? Someone gives us a gift, we go ga-ga over it, we naturally bring it to the capital using those machines to transport it...besides, what's in that obelisk?"

Radner shook his head. "It wouldn't make sense for them to try to conquer us, sir. They're merpeople. They prefer the ocean to land. Why would they attack us if they can't occupy our territory? Besides, I know a few merfolk. They're traders, as I told you."

"Not if they made an alliance with Syrdan. Remember Syrdan is an island, so the Syrdani can talk with these fellows. If Syrdan decided to fight and seek out allies instead of reform itself..."

Radner didn't like where this was going. Unfortunately, Clinton was reaching a perfectly valid conclusion given the available evidence. "The merpeople don't act like that, sir. I don't think there are any ulterior motives here. Besides, Syrdan's in the Atlantic and these fellows are reporting from the Pacific."
Clinton thought for a moment. "All right, Travis, here's what we'll do. Send a wizard out there to check these guys out. Do not move that obelisk off Kodiak Island until we're sure it's safe --"

The suddenly president cut back to the phone. "Did they leave any of those machines behind, or possibly an ambassador?"

The captain nodded. "Yes, Mr. President. There are two machines still here for us to inspect, and they've left someone to serve as an ambassador. His name is Zeekh, and he apparently has managed to overcome the language barrier. You may be interested to know that they use the Latin alphabet, by the way. That may make things easier. However, they've got a couple of interesting symbols, including the thorn for TH and a rounded W symbol for SH."

Clinton nodded. This would work out pretty well. "Good. Give him the same diplomatic status as the Xylend ambassador and show him around the unoccupied parts of the island. How big is this obelisk?"

"About 25 feet, sir. It's got some gold in it as well, so if I were a wizard I'd make sure no one damages or vandalizes it. Sir, if we want to transport it, we're going to need to get it onto some kind of aircraft or something."

Clinton made a note of that and turned back to Radner. "Good, they've left some of those machines behind. Inspect those two machines and make sure they're safe, and then see what you can do to translate that obelisk. Once you've done that and made sure there aren't any surprises, you can bring it over here. We'll set it up somewhere in the National Mall, and then you fellows can put a shield around it to make sure no one damages it or steals it."

Radner smiled. "That's not a bad idea, sir. Everyone is going to be able to learn about this new culture that way."

Clinton grunted in satisfaction and turned back to the phone. "Captain, can you see the obelisk from where you are right now?"

"Yes, sir. I'm walking around it as we speak."

"How did their civilization end? Maybe we can learn from their experience and not repeat it."

There was a pause. "I can't get all the details, sir, as I don't understand their language. However, the last panels appear to have images of a wall of water striking a building. There's also something which looks almost like a world map. However, the map's all screwed up. They've got islands in the Pacific and Atlantic which aren't there with names like DALERNUS and FRISLAND. I can see ROQTERATL located in the Indian Ocean, not far away from this big fiery circle marked K'NOHA-PI(SH)TIN LOTIPHIA RADOS with concentric circles radiating from it. Don't know what it means, sir."

Radner's eyes suddenly widened. "My God!"

Clinton turned to him. "Oh? What?"

"I know the language, sir. That means "Noha-Pishtin's Hammer of the God Ra."

Clinton blinked. "Hammer of Ra? Wasn't that --"
Radner stared at the floor in horror. "Sir, I think I know how this civilization ended. Noha-Pishtin described it perfectly. Asteroid impact in the Indian which occurred at the same time the one Noha-Pishtin witnessed. Judging from the tremendous number of flood myths around the world centered on the Indian Ocean, one would have figured that the main event took place somewhere down there. If the big one came in that close to ancient Roqteratl, hit the ocean, and generated a megatsunami which a shock wave through the water --"

Both men were silent for a moment. Then, Clinton said one word.

"Ouch."

He paused. "Still, if that were the case, how come any of them survived at all?"

Radner shrugged. "You can ask them, sir. Probably some of them had arks similar to those described by Noha-Pishtin. Others could have been away from home at the time the rock came in. What we can tell, however, is that although the merpeople's race didn't go extinct, they were basically blasted back to the Stone Age, if you get my drift. Sir, I recommend that we find the crater and make it an international historic site. If there's anything which demands international significance, it's this."

Clinton nodded. "I agree. We should see what we can do to organize an expedition down there -- I'll talk with various governments to see if we can get to the site. I must say, however, that I'm intrigued about another thing as well. What's this Dalernus he was referring to?"

Radner shrugged. "It's another hidden nation. It --"

His eyes suddenly widened as the realization hit him. "Oh my God! They used Latin characters on the obelisk, and they included a world map! They've just exposed every single Hidden nation!

What's more, the man on the phone claimed to have seen Frisland, the island Syrdan is now on!"

Clinton whistled. "I want to see that map and get descriptions of all those countries as soon as possible. Meanwhile, is there any way to have the fellow who's going to try to translate the obelisk Obliviate him before he gets it onto the Internet or somewhere like that? You can always start the rumor that those nations were all destroyed in the Hammer of Ra cataclysm and all that's left there are ruins covered by the ocean so that's why we can't see them."

Radner shook his head vigorously. "It's too late for that, sir. Xylenda already had the press conference, so the civilians know about it. It's not going to be hard to figure out what these other mysterious landmasses are. Fortunately, sir, we still have time to figure out what to do. The Muggles may know they're there, but they still can't reach them."

"Can we remove the other nations from the obelisk?"

"It would be seen as disrespectful to the merpeople, sir. The only thing I can suggest is telling everyone that all were destroyed other than Xylenda -- and hope the Xylend don't start chattering about Syrdan, Dalernus, or other of those places. Oh, and before I forget -- there's something else you may want to do."

"What?"

Radner chuckled. "Since we're not going to be defacing the obelisk at all, get Gulliver's Travels out of school reading lists as soon as possible."
"What? Why?"

Radner told him.

To be continued...

-----------------
Update #272.1
-------------

Tuesday, July 9, 1996
Xukwudiz Manor, Roqteratl
City-State of Roqteratl

----------------

Theun Lentjes and Jere Xukwudiz were in the manor's laboratory, so absorbed in their brainstorming they didn't notice the visitors entering- just as usual. The visitors were, though, highly unusual: the Eldest himself, accompanied by his aide Senja, Commander Idris, and Elder Ritva Xukwudiz. Surprised and embarassed, they tried to bow and salute at once, quickly settling for the former.

"At ease, gentlemen," said the Eldest, "I'm here to say thanks to you. As you've probably heard, your walkers have passed their test with very good results 3 days ago, and as my aide says the Muggles were quite impressed with them too. As you've assured me they are virtually unable to copy them, I've let them inspect some of those, to disperse any fears. Thanks to your invention, it looks like we've made a very good first impression. As agreed, I'll purchase the plans required to create more of them...and I'm willing to raise your current House foundings with City money, for the continued research. Now, please tell me, what improvements can I expect?"

Jere answered first. "Well, for starters, I have plans for an updated upper body exoskeleton. The prototype models have limited visibility and mobility, especially at the neck- with the correct materials and technologies, I could improve both, upgrading the gill protectors and replace the face plate with strenghtened glass or some other transparent material. It will require the involvement of further outside parties, though - some of the raw materials are only produced by goblins. I also have ideas about improved water containment and filtering, but those require long-term ground tests. Incorporating weapons into the spider part seems to be a bit of a dead end, only good for concealing weapons unless we radically alter limb anatomy. Equipped with traditionally two-handed weapons such as longswords, they already outclass any melee opponents- with their strenght, every weapon is one-handed, and their agility is almost as good as without the suit. Those are the mechanical details, my colleague will brief you about the magical ones."

Theun took over here: "apart from the complex of over a hundred spells that make the spider part work and obey, the movement and strenght amplification in the upper part, and some standard charms preventing corrosion and increasing durability, the current models are essentially blanks. I listed several possible developement routes: we could install a stealth mode, though it's worth noting that not even the most powerful disillusionment charm or a bedazzling hex will conceal the footprints. Also, I haven't yet find a way to enable them seeing through friendly stealth, and without that, friendly fire is a very real concern. As far as armors go, I can put some good shield charms on it, but even if they are piled up, it won't stop stronger curses or explosions for long. Finally, I've come up with ways to temporarily alter it's mass, making slow falls, high jumps, and even levitation possible. I have to warn you, though, that these will have mechanical control panels, resulting in quite... limited manoeuvreing capacities compared to traditional wizard flight."

Both the Eldest and the Commander were clearly interested. "Sounds promising, make it happen."
Though for now, everything looks peaceful, we might need these. After all, if you want peace, be ready for war. I'll see to it that you get all the necessary funding for this."

-------------------------------
meanwhile, Samanar Naztheros's hideout
-------------------------------

About a dozen goblins sat near the wall, all bound and gagged. With a loud crack, a house-elf, along with the place's owner and a Veela, currently in Harpy form, materialised in the middle of the room, carrying a stunned, parched and beaten up goblin. Putting the captive down and beginning the process of searching his clothing and tying him up, Myrtille slowly changed back into her normal shape.

"This is the last of them, at least alive. I can't believe they were stupid enough not to take any countermeasures against Legilimency interrogation."

"Hey, you speak about supposedly sentient magic-users running around with wands home-made by some ham-fisted savant using Veela hair of all things...that's an excellent indicator of stupidity, if there is any."

"Watch your tongue, Syrdani, you're speaking about my hair!" The girl's face instantly started to become bird-like again in anger. "We in Nestor have always used it to make our wands!"

Samanar raised his hand placatingly, and stopped his over-zealous house-elf from "defending her Master from the filthy enemy" with a stern glare. "I did not intend to insult you or your people, Little Fruit. You and your wands complement each other just fine. Using Veela hair is only stupid when the user is not a Veela himself... and besides, those wands would be dangerous to their user and anything within the same building with any other core too."

"Right, I know, and I respect that you respect me and my culture...I'm just overcame by bloodlust when I see these maggots. I say now that there are no more out there, we could kill them all with beak and claw and fire..."

"Don't, Myrtille! I understand you are angry at them, and they'd deserve it, but it would take you to a very dark place. By the gods, girl, do you really have the stomach to kill helpless prisoners in cold blood? Did you ever kill even one person?"

The Veela deflated. "...Well, no, not like this. Merde, who am I fooling, no one at all. But what would you do? They cut off your hand, taken your precious ring from you... you have as many reasons to kill them too... and we can't let them go either, or they'd come for us with allies."

The wizard smirked. "I have a better idea. We turn them over, alive and healthy, to the City Guard. Then, per international law, they'll be judged by a court of wizards, sentenced for unauthorised possession and making of wands, and left to rot somewhere in a dark cell guarded by dementors, probably driven into insanity long before they perish." At the mention of the dementors, all three of them shuddered involuntarily.

"Your place sounds darker, wizard."

"It has the advantage of being legal, and will make the police much more cooperating in the search of some humble unlicensed wizard's lost ring."
later, City Guards HQ

Kima was having another argument with her Squad leader. Since Red 8 was KIA and Red 2...no, only Toni now... blinded and transferred to the oath taker corps, nicknamed Legion of the Nameless to recieve prostetics, they both had been very agitated...especially as the investigation didn't go well at all.

"For the last time, I know we to find them, Leader. The chief here keeps saying the same, but as long as I have no good trails, it doesn't help if I hear how important this is. But as things are now, we need divine intervention to solve this case...what?" A Guard's timely interruption cut the tirade short.
"Letter for the detective leading the Ring case."

The mermaid hastily read the letter, sat there in stunned surprise, then read it again. "Is this...a joke?"
"We do not make fun of such cases, detective. May I ask you what do you find so strange?"

She told them...and showed them the letter when they didn't believe it either.

To be continued...

Update #272.5

Tuesday, July 9, 1996
Grand Mugwump's Office
Atlantis

Dagher had been afraid of this.

No fewer than 37 countries had signed a petition arguing that Atlantis couldn't force Unbreakable Vows down their throats. Unsurprisingly, not one of them had suffered any persecution from America for Humans, Britain for Humans, Muslims for Humans, or any of the smaller World for Humans groups.

These nations argued that Dagher's original idea of education and psychological counseling would be sufficient to rein in future Dark wizards. Furthermore, since the vast majority of wizards were good, all that the Vows would manage to accomplish would be a reminder that Atlantis could control their lives and make them extremely sick if they didn't follow the Grand Mugwump's request. How long would it be until someone forced the world to follow an Unbreakable Vow that they had to give 50% of their money to Atlantis? What would happen if someone started asking Muggles to take Unbreakable Vows or use them to try for a power grab? What happened if someone killed himself by experimenting with the wrong type of Vow or adopting Vows that contradicted each other?

Dagher had tried to explain that as an Aes Sedai, he had sworn to do the right thing and run the Wizarding community fairly and impartially. That wasn't enough, however. Detractors promptly reminded him that the idea of policing the wizards with vows came from (a) a Muggle, and (b) a fantasy story which bore little resemblance to real life and depicted an inaccurate account of how magic worked.

He couldn't understand what the problem was. The only two mandatory vows were to follow the laws of the land and not to use magic as a weapon other than in self-defense -- the First and Third
Vows. He had never heard of any wizard who wasn't Dark using Dark magic. As far as following the laws of the land --

Suddenly, it occurred to him what could have happened. Many of the nations who were complaining about the mandatory Vows had histories of corruption in their Ministries. Dagher suspected that many of these Ministers may have risen to the top via nepotism, bribery, and so forth. Muggles tended to overlook the fact that these Ministers were politicians as well as wizards. If they were forced to follow the laws of the land, they wouldn't be able to maintain their positions.

He called upon his staff to organize another press conference. He planned to tell everyone that the First and Third Vows would be optional and that those who had taken the First and Third Vows would be given the rank Novice. In return, however, the Grand Mugwump had the authority to oversee what was going on in the nations where fewer than 80% of the wizards refused to take the First and Third Vows or where the Minister of Magic or one of his immediate deputies had not sworn them. He had introduced the second condition because a Minister's obvious defense against the 80% criterion would be to force all of the civilians to take the Oaths, leaving them at the mercy of a corrupt government.

He didn't want Atlantis to get too involved as it would be setting a very dangerous precedent, and it could be possibly playing into his opponents' hands. However, he was concerned that officials would be reluctant to take the Third Vow only if they had something to hide. He was going to explain that all he was going to do was to deal with corruption in governments, and that people could tell he was telling the truth because he was an Aes Sedai. Regardless of what happens, he would stop abuse of power in the Ministries of Magic either by forcing them to take the Third Vow or by investigating them.

He hoped this would work. If everything went as planned, he'd make the Ministries of Magic run more smoothly and fairly. On the other hand, if they didn't go as planned, he could find himself out of a job -- or worse. Someone could assassinate him and put someone who did not endorse the Aes Sedai concept in his place. Worse still, the opponents could form their own Council of Wizards and break off from Atlantis completely. Such a thing had not happened for centuries, ever since that Liechtenstein debacle.

He knew what had happened back then, and he prayed that it wouldn't happen again. Had it not been for the Statute of Secrecy, the Liechtenstein situation could have gotten to DEFCON 4, something quite difficult with 13th-century technology...unless it was augmented by magic. Something like that was exactly what the world did NOT need right now.

Besides, there was another crisis brewing as the Muggles were slowly finding out about the Hidden Nations. He had just increased the alert level for Atlantis to DEFCON 3, as Syrdan and the United States had suddenly seemed to realize that they were working at cross purposes and Radner suspected that the Syrdani had absconded with several Americans. Furthermore, Xylenda had abruptly told the world that they existed and wanted to turn an American island into a trading post. And to make matters worse, the merpeople had stuck a world map -- with all the Hidden Landmasses exposed -- on that damn obelisk they'd sent to the United States! They had probably figured that the Hidden Nations had been exposed anyway when Xylenda had come out, so what was there to lose?

Plenty, Dagher thought. Plenty. Thank God Voldemort had been taken care of before all of this had started up.

-------------
Eastern Iraq
-------------
Mahmoud Singh had always been offended that he hadn't been given the Death Eater tattoo. He had done good work for the Death Eaters, and had been one of the principal agents involved in the aborted terror attack on the bank in Sri Lanka. He had been responsible for framing the Tamil Tigers for the attack once it happened. Of course, that had been before Dilmi reported that Voldemort had called off the attack, and that was that.

He had taken his revenge out on the Indian government when Voldemort had been killed. Since he didn't have the Dark Mark on his arm, he could go anywhere he want. He could even dress up as a Muggle from time to time, though he often found it distasteful.

At 1400Z on June 20th, he had been in the middle of organizing a crackdown on Indian wizards plotting to overthrow the Death Eaters. Everything had come to a screeching halt, however, when his wife had sent a Patronus reporting that her cousin had been killed in a freak accident in northern Kashmir. He had told his boss that a family emergency had cropped up and promised to resume his work within a couple of hours. He had then immediately Apparated over to his wife to help her through this difficult time.

It had dawned on him about five minutes after the Apparation that he had forgotten to tell his boss where he'd gone. He considered going back to tell him, but doubted that it would make much of a difference. He didn't want work intruding at a time like this.

That decision had saved his life and that of his wife. They would be two of the seven Death Eaters to survive Judgment Day.

An hour later, at 1500Z, the sky had turned red. Neither he nor his wife had known what it meant, but it hadn't sounded good. He had been about to report back to his boss when rumors had come out of a major crackdown on Death Eaters. He suddenly decided that it would be a very good idea to stay with his wife at a time like this and make sure nothing unusual happened. Half an hour later, it was all over, and now both he and his wife had colleagues to mourn for.

He vowed to avenge Voldemort and the Death Eaters. However, he didn't really know how to do that. He figured he still had a price on his head, so it wasn't a good idea to start getting creative until he found a place to set up a new headquarters.

Dilmi had been able to build a Death Eater chapter from scratch, so why not him?

Singh had been about ready to give up when he discovered that Saddam Hussein was offering asylum, and positions in the Ministry of Magic, for all Muslim wizards. This had been exactly what he had been looking for. Neither he nor his wife bore the Dark Mark, so unless someone started throwing Unbreakable Vows around -- which appeared to be VERY controversial given the Aes Sedai flap -- he'd be able to head over there and set up a new chapter. Allah willing, they would be able to catch the Iraqi government by surprise and take over once the group got powerful enough.

First things first, though. He tried to explain to the customs officer that he was in fact a wizard, and he was eventually forced to prove it by demonstrating a few spells. The agent was taken aback for a few moments when they found out he had an Indian name, and he was forced to improvise and say that the vast majority of Indian wizards were not Death Eaters and that they shouldn't discriminate against all Indians because of a few Dark wizards.

Much to his amazement, it worked. The customs agents welcomed him and his wife with open arms and told them they'd get the two of them on a fast track to Iraqi citizenship.
The next question was where to live. Should he try a big city like Baghdad or a smaller town in the middle of nowhere? He'd cross that bridge when he came to it.

-----------------------------

Syrdani Council Chamber
Syrdasch
Syrdan

-----------------------------

Siatnan looked gravely at the other two Chancellors. "You're sure this is the text of President Clinton's statement?"

Vixar nodded. "That's it, Siatnan. He's started a crusade against forced labor and indentured servitude."

Siatnan shook her head. "This does not look good."

Ortelu agreed. "No, it does not."

To be continued...

-----------------------------

Update #273

-------------

Wednesday, July 10, 1996
Happy Troll Pub
Syrdasch
Syrdan

-------------

Donald Davidson strolled into the Happy Troll Pub, hoping that his American accident wouldn't be too obvious. Radner had sent him on a top-secret mission to determine if, as Clinton suspected, the four missing American oilmen had been enslaved by the Syrdani slave master who had tried to intercept the Big Texas.

Davidson's goal was to figure out where the slave master had come from, and if possible to head over to his place to see if the missing crewmen were there. Radner had managed to get hold of a document (albeit an old one) matching Syrdani family crests to slaveholders and determined that the crest on the drowned people's uniforms matched that of a Master Altri, a middle-class wizard who lived near Syrdasch. The document claimed that Altri held between 10 and 15 slaves, though it could be out of date.

Davidson's alibi was that of a low-level slaveholder named Lissot who knew Altri a while back. Apparently this Lissot had heard about Altri's unfortunate demise and wanted to offer condolences to Altri's widow. If everything went as planned, the people would direct him to Altri's plantation, where he would take a look around to see if any of the missing crewmen were there. If he found any of the hostages, he was to report back as soon as he could. Although he was a trained wizard, he wasn't there to start a fight: just to provide reconnaissance.

The place was pretty crowded. He was surprised to see a couple of tattooed people working behind the counter and actually serving drinks. The slaves seemed in pretty decent physical condition, and he whistled silently to himself. Apparently some of the slaveowners were not as tough on their workers as Altri was.

Virtually everyone in the room was talking about one of three things: the events of Judgment Day, Altri's ignominious demise ("I never knew Altri liked to swim!") or Clinton's speech. Radner had
been right, Davidson thought. Apparently Clinton's abolitionist speech had made it to Syrdan after all, and the people were concerned that the powerful Muggle nation was going to go to war to prevent slavery in the Atlantic.

Seeing a that a relatively talkative individual was discussing Altri's fate, he drew a deep breath and walked over to the speaker. Trying to be as polite as possible, he said, "Excuse me, sir, but would it be possible for you to discuss Altri's death some other time? I knew him from childhood, though we'd been a bit estranged of late. When I heard that he'd died, I was horrified. I was hoping to visit his family and offer my condolences."

The Syrdani winced and nodded. "I apologize, sir. I lost a couple of my friends in Judgment Day as well -- who didn't -- so I can understand where you're coming from. Is there anything I can do to help in a time like this?"

Davidson nodded. "Maybe you can get me up to speed on where he's living now. Last time I heard, he was in southern Syrdasch."

The Syrdani frowned. "I don't recall him spending time there."

"This was a while ago, sir."

"I see. Well, he runs Five Tree Plantation, a few kilometers to the northwest of Syrdasch. I don't think it would be appropriate to just Apparate in there, so you may want to fly over there. I see you've got a broom, which is good."

Davidson patted his broom. "I'll fly in. I agree, simply surprising the mourners at their house won't be a good idea. Did he ever get married?"

"Yes, Master...I'm sorry, I don't think I got your name..."

"Lissot."

"I'm Irpan. Yes, Master Lissot, he got married maybe ten years ago, to some woman named Carelia. He's got a three-year-old son now, and he's wife's running the plantation until the kid comes of age. I must say, Ior Sen-Altri's a pretty clever kid. He's got the missus running all over the house."

"Can't the slaves take care of him? I can't imagine that all of his slaves escaped. How many did he have?"

The Syrdani chuckled. "He had fifteen before Judgment Day. Needless to say, he lost a bunch of them after that."

Davidson nodded. "Ah yes. I heard he lost three."


"Six? He lost forty percent of his stock?"

"Yup. However, that's not the worst of it. Supposedly three of them drowned, and three of them managed to escape to the United States."

"The United States?"
"A powerful Muggle nation whose leader recently started abolitionist rhetoric. Many of us are worried that Syrdan and the United States will go to war. I don't see how they can get over here without wizards, but apparently the threat is serious enough that the Chancellors are worried."

Davidson grunted. "I hope not. That would be bad. We've lost too many good wizards already, and the world can't afford another war given what happened. Did they ever get the slaves back?"

The Syrdani shook his head and smiled. "Believe it or not, that stupid Muggle leader didn't know he had to listen to us. He decided to keep the slaves and compensate Altri for the lost slaves in gold."

Davidson frowned. "What's wrong with that? I assume he can get more slaves with the money."

The Syrdani laughed again. "Oh, he got more slaves -- and he didn't even have to pay for them. Apparently he tracked down three of the missing yahoos to a large Muggle boat in the Atlantic. By the time he got there, however, the yahoos were gone, presumably to the United States. What does Altri do? Obvious. He's already lost six slaves, and there are these four sleeping Muggles right on the boat. He brings back the Muggles and convinces everyone on the ship that a rogue wave knocked them overboard."

Davidson was silent for a moment. This was precisely what Radner had been worried about. Would there be a war? Only time would tell.

He forced out a laugh. "Clever! Where are the four new slaves? Have they already started work?"

The Syrdani shrugged. "As far as I know, they have. They're probably up there at Five Tree. Supposedly Altri's widow has no idea how to talk to them as they don't speak any civilized tongues I've heard of before."

Davidson nodded, thankful that the man had given him an opening. "I'll see if I can help her understand their language when I get there. Now, if you would excuse me, I have to go. Enjoy your beer."

The Syrdani raised his glass. "Believe me, with the threat of war and a recent Judgment Day, I'm going to enjoy this beer a lot!"

-------------------
Five Tree Plantation
-------------------
Consoling the bereaved woman and her son came naturally to Davidson. Although he detested the idea of slavery, he could relate to what the family had gone through. Nevertheless, Altri's widow was slowly being pushed over the edge by the possible threat from the United States.

"What did we do, Lissot? Our society would collapse without slaves, yet if this barbarian Clinton wants to attack us he'll call the entire Muggle world in on us. Besides, I'm not like my late husband. No offense, but I never liked the way he treated the yahoos. In fact, I've already promised myself that I won't ruin the lives of these four new fellows he just brought in."

She snapped her fingers, and Davidson heard footsteps behind him. He spun around and his eyes widened momentarily as he found himself looking into a member of the Big Texas's bridge crew, a man who was now sporting an awfully-familiar tattoo on his forehead.

The crewman bowed to him and spoke in horribly mangled Syrdani. "Good afternoon, Master
Lissot. Is there anything I can help you with?"

An idea came to Davidson's mind. Rising, he said, "Actually, sirrah, I wouldn't mind it if you showed me where the facilities are. I need to use the restroom."

The crewman nodded. "Certainly. Follow me, please."

Davidson followed the crewman into the restroom. As soon as they were alone, he switched to English and whispered in the man's ear. "You're Second Officer Jason Kooyman, right?"

The yahoo stared at him. "What? How did you --"

Davidson shushed him up. "Listen, I work for the American Department of Magic and Radner. Are all four of you here?"

Kooyman nodded. "Yup, we're all here. I take it you're going to be getting us out of this hellhole?"

"I can't do it myself. However, rest assured, my friend. Clinton knows about your situation and has developed a distinct distaste for Syrdan. We'll be evacuating you and pressuring Syrdan to reform as soon as possible. I doubt we'll invade, but we might start sending special agents over to destabilize things."

Kooyman breathed a sigh of relief and shook his head. "We'd appreciate that, sir. I'll tell the other three guys. I take it you don't need to use the bathroom after all, then?"

Davidson shook his head. "No."

Kooyman nodded and flushed the toilet. "Good. I'm in one of the huts in the back of the house -- you can see them from the room you were in. And for what it's worth, don't kill the woman or the kid. Although she still has a long way to go to accepting Muggles as equals, she isn't nearly the sadist Altri was."

Davidson shook the man's hand. "I agree with your assessment of Mrs. Altri, and I'll keep that in mind when I report to the president."

To be continued...

------------------
Update #273.5
------------------
Wednesday, July 10, 1996
Abandoned building, Warehouse District
Roqteratl
------------------

The door opened with a creak to reveal an airlock. Preparing herself for the transition between swimming and sliding, detective Kima entered the building. She instantly recognised the man waiting for her, and his companion also seemed quite familiar.

"Well, well. No-Heart Sam. I should have recognised your bling when we found it. How come you have both your hands?" Instead of answering, the wizard just pulled off his glove, revealing an unnatural silver right hand. "Ouch...and you, Veela girl, didn't I see you dancing in Odnarlo's?"
Curious, the wizard turned to the Veela. "Odnarlo's? What kind of place is it?" The girl, visibly embarrassed, stammered: "It's a... a gentleman's club!"
Kima cruelly remarked: "She means it's a striptease bar."
"Oh" said the wizard, visibly hurt, and put some distance between Myrtille and himself.
"What, such a trivial thing, completely missing the great No-Heart Sam's fabled attention? Do tell me, where else did you meet her, then?"

"I rescued her from the same goblins that did this to my hand, and she's willing to be a witness in their case, just as I. She helped me capture those goblins and proven herself to be a fierce warrior, but also a decent gentlewoman...or so I believed. Anyway, we brought what we promised, how about your part of the deal?"

Kima's voice became formal (as much as one can tell with that shrieking): "I have the power to give you a deal signed by the Eldest of Roqteratl himself, that grants you impunity for past and present crimes. All you have to do is witnessing in this case under the effects of a one-time Unbreakable Vow against lying. And you'll get your ring back, if you survive stating it's still rightfully yours."

"I accept" said the wizard "now let's go collect those criminals."

Seeing the wizard and the veela were still visibly upset with each other, she added: "Oh, and one more thing. Before we go, I'd like to speak to both of you, privately. Sam, come with me!"

Entering one of the small side rooms, Samanar turned to the detective. "Okay, we're alone. What's so secret that Myrtille can't hear it, when you already blurted my street name? You know, I'm not a criminal!"
"I apologise for it. I only wanted to say that unlike most... employees in Odnarlo's, Miss Trépanier never did anything else for the guests other than dancing and accepting drinks."
"I...see. I guess I'd been too quick to judge her."
"Not at all. Until I told about her profession, you gave her all the respect she was due. I'd be happy to hear it'll continue that way."

---------------
moments later, same room
---------------

"Look, you don't have to tell anything" began the Veela "I don't care if he's a criminal, he rescued me and that's it. I'll travel home to Nestor after the trial anyway, it's not like I'd have to stay in the same town with him."

"You misunderstood. Despite having a fearsome reputation, he's not cruel at all. I know him quite well, he's always been a gentleman."

"A gentleman named No-Heart" snorted Myrtille "like I'll believe it."

"Oh, that nickname has nothing to do with cruelty. You see, this is not the first time he got into trouble. A few years ago, a guy ran a sword clean through Sam's chest. The lucky bastard, instead of dying as anyone in such a situation should, just asked for a medic to pull it out. Turns out, it missed all vital organs...he got away with a pair of really thought-provoking scars, and a new nickname."

"Nice story. But if he didn't do anything bad, why do people fear him?"

"Let's just say that few things are more dangerous than a house-elf whose master is threatened, and
leave it at that."

"I understand. Thank you for enlightening me, detective."

To be continued...

--------------------
Update #274
--------

Wednesday, July 10, 1996
Britain for Humans Headquarters

Isabel Miller couldn't believe it. The wizards had actually agreed to her demands! Not only were they going to require two Unbreakable Vows for all members in public office -- obedience to the laws of the land and a refusal to use magic as weapon except in self-defense -- but additional vows would allow them membership in a prestigious society known as the Order of Aes Sedai. Even more amazing was the fact that this Order of Aes Sedai was supposedly taken out of a sword-and-sorcery fantasy series!

From what she had been told, the wizards hadn't been particularly fond of the idea, but the Grand Mugwump had hammered it through. Still, several nations were threatening to not enforce the vows. Although officially they argued that the Aes Sedai oaths were setting a bad precedent for an Atlantis power grab, Isabel suspected that their real motivation involved corruption in government or plans to become the next Voldemort.

There were six vows in all. Wizards who adopted more vows would be seen as more trustworthy than those who adopted fewer, and Isabel suspected that there would rapidly be peer pressure to adopt as many vows as possible. In addition to the ones against offensive magic and obedience to the laws of the land, there vows against creating weapons, magically renouncing any of the Unbreakable Vows, and transmitting the vow requirements to the next generation of wizards.

The latest controversies involved the so-called Sixth Vow. It was a requirement that wizards not lie unless they felt that telling the truth would jeopardize them or an ally in some way. People were arguing that people wouldn't be lying if it didn't benefit them in some way to begin with, which implied that not doing so would be detrimental to them in SOME way. A loose interpretation of the vow could effectively render the restriction meaningless. Furthermore, it would cover situations like white lies as well. What was wrong with a white lie, especially if no one was harmed by it? Finally, many wizards argued that the ability to lie was part of being human -- or sentient, as the put it, as there were sentient beings other than humans. Removing that ability would make the person less (or more?) than human.

Reports were coming which would have Atlantis eliminate the Sixth Vow and replace it with an agreement that the wizard have a Secrecy Sensor within easy reach in his or her office. People had the right to ask the wizard to activate the Secrecy Sensor whenever they wished, and this gave the Muggles the opportunity to force wizards to tell the truth if they so chose. The catch, of course, was that the Secrecy Sensor was impartial and would report on lies spoken by either the wizard OR the Muggle. The Muggles had originally balked at that development, but Dagher had apparently convinced them that it would be a good way to prevent future persecution and manipulation of wizards still somewhat unfamiliar with the Muggle world.

Isabel had been surprised to hear that Unbreakable Vows were already in use in one wizard community: that of an obscure undersea territory known as Roqteratl (who on earth had a Q without
a U?). This land, populated by the same bizarre creatures which had inhabited the lake near Hogwarts, apparently required that political leaders swear a vow promising to obey the laws of the land and rule fairly and impartially, very similar to the proposed Third Vow. This nation functioned pretty well, and it seemed to be at peace. The merpeople also claimed that the vow cut down on corruption a great deal, and that they didn't see why other cultures couldn't try it out.

There were actually two variations of the Fifth Vow: to never renounce any of the Vows; and to never renounce the Second, Fourth, Fifth, or (for Aes Sedai) Sixth Vows while the wizard was serving in office. Wizards who adopted the Fifth Vow upon inauguration could choose either phrasing. Both of them were enough to allow for Accepted status. However, wizards who swore the latter lost Accepted status once they left office.

Many wizards had already adopted the vows. Grand Mugwump Dagher had taken the Aes Sedai oaths (with an older version of the Sixth Vow) live on television, and the Pope -- well, John Paul -- had done so shortly thereafter. A good 20% of the wizards in the United States had already taken the First and Third Oaths, as had 16% of those in Britain. Among those in the Ministry of Magic and equivalent positions in the United States, 45% had already been sworn in and the number was rising rapidly. The vast majority of the wizards had chosen to take Novice status, simply accepting the First and Third Vows. 20% of the wizards who had taken vows had chosen Accepted status, and only 5% of them had chosen Aes Sedai. Of those who had elected to go all the way, 75% of them had agreed to use the Secrecy Sensors to ensure truthfulness if needed.

It slowly dawned on her that this may very well result in the best of both worlds. Wizards who were corrupt would inevitably be outed as soon as they tried to break the laws of the land -- they'd wince in pain when they tried to violate their oath, and they'd naturally get kicked out of office. Meanwhile, good wizards would be able to continue operating as before.

It was a clever idea, and it was good enough for her. There was no longer a reason to fight evil wizards if it were no way for the bad guys to get into positions of power. Granted, there could be a few bad apples here and there, but the people who had sworn to obey the laws would take care of them.

Within an hour, she was at the podium saying that the Aes Sedai protocol was enough for Britain for Humans. The organization would no longer target civilians, and it would exempt Wizarding political leaders who had taken at least Novice-level oaths.

The capitulation of Britain for Humans sent shock waves around the world. Now that all three of the major World for Humans organizations had agreed to lay down their weapons in exchange for Aes Sedai oaths and psychological screening, the smaller ones began to see the writing on the wall. They, too, soon began to announce truces and armistices. By the end of the week, 95% of World for Humans had caved in. The wizards were free from persecution at last from all known secular agencies.

The Celestine Church, however, was not a secular agency.

-------------

Oval Office

-------------

Clinton looked at Gore and shook his head. "This isn't good. Despite all we've done, consumer confidence has dropped 35% and unemployment has already hit 8.3%. Markets are drying up and people are hoarding coins under their beds."

Gore nodded. "You got it, Bill. I'm not sure what to do next, to be honest with you. People are still
panicking whenever issues involving the search for bodies in New York and Miami make the news. Rest assured that Bob Dole is absolutely crowing about this. We've got to think of something."

Clinton turned to the window and looked in the direction of the National Mall. "Those fellows who sent us that obelisk are traders, right?"

Gore nodded. "Yup. Those Xylons are as well."

"The term's actually Xylend, Al. You would expect they don't have much Muggle stuff at the moment, right?"

"I would say so, yes. Why?"

Clinton winked at him. "I bet they'd like to buy stuff, right? And they've got an embassy, right?"

Gore chuckled. "You're going to try to start selling stuff to the wizards if the Muggles aren't going to buy it?"

"Why not? Now that we are sure the wizards will behave, we can trust them to not do anything crazy with them."

Gore frowned. "There aren't many wizards, Bill. It's not going to be much."

"But it should tide us over until people come back to their senses. Or, at the very least, until after the election."

-------
The Pentagon
-------

Monica Lewinsky had a problem. Secrecy Sensors had started popping up all over the Pentagon, courtesy of the Smoky Mountains Facility. The military brass had ordered a caseload of them as soon as word had leaked out that they would affect both Muggles and wizards. If everything went as planned during this test, the FBI would start handing them out to courts, military bases, and police stations across the country. Several would be kept in the Pentagon to ferret out spies.

She really hoped no one would ask her what she did with the President.

-------
Enfield, MA
-------

Radner frowned. "You saw them?"

Davidson nodded. "Yes, sir. I did. They're being held on Altri's plantation, Five Tree Plantation. I told them we're going to come and get them."

Radner looked at him. "What's your assessment of the situation in the Syrdani government?"

"They seem to have gotten the President's meaning, sir. Many of the civilians are worried about American intervention. Altri's widow -- who is a decent person who didn't like what Altri had been doing -- was complaining that Syrdan was in a bind: if they give up the slaves their society collapses, and if they don't we invade. It sounds like they're slowly starting to put themselves on guard."

Radner looked out the window and saw the fish going by. "Sort of like the Confederacy before the Civil War."
"Yes, sir. In all fairness, though, they have a point. Everything there is based on the feudal system, and trying to get rid of it is going to be as easy as it is for us to get rid of democracy or capitalism."

Radner nodded. "Do you think we can rescue them?"

Davidson smiled. "Yes. I memorized one man's location so we can Apparate there once we get inside Syrdan's Apparation shield."

Radner thought for a moment. "I'll tell the President. Let's hope he doesn't ask for an invasion to distract the country from the bad economy. For all he knows, the Syrdani abducted 1,000 Americans from cruise ships in the Bermuda Triangle in the 1950's."

To be continued...

----------
Update #275
----------
Wednesday, July 11, 1996
Strong Hoof Manor
Hiyan
Land of the Houyhnhnms
----------
Ihal was about ready to inform his masters that lunch was ready when he overheard Hahach's voice through the door. "What do you mean, they're thinking of attacking Syrdan?"

Hahach's husband, Lachshan, grunted, and Ihal heard him kick at the floor with his hind legs. Hind legs were something that he, Ihal, wouldn't have minded from time to time, particularly when it came to running and working quickly. However, he was a yahoo, and all yahoos had two legs. He could wish for freedom as well, but he doubted that would happen, either.

When Lachshan responded, he sounded irritable. "That's what I heard, wife. Apparently this Muggle nation managed to find out that Syrdan enslaves Muggles. Their leader -- a yahoo, what would you expect -- promptly decided that an anti-slavery crusade would be a pretty good idea. Interesting coincidence, is it not?"

"They can't get at Syrdan, my husband. Besides, how can a Muggle nation take out a country with thousands of wizards who excel at subduing Muggles?"

Lachshan hesitated briefly before responding. "The United States holds one of the Judgment Day keys. They're probably the most powerful Muggle nation in the entire world. If anyone can do it, it's them -- particularly if Nestor decides to play as well. The United States also supposedly fought a civil war where slavery was one of the point of contention. My manager thinks there's a 50/50 shot of this war starting up. Believe me, that's the last thing we need right now."

Ihal's mind raced. A powerful Muggle nation was going to be picking on Syrdan because they enslaved Muggles? This could be the break the yahoos here in Houyhnhnmmland needed to get out from under their centaur overlords! All they had to do was figure out how to tell the United States that Ihal and his friends needed help as well. If they got angry enough to fight Syrdan over Muggle enslavement, imagine their reaction to a nation where virtually ALL HUMANS were second-class citizens!

Being part of the Two Exceeds Four revolutionary underground movement could come in handy
here. Ihal was fairly certain that his cell's leader would jump at the chance to ally with the United States.

Ihal wanted to hear more. However, the food was getting cold and he knew his master didn't like cold food. He knocked on the door and announced himself. There was a brief delay, after which Lachshan told him to come in.

Ihal opened the door, faced the two centaurs, and bowed. "Master, Mistress, here's your lunch. I hope you like it."

Hahach took a whiff and smiled. "Doesn't smell half bad, actually. What is it?"

"Hay pudding, Mistress. The cook suspects that it will indulge both your equine and human halves."

Lachshan nodded. "Give him my complements, Ihal, and tell him that we're going to probably need a second helping up here. I suspect that this stuff is going to be gone before you get back down there."

Ihal bowed once more. "Very good, Master. I'll do that."

The master nodded, and Ihal left the room. He headed to the kitchen to place the order for seconds. Once he was done with that, he stopped by his room to send a coded message to Two Exceeds Four.

-------------------
Maori Territory
New Zealand
--- --- --- ---
The Maori chief witch doctor -- who also doubled as the New Zealand Minister of Magic -- shook his head. "Hell, no! I'm not going to swear those damn oaths!"

The Muggle president of New Zealand frowned. "Why not? I don't see any reason not to, particularly if they'll prevent Britain for Muggles from attacking you guys."

The witch doctor rolled his eyes. "I'm all for the wizards learning to police themselves better. The problem isn't the oaths themselves. It's the fact that Atlantis is intervening in what is normally a state's rights area. This looks a lot like a power grab to me, sir. What they should have done is instructed each Wizarding state to implement new policies which ensured that wizards behaved long-term. This sets a bad precedent."

The Muggle frowned. "I see what you're saying. Don't you trust the Grand Mugwump?"

The witch doctor gritted his teeth. "I trusted Dialonis, as well as his predecessor Dumbledore. I have no idea who this Dagher fellow is, though. He appears to have come out of nowhere over the past few months. I have no idea how he'll react once the aftershocks of Judgment Day subside."

"He's sworn the Aes Sedai oaths, from what I've been told -- all six of them. If there's anyone who's going to be trustworthy, it's an Aes Sedai."

The Minister threw his hands up in the air. "All right, Dagher's mortal. He dies. What about his successors?"

The Muggle hesitated for a moment before responding. "I personally think you're being a bit paranoid, Minister. However, be that as it may...how is Dagher going to react to this?"
The witch doctor shrugged. "Beats me. Hopefully he'll realize that he's overstepped his boundaries and change some of the rules. Had the Maori Wizarding Senate recommended that all of us take those particular Unbreakable Vows, I'd have been all for it. Having Atlantis force us to swallow the Vows, however, is much too dangerous."

-----------------
Syracuse, NY
-----------------

Cameras flashed as Eric Street stood at the podium. "That's right, ladies and gentlemen. Wizarding Services Corporation is proud to announce that two new regional headquarters have been set up in Fort Lauderdale and here in Syracuse. Both are accepting applications for new wizards to help with the reconstruction of Ogdensburg, New York, and Miami. Syracuse was chosen because it's relatively close to both of the northern attack sites."

One of the reporters raised her hand. "Will your group help with the reconstruction of Dana and Greenwich?"

Street shook his head. "No, ma'am. Ideally, we would have. However, it looks like the wizards in the remaining two towns are developing plans to rebuild those two cities by themselves. Besides, the nuclear targets need help much more urgently."

-----------------
REI Adventures Catalog
-----------------

NEW THIS MONTH:

Introducing the Extendatent! This magically enhanced camping aid is the size of an ordinary tent and is small enough to fit in the trunk of a car. It takes only moments to erect, like all of our other products. However, this product is different from any other tent on the market.

How so? The Extendatent is magical. Instead of enclosing an area of about 30 square feet, this device provides a dry, safe environment for between 500 and 1000 square feet. The 500 square foot model sells for $999, the 750 square foot model sells for $1399, and the 1000 square foot model sells for $1799.

How does it work? The wizards have informed us that has been ensorcelled in a way so that objects inside it shrink to one-tenth their normal size as soon as they are placed completely inside the tent. Beyond that, they have just told us it's...magic.

Try out the new Extandatent a store near you!

To be continued...

-----------------
Update #275.5

-----------------
Wednesday, July 11, 1996
Government District, Roqteratl
City-State of Roqteratl

-----------------

Toni was beyond boredom. "Another hour of this, till lunch" he thought, as he glanced at the clock above the door. "At least it's armor&walker training after that...only sensible thing to do in this damned place!"
It seemed like a good idea at the time. "Take the Oaths" they said. "Serve the city" they said. "Promotions, salary and health care are better than anywhere else in Roqteratl" they said... but why, oh why, didn't they say anything about the legal training? About the dawn to noon, six day out of seven, two damned years of legal training?! Life as a blind dolphin sounded quite alluring to him now... but he already passed that choice up.

Of course the training was necessary. When one takes an Unbreakable Vow to obey the laws of the city, knowing the law was vital, in the truest sense of the word.

The other things also put him off. Military was supposed to be like the Border Defense, but instead of the cozy, family-like but nonetheless highly coordinated attitude he got used to with the Red Squad, here, everything was somewhat... mechanical, somehow less lively. Literally too: he was far from being the only one with an artificial body part, though he had yet to see anyone else with two magical eyes.

But it was everywhere: instead of squads with largely constant membership for years, here there was only a chain of command, and people were transferred between units all the time. Instead of everyone having a number in the unit, showing his standing among his squadmates, here they had ranks, and any debate between those of the same rank was usually decided by seniority... a needlessly overcomplicated system in his opinion. Even the standing orders and manoeuvres were number-coded instead of just giving them a sensible name... it was numbers everywhere they shouldn't have been, and nowhere where they should. It was an upside down world after the Border Defense.

"Corporal Toni, are you listening to me?" The teacher's voice interrupted his musings. "You should remove that blindfold, so I can be sure you don't sleep in class!... Nevermind, keep in on, those magical eyes of yours are just too unnerving."

--------------------------------
Symrywin Manor, Downtown Roqteratl
--------------------------------

A casual observer could have mistaken the assembled folks for the Lesser Council: nearly half it's members were here, both from Greater and Minor Houses, though obviously the Guilds could not be involved - their Oaths compelled them to obey laws which were strictly forbidding conspiracies.

Many foreign diplomats were present too: some emissaries from the merpeople tribes, and almost all of the air-breather ambassadors.

The Eldest of House Symrywin spoke up. "Fellow citizens and honored guests! We have gathered here, because we all feel something needs to be done with the leadership of this city and the Merpeople Assembly! The recent actions of the Eldest have left us questioning the man's sanity. He is going to doom us all! We must stop him!"

A Galiver Consortium wizard responded. "That we can all see. The question is, how can you correct his mistake? Our hidden lands are already exposed!"

"They are only shown on a very old relic, dating back to the Hammer of Ra. Most Muggles can be convinced these lands are no longer there, if you keep your magical defenses up. Those few who know you are there can be bribed to keep their mouths shut."

Another wizard scoffed. "Offering them bribes? They'll keep asking for more. We are asking for
blackmail here. What if they keep increasing their demands? It may be even worse than being exposed!"

A centaur responded. "Look how they threaten Syrdan. What would they do to Houyhnmm, if they found out about us? Or for that matter, Festandri? We have much to hide from them!"

"Then what will we do? Run to Atlantis for help, saying exposure threatens our way of life and the peace? They allowed the fall of the SOS in the first place!"

"Your Atlantis should best be left out of this. This is an internal affair, even you should not normally be here. And don't forget they are only interested in humans. For all we know, their apocalypse-o-meter wouldn't even react if only us non-humans were threatened by something. No, it's simple: the Eldest must go. Once he's out of the picture, I, as the head of the most powerful House of the most powerful alliance will be elected as his successor... and I will rule with all our safety in mind."

"Not so fast, Elder Symrywin" interrupted Elder Zace, "We don't have majority yet! Houses Snurbevon, Xukwudiz, Duskryn and Suinrev, a total half of Great Houses, are behind the Eldest, if he dies, they will elect one of them, and the Nennorka haven't yet taken sides either. Out of 15 Minor Houses, I only see 2 here. This won't be enough!"

Symrywin dropped the bombshell: "It will, once I let the rest of them learn what I know of our supposedly most virtuous Eldest, and his bastard daughter!"

Tsalasian ambassador Zhyrr rose. "I have to say, it's underhanded, but at least this way he can live. Forcing him to resign could work. There is no need for bloodshed."

"Oh, there is. There is. As long as the old man lives, he can ruin our plans. He must die, the sooner the better."

"No! You can't afford such assassination!" insisted the Tsalal "Roqteratl is already unmasked, the eyes of the Muggle world are on you. For your own good, you must find another way!"

The merpeople leader became smug. "Do you really wish to protect us, instead of just trying to keep your friend Hessu alive?"

As he mentioned the Eldest's old name, panic ran through the black wizard's face. However, he still had some tricks up his sleeve. "Hessu? Who's that? I don't remember anyone with that name, and you don't, either, since "Obliviatius maxim... CRACK", snapped his neck, as he fell on the ground dead. A smug looking Centaur flexed his fingers at the opposite end of the room, then said:

"Oops, look at that, he fell off some stairs and died. Let this be an example for all of you: you are with us, or accidents start happening to you. Now, on to the next topic, how to kill your Eldest!"

To be continued....
Update #276

---------------

Wednesday, July 11, 1996
Oval Office
White House
Washington, DC
United States of America

Clinton swore and turned to face the window. "You're absolutely certain of this, Radner?"

Radner nodded. "Yes, Mr. President. The agent was able to contact Jason Kooyman, the second officer on the Big Texas. All four men are being held at Altri's plantation, Five Tree Plantation. They have been made into serfs and have been marked with the tattoo you saw on the heads of the three refugees who came here.

Clinton slammed his fist on the table. "Syrdan is going to pay for that, somehow. Frustrated that we walked away with three of their serfs, they decided to take four back?"

"That's what it looks like, sir."

The president's face hardened. "You guys can teleport, can't you? We'll send a strike force in and take them back."

Radner shook his head. "That won't work, sir. International Apparation is forbidden, and Syrdan has a Portkey barrier up as well. They appear to have gotten your message, sir, and are slowly starting to mobilize. At the very least, they've raised their defense alert level to the point that Portkeys aren't allowed in."

"Can we invade? I doubt they'd stand a chance against advanced Muggle technology. We'd wipe them out in no time."

Radner blanched. "We can invade, sir. However, I strongly discourage an invasion. There are thousands of wizards there and they are very good at dealing with Muggles. This could very well turn into another Vietnam, and to be frank you can't afford that with the recession and the promise to become more isolationist. Finally, sir, recall that the Americans don't know Syrdan exists."

Clinton grunted. "I forgot about that. Well, we'll have someone else do it then. Send a message to those three lunatics running Syrdan. Give them the following ultimatum: either they return our men and begin reforms to emancipate the serfs, or we'll blow the whistle on their whole damned operation. We'll go to the UN and tell them that they've been enslaving Muggles. We'll tell NATO as well, and since they've attacked some of our men NATO will have to help out."

Radner thought about that for a moment. "That's a clever idea, sir. Everyone is going to want to take a shot at these guys. There's only one problem, however. Our wizards cannot be used as a first strike weapon."
Clinton frowned. "Why not?"

"The Syrdani are not Dark wizards. The First Oath prevents a pre-emptive strike unless the target wizards are Dark. This will limit our numbers."

Clinton swore. "Those damned Aes Sedai oaths! They're holding people in thrall! Does that sound like something Mother Teresa would do?"

Radner tried to explain. "The Syrdani are not evil. They're a feudal state, and feudalism is a bit passe in modern society. Nevertheless, feudalism is not intrinsically evil. Besides, I highly doubt the Syrdani see themselves as Dark wizards. From what I recall, the serfdom started up because the wizards were taking care of the Muggles using magic and the Muggles began working for the wizards to repay the favor."

"I see. And unless I'm mistaken, the enemy wizards will be able to fight back against our Muggle forces because they are on defense."

"Correct. However, you have to keep in mind that once they attack us, the wizards will be able to engage as one of the American wizards' allies has been attacked. The wizards can get involved once the battle starts. Keep in mind, though, that once the two Wizarding armies start fighting each other things get a lot more complicated"

Clinton thought for a moment. Finally, he turned back to Radner. "Suggestions, Mr. Radner?"

Radner thought for a moment. "Send over the ultimatum. Hopefully they'll agree to back down and figure that not all of us have taken the Novice-level oaths. If they don't, gather a force of NATO troops and wizards and have them try to force Syrdan to reform itself. Make it a black op so no one knows about it unless it succeeds, at which point you get some good publicity with the election coming up."

Clinton nodded. "Sounds like a plan. Can we occupy Syrdan?"

Radner shook his head. "No, sir. It would be a long-term occupation and we would likely have to deal with guerrilla warfare. Besides, they know the terrain and have a high concentration of wizards. Think of the Russians in Afghanistan, but worse."

Clinton whistled. "You're probably right. Well, let's hope it doesn't get to that point. Head over there with the ultimatum and see what you can do."

"Yes, sir."

---------------------

Two Exceeds Four Headquarters
Land of the Houyhnhnms
---------------------

Fahr smiled. "Just what we've been looking for! The Americans have started an anti-slavery crusade. All we need to do is attract their attention and tell them what's going on over here."

Ihal nodded. "That's what it seems like, boss. The question is how on earth we tell them we're here."

Fahr chuckled. "Simple. We figure out what's maintaining the field which hides this nation from the Muggles and destroy it."
Ihal laughed. "Clever! That forces them to step aside for a moment to recast the spell. However, by
then it will be too late. The Muggles will have found out, and while they're busy we'll have started
our own revolt. There's only one problem, however."

"There is? What's that?"

"We don't know what -- or who -- is maintaining that field. And if I were a centaur, I'd make sure we
don't find out."

Fahr nodded. "WE don't. The centaurs, however, do."

Ihal rolled his eyes. "And why would they tell us?"

"Because some of lower classes can't afford yahoos...and they are kind of jealous of the upper
classes in that regard. They'd really like it if everyone was on the same level, wouldn't you think?"

Both men laughed at that.

To be continued...

------------
Update #277
------------
Thursday, July 12, 1996
Wizarding Service Corporation Headquarters
Dallas, TX
United States of America

IMPORTANT POLICY CHANGE FOR WSC EMPLOYEES

As you are undoubtedly aware, several momentous events have taken place over the past few weeks.
The evil wizard known as Voldemort was destroyed, yet his death triggered a cataclysm unlike
anything seen in the history of civilization. Several great cities were attacked with nuclear weapons,
and over a million people were killed in a span of a three hours.

Grand Mugwump Dialonis, who is now the Wizarding ambassador to the United Nations, was
forced to invoke the Judgment Day protocol for the third time in the history of mankind and the first
time in over 3500 years. Those red balls you saw hovering in the air on the morning of June 20th
were Magical EMP bombs which would disable all unauthorized wand use so that Atlantis and the
rest of the good Wizarding forces could annihilate the Death Eaters, al-Qaeda, and Hamas. If any of
you wondered why your wands would not work between 1500Z and 1530Z (10:00 to 10:30 AM
Central time) on that date, this is why.

Although Atlantis's mission was successful, there were still more surprises to come. Several of the
World for Humans groups argued that the wizards had to police themselves better to make sure that
no more Voldemorts emerged to threaten the world. Heydar Dagher, the new Grand Mugwump and
former Minister of Magic of Saudi Arabia, agreed with this premise and introduced some important
reforms. The most important of these are the institution of the Six Vows, known informally as the
Aes Sedai oaths.

Derived from an American fantasy series where the fictional wizards were forced to police
themselves after nearly destroying the world, the Six Vows are six promises which wizards are to make while under the Unbreakable Vow enchantment which causes excruciating pain when the oaths are violated. They are:

1. to not use magic as a weapon except in self-defense or defense of an ally (unless the opponent is a Dark wizard),
2. to not assist in the creation of weapons,
3. to follow the laws of the land fairly and impartially,
4. to transmit the Six Vows to the next generation of wizards,
5. to not renounce any of these Vows, and
6. to either never lie or to allow a Secrecy Sensor to be available for conversations at all times.

Wizards who swear all six vows are given the title Aes Sedai. Wizards who swear all but the sixth are given the title Accepted. Wizards who swear just the First and Third Vows are called Novices.

With this in mind, WSC has adopted a new policy change which will affect all of its employees from Eric Street himself all the way down. All WSC employees must swear the First and Third Oaths by the end of September or risk termination. Employees who earn Accepted status will get a 10% raise, and employees who earn full Aes Sedai status will receive a 20% raise. In addition, you will be expected to perform your civic duty to vote in the November election.

We can understand that this may be a shock to you. Nevertheless, it is a necessary evil. Wizarding Services Corporation is, in one real sense, the first major Wizarding organization designed to interact and serve Muggles. We are, in effect, the common American citizen's primary contact with the magical world. Consequently, we are effectively ambassadors to the Muggle world.

Needless to say, it is imperative that ambassadors behave in a manner appropriate for their station. No corrupt or illegal activities. No vigilante justice without going through the American court system. No Unforgivable Curses. Muggles will be looking to you for leadership and support, and WSC expects you to fulfill that role to the rest of your abilities. Remember that you are both Americans as well as wizards.

You may be interested to know that the term Aes Sedai in the fantasy series -- the Wheel of Time series by Robert Jordan, which starts with the novel Eye of the World -- translates to "Servant of All". Being a Servant of All is precisely what WSC was designed for, helping Muggles regardless of gender, race, or creed. I expect that adoption of these vows will help us be the best we can be.

If you want more information, please contact your supervisor.

Thank you for your attention.

---------------------
Submersible Alvin
Floor of the Indian Ocean
900 miles southeast of Madagascar

- - - - - - - - - - - -

The sonar operator put his hands to his headset and turned to the navigator.
"The mermaid says we're getting close, maybe a mile or so away at this point. Turn on the headlights
and see what we've got down there."

The navigator nodded and flicked the switch. The floodlights turned on, illuminating the seafloor in front of the submarine.

The sonar operator whistled as he looked out the window. "I've seen unusual areas of the ocean floor before, but I have never seen anything like this. And I'm not even including the mermaid off the port bow."

The navigator nodded. "I fully agree with you, Bob. This is absolutely remarkable."

The lights had revealed a chaotic jumble of rocks of different sizes with fish swimming around them. Usually, the seafloor was smooth and sandy. This landscape looked like something seen by the Apollo astronauts on the moon.

The navigator pointed out the window. "The ground seems to be coming up in the direction we're going. I think the mermaid is right. This has all the characteristics of an ejecta blanket from an impact. Take a look at that boulder over there -- it's probably fifty feet across. I wouldn't have wanted to be around when whatever threw it over here came down. Hold on when I take a rock sample."

The navigator stopped the Alvin, lowered it to the seabed, and began manipulating the sub's robotic arms. He withdrew a small container from the storage compartment and filled it with loose rocks from the site. Securing the container inside the sub, he started the vessel's engines again.

The rocks got bigger and bigger as the ground continued to rise. Finally, the sonar operator got another report from the mermaid. "It's right here, Joe. It's going to be a bit of a surprise. Let's get the film rolling here."

The navigator pressed the button to activate the IMAX projector, and the machine beeped and started taking in the scene. Seconds later, the seafloor vanished.

The sonar operator looked at his console. "Sea level has just dropped by several thousand feet, straight down. That's got to be the crater rim. Stop here for a second and get a panorama."

The navigator nodded and began recording the sights. It became obvious that the abrupt drop in the sea level extended as far as the sub could see.

"I don't see any radius of curvature here -- this looks to be almost a straight line, almost like a fault or cliff. Can you ask Madison over there how big it is?"

The sonar operator nodded and was surprised at the. "Thirty kilometers. Much bigger than Meteor Crater."

The navigator whistled. "Ouch! That must have hurt. Hold on while I get a sample from the rim, and then we'll go on in."

The Alvin proceeded over the lip of the crater and headed down. At 14,500 feet -- two thousand feet below the rim -- the seafloor re-emerged with its carpet of rocks. The sub took another sample and then started heading for the center of the crater.

The rocks began to disappear as they headed into the crater, and eventually the floor became sandy again. However, fourteen kilometers in, more rocks appeared.
The two humans looked at each other in puzzlement. Finally, the navigator whistled. "What the hell? What are rocks doing here? This looks like it should be ground zero -- GOOD GOD! That can't be --"

The sonar operator nodded. "Yup. I just got word from the mermaid. That's artificial. It's a memorial to the millions of people killed in the Hammer of Ra impact. I recognize the merpeople's architecture."

Both men looked on in awe as the ship approached a huge complex of spires, buildings, and arrangements of shells about the size of a football field. It was obvious that the merpeople realized that this was a historic site and had wanted to tell their descendants about it. Being careful not to damage any of the structures, the sub took pictures and obtained closeups of many of the buildings. The mermaid explained through the sonar operator that the inscriptions on the buildings described the disaster to tourists. Meanwhile, the navigator pointed out that several of the carvings seemed to mimic those on the obelisk in the National Mall.

Both men suddenly found themselves taking off their headsets and putting their hands over their hearts. It just seemed appropriate, given the circumstances. Eventually, they came back to reality. They took a sample of sand from the crater floor, just outside the monument's grounds, and started the long journey back to the surface.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #277.5
-------------

Thursday, July 12, 1996
Near the Greater Council Chamber, Roqteratl
City-State of Roqteratl

The Eldest was swimming toward his private quarters to have some refreshments. So far, his day was as bad as any other in the past week: the air-breathers demanded assurance that he'll convince the Muggles that their hidden lands are no longer there, the Houses demanded that seeing there is no known hostile outside power, he puts an end to the Wartime Truce, and the merpeople of the various coastal cities demanded that he provides them protection and independence from Muggles, if- or rather when- they are discovered. At least he could win the favor of some by promising to convince the Muggles to cease dolphin killing, and pay more attention to their environment.

However, he didn't see Zhyrr today. The Tsalal delegation was taken over by another one, who could provide no meaningful answer about his old friend's whereabouts.

The assassins spotted their prey approaching, visibly troubled by his thoughts, and quickly looked around to check for any bystanders. Founding none, they proceeded with their plan...

The Eldest nodded in greeting to the pair of guards waiting at his personal quarters. Even they seemed to be affected by his mood: he had known this too for years, just as he knew any other Oath Taker, and he'd never seen them so nervous. They looked a bit like a pair of strangers, forced to replace well-trained men on a job they had no experience with.
It was over in a few seconds. When the Eldest passed them, both assassins lunged at him, stabbing him with needles so far concealed in their stolen guard uniforms. The old man immediately collapsed in spasms: the poison acted fast. They winced when they heard him gritting his teeth so hard, some of them audibly cracked. One of them leaned down and whispered in his ears: "Elder Symrywin sends his regards!" Then, they closed the door and swam away as quick as they could- they had to be in a safe place when the polyjuice potion weared out, if they wanted to get out of this alive. In their hurry, they had no time to wait and confirm the death of their target, but there was no need: the poison was extremely potent, and they had seen it working on him.

Of course, if they would have waited only few more seconds, they would have noticed how the two pin-pricks stopped bleeding, and healed...

moments later, Eldest's private quarters

Slowly, the Eldest looked around with eyes slowly regaining their sight- well, as much of it as old age has left. Listening intently, he made sure there was no one nearby, then he shakily rose from the floor, then spat the crushed remains of a false tooth. Still feeling the otherworldly taste of phoenix tears in his mouth, he entered a side room filled with air, and opened a chest. There lied some of his newest toys, sent home by Ambassador Zeekh just two days ago. He selected one of the Muggle communication devices, read the short notes strapped to it, then activated it.

same time, Commander's office

The device on Idris's desk suddenly came alive with the distorted voice of the Eldest. "Commander, you hear me?"
He picked it up, activated it, and responded. "Yes, my lord."
"Good. Listen, this is urgent. Are you alone?"
"Yes, Eldest."
"We don't have much time to act. I've been assasinated."

Commander Idris was confused. "You sound very much alive, my lord."
"I am. But Symrywin thinks I'm dead, and I want him to keep thinking that for the time being. Commander, send a guild wizard to my private quarters, I don't care who as long as he took the oaths and can Apparate and cast Geminio. They wanted to make it look natural, let it appear that way."
"It will be done, my lord... anything else I can do for you?"
"Now that you say it, yes. Book another appointment with my dentist for this afternoon, and notify an Obliviator too."

To be continued...

Update #278

Saturday, July 13, 1996 [yes, I messed that up somewhere]
Residence of the Ministry of Magic
Maori Territory
The Minister of Magic winced as another broom made its way out of the sky and landed on the ground in front of his house. Its rider, a forty-something witch, was also carrying a sign: "THROW THE BUM OUT!". She soon made her way into the crowd, most of whom were holding signs.

"I SWARE ALL SIX AND HE CAN'T SWEAR TWO?"

"DEFEAT CORRUPTION WITH AES SEDAI VOWS!"

"BRITAIN FOR HUMANS -- NEED TARGET PRACTICE?"

"HEY, RA, HAMMER HIM!"

"HYPOCRITE!"

"LET'S HEAR IT FOR THE AEN'T SEDAI!"

There were already a good twenty people or so outside, and virtually all of them were saying things highly uncomplimentary of the Minister and his policies. He shook his head and turned to the two Aurors who were in the house with him.

"I can't believe this is happening. Why do they care if I swear the Vows or not? I don't have anything to hide, and I'm just resisting because it sets a bad precedent in the Wizarding community!"

One of the Auror tried to explain. "I think I know what's going on, Minister. Although we both realize that you haven't done anything wrong, the people don't. They figure you're holding out because you're corrupt and are doing creative things like embezzling money behind their backs. It wouldn't be the first time politicians did that, sir."

"But I'm not doing that! How could they possibly think that?"

The second Auror answered this. "You're refusing to uphold the Third Vow, the one that forces the person to follow the laws of the land and its ruler. This can be seen as an evasion, sir, or a stall tactic to try to buy time for you to hide any illegal activities."

The Minister pointed out the window. "One of you go out and tell them! My quarrel is not with the people of New Zealand, it's with Atlantis!"

The Auror shrugged his shoulders. "And why would they believe us? We work for you. For all they know, we're part of your little insider scheme or you're bribing us to support you."

The Minister wrung has hand feverishly. "Have either of you sworn the Oaths?"

The first Auror indicated his colleague. "I'm a Novice and he's an Accepted."

"Good. One of you tell them. Show them that stupid card of yours and explain."

The second Auror shook his head. "It won't work, sir. We could be lying."

"Lying? What -- oh damn! That's the Sixth Vow! And neither of you have sworn it!"
The second Auror nodded. "That's correct, sir. The fact that I have not sworn the Sixth Oath would be obvious if you were to look at my Silver Card."

The Minister was about to say something when the sound of a helicopter suddenly became audible over the crowd. All three men watched as a television news chopper landed on the front yard and disgorged a large platoon of reporters. Within five minutes, they had set up their cameras and had started reporting live from within the crowd. A couple of them interviewed a protester while two others began walking towards the front door.

A few seconds later, the door to the chopper opened again, revealing the Prime Minister. The man did not look happy. The crowd immediately started cheering and chanting "THROW THE BUM OUT!" The woman with the sign was waving it around like one of the revolutionaries storming the Bastille.

The Auror winced and spoke softly to the Minister of Magic. "Sir, I must warn you that technically, you fall under his jurisdiction now that the Statute of Secrecy has been revoked. This means that if he orders your arrest or dismissal, both Steve and I must comply and enforce it. The Third Vow demands it, sir. He exemplifies the laws of the land. If I were you, sir, I would swear those two Vows as soon as you can. I will be more than willing to officiate."

The Minister hesitated for a moment. Finally, his shoulders slumped. "I think you're right, Barry. I think you're right. Let's do it when the Prime Minister comes in so he can be a witness."

---------------------

The Burrow
Great Britain

---------------------

Harry heard Dudley's shriek from the attic and had a awful suspicion what had happened. Dropping his book, he headed upstairs to see Dudley with an ashen look on his face. Harry made a mental note to scream at George when he got a chance.

He grabbed Dudley, who was shaking. "Dudley! What's wrong!"

"There's a ghost up in the attic! He tried to eat me!"

Harry shook Dudley to try to bring him to his senses. "For one thing, it's a ghoul, not a ghost. Second, it's harmless. My guess is that he was as scared of you as you were -- he's never seen you before. Let me guess -- did George let you up there?"

Dudley nodded. "Yes. How do you know?"

Harry swore. "Be very wary of George. He runs a joke shop, after all. He is notorious for playing pranks on people. Whatever you do, DO NOT EAT ANYTHING HE ASKS YOU TO TRY."

Dudley drew a deep breath. "I'll try to remember that. I sure hope he's not picking on me because I'm a Muggle! Bloody hell, from what you've been telling me I shouldn't be able to see those monsters!"

Harry's retort was cut short when something occurred to him. Looking at Dudley curiously, he remarked, "You know, Dudley, you have a point. You shouldn't be able to see those monsters. Come to think of it, you shouldn't have been able to see that dementor last August."

Dudley shivered. "Does that mean that the monsters have marked me out as a target?"
Harry grunted impatiently. "No, Dudley. These ghouls and ghosts won't harm you, and the only reason the dementor attacked you was because Voldemort was controlling it and had sent it after me. As far as what it means...Dudley, I don't know. I honestly don't know. Something here doesn't make sense. You're only the second person I know who is able to see magical creatures without being able to cast spells."

Dudley's eyebrows shot up. "Really? Who was the first?"

"Argus Filch, a staff member at Hogwarts."

Dudley stared at Harry quizzically. "What would a Muggle be doing at Hogwarts? How did he get in?"

Harry chuckled. "He apparently is very good at faking it, using something called Kwikspell. However, back to the topic at hand. I think we should tell the wizards about this, Dudley, and possibly the Muggle biologists. It's obvious you're not a pure Muggle, and it's obvious you're not a wizard. Furthermore, you've got Wizarding relatives: an aunt and a cousin. Would you be willing to consent to an examination?"


Harry paused a minute to think. Finally, he shook his head. "I don't know, Dudley. I honestly don't know. Hopefully, we'll be able to find out."

To be continued...

------------------

Update #278.5

------------------

Saturday, July 13, 1996 [let's just pretend Friday 12 was the previous update]

A most definitely secret room in the Government District of Roqteratl City-State of Roqteratl

------------------

In a small, very secret room, the most influential government officials of the city-state have gathered. The Eldest, his aide, the Commander, leaders of the wizard guides, and a few others- each and every one of them oath takers, no one else could be trusted at that point.

The Eldest looked around. "Good, everyone's here. Let's get this started. Reports to me, now!"

Commander Idris began: "As the law dictates, the city has been quarantined and a news blackout issued, until the investigation of your apparent demise and the election of your successor is complete, my lord. As for armed forces, we have 157 armed walkers with trained drivers, along with 4219 normal units, already mobilised."

"Good, then we have some time to cover this up, without the Muggles noticing. Senja, tell me about politics."

"Our succession plans so far seem good. Houses Snurbevon, Xukwudiz, Duskryn and Suinrev are behind us, with your nephew, Ritva and my mother ready to step down and support me as permanent Eldest. It'd be up to the Minor Houses...so far, we have 2 for sure. But our scheme is pretty well-known, they must be aware of it. If I were Symrywin, I'd rally them with some good agenda, probably come up with some dirt on your successor, and hope the other 3 Great Houses stand behind..."
me. Problem is, I have no idea what they'll come up with, sir."

"They must have found something about you, without something solid their plan would fall apart. It means I must return, which in turn means I must accuse them of assasination and conspiracy... that could easily be a disaster that ruins our public image. How is the investigation going?"

A wizard answered: "We have found the bodies of the two guards, and the Tsalal Ambassador." The Eldest bowed his head - he had feared this, even expected this, but it still hurt. With a slightly croaking voice, he asked: "How did he die?"

"His neck was broken. He died instantly, without pain. It looks like a freak accident, just like one of the guards, but in light of the recent events, I say these are highly suspicious. And the other guard died the same way as you almost did- looks like violent spasms, and a heart attack. We've found a very small injury and some traces of some quickly decomposing poison, but only because you told us where to look."

The Eldest was thinking fast. "That would work fine for us. There's already a quarantine, after all..."

Another wizard interrupted: "There is one more thing you should know. The dead guards are not the ones who attacked you. They died in places where they couldn't have realistically been if they had been the assassins."

"So, not Imperio and oath removal, then. Any idea how they did it?"

"We have reasons to suspect that House Zace's private alchemists have managed to make a merpeople version of the Polyjuice Potion. It's the most probable explanation."

The Eldest thought it over. "It will make this mess a bit more complicated. Listen, our plan is...

To be continued...

-------------
Update #279
-------------
Monday, July 15, 1996
Career Placement Office
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Cambridge, MA
United States of America

Jason Morgenstern swore as he looked through the list of job openings. The number of positions had dwindled yet again, and most of those which remained in the Boston area were looking for people with master's degrees or PhD's.

He was really hoping he wouldn't have to move. Yet he was worried he wouldn't have much of a choice. He had a LOT of student loans to pay off, and he had just started kicking himself for not joining ROTC before realizing that he'd have likely been sent off to Korea as soon as he graduated in early June.

He had made some calls to several biology firms in the Boston area. Although most of them agreed he was a good candidate, they couldn't afford to hire anyone right now -- or they were forced to offer him a disturbingly low salary. Guinevere was telling him that he would likely do well to accept one
of those positions -- several of his friends had lost their jobs and were taking temporary positions as
gardeners and lifeguards for the time being.

He had asked Guinevere if she could use her magic to help him. She had shaken her head, however.
It wouldn't be appropriate for her to interfere with the job selection process, and trying to brainwash
people into accepting a particular candidate involved use of the forbidden Imperius curse. Besides, he
had a better chance of getting a position than most other new graduates. He went to MIT, one of the
best schools in the nation. Others weren't as lucky: people who went to community colleges, two
year colleges, Harv --

All thoughts of Harvey Mudd college suddenly vanished from his mind as the one of the people
running the Career Placement Office tacked a new list of positions onto the wall. He walked over
there to take a look.

At first, he wasn't impressed. Apparently they were positions at a firm in South Carolina known as
Harold-Green Pharmaceutical Corporation. They involved working with an experimental substance
which was reputed to cure all sorts of diseases and possibly retard aging as well. Jason's eyes
widened when he realized the potential of such a drug. If this drug did what it claimed, it would
revolutionize the medical industry.

His eyes widened at the proposed salary: over $100,000/year for a new hire. Where on earth had
they gotten all that money from? Had they stumbled across a gold mine or something like that? A
position like this would very likely warrant relocation to Charleston.

He looked down the list of qualifications for the job. He had most of them, but not all. Still, it didn't
hurt to try, and as Guinevere said an MIT degree was likely more valuable than one from a lesser
school. He dropped his resume into the envelope underneath the job postings and continued his
rounds through the room.

If all else fails, he could try going to grad school. That witch from Russian House was returning to
MIT in September for two purposes: to continue grad school in normal engineering studies and to
serve as the first Course 19 professor. He was reluctant to add any more debt to his record. However,
getting a Master's or PhD would likely help him stall for time until the economy turned around.

--------
Syrdani Council Chamber
Syrdan

Travis Radner shook his head. "Chancellors, I'm afraid I've come for an unpleasant reason. We have
received intelligence that four of our men are being held hostage on Five Tree Plantation, owned by
the late Altri. Supposedly his widow is now running it."

Ortelu grimaced. "Oh boy. I was afraid of this. I take it your Muggle president isn't happy about
this?"

"Indeed, Chancellor, he is not. I regret that I have been ordered to deliver an ultimatum from our
president."

All three chancellors gasped, and Siatnan put her hands to her mouth. "An ultimatum? Surely you
aren't going to attack us! We'd crush you, as we've got more wizards than your entire nation likely
has!"

"No, Chancellor. The terms are these. If you don't return our men and begin reforming your society
in a manner which leads to the emancipation of your slaves by the end of 2000, President Clinton will have no choice but to reveal your existence, and your lifestyle, to the rest of the Muggle world. Be advised that slavery of any sort is considered a crime against humanity in the rest of the Muggle world and entire coalitions of nations have been formed to liberate people held in thrall. Virtually the entire Muggle world will be allied against you, including nations from both sides of the Atlantic."

There was a long silence. Finally, Vixar swore. "I'd have recommended extraditing Altri for war crimes and throwing him under the hooves of the chariot, but that's impossible because he's dead."

Radner nodded. "Correct. And from what I've been told, his wife and son treat the slaves much more humanely than Altri did. They seem actually quite progressive for Syrdani. They cannot be made to suffer any more than they already have from the loss of their husband and father. Mrs. Altri's actions also show that a society where the slaves are treated fairly may actually work."

Radner drew a deep breath before continuing. "Ladies and gentleman, from what I've heard of your society this is not insurmountable. If you were to pay your Muggles and allow them to improve their lot somewhat it would go a long way towards reducing their hardship. Muggles are people as well, after all. They have feelings and can be hurt. Furthermore, it is well-known that happy workers perform better. Your productivity may actually increase if you emancipate your slaves, and the money saved can improve both Wizarding and Muggle lives even further."

He paused one last time. "Your history started out as a feudal state, where the Muggles worked for the wizards in exchange for magical services. Over the years, the wizards grew corrupt and began relegating the Muggles to serf status and then slaves. Why not go back to what your founders intended? They probably knew what they were talking about, Chancellors."

Radner looked at the chancellors sympathetically. "You have one week to make up your mind. If you do choose to start reforms, the United States and its allied nations will do everything in their power to assist you with this difficult transition. Be advised, however, that the American civilians will not hear about it. They do not know about your society, and if you accept our demands they will never know."

-----------------------

Southern Syrdan
-----------------------

The three veela made sure that no one was around. Satisfied that they were alone, they deactivated their Disillusionment Charms and transformed out of their harpy forms. It had taken them a while to fly over there, but they'd done it.

The leader of the group called her two colleagues over to her and handed out sets of Syrdani clothing. "All right, Nicole. You're in charge of trying to figure out if there are any abolitionist leaders among the wizards here. Allie, you put your Disillusionment Charm back on and see if there are any Muggles who want assistance. Whatever you do, do not do anything rash unless I tell you. For all we know, the government will agree to the United States's demands and we won't have to fight anyone. Is that understood?"

Both women nodded. "Yes, Commander."

"Good. Now move!"

To be continued...
The Gnawing Grindylow tavern was a quality establishment, usually frequented by the elite of the underwater city-state, both merpeople and air-breathers. The current city-wide quarantine made wonders to consumption: plenty of rich merchants, purses bulging with freshly-made profit, had to spend a few more days in the city.

Other affected people didn't spend their extra time in Roqteratl nearly as comfortable. The gang of goblins, as of Saturday convicted for kidnapping, attempted murder, complicity in murder, unlicensed wand manufacture and possession had spent these days in small cells, waiting for extradition to international wizarding authorities (in accordance with international treaties dealing with magical criminals who are not Roqteratl citizens...a treaty that cost the city some money, but saved it the trouble of maintaining a wizard prison on their own).

Yet another group was those who profited from the misery of the previously mentioned individuals. To be fair, they had plenty of reasons to celebrate the verdict, and with Myrtille Trépanier's full salary paid by her former employer (who sadly acknowledged that the Veela will return to her homeland ASAP) and Samanar "yes, I admit, I was a smuggler, but I was pardoned, get over it" Naztheros's various questionable incomes effectively washed clear by the jury, they had more than enough money to do so with style.

"So, Myrtille, what will you do when the quarantine is over? You still so adamant about returning to Nestor?" The Veela had to admit, Sam looked quite handsome in formal wear. It might have had something to do with the man's noble upbringing - the contrast with his usual roguish image was quite striking...although thinking about it, he did always behave as a gentleman.

"Unfortunately, yes. I've had enough of it for a while, and besides, I don't know what would I do here for a living, because I sure won't ever again step on a stage. With the money I've made here, I'll have enough time back home to continue my studies and find a decent job." Though the wizard was elegant, his companion stole the spotlight without doubt. To be fair, she helped Samanar to keep some of his focus- while her evening dress had a neckline worthy of attention (as if a Veela wouldn't be attractive in any given clothing), she also had a necklace of runes, reading, as the wizard discovered with some shame, "my eyes are up there!"

"But won't you miss any of it? I've never been to Nestor, but I'm sure you can find some good things here, and only here. I mean, look at me. I'm from another land, and I've got more than my fair share of trouble here, but still, I'd rather live here than anywhere else."

"I'd be glad if you'd visit me sometimes, then I'd see some of those things you mention."

"Pardon me?" came the startled answer from the wizard.

Myrtille blushed. "I meant your kindness, courage, and helpfulness. Never I thought I'll be fighting side by side with a Syrdani."

"What about side by side with a friend?"
"Yeah, I could do that."

----------------------
Lesser Council Chamber
----------------------

Elder Symrywin was annoyed. Well, actually, he advanced past annoyed and into furious sometimes yesterday. "What do you mean you can't lift the quarantine! You had days to investigate the old man's death, and nothing to show that indicates it wasn't natural! I demand that you cease this nonsense so we can get started with the election NOW!"

The Healer Guide witch was disturbingly calm: "You cannot order me to do anything yet, Elder. I obey the law of this city, and only the law of this city. We have reasons to believe the recent deaths of our Eldest, his guards, and the Tsalal ambassador were not simple accidents. Now, if you allow me, I'll continue asking my questions..."

If anyone noticed the Muggle surveillance devices in the room, they did not recognise them.

----------------------
secret room, somewhere close
----------------------

The Eldest was sitting in a chair, watching the monitors displaying the events in and near the Council. Within arm's reach, a radio lay on the table. He slowly picked it up.

"Commander Idris...the time has come. Initiate contingency protocol No.24!"
"It will be done, my lord."

----------------------
Lesser Council Chamber
----------------------

The shouting of the disputants was getting even louder, Elder Symrywin noticed. Funny, he didn't know mermish shouting can generate such vibrations... the main doors swung open, as dozens of walkers, equipped with tridents and huge crossbows (or were those siege ballistae?) marched in the chamber. At the same time, guards wearing the uniform of the Oath Taker elite poured in from every secondary door.

Stunned, Symrywin looked around in the chamber. His co-conspirators, with the exception of Elder Zace, currently in the restroom, were apparently equally shocked, and so were most of the other merpeople. The guild wizards, however, were disturbingly calm, and Senja was even grinning. "The oath takers are in this... but how? Those speculations about the Eldest finding a way to cheat the oaths are just rumors that I started, aren't they?" When he spoke, he was a lot more confident.

"What is the meaning of this? How dare you disturb the council! I demand explanations, now!"

One of the machines partially retracted it's helmet, allowing the driver, Commander Idris, to be seen. "By orders of The Eldest, you are under arrest, Elder Symrywin. You and your co-conspirators are exposed, your Houses are being pacified as we speak."
"This is nonsense! You don't have the right to do this, none of you do! Only the Eldest of the city can give such orders, and only with enough proof, and you have neither!" The next voice, however, turned his blood into ice.

"On the contrary, he has plenty of both." Said the Eldest, entering the chamber between the walkers.

"You!" Stared Symrywin. "You..."
"Me. Me, me, me..." Then, the same voice came from the side entrance leading to the restrooms: "Me too!"

Everyone gasped and turned towards the second Eldest, then back to the first. Elder Symrywin found his voice first. "Imposters! You are not real, either of you! You just use Zace's potion to masquerade as our late leader! I can't even believe the oath takers could be fooled by such idiots! I mean, two of you at once?"

The first Eldest answered. "Thank you for confirming that you knew that potion works, you've made our work so much easier. That me over there is actually Elder Zace, demonstrating his House's invention, and his loyalty to me and Roqteratl. He will revert to his normal shape in the next ten minutes...oh, and just that you know, he gave you all up to save his House."

The traitor turned to his betrayer. "You spineless idiot, you doomed us all!" The fake Eldest shrugged. "Nothing personal, it's just business."

The real one said: "Your associates have left you alone, your House's forces are hopelessly cornered by city soldiers, and we have plenty of evidence against you in all three murders and the attempted one. It's checkmate, Symrywin. The only thing you can still do is damage control. There are several ways things can go now. For Atlantis, they are all the same. That means, I can do them all I want. For you and your House, it's life or death. You choose."

Elder Symrywin's voice was weak, defeated, broken. "Tell me the choices."

"All the world will know is there was an outbreak of mass hallucinations and a few deaths, because someone accidentally released a toxin in the waters of the government district. If your House is disbanded, with you and everyone who knew about your plot taking the oaths, the outbreak was limited to the above mentioned fatalities and I don't care where the rest of your people go. The city will be strengthened, everyone will live, you only lose your ambitions."

"You'll order our death if we resist, won't you?"

"Your words, not mine. What's your choice?"

To be continued...

-------------
Update #280
-------------
Monday, July 15, 1996
Harold-Green Pharmaceutical Corporation
Charleston, SC
United States of America
-------------
Daniel Green stood at the podium with the movie screen behind him. This was going to be his
moment, the culmination of everything he had hoped to gain when he had co-founded Harold-Green Pharmaceutical Corporation. He had hoped to do two things: make a lot of money and save a lot of lives. Now, thanks to Wizard Hendrickson and the Philosopher's Stone, he was about to do both.

Hendrickson had already demonstrated that he would be able to make money in more ways than one. The Stone had successfully managed to transmute mercury and lead into gold, and Green had promptly bought up all of the leaded pipes and old-fashioned thermometers he could get his hands on "for sanitary purposes". After careful experimentation, the staff had determined that three isotopes were safe for transmutation into gold: Hg-198, Hg-199, and Pb-204. Other isotopes with at least 79 protons and at least 118 neutrons would work, except that they would produce radioactive byproducts which could jeopardize the health of the operator.

It was fairly obvious that the Stone served as an energy source for guided nuclear fission. The three reactions were pasted on the wall in Green's office:

\[
Pb-204 \rightarrow Au-197 + Li-7 \\
Hg-199 \rightarrow Au-197 + H-2 \\
Hg-198 \rightarrow Au-197 + H-1
\]

The initial attempt to turn lead into gold had used a natural mixture of isotopes, of which Pb-204 was in the minority. This had produced various radioactive isotopes of lithium which had started Geiger counters crackling.

Green couldn't help but admit that Dr. Flamel would have made a very good experimental chemist even by modern standards. Not only did he first describe radioactivity, albeit not knowing what it was (blaming radiation poisoning issues on angering Christ), he developed a method for using fractional distillation for separating out the isotopes of mercury so that the lightest -- and safest -- isotopes would float to the top of the liquid! Furthermore, he had noticed that the hydrogen released during the reaction could be ignited by a candle flame and had warned people to extinguish all flames before turning mercury into gold! The ancient wizard's record-keeping and log books had a professional level of detail, more than enough for Hendrickson to develop his own Stone.

There had been a brief hiccup when Hendrickson had had second thoughts over giving mortals the ability to achieve eternal life. Green had taken care of that pretty quickly, however, by telling him that he could keep 25% of the gold he produced with the Stone. Realizing that the gold would give him a much higher salary than anything else, the mercenary wizard agreed to continue working for Harold-Green.

Hendrickson had just reported that everything was set up in the laboratory. Everyone agreed that it would be unwise to bring the Stone or the Elixir out in the open for the demonstration, as it would be too easy for competitors or reporters to steal it or damage it. The experiment would be similar to the first one done, but with one key difference: instead of using the Stone a cure a sick rat, they were going to use the Stone to cure someone with cancer. Several cancer patients had been invited to the press conference, and one of them would be chosen at random to receive the treatment. Green didn't know what types of cancer would be represented in the audience, which ensured that Hendrickson didn't know in advance what type of treatment was necessary for the chosen patient. The Stone would have to determine the nature of the disease and provide the correct treatment.

Green drew a deep breath, adjusted his tie, and began. "Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, and thank you for coming to this press conference. My name is Mr. Daniel-Green, co-founder and CEO of Harold-Green Pharmaceutical Corporation. To my right is Lou Harold, co-founder and CFO. We've called this press conference to announce a new compound we've developed which will
revolutionize medicine as we know it.

"For hundreds of years, perhaps even thousands, legends existed of the Elixir of Life, a nutrient or fluid which had the ability to heal injuries, cure disease, and possibly retard or even stop aging. Chemists, and some case even wizards, searched for it for centuries and made very little progress.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the search is over. Now, thanks to the combination of magic and technology, we have developed the tool necessary for creating the Elixir of Life. Ladies and gentlemen, meet the Philosopher's Stone."

Green reached into his pocket and brought out the Geminio'ed copy of the Stone. Although bereft of its healing abilities as a simple duplicate, it still looked pretty impressive. It's a ruby the size of a golf ball, he thought. Hell, it's impressive.

People started chattering like crazy and began taking photographs. Several of the cancer patients started walking up to try to get their hands on it, but he told everyone to sit back down. "Actually, this is not the actual Stone. This is a duplicate, one which is inert and does not have any curative properties. The original one is in the lab, where our resident wizard, David Hendrickson, will perform a demonstration. If you would turn your attention to the movie screen behind me, you will be able to see the demonstration in real time."

He turned the lights off and activated the TV projector. Seconds later, Hendrickson's image appeared on the viewscreen in a rather cluttered lab filled with beakers and chemicals. In one hand was a red object which was obviously the original Stone. In the other hand was a vial filled with a glowing white liquid.

Hendrickson bowed to the camera. "Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I'm David Hendrickson, and I'm a wizard working for Harold-Green. When I was told about the Philosopher's Stone project, I signed up, hoping to see what I could do to improve the lives of people around the world."

Green chuckled to himself, though kept his face carefully impassive. By "people around the world" he probably meant himself and the bosses.

Hendrickson continued. "We did extensive research and traveled all around the world to try to get components and information."

Translation: we went to England and stole stuff from Flamel.

"It was a long and dangerous journey, and at several times our lives were in jeopardy. Nevertheless, it paid off, and now it's time to show everyone what we've done. In my right hand here is the Philosopher's Stone. I'll bring it closer to the camera so you can get a better view. In my other hand is the Elixir of Life, an exciting medical compound which can be created using the Stone. It's in this beaker over here."

He brought the beaker and Stone close to the camera so everyone could see.

"We could tell you how we did it, but unfortunately that wouldn't be a good idea for business so we'll have to hold off on that for now. Suffice it to say, however, that one needs a wizard, and quite possibly a well-equipped chemical lab, to get the job done. I'm a wizard, and here's the lab.

"Needless to say, extravagant claims like this require confirmation. To that end, I'm going to draw a raffle ticket out of this bucket. Several cancer patients have been invited to this session, and each of
them has been given a ticket. We at Harold-Green do not know which type of cancer they have, and as a result have not been able to tell the Stone what exactly it must do. I will draw a number out of the bucket. Whoever has that number should stand up and let us escort him or her to the laboratory for treatment."

The patient turned out to be a man named Bobby Fry. Fry started to explain what he had but Green shushed him up to ensure that Hendrickson had no knowledge of what exactly needed to be done. Shaking Fry's hand and wishing him luck, he escorted the patient over to the laboratory. A couple of minutes later, he appeared on the video camera as Green returned to the press room.

Hendrickson shook Fry's hand. "Welcome. How are you feeling?"

Fry chuckled nervously. "Excited, nervous, and hopeful."

"How bad is your condition?"

Fry looked a bit embarrassed. "I'm probably going to lose body parts if this doesn't work."

Hendrickson blanched a little but composed himself. "Don't worry, Mr. Fry, this should work. Would you be so kind as to drink the contents of this beaker?"

Fry looked at it warily. "It's glowing like mad. Don't tell me it's radioactive?"

Hendrickson shook his head. "No, Mr. Fry, it's not. I can't give you any more details as to what is in it, but it's not radioactive. First things first, however. Note that I am not carrying a wand and that the beaker is perfectly sealed. The Elixir has been prepared without knowledge of your condition, and I will not be tampering with it the rest of the way. Now that it's beyond our control, can you explain what you have?"

"Testicular cancer."

Hendrickson bit his lip, and Green drew a deep breath. What was supposed to happen next was that Hendrickson was supposed to take a biopsy from that area to get a "before" sample. It didn't dawn on him that the patient would have to take his pants off in the middle of a press conference. Nevertheless, everyone consented to continue with the operation. Most of the people in the audience turned their backs as the doctors examined Fry and brought the resulting samples out into the press room, where they were placed in a bin marked "BEFORE".

Once the samples were safely out of Hendrickson's reach, he asked Fry to drink the contents of the beaker. Fry took a sip, and his eyes widened. Grinning, he drank down the whole thing and licked his lips.

Hendrickson noticed the reaction and had to ask. "What does it taste like?"

Fry laughed. "Chocolate malt, believe it or not. It tastes great!"

Hendrickson smiled. "I'm not surprised. If it's good for you, your body will like it. While we wait for the Elixir to do its stuff, let's head back to the press room for the impartial panel of doctors up there to get a reading on how bad your condition is. What was your last number, Mr. Fry?"

"38.5."
"Let's see if this is consistent. Dan, if you would be so good as to tell us when you're done?"

A few minutes went by as the doctors did their analysis. Finally, the number came back. 37.9.

Hendrickson nodded when the number came back. "37.9. That's way too high, naturally. Anything above 5 is bad. Let's see if we can do something about that. Can we take another sample now?"

Everyone turned their backs again as the patient provided another sample. The sample was brought back and placed in a bin labeled "AFTER".

The doctors began working on the second sample as Hendrickson and Fry emerged into the press room with empty hands. The expression on the doctors' faces answered all of their questions: shock and awe across the board.

Green had to prompt the doctors three times to get a response. Eventually, one of them whispered the answer.

"6.4."

The room exploded. People started asking questions by the dozen, and the queries blended into an incomprehensible din. People were patting Fry on the back and offering congratulations all around.

Green looked at Hendrickson and winked. Now the fun really began.

To be continued...
Albus Dumbledore and Nicholas Flamel looked at the Muggle video recording in silence for several moments. Finally, the looked at each other and spoke simultaneously.

"SHIT!"

Flamel slammed his fist against the table. "This is not good. NOT GOOD! I didn't think they'd be able to pull it off even with the diary. I mean, they'd have to translate the old French and --"

Dumbledore tried to cut in. "Nicholas, calm down --"

Flamel grabbed his wand and blasted the television screen with a curse. "CALM DOWN? I sacrificed my own Stone to prevent it from getting into Voldemort's hands. For all we know, there's someone else out here who's just waiting to pounce on these fellows and steal the Stone. For all we know, some Muggle can --"

Dumbledore had to shout to be heard. "NICHOLAS! Screaming about it is not going to solve the problem! We've got contingency plans for this, Nicholas! We've got to think this through!"

Flamel threw his hands up in the air. "And what do you propose that we do? Making me Minister of Magic would have been a good idea except for those damn Aes Sedai oaths Britain for Humans forced onto all future British Ministers of Magic! What were you THINKING, Albus? If I take over now, I'd have to swear to tell the truth, and all they'd have to do is ask me when I was born!"

Dumbledore put his head in his hands. "All right, I'll admit that was a mistake on my part. However, to be honest protecting the rest of the British Wizarding community from Isabel Miller is a high priority, and I honestly didn't believe they'd get the Stone out this fast, if at all. You do have a point, however. I'm going to have to leave office, certainly, but we're going to have to put someone else in as Minister of Magic who won't be able to do any more damage if he's forced to tell the truth --"

Flamel wrung his hands in frustration. "And who would that be? You've got information linking me to the Stone all over Chocolate Frog cards! Everyone knows that I've made the Stone!"

Dumbledore thought for a moment. "All right, Nicholas, let's think about this. We're going to have to improvise, and do so very quickly. For one thing, we're going to have to scrap the idea of telling everyone that the Stone doesn't work and that Harold-Green faked it. We've both seen the video, and it's fairly obvious that they've done an excellent test of the Stone. It leaves no room for tampering or error, and it seems to be scientifically sound."

Flamel snorted. "Unless that Fry guy was a plant and they deliberately drew his number. For all we
know, that BEFORE sample was taken months before he started chemotherapy --"

Dumbledore shook his head. "I don't think so, Nicholas. You saw the expression on Hendrickson's face when he heard the man had testicular cancer. It was obvious they hadn't expected their patient to have the tumor in somewhere so...adult. My guess is that they planned to take the biopsy then and there from an arm, a leg, or whatever. They never thought that they'd have to worry about it being rated Mature. As it was, they requested that people turn their backs."

"Can we say they did something creative when everyone's backs were turned?"

"No, Nicholas. The camera was running the whole time, and it showed the wizards taking the samples. There was no fakery. Furthermore, there's a second part of the video. In it, the doctors who processed the two samples do some DNA testing and confirm that both (a) are from Fry, and (b) were taken within 15 minutes of each other. Nicholas, they have a very strong case, and they know it. Furthermore, realize that this has made the news all over the medical community. I highly doubt that they would risk a major scandal by announcing something they couldn't back up -- doing so would almost certainly discredit the company and put it out of business."

Nicholas face suddenly reddened even further. "There's more -- it just occurred to me. You know how people were wondering where this company got all its money from? Their Website indicates that they've been collecting lead and mercury. Lead and mercury, Albus. Those are the two elements which have isotopes which can safely be turned into gold. If they've been turning them into gold and selling that --"

Dumbledore winced. "Oh dear. I hadn't thought of that. It sounds like they've figured out the Stone's other abilities as well. I take it that we should assume that they know about the age retardation."

Flamel snorted. "Undoubtedly. I waxed all over it in the damn diary. I remember that even thought it was 600 years ago. We can deny it, at which point they shove that book in our faces! Shit -- Albus, you CAN'T deny it! Oh shit, we've got a problem...do they know you're an Aes Sedai now?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "I don't know, Nicholas. I don't know. But if they do...

Nicholas looked at him, hard. "Albus, let me do the talking here. We can't risk you being incapable of lying here. If you want, you can help me with my speech. I've got an idea."

-------------

Mr. Green smiled evilly as Dr. Flamel appeared on the monitor. Harold-Green was going to have fun here, he thought.

"Well, Dr. Flamel. What a pleasant surprise. How can I help you?"

Flamel looked furious. "I know exactly how you can help me, Mr. Green. You can help me by destroying that Stone and giving me back my damn notes. You obviously broke into my place and copied my diary, and it's also obvious that you realized I destroyed the Stone to prevent it from falling into Voldemort's hands. For humanity's sake, Green, give it up. Our species is not mature enough to deserve the Stone! Hell, we nearly destroyed ourselves when one Dark wizard decided to make a stink!"

Green chuckled. "You seriously think that the human race doesn't deserve cures for deadly diseases like cancer?"

"Cures for cancer, I'll give you. Creating gold and prolonging life indefinitely? No. If you seriously
intend to keep the Stone, keep it to curing illnesses and that's it."

There was an audible gasp in the room, and Green grinned. I've got him, he thought. Flamel had no way to know that there were still reporters in the room as the television cameras were all pointed directly at him.

He tried to maintain his composure. "You have a problem with prolonging life indefinitely, Dr. Flamel?"

Flamel nodded. "Absolutely, Mr. Green. I've given this a lot of thought over the past few years and have reached that inescapable conclusion."

Green then hit him with the coup de grace. "Dr. Flamel, would you be so kind as to tell me how your Minister of Magic manages to look so good at age 114?"

There was another gasp from the audience, and the first hints of fear appeared on Flamel's face. Nevertheless, the ancient wizard had a response ready. "Wizards generally live longer than Muggles. That's a well-known fact."

"Really? Samuel supposedly died around age 60."

Green could barely avoid gloating as Flamel dug himself in deeper. "Those were in ancient days, Mr. Green. You were lucky to hit 40 most of the time then."

Green grunted. "You're sure that your friendship with Dumbledore hasn't influenced that at all?"

Flamel blinked. "What? I -- wait a minute. You think I -- hell no! Dumbledore was the one who told me to destroy it in the first place! Ask him, he's an Aes Sedai! He'll say I've never helped him out with the Stone!"

Green shrugged and reached into his briefcase for the photographs from Flamel's school. "Dumbledore's an Aes Sedai? All Six Vows? Good to know. I'll ask him that, and while I'm there I'll ask him to confirm your date of birth."

The blood drained from Flamel's face as Green showed Flamel the old pictures. Licking his lips nervously, Flamel pointed at the pictures. "What do you have the pictures of my father and grandfather for?"

"Because I find it rather curious that they look a lot like you."

Flamel shrugged. "Children look like their parents. Big deal."

Green winked. "An exact copy? I highly doubt it, especially across three generations."

The people in the room with Green were starting to murmur excitedly among themselves. Apparently Flamel picked up the noise, and the old wizard's mood darkened even further.

Flamel finally got fed up. "Give me the diary, Green. You can keep the Stone if you want. Just give me the diary."

Green reached into his briefcase and brought out a copy of the diary -- there were at least four of them now in various secure places in Harold-Green's headquarters. "I've got a lot of old books in my
possession, Dr. Flamel. Is this the book you're referring to?"

Flamel nodded. "Yes. That's my diary. Tell me where you are so I can get it."

Green nodded. "I will. However, I'm kind of curious about some of the entries. Let's try one of the early ones over here..."

He opened the book near the beginning. Flamel suddenly screamed when he realized what Green was going to do. "STOP!"

Green did what he could to translate the old French. "June 6, 1357. Did research on --"

The entire room exploded. People started shouting incoherently and jumping into the field of view. No fewer than six people tried asking Flamel questions simultaneously.

Flamel seemed to be in shock as Green handed over the diary to the reporters. Although they wouldn't be able to read the contents because of the 14th-century French, they'd recognize the numbers and expressions like MCCCLVII. "No, NO!"

Green chuckled. "Well, Dr. Flamel. It seems that your text about the Philosopher's Stone not working may have been in error after all."

To be continued...

-------------

Update #281.3
-------------

Monday, July 15, 1996
Grand Mugwump's Office
Atlantis

Dagher's secretary barely had time to announce the two visitors when the two wizards Apparated into the room. Travis Radner's face looked absolutely horrified, and Dumbledore's was deeply disturbed.

The new Grand Mugwump had a bad feeling about this. Had Voldemort come back? Had America for Humans done something rash? It occurred to him that although many of the high-level wizards had sworn at least Novice-level oaths, no one had thought of asking the World for Humans representatives to do the same thing. If World for Humans intended to turn upon the wizards after shackling them with the Six Vows...

He had seriously considered asking the Muggles to swear Unbreakable Vows as well. However, the realization that Unbreakable Vows could work on Muggles could have devastating repercussions in world politics. Virtually every nation's secrets could be exposed by the fact that full Aes Sedai couldn't lie. Dagher was starting to have second thought about agreeing to that fantasy writer's oaths to begin with.

He grunted and turned to the two men. "Good evening, gentlemen. I take it something has happened which you don't particularly like? Let me guess -- Britain for Humans isn't standing by their agreement and have just started attacking us when we've shackled ourselves to the Six Vows."

Dumbledore shook his head. "No, Grand Mugwump. It's worse. Much worse."
Dagher didn't like the sound of this. "Worse than defenseless attacks on wizards? What's going on, Dumbledore? Don't tell me Voldemort came back. I thought he was dead! Did he have a Horcrux left over that we didn't know about and fake his death?"

Radner answered this. "It's not Voldemort, sir. It's worse than even that, I'm afraid. Unless we contain this immediately, the entire Muggle world is going to go berserk."

Dagher gaped at him. "Worse even than Voldemort coming back? Merlin's beard, what the hell is going on here? Did one of you do something to Syrdan? The situation in the Ukraine still appears to be stable, though we've still got a hell of a lot of Ukrainians trying to get into the Atlantis lottery. I'm still not entirely sure why Ndukaku has us at DEFCON 3 with the Ukraine as the flashpoint."

Radner shook his head. "It's not Syrdan, sir, though to be honest we're trying to force the Syrdani to cave in by threatening to expose them and their peculiarities to the Muggles."

Dagher whistled. "Clever idea, Mr. Dagher. I don't see how they can fight that -- it's too much of a risk. All right, gentlemen, what's going on?"

Both visitors spoke in unison. "The Muggles have the Philosopher's Stone."

Dagher blinked. "Come again?"

Dumbledore explained. "You may recall, Heydar, that a few months ago someone broke into Nicholas Flamel's house and stole the instructions for creating the Stone."

Dagher scratched his head. "I didn't --"

Radner slapped the palm of his hand against his forehead. "Albus, you spoke with Dialonis, not Dagher. Did Dialonis tell you about this?"

Dagher shook his head. "It must have been lower priority than the immediate aftermath of Judgment Day."

"I see. Well, someone broke into Nicholas Flamel's house and stole the instructions for creating the Stone. The thief was apparently hired by Harold-Green Pharmaceutical Corporation, based in Charleston, South Carolina. That was bad enough. However, things got worse, much worse. They managed to get their hands on a wizard, an alchemist named David Hendrickson."

Dagher reeled for a moment. "You mean to tell me that a Muggle medical company actually HAS a Stone? And they're planning on SELLING the Elixir of Life?"

Dumbledore reached into his pocket and brought out a Muggle recording device. "It's even worse than that. Harold-Green held a press conference to introduce the Stone and show how it can be used to cure cancer. They treated someone right in their labs."

Dagher grunted. "So the Muggles have a cure for cancer. What's wrong with that? If anything, that's overdue."

Radner gritted his teeth. "Daniel Green showed Flamel the diary, and Flamel acknowledged it was his. Then he promptly showed everyone that one of the entries was from 1357."

Dagher's blood drained from his face. "You're telling me that the Muggles have proof Flamel's been
alive for over 600 years?"

Dumbledore nodded. "I'm afraid so, Heydar. What's more, it's starting to get some news coverage and is on the verge of getting onto the Internet. Here, sir. Just watch this."

The three men watched the Harold-Green press conference together. When the recording ended, Dagher nearly collapsed in his chair. "This is not good, gentlemen."

Dumbledore groaned. "That's exactly what Flamel's reaction was when he first saw the demonstration. We need to think of something, and think of it fast."

"I agree, Albus. Where is Dr. Flamel right now?"

"He's in the process of being promoted to Minister of Magic, Heydar. I've resigned and will be returning to Hogwarts in September...which will 'just happen' to make Flamel Minister. Yes, he'll have to take the Aes Sedai oaths like any other British Minister of Magic, but it looks like he doesn't have many secrets left to reveal. You have to understand, sir, that he's forgotten how he made the Stone over the past 600 years and he destroyed his copy of the diary so he has no way to find out."

Dagher thought for a moment. "As Minister of Magic, he's going to have the entire British Ministry of Magic at his beck and call to go after these people."

Dumbledore nodded. "Exactly. That's precisely why I made him Deputy Minister -- I foresaw something like this happening and wanted to give Harold-Green a bit of a surprise when the Stone came out. Unfortunately, since Harold-Green is an American company, he would fall under Radner's jurisdiction...or yours if it goes international."

Dagher swore. "I hope that's going to be enough, because if it gets onto the Internet...well, you saw what happened last time something secret got onto the Internet: the Statute of Secrecy went down."

Radner looked intently at his feet. "That's what we're afraid of, sir. As it is, it may already be too late."

Dagher put his head in his hands. "What do you recommend?"

Radner explained. "I've already told the President about this issue, and he agrees that the human race is not mature enough to use the Elixir of Life responsibly. He plans to stall for time by forcing them to go through reams and reams of paperwork and procedures associated with the Food and Drug Administration -- if they intended to sell a drug in the United States, they'd better have all this stuff filled out."

Dagher chuckled. "Muggle bureaucracy -- gotta love it."

"I agree sir. Meanwhile, Flamel is about to issue a statement admitting that he made the Philosopher's Stone -- he can't lie, of course -- and that using the Philosopher's Stone can cause radiation poisoning...and that the Elixir of Life can't cure everything."

The Grand Mugwump looked at Radner skeptically. "Radiation poisoning? Like what killed Sirius Black?"

Dumbledore chimed in here. "Yes, sir. Technically, it's not a lie, so Flamel can say it. However, it's not the entire truth, either. You see, the Stone changes heavy metals into gold using directed nuclear
fission. Since there is only one stable isotope of gold, with 79 protons and 118 neutrons, transforming a substance with X protons and Y neutrons will create a substance with X-79 protons and Y-118 neutrons as a byproduct. There is no guarantee that this second nucleus is stable -- in fact, there are only three isotopes which produce stable daughter nuclei: Hg-198, Hg-199, and Pb-204. As far as the Stone not being able to cure everything, it just so happens that one of the things it can't cure is radiation poisoning, as Flamel didn't know to check for it when he wrote the instructions in 1350 or whenever it was. Now the key here is that although you don't get radiation poisoning from creating or using the Elixir of Life, the Muggles won't realize that."

Dagher smiled in understanding. "Flamel is going to try to scare them out of using the Stone by claiming that it's not guaranteed to work and that if it does work, it can make them sick. They know he's telling the truth, so they'll buy it."

"Exactly. The only fly in the ointment here is that Harold-Green appears to have already changed lead into gold and has purchased enough radiation suits to survive another Judgment Day. However, if they start selling radiation suits, or if the Muggles try creating the Elixir of Life and realize they don't get sick, then we have a problem."

Dagher thought some more. "Can a mass Obliviation work?"

Radner shook his head. "It's too late, sir. It's been a good hour or so since the Stone was introduced, and at least one major American broadcasting company -- NBC -- has broken the story. We'd have to force NBC to say that it's a false alarm, of course. That could be doable if we can find someone who isn't a full Aes Sedai. However, there's a complication: this Bobby Fry fellow, who is now healthy. To truly stop the crisis, we'd have to make it so that there is no Muggle evidence that the Stone existed, let alone worked."

Dagher hissed. "You mean you'd have to give Fry back his cancer again and convince him nothing ever happened."

Dumbledore nodded. "I'm afraid so. That violates every single moral and ethical guideline I can think of, let alone the Aes Sedai oaths."

"Can you Obliviate him and claim that it went into remission on its own, or if anything the Stone worked using the placebo effect?"

"Possibly, sir. Ideally, I'd like to see the world thinking the Stone could just cure cancer and that's IT -- no making gold and extending life. Unfortunately, that may not be an option. This is going to be tricky, Heydar. Very tricky."

Dagher could not help but agree with that. "Make it so, gentlemen. Oh, and one more thing, if you don't mind."

Dumbledore looked at him. "Yes?"

"Get your hands on that damn Stone...and destroy it, along with any copy of the diary you can find. Put a price on Hendrickson's head high enough to force any Muggle to think about doing our dirty work for us -- say, $5,000,000. If I were him, I'd Fidelius the Stone to myself without telling anyone, which means our problems are solved if he...experiences an unfortunate accident. Tell Dialonis to tell the United Nations to keep a lid on this as well as they can. Finally, start supporting Muggle oncology research hospitals -- if we're taking away one possible cure for cancer, we'd better offer them a replacement."
To be continued...

-----------
Update #281.5
-----------
Monday, July 15, 1996
Harold-Green Pharmaceutical Corporation
Charleston, SC
United States of America
-----------
David Hendrickson was kicking himself. He knew now that creating the Stone had been a mistake, and he'd made the mistake of being talked into it by a large influx of self-created gold.

Now, he would have given anything, including all of that gold, to go back in time and dismiss the reporters before Green showed everyone that Flamel was 600 years old.

He remembered reading Flamel's notes in the English version of the diary: mankind was too corrupt and irresponsible to deserve an artifact as powerful as the Philosopher's Stone. As long as people like Voldemort were around, no human being could be entrusted with such an object.

That comment had proven prophetic, as it had been written a good four years before Judgment Day. When someone with six hundred years of experience says something, wise people listen.

The question now: what was he supposed to do with the Stone? His first instinct was to destroy it. Although Hendrickson was deeply troubled by the fact that the Stone's destruction would cost thousands of sick people their lives due to injury and disease, the simple fact was that the same substance -- the Elixir of Life -- served to both stop aging and cure disease. You couldn't prevent immortality without taking the ability to cure disease with it. Flamel's notes had been explicit about that: if the patient was sick, it cured the disease; if the patient was well, it stopped aging. A sick person could also be given a double dosage to both cure the disease and prevent the person from aging.

His work for Harold-Green was done. They had contracted him to produce the Philosopher's Stone, and he had done so. He could plan his next moves without having to worry about allegiance to Harold-Green.

He had been just about to destroy it -- telling Mr. Green that there had been an accident trying to work with it -- when it occurred to him that as long as no one else had access to the Stone, no one would be able to abuse it. So, instead of destroying it, he had changed his mind and Fideliused it to himself, determined not to reveal the secret to anyone else. That way, he was in complete control over what exactly would be done with the Stone.

He intended to run away with the Stone, vowing to cure disease and only cure disease. He would not wreck the economy by mass-producing gold as he'd be able to get rich simply by advertising a cure for cancer (after all, there was no way to prevent that from making the news at this point). There wouldn't be any need to be a mercenary wizard after this!

He also promised himself that he wouldn't try to extend his life past 100. He suspected that his last ten years would consist of funeral after funeral, and he would probably welcome the opportunity to not have to worry about dealing with the deaths of any more friends. Hendrickson had grimaced what he had thought that. He was currently 43 and in pretty good health. Old age was still far in the future. Making a promise like this would be easy now. The real issue was whether he'd be able to
fulfill it when the time got closer.

He had briefly considered returning it to Flamel. He shot that down, however, when he realized that Flamel would likely destroy it as soon as he got his hands on it. Although that would ensure that no one abused it, it also meant that no one would be healed by the Elixir of Life that way.

Fideliusing the Stone to himself would also ensure that no one would be able to steal it. It also ensured that no one tried to kill him to steal the Stone as his death would immediately render the Stone irrecoverable.

Harold-Green had thrown a huge party celebrating the production of the Elixir of Life. Hendrickson had taken advantage of that by going through all of the company's copies of Flamel's diary and modifying the instructions so that they would produce a nonfunctional copy of the Stone. Furthermore, having helped Mr. Green write an article for the company's Web site, he'd managed to get onto the computer and censor the article to remove anything about life extension or gold production. He doubted that it would eliminate all of the old copies of the article, but it couldn't hurt.

He stuffed the Stone into his briefcase and set to work. It took a while for him to get out of his office and away from all the video cameras, but he eventually did it. He was horrified when he found reporters prompting him to show them the Stone, but he then realized that he could just hand over the duplicate if all else failed...

He had just made it out the door when he heard a squeal of brakes, followed by a scream and a thud. He spun and a woman collapsed on the ground underneath the hood of a Chevrolet. It was obvious what had happened. That woman needed help, and needed it quickly.

Hendrickson didn't hesitate. Saving a young woman's life in a situation like this was certainly not abuse. He hurried over the scene and looked around. He was the first person there other than the driver, who was trying to give the victim CPR.

Telling the driver he was an EMT, Hendrickson told the driver to stand aside while he investigated. Making sure no one was looking, he brought out a vial of the Elixir of Life and convinced the woman to swallow its contents. Not surprisingly, the wounds healed and the cuts closed. The victim's eyes suddenly widened, and she looked at him.

"I've been saved! Are you an angel? I -- whaa?"

That was as far as she got before the Obliviation hit her. The driver was about to question him when his memories were also wiped. The woman now thought that she had been just missed by the car, and the driver had the distinct impression that a rock had hit his bumper.

He was about to leave when he saw the bloodstain on the ground. Suddenly, an idea occurred to him...something which would neatly cover his escape. He modified the memory of the driver once again and then prepared to Geminio himself and Apparate out of there.

The driver never saw him leave. All the driver could think about was that there was no way this accident was his fault. After all, that poor man had clutched his chest crossing the street and had fallen right in front of him! There was nothing he could have done to avoid him, and by the time he'd gotten out to help the victim was already dead!

To be continued...
SOUTH CAROLINA FIRM DEVELOPS CURE FOR ALL DISEASES AND AGING
600-YEAR-OLD WIZARD EMERGES WARNING WORLD AGAINST ANY ABUSE

In what is unquestionably the most remarkable combination of magic and Muggle technology ever since the exposure of the Wizarding world in January, Harold-Green Pharmaceutical Corporation of Charleston has announced that it has teamed up with a wizard to develop a magical artifact known as the Philosopher's Stone. This device can be used to produce the Elixir of Life, a substance which can be used to cure virtually all known diseases as well as slow aging to a halt. Expanding upon the work of the 14th-century French wizard Nicholas Flamel Sedai, Harold-Green demonstrated the Elixir's ability to cure a cancer patient in front of a live audience.

In most cases, the cure for cancer would have been enough to win Harold-Green's team the Nobel Prize in Medicine. However, this announcement was upstaged by the arrival of none other than Flamel himself, who had apparently survived in England to this time using his own Philosopher's Stone.

Originally from France, Dr. Flamel faked his death in 1411 and moved to England with his wife and apprentice shortly thereafter. He spent the next 680 years serving as a professor at various Muggle and Wizarding institutions. In order to hide the fact that he was not aging, he would routinely retire, stay away for a few years, and return under another name, supposedly the old professor's son. He would take the pseudonyms Robert Flamel and John Flamel as well as use his real name, Nicholas. He served on several important Wizarding committees over the years, many of which are classified. He resigned from his academic position -- another retirement -- and became Deputy Minister of Magic after the events of Judgment Day. He suddenly found himself thrust into the limelight when the Stone came out and Dumbledore resigned, promoting Flamel to British Minister of Magic. In accordance with a deal brokered between Britain for Humans and the British Ministry of Magic, Flamel agreed to swear all six Aes Sedai oaths upon becoming Minister.

Flamel expressed concern about the newly created Stone. "The Philosopher's Stone is an extremely powerful magical object, one which is very easy to abuse. Your culture has a story called Lord of the Rings where people who initially promise to destroy a powerful magical tool eventually are corrupted by its power and decide to abuse it. Both you and I are familiar with the expression 'power corrupts, but absolute power corrupts absolutely'. With its ability to extend life indefinitely and cure most diseases, the Philosopher's Stone is not something for any mortal to trifle with."

When asked to explain why he himself created his Stone to begin with, Flamel explained that he had not expected evil wizards like Voldemort to obtain so much power -- and he certainly had not counted on the Internet, globalization, and above all the fall of the Statute of Secrecy. "I freely confess that I enjoyed being able to live forever for the first three hundred years, and I lived a rather mundane life as a Muggle professor. However, as I grew older and obtained wisdom and experience far beyond that of people with ordinary lifespans, I slowly began to realize that the Stone could be dangerous and began to wean myself off everything other than its life extension properties. I was also forced to withhold the Elixir of Life from several people I felt could no longer be trusted. At the moment, there are only three people left alive from my era: me, my wife, and my former apprentice Hugh."
"There were times where I was tempted to destroy the Stone and let the three of us go. However, even I couldn't give it up. I eventually decided to keep it out of sight, hoping I would not be tempted by it anymore, and locked it up in a vault at Gringotts, a Wizarding bank which was destroyed in the London blast. Locking it away in the vault did little good, as I still kept on using it.

"Eventually, things came ot a head. In the late summer of 1991, rumors emerged that one of Voldemort's men planned to steal the Stone. I warned Albus Dumbledore, headmaster of Hogwarts, and he had one of his staff members transport the Stone to Hogwarts and place it under heavy guard. This proved to have been a wise move, as Voldemort's men broke into Gringotts and reached the vault only to find it empty. Voldemort refused to be thwarted, however, and eventually possessed a Hogwarts instructor to gain access to the school. Had it not been for three brave students -- including, incidentally, both Hermione Granger and Harry Potter -- Voldemort could have come out with the Stone.

"It was this incident that convinced Dumbledore that the Stone had to be destroyed. After long discussions with my wife and apprentice, I agreed to destroy the Stone. We are aging normally now, and I expect to pass on somewhere in the late 2000's."

Flamel concluded his tale with a warning. "I have lived almost seven centuries and have yet to find someone worthy of the Stone. Keep that in mind, especially in times like this where one wizard -- ONE wizard -- can nearly bring society to its knees."

Flamel was disturbed by what Harold-Green had done. "The fact that they created a Stone and announced it to the Muggles is bad enough. What they do not realize is that they were able to do so by breaking into my house and stealing my notes. If there's anyone who exemplifies a personality which does not deserve use of a Stone, it would be Daniel Green."

Hermione Granger, the brilliant Hogwarts student whose prompt action saved millions of lives during Judgment Day, agreed with Flamel's assessment. "Harry Potter and I were indeed involved with the attempt to recover the Philosopher's Stone at Hogwarts. Assisted by my close friend Ronald Weasley, we discovered that one of the professors may be trying to steal the Stone. We eventually made our way through the defenses surrounding the Stone and caught the professor in the act. We were surprised to find that it was not the person we were expecting, but someone else whom we never even suspected.

"The professor in question, a certain Quirrell, spent his entire tenure at Hogwarts with his head in a turban. What none of us realized was that Voldemort had possessed him, and Voldemort's face was hidden behind the turban. Voldemort ordered Quirrell to steal the Stone from Harry, who had managed to discover it. Fortunately, Quirrell was unsuccessful, and Dumbledore was able to fend him off before Voldemort could escape with the Stone."

Mr. Green dismissed the concerns voiced by Hermione and Flamel. "Although I understand where Dr. Flamel is coming from, we intend to use the Stone to cure disease. Just talk to Bobby Fry, a cancer patient who was cured by the Elixir of Life. Life extension, and in particular immortality, is not currently on the table."

Green reports that Harold-Green was planning to market the Elixir of Life under the brand name Vitalix. They are currently in negotiation with the Food and Drug Administration, which is being extremely careful with this new discovery. An FDA spokesman said, "Although we congratulate Harold-Green for producing such a marvelous product, we are concerned that it has not undergone enough clinical trials and had its side effects documented. In addition, Dr. Flamel has warned that use
of the Philosopher's Stone could cause radiation sickness, and we need to assess the danger to the people manufacturing Vitalix."

Green went on to explain how the wizard and the Muggles worked together to create the Stone. "We hired a wizard named David Hendrickson to provide the magical support when it came to creating the Stone. He did an excellent job, and performed some very thorough investigation on rats and chimpanzees before testing the device on humans. Unfortunately, it appears that Mr. Hendrickson died in a car accident shortly after producing the Stone. We rushed the Elixir of Life out to him but were unable to get there in time. This shows, incidentally, one thing the Elixir CANNOT do: raise the dead. Flamel and Hendrickson were both in agreement that only God can do that. It is a pity that Dave isn't here to witness this moment, and we will hold him forever with the highest regard."

Several hospitals in the South have been asked to provide clinical trials for Vitalix. Harold-Green expects that the Elixir will be available for public use by 2001 at the latest.

To be continued...

Update #282
---------
Tuesday, July 16, 1996
Harold-Green Pharmaceutical Corporation
Charleston, SC
United States of America

"Sir, I think we may have a problem."

Mr. Green turned and saw Lindsay, one of the interns, coming to him with a sour expression on her face. "Let me guess. Hendrickson faked his death and walked away with the Stone."

Lindsay shook her head. "No, sir. We still have both copies of the Stone here, the original and the one Hendrickson gave you to hand out to the reporters for the press conference. They're both still here, though it's gotten hard to tell them apart as they've developed similar sets of scratches. Furthermore, we've still got all of our copies of the instructions to create the Stone."

Green didn't doubt that. If all else fails, the company could always fall back on the copy he had in his safe at the bank. "Then what is it?"

Lindsay bit her lip. "It appears that the services of a wizard are still required to create the Elixir of Life, even after the Stone has been created."

A horrible suspicion suddenly dawned on Green. Slowly, he said, "You're telling me that we've got the Stone but can't make any more Elixir because Hendrickson's dead?"

Lindsay nodded and handed over a small wooden cylinder which Green identified immediately as Hendrickson's wand. "I'm afraid so, sir. We found this on his desk next to the Stone in the lab. We tried all the magic words we could think of but nothing happened."

The intern handed over the wand, and Green picked it up and rolled it in his hands absently. He soon found himself staring at the wand. Something didn't seem right here, and he couldn't put his finger on it. Whatever it was, it seemed to involve the wand. Well, he'd deal with that later. At least they still HAD the wand.
Green grunted. "It seems like we're going to need to hire another wizard. I take it all of the equipment has been left in the lab just as Hendrickson kept it, with the exception of this wand?"

Lindsay nodded. "Nothing's changed, sir. One of the potted trees in the corridor appears to have lost a branch, but we're figuring that was probably due to radiation poisoning from the time he tried to turn the wrong isotope of lead into gold."

Green couldn't care less about the damn trees. "Does the Stone still work? Will it work for anyone other than its creator?"

Lindsay shrugged. "We don't know, sir, and Flamel's notes don't discuss that."

"Let's hope it does, Lindsay, or we're in big trouble. How much Elixir do we have left?"

"Not much, sir. Most of what we had has been turned over to the FDA."

"Damn. We need a wizard ASAP. We'll make the same proposal we did to Hendrickson: $100,000 per year -- sorry, make that $150,000 per year, and 25% of the gold he creates using the Stone. That's going to make everyone take notice. WSC --"

Lindsay interrupted him. "We can't hire anyone from WSC, sir. They've all taken the Novice level Aes Sedai oaths or are about to do so. Eric Street came down with the decree just recently."

Green looked at her, puzzled. Then, it finally hit him. "They can't violate the laws of the land anymore, so they can't create gold. Come to think of it, if they can't create gold we won't be able to pay their salaries, and it's rather unwise to upset a wizard!"

"Precisely, sir. We're going to need to find a renegade or Boba Fett-style bounty hunter, or at the very least someone who hasn't sworn the Oaths."

Green frowned. How the hell was he supposed to get in touch with another Hendrickson? He had to figure that out very quickly.

He looked out the window. "What the hell could have possibly killed off Dave so quickly? He seemed to be in good health, and he was a wizard to boot. Judging from what that driver said, he didn't even have time to give himself the Elixir of Life. Which reminds me -- was any Elixir of Life found on the body?"

Lindsay shook her head. "No, sir. At least we're secure there. As far as your first question goes, it could have been radiation poisoning. Maybe something had a delayed effect."

Green felt a tinge of fear. He doubted the radiation poisoning would have suddenly done in Hendrickson -- he had still had his hair, after all. "I'm not so sure, Lindsay. The security guard is adamant that Hendrickson had some of the Elixir on him when he stepped out the door -- the guard signed for it himself. Did the driver steal it?"

Lindsay shook her head. "I doubt it, sir. He probably didn't know what it was."

This brought another troubling possibility. Quietly, he asked: "Could some wizard have assassinated him and stolen the Elixir, hoping to get the Stone? He turns invisible and hexes Dave in the middle of the street in front of an oncoming car. Dave falls down, the car hits him, and the wizard escapes. The driver gets blamed even though the driver had no intention of hitting him. For all we know, the
driver could have been working for the wizard and covering his escape."

Lindsay was silent for a moment. "That is a possibility, sir. If that's the case, he's going to try again, and this time attack us without a wizard protecting us. He knows the Stone is in the building, and he won't be satisfied until he gets it."

Green nodded. "I agree. Here's what we'll do. Without a wizard, the Stone is useless. I'll make sure the original is placed in a safe place and the demonstration Stone is left in the lab. If someone tries to steal the Stone, they'll get the wrong one."

Lindsay chuckled. "Not a bad idea, if I should say so myself."

"Thank you, Lindsay. In the meantime, let me talk to the security desk. I want to see the recordings the outdoor video camera made of the incident. Thanks for the update -- I'll see what I can do. Dismissed."

Lindsay nodded and left the room. Green had barely gotten his attention back to his work when he saw the message button flashing on his phone.

He listened to the messages. The first was a report from the public relations team indicating that no fewer than five people, including Barbara Walters, wanted to talk to him and Flamel about the Stone. The second was a report from Sales that the company had received no fewer than 250 requests for the Elixir of Life in the last two hours. Several people had told the receptionist that they would be willing to pay more than $100,000 for a one-week supply of the Elixir and serve in FDA clinical trials.

The second message brought Green up short once more. It looked like he would be able to raise the price of the Elixir to $100,000 per week without any problems, which would be good. On the other hand, it meant that he would run out of the Elixir much faster than he had hoped.

He needed to find a wizard...quickly.

-------------------
Black Tower
Ministry of Magic
Hogsmeade
United Kingdom
-------------------

Nicholas Flamel was screaming to be heard over the din of reporters. "I am not going to talk about the Stone with you! Go away! I told you that the Stone is dangerous, and that's that! Now begone! I've got work to do!"

Someone didn't get the point and raised her hand. "Dr. Flamel, is it true that you've been using the Stone your entire life and that you're over 600 years old?"

Flamel threw his hands up in the air. He couldn't say no, of course, but he could be evasive without telling a lie. "I told you, I'm not going to discuss the Stone. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if creating a Stone would violate the Aes Sedai oaths -- in this case the Second Vow -- in that such a device could be used as a magical weapon if it fell into the wrong hands! To be honest, I'm starting regret that I even created the damn thing to begin with. Now get out of here!"

"Sir, is it true that you can change lead into gold?"
Flamel had the perfect answer for that. Staring the Muggle straight in the eye, he groaned. "You cannot turn lead into gold with the Stone."

There were exclamations of surprise in the room, and people jotted down notes. No one realized that Flamel was telling the reporter that she, as a Muggle, could not turn lead into gold. He wasn't lying, but he also wasn't answering the question she had asked...and she had no idea, judging by the look on her face.

He stood up, clearly irritated, and pointed out the door. "Now get out of here! I've got work to do!"

They didn't.

Atlantis

Dagher read the report and breathed a sigh of relief. Hendrickson was dead, albeit under mysterious circumstances. If Hendrickson had, as Dagher suspected, Fideliused the Stone, the crisis was over.

He just hoped that Hendrickson hadn't leaked the secret.

To be continued...

Update #282.5

Tuesday, July 16, 1996

Roqteratl's most influential people have gathered around the table. This time, the security was flawless- not even a fry could have gotten near them uninvited.

"First of all," began the Eldest, "allow me to introduce Biniam, soon to be deputy leader of the upcoming strengthened global merpeople alliance, may the ancestors help us find a fitting name for it."

Idris looked around cluelessly. "Excuse me, my lord, but...who?"

Biniam, formerly Elder of the late House Symrywin, ex-conspirator, wryly answered: "It's me. Funny how birth names go out of use once one becomes a House's leader...after 21 years of being one, I hardly remember it myself."

A witch, the leader of the Healer Guild, interrupted: "It's all fine and good to know everyone's name, but would you please tell me, Eldest, why you chose him of all people for such an important position? I'm surprised you let him live, let alone stay in Roqteratl."

The Architect Guild's first enchanter responded in place of his boss. "Isn't that obvious, Wynne? Our most cunning leader had planned this from the very beginning. How else could he survive the assassination attempt so easily, and what else could explain the surprising lack of reaction from Atlantis?"

The Eldest answered both of them. "I began to make plans for this as soon as the Statute of Secrecy was breached, and he was merely in the right place at the right time, proving both that he seeks to protect our people, and that he is a good politician, but not better than I. As for the Grand Mugwump, he no doubt knows and no doubt doesn't care who is Eldest here. He's definitely feeling resentment for the almost-exposure of the Hidden Nations, for one..."
The freshly pardoned traitor interjected: "Which could have been totally avoided, if you hadn't kept your great plan all to yourself. Seriously, your lack of trust could have resulted in much worse than your death."

"Don't be ridiculous, it was obvious anyone coming after me would do everything to preserve the city's stability. No-one benefits from a messy coup or ancestors forbid, a civil war. Yet...you might have a point. Any deaths would have been avoided if I had consulted with the Grand Mugwump and the others beforehand. It's just...hard to trust people who haven't sworn to protect our people."

"True, that. Sometimes I'm glad I didn't succeed you after all."

Joint Xylenda-Roqteratl trading outpost, Kodiak Island

Eyob Duskryn was a happy siren. He came here to profit from this first contact situation, and found a veritable gold mine beyond his wildest dreams. These Muggles have accumulated an unbelievable amount of technology, creating products that would sell extremely well in Roqteratl and the Hidden Nations. Of course, this was hardly new—anyone listening to the Xylends and the rare visitors from the wizards living hidden in Muggle countries could tell.

His luck was this: recently, some wizards and Muggles working together found a way to make Muggle technology work together with magic, even weaning it off their needlessly complicated wired power supplies. As fate would have it, he ran into a WSC wizard demonstrating a Muggle moving-picture-and-sound device, a television he called it, running on magic. So far, it only played records inserted into it, but he was told there were millions of those, and that the machine could be fixed up to receive invisible transmissions and show moving picture in real time.

Seeing the opportunities, he bought up the wizard's full stock, leaving only enough money to buy waterproof containers for the way back. Now, if only that portkey could take more... if trade will go on like this, they'll have to find a way to increase their transport capacities.

To be continued...

Update #283

Wednesday, July 17, 1996
Al-Aqsa Mosque
Jerusalem

John Paul II turned to the other religious leaders with a wry smile on his face. In addition to Celestine, Urban, the Dalai Lama, and Suleiman, he was now joined by the Patriarch of Constantinople and a representative from Hinduism.

"Gentlemen, I have just received an urgent bulletin from Dagher concerning the Philosopher's Stone. We have reason to believe that the Philosopher's Stone may no longer be accessible. It may no longer be possible to produce additional Elixir of Life."

Suleiman breathed a sigh of relief. "That's good news. The Bible limited mankind's lifespan to 120
years for a reason, and it is plainly obvious that the Being who instituted that restriction knew what He was talking about."

"Indeed. Immortality is simply too dangerous, and if that's not bad enough accepting the possibility of immortality could undermine the story of the Garden of Eden."

Urban bit his lip. "You're calling it a story, now? You seriously believe this nonsense about an asteroid impact?"

John Paul glared at the antipope. "The asteroid impact does not contradict the Bible, Urban. Genesis never explains what exactly God did to trigger the Great Flood. An asteroid impact would be a simple and elegant mechanism to trigger a cataclysm intended to destroy humanity. If anything, we should be gratified to know that He chose an asteroid to wield His power."

"I don't mean the asteroid impact itself, John Paul. I mean the possibility that the Garden of Eden did not occur as implied in the Bible. You seriously believe that document was supposedly written by NOAH?"

The Pope spoke carefully. "It is quite possible that the tradition has been garbled over the years. An asteroid impact that large could very easily destroy civilization, and if Noha-Pishtin's account is correct -- which I suspect is the case given the fact that preliminary evidence seems to confirm that the crater in the Indian Ocean has impact origin -- the Adam and Eve story could be discussing the re-establishment of civilization after the Fall of the pre-impact civilization. Remember there are two accounts of creation, gentlemen: the long one where humanity created in Genesis 1, and the one where Adam and Eve have their Fall in Genesis 2. It's quite possible that Genesis 1 occurred first -- the actual creation of mankind, then the Noah cataclysm, and then Genesis 2. Furthermore, if you take a look at the Babylonian equivalent of the Adam story, Adam was not the first man created."

Urban grunted. "Then what is Genesis 2 doing before the Noah story?"

Celestine grunted. "Simple. God got the order right, and some mortals screwed up."

Urban threw his hands up. "How can people screw this up?"

The Kohen Gadol, out of his wheelchair at last, cut in. "There's a very good explanation: God wrote everything down with Genesis 2 after the Deluge/Hammer of Ra and some idiot transposed a couple of scrolls after civilization collapsed. It makes sense: Genesis 1, the Flood, Genesis 2, an unbroken string of 20 generations where people have long lives, and then the birth of Abraham."

The Dalai Lama interrupted. "Gentlemen, this is not time to argue about this. We came to announce that conference to try to reunite the Abrahamic faiths. I doubt God would approve if we ignored this project His prophet inspired us to do and chose to fight among ourselves."

Suleiman looked at the Orthodox Patriarch, Urban, and John Paul. "Much as I agree that unification of the Abrahamic faiths is worthwhile, it seems increasingly unlikely that we're going to be able to pull it off. I mean, we've got both claimants to the Papacy and the Patriarch sitting in this room. How can we unite all the faiths if we can't even unite Christianity? I would argue that although the primary goal will be to unify the faiths, we should consider organizing a committee to smooth the relations between the Abrahamic faiths by showing what they have in common. If unification doesn't work, tolerance will suffice. Especially if all of us agree to excommunicate anyone who says otherwise."

The Patriarch shook his head. "No one's going to listen to us. Look what happened when John Paul
tried to follow Samuel's lead: Celestine breaks with Rome.

Celestine wrung his hands. "I didn't mean to permanently break with Rome! I just didn't think Samuel would be relevant in --"

This time both the Hindu leader and Patriarch broke in. "STOP FIGHTING!"

Everyone quieted down as the Patriarch continued. "Samuel warned us that fighting among the ancient Israelites led to their downfall. We fought, and look what happens. Another Judgment Day, which probably WOULD have brought about our downfall had it not been for Atlantis. Don't stare at me like that, Urban. I know you don't like wizards. In case you're wondering, Celestine -- the man who founded your movement -- is supportive of Atlantis."

John Paul nodded and continued. "I told you this earlier. Had God wanted to destroy us, He would have done so. The fact that He relented means that He has seen something which earned us another chance. He probably sees that we have agreed to work to unite the three faiths, and almost assuredly He wants that to proceed. Has it occurred to you that it's quite possible that He inspired all of us to work towards this at the same time as well?"

Everyone looked embarrassed as John Paul continued. "End of that discussion. Now, let's get back to the Philosopher's Stone. If the Stone is indeed irrecoverable, the Elixir of Life is going to run out and we don't need to worry about immortality. Harold-Green is probably going to go out of business when it finds that it can't produce any more Elixir, a punishment which looks a lot like God intervening and punishing someone who tried to trespass on His territory."

All of the Abrahamics agreed on that.

"With this in mind, we don't need to worry about the Stone as its creator is going to go out of business. The important thing is to advertise the conference. I assume, gentlemen, that all of you will be attending in August?"

Everyone nodded, including Urban. The Dalai Lama answered for them: "August 1st, at the Omega Institute in Rhinebeck, New York. It's an interfaith spiritual camp with holy books from many different traditions. The New York connection is important as it reminds people of the two bombs which went off there. There is only one thing which we need to figure out, however. Who's going to chair it?"

All of the religious figures looked at each other warily. If the Dalai Lama chaired it, people would argue that he didn't have the authority because he was not an Abrahamic. If someone like Suleiman did, people would argue that he would be biased towards his own Abrahamic faith, in his case Islam. No one said a word, and the Dalai Lama looked on anxiously.

A couple of minutes passed. Finally, an unfamiliar voice uttered something in archaic Hebrew behind John Paul.

"Anochi". Me.

Everyone turned in surprise, as they didn't hear anyone enter the room. The surprise turned to exclamations of surprise, suspicion, and fear.

Standing in the doorway was the ghostly silhouette of a short, bald man with a neatly trimmed mustache and beard. Seconds later, an Israeli woman ran right through him and entered the room. A
couple of the religious leaders looked at her a bit critically, as it was obvious that she hadn't been expecting to approach such devout people. She was wearing a low-cut blouse and blue jeans. A couple of the Abrahamics muttered to themselves, and the ghostly figure rolled his eyes when he looked at her.

The woman stammered. "He said 'me'. He has volunteered to serve as chairman."

Celestine put his head in his hands. Urban winced and shook his head. "I don't believe it. Here we go again."

The Hindu leader looked at the apparition quizzically. "Who is this man? Is he a ghost?"

John Paul nodded. "This, Venerable One, is the Abrahamic prophet Samuel. He lived around 1000 years before the birth of Christ. He is revered by all three Abrahamic faiths."

Samuel uttered something in his ancient Semitic dialect, and the interpreter translated. "Yes, I am Samuel. This woman is an interpreter, and she worked with Deborah earlier. Gentlemen, I congratulate you. You have indeed reformed your ways and are well on your way to reuniting the faiths. I had hoped and prayed that this would happen, and thankfully the Source of all goodness listened to our prayers. It is a pity that it took another Judgment Day to bring you all together. I volunteer to serve as chairman, as I consider all of your sects to fearing the Guide of Israel.

"I happened to overhear your comment about the Philosopher's Stone. The people of my time had wanted to create such a marvel, but they did not have the knowledge to do it. It is both remarkable and troubling that humans have been able to accomplish this. Remember my comment that technology -- in this case the Philosopher's Stone -- without wisdom can be dangerous. There is a reason, gentlemen, that humans have a finite lifespan. Keep that in mind...very strongly."

Samuel turned to the Dalai Lama, who was scratching his head. "I'm sorry, Rabbi, but I don't think I've seen you before. Which sect do you belong to?"

To be continued...

Update #283.5

---------------

Wednesday, July 17, 1996
Ministry of Magic, Lomé
Togo
-----

Cornelius Fudge was surprised. He didn't get any attention from other diplomats since his sacking, not surprisingly as he was sent here to be forgotten. But then, why would a fellow wizard, one he'd never even heard of, come visiting him?

"Are you sure it's me he's looking for?" He asked his secretary. "This better be serious, if it turns out to be yet another practical joke, consider yourself fired!"

"I said this is real, sir. He came straight from ... please don't ask me to spell that name, but he's waiting just outside and said it's urgent."

"Fine, let him in..."
The wizard was a total stranger to Fudge, yet he appeared to be of high class. His clothing gave no help to the ex-minister to identify him, unless...were those merpeople on that insignia?

"Mr. Cornelius Fudge, it's a pleasure to meet you." Said the visitor in strangely accented English - Galiver, Fudge recognised- "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Uldred Saldana, first enchanter of the architect's guild of Roqteratl."

Fudge recognised the name. "Isn't that a merpeople place? Why would those fish-men send a wizard to me?"

"For one, you have a reputation of not giving non-human Beings their due respect. And anyway, I doubt you’d understand surface Mermish, and communicating by writing to each other can become a bit awkward, don't you think?"

"I see. But if I have such a reputation, why did you come to me?"

"The rest of your Ministry of Magic had been wiped out in the Judgement Day attacks, that's why. You are one of the few people left who can help us."

"Help you to do what? Exposing the rest of the Hidden Nations? Forget it, I have made enough enemies already!" Fudge started to get upset.

"You misunderstand me. We desire your government's help because your country has a long-standing precedent which can be useful to us. It won't hurt anyone."

The ex-minister was getting curious. "A precedent? Elaborate on that, please."

"There is a centaur colony in the forest near Hogwarts. It's been left alone for centuries by the wizards, agreeing it belongs to the centaurs. We wish to know if the Muggles accept this too." Explained the wizard. "Your task is to ask around, see what they think about it. But be discreet about it, do not mention anything about me or merpeople."

"What does it have to do with..." Cornelius suddenly realised. "The merpeople! They are everywhere, in the lakes, in the sea, and your masters want to make sure they stay independent. But why did you bring this to me? Why not Dumbledore? He is a well-known friend of merpeople, unlike me."

"He is also Aes Sedai now. He can't lie. You, on the other hand, can."

Fudge understood it now. "I see. But there is another issue: what will my reward be for doing this for you?"

Uldred sighed, but it wasn't like he came unprepared for the man's selfishness. "Other than a generous monetary compensation for your troubles, you get the chance to do something good at last. I guess you don't want to get into the history books as Cornelius Fudge, British Minister for Magic from 1990 to 1996, who did nothing significant other than letting Voldemort return unopposed."

"You speak of fame, as a reward of a secret mission? That just doesn't add up."

"Of course it's not directly for that. But if you succeed, we will find a way to restore some of your good publicity."
John Paul drew a deep breath, and he wasn't the only one. It was obvious that Samuel didn't realize that the Dalai Lama wasn't an Abrahamic. He sure LOOKED like an Abrahamic with the Bedouin-like monk's robe.

Samuel probably recognized him as a fellow ascetic, the Pope thought. He probably figures that the Dalai Lama was another prophet similar to him, or at very least a God-fearing man who fit in perfectly with the rest of the people in the room.

The first thing John Paul thought of was a room filled with statues of the Buddha. In most cases, such a sight would inspire reverence and awe. However, Samuel had no way to tell who the Buddha even was, as the Buddha had achieved enlightenment five hundred years after Samuel died. Combine that with the fact that Samuel tended to go up in flames whenever possible idols came into play...

This could be bad, very bad. If he came out against Buddhism, Hinduism wouldn't be that far behind -- and a Hindu representative was in the room. Considering that Muslims and Hindus tended to fight in India and India had over a billion people, as well as nuclear weapons...

The pope cast a surreptitious look around the room. Everyone looked antsy, including the interpreter. The Dalai Lama, however, seemed pretty calm. "I think I can handle this. He deserves to know, after all. Hinduism the largest non-Abrahamic religion, after all."

The interpreter nodded. "I hope so, Holiness. This could be a disaster if this doesn't work. You're sure you want to go through with this?"

The old man nodded. "Yes, Meira. He'll find out at some point, and he'll probably get even more suspicious if our Hindu colleague here gets evasive."

The interpreter looked up in supplication. "All right, what do you want me to tell him?"

"Tell him that I am a monk, someone devoted to introspection. I am the leader of a large worldwide community of people who follow this philosophy."

The interpreter whistled. "Interesting how you call it a philosophy instead of a religion. I've always considered Buddhism a religion."

The monk nodded. "Most people do. However, the fact that Buddhism does not focus on a deity causes some confusion as to its status as a religion. In particular, a late Bronze Age philosopher like Samuel almost certainly cannot imagine that it's possible to be a religion and not follow one or more deities. Trust me, this is going to hope -- at least I hope so."

Meira nodded and relayed the information to Samuel. The prophet looked at the Dalai Lama and nodded gravely. "You are an ascetic too, I see."
The Dalai Lama bowed respectfully. "Yes, Holy One."

Samuel smiled. "You are a wise man -- what is your name, sir?"

"I'm the Dalai Lama, Holy One. In our community, a lama is a kind of instructor or teacher similar to a rabbi."

Samuel's eyes widened. "I'm Samuel the son of Eli the High Priest, Rabbi Dalai. You teach this philosophy across the world?"

John Paul nearly choked when he heard that. He didn't know what made him more uneasy: Samuel admitting he was Eli's son, Samuel calling the Dalai Lama a rabbi, or Samuel thinking Dalai was the man's first name.

"I try to, Holy One. Some people accept it, some people don't. Asceticism doesn't work for everyone. Can you imagine Saul or David becoming ascetics?"

Samuel chuckled. "They'd probably fall on their swords first. I knew Saul would be a disaster from the beginning, but the people wanted a king and I didn't have much of a choice. What is the name of your philosophy called?"

"Buddhism, Holy One. Its primary teacher was born in India about five hundred years after you died. There are actually many ascetic philosophies out there. One of them, Hinduism, actually predates you. This man here is a Hindu master". The Dalai Lama pointed to the Hindu, who blinked uneasily.

Samuel frowned. "Odd that I would have not known of it...unless this Hinduism is also based in India as well? I have never been there."

The Hindu bowed respectfully. "Yes, Holy One. Hinduism is also from India."

"I see. Introspection is a good thing, gentlemen. It lets you commune with God in your own personal way, one which is generally much more effective than going through an intermediary."

Samuel's eyes suddenly lit up. "Ah! You must be members of that Order of St. Benedict, right?"

John Paul winced, but the confusion was understandable. The Pope had told Samuel of the Christian monastic orders, and it was obvious that Buddhism and Hinduism were contemplative traditions.

The Dalai Lama answered this. "I am indeed a monk, Holy One. However, the Christian monastic traditions are much different from these two philosophies. They are both means to the same end, though."

"Indeed they are, Rabbi Dalai. I assume you are coming to this conference as well? Perhaps you will be able to introduce introspective practices where I failed."

Both Eastern leaders bowed. "We would be honored to do so, sir. It would likely cut down on the dogma and dissent between various sects."

Samuel grunted. "Hopefully, you will be able to do so without idols. If you include idols in your practices, you need to either remove them or warn practitioners that they aren't really gods."

The Dalai Lama nodded. "We use images of the Buddha in the same way that John Paul here uses
images of Jesus dying on the cross. They are inspirational symbols only, and the practitioners know this."

Samuel's eyes suddenly lit up. "Would you be willing to come on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and discuss these introspective practices during the services here in the Temple?"

The religious leaders looked uneasily at each other. Finally, the Dalai Lama drew a deep breath and explained. "Holy One, the Eastern traditions are actually not Abrahamic. It's understandable, if you think about it. You never knew about them, so how could they have known of you?"

The Pope cut in desperately. "They aren't Israelites, so they aren't beholden to the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur customs. However, they follow the Noahide laws, and as you can see they do so quite well. They've even developed some of the Abrahamic practices independently, as you can see with the asceticism."

Samuel looked at the two men quizzically. "Buddhism and Hinduism are not sects of the Israelite faith? They're idolators or pagans? They seem much too civilized to be pagans! Ascetics do not sacrifice their children! You must be mistaken."

Suleiman explained. "They aren't from the same ethnic group, but they follow the Noahide laws, and that's all that matters. In fact, they have gone far beyond the minimal Noahide laws and have developed customs which, in my opinion, would help us in our quest to unify the Abrahamic faiths."

Samuel was silent a long moment, and John Paul braced himself. Finally, the prophet turned to the two Eastern religious figures. "You don't worship foreign gods, I hope?"

Both Easterners shook their heads. "Our philosophies are non-theistic and can benefit anyone regardless of which god they worship. In one sense, they are orthogonal to standard Judeo-Christian religious practices. Mystical Jewish and Islamic traditions often go well with Buddhist philosophy."

Samuel jerked back a moment. "You can have a philosophy like this without God? Sounds very strange. I have never heard of such a thing! How can someone not have a god?"

Suleiman had the answer for this. "No more strange than the idea of a non-corporeal deity was to the people of your time, Holy One. Civilization evolves. This type of deity is even more abstract than the classical Abrahamic version."

Samuel mused for a moment. "So you can be a proper Israelite who worships a higher power such as God yet follows Buddhist and Hindu philosophy?"

"Yes, Holy One."

John Paul's eyebrows shot up. Was this going where he thought it was? If so, would it be good...or bad? If Samuel chose Buddhism over Hinduism or vice versa, or if he found out that Hindus and Muslims were fighting in Kashmir...

Samuel looked around the room. "When we have the conference, I want these people to instruct us in these philosophies as well as means to communing with God. These philosophies should be part of the traditions of the Children of Abraham as long as they do not contradict any of Abraham's primary tenets."

The religious figures looked around in awe as Samuel prattled on about the new plans. This was
The news had spread throughout the camp in less than half an hour. Hermione Granger, a British heroine and accomplished witch to boot, was going to be stopping by her camp at some point today.

Emma Watson couldn't wait to meet her. Virtually every single girl she knew had decided to abandon all of their dreams of becoming princesses and fairies and had urged their parents to help them be witches when they grew up. Hermione had normal parents, supposedly, yet she was able to become a witch. If Hermione could, why couldn't someone like Emma?

She had originally wanted to become an actress. However, her parents had warned her that many little girls dreamed of being in movies and that very few made it. When she had told her parents that she had decided to become a witch instead, she had expected her parents to be pleased.

Instead, they had pulled her aside and told her that she was a Muggle and there was no way that she could be a witch, let alone do what Hermione did. When Emma told them that Hermione had also had Muggle parents, they went on to explain that Emma had never done anything which remotely seemed magical. Most wizards with Muggle parents had done some unusual things before they were accepted to Hogwarts at age 11: for instance, Harry Potter had managed to seal his then-obnoxious brother in a zoo exhibit with a snake without realizing what he was doing. Emma may have been bright, but she never did anything truly...well, miraculous.

It appeared that she would have to live with simply seeing Hermione in real life. So, here she was in the auditorium with the rest of her bunk. A couple of them had made little signs with hearts and flowers and so forth. She got so angry at herself for not thinking of drawing Hermione's attention with pretty signs like that.

As it turned out, the signs may not have been necessary. By sheer chance, her bunk was assigned a place at the front of the auditorium with the rest of the youngest students. People who were six years old generally had trouble seeing over the really tall kids who were twelve or thirteen.

Many of the tall boys in the back of the room were very excited about meeting Hermione. Oddly enough, however, very few of the boys her age were. When she asked the bunk leader why that was, the bunk leader had just laughed and said she'd find out in due time.

There was a flash of light, and at precisely 12:00 the celebrated witch flew in one of the open windows on a broomstick -- yes, she was actually riding a broomstick! All of the campers began screaming and waving, and the adults barely were able to keep them all under control. Hermione was eventually followed in by two adults on broomsticks of their own, presumably reporters or parents.

Hermione introduced herself and gave a brief little speech where she explained that she had not seen herself as particularly special. However, with a lot of work and disciplined training, anyone in that room could become as famous and popular as she was. Fame without wisdom or work, on the other hand, was extremely dangerous.
Hermione had done something very strange at that point. She had turned away from the microphone for a second and muttered something about a stone. This confused Emma. Why would a stone make someone famous?

Turning back to the microphone, she looked around the room and asked for a volunteer to go onstage. Virtually every single hand went up simultaneously, and Hermione muttered something about being forced to take someone from the front because it would be impossible for the people in the back to get over there. She then lowered her eyes to Emma, who smiled nervously at her.

Then something happened which Emma couldn't believe. Hermione picked her.

Heart pounding furiously, Emma got up and raced onstage. She gave Hermione a hug (or at least tried to, as Hermione was much taller than she was). Hermione smiled, returned the hug, and bent down to speak with her.

"Hi there, young lady! What's your name?"

Emma could barely speak. "I'm Emma, Miss Granger!"

"Are you excited to see me, Emma?"

"Yes, Miss Granger! I want to be your best friend, and I want to be you when I grow up!"

An odd smile appeared on Hermione's face, and one of the adults next to her rolled his eyes. Emma had the odd feeling that she hadn't been the first person to tell Hermione that she wanted to be like her.

Hermione thought for a moment and answered. "It's unlikely that you'll be able to become a witch, Emma. However, like I said, with a lot of work you can make all your dreams come true. If you couldn't become me, what else would you do?"

Emma's joy slowly started to dissipate. "Well, I want to be a movie star. Can you wave your wand and make me a movie star?"

Several of the adults and older children chuckled. Hermione, however, shook her head. "I can't do that, Emma. However, the key to your future is in your hands. Work hard, and stay focused on what you're doing, and who knows? Your dreams could come true, and you could be in a movie, possibly with me! Would you like that, Emma?"

Emma squealed with delight. "Yeah! I promise you, Miss Granger, I'll do all the work needed to become a movie star!"

Hermione patted her on the shoulder. "That's all we can ask for at this point. Good luck, my little friend." And with that, she gave her a present and told her to sit back down.

Emma's bunkmates crowded around her to see the present. It appeared to something the size of a baseball card, and it had a very lifelike picture of an old man on the cover. Underneath it were the words "ALBUS DUMBLEDORE". All of the girls gasped in unison as the old man winked at them and then disappeared!

Emma couldn't believe it. She had actually spoken to Hermione Granger and gotten a present!
She was absolutely beside herself with joy.

-------------------

Al-Aqsa Mosque

-------------------

Celestine took a deep breath and looked at Samuel's feet. "Holy One, I believe I owe you an apology. I'm Celestine VI, the man who originally created the sect known as the Celestines."

Samuel grunted. "Ah yes. I've been warned about you. Have you come to appeal your excommunication or repent?"

Celestine nodded. "Indeed I have, sir. Having seen you address these other leaders and spoken with you personally, it is now obvious that I underestimated you. I had originally broken with John Paul because I thought that you would not be able to adjust to modern society. I thought that if John Paul listened to you, he would bring the Church to ruin. However, now I see that you intend to take our advice when making decisions about the Church."

Samuel nodded. "I freely confess, Celestine, that the transition has been difficult. There are a great many things that I do not understand, and I have to learn about a whole new world. Fortunately, I know enough to not try to handle this all by myself. Using counselors such as the people in this room, I plan to guide the Church into the next millennium."

Celestine nodded. "That is just what I was hoping for, Holy One. Would you be willing to accept my forgiveness?"

Samuel extended his hand, and Celestine took it. "God is always waiting for people to repent and forgive their sins. How could I do anything less? Congratulations, Celestine. I hereby revoke your excommunication."

Celestine wept in gratitude as Samuel turned to Urban. "All right then. Who are you? Are you also an ascetic?"

Urban didn't say anything for a couple of minutes, and Celestine frantically signaled for him to keep his mouth shut. However, Urban wouldn't listen. "Unfortunately, I am not. I'm Urban IX, the new leader of the Celestine movement, and unlike my predecessor I'm a bit concerned about the fact that wizards are loose in the world."

Samuel didn't look happy. "The fact that someone is a wizard does not make him evil, Urban. Being a wizard is simply choosing a profession, sir, not a moral failure. Should one person discriminate against another simply because the latter is a fisherman?"

"Then why does God advise people not to suffice a witch to live?"

Samuel's response was succinct. "That prohibition refers only to people who use Dark magic to harm others or themselves. If a wizard can use his power to help people, it is not only permitted but mandatory."

Urban blinked for a moment, and then replied. "Then why didn't people do -- oh, the Statute of Secrecy!"

Samuel nodded sadly. "Indeed. The Bible was written during a time when wizards walked the world and were accepted as members of society. As time went by, people began to fear Dark
wizards and gave my people a bad reputation. The few times wizards tried to help, they were attacked by the people they were trying to save for the simple reason that the quote in the Bible did not include the Dark wizard restriction. It was this persecution that helped bring up the Statute of Secrecy. Leaving that clause out of the Bible was a grievous mistake, I fear. Errors like this occur when Muggles write chronicles and judicial texts for Muggles but do not understand the nature of magic."

The religious leaders looked at each other wildly. Samuel admitting a mistake in the BIBLE? Suddenly one of John Paul's observations came to him: Samuel claimed Eli was his father, and Samuel most definitely shaved...

Urban sat back down for a second, his head in his hands. "I'll have to think about this."

To be continued...

-----------------

Update #285

------------

Thursday, July 18, 1996
Southern Syrdan

Nicole Qortlas watched from the bushes as the yahoos looked over the little packet she had left behind. Ideally, she would have been able to leave a roll of parchment explaining that Nestor would be willing to help them achieve their freedom and that all they had to do was leave a little mark on the doorway of the plantation house to indicate that they could be counted on to help with the rebellion in case the United States and Nestor decided to attack Syrdan.

Unfortunately, most of the yahoos were illiterate, and as a result Nicole had to do something much more risky: provide a document which would speak in a low voice once it was touched by someone with a tattooed forehead. It was designed to disappear instantaneously once its message was delivered or if a Syrdani without a tattoo touched it. Sometimes, she would luck out and the yahoos would join the fight. Other times, however, the foreman would intercept the document before the yahoos could read it, destroying it.

These five yahoos seemed very interested in its message. The message had just started playing, and they were calling over their friends excitedly. She grabbed her quill so she could jot down some notes.

A gruff voice suddenly broke her concentration. "Ho, there! What are you guys all doing sitting around? Go back to your stations or you're in big trouble!"

Nicole watched as the overseer began walking in the slaves' direction. Defeated, they glared at him and began walking away. One of them surreptitiously stuffed the message parchment into cloak's pocket. Much to Nicole's chagrin, the document was still speaking.

The overseer's reaction said it all. His eyes suddenly widened, and he cast a spell to block Apparation followed by an immediate Revelio Hominem. Yelling at all the slaves to stay put or risk execution, he ran towards the bushes with a raised wand.

Nicole swore to herself: we have a problem.

She reached for her Invisibility Cloak and tried to make her way out of the bushes. Unfortunately, the cloak did nothing to prevent objects such as leaves from moving around if a cloaked individual was
caught in a stand of trees. Realizing that the sounds of breaking twigs and rustling leaves would blow her cover, she stayed low and made sure the Cloak covered her completely.

It didn't work. The overseer came within two meters of her and saw all of the branches bent out of position. She was trapped. Hoping she wouldn't have to do this, she brought out her wand.

Unfortunately, his wand was already out, and his lips were moving. "Petrificus Totalus!"

She went as stiff as a board and fell on her face. The Invisibility Cloak caught on a branch and lifted off her body as she fell, making her visible.

Oops.

---------------------
Syrdani Chancellors' Office
- - - - - - - - - - - -

Ortelu didn't like what she was hearing. "What do you mean, we acquiesce to those Muggles' demands? There's no way the United States is going to attack us. Besides, what right does anyone have to tell us how to control our people?"

Vixar shook his head. "It makes no sense. The United States can't even get Muggle troops over here, and if we put up the Apparation barrier not even wizards can get in. They have no way to attack us without drawing in all their wizards. If they were to do that, all we would have to do is send a few special agents over there and wipe out their Muggles."

Siatnan added her two Knuts. "They can't attack us. However, one must admit that this would be bad for publicity. Particularly in the light of the fact that a society where wizards appear to rule Muggles looks dangerously like a Death Eater hideout."

Ortelu whistled. "You're thinking that Atlantis is going to get involved and make sure that we aren't hiding any Death Eaters here? That's impossible. They're not at DEFCON 1, for one thing. They're still at DEFCON 3. They can't intervene. Besides, if they are supposed to be focusing on something, it should be getting rid of that renegade Philosopher's Stone!"

Vixar thought for a moment. "I'm not sure if the DEFCON scenario applies here, Ortelu. There are serious Muggle-wizard public relations involved, for one thing, and this is a good case for setting a precedent. For another, we're still dealing with the aftershocks of a Judgment Day. It may be unorthodox, but I suspect the Grand Mugwump could very well interfere here, especially if word leaks out and he's pressured by the Muggle United Nations."

"They can't, Vixar! It's against the law! Besides, I know Dialonis! He won't do it!"

"Dialonis isn't running Atlantis anymore. This fellow named Dagher is, and he's a relative unknown."

Siatnan cut in. "Do you seriously think that the Americans expect us to completely reform society as we know it? Our entire society is based on the Wizards ruling the Muggles --"

Her tirade was cut off when an owl suddenly flew into the room and landed on Ortelu's desk. In its talons was a blue envelope, indicating that it was from the Syrdani Internal Affairs Bureau. The envelope had a red border around it, indicating that it was urgent.

Worried that the Americans might be trying a pre-emptive strike, she walked over to the desk and
read the document. Her face turned ashen, and she shook her head. Grimacing, she turned to the other two chancellors.

"The IAB just captured a Nestorian special agent trying to foment rebellion among the yahoos. Her name is Nicole Qortlas, and she says there were more of her."

Siatnan swore. "They've captured a Nestorian agent here? How the hell did she get over here with the Apparation barrier up?"

Ortelu was losing her patience. "How should I know? At any rate, they've interrogated her with Veritaserum and she sang like a bird. Among other things, she mentioned that Nestor is aware of the United States' demands and is in the process of trying to formalize an alliance."

All three chancellors were silent for a good two or three minutes. Finally, Ortelu's shoulders slumped. "You realize what this means, of course. I think we're going to have to cave in, no matter what. We may have been able to ward off the Americans because they don't have enough wizards. However, if they ally with Nestor..."

Siatnan finished the statement: "...we've got a two-front war with Muggle technology hitting us from the west and wizards hitting us from the east. This would be bad, very bad. We can't afford a war, particularly at a time like this."

Ortelu looked around the room, and she watched as the other two chancellors both nodded. Sighing, she started dictating a note and watched as the Quick-Quotes Quill began to write down what she was saying.

"Dear Ambassador Radner. After careful consideration, we have decided to accept the terms of your ultimatum. Your four missing crewmen will be returned forthwith, and we look forward to reducing the burden of our lower classes through the use of Muggle technology..."

To be continued...
Update #286 through Update #290

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Mislagnissa

Update #286
----------
Friday, July 19, 1996
The Burrow
Great Britain
----------

J. K. Rowling had read over her notes from Harry Potter's interviews several times. Much to her amazement, Scholastic had agreed to publish Harry Potter's experiences as a first-year Hogwarts student under the title Harry Potter and the Magical Orb. In effect, it would be a young-adult appropriate biography of Harry Potter written by Rowling herself. If the book did well, she would be given the option of continuing on with Harry's remaining six years.

Even though its release date was not until April 1997, there were rumors that 250 people had already -- ALREADY -- preordered it. She was fairly certain that she would be able to finish editing the manuscript before the deadline. What she wasn't sure about, however, was whether this would make her so famous people would follow her wherever she went.

However, that issue paled in comparison to the second issue which would inevitably be raised as soon as Harry's memoirs were published. Unless J. K. Rowling was VERY badly mistaken -- and she couldn't see how that could be possible -- she had an awful feeling she knew what the Magical Orb was.

Everything fit perfectly. Harry had mentioned Nicholas Flamel several times in the interviews, not knowing that Harold-Green was on the verge of releasing the Stone. Hermione had claimed that Harry had been involved with the plans to protect the Stone. The Magical Orb had all of the major abilities of the Stone, including the ability to halt aging with the Elixir of Life. The artifact had apparently been powerful enough to have brought back Voldemort from a completely disembodied state if necessary. Finally, according to Harry it was destroyed at just about the time Flamel's diary mentioned that the great alchemist had destroyed the original Stone.

Harry had mentioned that the Magical Orb had looked like a large, delicately faceted ruby. It had been obvious that one of the Flamels had taken a lot of time beautifying it. In contrast, the Stone which had been used in Harold-Green's demonstration looked like a misshaped, roughly spherical hunk of red crystal. This distinction said it all, Rowling thought. For Flamel, creation of the Stone was the goal. For Harold-Green, it was using the Stone to create the Elixir and make money, and as a result the biologists didn't care if the Stone looked like it had just come out of some chemistry lab. Rowling couldn't tell which disturbed her more: the Philosopher's Stone in the hands of a clueless eleven-year-old kid, the Philosopher's Stone in the hands of a ruthless businessman, or the Philosopher's Stone in the hands of Voldemort.

All of these were on her mind as she sat down next to Harry. She noticed that Harry was reading the London Times, which had just gotten back into business after the nuclear attack. He appeared to be reading an article on the Philosopher's Stone, and he did not look happy.

Harry heard her approach and turned to her. "Good afternoon, Ms. Rowling. How are you?"
Rowling shook her head. "A bit troubled, Harry. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions about the Magical Orb?"

Harry sighed. "I suspect I know what the first one is going to be."

Rowling could barely speak. "Harry, is it true that --"

Harry nodded. "Yes, Ms. Rowling. The Magical Orb was in fact Flamel's original Philosopher's Stone. I was with Hagrid -- the half-giant who is supposedly about to become one of our magical ambassadors. He retrieved the Stone from Gringotts shortly after he took me to my family's vault and showed me that I had more than enough money to pay for Hogwarts."

"Did you know what it was at the time?"

"No, Ms. Rowling. All I knew was that it was something very important for Hogwarts. I didn't know what it was until Hermione reasoned it out later."

"Once you knew what it was, were you tempted to use it?"

Harry was silent for a good thirty seconds. Finally, he shrugged. "I didn't actually get my hands on the Stone until I confronted Quirrell and Voldemort. However, I must confess that I was relieved that Dumbledore took the Stone from me after Voldemort attacked. I had originally focused entirely on keeping the Stone from Voldemort, which is what allowed me to retrieve it from inside the Mirror of Erised. Even after I got the Stone, I was focused entirely on Voldemort's attack and as a result I couldn't even start to imagine what I'd actually DO with the thing. Personally, I think I would have returned it to Dumbledore or Flamel...but who knows, perhaps I could have been corrupted. Thank God I didn't have to find out."

"Do you want me to change the manuscript so that it actually refers to the Stone instead of some fictitious Magical Orb?"

Harry looked out the window for a moment. "Well, the Stone is public knowledge anyway, though thankfully this Hendrickson's death made sure that no one else can access it. What I would argue is that you should in fact change the name to the Philosopher's Stone. Furthermore, I'd recommend that Flamel, Dumbledore, and I all write prefaces, forewords, and things like that explaining why the Stone should never be used. You may want to include Snape as well, as he is a skilled Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher and a former Voldemort supporter. He would be able to tell exactly what Voldemort planned to do with the Stone."

Rowling nodded. "That would be a brilliant idea, Harry. Maybe Samuel can add one as well."

Harry looked at her, confused. "Samuel? Samuel who?"

"Samuel the biblical prophet, Harry. He's back and is trying to unify the faiths again, and he's apparently managed to include some Buddhist practices and even a few non-theistic Hindu ones. I doubt it will work, but he's doing his best. Samuel supposedly said something along the lines of people had a limited lifespan for a reason. It's obvious he knew what was going on with the Stone and didn't like it."

Harry chuckled. "I'd say Samuel would be a big asset, here. If people think he's got a direct line to God, that could come in handy."
The comment brought up another question Rowling had always meant to ask but didn't. Delicately, he asked, "Do the wizards know if God exists? Can they communicate with Him?"

Harry shook his head. "Wizards have no more information as to the existence of God than Muggles. Many wizards, such as Xenophilius Lovegood, are in fact religious, and they believe that God can assist them in times of trouble. From what I've been told, the Statute of Secrecy caused many of the events performed by wizards to be recast as miracles in the Bible. However, the fact that the Bible records something as a miracle does not necessarily mean that it was caused by a wizard."

Rowling nodded and wrote that down. "In other words, if a wizard did it, it's attributed to God, but the converse is not necessarily true."

"Exactly. Which miracles are actually attributed to God depends on the believer's personal faith."

Rowling recorded this and got back to her original list of questions. "Do you think the Stone is out of our lives for good now that Hendrickson is dead?"

Harry shook his head. "Unfortunately, I don't think so. I suspect that Hendrickson left all his notes behind -- not to mention Flamel's diary -- when he died. If I were Green, I'd hire another wizard to create a stone based on these notes. Trust me, Ms. Rowling. Unless the American Department of Magic does something VERY quickly, the Stone is coming back. And judging from the world's reaction to it so far, it's going to sell."

Rowling whistled. "That can't be good. Just imagine all of the doctors put out of business by this. Combine that with the fact that supposedly Harold-Green is going to be charging $150,000 for a week's supply of the Elixir and you're going to wind up with a small community of wealthy immortals holding all of the power over a vast worldwide peasantry."

Harry's eyes widened. "I hadn't even thought of that. That's worse than even I had imagined, especially if one of these wealthy people manages to create his own Stone and starts making gold and so forth to bribe off the police."

Rowling shook her head in disbelief and took out her notebook. "Hopefully that won't happen. In the meantime, however, let's get back to business. You were going to start talking about your second year at Hogwarts?"

Harry nodded. "Yes, Ms. Rowling. Things started late in the summer when this elf Apparated into my house and told me to not return to Hogwarts in the fall because I would be in danger..."

To be continued...

Update #287
-------------
Saturday, July 20, 1996
Filch Residence
Hogsmeade
Great Britain (or should I say United Kingdom?)
-------------

Argus Filch had always affected a gruff exterior to the Hogwarts students. However, deep down inside he respected and envied them. Although he was incapable of actually casting magic spells, he had gotten to know many of them over the years and often found himself rooting for them. However, like any other staff member he had to be impartial towards the students.
For the first time in many years, he had allowed himself to express his true feelings for the students. The reason had been made perfectly clear at the ceremonies earlier in the day commemorating the one-month anniversary of Judgment Day.

At precisely 1:08 PM, somber bells began tolling all over Hogsmeade. There were 258 in all, each representing one thousand people killed in the attack on London. Had it not been for the prompt actions of Hermione Granger, that number would have likely doubled. And had the wind been coming from any other direction, it would have likely double again. The bells were followed by a list of all known wizards killed in the attack.

Filch had nearly fallen over when he heard that a good 6% of the Hogwarts students would not be returning in the fall -- indeed, would never return again. Gryffindor and Ravenclaw Houses had taken major hits because of the high proportion of Muggle-born wizards who had lived in and around London. Slytherin, thanks to its tendency for pure-blood wizards, had survived entirely intact.

The Hogwarts staff was seriously thinking of making Hermione Head Girl next year even though she would only be a sixth-year student. The last time that had happened had been over 200 years ago, and the boy who had been elevated to Head Boy had eventually gone on to become Minister of Magic and one of the most powerful wizards of his time. Dumbledore had recommended that Harry be made Head Boy for his work in destroying some of the Horcruxes, but the rest of the staff -- including Filch -- shot that down immediately. Snape, of course, led the anti-Harry faction, and as head of Hogwarts at the time his opinion played a major role.

Filch was happy Dumbledore was back in charge of Hogwarts. The great wizard's return had pushed Snape back into his familiar role as Potions master and Slughorn back into retirement. Alastair Moody had returned for Defense Against the Dark Arts, and the staff roster looked remarkably similar to the way it had during the 1994-1995 school year.

There were a few exceptions, of course. Perenelle Flamel, the Minister's wife, would be teaching History of Magic and spending half of her time expounding on why the Philosopher's Stone should not be used. Wilhelmina Grubbly-Plank had replaced Hagrid, who reputedly was being primed to become ambassador to Ietalis. Hugh, Flamel's former apprentice, had become an assistant professor.

There was also Erin Megan Baldwin, of course. At age 26, this Muggle seemed barely older than the students themselves. Professor Baldwin's hair changed color enough to make people think she was an Metamorphmagus -- whereas in fact she was just dyeing it. Dumbledore claimed that she reminded him of Nymphadora Tonks -- but the similarities were just skin deep.

There was one major piece missing, however, which would probably have an impact far beyond the arrival of the new staff members: Minerva McGonagall. McGonagall was dead, killed by Death Eaters in Diagon Alley. She had served Hogwarts for decades, and the staff was trying to figure out the best way to memorialize her. Filch looked over the plans for Black House's new tower and wondered if there was any way to put a painting of McGonagall in the main foyer. As a former headmistress, she would get one in the headmaster's office. However, not many students got a chance to visit Dumbledore's office.

At 3:30, red globes of light had begin hovering over Hogsmeade to represent the glowing balls of light over the Ministries of Magic. They had exploded in fireworks at 4:00 to celebrate Dialonis's successful program to save the world during the third Judgment Day in the history of the human race. The fireworks were followed by a promise -- thankfully not an Unbreakable Vow -- that the citizens of Hogsmeade would never allow this to happen again.
A soft hoot attracted Filch's attention, and he turned to see an owl in the window holding a letter. Wondering who the message was from, he retrieved the message and left a Knut in the owl's claws.

Filch's eyes shot up. It was from Harry Potter, and it had in fact been addressed to him. The owl hadn't made a mistake.

What the hell was this? Potter didn't like him all that much, and to be honest Filch figured the boy was too clever for his own good. Nevertheless, he figured he should at least read what the boy had to say.

Dear Professor Filch:

I hope you are doing well and that you have weathered the storms of Judgment Day along with the rest of the Hogwarts staff. I look forward to returning to Hogwarts as a sixth-year student in the fall.

I am writing to inform you that I have just received information that will likely cheer your spirits. I understand that you are a Squib, relying on Kwikspell to mask your inability to cast spells. Rest assured that your secret has been safe with me, Ron, and Hermione. We have never betrayed you.

You have always considered yourself to be incapable of magic, and you have likely been treated as a second-class citizen by some of the wizards of Slytherin. However, you should know that it is extremely likely that you do in fact have magical blood inside you. You may not able to cast spells, but you most assuredly are not a Muggle. In fact, I would not be surprised if most of the people who are Squibs do in fact have magical blood inside them.

Filch nearly fell over. What was this? Fascinated, he read on.

Let me explain how I know this. Yesterday, I received a note from a laboratory specializing in wizarding DNA. I had always found it odd that Dudley, my cousin, could see dementors even though he could not cast spells. The laboratory took a sample of Dudley's blood and revealed that he had a gene known as "Z" activated. To the best of the laboratory's knowledge, all wizards have this gene activated.

The lab suspects that this gene allows Dudley to see the dementors and experience magic more strongly than a typical Muggle. It makes sense, if you think about it. My mother was a witch, so she had the Z gene. This likely means that her grandmother had it as well...which in turn means that her other daughter, Dudley's mother, could have been a carrier.

Although the research is still in the preliminary stages, there is increasing evidence that all wizards have two genes, known as Q and Z. The Z gene I told you about allows a person to see dementors and other magical beings. Q is still elusive, but there is a strong indication that the Q gene allows the person to cast spells.

The reason we know about the Q gene is also interesting. You may recall that a physics lab eventually gained custody of Professor Lupin's wand after he was killed in the football stadium. It just so happened that one man -- a seeming Muggle -- was able to pick up the wand without being harmed. The wand obviously chose this scientist, and as we know wands choose wizards. The wand obviously thought the man was a wizard...but how? Well, his blood was tested and compared to other people who were able to cast spells and handle wands. They all had the Q gene activated.
Consider the following. In order to be recognized as a wizard over all these years, someone had to have both the Q and Z genes. Anyone without these genes was obviously a Muggle. This made perfect sense except for one thing: Squibs. No theory of Wizarding genetics could explain Squibs...until now.

Because there are two genes, it is possible for someone to have ONE of them and not be recognized as an obvious wizard. Had it not been for the fall of the Statute of Secrecy and the involvement of the Muggle geneticists, we would likely have never known about this. This discovery is a direct result of the exposure of the wizards.

If this is the case, there are four types of people: straight Muggles with neither Q nor Z active, traditional wizards with both Q and Z, Q-only half-wizards, and Z-only half-wizards. Of these four groups, the lab suspects that 98% of people are straight Muggles, 1% are Q-only, 1% are Z-only, and one out of every 10,000 or so is a full wizard with both Q and Z. Yes, there are million of people out there with the potential to interact with magic who don't even realize it. What's more, there are 198 half-wizards for each full wizard. That Kwikspell course you were taking is likely designed to cater to Z-only half-wizards without even realizing it.

This theory explains the existence of Muggle-born wizards: one parent has the Q gene and the other has the Z, yet they're both considered "Muggles" according to the traditional definition of wizard.

Now consider Squibs. Squibs are born to Wizarding parents, where both the Q and Z are active. The parents find themselves surprised that their child does not test as a wizard. However, genetics are fairly predictable, and as a result the Q and the Z usually make it through...unless there is a mutation which causes the Q or Z to deactivate. This will produce half-wizards, which would be called Squibs in the Wizarding community...and Muggles outside it.

Professor Filch, unless I am very badly mistaken, you are not a Muggle. Your experience matches precisely what I would expect of a Z-only half-wizard raised in a Wizarding environment. You do not have to feel ashamed that you have no magic potential in you: the potential is there, but no one knew to look for it. In fact, I would not be surprised if the Muggles would consider you to be a potential wizard!

I highly recommend that you test yourself, as I suspect you will be in for a pleasant surprise. For one thing, if you marry a traditional wizard there is a 50% chance per child that your children will be wizards, and those who aren't will be half-wizards like yourself and as a result carriers for producing more wizards in later generations. Furthermore, your status as a half-wizard could very well earn you the position of Head of Black House.

Sincerely,

Harry Potter

P.S. No, I did NOT touch Mrs. Norris. The basilisk did it, and you know it.

P.P.S. Dudley is not sure if he would accept an invitation to Hogwarts as a Z-only wizard.

Filch put down the document with trembling hands. Could he have Wizarding potential after all these years? He had to find out.
For the longest time, I had only known of it as Temple Beth Bingo. It was a small synagogue, generally serving an older crowd, in Waltham near the big supermarket. I had heard about its nickname from Erica, who only knew that they held bingo nights occasionally. Very few people from Brandeis went to the old synagogue, especially when school was in session, as the school's high Jewish population allowed it to have different services for each stream of Judaism.

Things had changed in a hurry, however. First, Erica had gotten involved with Temple Beth Israel -- Beth Bingo's real name -- after realizing that young adults didn't really have a place to go to when school wasn't in session. She had originally hoped to move to Cambridge, where she had been planning to turn the moribund Temple Beth Shalom into a similar young adult haven. Those dreams were dashed, however, by the collapse of the economy and astronomical rents the had been charging in Cambridge ever since it was found to have a water supply separate from the Quabbin.

Second, it had become increasingly obvious that the services for July 20th would be an absolute ZOO. Not only would it be the one-month anniversary of the Judgment Day attacks, but it would also be harbinger of the Ninth of Av, the most remorseful day in the Jewish calendar and the climax of the Three (now Five) Weeks. Traditionally, the Ninth of Av was dedicated to mourning the end of the classical State of Israel, where the Book of Lamentations was read in synagogue and people eschewed eating and drinking. Considering that Tel Aviv had been destroyed on Judgment Day and Haifa had been hit with a dirty bomb, the coincidence was unsettling to many people.

All three Jewish congregations had agreed to join together for a special service to commemorate the one-month anniversary. Considering that tradition held that the destruction of the State of Israel was a punishment for people quarreling with their peers, the combined service was quite appropriate. They had agreed to take over Sherman Auditorium as they did for Friday night dinners.

That, however, had been before Samuel had suddenly returned and spurred the now-huge interfaith support group into action. Having been intrigued by the concept at what was now being called the Leap Day Meeting on February 29th, I had joined the group and watched in amazement as it had grown to include Harvard, MIT, and Boston University. Now known as Students for Samuel, it supposedly had 2000 people on its roster. They were split between undergrads, grad students, and young adults, and people were convinced the movement would spread when students graduated and spread the news to locations outside Massachusetts.

The fact that Samuel had endorsed Buddhist contemplative practices and offered to chair an interfaith conference somewhere in upstate New York had electrified everyone. Several Buddhists wanted to attend services as well, even though some of the more conservative Abrahamics were reluctant to let them in. Some of the more open-minded Christians argued that if Samuel accepted the Buddhists, how could less knowledgeable people do otherwise.

Samuel had also been interested in Hinduism as well, though he had gotten a little wary over the past few days once he had been told that the Hindus believed in gods. He eventually concluded that non-theistic Hindu practices were still all right as long as they did not require idols in the sanctuary. It was
obvious that he was having some trouble letting go of a prior lifestyle where he spent his time railing against idol worship.

It took me a while to walk to the synagogue -- it was further away than I had expected. I got there fashionably late, as usual, and as a result found myself sitting on a folding chair in the auditorium. The rabbi commented that he'd never seen this many people in the building in his entire life. Granted, some more people had been coming of late because of Erica's involvement with the community, but this was unprecedented.

There were representatives from virtually every young adult religious group in the area. Brandeis had by far the largest contingent, as the Orthodox Jews who were reluctant to drive on the Sabbath were able to walk. Harvard had brought many people as well thanks to its large Jewish community and divinity school. Boston University had a few, led by a charismatic -- and attractive -- young woman named Michelle Goldhaber who had learned about the event in a most unusual manner: by being Dara Lifschutz's roommate.

MIT, not surprisingly, didn't have many. The Jewish community was relatively small, and it wasn't very organized when it came to people who were not observant. I recognized a few of them, but not many. One of the problems with MIT Hillel was that very often people who weren't observant (only culturally Jewish) tended to be uncomfortable with it. I had actually run for Hillel president for 1993-1994 to try to stop this but hadn't gotten elected. However, there was one member of the MIT community other than myself who got a lot of attention: Jelena Kurchatova.

I could barely get my mind around the fact that this girl was a witch. She had just seemed like an ordinary MIT student. Nevertheless, she felt compelled to come because as a practicing Wiccan (which surprised me -- I hadn't known, but given what I had seen with MIT Hillel it wasn't surprising that she hid the Wicca) an interfaith group made sense for her. Apparently it was possible to be Jewish and Wiccan at the same time, which confused me at first. She had apparently wanted to make this a low-key visit, and she had arrived in a car instead of on a broom.

There was already talk of a young adult trip to Rhinebeck, though not "officially" to Omega itself. The authorities had tried to discourage civilian trips as there wasn't enough room at the old summer camp to host everyone who wanted to go, and they didn't want people to attend unless they were qualified to discuss multiple faiths with at least SOME degree of fluency. Supposedly people needed at least a Ph.D. in religious studies (or multiple Masters degrees) to be even considered a candidate, and even with those you had to get in through a lottery.

Many people were concerned that the Omega conference was going to turn into an interfaith/spiritual version of Woodstock. Every single delegate had condemned the Woodstock analogy, arguing that the discussions would be quite serious and as a result it would not be appropriate to make light of it. Samuel supposedly had gone off the deep end when they told him what Woodstock was; supposedly he had complained that the description of the 1969 concert reminded him a lot of Sodom and Gomorrah.

I was encouraged to hear that the remnants of Hamas -- the humanitarian organizations which had been serving the Palestinians prior to the fall of the Statute of Secrecy -- were rapidly burying the hatchet with the Israelis. This, combined with the work of King Fahd and the former Hamas Death Eater, had surprised many people all around the world, not to mention many Brandeis students who were still reeling from the death of one of their number, Alisa Flatow, in a bus attack while she had been studying in Israel. Taking a cue from Kurchatova and some of the other wizards, the Hamas wizard and Michal Oved were joining forces to help with the reconstruction of Tel Aviv. It would take a couple of more years for the parts of the town destroyed in the nuclear explosion to be rebuilt,
but the progress had been nothing short of...magical.

Reconstruction of the other cities were also continuing apace. Places which had been flooded by the explosions -- such as Lake Scrimgeour and Wall Bay -- were left as is as memorials.

The service was more or less as I had expected -- pretty traditional, and therefore somewhat old hat. The sermon, however, was electrifying. People of all faiths gave short talks, and I was amazed how much all of these traditions had in common. It made me wonder why everyone had been fighting over all these years!

There was going to be a similar service in a church the next day and one in a mosque on Monday. Later on in the week, everyone would reconvene for Ninth of Av services -- and supposedly many Christians, Buddhists, and Muslims would be joining the fast this time.

Having gone to a religious Jewish elementary and high school, I had little experience with churches. The last time I had been in at church services, it had been for my former babysitter's wedding and all I remember was staying up late the night before to watch the Celtics in the finals. I was a bit nervous visiting a church. However, I figured I should at least give it a try. They respected us, so it would only be appropriate for us to return the favor. Besides, half of the Jewish girls in the room were going to be attending the church service as well. That in itself would have sealed the deal.

I debated if I should get involved helping Students for Samuel set up a Web page. If I got laid off from Parametric, perhaps that could sustain me until I got a new job. I'd have to learn HTML and stuff like that, though. I'd have preferred continuing to program my video games at home, but you had to do what you had to in an economy like this.

To be continued...

--------------
Update #289
--------------
Sunday, July 21, 1996
Green Residence
Charleston, SC
United States Of America
--------------
The phone rang at 8:35 AM. Irritated that someone had the temerity to wake up him and his wife so early in the morning on a Sunday, Daniel Green was barely able to restrain himself from throwing the handset out the window.

"Hello?"

A vaguely familiar voice replied. "Is this Daniel Green?"

"Yes, and it's too damn early for telemarketers to be calling. Who is this?"

"I'm Warren Bracken from Ace Security Corporation. You've been hiring our people to run the security desk for a few years now."

So that's why I recognize the voice, Green thought. He had always wanted to get to know the employees better, but he just didn't have time to talk to them -- especially that he had already managed to come up with a candidate who would be willing to help produce the Elixir AND who had not yet sworn any of the Six Vows.
Green had been walking down the street outside of Charleston when he had seen a flash of light. Curious, he had glanced over there and seen two people talking. One of them had been clearly dressed as a wizard. It appeared that the wizard was trying to find a job, and by sheer good luck Green had been in the area at the time. Green had conducted a quick interview and hired him on the spot.

Dmitri Vasilev was 33 and from a small town in Ukraine. He had married an American Muggle -- which apparently was not as infrequent as one would have expected -- and moved to the United States so she could be closer to her family. Now he was trying to find himself a job in a world where alchemy, his main focus, wouldn't be as marketable as it would have been in a Wizarding community.

It would take a while to train Dmitri, and things were going to be a bit hectic tomorrow, when the new guy was supposed to show up. Hopefully the first batch of the Elixir of Life would last long enough for Green to bring him up to speed using Flamel's notes, which Hendrickson had conveniently left behind. With luck, no one would even notice that there had been a point when the company had been unable to produce the Stone.

He wrenched his mind back to the conversation with the security guard. "Is there a problem, Mr. Bracken? Did someone break into the office?"

"No, sir. However, we've just managed to track down the security tapes from the video cameras outside the building. We were able to get full coverage of the accident involving David Hendrickson."

Green breathed a sigh of relief. "That's good to hear. I take it he wasn't assassinated and marked our company out as a target since they didn't get what they had been looking for?"

There was a startled gasp on the other end of the line, followed by a wan chuckle. "No, Mr. Green, he wasn't assassinated. That we're sure of now."

"Then what the hell are you calling me at nine in the morning on a Sunday for?"

Bracken's voice hardened. "I can't tell you over the phone, Mr. Green. You need to see this yourself to believe it. We may have a problem, sir. How soon can you get here?"

Green's mind raced. "10:00, maybe?"

"Good. I'll see you then."

Not even bothering to put on a tie, Green raced over to the plant and found the security guard waiting for him. They shook hands, and the guard showed him a data tape. He then led Green into one of the back rooms, far away from anywhere which had public access.

This was most unusual, Green thought. Why doesn't he play the information right here out at the front desk? The only thing he could think of was the possibility of exposing proprietary information. But there was nothing proprietary outside the building!

Once safely ensconced in the video lab, he inserted the CD into the computer and turned it on. As he was waiting for the computer to boot up, he explained what was going to happen to his boss. "Mr. Green, let me explain to you what you are about to see."
Green rolled his eyes. "I know what's going to happen, Mr. Green. Dave is going to walk out in front of the car, fall down, and be hit."

Bracken looked him in the eyes and then pointed at the cassette. "Wrong."

Green stared at him. "What do you mean, wrong?"

The security guard didn’t say anything. Instead, Bracken finished waiting for the computer to boot up and instructed it to play the CD. As the scene outside the building appeared on the screen, the guard told him to take a look at what happened first in real time.

Green watched as Hendrickson appeared outside the door. He looked deep in thought and a little nervous. Seconds later, a woman started crossing the street a few feet away. There was the Chevy barreling down the street, apparently not looking that the woman had stepped into the street. She just had a moment to scream before it hit her.

Green's jaw dropped. "How could she have --"

Bracken just shook his head and pointed back at the screen, where the driver had gotten out and was trying to help the injured woman. Green watched as Hendrickson told the driver to get out of the way and bent over the woman. He looked around a bit anxiously and then pulled a vial of glowing liquid out of his pocket. He poured it into the injured woman's mouth and forced her to swallow it.

Green looked at the screen, confused. There had been two accidents, one of which had involved this woman and one of which had involved Hendrickson? Dave had effectively sacrificed the Elixir of Life in his pocket to save the woman, not knowing he'd be hit himself? That made sense except for one thing: how could the same car hit both people? It took a second for him to realize: hey, Dave was a wizard. God knows what he could do...

The woman's injuries healed, and she looked up in surprise at Hendrickson. Hendrickson seemed a little distracted, however, as if an idea had just come to him.

Bracken snapped at him over his shoulder: "Now watch this!"

On screen, Hendrickson pointed his wand at the formerly-injured woman and muttered "Obliviate". The woman looked confused for a second and blinked. The driver started questioning him and got Obliviated for his troubles.

Green tried to wrap his head around what he was seeing. Obliviation was the spell to modify people's memories. Was Hendrickson trying to cover up the fact that he had used the Elixir of Life in public? It made sense. What was this guard so riled up about? He had a wand, and --

Then it hit him. The wand. Hendrickson had been holding his wand at the time, and he had never returned to the building after the accident. How did the wand get back into the lab?

What Hendrickson did after that surprised Green even further. He pointed his wand at himself and shouted "Geminio". There was a flash of light which cleared to reveal, of all things, a cloned body of the wizard! Hendrickson then arranged the body so it appeared to have been hit by the car, threw another Obliviation at the driver, and disappeared. A few minutes later, the first witnesses appeared on the screen.
Green stared at Bracken in disbelief as the guard ejected the CD. No one spoke for a good thirty seconds. Finally, Green swore loud enough to probably be heard in Columbia.

"Shit! Am I imagining something, or did Hendrickson fake his death and use that Obliviation spell to tamper with the witnesses and accident scene?"

Bracken nodded, reached into his pocket, and brought out the wand from the office. "It sure appears like that, sir. And in case you're wondering how that wand got back into the lab while no one was looking, it's simple. That thing in the lab isn't his wand."

Green stared at him. "WHAT?"

"You heard me right. I remember talking to him shortly after he arrived, and he claimed that his wand was ten inches long and made of oak. Could you hand me that ruler, please?"

Still in disbelief, Green handed over the ruler. The guard then lay the ruler next to the wand and measured it. Eleven inches.

Green swore again, and Bracken nodded. "Exactly, and it's made of something which isn't pine. If I were to guess, it's made from the wood in the hall which lost a branch. What's more, you should have known by now that it couldn't have been his wand. Remember that Muggles can't touch wands."

Green hit himself on the head with the palm of his hand. "I KNEW something was wrong when Lindsay first gave me the wand, but I couldn't put my finger on it!"

"Exactly. This is what I wanted you to see. You wouldn't have believed it otherwise."

Green tried to think. "Where is he now?"

Bracken shrugged. "I don't know, and probably far away from here. If he faked his death, he probably doesn't want us to find him. Considering that he's a wizard, we can probably assume he'll be able to evade us."

"Why would he do this to us? He's been so helpful!"

Bracken looked surprised. "I would have assumed it was obvious, Mr. Green. He figured he could run away with the Stone and possibly offer it to the highest bidder. He is a mercenary, after all."

"But the Stone's here! It was left in the lab with the fake --"

The realization came to Green before he could finish the sentence. Hendrickson knew there were two Stones -- the original and an inert duplicate used for the press conference. Green had already noticed how the two Stones had similar scratches now. VERY similar scratches.

God in heaven, he thought. Hendrickson had cloned the duplicate a second time, left this new copy in the lab, and walked away with the original!

Bracken nodded as he saw Green's reaction. "The Stone's a fake too, sir. I'm sure of it. What's more is that if I were him, I'd make sure that all of the instructions have been tampered with or have mysteriously disappeared. I would know that you would try to hire another wizard to create a new Stone, and without the instructions the wizard isn't going to do much good."
Green nodded gravely. "That slick con artist fooled us all. I'm going to try to get Radner or someone like that to put out a warrant for his arrest."

"You can try that, sir, but if he's faked his death and is a wizard he may be hard to track down."

"It's all we can do, Mr. Bracken. And as far as creating a new Stone, don't worry. We've got a contingency plan for that, and besides we've got some Ukrainian named Dmitri coming in tomorrow to replace Dave. Don't worry, my friend. We're going to get out of this in one piece."

Bracken grunted. "Not if this Ukrainian winds up stealing this new copy, works for Voldemort, or both."

To be continued...

-----------

Update #290

-----------

Monday, July 22, 1996
New York Times temporary headquarters
Albany, NY
United States Of America

BOOK REVIEW: Gilderoy Lockhart, Adventures with Arachnids

In today's column, we will discuss the first book of the Gilderoy Lockhart series, Adventures with Arachnids. Although it is unusual for us to cover sword and sorcery fantasy, this book is not just the introductory novel as a long fantasy series. Rather, it will likely be the first Wizarding novel to successfully cross over into the Muggle world. Furthermore, many wizards believe that Mr. Lockhart actually performed the feats described in the book.

We will begin with a brief introduction to Gilderoy Lockhart. Mr. Lockhart (1958-1996) was a British wizard whose works were extremely popular among the Wizarding community. A former Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor, Lockhart was known for embarking on dangerous journeys and adventures. In the first installment of his alphabetical series, Adventures with Arachnids, he describes a trip into a forbidden forest in the United Kingdom where he had to confront several large spiders. He claims to have been no older than Hermione Granger at the time, and judging from what Ms. Granger has done even a young wizard can do amazing things.

Having successfully dealt with the spiders, he continued on to more sophisticated and difficult adventures: Battles with Banshees, Cries of the Cockatrice, and so forth. By the time of he had released his fifth book, he had gotten a worldwide following and supposedly had a fan club stretching from California to Christchurch.

He married Demeter Larcus, a Scottish witch, in the summer of 1985. Their only child, Marianne, was born in the spring of 1988.

Lockhart was appointed Defense Against the Dark Arts professor at Hogwarts for the 1992-1993 school year. He soon found, however, that he was better at writing books and fighting off monsters than teaching children. He decided to leave at the end of that year to continue with his work.

Tragedy, however, struck in June 1993. Intent on one more adventure, he suffered an accident in the catacombs under Hogwarts and lost virtually all of his memories. He would spend the next three
years of his life at St. Mungo's Hospital in London, where he would eventually be killed in
Voldemort's nuclear attack. He and his wife got divorced in December 1993, and Demeter Larcus

Until June 1993, it was universally believed that Lockhart's adventure tales were documentaries of
actual fights he had with various monsters. Shortly after his accident, however, word began to leak
out that he may have made up most of his "adventures". This accusation, combined with Lockhart's
accident, helped discredit him among the Wizarding community. When he died in London on
Judgment Day, many of his former fans felt that the bomb had put the now-disgraced author out of
his misery.

Lockhart's widow acquired the rights to the books after the accident, and after a brief argument she
agreed to start selling them to the Muggles as a series of fantasy novels. As long as it was obvious
that the books were fantasy, the Muggles could read them even if the Statute of Secrecy was still up.
Tor Publishing Company eventually agreed to start selling the books, and the first one's publication
date was set for July 1998.

No one could have known, of course, that the Statute of Secrecy would fall and that world would
nearly end a month ago. Demeter and her second husband were adamant, however, that the
publication should be moved up to July 1996 and that all proceeds would be donated to charitable
funds dedicated to rebuilding the cities damaged in the nuclear attacks.

We at the Book Review highly recommend Adventures with Arachnids and can understand how
Gilderoy Lockhart became such a popular author. Regardless of whether or not Lockhart actually did
all of the things mentioned in the book, the books do an admirable job in telling us -- the Muggles --
about unusual creatures from the magical world. Take, for example, the various arachnids. One of
them is supposedly a large spider about the size of a small car which is capable of speech.
Supposedly introduced to the grounds of Hogwarts as a pet by a rambunctious student, this creature
is capable of speech and is quite intelligent. Ms. Granger, who is convinced that Lockhart faked
everything, confirmed that the animal in question is indeed capable of speech. However, it is an
extremely dangerous creature and that people should keep their distance from it. Still, one can only
imagine what it would be like to have an intellectual conversation with a creature which is not a
hominid. What is it like to build a web or lay eggs?

Adventures with Arachnids is an easy read, and it provides very detailed descriptions of magical
spells and brings to mind vivid images of fantastic creatures. Some of these descriptions, however,
are a bit graphic, so the Book Review does not recommend it for children under 13. It has 205 pages
and several illustrations showing Lockhart in action against his enemies.

Tor will be selling three versions of the book: a standard Muggle paperback for $13.99, a standard
Muggle hardcover for $29.99, and a dynamic photograph hardcover for $109.99. The first two will
be available in all stores. The third can be ordered directly from Tor.

Lockhart's second book, Battles with Banshees, is scheduled to be released in January 1997.

----------------------
Harold-Green Pharmaceutical Corporation
----------------------
Dmitri Vasilev smiled. Everything was going according to plan. He had the instructions for the Stone
in his hand, taken directly from Mr. Green's secure vault. Green's suspicion had in fact been correct:
Hendrickson had in fact doctored all of the written copies of Flamel's diary so that the instructions
would not produce a viable Stone. Vasilev also proved almost immediately that the Stone left on the
countertop had indeed been a dud.
Green bade him good luck and asked him to swear an Unbreakable Vow that he would return the Stone to his boss as soon as he was finished using with it. Vasilev didn't have a problem with that: as far as he could tell, Rasputin was his boss, and he intended to give the Stone to Rasputin anyway at some point.

The instructions were difficult and required some hard-to-obtain components. Green told him that the company would spare no expense in getting its hands on a new Stone. Vasilev thought that would be nice of them.

To be continued...
Update #291 through Update #295

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Mislagnissa

Update #291
-------------
Monday, July 22, 1996
Omega Institute
Rhinebeck, NY
United States of America
-------------
John Paul and the rest of the religious leaders liked what they were seeing here. This place was
certainly appropriate for a conference which would, God willing, reunite the Abrahamic faiths and
throw in a dash of Hinduism and Buddhism as well. If it proved to be impossible to reunite the faiths,
the conference would establish a new council for tolerance and mutual respect.

Everyone in his party was being forced to travel incognito as Omega was still filled with people. The
announcement of the conference had completely thrown the Institute's schedule for a loop. The site
was going to close (tentatively) from 8/1 to 9/1. All of the speakers and events which had been
planned during that time had been moved to another spiritually-minded camp near Rhinebeck -- one
didn't have the same cachet as Omega, but a good one nonetheless.

Several pilgrims, however, preferred Omega and had wound up changing their schedules so they
would be coming up before or after the conference. From John Paul's perspective, this had had the
unfortunate side effect of having the camp having to host a good 50% more people during his visit
than it normally did. The director added that the weekend of the 28th had gotten so crowded that
people were willing to share tiny rooms and sleep on the beach near the lake.

The Buddhist and Hindu contingents were surprised when they saw that the cafeteria was vegetarian.
Suleiman could get by for the most part with the vegetarian food, but he was still a bit concerned that
he couldn't get true Halal easily.

A Jewish representative complained that the combination of the vegetarian diet and Kosher
restrictions made it so he wouldn't be able to eat anything. Fortunately, the word had gone out to the
Culinary Institute of America, an elite cooking school which also happened to be in Rhinebeck. The
chefs promised that all faiths would have high-quality organic food to eat.

The Pope's party spent a good half hour rummaging around in the Ram Dass library. They then
visited the meditation hall (climbing up all those stairs proved to be a bit of a pain for some of the
more senior members) and sauna/massage building (the normally co-ed sauna was changed to single-
sex for the duration of the conference). The large auditorium would be a perfect location to hold
religious services, and small focus groups could spend time working in various cabins spread out
over the grounds.

It was painfully obvious that there wouldn't be enough dormitories to go around, and the delegates
agreed to house the highest-ranking members (and the infirm) in the dorms and put the others in tents
and sleeping bags. Several people grumbled about the bias towards seniority, of course. However,
the fact remained that the most highest-ranking members were also the oldest and frailest.

The highest-ranking member of all, of course, did not need any housing or food. Samuel and his
interpreter had chosen to arrive in the dead of night, after which the prophet had immediately disappeared as to not blow his party's cover. The interpreter, concerned that people may have been accustomed to seeing her together with Samuel, insisted that she stay in her dorm room until the religious leaders had completed their tour.

John Paul had been more than relieved that Celestine had switched sides. Urban, however, was proving more intractable. When the other leaders recommended that the Bible be amended to the correct the erroneous quote sanctioning the blanket persecution of witches, Urban had gotten angry, saying that God's work couldn't be changed. The arguments were still going on by the time the tour had completed and they had returned to the interpreter's dorm.

The Pope saw that Samuel had returned -- and had brought Deborah back with him. The Dalai Lama and the Hindu leaders looked at her in confusion, and John Paul had to explain who exactly she was. Granted, there wasn't much to see as she was still wearing the archaic burqa-like dress with the bee decoration. But she was definitely there.

All heads turned, including Samuel's, as Urban entered the room in the middle of his latest tirade. "You're thinking of putting the Noha-Pishtin impact in there as well now? That's REALLY pushing it!"

The interpreter obediently translated for Samuel, and the ghost raised his eyebrows. "Noha-Pishtin impact? What is that?"

At those words, everyone went silent and alarm bells began to ring in John Paul's head.

No one said anything for a good minute. Finally, Celestine answered. "Samuel, do you recognize the name Noha-Pishtin?"

Samuel frowned. "I cannot say that I do. However, it sounds Egyptian or Babylonian. Is this person going to be coming to this meeting as well?"

John Paul's alarm bells rang louder. Samuel didn't know about Noha-Pishtin! How could that be? He suddenly answered his own question: Samuel had lived around 1000 BC, and the Noha-Pishtin impact had occurred over 1800 years earlier. No wonder a lot of the details were lost and the legend was passed down as the Noah story! It was as if someone had asked a contemporary person about details of a famous person's life from the time of Christ!

Celestine thought for a minute before answering. "Noha-Pishtin was a wizard who lived almost two thousand years before you were born. He helped save the world during the first Judgment Day."

Samuel grunted. "All that I know is that there were two -- sorry, three now -- Judgment Days. I do not have many details as to what exactly happened or who was in charge. Is this Noha-Pishtin also a ghost? Is he coming?"

Celestine continued. "Samuel, as it turns out you actually have heard of this man before. He's actually mentioned in the book of Genesis."

Samuel's jaw dropped. "WHAT? That's impossible! I'd have recognized the name! I don't remember any Egyptians or anyone like that prior to some tales involving Abraham."

John Paul took over. "Let me explain to you what this man did during the first Judgment Day. Are you familiar with falling stars?"
Samuel nodded. "Yes, I am. The stars are normally fixed in the sky, as compared to the planets which revolve around the Earth. Sometimes, they fall out of the sky and becomes streaks of light. Why do you ask?"

"This is why, Holy One. Over the past thousands of years, we've discovered that these streaks of light are not stars but small pieces of rock. These rocks fall out of the sky, catch fire, and burn up."

Samuel looked at him skeptically. "Rocks fall out of the sky? And this happens several times a day?"

"Yes, Holy One. It's a natural phenomenon. I know this is surprising to you, but you will need to realize this to understand the Noha-Pishtin story. Sometimes, these rocks reach the ground before they finish burning up. If they do that, they make a hole in the ground. If they hit the water, they produce a splash and waves as well. Rocks big enough to reach the ground before burning up are rare, but they do exist."

Samuel nodded warily. "All right, I'll accept that. I've seen sieges of coastal cities and see what happens when boulders miss the target and land in the ocean."

"Well, about five thousand years ago, a rock the size of a small city fell out of the sky. It struck the ocean and made a big splash. Very large waves the size of mountains moved away from the impact site and drowned many coastal communities."

Samuel didn't say anything for a long time. Finally, he shook his head. "This cannot be. Rocks the size of a small city falling out of the sky and creating large waves? I have never heard of such a thing, let alone seen it!"

John Paul nodded. "It happens extremely rarely, once every few thousand years on the average. As a result, people do not prepare for it, and when it happens it catches the entire world by surprise. Rest assured, however, it happened. We know where this hit, we have evidence of the impact, and we have a written testimony from Noha-Pishtin himself. This testimony had been sitting in the vaults of Atlantis all these years until our Grand Mugwump unearthed it to prepare for the most recent Judgment Day."

Samuel frowned again. "You're sure that wasn't a divine punishment? It reminds me a lot of the Noah story, come to think of it."

Suleiman had been waiting for this. Gently, he said: "Samuel, Noha-Pishtin WAS the man known as Noah. He was a former Grand Mugwump, and his name was garbled over the years into the names Noah and Utnapishtim. That is, the heroes of the Hebrew and Babylonian flood stories. Are you familiar with the term 'Hammer of Ra'?"

"Yes, Holy One. Noha-Pishtin was in fact a devout Egyptian wizard, and he attributed the glowing apparition as the wrath of the Egyptian sun god, Ra. Without knowledge of modern astronomy, it was only natural that he attributed it to the anger of an anthropomorphic god. He witnessed the whole incident, Holy One. The astrologers realized that the world was in danger, so Noha-Pishtin used the Judgment Day protocol to get as many people as he could onto three hastily prepared ships: the Shim, the Han, and the Iavet."
Samuel whistled. "Noah's sons."

John Paul nodded. "Yes, Holy One. Noah's sons. Using the power of magic, the Grand Mugwump managed to get the three ships into deep water before the waves struck. As it was, the Iavet went down with all hands. By the time the waves had passed and the rocks had stopped falling, most of civilization had been flooded out with the exception of the two surviving ships. Had Noha-Pishtin not done what he did, it is quite possible that we would not be here today discussing this."

Samuel paused a moment and shook his head. "This is...remarkable. I find it hard to believe!"

"It happened, Samuel. We've found the hole in the ground created by the Hammer of Ra -- it's far away from here and underwater. The site's location is marked on a monument which was given by the merpeople as a gift to the people of this land, and there is a possible expedition in the works to visit what is left of the wreck of the Iavet. If you wish, I will get a copy of Noha-Pishtin's testimony and have the interpreter translate it for you. You will see how there are many, many parallels with the story of Noah. It even has possible references to the Adam and Eve stories as well as the Tower of Babel -- in short, everything before the start of recorded history with Abraham. It's increasingly obvious what happened: the creation of the world, the Hammer of Ra, the re-establishment of civilization, and the beginning of history as we know it. For the first time ever, the problem of the two creation stories in Genesis has been solved. Genesis 1 is the creation of the world, and Genesis 2 -- the Adam and Eve story -- is the re-establishment of civilization after Noha-Pishtin. Eden, apparently, was a reference to the less chaotic world before that rock came in."

Samuel nodded. "I'm going to need to see hard physical evidence if I'm going to accept this. Do you have a piece of the rock that hit the ground? I would normally have asked to go on the expeditions to the impact site and the wreck of the Iavet, but that won't work for several reasons. First, I'm busy here. Second, as a Kohen I am not permitted to be in the vicinity of a corpse. Third, visiting the Iavet reminds me uncomfortably of stories where people loot Egyptian tombs and I won't have it. If what you say is correct, the wreck of the Iavet is an important historical site and it cannot be touched. One last question, however. The Bible says that it rained for forty days and forty nights. Rocks fell for forty days and forty nights?"

Suleiman nodded. "The entire WORLD was ruined by this event. Rocks, rain, and ash fell out of the sky for a long, long time, possibly a year. There are stories of waves striking lands on the other side of the world. Trust me, Samuel. Forty days and forty nights, if anything, was an understatement. We estimated that a good 25% of the world's population died in this event. In and around the Fertile Crescent, where you are from, it was over 60%. If there truly was a time Judgment Day was necessary, that was it."

To be continued...

-------------------
Update #292
-------------------
Tuesday, July 23, 1996
Waffle House
Macon, Georgia
United States of America

James Furmann looked in disbelief at the two dollar bills in front of them. They were identical, and according to the detector in the back of the store both of them were genuine.
He would have never noticed anything unusual had it not been for the fact that the first bill had come in two days ago with the phone number "555-123-4567" scrawled onto an edge with pink highlighter. Having heard that it was illegal to intentionally deface American currency, he had jotted down the bill's serial number -- EE67992733E -- and had confiscated the bill so he could tell the bank about it. Normally, he didn't bother with confiscating the bills unless the damage was obvious. In this case, however, it was more than obvious. And it was a $20 bill to boot.

He had wanted to ask the person who had given him the bill what her name was. However, she had left the store before he could ask the question.

That had been a couple of days ago. The bill had slipped his mind until five minutes ago, when an old man buying a soft drink had slipped him a $20 bill with the same phone number scrawled onto it. Without thinking, he opened up his spreadsheet and entered the bill's serial number, EE67992733E.

Much to his amazement, the bill was already on the sheet. Figuring that he must have put the bill back in circulation after supposedly confiscating it, he looked through the drawers until he found the original bill. He had not made a mistake after all. There were two identical bills with the same serial number.

Someone was counterfeiting money in a way which was outsmarting the latest technology used by the federal government.

This was much worse than a case of vandalizing a couple of dollar bills. The economy was in a freefall, and it wouldn't be out of the realm of possibility for someone to try to resort to creative methods of increasing their income. Printing dollar bills, however, was bad. Criminals got wealthy without earning it, for one thing. In addition, reckless printing of dollar bills tended to lead to runaway inflation. His grandfather Peter had grown up in Berlin during the days of the Weimar Republic and had described in terrifying detail not just the horrors of the Second World War but the hyperinflation between the wars. In a span of a few months, a king's fortune would depreciate to the point where it would be lucky to buy a loaf of bread.

A bad economy by itself was one thing. A bad economy with hyperinflation would be a hell of a lot worse.

Thankfully, the customer was still at the bar when Furmann returned. Gently, he showed the customer the two identical bills and asked the customer if he had another bill. The customer looked stunned and readily complied, stating repeatedly that he had no idea. Furmann, who was very good at reading people's facial expressions, could tell immediately that the customer was telling the truth.

He asked the custoer where he'd gotten the bill from as the government needed to track down the counterfeiter. The man shrugged and claimed he'd gotten it from a restaurant near Atlanta. He remembered the place pretty well, and the fact that the bill had the pink phone number on it made it stand out.

Furmann jotted down the appropriate information along with the customer's phone number. Someone was going to have to track down which of the two bills was counterfeit (if not both). Once that was done, that bill had to be traced back to its source.

This had to be done as quickly as possible. Temporarily closing his position, he walked over to the office in the bank to call the bank.

The customer's bill was genuine. However, Furmann had no way to know, nor could he have known
that the woman who had brought in the counterfeit bill earlier had received from someone else a few hours before. It would take luck -- or a dollop of magic -- to track down where the money had come from.

Ocala National Forest Facility
Ocala National Forest
Florida

Kenneth Franco stood at the podium to announce the new initiative. "Yes, ladies and gentlemen. Given the current state of the world, the American Department of Magic has agreed to have wizards from the Ocala National Forest Facility join the security detail for the upcoming Olympic Games in Atlanta. These wizards will be dressed as plainclothes officers, with wands hidden in their pockets instead of guns. Whenever possible, witches will be asked to serve at women's events and wizards will be asked to serve at men's events. This will be done to respect the traditions of our Muslim friends as well as to be able to help protect the athletes if a threat materialized in the locker rooms.

"Once the Games begin, people will not be allowed to Apparate in and out of cities which are hosting events. Furthermore --"

He cut off his speech as someone tapped him on the shoulder. Surprised and someone upset that someone interrupted him, he hissed at the man beneath his breath. "All right, Derek what the hell is this about? As you can see, I'm a bit busy here!"

The man winced. "I apologize, sir. However, we've got a disturbing report out of Macon, Georgia. It appears that someone has discovered a way to make counterfeit money in a way which recent -- and I mean very recent -- counterfeiting equipment has not been able to detect. Some people are worried that a wizard has taken to Geminioing dollar bills."

Franco turned away from the microphone and swore beneath his breath. "Just we we need. Wonderful. What the hell is going to happen next? Is Voldemort going to throw another rock at us?"

-----
Black Tower
-----
Flamel stared in horror at Radner's Patronus. "I sure as hell hope you're wrong, Mr. Radner."

Radner shook his head. "I'm afraid not, Minister. Not only has Harold-Green hired a new wizard, some Ukrainian named Vasilev, but the security cameras outside the building appear to show Hendrickson faking his death. The cameras picked him up Obliviating witnesses to the car crash, healing the original victim with the Elixir of Life, generating a fake body, and Apparating out of there."

"Shit. Where is Hendrickson now, and more importantly where is that Stone?"

Radner's shoulders drooped. "We have no idea, Minister. That accident occurred several days ago, and by now Hendrickson could be anywhere. Furthermore, if he did what many of us suspected he did, he likely ran away with the Stone and Fideliused it to himself. If that's the case, there's no way we'll be able to get rid of it unless we kill him."

Flamel scratched his beard. "He's already got a price on his head, right?"

"Had, Minister. The bounty was retracted once he was thought to be dead."
Flamel jotted down some notes. "I'm going to talk to Dagher and Dialonis, and I'm going to recommend that they reinstate the bounty and double it. In addition, I'm going to offer a £25,000,000 reward for the recovery of the Stone and a £2,500,000 reward for information pertaining to its whereabouts. Finally, I'm going to take advantage of my position as Minister of Magic. As Minister, I've got the entire Auror Department at my beck and call. As soon as we finish this discussion, I'm going to send no fewer than HALF the Aurors all around the world with one goal and one goal only: capture Hendrickson and get that Stone back -- or at least extradite him back to Britain where we can deal with him. Is there anything you can do on your end, Mr. Radner?"

Radner nodded. "I've already issued a warrant for Hendrickson's arrest and asked that they hand over all copies of your work. In addition, I'm going to suggest that Clinton throw enough legal roadblocks in front of Harold-Green that they won't be able to get very far even if this Vasilev character DOES help them make a new Stone. The guy's an alchemist, Minister. We know what that means. What's more, he has your old notes, the ones Hendrickson used to make the Stone in the first place."

Flamel groaned. "God help us all if Vasilev makes a new Stone. Unless I'm very badly mistaken, the power will corrupt HIM and this second Stone will go the same way as Hendrickson's. Ukraine, or possibly Russia, or possibly some terror organization, gets its hands on a Stone. Harold-Green will panic again, get a new wizard..."

Radner nodded. "That's what we're afraid of, Minister. A very large number of Stones, most of which cannot be tracked."

Flamel stared at him. "Can you do something to make sure Vasilev doesn't create another Stone?"

Radner shook his head. "Not yet. As of this moment, Dmitri Vasilev has not done anything wrong. We cannot arrest him. This is going to be a tricky case, Minister. However, I've got an idea which could buy us even more time."

Flamel's eyes glittered. "Really? What's that?"

"We're going to sue on the grounds that the Stone is an issue of national security, which technically it is if you think about it."

Flamel shook his head. "You're going to sue that Harold-Green isn't allowed to produce a cure for cancer? How are you going to pull that off?"

Radner stared at his feet. "We're working on it. And let's hope we find a solution."

To be continued...

-------------
Update #292.5
-------------
Tuesday, July 23, 1996
Dolphin Research Center
Grassy Key, Florida
United States of America
-------------

More than a month has passed since Judgement Day and the attack on Miami, and things slowly returned to normal. One by one, the hundreds of refugees, dropped off at Key West by the Noordam, given temporary accommodations by the locals, found their way out of the archipelago to their friends
Janet A. Bridger, pensioner, didn’t have much to return to. Her apartment was destroyed by the nuke, most of her friends and family already passed on or distant, didn’t hurry to leave the Florida Keys. She planned to use her saved money to travel around anyway, and the loss of her house could easily be seen as a sign: Do Not Stay There Any Longer.

Today, by far not the first time since she saw the interview with that mermaid on TV, she was in DRC, watching the dolphins, and speaking to them. Deep down, she prayed for something, anything exciting to happen, like dolphins turning into merpeople, or magically starting to talk. After all, they were supposed to be very intelligent, and isolated as they were here, they might not know that Statute of Secrecy is over and they can show their true form.

Several times, she stood as close to them as she could, and spoke to them about these things. They reacted, but then, they did react to other people too— it seemed likely they didn't understand her speech. Today, she had something else in mind...

-----

"So, she showed them a poster, so what?" Thomas Whitesides did not see why his fellow researcher was so excited. "They do react to visual stimuli, everyone knows that."

"Of course, but how do you explain that one of the dolphins was so interested?" Frank Fenwick insisted. "Could it be different than the others?"

"Well, it is Kibby, the only member of the pod who came from the wild, so I guess he might have seen merpeople, and the others obviously did not."

"Or, he is one of them, and doesn't want to show his true form. For all we know, he might be hiding here. Seeing one of his kind would no doubt agitate or at least excite him."

"That'd be sick, he is clearly acting as a mature male dolphin, if you know what I mean. It would be bestiality!"

"It would, if he was human, which he isn't in any case. But even if it's morally right, having a merpeople here would compromise our research— it's about dolphins, not them. We have to make sure all our dolphins are really dolphins." An idea came to him. "Hell, it may even be possible that others are merpeople too, or even half-breeds. I've watched that interview, they didn't tell anything specific about that transformation."

Whitesides thought about it. "We should ask the merpeople. If anyone knows about these things, they do. I wonder if there's an easier way to contact them than flying all the way to Kodiak..."
Tupa Rastu charged into the house with the bag of goodies in his hand. He'd gotten a few Muggle artifacts from the Inuit before: who hadn't? However, these looked much different, and for the most part much more sophisticated.

Officially, all property belonged to the nation, and citizens had to petition the government to "borrow" them. The demand for the new Muggle objects, however, was so great that the government had had to hold a lottery. Each ticket cost 10 Galleons, and people would be allowed to win more than once.

In theory, the government had the right to take personal property by eminent domain. In this case, however, the citizens told that it wouldn't happen unless a particular object was important enough to be deemed an issue of national security. In that case, the citizen would have to do some experiments to see how exactly the object worked before turning it over to the government. The citizen would then be compensated by getting first dibs on the next set of Muggle artifacts.

There was a stampede down the staircase as Tupa's wife and three children rushed into the living room to see the goodies. Mira, his wife, was barely able to restrain the six-year-old from reaching into the bag and grabbing something which, for all she knew, could be dangerous.

The thought made her turn to her husband. "Tupa, are any of these objects actually dangerous? You don't have any experience with this stuff."

Tupa shook his head. "I doubt it, honey. None of the Inuit artifacts were."

"I know that. However, this stuff isn't Inuit, and from what I've read it's far more sophisticated...and has many different uses."

"I agree. That's why I've decided that the two of us will work with them first, and unless it's obvious that they're safe we're going to hold onto them or exchange them."

This, of course, prompted an uproar from the children. It took the parents a good five minutes to stop the crying and screaming. The threat that finally did it was simple: if you don't shut up, no one gets any presents.

Wit the kids silenced at last, Tupa reached into the bag and came out with a small box. He opened the box to reveal a small purple cylinder which appeared to be encased in glass. It looked like a candle, and it had unusual writing on it of which Tupa could translate only one word: CANDLE. The picture also showed images of lemons and flowers.

Mira scratched his head. "Looks like a candle to me, complete with the wick. What's so special about that?"
Tupa chuckled. "Unless I miss my guess, this candle is supposed to smell like lemons or flowers when it's burned. They actually need to have material objects to create these smells. Isn't that funny?"

The kids all laughed at that and told him to light the candle. Making them promise to not touch, he lit the candle and sat back.

For a few minutes, nothing happened. Eventually, a faint whiff of lemon and lavender became noticeable. It was something a fifth-year wizard could have done while he was half asleep. Nida, the nine-year-old, claimed that her dolls could do better than that, and Tupa couldn't argue with that.

The second object was larger than the candle and seemed to come in two pieces. There was a large white box with a black square on the top and a bunch of buttons with the digits 0-9 on the bottom. There were also two buttons labeled "#" and "*". In the middle of the device was a set of white buttons with labels like "FLASH" and "MUTE". At the very top was an odd sequence of characters: "AT&T". Tupa didn't recognize the third character at all -- how was that pronounced?

There appeared be a cable attached to the left side of the box. The other end of the cable was attached to a white object about a foot long, and when Tupa turned the device upside down the object fell out and began hanging from the cable. The six-year-old looked at the object curiously, then daringly put the part that had fallen out on her head. "Look, Mom! I've got a headband!"

Mira suddenly had a flash of insight. "Tupa, I think I know what this is! This is a really good pickup if we know how to get it to work."

Tupa's eyebrows shot up. "Really? What do you think it is?"

Mira pointed at the display. "Those buttons with the numbers seem to be important, given their location on the device. My guess is that the device teaches Muggle children how to count. I bet that if someone pushes the button, the little black box on top speaks the number in words."

Tupa grunted. "That's possible, but what's this extra equipment for? I have no idea what Ura's headband is supposed to be."

Ura, who was quite bright for her age, had an idea. "I think I know, Dad. You see all those little twists on the side of the rope connecting my headband and the box? I bet that you can add or remove twists from it. The thing plays a game as well! If you enter the number of twists on the buttons you'll get a message if you got it right. That's what those other buttons like * and # are for."

Mira looked at the other words on the object. The words were written in the Galiver alphabet, but the language had changed drastically from the way it had been when Galiver had brought it to Xylenda. "MEMORY? VOLUME? HOLD? PROGRAM?"

Tupa noded. "Makes sense. There are multiple programs and games, so that's what the PROGRAM button is for. MEMORY is another game, obviously. VOLUME controls how loud the device speaks. I'm not sure what HOLD is."

Suddenly it hit him. "Merlin's beard, Mira. I think I've heard of this device before. Someone I know managed to get one of these which supposedly taught the Muggle children to spell."

"The Speak-N-Spell?"

"Yup. I bet this is a Speak-N-Count. This could be useful if we could adapt it for our use. Once we
do that, we may be able to help Vad with his Speak-N-Spell."

Mira smiled. "Not a bad idea, Tupa. In fact, if you take a closer look at the buttons, you'll see that most of them have letters on them. Oddly enough, there's no Q, thorn, or Z. I bet you can learn letters with it too."

"That's quite possible, Mira. Perhaps this is an advanced Speak-N-Spell where you can learn both numbers and letters."

"But why is there no Q, thorn, or Z? Muggles have no Q or Z in their world?"

Tupa grinned. "Easy. The Americans no longer use those letters. Q became K and Z became S or something like that. It's not like those letters were used often. Thorn probably turned into D, T, or Y."

Mira nodded and had one final question. "How do we turn it on?"

Tupa scratched his head. "Er...um..."

Not knowing how on earth the machine worked, he reached into the bag for the last object. It was a small card the size of a Chocolate Frog card. However, the picture wasn't dynamic. The name at the bottom said "MARK McGWIRE". It showed an extremely muscular man with what appeared to be a large stick in his hand. He appeared be wearing a uniform of some sort and was standing in front of a squatting man with a mask.

Mira looked at the card in puzzlement. "Mark McGwire? Who's he?"

Tupa shrugged. "I don't know. He must be an important person, however, to get something like a Chocolate Frog card."

He turned the card over and looked at the back. The back had a lot of numbers and codes on it which looked meaningless to him: 3B, RBI, HR, and so forth. Some of the numbers under the HR column were highlighted.

Mira looked at the card curiously. "I wonder if he's the president of the United States."

Tupa shook his head. "No, Mira. I know the president of the United States is named Bill Clinton."

"Then who's this guy?"

Tupa thought for a moment. "Vice president? No wait...head of the army. Look at the way he's holding that stick. It looks like he's going to smash in Voldemort's head! Combine that with the fact that the person behind him looks armored and is wearing a mask...head of the army. I'm sure of it."

To be continued...

-------------
Update #294
-------------
Wednesday, July 23, 1996
Black Tower
Hogsmeade
United Kingdom
Nicholas Flamel had been very persuasive, and he had eventually convinced Dagher that the Stone had to be retaken. What he hadn't expected, however, was the former Saudi minister's reaction.

With the First Division of the Wizards' Standing Army still on station in the DMZ, the Grand Mugwump had decided to deploy the Second Division all around the world, working together to track down Hendrickson and hopefully come away with the Stone. These individuals would assist the British Aurors and various American agents whenever necessary.

In most cases, the deployment of the Second Division would have just gotten a few shrugs, accompanied by remarks that Atlantis was trying to recapture the Stone. In Britain, however, the reactions were much stronger for one reason, and one reason alone. This was because prior to Judgment Day, the Second Division had been known by another, more informal name: Dumbledore's Army.

Dumbledore had to go with them, of course. Not surprisingly, the former Grand Mugwump was going to be serving as the commander in chief of the Second Division. This put Snape back in the Headmaster's Tower and got Flamel into a shouting match with Slughorn about returning to Hogwarts. Not surprisingly, Slughorn had gotten fed up with all of this coming and going (not to mention the work in Korea) and had decided that he was staying retired for good.

With Slughorn out of the picture, the position of Potions master was open. After a brief discussion, they had offered it to Hugh. Flamel and Hugh had both balked at this, stating that Hugh was trained as an alchemist and not as a potioneer. Yes, Hugh was also over 600 years old, but he hadn't done much potioneering work for over 500 years. The comment, of course, promptly backfired as Dagher (whose Patronus had still been in the room at the time) realized that Hugh's experience with the Stone could make him a valuable member of the team. Although Flamel didn't like Hugh risking himself like this, he could not see any fault with Dagher's reasoning.

The net result was that Hogwarts had suffered another staff shuffling and currently had no Potions master. Snape promised to look for a replacement, and he offered to do double-duty as headmaster AND Potions master in case of emergency. No one really liked that idea, as the man would likely be overworked. However, it was the only thing they could think of at the time.

The next issue involved Dumbledore's Army members who had initially enlisted to fight Umbridge and suddenly found themselves age 17 or older. Those who had graduated from Hogwarts were going to be sent on the mission no matter what. However, Snape, Dumbledore, and Flamel had argued vehemently that seventh-year Hogwarts students who had reached age 17 should be exempted from this draft. Dagher, unfortunately, had refused. Hendrickson would be less likely to consider the younger witches and wizards as possible threats, and the students would be able to resume their classes as soon as Hendrickson was caught. In fact, if the Stone were retrieved before September, the seventh-years would gain real-life experience and not have to worry about missing classes!

Hogsmeade, not surprisingly, was absolute bedlam. A good 25% of the adult population had joined Dumbledore's Army to defend themselves against Voldemort, and with many of the London wizards killed on Judgment Day, the unit couldn't afford that many absentees. Flamel eventually had to convince all of these possible deserters that they were only going after one man and that there was no need for alarm. If anything, they could get an international vacation out of it while on deployment.

Snape was still affiliated with the British Secret Service and informed Flamel that many SAS and Secret Service personnel would be tagging along for the ride. Flamel heartily approved, as the
presence of the SAS people would make it easier to deal with, and work around, Muggles.

All of the Dumbledore's Army members would be deployed in groups of three. This was done for two purposes. First and foremost was for protection in case Hendrickson got nasty. The second, of course, was the simple fact that wizards with access to the Stone tended to do Bad Things unless they had at least one chaperone. What good would it do for someone to manage to take the Stone off of Hendrickson only to Fidelius it to HIMSELF?

He looked over the most recent correspondences with Radner. The American Ministry of Magic and the FBI had searched Hendrickson's house as soon as word leaked out that he had faked his death. Of course, there was no Hendrickson there, let alone the Stone. Flamel wasn't surprised, as he suspected that Hendrickson had conjured enough gold to pay for hotels anywhere in the world. The raiders did, however, manage to come away with a few components needed to make the Stone and a copy of Flamel's notes, which Radner had immediately destroyed.

Flamel would have been astonished to know that Hendrickson intended to use the Stone (unlike Flamel) but not do so frivolously. The American alchemist was only keeping it away from the rest of the world because he thought the GOVERNMENT would abuse it. With something as powerful as the Stone, no one could be trusted.

The Muggle phone rang in Flamel's office. Wanting to scream in frustration, he picked it up. "This is Flamel. Who's calling?"

An unfamiliar voice responded. "Minister, allow me to introduce myself. My name is John Jefferson, and I work for Amblin Entertainment. I was wondering if I could discuss a project with you."

Flamel recognized the name Amblin and had an awful suspicion. Trying to maintain control, he said. "Mr. Jefferson, I'm a busy man, and in case you're wondering a powerful magical object is loose. If you wouldn't mind, I'd --"

Jefferson cut in. "You don't want a movie made out of your life story? We've got a censored copy of your diary, Minister. If you wish, you can come over and see it for yourself. There are no references to the Stone in there."

Flamel's mind raced. A censored copy? Then it hit him: the translated English copy he had left on his desk to be used as a memoir. How the hell had the movie company gotten THAT? Never mind, he thought. Deal with the problem.

The Minister thought about it for a second. He had done everything he could to record what had happened fairly and impartially. Yes, he sometimes got irritated about things which took place, and there were things even he got confused about. However, he wrote things down as they had transpired, and this made the censored diary a valuable historical document. It had never occurred to him that the story of his life would make a good Muggle movie. How many people grew up in the middle of the Black Death and lived long enough to tell the tale on the big screen? He chuckled and answered the question: three.

If the moviegoers wanted death and violence, that Koschei jerk who had messed with the bubonic plague would do pretty well. Grindelwald wouldn't be a bad story, either. And the world didn't need to worry about them anymore, with Grindelwald in Azkaban and Koschei losing his head in 1360.

Flamel spoke cautiously. "It's an interesting idea, assuming you have the censored diary. I'll think about it. However, if there is ANY reference to the Stone or any other classified information, I'm
going to have someone destroy the sources and Obliviate you."

Flamel swore at the last sentence. He would have LOVED to do it himself, except that the Aes Sedai oaths prevented him from lying or using magic as a weapon.

"Is it all right if we include magical history as well, Minister?"

Flamel was getting increasingly frustrated, and his ire only grew when he saw people lined up outside his office. "Assuming I censor it, yes. The more safe and correct information the Muggles receive about the magical world, The better. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have business to attend to. We will discuss this later. Good day."

Flamel hung up and composed himself. Couldn't those idiots make a story about Noha-Pishin and the Hammer of Ra instead and not bother him?

He answered his second question almost immediately: of course they could. He wouldn't be surprised in the least if one of Amblin's competitors had already bought the rights to a Hammer of Ra movie and Amblin was now trying to get in on the action...

To be continued...

-------------
Update #295
-------------
Wednesday, July 24, 1996
Oval Office
White House
Washington, DC
United States of America
-------------
An increasingly frazzled -- and sleep-deprived -- Travis Radner marched into the Oval Office. "You wished to see me, Mr. President?"

Clinton nodded. "I'm afraid so, Mr. Radner. I know you're a bit busy, so I'll try to keep this short. Unfortunately, this is going to make your life a little busier."

Radner nearly screamed. "I'm in the middle of deploying a bunch of people to chase after Hendrickson and that Philosopher's Stone, Mr. President. In addition, I'm trying to think of a way to sue Harold-Green to keep them under control if and when they produce another Stone. What else am I supposed to do, sir? I'm doing everything I can with the Stone!"

Clinton nodded apologetically. "I understand, Mr. Radner. Unfortunately, this issue is completely independent of the Stone. You see, someone has discovered a rather...disturbing use for the Geminio charm."

Radner collapsed in the seat opposite the president. "No more nukes, please! Merlin's beard, no more nukes! We don't have the manpower for anything new right now!"

"You won't be doing this alone, Mr. Radner. You'll be assisted by the Federal Bureau of Engraving and Printing."

Radner blinked. "The WHAT?"
"Bureau of Engraving and Printing. They're responsible for producing all American paper currency."

Radner put his head in his hands. "Are you saying that someone is using the Geminio charm to print counterfeit money?"

"I'm afraid so, Mr. Radner. We've just received a report from a restaurant in Georgia where someone saw two $20 bills with the same serial number and markings...and both of them were genuine, according to the machines in the store which test for counterfeit money."

"You're sure that this was done by magic and not by something entirely Muggle?"

Clinton shook his head. "We're not sure. However, it's a distinct possibility. After all, the world knows about the Geminio charm now thanks to Voldemort's nuclear terrorism. Furthermore, the machines which accepted the bills in the restaurant are up-to-date and are designed to detect all known forgeries. They wouldn't be able to detect magical copies, though."

Radner winced. "No, sir. They would not."

Clinton looked at him. "Any recommendations? Presumably you know how to deal with magical counterfeiting."

Radner explained. "Well, there are enchantments on the Galleon, Knut, and Sickle coins used by the Wizarding community to prevent them from being duplicated. I'm not familiar with the exact details, however."

"Could these enchantments be applied to Muggle money?"

Radner shrugged. "We're not sure, sir. No one has ever tried it. I suspect -- no, I sure HOPE that it will work. Then again, sir, I don't know the details."

"Do you know who would, Mr. Radner?"

Radner nodded. "Probably the merpeople, the beings who gave us that obelisk. They're well-known for trading around the world. If there's anyone who is a master at dealing with fake money, it would be them."

"Can you set up a meeting with them, Mr. Radner?"

Radner sighed. "I'm a bit busy, but I'll see what I can do."

-------------------------
Ziggurat Labs
Manchester, England
--------------
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED FOR WIZARD GENETIC RESEARCH TESTING

Ziggurat Labs is proud to announce clinical trials for a test to determine the presence of Wizarding genes in Muggles. We at Ziggurat have determined that there are two clusters of genes which appear to be shared across all wizards. Although we are not entirely certain what exactly they do, and which parts of these complexes are actually responsible for spellcasting ability, we are now sure that Wizarding ability has a genetic component.
Wizards have known that their powers were hereditary for many years. When two wizards marry each other and have children, the children are almost always wizards. When a wizard marries a Muggle, the children tend to be Muggles. However, it is believed that these children can to be carriers of the Wizarding genes and as a result may be capable of producing Wizarding grandchildren.

The tests will be focusing on six genes: G, a complex seen in giants; M, a complex seen primarily in merpeople; V, a complex seen primarily in veela; W, a canid complex associated with werewolves; and Q and Z, the conjectured Wizarding genes. Although we have a theory as to what exactly Q and Z do, we will not disclose this information until we are absolutely certain that the theory is correct. This will likely require several more experiments and trials similar to this one.

Subjects will be asked to take a simple blood test and then be asked questions about their Wizarding history. Have strange things happened to you in the past? Can you see things others cannot? All interviews will be conducted in a manner which will ensure strict confidentiality.

Note that these experiments will require a test which will likely result in a mild electric shock. Be advised that we will be conducting the test under close supervision. At no point will any of our patients be in any danger.

Both wizards and Muggles are welcome to apply, and compensation will be provided for all applicants.

For more information, contact Michael Parson at parson@zigguratlabs.com.

-----------------------------------------------

Harold-Green Pharmaceutical Corporation

-----------------------------------------------

Mr. Green was halfway through his lunch when he discovered that a large red object was sitting in his glass of Sprite. He recognized it immediately and breathed a deep sigh of relief. The Stone was back, and with it Harold-Green's fortunes.

He looked up to see Dmitri Vasilev beaming with pride. Pointing at the new Stone, the Ukrainian smiled. "Mr. Green, meet your new Philosopher's Stone. Hopefully we'll be able to get something useful out of it this time."

"That's great news, Dmitri. Have you been able to produce any Elixir of Life?"

Vasilev reached into his pocket and pulled a test tube filled with the glowing liquid. "Yes, sir. Works fine, at least on a sick frog."

"How about gold?"

Vasilev shook his head. "I haven't tried that yet. To be honest, I'm a bit reluctant given the radiation leaks last time. I want to make sure I've got the thing with the mercury down pat before working with the gold."

"Don't worry about it, Dmitri. You've done well. However, there's one thing I need to ask of you."

Vasilev nodded. "Sure. What is it?"

Green looked at Vasilev, hard, and pointed at the Stone. "I need you to swear an Unbreakable Vow
that this Stone will not leave this building. I don't want you to run away with it like Hendrickson did."

Vasilev blinked. He hadn't expected this.

He had planned to run off with the Stone and bring it to Rasputin. If the Stone was not allowed to leave the building, he'd have to sacrifice his own life to help Rasputin bring back Koschei. He didn't know how to make a Horcrux: perhaps he could research that.

Suddenly, an idea came to him. He would indeed swear that this Stone would not leave the building. After all, he had the instructions. He could just make two Stones, Fidelius the second to himself so no one else could find it, walk away with that, and disclose the location to Rasputin.

Vasilev nodded. "It's a bit unorthodox, but I'll do it."

"Good, Dmitri. You will also swear that the Stone becomes the property of Harold-Green Pharmaceutical Corporation, and you will do everything you can to make our company prosper with it."

Vasilev agreed to that as well. The second Stone wouldn't be the property of Harold-Green, and that was the one that mattered.

"Finally, you will not make another Stone as long as this one exists. We need to keep our monopoly."

Vasliev hesitated for a moment, then shrugged and nodded once more. He'd just hand over the notes to an accomplice and have that person make the second Stone.

Green stood and shook Vasilev's hand. "You're a good man, Dmitri. It's a pity we didn't run into you earlier. Now, shall we get to work?"

To be continued...

-------------

Update #295.5
-------------

Wednesday, July 24, 1996
Joint Xylenda-Roqteratl Trading Post
Kodiak Island
-------------

Merpeople ambassador Zeekh had a busy day, as usual since the trading post has been given access to several Muggle communications networks. The first two of these, called "radio" and "telephone" were voice only, meaning that the only member of the original delegation speaking both Surface Mermish and English*, the Architect Guild wizard sent to create some necessary infrastructure, had to spend more time translating than conjuring pools or soft silt pathways.

Things got easier when yesterday, Muggle technicians installed a handful of "computers", connected to their great network. The merpeople were cautious at first- the word "internet" somehow made them think of the cruel fishing instruments of the sea-faring Muggles, but under the guidance of the Muggles, a few of them were quick to learn the basic functions of the machine. And unlike the
others, these worked by sending and receiving letters, which merpeople could do just as well as any surface-dweller.

Speaking of those Muggles, some of them adjusted very quickly to the merpeople's presence, and acted quite strange around them, displaying unsateable curiosity and an obsession with magic and magical Beings most unexpected given their professions (from what he gathered, Magic and their so-called Electricity didn't like each other, to put it lightly) and overall ignorance. Unexpected questions were asked, and many times, they couldn't give an answer, (either limited by lack of knowledge: "Mister Zeekh, why there is no fossil record of your species?" or by the requested information being classified for the time being: "Ambassador, did any Giants or Centaurs or other magical Beings survive the destruction of those islands?").

Also, thanks to them, the spider walkers now got a new name: drider. Being told what the word meant, he could not deny the morphological similarity... of course, learning more about that game, or mythology, or whatever it was part of, he voiced some protests for fear of association with Evil, but by then the name stuck.

Right now, Zeekh has just finished writing a response to a high-ranking Muggle government official from the Federal Bureau of Engraving and Printing. The humans wanted to learn about wizard money, specifically, how it's protected against copying. He truthfully responded that it involves magic and runes, that prevent the object from being Geminioed altogether, but only the goblins know the exact details of the process. He also warned the Muggles about leprechaun gold. Taking a mental note to call over some Goblin experts from Roqteratl, and to avoid accepting payment in Muggle money whenever possible, he opened up a new e-mail, coming from some DRC, and began reading.

To be continued...
Nymphadora Tonks was upset for the first time in a long time. Not only was Remus Lupin dead, he had died barely months before THIS had come out.

Most of the world was reacting with absolute amazement at Ziggurat Labs' advertisement for people to be tested for Wizarding genes. The company's Web site had gone down from all of the traffic, and rumor had it that many famous individuals were going to Manchester to participate in the experiment.

However, Tonks wasn't interested in that announcement. She had been floored by the second, less known announcement -- the one released only to the Wizarding community via Severus Snape, headmaster of Hogwarts.

Snape had made a tremendous amount of progress on the Wolfsbane Pill. That, combined with the medical information taken by from the tame werewolves who had been transforming in Hogsmeade, had advanced the study of lycanthropy by leaps and bounds. However, the possible discovery of the W gene, combined with the assets of a sophisticated Muggle biological engineering company like Ziggurat, had actually convinced Snape that it could soon be possible to do something which had, until today, believed to be magically impossible.

Tonks had had to read the document three times to confirm she wasn't imagining it. Yet there it was: a possible vaccine for lycanthropy.

Both Snape and the doctors at Ziggurat admitted that it would likely take a lot of work for a successful vaccine to be prepared. New medical products usually took a while to make, and that wasn't even considering the fact that the efficacy of the treatment could only be tested once per month on a relatively small sample size. However, the simple fact remained that the combination of magic and Muggle technology had done something which wizards for eons had considered to be impossible.

There were rumors that the British Ministry of Magic had loaned Ziggurat Labs no fewer than 5,000,000 Galleons -- that is, £25,000,000 -- for the vaccine project. Emperor Sorta, the leader of the werewolf empire of Luggnagg, had done the same (through Atlantis) as that nation was still hidden from the Muggles. Despite this infusion of money, Snape had cautioned that it would likely be years, possibly even decades, for the vaccine to be safe for public use. Flamel would normally have commented on the loan except that he was nowhere in sight because of the flap over the missing Stone.

Tonks hoped that Hendrickson knew what he was doing. However, the simple fact remained that power like that tended to corrupt. Remus had told her of an old Muggle story where an evil wizard named Sauron had invested all of his power in a magical ring which could be used to rule all of sentient life. After being incapacitated in battle, a hero named Isildur who had promised to destroy
the ring was about to do so when he realized what he going to be throwing away. At the last minute, he had changed his mind and used the ring to disappear. The same tale included stories where nine people were given rings of power but became corrupt, turning them into creatures which seemed awfully like dementors. Remus had always wondered if the author of that story, a man named Tolkien, had actually seen something he hadn't been supposed to and no one realized it.

She thought back to Ziggurat's first announcement, the one about the genetic testing. The idea of Wizarding ability being passed down through genes intrigued her, particularly the possibility that it took more than one gene to produce a wizard. If these genes were rare, it would explain the low number of wizards as a person would have to catch lightning in a cauldron twice for to get both of them. It also explained the possibility of Muggle-born wizards, where two people with half the genes produced a child with all of them. Finally, it explained the existence of Squibs -- cases where there was a flaw in one of the genes and you wound up with someone who was partially, but not all, wizard.

Filch had sent out an excited message to the staff of Hogwarts, claiming that he may be a partial wizard after all. Harry Potter had written to Filch, claiming that the caretaker could very well be a Z-only wizard. Even more surprisingly, Dudley Dursley had come out as a Z wizard despite his terrible upbringing! The possibility that Wizarding ability was not an all-or-nothing deal was going to change the magical world. Tonks was sure of it.

The biggest impact would be the simple fact that there were likely many, many times as many people with SOME of the wizard genes than there were wizards. Being struck with by lightning once was much more likely than being struck by lightning twice, after all.

Tonks looked at her pocket watch and realized that it was about time for her to get dinner with Megan Baldwin. The two twenty-somethings had become close friends, and Megan had interviewed her extensively about life as a witch. The only thing Megan had been irritated about to this point was the fact that she couldn't get her hair to change color on a whim.

------------------------

Ziggurat Labs

The line went around the block...three times. It had reached the point where Michael Parson had to start turning people away and telling them to come back for the next clinical trial. The simple fact was that he couldn't deal with all these people at the same time.

Half the subjects had grumbled a bit about being dismissed. Yet when the word leaked out that three of the people near the end of the line were going to be chosen for the study despite their late arrival, not THAT many people complained out. After all, the lucky ones had been Princess Diana (now the Queen Mother), Sarah Ferguson, and King William V.

Naturally, the paparazzi wanted to watch the royals take the test. Parson, however, would have nothing of it. William, still trying to figure out what he was going to do now that he had the throne, felt a sigh of relief as the scientists closed the door to the lab, blocking out the reporters.

The doctor was just about to explain the procedure when William heard a startled swear at his side. He turned to see a wand falling to the ground and Fergie shaking her hand feverishly. Figuring that he had to help his aunt and the doctor, he picked the wand up off the floor and examined it. It didn't seem all that dangerous, regardless of what everyone said. His aunt must have hurt herself with a splinter or something.

He put the wand back on the table and asked Fergie whether she was all right. The Duchess of York,
not surprisingly, complained that people shouldn't leave things like that around, especially with the royal family in the area.

William grunted -- she had a point. Turning back to the doctor, he was about to make the suggestion when he realized every single doctor was staring at him. His mother was looking at him in disbelief as well.

Two of the doctors looked at each other. Finally, one of them turned to Parson. "This can't be happening. No way. This is impossible!"

Parson looked a bit shell-shocked as well but kept his composure. "It could just be a fluke, guys. Let's get him tested just like everyone else. You know the protocol. The fact that you've got a crown on your head doesn't make you any less human."

William scratched his head. What the bloody hell was going on here? Was he going to get into trouble just for trying to pick up a wand?

-------------
Presidential Mansion
Houyhnhnmland
-------------
One of the advantages of being a yahoo who worked in the Presidential Mansion was that the centaurs tended to overlook him simply as a member of the hired help. He had access to rooms where people often weren't allowed to go -- after all, not all centaurs were wizards, and they didn't want to have to clean up after themselves.

In this case, it was the bedroom of one of the main security guards.

Making sure not to make any noise, he reached into his pocket for the list of code words his cell leader in Two Exceeds Four had given him. He looked up today's date on the list and found the correct code word. Walking over to a blank space in the wall, he inscribe the code word into the wall. The wall dissolved, revealing a closet with a key in it. Entering another code word from a second list, the glowing white light surrounding the key faded and the Muggle was able to pick it up.

Now he had to be careful. Waiting until the guards were out of sight, he grabbed the stolen Invisibility Cloak and hurried down the hall towards the room holding the Protector. Consulting yet a third list -- he couldn't fault the centaurs for their paranoia here -- he entered another code word and the door opened.

Seconds later, he was face to face with the Protector. Even though the Muggle knew what his mission was, he couldn't help but stare in amazement at it.

The magical statue known as the Protector had been hiding the land of the Houyhnhnms from the Muggle world since shortly after Galiver's visit in 5 AG. It had been lovingly crafted out of metal and wood by centaur arms and hooves hundreds of years ago, and it was made to look like a rearing horse. The horse glowed brightly in the dark room, and the Muggle recognized it immediately from the flag of the land of the Houyhnhnms.

The Muggle confessed that it would be a shame to destroy it. However, he had his job. The only way the yahoos could be freed would be if a nation like the United States -- or the Muggle world in general -- found out about what was going on here. Considering what had happened in Syrdan, it was unlikely that any of the yahoos would be leaving here anytime soon.
Making sure he was safely under the Invisibility Cloak, he reached into his belt and withdrew a small pouch. He extracted an object from the pouch and promptly unfolded it so it became a large metal rod.

He raised the rod over his head and began whacking away at the statue. Not surprisingly, a couple of alarms went off. He expected that, however, and figured that he had at least a good two minutes before the four-legs realized what was going on.

Sixty seconds later, he had bashed in one leg and dented the metal casing. The light, however, was still on. Exasperated, he went for the other leg and was rewarded with a shearing sound as it broke in two. With both of its supports gone, the statue fell off its pedestal and broke into two pieces. The light surrounding it winked out, plunging the room into darkness.

For the first time in almost three hundred years, the land of the Houyhnhnms was visible to the Muggles.

Congratulating himself on a job well done, he hurriedly folded up his makeshift bat and headed for the exit. He didn't make it in time, however, as the guards intercepted him just as he was about to leave the room. He had completely forgotten about the fact that Revelio Hominem could track invisible people.

Seconds later, the Two Exceeds Four saboteur was dead. The damage, however, had already been done.

To be continued...

Update #296.5

Wednesday, July 24, 1996
Japan Airlines Flight 001
33,000 Feet Above the Eastern Pacific

Konami Yamamura was bored. There wasn't really much to do out here, and she was sick and tired about her co-pilot complaining about his unfaithful wife. Granted, things might have been different if he had actually been trying to hit on her. But that wasn't the case.

She had an amusing thought of the two of them getting frisky in the cockpit. The plane WAS on automatic pilot, after all, and no one was allowed into the cockpit in mid-flight. Rather convenient, in a way.

The view outside was of an endless expanse of water blocked in a few cases by clouds. Occasionally, she would see whitecaps on a few of the waves, and here and there an oil tanker. But that was it. Had it not been for the fact that her aircraft had a tracking device, she wouldn't have been able to tell where she was.

She figured she should at least do some kind of routine check to get SOMETHING done. She was about to start on the checklist when there was a huge flash of blue light outside. Seconds later, a freak gust of wind suddenly slammed into the bottom of the plane, lifting it by a good 200 feet.

Her training took over, and she immediately looked to the safety of the aircraft. Miraculously, there wasn't any major damage. Boeing built their planes well.
The co-pilot looked at her. "What the hell was that?"

Yamamura looked at the controls frantically. "I don't know, Daisuke-san! Did you see anything on the radar?"

"I sure didn't. I'll check some more of the readouts here and tell the stewardesses to check on the passengers. Meanwhile, you call Tokyo."

Yamamura nodded and reached for the intercom. "Tokyo, this is JL001. We've just experienced a bad case of vertical wind shear, taking us up 60 meters or so. I saw a flash of light just before that happened. Anyone have any idea what that was, over?"

The response came back quickly. "Are you declaring a mayday, over?"

"Negative, Tokyo. The plane seems fine, and the co-pilot is checking on the passengers. It's got to be some kind of weather-related problem."

"What are your coordinates, over?"

"We're currently around 140W, 5N. We're in the middle of nowhere, over."

There was a brief delay as the meteorologists in Japan consulted their charts. The pilot took advantage of the opportunity to look out the window to see if she could determine what had caused the anomaly.

There appeared to be a large cloud forming beneath the aircraft, one which hadn't been there earlier. Probably water vapor being lifted by the updraft, she thought. She could see land through the holes in the cloud. The terrain appeared to be primarily rolling hills covered with fields and, of all things, rainforests.

The meteorologist came back on. "JP001, we're not picking up anything here. What do you see out your window?"

Yamamura tried to explain. "There's a big cloud forming underneath us, maybe down at 2000 feet or so. I can see the land underneath it, lots of rainforest and --"  

Then it hit her. Land.

There was no land anywhere in the vicinity.

This had to be a hallucination. She MUST have hit her head.

She activated the intercom, reassured everyone to keep their seat-belts fastened, and told the co-pilot to come back to the cockpit. When he did, so he seemed very agitated.

"Konami-san, take a look out the window. Tell me if you're seeing what I think I'm seeing."

Konami bit her lip. "Don't tell me you see land down there too. Did you hit your head as well?"

"No, I didn't. What's more, virtually all of the passengers are seeing land down there as well. The stewardesses are reporting that passengers think we're lost. Are we? I still want to know what hit us."
Konami looked at the GPS. It now reported 139W, 5N. Airspeed was normal, oil pressure was normal. As far as the plane was concerned, everything was fine.

Then where the hell had that land come from?

The meteorologist came back on after a brief delay. "Land? What do you mean, land? There's no land out there, over!"

Konami's frustration boiled over. "That's what I thought! Yet I'm not hallucinating. Everyone else in this aircraft is seeing clouds and land down there as well, over. Everything is normal on board, and the plane is running safely. I don't know what that was, over."

Tokyo's controller came back on. "Check your coordinates again, over."

"139W, 5N. Course 089, airspeed 400 knots. Right on target. Now we've got a lake and a field popping up in the clouds, and the clouds are getting thicker down there. I tell you, this is real. Get a satellite on it, pronto. This is not natural, Tokyo.

"Could it be a volcanic eruption? Over?"

"With no mountain? I doubt it, and I don't see any lava. In fact -- good lord, there are buildings down there! What is this, James Bond's villains' hideout. Over."

Konami started trying to figure out what to tell the passengers. "Either that, or some wizard is really fond of practical jokes. Over."

--------------
Oval Office
--------------
Clinton already had enough on his plate. Now this?

He barked into the phone. "Where are the coordinates again?"

The head of the FAA replied. "The pilot reported that the land was at 140W, 5N. Last time I checked, there wasn't any land out there. However, sir, we've got a lot more information now. We've got land sightings from flights all over the eastern Pacific. SOMETHING appeared between South America and Hawaii, and I'll be damned if I know what it is. Whatever it is, it isn't just an island. It's something the size of a small continent. What's more, there is evidence that it's inhabited."

Clinton's jaw dropped. "Inhabited?"

"Yes, sir. I suspect that they're farmers -- they've cleared out large tracts of rainforest in there. There HAVE to be wizards involved, sir. I can't imagine any other way continents can appear out of nowhere."

The phone line connected to NASA started flashing. Telling the FAA person to wait, he switched over to the spacemen. "Well, Chairman? Do you have a satellite picture?"

The NASA chairman answered. "Yes, Mr. President. We're sending over a picture now from one of the geostationary satellites -- thank God the anomaly was so close to the equator."

"How big is it?"
"You're not going to believe it, sir. It's HUGE. The new island is roughly the size of Alaska, and it's centered at roughly 130W, 7S. Here, sir, see for yourself."

Clinton opened the message and looked at the attachment. There was a huge, roughly circular cloud bank about 15 degrees across centered on these particular coordinates. He literally could not believe what he was seeing. Then it finally hit him.

Syrdan. Xylenda. Lilliput. Brobdingnag. Now that the Statute of Secrecy had fallen, were those Hidden Nations starting to come out? The wizards must have realized that the United States already knew about Syrdan, and the Xylends and merpeople had already announced their existence to the world. Who would be next? Who were these people?

His train was thought was disrupted by the distinctive sound of someone Apparating into the room. It was Radner, and his eyes were wild.

He spoke three words. "It's Houyhnhnmland, sir!"

Clinton's mind raced. He was barely able to ask, "Which one is that?"

"The centaur homeland, sir. The one where the centaurs are the upper class and the humans are the lower class. The Syrdani term 'yahoo' is actually Houyhnhnm."

Clinton felt as if he were drinking from a firehose. "CENTAURS? Did you say CENTAURS?"

"Yes, sir. Half-horse, half-man. I don't know how that happened, but it did. They have the strength and stamina of a horse and the intelligence of a human being. They are quite remarkable creatures with an extremely advanced magical civilization. The Head of State is President Neihym, and the official name of the territory is the Republic of the Houyhnhnmns."

"Why didn't the president announce they were going to come out? Surprising people is not a good idea."

Radner drew a deep breath. "My guess is that something unusual has happened there. Atlantis is reporting that none of the Houyhnhnm diplomats had any idea this was going to happen. Furthermore, Neihym was out of the loop as well. That is most disturbing as the Protector is inside the president's mansion."

"The Protector?"

"A powerful magical artifact, usually in the form of a statue, which hides the nation from the Muggles. How anyone could deactivate it without his authority is beyond me. I can only think of one explanation, sir, and it's not pretty."

Clinton bit his lip. "I hate to think. Tell me."

Radner sighed. "Many people have seen signs painted on rocks in the fields of Houyhnhnmland in Galiver, the language of the Galiver Consortium. This language is close enough to English for many English-speaking Muggles to understand bits and pieces of it. The biggest problems involve the thorn and eth characters, still present in Icelandic but which in modern English have been replaced with TH. At any rate, the signs are asking for the United States's help in overthrowing the centaur overlords."
Clinton couldn't believe it. "Why would we assist in the overthrow of a ruler of a democratic foreign country, let alone one we know nothing about?"

Radner shook his head. "The messages continue to say that if we felt it justified to help free the Muggles of Syrdan, how could we not intervene in a situation where ALL humans are being discriminated against?"

Clinton swore. "Christ. These tiny nations want us to play grade school hall monitor and spank the bullies for them."

"It appears that way, sir. Remember Atlantis cannot intervene in national affairs, and if they can't, we're the strongest Muggle power."

"What's your recommendation, Mr. Radner?"

Radner leaned over the president's desk. "We need to put a gag order on this IMMEDIATELY, sir. Atlantis has reported that Neihym did NOT authorize exposure of his nation. You may recall that Galiver Consortium nations have to pass a 3/4 vote in the national senates and a unanimous vote in the Galiver Senate itself in order to allow for exposure. That has clearly not happened here. As a result, we cannot let the word leak out. Dagher is ordering everyone to shut down all Muggle references to Houyhnhnmland until we get official permission from Neihym."

Radner paused. "Sir, I suspect that we won't get official permission. Why would they tell everyone they enslave humans? All that would do is get the entire world mad at them. The more that I think about it, the more I think that someone in one of the human resistance movements wanted to up the ante and destroyed the Protector to blow the whistle on the enslavement and force the world to intervene."

"Human resistance movements?"

"Yes, Mr. President, advocating rebellion against the centaurs. The three biggest are Human Heritage, Two Exceeds Four, and the Organization. We're still trying to figure out which one of them did it, sir. Information is still coming in."

Clinton tried to make sense of it all. "All right, Mr. Radner. Lock up all the news and Obliviate everyone who has found out about Houyhnhnmland so far. Keep me posted if anything changes."

"Yes, sir."

To be continued...

-------------
Update #296.7
-------------
Wendesday, July 24, 1996
Ocean floor, Roqteratl border
Indian Ocean
-------------

The centaur re-materialised after the Portkey travel, and promptly fell over and slid a good 2 meters on the floor. He looked up to see concerned merpeople and humans gather around him, trying to help him up. One of the wizards, sympathy evident in his voice, asked him: "You're new to this, aren't
The dazed centaur nodded, then wildly looked around when something important dawned on him: instead of the colossal underground- and underwater- Portkey hall right under Roqteratl's greatest building, he was definitely elsewhere. He could see the deep blue of the ocean through a transparent barrier above and around himself. "Wait, this isn't my destination! Where am I?" he tried to say, but instead of words leaving his mouth, all he could do was gasping and starting to feel dizzy and in need of...water?

One of the merpeople screeched something, and the wizard shook his head in worry. "Yeah, Eiwec, that's Gillyweed. Poor chap didn't listen to our people on the other end... Vingardium Leviosa!" With the spell, he lifted the choking centaur from the ground and shoved him through the nearest airlock, out into the sea. Two of the merpeople, one wearing only a red armband with a symbol, the other in Oath Taker uniform and a blindfold, followed their guest out. Once outside, they could speak Galiver that the centaur definitely understood.

"You should have used the other portkey," began one of them. The centaur cast a questioning glance at him. "Our wizards have recently installed a second Portkey system and modified the ancient one to increase security. Any incoming Portkey is halted at our Apparition Barrier, and we've built border stations where we can inspect our guests, to make sure no threats are smuggled unknowingly or knowingly into Roqteratl, then the travelers are allowed to Apparate into the city, or Portkey on to the original destination, under the Council Chamber. The underwater Portkeys lead to underwater stations, while newly installed ones in air-filled places lead to air-filled stations, as lots of signs and our people there will tell you. I guess you were in such a hurry that you didn't read or listen, swam into an airy one, and thought that you should eat Gillyweed before starting because you'd arrive underwater?"

The centaur nodded. He didn't even try to speak- he felt his vocal cords were not where they used to be, displaced by gills. The merman noticed it. "So, you're really new to this, aren't you? Didn't they teach you to speak underwater? It's not that difficult, you still have vocal cords, you just have to move your gills in a certain way when you speak, and you'll sound somewhat like us, just not so nice. Watch and learn!" Observing and mimicking, the centaur spoke for the first time: "Urgent...news to your leaders. Let me pass!"

"Right. You have already passed one of the inspections, as there is a clicking Muggle machine in there. As long as it doesn't click more frequently, you've cleared it, or so I'm told. Now, seeing you don't have any clothes or luggage, we would only normally need a wizard to do his soul-detect spell when you touch the ingoing Portkey in that building, read it this time because the other one takes you back to the sea near Houyhnhnmland" -he gestured to a simple, but big stone building with just one door- "but with my blindfolded friend here, even that is unnecessary. You're clear to go, Messenger."

Once the centaur left, the merman wearing the armband turned to the other one. "Toni, don't you find it strange that when it's your turn of border duty, you are always placed here to the Houyhnhnmland 'keys? And when it isn't you, it's always someone with a magical eye, most of the time at both stations, as if constantly watching out for infiltrators! I mean, geez, what did the centaurs do, stage a
"I don't know, Red 7, and even if I knew it would most likely be classified. For now, I'm just trying to enjoy spending time with my former squadmates. But I wonder why this fellow was in such a hurry..."

To be continued...

-------------

Update #296.8
-------------

Wednesday, July 24, 1996
Hane, Marquesas Islands
French Polynesia

Edouard Vane swore loudly. Where was a damn wizard when you wanted one?

He had this motorboat for seven or eight years, and it was much better than canoes and so forth when it came to fishing. A motorboat wouldn't do much good, however, without a motor.

Well, if all else failed, he'd do it the old way. He knew many of the old ways, methods were tried and true and had been tested over a hundred years. If he had to paddle, he'd paddle.

Adjusting his had to keep the sun out of his eyes, he headed away from the beach and back over to his house to tell his wife he was going to be taking the canoe. Much to his surprise, she offered to help with the paddling and spearfishing. He took one look at her eight-month-pregnant belly and turned her down. If she decided to have the baby while in the canoe, it would get VERY messy.

Shrugging, he headed into the supply area to pick up the paddles. He was just about to leave the house when the entire world suddenly disappeared in a blinding blue flash.

Edouard swore once more and put his hands on his head as his wife reached for her rosary. Panicked remarks in the nearby homes indicated that he hadn't been hallucinating. Turning to his wife, he roared. "Marie, what in damnation was that!"

His wife said nothing. All she did was point out the door, in the direction of the beach. "This can't be right. I must be possessed by an evil spirit who wants to steal our child. No way."

Edouard spun as he spoke. "You're not possessed, Marie, you're -- Mon Dieu!"

Outside the hut, the entire landscape had changed. Less than a minute ago, his front door offered him a view of the beach and the ocean beyond it. The beach was still there, however. But the ocean was not.

What had once been the mighty East Pacific had suddenly shrunk to a river maybe 5-7 meters across. Beyond that was land which should not, and could not, be there.

The far side of the river was blocked off by a large, forbidding red fence. Edouard could see an area between the fence and the river where nothing appeared to live, which seemed kind of odd. There were signs on the far side, facing off into the distance. Edouard suspected that they would read
something along the lines of "DANGEROUS AREA. DON'T GO HERE". Patrolling the area on the far side of the fence were a bunch of men who appeared to be riding horses. They seemed to be looking around in confusion: the blue flash which had brought them her must have surprised them as well.

Beyond the patrol area was thick rainforest. The only building in sight was a large house with a hayfield nearby. Presumably that was where the guards lived. The terrain was hilly and could have passed for any landscape on the island.

Edouard tried to understand what he was seeing. For a second, it almost looked as if his island had suddenly become part of one larger landmass -- or had been part of that landmass all along and no one had known about it.

This had to be work of evil spirits, he thought. He tried to look to the bright side, however. He wouldn't have to use the motorboat or canoe go fishing as he could just wade into the river.

He walked out of the house and looked around. People were slowly coming out of their little homes, pointing across the river in confusion and asking what was going on. Various local gods and Jesus were mentioned quite frequently, as were Satan and other evil spirits. They apparently had no idea what was happening, either.

Someone hollered over at the mounted men on the other side of the river. "Messieurs, what's going here? What just happened?"

Edouard was surprised by the mounted men's reaction. They swore and spun to look at them, and their jaws all dropped in unison. Finally, one of them shouted something in an unintelligible dialect of English. Edouard couldn't understand what he was saying, but he understood the tone well enough to guess its meaning:

"Oh, shit."

The three men turned to talk to each other. Then, in the blink of an eye, one of them disappeared, just like that. The disappearance immediately made Edouard think of wizards. Had they just been visited by some wizards?

He saw movement out of the corner of his eye and turned to see three men starting to wade across the river. The two remaining guards stared at each other momentarily and then did something even more remarkable. They shoved a branch into the area beyond the fence where nothing grew and withdrew it. They inspected the branch momentarily and swore some more.

Nothing happened for a minute or so, and this allowed Edouard's friends to make it onto the far bank and start walking towards the guards. The man in the lead was introducing himself and trying to start up a conversation.

In response, one of the mounted men jumped over the fence. For the first time, Edouard and the rest of the villagers could see the man's entire body.

It was half man, half horse.

This was not good.

Hich, Raach, and Hnom nearly fell over when the blue flash hit. Dropping the ball they were kicking
around -- Border duty tended to be boring -- they looked around the area in confusion.

Hnom spoke first. "What the hell was that? Did you see a blue flash?"

Raach nodded. "Yup. What's more, I'm even sober. You have any idea what it was?"

Hnom shook his head and turned to Hich. "Beats me. Hich, what about you? Do you recognize that?"

Hich's eyes were wide, and he kicked the fence blocking the Death Zone which would prevent anyone, yaho or centaur, from crossing the Border. Due to an unusual quirk in the geography, this part of Houyhnhnm territory could not be handled by the Protector. As a result, it was left to the Muggles and powerful spells were put in place which would prevent any intrusion from the centaurs' side as long as the Protector was stil up. "I have no idea. I --"

He was interrupted by some shouts from the other side of the river. All three centaurs turned as one to see the Muggles staring, pointing, and shouting at them.

Hnom blinked. "Is it my imagination, or can they see us? That's impossible, right?"

Raach nodded. "They should just see ocean. Don't worry, they can't see us. I don't know who they're talking to."

The three centaurs watched as the Muggles continued hollering in their bizarre language. The entire city was looking out now -- something quite unusual was happening. Presumably they were trying to figure out what that light had come from as well.

Then it hit them. That light was obviously wizard work. If so, how could the Muggles see it with the Protector still in place?

All three centaurs blanched at the implications as Hnom summed everything up with two words, uttered at a loud neigh: "Oh shit."

Raach gritted his teeth. "Don't tell me that Neihym lowered the Protector because the Statute of Secrecy is gone. He can't be THAT stupid. Hnom, head back to the capital and figure out what the hell is going on."

Hnom nodded and Apparated out of there. Most of the centaur wizards were on Border duty as they were a last resort against yahoos escaping and warning the Muggles.

Several of the shouting Muggles began wading across the river. Gingerly, Raach picked up a stick and shoved it through a hole in the fence into the death zone. As he had been afraid of, the stick didn't wither immediately.

Raach and Hich stared at each other. "Galiver did something to us. I can't imagine anything ELSE getting convincing Neihym to put the shield down."

The two remaining Border guards continued talking to each other. Hich had a suggestion. "What do we do now? Enslave them?"

Raach shook his head vehemently. "We can't, as by law they are considered foreigners and cannot be enslaved."
"But they're on Houyhnhnm territory!"

"Actually, Hich, they're not. WE think they are, but they aren't until they get past this fence -- and when they do, we have to treat them like diplomats. However, we've got to do something about this. If they meet any yahoos the entire Muggle world will be after us. We've got to make sure they don't get any further into the country."

Hich snorted. "If the Protector's down, the Muggles are going to come after us anyway. I doubt these fellows are going to make much of a difference."

Raach grunted as the first man reached other side. "Quite possibly. However, we don't want to pick a fight. They're probably scared and curious where we came from. Keep an eye on me, Raach. I'm going to talk to them."

"Like hell you are! I can tell you don't know a single damn word they're saying."

"We'll try sign language, unless you've got a better. Wish me luck."

Not waiting for Hich's response, Raach vaulted over the fence and came down on the other side. For the first time, the Muggles could see his entire body. Hopefully the sight of a half-man, half-horse would surprise the Muggles and stall for time.

It worked. Some of the people on the far bank started ululating wildly and running into their houses. One of them eventually returned with a long metal object in his hands. It appeared to be a long tube with a trigger grip. Half the people on the centaurs' side of the river promptly began running back in fear. One of them, however, stayed put, though he trembled slightly.

Raach showed the visitors his bow and, with them all watching, lay it on the ground. He then tried to convey the message that he wasn't going to hurt them. He then pleaded with the Muggles -- or at least he tried -- to stay on their side of the river until everyone sorted out what was going on.

The man with the long tube swore and pointed it at him. Two seconds later, however, the man next to him cuff him in the head with his fist. The tube man's eyes glazed over, and he fell down with the tube splashing into the sand.

Raach headed down to the last man on the centaurs' side of the river. "Hello, there. I'm Raach, and I'm a Border guard for the Centaur Republic of the Houyhnhnms. I'm sorry, sir, but this is a restricted area. Stay on your side of the river, and we'll see what we can do to clean all this up."

He had no idea whether he got the message across. The Muggle was silent for a moment and then began muttering something. He pointed to himself, to Raach, and then began and gesturing wildly. The meaning was obvious. "I'm X, who are you, what's all this stuff, and what was that blue flash?"

Raach didn't know what to say. He could answer all the questions, of course. However, he was a Border guard, not a diplomat, and was afraid of the questions yet to come.

He walked over to the patrol house and came out with a few Galleons and Houyhnhnms trinkets. As a gesture of goodwill, he dropped it into the hands of the Muggle. The Muggle smiled and showed them to the people on the Muggle side, and them mood there brightened. A few seconds later, another man waded across with something which looked a like a ceremonial mask and a bucket full of fish.
It was a start, at least. The Republic would need the best relations it could get with the Muggles before the news broke of the existence of yahoos.

To be continued...

-----------------
Update #297
-----------------
Thursday, July 25, 1996
Presidential Palace
Houyhnhnmmland

President Neihym's jaw dropped when he saw the shattered pieces of the Protector lying on the floor. "Oh, crap. That CAN'T be good."

His aide chuckled. "You're telling ME? Fortunately, sir, we were able to neutralize the saboteur. It appears that he was a previously unknown member of Two Exceeds Four -- and he had a hell of a lot of code lists on him. He was also a member of the cleaning staff here at the Golden House."

Neihym whistled. "Inside job. I need to do more background checks on the yahoos I hire."

"Yes, sir. I've taken the liberty of launching an investigation into all human resistance activity. If there's anything else planned, we're going to want to know about it."

"Good idea, Minister. How has the world reacted now that we're visible?"

The aide smiled. "Believe it or not, we may be able to cover most of this up. The first reports came in from Muggle aircraft flying over the island, several hours from the mainland and with limited means of communication with the rest of the Muggle world. The Galiver Consortium and Atlantis managed to find out well before the people on the aircraft were able to get the word out, and Dagher has ordered an immediate gag order on information on our existence."

"That's all well and good, Minister, but you can't miss a LANDMASS the size of Alaska which just appeared out of nowhere."

"True, sir. However, it's buying us time. If all else fails, Dagher is going to report that yes, this land exists, but it is designed as a wizard sanctuary off-limits to Muggles. That will explain why no one knew about it before, and it will prevent curious Muggles from coming over and possibly being enslaved, an event which would trigger a political firestorm."

Neihym nodded. "That's good. Better than I had expected, in fact."

"Indeed, sir. However, there is a complication. You remember those areas not covered by the Protector because they're surrounded by rivers? The ones blocked off by those guards, red fences, and death zones?"

"Yes. What about them?"

"Well, the death zones disappeared when the Protector fell."

Neihym's eyes bulged. "You mean we're going to have our yahoos escaping to Muggle lands? I doubt they're going to come back if that happens."
"It's worse than that, sir. We've got a situation developing in the enclave known to Muggles as Ua Huka Island, where two of the villages have made contact with us. Raach, in charge of the Hane part of the border, has managed to get simple trade going with the natives while warning the Muggles to stay off our land. That seems to have been a pretty peaceful encounter. However, he managed to attract the attention of the Vaipae Border guards as well, a few kilometers away. The Vaipae fellows stopped by to see what was going on, leaving one person on guard. That guard was promptly overrun by yahoos trying to escape and no fewer than 500 set up in Vaipae. They're refusing to go back and are trying to tell the locals what we've been doing."

"Trying?"

The aide chuckled. "The two sides are dealing with a nasty language barrier. However, they've got a few people there who speak English, primarily at the cruise port in Vaipae and the airport in Hane. That's close enough to Galiver that the yahoos can get their message across. You have to remember that both of these Muggle sites are on the same island from their perspective and pretty close together."

Neihym winced. "How has the government there responded?"

"The government is confused, sir. The citizens of Hane are seeing us as a peaceful people, and those on the Vaipae side are seeing us as slaveholders. They're trying to figure out what the hell is going on as well...and where they're going to put all these extra people. The population of that island, after all, was only about 600 to begin with, so it's now almost half yahoos. They're also demanding to figure out where all this rain came from. They've never seen any of that before. Raach apparently has called for our people to send over temporary housing just in case."

The president turned to Hnom, who had Apparated back into the room. "Well, Hnom? You're the wizard. You know what's going on here with the rain? And how are we going to fix this?"

Hnom shrugged. "Mr. President, I suspect the rain is a side effect of the deactivation of the Protector. All of that water the Muggles had been seeing had to go somewhere, and I suspect it went into the atmosphere only to rain down on us again. If that's the case, it should slow Muggle tourism for a while and buy us more time."

Neihym grunted and pointed out the window. "How long is this going to last, Hnom?"

"Judging from the amount of water we displaced, a good month or so at least."

"Great. I hate rain. What about the Protector? Can you repair it?"

Hnom shook his head. "No, Mr. President. I'm afraid not. That was installed by Atlantis, and you'll have to go through Dagher to get that reinstalled. Given the crisis with the Philosopher's Stone and the fact that we had a Judgment Day a month ago, he may be a bit busy."

"All right, let's try Plan B. How do you see this unfolding?"

Hnom looked at his front feet. "I don't know, sir. I honestly don't know. All I'd recommend that we do is give Raach official ambassadorial powers -- make him the point man -- and make sure that nothing, and nobody, gets off that island."

---------------------

Huntsville, TX
Teresa Crowell stared at her manager in disbelief. "What? You can't lay me off! I've been here for years!"

The manager shrugged. "To be honest, Teresa, I didn't like the idea myself. Unfortunately, we're in a major economic crisis here and we have to cut costs. The simple fact is that the WSC fellow here can do the work of three people simultaneously via magic at only double the price. That's a 33% cost savings. I'm sorry, Teresa, but I'll be sure to put in a good word for you if you need any references for a future job."

Both Teresa and the manager were silent for a few seconds when they realized they were thinking the same thing: WAS there actually anyone else hiring?

Enfield, MA

Travis Radner dismissed the Patronus and swore. It was time to talk to Clinton again.

Harold-Green had hired a new wizard, this time a Ukrainian. What's more, the fellow had created a new Stone and on the verge of producing more Elixir of Life. Hendrickson, of course, was nowhere to be found. For all Radner knew, the fugitive wizard was selling HIS stone to the highest bidder.

There were now two Stones. Radner had a bad feeling there would soon be even more.

The United States Government HAD to organize an operation to capture and destroy that Stone, or at least allow it to only be used as a cure for cancer. It was time to bring out the special operations playbook.

To be continued...

Update #297.5

Thursday, July 25, 1996
Joint Xylenda-Roqteratl Trading Post
Kodiak Island

Ambassador Zeekh heard the distinctive crack of incoming Apparition faintly in the distance, followed by the sound of numerous metal feet ruthlessly pounding the ground. Exiting his newly finished office -complete with a magically illuminated underwater recreation room in the basement- he came face to face with the source of the noise, a drider that skidded to a halt at the door, barely missing him.

Unlike the plain chrome and black prototypes he arrived with, this walker was covered in ornately engraved gold plates, with many precious gems inserted into various parts of the armor suit. The machine's humanoid upper half was formed like an attractive female's idealised torso and face, and a slightly glowing glyph hanging from her neck identified her as the Eldest's Aide.

Regaining his calm, the ambassador greeted his unexpected guest. "Is that you, Senja? What a fine vehicle you have, am I right it's custom-made just for you?" The mermaid's familiar screeching interrupted his pleasantries. "There's no time for this, Ambassador. We must speak, privately!"
Zeekh led her back into the building, leaving the door open for a moment to allow the wizard who brought her here to catch up. Looking around inside, she nodded to the wizard, who began to cast spells and waving around magical detectors. Satisfied with what he found, he finally said: "We are alone."

Senja opened a concealed control panel in one of her drider's bracers, and flipped a switch. Her mask retracted, the machine spider's thorax visibly dilated as the water inside was circulated there, and the suit's plates gradually moved apart to allow her crawl out at the front. The walker remained in standby mode, with the first legs bending and the upper body plates aligned near the 'spine' to allow easy entrance for the pilot.

Stretching her body, she dropped the conversational bomb: "Houyhnhnmland's Protector is destroyed by yahoo rebels with no hope of repair for weeks, possibly months. The breach appears to be contained for now, but the yahoos will no doubt try to make it worse. What's more, a small island of Muggles is now in the middle of Houyhnhnmland. For now, this is highly classified, which means none of you should answer any questions about centaurs. As the surfacers say, we wash our hands."

Zeekh remained silent for a minute, thinking this through. Finally, he spoke: "This will get nasty, when the yahoos get aid from the Muggles. Worse, it can aggravate the Syrdani situation, if the Veela or some abolitionist fool go for their Protector. The centaurs have a fresh start, can live without their yahoos, and may yet talk themselves out of the worst of this, but the Syrdani don't. If their Protector fails..."

The aide paled. "Game over. They would stand before the world, to be judged, deemed unworthy and torn apart lest they release their slaves at once...and doing so, they'd tear themselves apart. Let's just hope they can protect their Protector."

"May their gods help them all" agreed the ambassador. "I'll pass the word down. Now, if there isn't anything else, I have most curious news for you. It seems some Muggles not only kill dolphins, but also hold them in captivity...yeah, I made that face too when I heard of it first. But it gets better. These so called dolphinariums are quite strictly regulated nowadays, and they treat them well there. Most of them are born there, and having never known freedom, they can't miss it, at least the Muggles say so."

"So the Muggles are no better than the centaurs, enslaving other Beings? How can they be such hypocrites? And just what they use them for? A dolphin in a small pond...pointless, isn't it?"

"Oh, it gets better" explained Zeekh. "They don't even know that dolphins are not simply beasts. They see them as intelligent, graceful, and entertaining animals, watching them play... but I also heard some dolphins are actually employed by their military. Their researchers are still in the process of understanding them, and aren't quick to make progress. Recently, they contacted me and asked some questions about dolphins and our transformations. I shall visit them someday, soon, to clear this up."
"Very well, Ambassador. May the Ancestors help you bring understanding to the Muggles."

----------------------
Nestora, Republic of Nestor
----------------------

She tried to settle down, and live a peaceful, honest, risk-avoiding life. She really tried. After her misadventures in Roqteratl, Myrtille Trépanier returned to her family's home in the capital of Nestor, with no intention of leaving anytime soon. Even without being a truly skilled witch, she could have found employment, not to mention she had more than enough Galleons now to pay for Kwikspell courses, should she decide to improve her meager magical skills.

But in less than a week, she became more and more fed up with the things that made her leave in the first place: the spineless sorry excuses of males, groveling before every woman they saw. The hypocrisy of her fellow Veela, saying that any manner of humiliation, perversion or exploitation inflicted upon a male is all right as long as they are in control, because they can have the males Obliviated anyway if they go too far. The constant warmongering against Syrdan, with everyone eager to spill blood, break bone and burn flesh over a feud so ancient, they could hardly remember it's original cause.

Perhaps it was just her rebellious, adventure-seeking nature, that made her see things that way. Perhaps if she hadn't met that syrdani exile, she would have overcome her temptations in time, and would have remained with her mother and sisters. But with the wizard's letter in her pocket, she felt the call of adventure once again, and suddenly decided to just go with it. Running up to her room, she hopped down at her table and began to write a response for the letter.

Dear Sam,

I've read your proposal, and I agree wholeheartedly. I heard nothing about my people contemplating the deactivation of our Protector, but it doesn't mean they aren't curious about Muggle wares. I understand your decision about weapons trade, I wouldn't expect you to lend a hand to Nestor's preparations for war. The only thing I ask in return is that you won't sell Muggle arms to Syrdan either, should they ever revoke your banishment.

Thinking about it, we shouldn't deal with weapons at all. We both have enough money, and thanks to you, good luck, to make this a perfectly legitimate business and still profit from it. I for one would prefer if we hadn't made any more enemies, being imprisoned and drugged once has already been enough for one lifetime.

Your plan for getting me to Kodiak sounds brave and even romantic, but I suggest a more appropriate rendezvous point - coming this near to Nestor's shore will risk you being blown out of the sky. Instead, let's meet five days from now, on the 30th, over the summit of the Pico do Fogo. It's the highest peak in the Cape Verde archipelago, within flying distance from Nestor. With both of us approaching it from the air, we can't miss it
It's been too long since we last talked. I look forward to seeing you again,

Myrtille

Re-reading the letter to make sure she didn't forget something, she put it into an envelope, sealed it, and whistled. A moment later, a seagull appeared in the window. She tied the envelope to the bird's leg, and watched the critter fly away. When it became a small white speckle on the eastern horizon, then disappeared altogether, she finally turned away and started to make preparations for her next great adventure.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #298
-------------
Friday, July 26, 1996
Ocala National Forest Facility
Ocala National Forest
Florida
United States of America

Auror Dorothy Weathers listened as Kenneth Franco's delivered his final orders to the strike team. "Well, that's it, ladies and gentlemen. We know where he is, and what he's trying to do. And we're going to Apparate in and catch him. I've just gotten ourselves a search warrant, so we can go in without worrying about breaking the law."

Weathers nodded. This should be a particularly easy case, primarily because the target was going to be a Muggle.

Franco then spoke with a combination of both alarm and pride. "Fellow Aurors, I must be frank. Had it not been for the fall of the Statute of Secrecy, it is unlikely that the federal government would have received enough information to track this man down in time. This could have been a disaster, especially if he took out several foreign athletes with that homemade contraption of his."

Weathers couldn't agree with him more. Although the plans supposedly involved detonating the device in the stands, he could have always changed them at the last minute -- particularly if he realized the government was onto him.

The head of the Ocala National Forest Facility looked around one last time. "Well, this is it then. It is currently 9:53 AM, and he is still at home right now. As soon as that clock hits 10:00, go and grab him. We can't wait any longer, as we suspect that he's going to do the deed tomorrow. Good luck."

Seven minutes later, Weathers turned on the spot and Apparated to a small apartment in the greater Atlanta area. By good fortune, she found herself facing the target, a thirty-year-old man whose back was to her. He was surrounded by bomb-making paraphernalia and several devices which looked ready to go.

She pointed her wand at the man, cast a Protego spell upon her and the rest of the attack party, and
shouted "FREEZE!"

The terrorist jumped two feet in the air and started to turn around. He looked frantically for something to defend himself with, but a quick Expelliarmus tossed a bunch of keys out of his hand. Keys could be a dangerous missile weapon, especially if they hit the enemy in the eyes.

One of Weathers's colleagues hit the man with an Impedimenta jinx, and he toppled to the floor. Officers promptly started issuing him his Miranda rights and started reading him the riot act.

"Eric Robert Rudolph, you are under arrest for conspiracy to commit terrorism. You have the right to remain silent..."

Not surprisingly, Rudolph remained silent. He was likely still in shock from being apprehended by people just teleporting into his apartment.

------------------

United States Senate

--------------------

The senator from Arizona had the floor. Rumors had been circulating that he was going to recommend a very revolutionary and controversial new idea. No one knew, however, what it was going to be. The man had kept it very close to his vest.

Well, the senators wouldn't have to wait much longer. They held their breath as he began his speech.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the Senate, I would like to propose a new amendment to the Constitution which allows citizens to elect presidential cabinet members directly, rather than having the president appoint them himself. I admit that this is a most unusual request. However, it makes sense for one very good reason.

"Members of the Senate, we have a precedent for this. As you are undoubtedly aware by now, the wizards elect Travis Radner directly by a simple election. Although we all know him as the Secretary of Magic, the fact remains that he is technically a member of the president's cabinet, right up there with the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense. If American citizens have the right to vote for who becomes president, why should they not be awarded the right to vote for his advisors?"

--------------------

Enfield, MA

-------------------------------

Cameras flashed as Persephone Ariadne addressed the media. "It is my duty as Deputy Secretary of Magic to announce that the Geminio Charm has been Taboo'ed. What this means is that if anyone tries to cast the Geminio Charm in the United States or its territories, the Department of Magic will find out immediately and track him or her down.

"I know that this seems like a case of the government trying to spy on its citizens. However, let me explain what is going on here. Although technically a neutral spell, the Geminio Charm does not care about what exactly it duplicates. It can be used to duplicate keys and documents, which is good. Unfortunately, the events of Judgment Day also demonstrate what can happen with the Geminio Charm is used for malicious purposes.

"This new initiative has been made necessary by a disturbing new use of magic to commit crimes. We have reason to believe that the Geminio Charm has been used to print counterfeit money which will pass as genuine by even the most sophisticated Bureau of Engraving and Printing detectors. All the perpetrator needs is one dollar bill. The Geminio Charm can be used to duplicate that dollar bill as many times as the criminal sees fit. Needless to say, that must be stopped to keep the dollar
"We are working with other magical authorities to ensure that the American dollar becomes as resistant to counterfeiting as the Galleon, the standard unit of currency in the Wizarding world. The prohibition of the Geminio Charm will stay in place until a more permanent method is developed to modify dollar bills so that they can no longer be duplicated. Once that is in place, the Taboo will be lifted.

"Thank you for your attention."

St. Peter's Basilica

Samuel looked troubled. "You're thinking of modifying the text of Genesis to insert the Noha-Pishtin text and the story of Noah between the two tales of creation?"

John Paul nodded. "Yes, Holy One. Unless I'm mistaken, we are correcting a mistake that's been there ever since shortly after the Hammer of Ra hit. It fits the chronology much better, and as you have seen we now have physical evidence for the existence of the impact."

Urban IX snorted, and everyone glared at him. Although he was increasingly convinced that Samuel knew what he was talking about, he was still reluctant to do anything major to the text of the Bible.

Samuel winced. "This does not seem right, John Paul. It goes against everything I believe in. Changing the text of the Bible seems dangerous."

John Paul spoke quickly. "We're not changing the content, Holy One. We're just moving things around to fit the historical record better. Everything you know about will still be the same, albeit in a different order. The only thing which will be added will be the Noha-Pishtin story, and that will be inserted as an additional Flood story after Noah."

Samuel thought for a second. "You know, you may have a point. You're sure Noha-Pishtin was Noah, right?"

Suleiman nodded. "Yes, Holy One. We are absolutely sure about that now."

"In that case, how about lengthening the Noah story to include everything Noha-Pishtin says as well, but in this case attribute it to Noah? The Bible must always tell the truth, and according to this evidence Noah did in fact do these things. You can even include a more detailed description of the event triggering the Flood: God choosing to send a tremendous rock down from the sky to strike the ground. Call it the Hammer of God instead of Hammer of Ra, however."

John Paul's eyebrows shot up. That actually wasn't a bad idea.

-------------------------
Five Tree Plantation
Syrdan

Altri's widow looked in amazement at the new contraption. "What a wonder! It works, and it only needs one person to operate it!"

The American wizard beamed. "Yes, Mrs. Altri. This Muggle device is called a tractor, and it can do the work of ten men in a much shorter period of time. We will convert it to run off magic if you wish. With a device such as this, you can emancipate nine people and have the tenth become a specialist
which can earn him a lot of money driving tractors."

Altri's widow nodded. "I like this, sir. I like this a lot."

To be continued...

-------------

Update #299

-------------

Monday, July 29, 1996
Harold-Green Pharmaceutical Company
Charleston, SC
United States of America

-------------

It was 3:00 AM. The janitors had gone home, and the security guard was starting to doze off. Just to be certain, however, Dmitri Vasilev hit him with a Sleep spell and watched in satisfaction as his head fell on the his console. Vasilev was amused when he saw the screen printing out "aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa...."

He figured he had maybe an hour at most before the early birds started to come in. With all of the work surrounding the Philosopher's Stone, people were working long hours. Although the vast majority of people still worked 8 to 6 or thereabouts, he couldn't risk underestimating how early people would come in.

Noticing that the coast was clear, he Apparated over to his accomplice's hideout. He wasn't allowed to actually bring the original Stone outside the building, nor was he allowed to bring any of the notes -- Green had thought of that Unbreakable Oath shortly after Vasilev had sworn the first set.

He tapped Igor Laronov on the shoulder. "Well, old friend. Everything is all set. You're sure you're up to the task? I've got the instructions all ready, but I must warn you that they're pretty complicated. It took me 45 minutes to make the one that's already in the building, and I'm a master alchemist. You think you can do it?"

Laronov shuddered. "I hope so, Dmitri. Rasputin told me that if I don't, he's going to do to me what the Romanovs tried to do to him -- draw and quarter me, behead me, that type of stuff. I'm very motivated to do this. Hopefully I'll be able to convince Koschei to make me Primary Disciple, which will in turn allow me to order that Rasputin be killed."

Vasilev grinned. "I must admit, Rasputin is a bit...strange. However, he's the only person able to bring Koschei back, so we're going to have to deal with him. Here, grab onto my hand and I'll bring you back to the lab via Side-Along Apparation."

Laronov grabbed hold of him, and Vasliev transported both of them to the lab. Laronov looked around the room and whistled.

"Impressive setup you've got here. Where'd you get all that material for the second Stone?"

"Most of it came from leftover spell components from previous two Stones. I was able to Geminio stuff which I'd run out of. Thankfully, none of those limiting reagents were magical. Here are the instructions, Igor. I've disabled the security camera for the time being, and since the guard is asleep he won't notice anything. If you have any questions, don't hesitate to ask."

Laronov rolled up his sleeves, looked at the instructions, and frowned. "Uh...Dmitri, you do realize I
don't know English. Next time, can you please translate this stuff into Russian?"

Vasilev slapped the palm of his hand against his head. "Great work, Dmitri. Very good. All right, give me the book back. I'll TELL YOU what to do. First, I highly recommend that you take twenty-five ounces of that liquid in jar A..."

The work went pretty quickly, with Vasilev phrasing his instructions as "suggestions" to get around the Oath that he not actually make a new Stone. One hour later, the second Stone was finished. It was only about the size of an acorn, and as a result it wouldn't be able to provide as much of the Elixir of Life as Hendrickson's, Flamel's, or Vasilev's. However, that wasn't a problem. When you lived forever, waiting a few extra days to get your Elixir wouldn't be an issue.

Laronov tested the new Stone on a cut on his finger. Watching the cut heal completely, he nodded and Fidelised the Stone to himself. Vasilev congratulated him, grabbed two Cokes from a vending machine, and raised a toast to the Black God Tchernobog.

The two cultists then left the building and returned to the hideout. Laronov was about return to his normal civilian job when something occurred to him. Turning to Vasilev, he asked:

"Dmitri, is it true that when Koschei comes back, he'll be the avatar of the Black God Himself?"

Vasilev shrugged. "I don't know, Igor. However, given the amazing things I've heard of this man, I wouldn't be surprised."

Six hours later, Vasilev was called into Mr. Green's office by a very troubled Mr. Green. Vasilev's heart leapt into his throat -- had his early morning escapades been detected? He couldn't see how -- he'd planned everything perfectly.

Trying to stay calm, he walked into the office and shook Green's hand. "Good morning, Mr. Green. How are you?"

Green shook his head and handed him a folder. "We've got a problem, Dmitri. Read this."

Frowning, Vasilev looked at the folder. He read the first couple of pages and his eyes widened.

"Radner and this Franco fellow have managed to convince the State of South Carolina to issued a CEASE AND DESIST ORDER against production of the Elixir of Life?"

"It appears so, Dmitri. I can't imagine how they think they're going to be able to get away with this. I can understand them being paranoid about the possibility of eternal life -- they don't realize what good it can do for the world, and they probably see it as a threat to their own high-ranking positions in the American Wizarding world. However, they must realize that all we're going to do is say we're going to produce a cure for cancer and that's it. We can't control how the Elixir is used."

Vasilev shook his head. "What exactly are they doing? Stalling for time until they figure out how the hell they're going to handle this?"

"If they're stalling for time, it's not working. Franco -- the head of the Ocala National Forest branch of the American Department Of Magic, which oversees South Carolina -- and Charleston can't seem to figure out who's supposed to try the case, the regional Wizarding courts or the normal Muggle court system. The Baseball League Protocol isn't really clear here as the case involves use of a powerful magical artifact by Muggles. Franco claims the Stone's magical use means a Wizarding trial
is necessary, and the state claims that our status as a public company means a Muggle trial is necessary. For all we know, they're going to try to sue us in both courts."

"That's going to slow down their proceedings a bit -- and probably take a lot out of their paychecks. Lawyers are expensive, you know."

Green grinned. "Not unless you're getting gold virtually for free. If I were them, I'd settle on one court system and have the leader of the other side serve as a witness or consultant."

"I see. Upon which grounds are they basing this lawsuit?"

"More or less what we expected, Dmitri. Mankind isn't wise enough to deserve the Elixir of Life. Even if we did use it to cure cancer, people would abuse it and make themselves immortal."

Vasilev chuckled. "Let me guess. Dr. Flamel is probably going to testify as well."

Green grinned. "I sure hope so, Dmitri. I know exactly what I'm going to say to him."

"Really? What's that?"

"Simple. If you think mankind isn't wise enough to deserve the Elixir of Life, why did YOU hold onto it for SIX HUNDRED YEARS? Trust me, Dmitri. There's no way they're going to win this."

Both men laughed at that. Vasilev, however, couldn't help but think the worst. "What happens if they do rule against us and force us to destroy the Stone? What next?"

Green shrugged. "Hunt down Hendrickson and recover our stolen property. You're a wizard working for us, so things may have just gotten a hell of a lot easier."

To be continued...

-------------
Update #300
-------------
Tuesday, July 30, 1996
Somewhere
Ukraine

-------------
Grigori Rasputin had liked the way things were going. And that was before he had reviewed some of the most recent news and discovered that Albus Dumbledore had temporarily left the protection of Hogwarts to chase Hendrickson as part of Dumbledore's Army.

Very interesting. Professor Dumbledore was the master of the Elder Wand, and that made him virtually unassailable by magical weapons. However, Rasputin had worked with both Muggles and wizards in the teens. He had a strong suspicion that the Elder Wand wouldn't do much good against a ranged Muggle weapon like a bomb, missile, or bullet.

Yes, Voldemort had been shot by Sirius Black while the Dark Lord had been holding the Elder Wand. However, that didn't really prove much as Voldemort had not been the master of the wand at the time he was killed.

Rasputin knew all about the Elder Wand of course. Mastery of the Elder Wand was transferred by the death or defeat of the previous master, and in the hands of its master the Elder Wand could
perform magic which would have normally been considered impossible. The legends said that Death Himself actually created the wand, though Rasputin didn't buy that. All he knew is that the Elder Wand was the most powerful wand in the world and could defeat any other wand in a duel.

The Elder Wand could come in handy when he brought back Koschei. Needless to say, there would likely be a fight to see who would become Koschei's new Primary Disciple. Having the Elder Wand at a time like that could come in quite handy and make sure that he, Rasputin, came out on top.

For defense, Rasputin planned to rely on the Philosopher's Stone. Igor Laronov had just delivered the Stone to him, and Rasputin had thanked him profusely. Unfortunately, Laronov hadn't gotten much of a chance to enjoy his new status as an "unexpected" wind gust had knocked a utility pole hosting an electrical transformer into the lake Igor had been swimming in. The resulting 20,000 volts or whatever it had been had done its job, and now Rasputin was one of the Secret-Keepers for the Stone.

Rasputin went over in his mind what would be necessary to bring back Koschei. The ritual was ancient, of course. It had to be performed during the Twelve Days of Christmas between the Catholic and Orthodox holidays. The Mad Monk figured he'd do it in the early morning hours of New Year's Day or thereabouts, when everyone else was going to sleep and distracted by all the fireworks.

Wizard -- and former professional physician -- Boris Maximovich Koschei had ingratiated himself to the leaders of a small Russian princedom shortly before the Black Death. This had put him in a position of wealth and power, and in return he provided them with a spell which would protect them from his enhanced bubonic plague.

Eventually, though, the plague had gotten out of control. With Atlantis at DEFCON 1 and Grand Mugwump Zerind's agents running all over the place, Koschei's benefactors had had no choice but to turn him in. However, they offered him a deal: since he had a Horcrux, they'd help him construct a ritual which would allow the primary advisor to the ruler of the principality to bring him back as a possible ally in case he was needed in the future. Koschei had agreed to this and gone to his incapacitation knowing that he could be brought back.

The problem was that in the chaos after the Black Death, everyone had forgotten about him -- and for the most part the surviving advisors were Muggles who wouldn't be able to perform the rituals. Yet the enchantment was still there, passing from advisory council to advisory council. As time went by, the principality was taken over by St. Petersburg, so the people responsible for bringing Koschei back became those associated with the tsars.

The last tsar was Nicholas II. Rasputin, a fellow Black God cultist, had found out about the enchantment and managed to maneuver himself into a position of power to bring back Koschei. Someone like Koschei could really have had fun with the First World War. Of course, Rasputin had been incapacitated before he could perform the ritual, so that hadn't worked out as he had intended.

This time, however, he'd get the job done.

He realized he'd have to gain control of the Elder Wand and the Philosopher's Stone before Koschei came back and everyone started fighting for Primary Disciple status. He had just acquired the Stone. However, he still needed the wand.

The plan was simple. Albus Dumbledore was going to die by Rasputin's hand, and Rasputin was going to make it look like an accident.
And Rasputin knew exactly what he was going to do.

------------------
Ziggurat Labs
------------------

Michael Parson had asked Fergie, Diana, and the king to return to his lab. He needed to tell them this in person...and WITHOUT the paparazzi to spread the news prematurely.

Parson could tell that the Queen Mother had realized immediately what had happened as soon as William had picked that wand up. Parson had as well, of course, but just prayed that it was a fluke.

It turned out that it wasn't a fluke. What's more, there had been a second surprise which, in retrospect, shouldn't have been a surprise given the way the world had reacted to the woman in the first place.

The doctor bowed to the royals and began his report. "Your Majesty, I've got the results of the genetic testing for you and your family. The results are most...intriguing."

He turned to Sarah Ferguson. "Your Highness, you seem to be a Muggle, which is more or less what we expected. You don't seem to have any of the unusual genes. Don't worry, however, that's like 99% of the rest of the people on this planet, including Prime Minister Heseltine."

Fergie nodded. "Makes sense."

He then turned to Diana. "Princess, you appear to have the V complex. The one associated with veela ancestry."

Diana's eyebrows shot up. "I'm a veela?"

"Unlikely, Princess. However, the wizards tell me that this complex tends to be rather dominant. For all we know, you could be 1/64 veela and it was still passed down. You may not even know your veela ancestor."

Fergie chuckled. "I must say, Di, it would explain why everyone's been gawking at you all these years and how you managed to be so charismatic."

Diana glared at her. "Thank you, Fergie. I really needed that."

She turned back to the Parson. "Am I sick? Do I have to take pills for it?"

Parson laughed. "No, Princess. The presence of the V complex is absolutely harmless unless the person is 1/4 veela or more, in which case she can charm men."

Di grunted as Parson turned to the king. This was the interesting, and disturbing, case.

"Your Majesty, you also have the V complex. Given the fact that V tends to be dominant, it's not surprising that your mother passed it on to you. In theory, it would allow you to attract women. However, there isn't much information as to how veela genes work with men."

The king's eyes widened for a moment, but he nodded. "All right, fair enough. Like you said, it's harmless. And it could be useful as a pickup line for girls when I get older."

Parson laughed for a moment, but his face grew serious again. "That's not all, however. Your
Highness, we double-checked this several times, and the results all came out the same."

He paused for effect. "Your Majesty, you've got the Q complex. If our theories are correct -- and they appear to be holding up to this point -- this means that you have latent Wizarding abilities. You have the ability to cast spells under certain circumstances. We suspected this from the beginning, as soon as you were able to pick up the wand without being harmed. Only beings with the Q complex can touch wands."

Fergie swore, and Diana blinked. No one spoke for a few minutes. Finally, Diana rolled her eyes.  

"At least Charles gave him SOMETHING useful."

Fergie snorted as the king, wide-eyed, began to speak. "Are you telling me, Dr. Parson, that...I'm a wizard?"

"Quite possibly, Your Majesty. Minister of Magic Flamel, who has been around for a long time, suspects that people with Q and no Z may be able to attend Hogwarts provided that they work under close supervision."

William reeled back. "I can go to Hogwarts with Hermione Granger? Wow! Mom -- can I? I'm brave! I can handle it!"

Diana ignored him and remained focused on the doctor. "If he has magical abilities, how come no one knew about this? Come to think of it, how come I didn't know I had veela genes?"

Parson shrugged. "The Wizarding community likely had no idea about genes and advanced biology prior to the fall of the Statute of Secrecy. Their Wizarding tests probably looked for signs that candidates had both Q and Z activated, which would cause people like His Majesty to be seen as Muggles -- a false negative."

"Is it possible for someone to have the Z complex and not the Q?"

"Yes, Princess. We've found several people like that. These include, among others, Harry Potter's cousin Dudley Dursley and Hogwarts instructor Argus Filch."

Fergie frowned. "How could someone unable to cast spells work at Hogwarts?"

"Professor Filch is familiar with the magical world, having been raised in the Wizarding community, and is in a position where he does not need to use magic. He is likely a case where a freak mutation deactivated the Z gene in a case where both parents had QZ. The net result is a wizard with unusually limited magical abilities, generally known as a Squib. Had His Majesty been raised in the Wizarding world, he would likely have been considered a Squib and not a Muggle. Squibs without Z can cast spells but have trouble seeing magical fields. Squibs without Q can see ghosts and other magical entities but not cast spells."

Realization dawned on Diana's face. "Let me guess. Those haunted house stories were actually sightings of real ghosts by Z-only Squibs, but the vast majority of people don't see the ghosts not because the ghosts don't exist but because they lack the Z?"

"Most likely, Princess."

Diana thought for a moment. "Do you know of any cases where Q-only Squibs were taught to cast
spells?"

Parsons nodded. "I believe so. Flamel claims Dialonis mentioned a case in South Korea where a man was being trained as a wizard even though he was unable to see certain magical objects. That fits the description of a Q-only Squib."

William turned to his mother. "Mom, can I go to Hogwarts this year? If I'm going to be king, I'll have to protect the United Kingdom from monsters and bad wizards. Only a wizard would be able to do that!"

Diana and Fergie stared at each other. Meanwhile, the doctor picked up the wand used for the test with tongs and placed it in William's hands.

"Your Majesty, I think this is yours."

---------------------

Hunstville, TX

---------------------

Teresa Crowell left the lawyer's office convinced that she had a case. She was going to get her job back from that WSC usurper. Although WSC people deserved jobs, they shouldn't be taking jobs from Muggles! WSC should be handling wizard work, while Muggles should be handling Muggle work.

She started filling out the appropriate paperwork.

To be continued...

---------

Update #300.5

---------

Tuesday, July 30, 1996
Francisco Mendes International Airport
Praia, Republic of Cape Verde

---------

Lisias Tello Saldivar, air traffic controller, swore viciously, then shouted to one of his colleagues: "Alvero! It's not adjusting course! Get back to that #!###* radio, NOW!" Alvero Guzmán sounded equally despaired. "It's no use! I've tried every frequency and several languages, but I still got no response! Whatever it is, it's gonna cross over us in under a minute! Do you get a visual?"

Lisias looked at the radar, and realised that indeed, even a decent sized bird should be visible to the naked eye by now. Yet, when he looked out to the east, all he could see was the pristine weather, and a flock of birds in the distance. Thinking that it may be the birds, he reached for his binoculars- but couldn't find them. Realising that they were borrowed by some of their friends, he decided to do the next best thing- anything with a zoom setting.

"Hey, that's my camera, man!" shouted Alvero. "Give it back!"
"Chill, I only borrowed it for a minute" said Lisias, then turned the device on and eastwards, and looked at the display. Then he rubbed his eyes, looked without the camera, then again with the camera, suddenly paling, then swallowing and uttering something like "oh boy...we've got an infiltrator, call the Coast Guard, or the wizards, or anyone! NOW!"
Samanar Naztheros swore viciously. Up to this point, his journey was comfortably boring: he Apparated to Seychelles, where he promptly bought the first Muggle fishing boat that looked younger than 20 years. Enchanting it to fly had been child's play, and figuring that he would fly over Africa in a straight line, he thought he didn't need to do more than reaching the desired altitude (1000 feet), start flying in the right direction (West-Northwest), and keep accelerating (the boat started shaking at 180 mph in clear weather, luckily he had the foresight to dial it back to 100 mph- not that he had any speedometers on board).

There were some hiccups, naturally... but after splattering an unsuspecting vulture over the plains, he remembered to add a minor repulsing charm to the enchantments. He and Floppy took turns keeping watch, but nothing interesting happened after the bird crash- of course, if only they had brought a radio on board, they'd have known that half the continent's air traffic control and military have noticed them. Minutes away from their destination, he was already thinking about Myrtille in several very pleasant situations...then without warning, the boat lurched, as a Muggle aircraft flew below them, way too close for comfort, prompting him to start shouting about shameful and debatably real aspects of respectable historically significant wizards. Somehow regaining control of the boat, the wizard shakily looked back at the descending airplane, then seeing that it was still apparently unharmed, he resumed his course.

The repulsing charms were commonly used by flying wizards to provide defense against birds and other flying objects, including other wizards. To keep both would-be colliders alive, they consisted of several fields on top of each other like an onion, each more powerful the closer the object got to the wizard's vehicle. Spell force and radius was directly proportional to the vehicle's speed. After hitting the vulture, Samanar put all the power he could in the enchantment. At his present speed of 100 mph, the spell's weakest outer layers extended over 100 meters forward and up to 25 meters around the boat.

The Boeing 737, minutes away from landing, flew 23 meters below the boat. Thanks to it's much greater weight, it wasn't significantly pushed off course. However, it was partially immersed into a magical field, which had immediate and very unpleasant effects on the electrics on board. Thanks to the pilot's skill , they still had a safe landing- at least the wheels were already out when the power was cut.

Myrtille lazily floated on a thermal, casting expectant glances to the east. For a minute now, her bird-eyes could pick up an approaching object from there. Her... boyfriend didn't tell what kind of vehicle he'll use, and she wanted to keep it a surprise. But now, she started to have some bad feelings- she spotted several more objects closing in behind the first. On the other hand, Samanar couldn't be so foolish to neglect using concealing charms- indeed, she could now see the shimmering of the magic
field around the approaching...boat? And quite a fine one, apparently. Calming herself, she began to match vectors with the slowing vehicle. One thing, however, bothered her: she'll be highly visible to the approaching Muggle vehicles. Then again, Muggles seeing a Veela in her monstrous form usually explained it away as "It was a very big bird, and... and let's speak about something else, right?".

Swooping down, she jumped on to the boat just as it slowed to a hovering halt. She barely had enough time to drop her backpack and transform into human form, before the Syrdani ran to her and caught her in his embrace. Occupied in shameless kissing for several minutes, they were interrupted by the ever increasing noise of rotor blades and Muggle loudspeakers growing to audible, then annoying volumes, followed by the panicked exclamation of the house-elf: "Master, Mistress, Floppy is very sorry to interrupt, but these Muggles can somehow see us!"

"That's not possible. No Muggle can see through a Disillusionment Charm. Their presence here is mere coincidence, it must be. But hey, what about you, look around, check the island for anything interesting? We'll wait for you right here, be back in an hour -he winked at the Veela- or two."

Huffing, the elf Disapparated. The wizard turned to his beloved, and asked her: "Hey, have you ever done it 1000 feet in the air, on a boat, in front of unsuspecting Muggles?" Right on cue, three wizards sitting on brooms and pointing wands at them- Aurors judging by their clothing and very grumpy judging by the looks on their face- materialised around them, and began yelling at them in Portuguese. Reluctantly pulling away from the Veela and slowly lifting his hands, Samanar found two words that amply expressed his feelings about the situation: "Oh, crap."

To be continued...
Update #301 through Update #305

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Misagnissa

Update #301
-------------

Tuesday, July 30, 1996
Oval Office
White House
Washington, DC
United States of America
-------------

Bill Clinton didn't like what the report was saying. If this was true, there would be an additional threat to the economy which neither he nor Radner had even thought about.

The message was a report from a certain George W. Bush, governor of Texas. This man appeared to have inherited his father's political ability and was well on his way to become a viable candidate for the presidency. Many people thought that the Texas governor would be a viable candidate for the 2000 election. Only time would tell, he thought.

Governor Bush was reporting that a woman had sued her employer because she had been unexpectedly laid off after many years of service. While any layoff was a tragedy, particularly in the post-Judgment Day economy, such events were commonplace and normally would not have come to the attention of the governor. This case, however, was different.

The employer had replaced the plaintiff and two other people with a Wizarding Services Corporation wizard who would be able to perform all three roles, through magic, at a lower salary than the three Muggles had drawn.

Bush had argued that WSC was overstepping its boundaries here. For one thing, wizards should be used for magical tasks and not waste their power on things which could be done by Muggles. More troubling, however, was the simple fact that once this became public knowledge, everyone would start hiring WSC wizards to replace their Muggles. Within a matter of months, unemployment would skyrocket to 20% or more and Eric Street would almost certainly be a multibillionaire.

No job would be safe, even supposedly indispensable ones such as doctors and public servants. After all, who knew what the wizards would be able to pull off with magic?

Worst of all was the possibility that Eric Street could be overthrown by a Dark wizard who could take control of WSC and hold the Muggle world hostage simply by denying them access to the services they were familiar with: police, fire, and so forth. Yes, Street had admitted that he had sworn all six Aes Sedai oaths and was trust worthy. However, people were slowly finding out that Aes Sedai oaths, particularly the one against lying, put a wizard in awkward situations from time to time where people could take advantage of him.

Bush and his father had both recommended that Street -- who thankfully was a citizen of Texas and subject to the younger Bush's jurisdiction -- issue a decree that wizards couldn't take Muggles' jobs. Thankfully, Street supposedly was thinking about it. Furthermore, Shawna Santana -- the head of the Big Thicket Facility, a supporter of WSB, and supposedly the woman in charge of Street's area -- was putting him under heavy pressure to endorse the change.
The problem was that even if Street instituted the new restriction, it was unlikely that it would apply retroactively to Teresa Cromwell's case. That particular WSC wizard -- along with any others who had already thought of this idea -- would likely still get to keep their jobs unless the lawsuit forced their new employers to dismiss them.

This was going to be big news once this leaked out. Hopefully Street, Cromwell, and the employer would settle out of court. If it didn't however, people would be discussing it everywhere and protesting on behalf of Cromwell. However, according to the bylaws as he knew them, the WSC employee had done nothing illegal and had a very strong case.

Clinton shook his head. Even if Cromwell won and Street did change the policy for WSC employees, would it only apply to new employees? Would Street force other employees who had taken Muggle jobs to resign? The president didn't know, and he didn't really want to find out.

An odd thought occurred to him. The election was still in a little over three months. He wanted to win re-election, of course. However, he couldn't help but admit that he wouldn't have minded dropping everything into Bob Dole's lap come January...

---------------------------------
Ministry of Magic
Krum Tower
Bojidar Castle
Bulgaria

---------------------------------
Minister of Magic Viktor Obalonsk had debated long and hard about opening the Ministry of Magic to Muggle tourism. However, he had eventually given in. It was only a matter of time until they found out where it was, anyway. Besides, the American Ministry of Magic had opened its headquarters to tourism and there hadn't been any incidents. Yes, America for Humans had destroyed the complex. However, they would have been able to do so even without the tourist program -- all the terrorists had needed was the location.

The location of the Ministry of Magic in Sofia was out now, of course. There wasn't anything he could do to rein that back in short of sending out hordes of Obliviators -- which would not be a good idea in this political climate. It was time to make the best of things, he thought.

For the most part, however, the tours had been peaceful. Most of the wizards who worked in the Ministry were as curious about the Muggles as the Muggles were about the wizards, and there were a few helpful people who served as translators for both sides. The house-elves who had been holed up in Bojidar Castle all these years were fairly popular as well.

He had been Minister of Magic for the past five years, ever since Stanislav Drakul was selected to become Deputy Headmaster of Durmstrang. He had done what he could to keep everything under control during Judgment Day, and he had been adamant that the main tower be named after fallen hero, athelete, and namesake Viktor Krum. So far, he seemed to be doing a decent job. The wizards were starting to give him more respect, and the community was starting to prosper again.

There were strange rumblings going on Ukraine. No one really knew what was going on, but it looked like someone was trying to stuff the ballot box for the lottery for Muggle openings in Atlantis. He figured it had something to do with the Celestines, who were getting increasingly belligerent now that Samuel was back. That's just what the world needed, he thought. Celestines wreaking havoc on Atlantis.
The latest tour had begun with a bit of a complication. Apparently someone had managed to try to bring a gun into the castle, and the entire group had been thrown into confusion. Thankfully, the Aurors had whisked him away and interrogated him. Apparently the man had been half-asleep -- this was an 8:00 PM tour, after all -- and had forgotten to check the firearm at the security checkpoint.

He was midway through his paperwork -- hopefully he'd be done by 9:00 -- when he heard a tremendous explosion far beneath her. What the hell was that? Seconds later, the tower he was in began shaking violently, and he was forced to invoke an emergency spell to strengthen it to make sure it didn't come down.

There was only one thing he could think of. Someone -- or something -- had detonated a bomb in the Ministry of Magic. This was not good, not good at all. He had to figure out what was going on and keep everything under control.

Dropping his work on his desk, he Apparated down to the main entrance and nearly found himself trampled by people -- both Muggles and wizards -- running out of what had once been the main audience chamber and had been transformed in the headquarters of Bulgarian Ministry of Magic. He grabbed one of them to ask her what was going on and was rewarded by a kick in the leg. The Minister went down as the woman ran, screaming, out of the building.

Amplifying his voice with the Sonorus spell, he told everyone to stay put and that he was coming in. Shoving people out of the way, he forced his way into the main audience chamber.

The place was an absolute mess. Body parts had been sprayed all over the building, and cauldrons had spilled their contents on the flagstones. Part of the roof had caved in, and a huge fire in the corner of the room had sprung up when two potions intermixed in a way that they shouldn't have.

He scanned the room and saw at least three dead and ten wounded. Summoning all the Aurors, he hurried to the nearest injury victim and asked him what had happened.

The man winced in pain, but responded. "One of the people shouted something in a bizarre language and suddenly blew up. Then everything went to hell."

"Was it a Muggle or a wizard?"

"Muggle, I think. Though I suppose you could have had a wizard disguised as a Muggle -- ow! What are you doing?"

Obalonsk was furious. "How did --"

He answered his own question. The attackers had executed a classic maneuver to get around security: have an accomplice set off the security detector and sneak the primary weapon into the building in the chaos.

Who did it?

He promised himself that he would get to the bottom of this as soon as possible.

----------------------

Bellavista Birding Resort
Outside of Quito
Ecuador
- - - - - - - - - - - -
David Hendrickson didn't know much Spanish. However, he knew enough to get by. Besides, there were enough American birders here that he could speak English from time to time.

He was posing as a chemistry professor named Harley Lamar who enjoyed birding as a hobby. As far as he could tell, he had managed to escape with his precious Philosopher's Stone. He was out of Mr. Green's clutches for the time being.

There were times where he had pondered using the Stone to heal injuries the fellow birders had taken during their expeditions: one man had hurt his leg when he fell off a tree branch. He had to be careful, however. For all he knew, one of these people could be a spy for Atlantis.

In the meantime, however, he'd enjoy himself. He knew now not to use the Stone frivolously, but using it for good purposes sure beat not using it at all. That poor woman who had been hit by the car outside the office could have died had it not been for him. Furthermore, he had seen all of the poor people in slums outside Quito and figured that they needed some charity as well.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #301.5
-------------
Tuesday, July 30, 1996
Taiji
Higashimuro District, Wakayama
Japan
-------------

Noboru Kamitani's afternoon sleep was disrespectfully interrupted by the shouting of his firstborn.
"Father, father, wake up! We're going to the drive hunt!" Opening an eye, he grunted: "Kuroki, you idiot, it's the middle of summer, there is no drive hunt till September! Now leave me alone to rest my old bones!" But this had little effect on his insolent offspring. "There is one, just now. A huge pod of dolphins was sighted nearby, thousands of them! Come, see Mr. Hidaka if you don't believe me."

"Right, I believe if you say so," came the grumpy response, "but mark my words boy, that much dolphins this early is not natural!" Of course Kuroki could not be dishartened this easily. "Oh come on, father, don't look the gift horse in the mouth. We'll have fresh meat at last! Come!"

-------------
later, at the sea near Taiji
-------------

The small fleet of fishing ships cautiously moved between the huge swarm of dolphins and the open sea, trying not to spook them prematurely. The animals have been acting strangely, or rather, stupidly. Jumping out of the water, and just congregating in a mass of thousands, but apparently doing nothing but attracting attention... writing their own death sentences. "And to think that some gaijin actually believe these things are as smart as a human... they should see this," said Kuroki to no-one in particular. "Well, they might be just as smart as them" remarked his father with a grin. The untold amount of meat swimming in the water cheered the old man up, even made him forget his pains for a time.
Down under the mass of bottlenose dolphins, one of them approached a solitary figure of a merperson. He was a sight to behold: his skin tone—wherever the extensive tattoos covering his upper body let that show—a greyish pink, his braided hair pale green, the result of generations of crossbreeding between all three merpeople subraces. Despite being of smaller than average built and not really muscular, the hybrid held himself with great confidence—with the posture of an unbeatable champion, or a demigod among mortals. The creature held a cage in his hand, with several silvery fishes inside.

The dolphin's shape wavered, then it wasn't a dolphin anymore: in it's place, a siren woman floated with her head bowed. Without turning, the male said in Galiver: "Speak!"
"My Lord Sarebas, there is no sign of more Muggle ships... your warriors are in position... we stand ready." The mermaid's voice was quivering in fear. Not dignifying her with a response, he opened the cage and stuck his hand inside, caressing a fish. The ramora, for all it's power, sensed that he was it's superior, and bore his touch without a flinch, subjugating itself, letting the Being dominate it's body...and mind.

It happened too quickly: in one moment, Kuroki was standing in the boat, watching the oblivious cetaceans playing in the calm water. In the next, the sea appeared to shudder, and huge waves appeared out of nothing, throwing the boats left and right. Then something inexplicable happened: the sea calmed again, as if the moment of storm was merely a fragment of it's imagination... except, around the boats, it did not cease: it increased. In a few seconds, 5 meter high waves washed over the deck of their tiny ship, and though he managed to grasp a rope, he saw he'll end up in the water one way or the other: the boat started to fill. Wildly looking around, he saw that the rest of the fleet is struggling with the same problem... for some reason, reminding him of Gaijin cartoons, where miniature, personalised storm clouds gathered over the heads of angry people. Then another, even bigger wave tore the rope from his hand and swept him from the boat. Seeing that he ended up just at the edge of the storm, he tried to swim to calm water... but then, he suddenly felt hands grabbing his feet and pulling him under. Struggling with eyes closed, he felt a fist punching him in the stomach, and when he reflexively exhaled, some disgusting material was shoved into his mouth.

Opening his eyes in shock, he saw men and women with the lower bodies of giant fish, holding him down, keeping a hand on his mouth so he couldn't spit. He hears a strange chanting, which somehow calmed him down...though he still had the thought that he'll drown in a minute. One of them did something to his neck that made himself swallow the foul thing involuntarily. Looking around, he saw his father plunge into the water as their boat surrendered to the sea's onslaught, and he could see other fishermen further away in the same situation... then he began to notice a curious lack of the usual asphyxiation: despite being underwater, his lungs didn't burn for air, he had an overwhelming desire to open his mouth and breathe water instead. The one holding it's hand on his mouth finally let him go, and he inhaled... and to his surprise, it actually worked.

His hands also felt strange, but when he tried to examine them, he realised the creatures still held him down... and now, after one of them barked an order in some sing-song language, they started to drag him down, to the seabed. Suddenly, a terrifying thought came to him: what if these creatures are the dolphins they saw... what if they came here to seek revenge for the countless dolphins slaughtered by his people?
Minister of Magic Nazareno Delgadillo had a problem. His Aurors brought in a couple of trespassers. By itself this wouldn't have been a problem: other than a lack of common courtesy, wizards usually didn't find any problems with surprise visits into each other's airspace in peacetime. However, this time the intruder almost caused a catastrophe, when his vehicle had a near miss with a Muggle airplane, disturbing it's various devices. To make matters worse, the Muggles detected it despite being covered in a Disillusionment Charm, and effectively hunted it down on their own. Luckily, his own Aurors arrived there in time, and taken over the situation... as it turned out, the intruders were from the Hidden Nations, which would have made an interrogation by Muggles unfortunate, to put it mildly.

Of course things didn't go easily after that. The wizard and the witch cooperated, sure, but they didn't speak Portuguese, or even decent English. That was solved, though, when they realised the girl spoke French, just like one of the Ministry's handful of employees. They had been appropriately horrified when they learned about the tragedy they almost caused, and all in all seemed to be honest and harmless people. Still, with the almost-accident, he had to come up with something that satisfies the Muggles too...

The spell's effect made him wonder. Being quite familiar with flight and aerodynamics, playing Quidditch for years in the Lisboa Lethifolds in his youth, he actually had some theories how could that boat speed up so much and what happened to the repelling charm- but it needed to be tested, so they could make sure it never happens again. Also, the Muggles were curious about the flying vehicle, and wanted to test a number of things he didn't ever think about. The boat had to stay. The couple currently in front of him, however, were better off far from his country, as soon as possible.

Through his interpreter, he said his verdict: "To cover the repairs on the Muggle airplane, I confiscate your boat. However, you're free to buy another one and continue your journey, on two conditions: one, you do it quickly. Two, you see to it that this won't happen again- you either fly low, or get a radio." Looking into his eyes, the Veela said her thanks in her sweetest voice... somehow, in the end, she made him offer them a radio for free, as a gift for dropping by and dispelling their boredom.

Later that day, when one of his Aurors reported that a house-elf joined the pair when they were buying their replacement boat, the Minister wasn't really surprised. In fact, he was still thinking about the negotiations with the Veela: "Damn, she's good. God help anyone who will have to haggle with her..."

To be continued...

Update #302
Severus Snape stared at Princess Diana...hard. "Absolutely not, Your Highness."

Princess Diana frowned. "Why not, Headmaster?"

"Training to be a wizard is an extremely difficult and dangerous undertaking, Your Highness. Unless someone is very skilled at what they are doing, they are putting themselves at risk of injuring themselves or worse."

Diana fumed. "I've told him about this several times, Headmaster, and he's willing to take the risk. He'd already convinced me to let him served in the armed forces when he grows up. How is this any different?"

Snape grunted. "A soldier knows what he is getting into when he joins the army. His Majesty has no idea what awaits him once he enters the doors of Hogwarts Castle. Furthermore, if what you are saying is correct, he may be ABLE to cast spells but will not be able to see what he's doing in some cases because of the lack of this Z complex. That makes him a danger to us and to himself, and I cannot allow that -- especially when we are dealing with the King of England."

Diana pressed on. "But he's already a fan of Hermione Granger, and he's actually met her, Ron Weasley, and Harry Potter. Surely they will be able to tutor him! After all, both Harry and Hermione also come from Muggle backgrounds --"

One look at the headmaster's face forced the Queen Mother's mouth shut. Clearly, Snape did not like any of those students. Harry had mentioned something about Snape being a harsh teacher during one of the interviews with J. K. Rowling, but he hadn't provided many details.

Snape drew a deep breath, as if he couldn't believe he was saying. "Your Highness, we have ample evidence that the Muggle-born wizards and Muggle-raised wizards can become as proficient in the Art as people with one or two Wizarding parents. Although I personally think that Miss Granger is an arrogant know-it-all, I freely confess that she is the most gifted witch in Harry's year. However, there are significant differences here. First and foremost is the simple fact that His Majesty would be entering Hogwarts with one hand tied behind his back because of his lack of the Z complex."

"He knows all that, Wizard Snape. He still wants to take the risk. He's your king, sir. What he says goes, if you think about it."

Snape smiled. "Yes, and as his subject it is my duty to stop him if he is putting his life in danger."

"From what Dumbledore has told us, the teachers here are excellent! Didn't you teach here yourself at one point?"

Snape bit his lip, and Diana began to understand why Harry Potter disliked this man. "Yes, Your Highness. I taught Potions for many years. However, I must be frank. There has been a major shakeup in the staff here. Most of the experienced teachers -- myself, Dumbledore, and McGonagall -- are no longer in a position to teach class. It's possible that Dumbledore will return before the beginning of the school year and allow me to teach Potions, but there is no guarantee that will happen. Dumbledore's fate rests in the hands of a certain David Hendrickson."
Diana recognized the name. "The man who stole the Philosopher's Stone."

"Exactly, Your Highness. The Stone is an extremely powerful magical object, one which can be misused terribly if it fell into the wrong hands. You may be interested to know that the Dark Lord sought the Stone at one point and nearly got his hands on it. Had he obtained the Philosopher's Stone, the results could have been...ghastly. At any rate, back to the subject at hand. Many of the teachers this year are quite inexperienced, Your Highness. If there is one year when it would be inadvisable to admit His Majesty, it would be this one."

Diana frowned. "What about that Korean witch, Choi something? Wasn't she able to train a Q-only wizard to cast spells?"

Snape's face grew even more sour. "Given the proper instructor, and one with...significant experience...it may be possible. However, I must advise you that (a) from what I've been told, the witch you mention is dead, and (b) even if she weren't dead, she almost certainly does not speak English."

Diana wasn't convinced. "She seemed to do a decent job, from what I was told!"

Snape gritted his teeth. "She had the help of the South Korean Ministry of Magic, from what I've been told. With the capital hit with a nuclear blast and the two Koreas less than twenty-four hours away from a major referendum on reunification, I would argue that Seoul is a bit busy."

"Hermione's a bright girl. Maybe she can help."

Snape nearly turned green. "Miss Granger is a bright witch. However, she is quite inexperienced. Furthermore, it is unlikely that she and His Majesty would even spend enough time together to tutor her."

"Oh? Why is that?"

Snape looked like he wanted to say something sarcastic and was forced to keep it down. "Because Hogwarts has four houses: Slytherin, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, and Gryffindor. A fifth house, Black, is under construction. Students spend most of their time with those of their own House. The only way His Majesty would be able to spend a lot of time with Miss Granger would be if he were sorted into Gryffindor. Although that is a distinct possibility given His Majesty's bravery, it is not a sure thing. Furthermore, the possible...romantic involvement...between Miss Granger and His Majesty would likely attract...undue attention and paparazzi, interruptions which could interfere with the education of our students."

Diana nodded. "It's understandable. However, we have no idea if Hermione is even interested in William. I suspect she isn't, since she's much older than he is, but I haven't told him that. Schoolboy crushes tend to be...well..."

Snape's eyes grew distant. "Irrational. People can do stupid things when they are teenagers."

Diana chuckled. "Tell me about it. Boy, tell me about it."

Snape winced and continued his report. "There are also other issues as well. His Majesty would be entering Hogwarts at an unusual age. He would be placed in a first-year class where he would be three years older than everyone else. Being the big man in his class -- in more ways than one -- can
inflate his ego, which is something a wizard, especially a king, does not need. I doubt he'd feel
comfortable with all those children around them. Secondly, he could be teased by people of Slytherin
House who looked down upon Muggle-born wizards. Thirdly, even if Miss Granger does tutor her,
what is he going to do in his third year? Miss Granger is scheduled to graduate in the summer of
1998."

Snape was pretty convincing, Diana thought. However, she couldn't get the story of the South
Korean witch out of her mind. She tried a different tack.

"Has Hogwarts graduated any British royalty before?"

Snape nodded. "Yes, Your Highness. I'm not at liberty to say who, though."

"Were any of them acting monarchs?"

"No."

"Did any of them become king or queen later on?"

"Yes."

"So why can't we admit William?"

"Because they were full wizards, with both Q and Z, who were admitted with their Muggle
classmates at age 11. They did not have any of these handicaps, and they were not reigning
monarchs. At worst, they were heir to the throne. I'm sorry, this isn't appropriate."

Diana's mind raced. "I have an idea. What happens if I had Minister Flamel send some people to go
to Korea to find whoever taught Choi-whatever her tricks? He really wants to go, and after all he is
your king."

Snape thought for a long time. Finally he sighed. "This goes against my better judgment. However, if
you find a knowledgeable tutor -- IF you find one, and we approve of him -- then we'll admit him.
Be advised, however, that he will be treated like any other student. He will be held to the same high
standards as every single other person in this school. As soon as he steps in those doors, he will no
longer be His Majesty. He will be Mr. Windsor, first year Hogwarts student. Furthermore, if he does
anything which puts him or anyone else in jeopardy, we will expel him IMMEDIATELY. We
cannot risk the life of the reigning King of England."

Diana stood and smiled, and Snape followed her. "That's all I can ask for, Headmaster. That's all I
can ask for."

Snape bowed. "That is all I can grant, Your Highness. School starts at the beginning of September.
We have one month, so let's make the most of it."

To be continued...

-------------
Update #303
-------------

Wednesday, July 31, 1996
Harold-Green Pharmaceutical Corporation
Charleston, South Carolina
The phone rang in Dr. Green's office. Would the interruptions ever cease? With the Stone back in play again, he was busy!

He picked it up irritably. "Hello?"

"Mr. Green? This is Henry McPhee from the security desk. We've got a bunch of people here from the Food and Drug Administration. They're here to conduct an surprise audit of the equipment and compounds used to produce Vitalix."

Green's mind raced. The FDA wanted an inspection? Since when had they done unscheduled inspections of facilities, and why hadn't they done this earlier? Something here didn't make sense.

Wary, he spoke into the handset. "McPhee, do they have badges? They could be spies from Merck or something like that."

There was a delay of a minute or so on the other end of the line, followed by: "Yes, sir. They're authentic. Their badges check out as clean."

Green cursed. Another damn bureaucratic visit. Weren't the paperwork and lawsuit enough of an obstacle to the success of the Stone? Making a note of what he had been doing, he got up and walked down to the security desk.

Three men greeted him there, all in dressed in professional business suits. One of them was carrying a briefcase, and another was carrying an odd-looking contraption that looked like the love-child of a TV antenna and a microphone. The third was jotting down notes.

The note taker shook his hand. "Mr. Green, I apologize for the interruption, but there isn't much we can do about it. After all, the inspection has to be unannounced."

Green grimaced as he watched the bizarre TV antenna wiggle up and down. "Since when have you started conducting surprise inspections like this?"

The man shrugged. "Believe it or not, not as much as we should. Although technically it's on the books, many FDA people don't bother with it. Given the promise of Vitalix, however, we decided to make sure that we've dotted all the I's and crossed all the T's». The antenna wiggled in approval.

Green didn't like this. He didn't want too many people to find out about the Stone, and it was obvious he would have to bring them into the lab to show them all of the components which were needed to produce Vitalix. Well, he had already planned a cover story for the Stone. He hoped Vasilev remembered his alibi.

Shaking his head in disbelief, he told the FDA investigators to follow him into the building. The bizarre TV antenna bashed into his head every twenty feet or so, and he eventually spun around in irritation and pointed at the antenna. "If you don't mind me asking, Mr. Johnson, what in the name of creation is THAT?"

The man holding that antenna chuckled. "It's a new device used to check for airborne toxins. There's been a bit of a boost in counterterrorism technology since the Quabbin attack."

"Can you put it away?"
Antenna Man shook his head. "I'm sorry, sir, but I need it out for the inspection. I'll try to keep it out of your way, if you want."

The antenna wiggled again, whacking Green on the head once more. "Please do, if you don't mind. I've already losing much of my hair, and I don't need this thing to knock off the rest of it."

The man with the notebook stopped the tour momentarily when he saw a rack of radiation suits. Frowning, he asked what they were for.

Green shrugged as the man with the briefcase opened it and ducked out of the way of the frantically bobbing TV antenna. "A pending project trying to cure radiation sickness. We have -- hey, what are you doing?"

The man with the briefcase had just finished rubbing the radiation suit with a clock and placing the cloth in an envelope in the briefcase. "We're taking a sample to figure out what compounds you've been experimenting with. Unless we're mistaken, you've probably got some radioactive waste on those gloves."

For the first time in the entire session, that ridiculous antenna stopped moving.

Green grunted. "Next time, warn me when you're going to do that. Some of this stuff is classified, and we want to make sure that nothing leaks out."

Briefcase Man nodded and closed the briefcase. "Of course, Mr. Green."

They continued down the hall, and Green fretted as Briefcase Man copied papers and put them in the briefcase. Finally, they reached the lab, where the talented Ukrainian was working with the Stone. Hoping this wouldn't be a disaster, Green drew a deep breath.

"Dr. Vasilev, these are some agents from the Food and Drug Administration. They are conducting an unannounced survey of our facilities and making sure that we're preparing the Vitalix under proper conditions. Gentlemen, this is Dr. Dmitri Vasilev, our head chemist."

Wiggle, wiggle, wiggle. Vasilev stared at the antenna for a second, as if he'd seen it before. Then he shook his head abruptly and began to speak.

"Welcome, gentlemen. I apologize that this place is a bit of a mess, but you can probably understand that labs aren't always neat and tidy."

Antenna Man somehow managed to stabilize the antenna again. "I understand, Dr. Vasilev. Are you working on the Vitalix right now?"

"Yes, sir."

Briefcase Man approached the table. "Can I see what you've got here?"

Vasilev looked at Green in alarm. Green didn't have much of a choice, however. If they figured out he was falsifying research documents and lying to the FDA this Stone project was going out the window. He closed his eyes and nodded.

Vasilev moved out of the way and pointed out the various beakers and jars. "These are various
chemicals used to create Vitalix. For security measures, we call them Jar A, Jar B, and so forth."

Briefcase Man stepped forward. "Would it be all right if I took samples of some of these substances for our inspection?"

Vasilev blinked and turned to Green for an explanation. "They're taking samples of lots of stuff, Dmitri. I don't see what they're going to be able to do with it, and we need to make sure that they can't reproduce --"

Notebook Man held up a hand. "There are 13 jars here. I don't know what's in the jars, so let's go by my name and take four samples: jars M, I, K, and E. That should be good enough for a spot test without compromising your secrecy any more than necessary."

Vasilev fretted a minute but moved out of the way as Briefcase Man took his samples. Once he was done, he pointed at the Stone.

"What's that, Dr. Vasilev? I've never seen anything like that before."

Green held his breath as Vasilev answered. "A catalytic crystal which we use to speed up our reactions."

Wiggle, wiggle, wiggle.

The three agents conferred for a moment excitedly. Finally, Briefcase Man held out his hand. "Something that could expedite reactions could help many, many biology companies. I'm taking that too. We'll give it back, I promise."

Vasilev eyebrows shot up. "We need that, sir. We can't do our work without it."

Notebook Man looked around the room. Suddenly, his eyes stopped moving. Green turned to see what he was looking at, and his face turned white.

Notebook Man was staring at one of the two fake Stones. Green had a bad feeling about this --

Notebook Man pointed. "Don't worry, you can keep that one. Give me the one on the table. We need to use the one which you were using in the latest experiment to be consistent with the stuff recently taken from the jars."

Wiggle, wiggle, wiggle. Green was starting to hate that thing. Turning his eyes to Vasilev, he noticed that Vasilev was looking hard at the antenna again. Suddenly, his jaw dropped and he started shaking. Did Vasilev actually recognize the antenna? Was it a Wizarding aid?

Vasilev was starting to sound desperate, and Green knew why. If the Stone left the building, Vasilev would be killed by the Unbreakable Vow -- even thought he had not actually taken the Stone out of the building.

"Uh...you may want to rethink that. This latest experiment was to check if the Stone -- er, catalyst was actually working. I don't think it was. This wasn't a valid test, I'm afraid."

Green whistled silently to himself. Would they get away with this? He turned to see all three men staring at the antenna, which was wiggling wildly.
He turned to look back at Vasilev, who was sweating. He then mouthed something: "Secrecy Sensor -- it's..."

Vasilev shut his mouth as the three FDA men turned back to him again. "This is disturbing, Dr. Vasilev. If a randomly chosen catalyst doesn't work on this inspection, your Vitalix may not be as robust as we had hoped. Nevertheless, rules are rules, and we have to insist. I'm sorry. If it's any consolation, we'll be taking the bad one off your hands and leave you with all the equipment to make new ones. Good luck, gentlemen."

And with that, Briefcase Man plucked the Stone out of Vasilev's hand and put it in the briefcase. Vasilev, increasingly flustered, reached for his pocket...which held his wand.

Antenna Man's eyes widened, and he put down the rapidly vibrating antenna. He reached into his pocket showed the wizard the butt of a gun. "Don't be an idiot, Dr. Vasilev, or that will figure negatively in our report."

And with that, all three of them left the room. Vasilev screamed at them to stop, but they didn't. Green tried to negotiate with them to swap Stones, but they wouldn't.

Five minutes later, the encounter was over and Green was standing over Vasilev's body. People were gathering rapidly and trying to figure out what happened.

He really hoped he wouldn't be seen as a suspect.

------------------------

Hane
Marquesas Islands
French Polynesia

- - - - - - - - - - - - - -

Nechir was now a free yahoo. And since he was a free yahoo, he felt obliged to do what he could to escalate the budding yahoo rebellion in the land of the Houyhnhnms. Two Exceeds Four may have been decimated, but Human Heritage and the Organization were now joining forces. There were protests going on all over the land, and many of the plantations had been shut down by work stoppages. Here and there, Muggle aircraft would hover beneath the omnipresent rain clouds and to keep an eye on things.

He had just received word that the flood of yahoos had managed to overwhelm the natives and, in a few cases, convey enough information to turn the natives to their side. The natives, not surprisingly, had offered to provide support and relay the request up the chain of command.

They had already taken Raach -- the ambassador -- hostage along with most of his entourage. Raach kept on explaining that there had to be a way for the two groups to coexist, but no one was really paying any attention to him anymore.

Nechir watched carefully as a Wizarding tribal shaman who had been living among the Muggles on the island took one of the Muggle tube weapons and cast Geminio on it. Now there were two such weapons. Nechir didn't know much about how it worked, but from what he could tell he pointed the tube at the enemy and pulled the little lever at the bottom. The weapon would then fire a powerful projectile at the enemy.

The tribal shaman had been horrified to hear that the centaurs enslaved humans. He had shouted something in a very bitter tone when someone managed to tell him that the centaurs were going to enslave every human in the area...and that they had wizards as well.
Nechir watched as the man continued to cast his spells. By the time he was done, there were more than 1,000 tube weapons and more than 150,000 projectiles. He distributed them to the rest of the escaped yahoos and showed everyone how to operate them.

Without realizing what he was doing, Nechir suddenly roared: "Neihym, here we come!" Seconds later, the battle cry was picked up by virtually everyone else on the island.

Within an hour, the yahoos had flooded their way back across the border, this time with enough tube weapons to hopefully overwhelm a civilization which had never been exposed to such devices. Meanwhile, far above, a Muggle aircraft lifted off from the building with the long road in Hane and began flying towards the centaurs' capital.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #303.5
-------------
Wednesday, July 31, 1996
Somewhere south of Japan
Pacific Ocean

Even carried between two of the fish-men, Noboru Kamitani was really tired. After the strange mini-storm sank their fleet- and it really did, he saw the boats fall apart under the onslaught- the creatures dragged each of them down, forcing them to eat some magical substance that enabled them to breathe underwater. Unfortunately, there were casualties: some of the whalers took too long to fall or jump from the boats and were injured by debris, and one of them actually had the presence of mind to draw a knife mid-dive and stab one of the creatures. Needless to say, he didn't live another minute, the monsters stabbed him with a dozen spears and knives at once.

As soon as the magical food saved the humans from drawing, the fish-men stripped them naked and folded their clothing, putting it into bags and harnesses, and tied their limbs with rope. After that, the creatures grabbed them all, including the wounded and the dead, and took off as one at a hurried pace. They have been swimming ever since, only slowing down from time to time to feed the humans another dose of that wierd stuff. They swam deep, near the seafloor- to his human eyes, the darkness appeared to be impenetrable. After the first few hours, the fish-men began to sing, and kami, it was rousing: he didn't understand the words, and even most of the sounds had no equivalent in human speech, but he felt as if his own body would be a musical instrument, feeling not only the rythm, but somehow, he thought, the feelings and thoughts of the singers. He felt strenght and stamina he didn't know he had, and judging by his captor's tireless pace, it had the same effect on them. "A march!" he realised. Looking around to try and see his son, he saw faint movement in the darkness all around, and heard the march from every direction. Despite knowing that Kuroki fell into the water before him, and even catching a glimpse of the boy later, he worried for the kid...

Hundreds of meters ahead of the prisoners, the tattoed merman led the way in silence. He never joined the choir- even after so years spent with this tribe, he felt his accent was horrible, his singing voice untrained and crude... not that any of his subjects would have dared to tell him. They feared him too much for that, and they were right to do so. Yet, they followed him obediently, without complaint... and he showed them a way. At the moment, he did it literally, too: using his powers, he
willed the spear in his hand to glow with a bright light, illuminating the way for him and those following him. Of course, with his army numbering in the thousands, the light didn't reach the majority of them- but that's what the song was for.

They arrived at last to a great chasm. For a moment, even he, the Chosen One, great mage, favored of the Ancestors stopped to marvel in the sight: the continental shelf ended abruptly here, as if sliced by a gigantic knife. Down there, so deep that his makeshift lamp's light was hopelessly lost before getting near the bottom, lay the abyssal plain. Not many of his kind braved that dark, barren wasteland: the tribes seldom ventured far from their established sources of nutrition, not to mention they didn't have much when it came to illumination. "Or anything else, for that matter" he thought bitterly. Only the merpeople of his birthplace, the shining city of Roqteratl, launched expeditions there, looking for resources, both mundane and magical. Looking back to see his entourage caught up with him and waiting, he swam over the edge and began the descent.

Noboro Kuroki shifted uncomfortably in the fish-men's grasp. Even without seeing anything in the darkness, he felt they are descending... descending far too quickly to his liking. Even without air in his lungs, the increasing pressure threatened to damage his ears... and that hurt like hell. Just when he believed he couldn't take it any longer, the descent stopped, and his captors continued horizontally. Around him, faint dots of light appeared, growing stronger by the minute as they moved on, revealing a labyrinthine cave system. Several minutes later, they stopped, and he was unceremoniously shoved down besides several other fellow whalers, his collision with stone mercifully softened by being underwater. He felt relief wash over him as he spotted his father, alive and unharmed, among the men. Then, he noticed something- the fish-men were conversing, and they used another language, that sounded strangely similar to English. Listening in, he could understand some of it.

"I'm starving! We ain't had nothing but compressed algae for a whole stinking day!" Even if he didn't understand every word, the meaning was made obvious by the rumble erupting from the thin creature's belly. The others in the vicinity also sounded hungry. "Yeah, why can't we have some meat?... What about them?" One lithe monster gestured in the captives's direction "They look fresh!" Kuroki's fears rose, then dispersed when they promptly burst into laughing... though, he could have sworn they looked at him... "They jest with us" he realised. The first one said "But seriously, I could eat some meat. Did the others catch anything?" The others winked together, and said in a playful, but reassuring tone: "It's your first raid with our beloved lord? Just wait and see... aaand, here it comes!" Right on cue, a dozen fish-men, or rather, fish-women, swam into their alcove, dragging ropes attached to the greatest tuna fish Kuroki had ever seen. The creature could barely fit in the cave, it's size more fitting for a small whale than it's own kind. Apparently it was killed recently, blood still oozing from a wound on it's side... a wound that was apparently made by a very big stabbing instrument. No weapon wielded by man could have done that...

One of the fish-men, the one who asked for meat before, appeared to be just as puzzled as the humans. However, before he could have asked a question, the others yelled "Looks like meat's back on the menu, boys!" and drawing huge knives from their harnesses, they lunged at the fish as one. Eyes glued to the feeding frenzy before him, Kuroki was startled as suddenly a female appeared in front of him, offering him stripes of raw tuna. "Eat, human. You must be hungry." Her voice was beautiful, but disdainful... but she was right: he was hungry, and tuna meat wasn't that bad anyway. Whoever these creatures were, they wanted them alive... but for what purpose, he couldn't fathom.
I stared in shock at the letter my landlord had left in the mailbox. Starting September 1st, my rent would be increasing from $775/month to $975/month. The landlord had claimed -- what else -- that the economy had taken a hit and he needed more money. Guess where he was going to get it from.

Granted, I had a roommate, so I would only be hit with a $100/month increase. Although I was fairly certain I would be able to handle it, it would be tricky. I had already taken a 10% pay cut and had been forced to cut back on many day trips, decorations for the apartment, and additional accessories for the telescope. I was praying that I wouldn't have to reduce the amount of money I was putting into my 401k.

There were two major concerns. First, there was no telling if I would be able to keep my job. Although Matt Ender -- the man who had claimed to be an elf but hadn't -- had told me that they weren't planning on laying anyone off, that didn't mean that they would change their mind if the downturn continued. As a relatively new hire, I would likely be one of the first to go. Without a job, there was no way I would be able to pay for any of this. If all else failed, I could either resume my Ph.D. or move back in with my parents...if they would let me.

The second was the possibility that I would be able to keep my job but my roommate wouldn't be able to pay her share of the rent and I wouldn't be able to find another roommate at such short notice. I deemed that to be unlikely, however. She never lived there, and her parents were paying the bills just to soothe their nerves that she had "somewhere to live".

I had already cut most of my magazine subscriptions other than those to Scientific American and Sky and Telescope. Thank God that I was only a few months out of graduate school and not accustomed to living with a true salary yet!

Trying to put the letter out of my mind, I turned on the TV and turned to the Olympics. There had already been several major upsets at the Games, and several little-known countries had won golds. However, the only major controversy had involved one of the hurdle races. The French competitor, who had been running second, had apparently been surprised by a bright camera flash in his face, tripped, and fallen over a hurdle. Everyone had gasped, and by the time the man had regained his composure the race was over. Canada had won the gold, Egypt the silver, and Tunisia the bronze. The incident had been serious enough to convince the announcer to remind the fans to not try to distract the athletes during the competition. Although the footage clearly showed the camera flash in the man's face, I couldn't imagine how an elite athlete like an Olympian could succumb to distractions that easily.

Things could have been worse, however. Rumors had emerged that a terrorist had planned to detonate a bomb in the stadium last Saturday. Thankfully, the wizards had caught him in the nick of time -- and the Muggles admitted that they likely would not have been able to thwart the attack without magical help. This was a clear case where the fall of the Statute of Secrecy had been
beneficial.

In other news, the British royal family was abuzz with the news that King William apparently had a latent ability to cast spells. This earth-shattering discovery had surprised both Muggles and wizards, not to mention His Majesty himself. Princess Diana was shown to have veela ancestry, a discovery which prompted even more people to take the Ziggurat Labs genetic tests to see if they had unusual genes.

The results of these additional tests had been even more amazing. Of the twenty or so members of the British royal family who had been whisked to the front of the line to take the test, no fewer than SIX had either the Q or Z genes. That was a 30% hit rate in a test where random chance would average about 2%. Even more mind-blowing was the fact that the Emperor of Japan and the Queen of Spain, who had been in town at the time, had taken the test. Akihito had come out with a Q, and Sofia had come out with nothing. People began to speculate if the royal lines worldwide had originated with Wizarding families whose genetic traits were diluted as they married Muggles over the centuries -- and if so, were there Wizarding royals no one knew about?

Dialonis, the Wizarding ambassador to the United Nations, had not provided any comment on this speculation. Normally Dialonis was quite forthcoming on information about the Wizarding world. The fact that he wasn't saying much here was raising a few eyebrows.

The idea of royal lines starting out as Wizarding families made a lot of sense. Traditionally, royals tended to marry each other, possibly to keep the Q and Z together. Furthermore, in a world before the Statute of Secrecy (or where the Statute of Secrecy was less stringently enforced), warrior wizards -- the fighter/magic-users from Dungeons and Dragons -- could very easily become great conquerors through the use of magic. It would also explain the legends of the divine right of kings, where kings were seen as gods.

A preliminary investigation of the attack on the Bulgarian Ministry of Magic had pointed the finger squarely at a Celestine "Crusader Cell". The Christian splinter group had not liked wizards to begin with, and the shout of "Deus lo volt" before the bomb had gone off had been a dead giveaway. Celestine, clearly distraught, had condemned the attack as a defamation of God's name. Samuel excommunicated all members of that cell, and the Kohen Gadol had reportedly been about ready to place a fatwa of execution against the Crusader High Command before someone talked him out of it, citing Muslim/Christian relations. Only time would tell if this would actually work. Xenophilius Lovegood, a British wizard who had already defended worshipers at a church, had immediately offered to assist in the investigation.

Oddly enough, no word had come back from Urban IX yet, the current head of the Celestine Church. Supposedly he was in deep discussions with some of his advisors and was trying to think of a viable solution. Many people were starting to become concerned that he was just going to turn a blind eye to the deaths of the wizards. I feared that was the case as well, and had a bad feeling that once again that instructions intended to provide guidance and moral support were being perverted into evil.

Strange things were afoot in the Eastern Pacific as well. There were unconfirmed rumors that an entirely new continent filled with centaurs -- yes, horse/man hybrids -- had spontaneously appeared out of nowhere, triggering worldwide weather changes over the past few days. What's more, several islands in the eastern Pacific which had been part of French Polynesia suddenly found themselves becoming part of this landmass. The French government was denying everything, of course. However, a friend of the family had been informed us that her vacation to Tahiti had been cancelled because of a "fire in the resort complex".
People were telling stories about fights between humans -- armed with rifles -- and centaurs. The centaurs were coming out second best, supposedly, as the humans' bodies were smaller than those of the centaurs and the humans could just fire their rifles from behind trees in a prolonged guerrilla war. People were condemning the fight on both sides, of course. Why must a first contact situation with a brand-new, clearly intelligent civilization -- let alone species -- be hostile?

Harold-Green's Philosopher's Stone and its valuable Elixir of Life were still off the market, and the latest reports from both Harold-Green and Clinton said that the wonder drug was likely several years away from widespread distribution. However, due to the fact that many people were starting to get impatient for a cure now that they had witnessed the Elixir in action, Clinton had promised $10,000,000 for the first person to perfect a cure for cancer. The bounty would drop by $1,000,000 every year for the next eight years.

Clinton also mentioned that Secrecy Sensors would be added to all federal courtrooms. These would detect if someone was lying, and people could choose to have their trials use either the traditional oaths on the Bible or the Secrecy Sensors.

The world was still agog about the fact that Nicholas Flamel -- the British Minister of Magic -- was indeed six hundred years old. Having sworn the Aes Sedai oaths, there was no way he could deny it. Flamel was not giving interviews at the present time as he was quite busy tracking down a supposedly missing Philosopher's Stone. He reiterated that although a cure for cancer would be wonderful, mankind was not intended to have eternal life. Flamel admitted, under the Aes Sedai oaths, that he had destroyed his own Stone after a long discussion with Albus Dumbledore.

The Minister had ended his remarks with three sentences. "I was always taught that wisdom comes with age, and I have learned many things over my six centuries plus of existence. There is a reason, ladies and gentlemen, that God limited us to 120 years of life. Live with it."

I looked out the window. What was the world coming to? Things were getting, very, very complicated. There was a whole new world out there of magic and sorcery, and I had only scratched the surface of it with my visit to the Dutch Wizarding headquarters on Curacao. Would this new discovery enhance the human race...or destroy it?

To be continued...

-------------
Update #304.5
-------------
Thursday, August 1, 1996
Ministry of Magic
Tokyo
Japan

The Japanese Ministry of Magic was hectic like a kicked ant-nest these days. Some weeks ago, they decided to open the facility for guided Muggle tours, and started joint research projects with several government agencies. Most of their numbers have taken the Oaths by now... in fact, they already started to regret it. Surpassing the information about newly- and unwillingly- exposed Houyhnhnmland proved to be unexpectedly difficult with their hands tied by Oaths and their Obliviators fired months ago. Then came the news of a Muggle terrorist attack 2 days ago in Bulgaria, forcing the Japanese wizards to rethink the whole "we're no longer hiding from Muggles,
yay!" policy. Currently, the Ministry was closed for civilians once again, but they maintained their increased cooperation with the government and various science institutes, studying for example the effect of magic fields on electricity.

Masakazu Nagata, Minister of Magic was just thinking what else could happen unexpectedly, when his phone rang. It was the receptionist: "Sorry to disturb you, Sir, but we have guests, and they want to speak with you." He sighed, and responded: "I told you to redirect everyone to the specialist they'll work with anyway. Please tell me it's at least wizards this time."
The receptionist chuckled.
"Well, yes and no. They aren't Muggles, but not wizards either- it's a delegation of merpeople, led by Ambassador Temshe, from Roqteratl." Thinking it over, the Minister finally answered: "Roqteratl. It's about time they open another trading outpost here, I was beginning to think they want to give a monopoly to the Americans! Let them in."

The Ministry was hidden under a Middle Age fortification, and it's corridors and rooms were built in the lavishly overengineered style of an age when people didn't need to be crammed in the smallest possible spaces. Of course, unlike in Muggle architecture, this had practical applications: Giant visitors, however rare, meant that building things strong and large was a necessity. Thanks to this, the merpeople delegation could stay in their drider suits inside the building, which made things considerably easier for them. One of them carried another mermaid on it's back- the Chieftainess of a local tribe, who didn't have the opportunity to get a walker or the experience to drive it.

The Minister was wondering what the merpeople will do about the language barrier- he heard that the Kodiak trading post had Muggle computers they could use to write, but they had none of those available at the moment, and none of them could speak Mermish. Then he noticed that each siren had a slate and chalk in hand...
"Greetings, Minister. My name is Temshe, I'll be Roqteratl's delegated ambassador to your nation" wrote the female wearing the most shinily decorated encounter suit "Allow me to introduce my colleagues, Seikola and Jissu of Roqteratl" here, each of them pointed at the name tags painted on their walkers, "and our first client, the Chieftainess of the Five Fins tribe. If possible, we'd like to switch this conversation to English or Galiver for her sake- she can't write or understand Japanese."

Fortunately, Masakazu was fluent in English and had some knowledge of Galiver, though the latter was seldom used. "Well, it has to suffice" he thought, then addressed the sirens in English: "I welcome you here, and hope that this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship. Out of curiosity, where do you plan to open your embassy?"
"Somewhere away from big cities" came the response "the amount of human waste and garbage in the water is uncomfortable for us here, though the Chieftainess here says it was much worse a few decades ago. There are several well-preserved coasts in your islands, but we don't know much about inland infrastructure. We'll need your help choosing the ideal location, where the water and the air is clean but access is easy. But first, the Chieftainess has urgent news for you."

Taking a look at the great map decorating the wall of the Minister's office, the tribal leader pointed at the area known to the humans as Taiji, Wakayama. "My tribe's town is near this place. The humans living there kill dolphins every year, and our patience was wearing thin for them. Some of the more reckless ones have been leaving my tribe and joined another tribe that used to be weak and nomadic, but has recently grew strong in number and equipment. We've been skirmishing with them but they
left the humans alone, seeing the need to keep ourselves hidden... but two days ago, they trespassed again and our scouts have found the Muggle ships smashed to pieces and sunk. Please, Minister, they are now the enemy of both of us. Help us!"

The wizard was speechless. He knew of the Taiji incident of course, even had a debate with the Prime Minister over it, but he attributed it to a storm, albeit one probably caused by the failure of the Houyhnhnmland Protector. The Muggles have been searching for bodies ever since, but it was a task their technology was better suited for than magic. At least it was obvious that it wasn't the poor woman's tribe: the damage done to the boats clearly exceeded the capacities of these primitives... which begged a question.
"Incredible powers must have been unleashed in that incident. Tell me more about that tribe, why do you suspect them?"

"The songs of our Keepers say the Broken Shell tribe has always been trying to take our feeding grounds." The Minister interrupted: "Wait, wait! What's a Keeper, and what kind of feeding ground?"
Ambassador Temshe answered that one in Japanese: "The Keepers are the wise men and women of a tribe, who dedicate their lives to preserve the oral and written history of their people. They are influential advisors, the lead Keeper is second only to the Chieftain itself. And by feeding ground, she means kelp forests and routes of migrating sealife."
"Fine then, continue, I'll keep my other questions for the end, Chieftainess." said the Minister.
"You may call me Asmara. It will save you trouble when you deal with other tribal leaders. It used to be my name, but I discarded it when I became leader... but it beats "Hey you, over there". Anyway, back on the attackers. They have no permanent settlement we know of. Since ancient times, they always came, but we drove them back. It was a fight for well-being and we had all the advantages: higher numbers, stable nutrition, more refined tools and a defensible city. But something happened 12 years ago, rumors began to spread that a demon wearing the body of a merman arrived to them and took over. Since then, they never seem to lack food, their knives and spears are sharper than ours, and they steadily gain numbers as people betray their tribes all over the coast, and flock under his banner. They number in the thousands by now. At least they didn't attack us since then- it looks like they already have everything they could gain by taking our city."

The Minister was deep in thought. "A demon? Sounds more like a wizard to me. Is such a thing possible?" The Chieftainess and the Ambassador began writing at the same time, and their slates read as: "Never happened in any tribe I know of" and "There are some urban legends in Roqteratl claiming that merwizards exist, but I don't know any. I wouldn't put it past some Houses to raise one in secrecy, if such a person is ever born... but it's dangerous."

Sarcasm was dripping in the wizard's voice. "Marvellous, we may have a merwizard behind this. Anyway, you mentioned trespassing, when and how did that happen?" Asmara wrote "I was going to elaborate on that. Yesterday, a fishing party of our tribe heard the marching songs of the Broken Shell tribe. They didn't see them, and were even out of dolphin sense range, but still clearly audible. It means there were many of them. They were moving south, towards the deep ocean. We are eager to help you catch them, as long as we can trust your people to let us live in peace afterwards."

Masakazu Nagata recognised an urgent situation when he saw one. "They must have captured the whalers, who may still be alive. We must rescue them. I understand your tribe's dislike for them, but
they are the citizens of my nation, and I will not stand aside when they are kidnapped. We will need all available help, including the help of your people for that operation. Your tribe's independence has always been respected by our Ministry, and our laws will ensure that it will stay so. For now, I can only give my word as Minister of Magic, but I'll speak with the Prime Minister, to see what protection we can offer to your tribe. Does Roqteratl has anything to add?"

"Yes," wrote Ambassador Temshe "we also offer a small team of experts for the search as a gesture of good will. Most of the search will however be done by the Five Fins tribe, as we don't have the manpower for that on our own. You see, even as we speak, every coastal nation's government in the world is recieving a similar delegation, and that puts a strain on our resources."

To be continued...

-------------
Update #305
-------------
Thursday, August 1, 1996
High Chief's Office
Ietalis
-------------
Rubeus Hagrid was amazed at what he was seeing. He had grown up thinking that he was the only half-giant in existence. Things had changed a little when he had met Olympe Maxime at the Triwizard Tournament, but two members did not a species make.

The land of Ietalis was filled with half-giants and short exiles from Brobdingnag. For the first time in his life, he didn't stand out by being either too tall or too short.

The High Chief had been a most gracious host. He had introduced Hagrid to many of the Ieti elite, including several cabinet members. Every single person he had spoken to agreed that Hagrid would make a very good ambassador.

It would take a while, however, for Hagrid to get accustomed to this nation if he took the job. The land of Ietalis was at an extremely high altitude, and living that far north had some rather interesting ramifications.

For one thing, the sun didn't look like it was going to be setting anytime soon. Sure, it got lower and lower in the northern sky. However, just before it hit the horizon, it slowed to a halt and then began climbing again. How was someone going to be able to sleep through all this? Were these chaps supposed to sleep 24 hours a day in February and store up all that rest for the summer?

The combination of the 24-hour sunlight with the cold temperatures didn't make much sense, either. Here it was, in the middle of August, and he was wearing a coat. It slowly dawned on him why furs and robes were such an important part of life up here.

At the moment, the High Chief was pointing out interesting sights in the capital. The little village of Shwach didn't look much like a national capital, and the High Chief had to explain that the state of Ietalis did not have a permanent capital. Rather, it was wherever the High Chief lived. This man -- for some reason, only men were eligible -- was determined by a carefully monitored election where all of the towns submitted candidates. If no one managed to secure a majority, the men who had received fewer than the median number of votes were eliminated and the towns held another election with half the candidates.
Ietalis had friendly relations with the Inuits and other native peoples from the Canadian Northwest. In a stunning reversal of traditional giant politics where size determined the Gurg, ambassadors to the Muggle communities could not be spellcasters and had to be no taller than seven feet. Ambassadors to the Inuit Wizarding communities could, of course, be of any height or magical ability. However, they could only interact with the Wizarding world.

The High Chief pointed out the newly-constructed building which was serving as the Ieti Council Chamber. "They're still debating revealing themselves to the Muggles in there, Mr. Hagrid. There was widespread support for the motion up to a few days ago, when those idiots in the Houyhnhnm lands knocked out the Protector and showed what could happen when a country revealed itself. Thank God that revolution start in the summer: had it been winter, we'd have been knee-deep in snow by now. We've already got enough problems with global warming up here -- we don't need more climatic issues."

Hagrid frowned. "But you're not going to be exposing any new land, sir. You're just going to be telling the world that you have a little community up here with a few spellcasters. They already know about half giants thanks to me, so you don't need to worry about that."

The High Chief shook his head. "There are also political ramifications as well, Mr. Hagrid. Keep in mind that the entire population of the Northwest Territories is maybe double the size of Ietalis. Furthermore, we have wizards and are eleven feet tall, in some cases taller. I don't know about you, but if I were Ottawa, I would be very nervous that we'd try to take over some of that Muggle territory up there to reduce our population density."

Hagrid whistled. "I see, sir. That could be problematic. What have the Inuits told the Canadian government?"

"Very little that the Muggles don't already know, Mr. Hagrid. Very few of us have the privilege -- or are short enough -- to interact with the Muggles."

Hagrid thought for a minute. "Your society seems much better organized and cohesive than that of the Inuits. Could you help the Inuits in the same way the Xylend are with their trading post? Wizarding support could be very valuable up here."

The High Chief pursed his lips. "That's part of our plan, Mr. Hagrid. What everything is going to boil down to us is this: will the Canadians be more appreciative of our help or will they be scared of us and try to eliminate us? If they kick us out of here, we'll have nowhere to go. We're too tall to live with the Muggles and too short to go back to Brobdingnag."

--------
Ancestral Wizarding Shrine
Seoul
South Korea
--------
"Mr. Wong?"

Wong grunted in astonishment -- here was a voice he didn't recognize. All he could tell at this point was that the man had a very bad accent.

He turned to face the speaker and was surprised to find that the man wasn't Korean. He appeared to be one of the British personnel who had arrived in Seoul during the fight with Voldemort.

Wondering what was going on, Wong bowed. "Yes?"
The man shook his hand. "Good evening. I'm Wizard Horace Slughorn, and I was wondering if you could assist us with something."

Wong bit his lip. He knew how to cast a few simple spells now thanks to the work of the Wizarding Shrine, but he still didn't like doing it much because he was afraid he'd blow something up and not realize it. "If it is in my power, I will. However, I must warn you that until recently I had no idea that I could cast spells."

Slughorn nodded in understanding. "I'm aware of that, Mr. Wong. In fact, that is precisely why I was hoping you would be able to assist us. You see, we've found another Muggle who is capable of casting spells. He, too, has the Q gene and not the Z gene. Would you and/or your instructors be willing to help him?"

Wong bowed. "It would be my pleasure, Mr. Slughorn. Who is it?"

Slughorn chuckled. "You're not going to believe it, but William V, the king of England?"

Wong's jaw dropped. "WHAT? The king of England is a wizard?"

"Apparently, Mr. Wong. Believe me, we're as surprised as you are."

Wong covered his eyes with his hand. "I don't want to blow up the King of England with a misfiring spell, Mr. Slughorn."

"You won't, Mr. Wong. Your instructors will likely be there with you, and Hogwarts personnel will be there as well."

"But I don't even speak English!"

Slughorn chuckled. "We'll take care of that. We've got interpreters."

Wong whistled. "I'll think about it."

---------------------------

PROCEEDINGS OF GHOST INTRODUCTORY CONFERENCE
HELD FEBRUARY 18, 1996

1. INTRODUCTION.................................Page 1
2. INTERVIEW WITH REBECCA NURSE.........Page 6
3. INTERVIEW WITH IMAM ABD IBN TARIQ.....Page 12
4. INTERVIEW WITH SAMUEL BEN ELI........Page 17
5. INTERVIEW WITH SIR ROBERT LANE........Page 38
6. INTERVIEW WITH TRIBAL SHAMAN TAPEK.....Page 46
7. INTERVIEW WITH KARTIK.....................Page 49
8. DISCUSSION OF SHEOL........................Page 55
9. DISCUSSION OF LIMBO........................Page 73
10. DISCUSSION OF FUTURE STUDIES.........Page 90
11. BIBLIOGRAPHY.........................Page 99

To be continued...

-----------

Update #305.5
PROOF OF DOLPHIN SENTIENCE
INTERVIEW WITH BOTTLENOSE DOLPHIN

GRASSY KEY, FLORIDA.--- Today, Dolphin Research Center released a press statement that promises nothing less that absolute proof that dolphins are fully sentient beings, just like us humans. This could not have happened without the help of the merpeople, who shared the oceans with the dolphins for thousands of years, and forget a very special connection with them. Now, we present you the transcript of two interviews, first with the bottlenose dolphins from DRC, and the other with Zeekh, the ambassador from the merpeople nation of Roqteratl.

For the first interview, we gave Ambassador Zeekh a list of questions we wanted to ask from the dolphins. He then proceeded to shapeshift into a dolphin himself to communicate with them, ask them the questions, and memorise the answers. Now, let's see how the interview went!

[the ambassador got in the water and transformed]
Aleta: Hey guys, look, a new dolphin!
Kibby: He's not a real one. Let me handle this. [swims so close to Zeekh, they almost touch]
Greetings, blinker!
Zeekh: Heh, never heard that before. Greetings to you and your pod!
K: What brings you here?
Z: I came to see your pod. The humans want me to ask you some questions.
K: So, they finally noticed we're not stupid fish? Took them long enough. Ask, and I will answer.
Z: Thank you. Is that true that you're the only member of this pod who have ever been outside of this place?
K: Yes. Only I was born in the sea, the others were here all their lives. Well, some of them were brought from other such places, but never the sea.
Z: Are you happy here?
K: Not really. It's difficult to live in such a confined small place, and I long for the infinite waters of the sea. But it's not that bad- I get food without hunting, I have a pod to play with, females to mate with, and the humans see to it that we don't get bored. They can play in ways I would not think of on my own.
Z: Would you prefer living free in the sea?
K: Any time.
Z: Do they treat you well?
K: They saved my life. They found me in the sea, injured and sick. I would have died if not for their help. For this, I owe them.
Z: Would you leave if you could?
K: As I said I’ indebted to the humans. But if they said I paid my debt, I’d be happy to return to the sea. Allow me one question, Blinker: did they tell why they keep us here?
Z: Yes. They wish to learn more about your kind. The playing with humans stuff is just for money, so they can keep learning about you.
K: Money? [the word doesn't exist in dolphin language, the mere concept is alien to them. Zeekh used a merpeople expression here]
Z: It's part of human group life, something they give in exchange for food and other good things. It's complicated.
K: I've realised that. I've once seen one big place of your kind, they overcomplicate life too, but that's
still nothing compared to humans.

Z: But you know they are smart, just like you?
K: Yes. But they are hard to understand. They make their places and wear their clothes and even keep us here, but they are still so often sad.

Z: Right. Now, let's speak of pods. Do you know of any greater groups of dolphins?
K: Usually we live in small groups, where everyone knows each other, and we stay in one territory. Except when we're travelling. Sometimes the pods gather into a greater group, with hundreds of dolphins, when the time is right.

Z: When the time is right?
K: When we find enough food to share. Then we welcome other groups to our territory, and we feed together, play together, exchange stories and mate. Also, sometimes a pod leaves that didn't enter: members of several groups band together to try their lack apart from the old group.

Z: Why do they do that?
K: They want to get away from dominant members of their own pod. Maybe they want to choose mates, maybe they disagree with the dominant ones, or are banished...

Z: Disagree? As in, you guys are debating things?
K: Of course. Why not? You can't have all members of a species agree in everything. When one thinks differently of an important thing, he/she might leave the pod and find another one that agrees with hir. Like to like, as I like to say.

Z: Do all of you live in pods?
K: No. Most males live alone or in pairs or groups of three. They wander around and join pods of females and young for a short time, mate, and go on.

Z: What about other kinds of dolphins?
K: That's one of the things the debates are about. Some groups cheerfully mixes with them and even breeds with them, others think they are inferior and should be killed, or driven off, or else. There are many different opinions regarding that, and many interesting stories. I've even heard of a male in the southern seas who mated with an orca... that was a brave guy.

Z: About that: the humans say some dolphins even tried to mate with humans. Do you think it's truly what happened?
K: Probably. Lonely males will try anything if they don't find females. Including each other. And humans are pleasing to touch, almost like us. Just a lot more bony, and fragile, and they can't hold their air. But you know what a male dolphin feels, don't you? I've seen many blinkers play with each other in this form. Sometimes even with us! Mind you, I'd rather take that orca than one of you- your kind lives in enormous groups and has hands with deadly things in it. They come playing, and we are happy to do so, but only fools initiate mating with them.

Z: Leave my people out of this.
K: Why? Mating feels good, you shouldn't be ashamed about it.

Z: Not the way your kind does it, no. I can't imagine any merpeople wishing to participate in that brutal, savage activity you call mating.
K: And yet still there are tales of some who did it. It seems your kind has just as diverse opinions as mine.

Z: Okay, you win. Now it's very disturbing, please let's speak of something else.
K: Okay, allow me a question: the humans throwing nets in the water and killing us in many ways are bad for you too. Will you ever do something about it?

Z: Yes. Now that we no longer need to hide, we will talk to the humans and convince them to stop killing dolphins. I'm confident that the story of the two of us talking will be enough to do it. They did not know you were sentient.

K: Believe me, I can understand that. We can't speak to them, and we don't create places or use tools. They are so blind, they couldn't find out any other way.

Z: What about other kinds of sealife? Other dolphins, whales, seals, that kind of thing. Do you know of anyone as smart as you?
K: I told you we disagree about these things so I can only speak for myself. I think other dolphins
and porpoises are more or less just like us. Whales are strange, but they sing to each other in beautiful voices, so they may or may not be smart. I’ve met no seals in the sea, but there are some in this place, and they appear to be very vocal, but I don't understand them and can't exactly go over to see them for myself up close. Others... I’ve met big slow fat creatures a few times, they appeared to be dumb. The rest is just fish. But of course appearances may be deceiving, and the smartness of anything I can't talk to can only be guessed.

Z: Thank you for your answers, this will be for now. We shall meet again, but for now I say goodbye.

K: It's been a good thing to speak you. Please tell the humans thanks for all the fish!

After Zeekh got out of the water and wrote his answers down, we interviewed him too. Here's the transcript:

Reporter: These are pretty surprisingly eloquent answers from a dolphin. Did really he say this, word-to-word?

Zeekh: Translating from Dolphish is difficult. They have many expressions for things that are fairly irrelevant for us, and no good expressions for things we find important. And their grammar is different from human too, though that's hard for me- it is very similar to Mermish.

R: What do you exactly mean by Mermish? I've heard you sound very differently underwater and above water, are those two different languages?

Z: Correct. Underwater Mermish is a beautiful language with all the sounds a human can produce, and then some. It's good for nice songs. Surface Mermish on the other hand is awful, and painful both to hear and to speak. It's only good for quick conversation, and has a limited vocabulary with few synonyms and as short words as possible, but it's the only language we can speak on the surface. Underwater, we can speak any language you can speak, and we often do, because though Mermish is a nice language, it's not a practical language.

R: Not practical? How?

Z: To put it in the simplest possible terms, if you want to say something long, beautiful, and full of emotions, you use Mermish, and if you want to say something quickly and squarely, you use Galiver, or a Muggle language.

R: Tell me about this Galiver! It sounds almost familiar, is there a chance I've seen this word somewhere before?

Z: It is a corrupted dialect of Medieval English, one of the common languages of many wizards, with Latin being the other. I doubt you've ever heard about it, until recently such knowledge was inevitably Obliviated.

R: Back to the topic of dolphins, tell me more about this magical transformation of yours!

Z: Ask your questions and I'll answer to the best of my knowledge.

R: I see you transformed into a Bottlenose Dolphin. Is this true for all of your kind?

Z: Yes, all merpeople, be it Siren, Selkie or Merrow, transform into bottlenose dolphins.

R: Does that mean you can breed with dolphins?

Z: Absolutely not. Our dolphin forms are magical transformations, and sterile by nature.

R: Interesting. What does that mean for pregnant mermaids?

Z: The fetus doesn't transform when the mother does. Size and anatomy is too different, so after a time, it would cause miscarriage. Generally, transformation is considered unsafe for the whole duration of the pregnancy, but in the first few months it's relatively free of risk. Once it starts to show, it's considered the end of safe dolphin-form fun until childbirth. Also, women feel when they can no longer safely transform. In fact the more faint variant of that feeling is the first thing they notice if they become pregnant.

R: You've mentioned different kinds of merpeople. Please elaborate on them.

Z: We are like humans, with great diversity in color and shape. I, for example, am a Siren. Merrows have bluish green skin and usually green hair, and Selkies have greenish grey skin with usually brown hair. There is no other difference between them other than appearance, and all are of the same
species. Half breeds are entirely possible and fairly common in Roqteratl.

R: Kibby repeatedly called you a Blinker. What does that mean?
Z: It refers to one of the ways we use our dolphin forms. Dolphins have special organs that make clicking sounds that then travel through water, reflect from objects, and the dolphin senses the reflected sounds with another organ, allowing it to get a good picture of it's surroundings even in darkness or murky water. They just emit the clicks in a static, even pace and see what comes back. Us, we use these organs for communication: we change the pace of the clicks, generating messages. I've read about human Morse code, it's very similar. Now, imagine you use your eye to see, you blink when you need to, and you see there is one guy who makes Morse code with his blinks. What you're going to nickname him?

R: Interesting. You said that's one use of the dolphin form, what are the others?
Z: Speed, strength, a form that allows us to observe Muggles up close, and a more effective metabolism. Our true form is very skinny, which means we have to eat a lot to maintain core temperature. When food is scarce, we spend as much time in dolphin form as possible.

R: I see. So, do the dolphins know whether or not a fellow dolphin is a merperson?
Z: Not necessarily, but it would take a very experienced person to keep it secret. Dolphins are quite observant. But they accept merpeople among themselves, and there are a few of us who are so fed up with any kind of society that they go to live among the dolphins, saying that they are happy because they don't make things needlessly complicated.

R: You don't think they are right, do you?
Z: I agree that dolphins are happy, more so than us. But to live like them is to give up shaping the world altogether. Humans didn't realise dolphins are sentient because they didn't create anything, and truth be told, we probably wouldn't have realised it either without our transformation ability.

To be continued...
Update #306

Thursday, August 1, 1996
New England Aquarium
Boston, Massachusetts
United States of America

The Aquarium had already closed up shop for the evening. The last tourists had left the building and the animals in the touch tanks had been brought back into their containers for the night. The staff was doing what it could to clean everything up. However, there was one mess which was going to take a lot more than a few marine biologists to clean up.

A few hours earlier, there had been a report that Zeekh, the ambassador to the merpeople, had communicated with a dolphin and proven that once and for all that the graceful marine mammals were not only intelligent but a sentient species. Dolphins had at least one spoken language, albeit not a written one. Whether all dolphins all over the planet spoke the same language was still an open question. If there were multiple delphinic languages, that brought up the possibility of honest-to-goodness dolphin NATIONS hiding in the ocean along with the merpeople.

The scientists had been floored by the discovery and had immediately started developing plans to speak with dolphins in the aquariums and observe the way pods interacted with each other. The Woods Hole Institute suddenly found itself flooded with inquiries, most of which they weren’t able to resolve.

Unfortunately for the aquarium staff, one other group had had a strong reaction to the news: PETA, the People for Ethical Treatment of Animals. Within half an hour of the announcement -- even before the report was confirmed -- there were no fewer than fifteen people picketing outside the exhibit housing the dolphin show. The protestors were carrying signs which read "Free the Dolphins", "Get Out Of Jail Fish", "Cruelty to Animals", and so forth. One clever sign argued that the poor creatures were the most intelligent dolphins in Miami, including the NFL players who had survived the nuclear explosion. Although the vast majority of people didn’t really know what to make of the new development, it was obvious that SOME people had been riled up.

Channels 4, 5, and 7 were all covering the protests, interrupting the broadcasts about the economic crises, the reconstruction of New York and Cambridge, and the Philosopher's Stone controversy. The New England Aquarium was not the only site being targeted: the Monterey Aquarium, Whaling Museum, and three other sites were also affected. Rumor had it that Greenpeace was thinking of getting involved as well.

The fact that dolphins were sentient had surprised most of the wizards as well. Nicholas Flamel, still screaming about the Stone, had not been available for comment. Travis Radner had grudgingly admitted that this forced the American Department of Magic to "reconsider" the way it handled dolphins. Hermione Granger, the latest British teenage superstar, had immediately sided with the dolphins, explaining that she had already denounced the wizards' maltreatment of elves and created a protest group known as SPEW, the Society for Preservation of Elvish Welfare. With one stroke of a pen, that "E" had turned into an "I": Intelligent. The newly renamed SPIW immediately took the
dolphins under its wing and started petitioning the British government to confirm Zeekh's observations and, if they were confirmed, give dolphins and all other sentient species the same rights human beings had. Within an hour of the young witch's declaration, SPIW had suddenly ballooned to over 250 members and had earned itself two new chapters in the United States and Canada.

So far, SPIW was just a fringe group. Only time would tell if it would become a serious force in American politics.

-----------------------
Friday, August 2, 1996
Interim Government Offices
Ancestral Wizarding Shrine
Seoul
-----------------------
The president of South Korea answered the phone. "Yes?"

The voice on the other end of the line sounded excited. "Mr. President, I think we can declare victory. With 56% of the vote counted up there, we've got 73% in favor of democracy, 5% in favor of the status quo, and 22% in favor of some other form of government. The first step to reunification appears to have been taken, sir!"

"Any irregularities?"

"A few. However, the margin of victory is so high that I don't think they'll change the outcome."

The president punched his first in the air in excitement. "That's very good to hear, my friend. Who's the new president?"

"Man Joong Man, sir. He was a former underground democracy activist who got involved with the UN ruling committee and made a name for himself."

"Fantastic! Now, it's time for the next step. I'll make the announcement in a couple of hours."

"You mean the announcement of the referendum on reunification, with Seoul as the combined capital?"

"That is affirmative. The current plan has them voting on independence, operating under protectorate status, or rejoining South Korea. If they decide to become our protectorate, the transition will take place on New Year's Day 1998. If they choose unification, they will become part of our nation on New Year's Day 1999. Drakul and the rest of those people will clear out of the DMZ 6 months before the transition."

"Makes sense, sir. Do you see any reason to change it?"

"Not that I know of. I'll keep you posted if anything comes up."

"Thank you, sir. Oh -- and one more thing. You're not going to believe this."

The president chuckled. "Given all the strange events of late, I'll probably believe anything now. What is it?"

There was a pause on the other end of the line, followed by: "Have you actually read the Robert Jordan books, Mr. President?"
"The fantasy series which introduced the concept of an Aes Sedai? I hadn't, but I've heard of it."

"That's it, sir. Well, it looks like Man Joong Man has decided to adopt one of the customs Jordan's
countries did in the novels. He's going to appoint an Aes Sedai advisor!"

-----------------------
Thursday, August 1, 1996
Omega Institute
- - - - - - - - - - - - -
Urban IX winced. Samuel looked as if he was going to punch him in the head. Fortunately, since
Samuel was a ghost, the biblical legend wasn't going to do any...physical...damage at least. The
interpreter stared at him and shrugged. "He's not happy, Urban. You're not going to --"

Samuel talked right over her, and she started translating. "Urban, what is this that I hear happening in
this country in Eastern Europe, near what you call Turkey?"

Urban tried to stay calm. "There was an attack on a Ministry of Magic there. Several people were
killed, as I've been told."

Samuel grunted. "You've probably been told a lot of this. Suleiman, John Paul, and the interpreter
have all told me that the Celestines were behind it."

Urban's mind raced. It sounded like a Celestine Crusader Cell all right. However, Urban hadn't
actually ordered the attack. He may have organized the first Crusader Cells to resist the wizards, but
once the cells were organized he couldn't control what their members did.

He tried to think of an excuse. "The fact that they were Celestines does not mean all of the people in
my sect are evil, Samuel."

"Indeed, Urban, I cannot. After all, I know that Celestine himself is good and that he has seen the
light and accepted my assistance. However, the fact that the distrust of wizards seems to
be...pervasive...has forced me to take some regrettable but necessary actions."

This doesn't sound good, Urban thought. Could Samuel have figured out that Urban had been
egging on many of the cells?

Samuel braced himself, and the interpreter drew a deep breath. "I believe I may have no choice but to
excommunicate you and all major religious leaders in your sect. Due to the fact that we are going to
have a unified front when it comes to the conference starting later today, you have been given a five-
month probation period. If the members of your sect do not improve their behavior, you will all be
excommunicated at the end of the year. Both Suleiman and John Paul have agreed to this."

Urban's jaw dropped. "You can't excommunicate Celestine if he's reformed!"

Samuel nodded. "Indeed, I cannot. However, Celestine has agreed to side with John Paul on this.
Remember that he founded his movement because of the iconoclasm and his distrust of me
personally, and he has discovered that those fears have been groundless. As a result, Celestine is now
on the same side as John Paul and, as a result, I no longer consider him part of the sect which, in
great irony, now bears his name. Had he known then what he does now, there would have been no
Celestine sect. Someone other than Celestine has corrupted this man's sect, and we both know who
that is."
Samuel went on. "You will also notice that I am not excommunicating the laymen in the Celestine churches. They have been taught improper doctrines by bigoted clergy, and it is my opinion that replacing the teachers can save the students."

Urban tried to think of a suitable rebuttal. "Samuel, now wait a minute --"

Samuel talked right over him. "You have five months, Urban. Now, if you know what is good for you, you will do exactly what I tell you."

To be continued...

Update #306.5

Thursday, August 1, 1996
Hidden cave system at the edge of the continental shelf
Somewhere south of Japan
Pacific Ocean

It has been two days since their capture, and Noboro Kuroki began to see a pattern in the placement of their guards. He didn't have anything to measure time with, but he guessed they had three short shifts, a few hours each, repeating without variation. The 98 of them were placed in one branch of the cave, watched by a mere dozen of the creatures. Not that it wasn't more than enough: they were tied securely, and he suspected that the strange weed they fed them every few hours was the only reason they could breathe water, and also speak as he realised after several hours of trying. Escape seemed hopeless... so, it was time for more indirect approaches.

He recognised one of the guards from before, it... no, she was the one who gave them food when that ridiculously large tuna fish was shredded horribly by the fish-men. Right now, she seemed bored out of her mind, so, remembering that he heard them speak in a language so similar to English that he could either know an expression or guess it from context, Kuroki initiated a whispered little conversation.

"Hey, you there with the necklace! Do you speak English?" The female looked at him and swam closer. "I do not know what English is, but why do you want to know?"

Kuroki looked at her, puzzled. "They what language is this?"

She cast him an amused glance. "Why of course, Galiver. You seem to be nede of it yet you mastered it. How can this be?"

"It is very similar to a gaijin language I know. Most of the world speaks it."

"What is a gaijin?... I see. Most of the two languages are the same, yet there are differences. Perhaps the differences are ettin enough that we understand each other. It's not like I was forbidden from speaking with you to pass my time. So tell me, human, what's your name?"

"Noboro Kuroki. And yours?"

"Ghenet, daughter of Tiblet, of the Broken Shell tribe of the merpeople. Why did you murder dolphins?"

"Oh, that's why you guys kidnapped us? Well, we kill dolphins for the same reason we kill fish, for food. Why is that a problem?" From the grimace on Ghenet's face, he immediately knew he shouldn't have said it so cockily. She shrieked:

"Parshaara! You are not just ignorant, but a cannibalistic garasje as well! We should have killed you all!"
He was desperate now. "We didn't kill anyone! This must be a misunderstanding!"
If looks could kill, he'd have been dead ten times over by now. She seemed to have regained her
calm, but she was visibly near to another explosion of fury. "You and your people have killed sons
and daughters of my tribe, and dolphins too. They had to keep their tal form hidden from you, so
they stayed dolphins even as their blood was let into the sea! They trusted your people to be decent
effort to agree that food that talks is not food, and they gave their life for this!"
He was shocked. He had slain people unknowingly, he had blood on his hands. But some pieces just
didn't add up. After a minute of silence, he finally said: "I'm truly sorry. I didn't know they were
people. If they had shown themselves for what they are, we would have apologised and let them go."
A short, bitter laugh escaped her mouth. "You really don't see, human. Dolphins are people just like
you or me. They feel, they think, even talk. But you'll see for yourself soon enough, when..." She
was interrupted by another mermaid rushing in at top speed, slowing to a halt before slamming into
them, screaming all along: "Come, hurry! Your sister, it's her time! Hurry!"
Ghenet looked at her, then quickly said "Sorry, I must go now, my sister is about to give birth!" to
the young whaler, then she was off.

-------------------
Observatory Vault, Trapananda
South Pacific Ocean west of the southern tip of South America
-------------------

In the middle of a cavernous chamber faintly illuminated by the blue glow of runes carved on all
walls, floor and ceiling, a huge transparent globe hovered. It's surface was that of the planet Earth,
complete with the hidden landmasses in the Pacific and the Atlantic. The continental landmasses
reflected a state before the present, obviously the globe's creators didn't yet update most of the highly
visible landmarks of the last decades: forests were bigger, deserts and urban areas smaller than what a
satellite would show. Coastal areas and the seafloor, on the other hand, were very detailed and up to
date, with symbols appearing at every location if the viewer concentrated on a given point.

And there were glowing dots on the map, in various colors, radiating with a light that was visible
only to wizards. Just like the landmarks, each dot showed a cluster of symbols when focused at. The
distribution was odd: most of them were silver, scattered near the landmasses, and a few in the open
ocean. There were golden ones, mostly concentrated into a solid blob of gold west of Patagonia, with
a few scattered ones blinking into existence and disappearing all around the globe, even on the
landmasses.

And there were about a dozen red dots, centered in the relatively shallow waters east of the
Seychelles Islands. Their very color was unnerving, but they were there for so long without
significant change, no Watchers cared about them. They were a nuisance, but each of them popped
into existence, spent some time in and near that place, and after a few short decades, blinked out.

However, there was another, smaller group of red dots in the North Pacific. These weren't there for
much more than a decade, starting with a single one, then another appeared next year, two others
after that, three others after that... by now, there were two dozen ominous red dots scattered over a
large area, for most of the time staying where they appeared without further update, but recently they
started to congregate around the first. Suddenly, a new silver dot appeared near the small red cluster,
but it too turned red in a second.

A small group of merpeople, wearing strange garments such as several harnesses and belts with pouches hanging from those, looked at each other, exchanging worried glances. One of them finally spoke in unusually musical-accented Galiver: "We can't allow this to continue any further. It's one thing we can't go into Roqteratl, but we have errant merwizards at our hand here, multiplying at an unnaturally fast rate."

Another Watcher angrily responded: "But the rules are clear in this, we cannot reap when wizards are near the children, it's too risky for..."
"SCREW your rules, Jowon," interrupted the first speaker, "they never did include this shit happening! If we don't act now, this will completely get out of our hands!"
Jowon was not that easy to convince, however. "Even so, above all else we have to maintain our cover. If the rules are outdated, it's up to the Archon to decide how to change them, not you."
"Then I shall take this before him immediately." Responded the determined Watcher, and stormed out of the chamber.

----------------

Coast of Taiji
Higashimuro District, Wakayama
Japan
----------------

Night has already began to fall when the divers, ships and submarines of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force were joined by hundreds of Five Fin warriors. They were joined by a dozen or Roqteratl's finest specialists, including investigator and tracker Kima of Red Squad and "creepy guy with the freaking magic eyes" Toni. No driders were sent out this time, the heavy constructs would have only slowed them down. This time, it was up to the merpeople to find the enemy, and they didn't have much hope that the subs with their few wizards inside will get anywhere near in time when that happened.

The repeatedly reassigned detective was happy to see her former squad-mate again, but the circumstances worried her, prompting her to make the rhetoric question: "Hey, big guy, how come we always end up in a damn mage-hunt?" Her blindfolded companion didn't seem worried about it. "With these cool human toys" he showed the AAI underwater revolver borrowed from the JMSDF, "they could send me after wizards anyday. BOOM, headshot!"
The girl didn't hold back her sarcastic remark: "And here it is, do we need further proof that Muggle culture has already spoiled your brain?" Then she added: "Anyway, I hope these tribal guys won't get any of these, having never even seen a crossbow, they would forget which end to point when they pull the trigger."

To be continued...

----------

Update #307
----------
Dan Rather could not recall having ever seen this many religious figures in one room at the same time. The only thing that could conceivably have even come close would have been a papal conclave -- yet as a layman even he wouldn't have been able to get into one of those. That Exeunt Omnes would have forced him out along with everyone else.

A good third of the delegates were Christian dignitaries. He recognized Vatican notables such as the papal nuncio and Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. There were no fewer than eight monks, twelve cardinals in addition to Ratzinger, and five people who looked like professors. The Patriarch of Constantinople was also there, as was the Archbishop of Canterbury. Rather imagined what would have happened if the same gathering had been attempted a few hundred years earlier: holy war, if not worse.

Except that the holy war would not have been between Christian and Christian. This was because another third of the delegates were Muslim, both Shi'a and Sunni. Several of the people appeared to be Sufi mystics, which intrigued him a great deal. He didn't know much about Islamic mysticism. Both men and women were represented, and although the men often frowned upon the female scholars they wisely kept their mouths shut.

Roughly one out of every five people was Jewish. Several rabbis were there, primarily Conservative and Reform. The Orthodox were still wary for the most part, but a couple of brave souls had still managed to make it over there. A few Kabbalistic scholars were there as well.

Rather could not help but be amazed at how well the three faiths managed to get along. He knew all too well that peaceful relations between religious groups tended to get scant airtime on the news. He probably wasn't the only reporter who gave everyone the impression that every monotheist would be more than willing to attack every other monotheist at a drop of a hat, kippah, or burqa. How many people realized that the terrorists were the exception rather than the rule.

Not all of the monotheists in the room were religious. It had taken Suleiman and John Paul some fast talking with Samuel to pull it off, but they had eventually agreed to include small group of people who culturally belonged to a monotheistic faith but were in fact non-practicing. It was important to have all viewpoints represented when it came to the monotheistic faiths.

The remaining delegates were primarily Buddhist or Hindu. There was some friction between the adherents of these two traditions and the monotheists, but thankfully everything seemed to still be working out.

Rather brought out his camera, walked over to the nearest delegate, and tapped him on the shoulder. "Excuse me, Revered One, but can I ask you a few questions?"

The man, who appeared to be Muslim, turned and nodded. "Go ahead."

"What's going through your mind right now?"

The man chuckled. "Allah take me, my mind is still a bit blown at what we're trying to do here. Although I personally don't consider myself worthy enough to be part of this gathering, Allah must have His reasons for including me."
"Why do you think He chose you?"

The man shrugged. "I don't presume to know the way Allah thinks. All I have to offer is experience as a dean of religious studies at a university in Morocco."

"Sounds like He realized that you have a great deal of experience in interfaith studies and a lot of people who can help you through this."

"Quite possibly. However, like I said, we mortals cannot comprehend the divine."

Rather changed the subject. "Do you think that you will be able to unify the monotheistic faiths and overcome millennia of animosity?"

The Muslim was silent for a moment. Eventually, he drew a deep breath. "Inshallah, we will be up to the task. However, we are all but human. Even the wizards here have admitted that their ability to cast spells does not change the fact that they will inevitably make mistakes."

Rather whistled silently to himself and jotted down some notes. "There are wizards here as well?"

The man nodded. "From what I've been told, yes. The fact that a person has some unusual abilities does not make him any less human. To the best of my knowledge, religious devotion and magical abilities are completely independent of each other."

"Very interesting. How long do you think it will take?"

The cleric looked around the room, where people were starting to head for their seats. "Months, perhaps? Possibly years? I honestly have no idea. Hopefully I will live long enough to see this come to fruition."

Rather thanked the interviewee and got his name. He then turned the camera on the platform in the front of the stage, where seven chairs had been placed behind two lecterns. The audience buzzed as a man and a woman walked onto the stage, bowed to someone in a curtained off area, and then took their positions beside the lecterns. Rather recognized them as the people who had been serving as the interpreters for Samuel and Deborah.

The interpreters introduced themselves and then bid everyone who was able to rise. Chairs scraped across the floor as six of the most powerful religious figures in the world made their way onstage. The Pope and Dalai Lama seemed serene. Celestine seemed nervous, and he was supporting Suleiman, who still walked with a slight limp. The panel was closed out by a Hindu leader, a rabbi, and the Patriarch of Constantinople. Later on in the evening, Rather would learn that the seating order had been determined at random prior to the beginning of the conference.

The people started muttering quietly among themselves. Rather was puzzled for a moment until he realized something surprising. Urban IX -- the Celestine antipope -- was not there. Celestine himself was there, but he had renounced his claim to the papacy. What was going on here?

Suleiman sat down. However, the six other men remained on their feet, staring expectantly at the two lecterns.

John Paul stepped forward. "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Omega Institute and Retreat Center. It is my great duty to welcome our two featured guests: Samuel the son of Eli; and Anitiel the
wife of Lappidot, also known as Deborah."

There was a flash of light at the front of the stage. When it had cleared, Samuel and Deborah were standing there, shimmering in their ghostly auras.

Rather recognized Samuel immediately. He had never seen Deborah before, however, though he had heard rumors that she had come back and may have even been Samuel's teacher. There wasn't much to see, however. She was dressed in something which looked very much like a burqa, and the people could barely see her eyes. Her robe was decorated with a fanciful image of a bee.

It soon became obvious that the female interpreter would be speaking for Deborah and the male interpreter would be handling Samuel. Not only did that make sense gender-wise, it would allow access to single-sex gatherings where the delegates, particularly the women, could relax their modest dress restrictions.

Samuel spoke, and the interpreter translated. "Ladies and gentlemen, you may be seated."

Everyone sat down as Samuel continued his speech. "We are gathered here today to put to rest over two thousand years of hatred and bigotry, where the Children of Israel have vied among themselves to determine which of them is the true heir to Abraham. Rest assured, faithful of the world, that you are all heirs to his tradition and have no reason to fight among yourselves. Why should Isaac and Ishmael be fighting when it is obvious that Abraham loves them both?"

Everyone clapped at that.

"I have only been here for a short time. However, it is obvious that all four of your sects are derived from the traditions I grew up with. You are all on the right track, and with a little help from my experience here and there we may be able to reunite the Children of Israel."

Samuel held up his hands. "Now, I freely admit that this is going to be difficult. There is a distinct possibility that despite our best efforts, we will not be able to end this bickering with one conference. Rest assured, however, that this conference will continue until we reach an acceptable compromise."

Samuel's last remark drew a lot of surprised comments, many of them worried. Rather thought he knew why. Omega was intended as a summer camp, and the bunks were not winterized. Those cabins were not heated. By forcing them to stay until they reached a compromise, he was effectively giving them a deadline: get the job done or you'll get very cold. Oh, and since I'm a ghost, I don't need to worry about it.

The prophet continued. "If, at some point, it becomes obvious that there is going to be no way to actually unify the faiths, then the conference will continue until a tribunal is set up which will ensure that the Abrahamic civil war will never start again."

This comment brought an ovation, and Rather grunted approvingly. It seemed as if Samuel had finally realized he was probably in over his head here and needed to tone things down.

Samuel looked up thoughtfully. "I have often wondered what inspired me to stay around as a ghost after my time on earth ended. All of our faiths teach that everything happens for a reason, including my decision to become a ghost. It appears now that the reason is obvious: to help this community from my future to resolve some major theological crises. Needless to say, God may work in mysterious ways, but my experience serves as proof that even the most trivial or inconsequential decision could be part of some divine plan."
The clapping at this point was deafening. Samuel had to wait a good twenty seconds to conclude his address. Still looking up, he fell to his knees.

"God of Abraham, bless this gathering and provide us with Your guidance. You have brought us all here for a reason, uniting my knowledge of ancient Israel with wisdom of modern theology. The fall of the Statute of Secrecy must have been Your doing as well, as without it I would never have been able to emerge and speak with these people."

Samuel's face grew troubled. "Lord, I am not Moses. I am not Abraham. I am just a ghost of a prophet who lived three thousand years before this time. The more that I think about it, the more that I believe I am not worthy of this mission. Yet if that is Your decision, I must be comforted by the fact that Your in Your infinite wisdom has chosen me."

Samuel then stood up and then uttered a blessing which Jewish households recognized all over the world.

"Barach Atah Adonai, Eloheinu melekh ha'olam, she'hechianu, w'qiyimanu, w'higiyanu lazman hazeh. Blessed art Thou, Our Lord, king of the world, who kept us alive, sustained us, and allowed us to reach this momentous occasion."

There was a resounding AMEN as the Jewish contingent exploded in cheers. Finally, Samuel looked back into the crowd. "Let's get going."

To be continued...

-------------
Update #308
-------------
Friday, August 2, 1996
Imperial Palace
St. Petersburg
Russia

----------
Tsar Alexei grunted. "I understand, Ambassador Dialonis. I may not LIKE the idea all that much, but I can see why it's going to be necessary."

The scintillating white fish representing Dialonis glowed more brightly. "It's all for the best, Your Majesty. It's only a matter of time until the Muggles figure out that most of the royal lines started out as Wizarding families. How else would you explain such a high hit rate in noble lines all over the world?"

The head Romanov paced around the room. "Who was the idiot who betrayed us?"

Dialonis shrugged. "There's nothing we could really have done, Your Majesty. Even Atlantis didn't realize that it was possible to have half the Wizarding genes. We had though that we'd manage to isolate all of the spellcasting royals, but it appears that we were in error."

Alexei growled viciously. "And now we've got the King of England wanting to go to Hogwarts. That's going to be riot, I'm sure. Thank God he's got a younger sibling who doesn't have that Q."

The fish shook its head. "Headmaster Snape tried to convince the Queen Mother not to send William to Hogwarts, but she insisted -- and rest assured, Your Majesty, that you don't want to seem to be an
enemy of Princess Diana. Eventually, he agreed to admit the king provided that someone was found to train a Q-only wizard."

Alexei thought for a moment. "From what I've heard of Diana, I concur. Have the Hapsburgs decided to come out as well?"

"I spoke with both Michael and Otto and they've agreed. Both the Grand Mugwump and I had to browbeat them into not trying to take over the Muggles, however, as doing so would likely trigger another round of People For Humans groups and possibly even Death Eater support. Considering that we can't use the Judgment Day protocol again for five years, that would be extremely unwise."

Alexei's jaw dropped. "You can't use it for five more years? Why not?"

Dialonis explained. "Although the Time-Turners will still work if the four keys are inserted, the magical EMP's which provide a safe environment for the operatives take five years to charge. It appears that they were designed that way to make sure no one tried to abuse Judgment Day declarations. Without the EMP devices, we won't have enough manpower to deal with irritated Wizarding nobles and surviving Death Eaters."

Alexei snorted. "Oh, lovely."

"Indeed, Your Majesty. Otto and Michael are going to make the announcement in a few hours, and they've already introduced themselves to the Chancellor using Jorg Eichmann as a mediator. Supposedly the government agreed to let them serve as ceremonial joint rulers and the immediate supervisors of the German Ministry of Magic. Wizarding Emperor Shima is going to tell the Japanese pretty soon as well, and he'll serve as the nominal boss for the Japanese Ministry of Magic. The real interesting case is going to be Laura Spencer of Britain."

Alexei closed his eyes. "You mean to tell me there's a BRITISH witch hiding out there who's going to trump William? That's going to be a disaster, particularly if she comes before William and she's old enough to not be a minor."

"Indeed, that would be problematic, as she is 24 and of age. She was in Hufflepuff, according to the notes I have here, and she's William's third cousin. Fortunately, she's already said that she's not going to take the Muggle throne, and from what we've been told she keeps to herself and doesn't get involved in politics. She has, however, offered to tutor William in case he wants to go through with a career as a wizard."

Alexei thought for a second. "Third cousin, you say?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Interesting. And he's 14. Don't tell me they're thinking of having William marry Laura to unify the lines once the two of them meet each other."

Dialonis hesitated a minute before he responded. "There are some people who are recommending that. However, this isn't the 13th century. Both William and Laura will be permitted to choose their spouses, Your Majesty. There aren't any more arranged marriages, especially for Laura as she can now marry Muggles thanks to the fall of the Statute of Secrecy. At any rate, Your Majesty, would you be willing to reveal your existence?"

Alexei paused. "Since it seems obvious we're going to be found out anyway, I don't see how we can
avoid it. We'll do it, and God help us if there's a problem."

"A problem, Your Majesty? The Communist regime which did in the Muggle branch is no more. You have nothing to be afraid of."

Alexei bit his lip. One would think that, Ambassador. However, there are several pieces of information which seem to indicate otherwise."

"Indeed, Your Majesty? Is there anything we can do?"

Alexei sighed. "To be honest, I'm not sure. The future may already be written as there is a prophecy involved."

Dialonis suddenly remembered. "Kurchatova's Dawn Ash Prophecy. I had completely forgotten."

"Exactly, Ambassador. Although some things don't add up, the most obvious interpretation is that the entire Romanov line will go extinct within six years after the nuclear explosions on Judgment Day. If that's the case, the clock is ticking."

Dialonis paused. "That is a distinct possibility, unfortunately. The astrologers seem to all agree that if something is going to cause a problem in the near future, it's going to come out of the Ukraine."

Alexei gasped. "The Ukraine? God help us all. There are a lot of Celestines over there who don't particularly like wizards. However, that isn't the worst of it."

"Really? What else have you found?"

Alexei fidgeted a little. "We don't have proof of this, Ambassador. However, there is tantalizing evidence that former Tchernobog cultist Grigori Rasputin may have returned via a Horcrux. And he loved to manipulate my Muggle ancestors."

Dialonis suddenly remembered. "This jogs my memory a bit now, Your Majesty. Have you discovered any new information about Rasputin and his whereabouts?"

"No, Ambassador. However, the fact that there are boatloads of Ukrainians trying to get into Atlantis is troubling -- as if someone is orchestrating this to try to increase Ukraine's influence in Atlantis. There's also the Celestine attack on the Bulgarian Ministry of Magic. Although everyone seems to think it was Celestines, for all we knew it was Black God cultists trying to test their skills at Rasputin's behest. It wouldn't be hard for them to frame the Celestines."

The fish frowned. "I freely admit that we're surprised by the number of Tchernobog cultists trying to get into Atlantis. However, all of them have passed the background checks. With all due respect, this seems like a bit of a stretch, Your Majesty. How sure are you about this?"

Alexei shrugged. "Like I said, we have no proof. Just a lot of circumstantial evidence."

"Where is Rasputin now?"

Alexei's shoulders slumped. "I don't know, Ambassador. I honestly don't know."

---------------------

Headmaster's Office  
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
Snape chuckled at the message which had been sent to him express by owl. It had informed him that his work on the Wolfsbane Pill had earned him a nomination for the Nobel Prize in Medicine. He had also earned an Order of Merlin, Second Class, for his work on the Wolfsbane Pill, as well as the Grand Medal of Luggnagg.

Although he wouldn't mind these awards, he couldn't help but think that he didn't do most of the work on the potion. All he did was add a few preservatives and put it in pill form. Nevertheless, if someone wanted to give him an award, he wouldn't complain about it.

What he thought was truly amusing, however, was the fact that one of the other Nobel nominees was the combination of Nicholas Flamel and David Hendrickson for the Elixir of Life as a cure for cancer. From what he knew about the Elixir of Life, Hendrickson hadn't done anything -- he'd just stolen Flamel's notes. Flamel should have been nominated on his own, without Hendrickson as a co-nominee.

It was blatantly clear that someone was trying to coax David Hendrickson out of hiding with the Nobel Prize. It was so obvious: lure him to Stockholm and grab him when he picks up the medal. Snape couldn't imagine that Hendrickson would be stupid enough to fall for that.

Then again, he'd been fooled before.

To be continued...

--------------
Update #308.5
--------------
Friday, August 2, 1996
Hidden cave system at the edge of the continental shelf
Somewhere south of Japan
Pacific Ocean
--------------

The joint rescue team of Japan, Roqteratl and the Five Fins tribe had found the cave mouth an hour ago. Being in the tribe's territory, it was a known location, albeit one without function, and Chieftainess has correctly guessed from her scout's report that the marching trespassers were headed here. Of course, that was yesterday, and they could have moved away by now. On the other hand, the cave was a large and complex maze, a suitable site for an ambush- extreme caution was advisable.

Luckily, they had two world's best equipment to help them get a good picture of their surroundings. Unluckily, the submarines could only provide illumination, after they discovered to the great discomfort of every merpeople present that their sonar was not only audible but way too loud for their sensitive ears. So, it was up to Toni and his pair of magical eyes to warn the others if someone approached outside the small spot of light provided by the sub's lamps- which ended at the tunnel's first turn anyway.

As they moved deeper and deeper in the cave, bringing out lamps provided by the Muggles, they came to a crossroad. Soldiers holding pistols and warriors gripping spears looked at the blindfolded
merman with equal anxiety, and his soft words: "I don't see anyone, or anything here for at least a hundred meters" didn't do much to dispel the tension. The previous briefing's words came back to them: The target is a probably spellcaster, possibly with a wand and the same potential as a human wizard, with thousands of fanatically loyal followers who may or may not have magically enchanted weapons and armor. Coupled with over 100 potential hostages hidden somewhere and in a terrain that effectively took their advantage of long-range weapons away, this could easily become a very nasty Charlie Foxtrot.

In the end, they found no-one alive after searching the tunnels stretching for several miles. However, they found subtle signs of recent inhabitation, such as morsels of food, shreds of torn material on sharp edges, but not much else. Whoever stayed there really took an effort to hide their track. As they left the cave, Kima suddenly got an idea. "Hey, Eyes, how about you take a look at the cliff wall near the cave, see if there is something hidden? After all, you can see through rock." As it turned out, her hunch was good: not far from the cave mouth, a smaller hole was discovered- hidden, all but invisible to the naked eye, behind a seamlessly placed rock. There was no movement inside as far as the blindfolded merman could tell, so they pushed the boulder aside, only to find... a tomb, containing the fresh corpses of a stabbed siren, a stabbed Japanese Muggle, and two other of the humans with many injuries from blunt trauma. All of them lay in separate graves, buried into stone, with Mermish-and-Galiver plates telling their names and deeds, asking the Ancestors to accept them among themselves. Taking Toni's word for it, the rescue team choose not to disturb the graves... instead, they pondered about the puzzle they presented.

--------------------

Observatory Vault, Trapananda
South Pacific Ocean west of the southern tip of South America
--------------------

"Listen up, boys and girls, your Magister is speaking to you!"
Merpeople of every possible color gathered in the room. Life in Trapananda was far from boring, with a dozen schools of magic peacefully and amiably, but very seriously contending with each other, and tens of thousands of spellcasters just having a good time, but the fact remained that many more wished to visit the outside world than the few authorised persons. Thanks to this, when the Crimson Circle's Magister Awate, the current official responsible for... gathering... new students, had asked for volunteers to do some recon which possibly included pacifying an errant wizard, so many volunteered that they didn't fit in the room. Now, over a hundred of them waited in silence for him to speak.

"I won't lie to you. This mission is going to be dangerous. You will face a rogue merwizard, who judging by the Observatory's record, has a wand and a working knowledge of the majority of human language spells. Anyone who thinks he or she isn't ready for this, you're free to leave now. Same goes for those who didn't graduate yet, or aren't confident in their Spellsinger skills. Our adventage will be numbers, surprise and Mermish spells, not in this order of importance. Out of those who remain, 12 will be chosen to be divided into groups of six and be given coordinates for Apparition in five minutes. Make sure you've got your wands, guys, you'll need them for this operation. Bring in the kids, and also the wizard if possible, but don't hesitate to use force when necessary. Ancestor's blessing on you!"
Minister Ferreira was looking at the Guanabara Bay. He had just received a fast owl coming from Dumbledore – apparently he and Flamel thought it was possible that Hendrickson was hiding in the Amazon Rainforest. Albus had asked him to keep an eye at the Amazonic political borders, just in case Hendrickson was trying to fool the DA by changing countries rapidly – after all, an outlaw life in a border region would be greatly logistical – he could apparate to any point of the two countries by crossing the apparition barrier around each country. The Minister had already ordered some auror squads to be sent to the border of Venezuela and Colombia. Suriname, Bolivia and Peru would have to stay unguarded – the Brazilian border was gigantic and there was a limited number of aurors. Anyway, Ferreira thought it would be enough.

Pedro José Ferreira had become Minister of Magic in 1994, following the retirement of the ancient Minister Mary. Appointed by the Imperial Supreme Court and approved by the Emperor, he was a young and prepared man. However, nothing could have prepared the Ministry for the Superbowl Breach. At first, he tried to contain the breach of the Statute of Secrecy in Wizarding Brazil by sending obliviators to each provincial capital. Needless to say, they failed and the existence of wizards soon became known by the people. Following the example of the American Secretary Radner, he and President Fernando Henrique Cardoso confirmed to the people that magic did exist, although they preferred to not mention that the Republic had still and Emperor – D. Pedro V. After all, the monarchy had lost the constitutional polls of 1993 by a margin of 90%.

In fact, it was extreme luck that the monarchy was able to withstand the Proclamation of the Republic. Emperor Pedro I of Brazil was a squib, just like his father, King John VI of Portugal, and grandfather. It was a sort of miracle when he fathered his only wizard child – Prince John Carlos. In order to prevent someone to hurt him, he fooled the Prince’s death in 1821, when John was just a baby. He re-created the wizarding branch of the Braganza Dynasty and engaged John to Mathilda, a Habsburg witch. When Pedro abdicated in 1831, John Carlos became the Emperor of Wizarding Brazil while Emperor Pedro II reigned over the muggles. If John Carlos had been born a muggle, there would be no monarchy at all.

The first Minister of Magic of Brazil was called José Bonifácio (1763-1843), the Patriarch of the Independence. Bonifácio is a unique example of a wizard ruling over both wizards and muggles, since he was the Prime Minister of Brazil too. Bonifácio would be later succeeded by Luís Ackel Pinto as the Minister of Magic. Pinto was a radical, but nevertheless an effective bureaucrat and a wise leader. Despite this, his Ministry almost breached the Statute of Secrecy twice. The first one was during the Great War of the Triple Alliance when he tried to enlist wizards in the army. It is also known that he ordered a group of elite aurors to kill President Solano López of Paraguay, ending the war in favor of the Brazilian Empire and its allies, Argentina and Uruguay. Pinto was congratulated by Emperor John II [Carlos] but was warned too: do not interfere in muggle Brazil.

The relationship between the two brothers and rulers was excellent. Despite being ‘rival’ Emperors theoretically, much of Pedro II’s actions were backed by John Carlos. The Emperor also helped
much the wizarding community when he built the Palace of Petrópolis and confiscated the area around it in order to protect the Brazilian School of Witchcraft and Wizarding, founded back in 1808 by the Portuguese Minister of Magic after the Court had fled to Brazil, fearing the mighty Grand Armée of Napoleon. In 1889, when General Deodoro da Fonseca proclaimed the Republic, Pedro asked his brother not to interfere, since he did not want any Brazilian hurt just for personal wealth. John accepted, reluctantly. Minister Pinto did send some aurors to the Palace though, causing his dismiss.

The next years were of turmoil, but finally the new President Prudente de Morais was informed about the wizarding world and the living monarchy. Relations were good and Brazilian wizards even helped the government to put the statue of Christ the Redeemer on top of the Corcovado Mountain. When President Juscelino Kubitschek transferred the capital of Brazil to the newly built Brasília, Emperor Pedro IV refused to move and the Ministry remained inside the Sugarloaf Mountain in the ex-capital.

The Statute of Secrecy had been almost breached by muggle-borns during the military Dictatorship, when they tried to help their relatives and friends to sabotage the government and perform terrorist attacks. Minister Mary ruled iron-handed and punished severely the ‘rebels’ and sent obliterating-crews to fix the situation. The Dictatorship itself never knew the existence of any kind of magic.

Mary retired in 1994, just a year before the Superbowl Breach and he, Pedro José Ferreira, had been appointed to be Minister. The world had changed drastically since then. The odd thing about this all is that his daughter had some minimal contact with Harry Potter, since she had ‘owl-dated’ Bill Weasley some years ago.

Fortunately all was going well between the two worlds. In February, some wizards of the Ministry helped to rescue people after a landslide in the slums of Rio de Janeiro. After that, some aurors had joined the police and together they were slowly reclaiming the slums, ruled by the terrible Brazilian mafia. Moreover, the wizards helped in the special effects of the Carnival, with spells like Periculum and Lumus Maxima.

The Minister interrupted his thoughts when the painting of the late Minister Bonifácio spoke to him.

‘The Emperor awaits you at the Palace, your Excellency’ said Bonifácio. His painting had connections to various wizarding sites of Brazil, including the Imperial Palace.

‘Alright, thanks José’. Ferreira slowly walked over to his fireplace and took a powder from a pot. He threw it into the fireplace, in which green flames appeared, entered it and shouted ‘Palace of São Cristóvão’. The Minister closed his eyes. He didn’t like floo powder transportation; it made him sick.

When he felt he had arrived at his destiny, he opened his eyes and saw himself in a richly decorated and long hall. Ferreira wasn’t familiar with this place yet. However, he knew where to go. The Minister was greeted by the Dragons of Independence when he approached the throne-room. A quick announcement was made and Ferreira entered the room; much to his surprise the newly crowned D. Pedro V was waiting for him beneath the door.

‘Good day, Minister’ he said.

‘Good day, your Majesty. May I know the reason of why you summoned me?’

‘Yes, of course. This man here’ – he pointed at a German-looking man – ‘and he comes directly from Vienna. He says that Anastasios Dialonis has just left the Habsburg Palace in Vienna for St.
Petersburg. Apparently, Dialonis was afraid of muggles coming up with a conclusion that there must be wizarding royals. The rumors, as you well know, were caused by the reduced British Royal Family. At least one quarter of them has one wizarding gene – and that includes King William V. Dialonis thought it was better for the Habsburgs to reveal themselves to the world. The Austrian ambassador here seems to agree with him. I want your opinion, Minister’.

‘Majesty, I think that it would be better for your family and our government if you reveal yourself to the muggles as soon as possible. Do you know when the Habsburgs are going to make the announcement? Maybe we could organize it in a way that both Braganza and Habsburg make the announcement at the same time. May I suggest that your Imperial Majesty takes the Aes Sedai owes? The people know that an Aes Sedai can be trusted.’

‘I was sure you would agree’ replied Emperor Pedro with enthusiasm. ‘And yes, I will take these Aes Sedai owes. Although I don’t agree with Atlantis’ new ‘ideology’, this is the best way to ensure the loyalty of our people. I’ve just came up with a thought: the numbers of Empires in the world have quadrupled – in addition to the Japanese Emperor, we have a Tsar, a Kaiser and an Imperador, me. We certainly need a good speech.’

‘Of course, your Majesty’.

Update #309
Saturday, August 3, 1996
The Witchery Restaurant
Edinburgh
United Kingdom

Hermione Granger was more nervous than she ever been in her entire life. She had faced werewolves outside the Shrieking Shack, nuclear weapons at her parents’ dental office, and a truly horrifying Potions professor. She had traveled through time knowing that one mistake could cause her death and possibly that of many other people. However, she had never faced anything like this.

That wasn't all, however. She had thought that Viktor Krum choosing her as her date during the Triwizard tournament would have been one of the highlights of her life, either that or meeting Gilderoy Lockhart before she realized that he was a fraud. Yet both of those momentous occasions were nothing compared to what she was about to do.

She was about to go on a date with the King of England.

Ron wasn’t happy, to say the least. She tried to convince him that it was unlikely that William would actually see her all that often and this was likely a one-shot audience. In order for William to become a serious threat to Ron, His Majesty would have to not only be accepted to Hogwarts -- which Snape was not particularly in favor of -- but he would have to be placed in Gryffindor as well. As if that weren't enough, Hermione and William's careers at the school would only overlap by three years. Finally, the king was only 14. Hermione would be turning 17 later on this year. She had heard of stories about robbing the cradle, but this was a bit much.

She hoped that Ron would understand, at least for the time being, that William wasn’t a threat...yet. At her current age, a three-year age difference would be a bit much. However, eight or ten years later, things could get interesting.

She had to admit to herself that if at some point William became serious dating material, she would
have to choose him over Ron. You don't turn down the king, after all. Besides, she had always wanted to be a princess when she was younger, before she had started attending Hogwarts. If she married William, she would actually BE a princess!

A king of England marrying an influential Muggle-born witch. Who could have predicted THAT?

William and Hermione weren't alone, of course. The Queen Mother was there along with Prince Andrew, William's uncle. Having encountered veela herself during the Triwizard Tournament and through Ron's brother Bill (who was dating Fleur Delacoeur), she could believe that Princess Diana was part veela.

Hermione had been surprised that the king hadn't brought along some security officers. William explained that there were in fact guards there hiding under Invisibility Cloaks. This remark was followed by a disembodied hand waving at them a few tables away, a sight which Hermione's parents, who had been invited as well, found a bit disturbing.

She had been forced to listen to her mother fret about not having anything to wear to meet the royal family. Hermione had a brief moment of panic when she realized that she had outgrown the Triwizard Tournament dress and had to do some quick magic to modify it so it would fit her more mature frame. She also had to do some modifications so she could show off all of the medals and stuff she had earned saving people during Judgment Day.

An entire section of the restaurant had been cordoned off so that the royal party could eat away from the paparazzi. The only employee who was granted access to Hermione and William were a twenty-something waitress named Kate who had apparently not been told who her guests were going to be. She spent a good five seconds simply gawking at William and Diana before remembering to curtsey. The poor woman was promptly lectured by Diana and Andrew to keep the meal secret and to not start spreading any rumors about Hermione and William.

Hermione saw William ogling Kate for a few seconds. Although virtually every single boy in her class ogled cute girls when they were fourteen, she felt a brief surge of jealousy. How dare William even LOOK at Kate? Did William seriously think that he'd marry Kate? The feeling passed quickly, however, when William simultaneously saw Hermione -- and his mother -- staring at him. Apparently even a king could be embarrassed.

------------------

The Pentagon

Radner didn't like what he was hearing. "What do you mean, you're not going to destroy it?"

General Mears nodded at the newly confiscated Philosopher's Stone, which was sitting for the moment on his desk. "Hear me out, Secretary. Yes, I know that the Stone is dangerous, and we had originally intended to destroy it. However, it occurred to us that we need to work with it more. After all, the Elixir of Life could be useful to save our men on the battlefield."

"But --"

Mears lifted his hands in resignation. "We're not using it to extend people's lives indefinitely, Secretary. We're using it to heal people who have been injured in war."

Radner shook his head. "Although that's a commendable thing to do, the simple fact is that the same substance which will be saving the soldiers' lives can be used to extend life indefinitely. It's too easy to abuse. The only thing I can think of would be to modify the Elixir when you make it so that --"
He suddenly cut off mid-sentence as he realized something. "Wait a minute, General. How can you even make the Elixir of Life? You don't even have a wizard, let alone the instructions!"

Mears was silent for a moment. Finally, he looked at Radner hard. "That's classified information, I'm afraid. We --"

Radner's anger boiled over. "Classified? I'm the Secretary of Magic! I need to know about things like this! I -- good God, you messed around with the computers in Harold-Green's lab when you went in and picked up the Stone, didn't you?"

The General winced. "I see it took a wizard to figure that out. Please don't tell anyone, Secretary."

"Did you have a warrant for that?"

General looked at him apologetically. "The warrant was for retrieval of the Stone and any information related to the Stone. It was phrased that way so that we could get the instructions as well."

"And you think that you're not going to be corrupted by its power?"

Mears nodded emphatically. "Everyone who will be working with the Stone will be swearing Unbreakable Vows to not abuse it or leak it to the public. It is similar to what you fellows call working with the Department of Mysteries."

Radner couldn't tell whether Mears was telling the truth or not. He sure hoped he was. He decided to change the subject.

"Where'd you get the wizard from?"

"Where else? WSC. Full Aes Sedai, and pleased keep that classified."

Radner thought about that for a moment. That might actually work. The wizard couldn't renounce any of the oaths, and he couldn't lie. The Stone couldn't be used as a weapon, so he didn't need to worry about that.

A chilling thought occurred to him. If the Aes Sedai interpreted the Pentagon's orders as the laws of the land and was given orders which did not technically violate one of the other five Oaths, he'd have to follow them even if the Pentagon had ulterior motives for them...

The Secretary of Magic winced. "You're treading on dangerous ground here. I'm going to have to insist that we at least monitor your work with the Stone. WSC may be fine and good, but they're only human."

Mears shrugged. "Be my guest. He'll need to go through a thorough security check, but I doubt that will be an issue."

"What about foreign spies? Once other countries find out about this, they're going to want to get in on the action."

Mears stood -- apparently the interview was coming to a close. "We've got top men working on it right now."
"Who?"

"Top men."

To be continued...

--------------
Update #309.5
--------------
Friday, August 2, 1996
Hidden cave system at the edge of the continental shelf
Somewhere south of Japan
Pacific Ocean

"This doesn't make any sense!" growled a Japanese Auror. "What kind of a sick bastard witnesses a storm destroying a fleet, only to kidnap the crews, and then bury the casualties as if they were his own?" They have spread out around the cave entrance, searching for more bodies or any clues, but so far they found nothing, even as they wandered off so far they had to resort to radio.
"I think I know why he did it" responded Merchieftainess Asmara. "The demon wants to seduce my warriors into his own tribe. Many of my people are reckless, they wanted the whalers dealt with. Some of them have already deserted me and many more are on the brink of following them. He crushes the boats, captures the humans, shows them he could kill them all if he wanted, and makes them promise no more dolphin killing."

"That still doesn't make any sense. There is no such a thing as a demon. It's just a wizard, using magic." But the tribal leader wasn't that easy to convince. "No wizard can take the shape of our kind."
"Well, then it's a merpeople wizard. Merwizard. Whatever. Puzzle solved, just hunt him down, free the hostages, go home and be happy," said the Japanese wizard.
Of course Asmara didn't think so. "There are no wizards among my kind. It is known."
A new voice, one of the Roqteratl soldiers, interrupted. "Sorry, but that's just not true. In my city, merwizards are born from time to time. But they are dangerous, somehow they can't be properly trained...at least that's what I heard."
The Auror thought about it, then realised something. "But even if he is a wizard, there is no way to destroy all those boats this way with spells. I've seen the wrecks, they look like they were smashed by the storm of the century, scattered over such a great area... it would take a high number of wizards, dozens or even hundreds to do such a thing."
The Chieftainess rolled her eyes. "Thank you, wizard, for the sleepless nights when I ponder just how many of this guy is out there against me. But really, I'll be very happy when we catch the dem... the merwizard, and learn how he did it and that no, there are no others like him!"

--------------
Observatory Vault, Trapananda
South Pacific Ocean west of the southern tip of South America
--------------

In five minutes, out of the crowd of merwizards a select dozen had been hand-picked and divided
into two groups of six, before the watchful eyes of all who gathered in the chamber. Each group consisted of five members standing in a circle, touching the sixth one, who had in the last minute received and absorbed a silver thread of memory from the giant globe— the thing was like a giant Pensieve, providing an up-to-date map by pooling the memories of Trapananda's travelling spellcasters. With an exact destination now firmly planted in their minds, they could channel the powers provided by the spellsongs of the other five members, and direct a group Apparition over thousands of miles, through all but the strongest Anti-Apparition Jinxes, even from deep underground. The target was last detected in a cave system. One group was to Apparate to the sole entrance and block it, while the other cleared the inside.

Of course, providing 12 individuals with coordinates didn't take up the whole 5 minutes, the rest was just double- and triple checking any necessary steps: Pressure Shield Charm enabled- check, Disillusionment Charms enabled- check, Friend-or-foe options correctly chosen when casting the Disillusionment Charms- double check (this was where things could get real nasty real quick)... but of course everything was in good working order, and when at last the timer reached zero, 12 merpeople began chanting their Apparation spells in perfect unison- and then they were gone.

---------------
back at the cave
---------------

"Did you hear it too?" A worried Five Fins warrior turned to his mates. One of them chuckled. "If you heard a faint cracking sound, yes I did. I hope it didn't come out of Iggi, poor kid looks sickly, guess he really shouldn't have eaten that fish gut..."
"Shut up, you two" growled the Roqteratli operative assigned to the small group, "That was no fart, that was incoming Apparition." Taking a look at the complete incomprehension at the tribal gang’s faces, he added in a low voice: "It means we have company... wizard company. Several of them, judging by the sound."

That immediately got their attention, complete with the predictable shift in fight or flight attitude, understandable in the case of guys armed only with knives and spears: "We... we should leave, this cave is giving me the willies." As the Roqteratli sent a withering glare at him, the warrior corrected himself: "I mean, someone must report it to the bosses, so they aren't taken by surprise." Smirking smugly, the soldier said: "And I guess you'd be eager to volunteer for this noble duty? Well, there is no need." He lifted a small hand-held device from his weapons harness, pressed something on it, and spoke: "Headquarters, this is Squad 14, position left- left- right- up- right- straight- down, we've heard incoming Apparition from ahead of us, don't you guys have a blocking jinx in place?"

His confidence, and his secret belief that the sound in fact meant friendly reinforcements, was shattered by the response: "We do, and none of us Apparated. The Jinx was disturbed just now, as if something tore through it. We got similar reports from all units. Large number of unknown wizards may be nearby, possibly hostile, no contact yet. Return to HQ. Over."
The Five Fins tribesmen looked curiously at the handheld radio. One of them asked: "What is this new devilry?" Slowly, the Roqteratli responded: "An order to retreat. We have unidentified incoming mages ahead of us. This is beyond any of us." As they looked at him cluelessly, he snapped and yelled: "MOVE!"
"...Large number of unknown wizards may be nearby, possibly hostile, no contact yet. Return to HQ. Over." Toni put down the radio and turned his attention away from the cliffs... then his blood froze, as he spotted six merpeople, transparent to his magical eyes -meaning some form of magical invisibility- very close behind his back, right in the middle of his squad. They had wands in hand projecting light that he knew was also only visible for him, they were standing close together and just released each other, they were of mixed ethnicity (a trait almost exclusively restricted to Roqteratl, as far as he knew it), they wore strange garments with many places to store things, and most importantly they definitely weren't anywhere nearby a minute ago. His normal-eyed squadmates didn't notice anything, but as his mind raced he already made quick plans, factoring everyone's location...

One of the merwizards, or rather, a merwitch, wand raised, swam right behind him to take a look at the interesting rock formation he has been inspecting until now. The spellcaster approached him from behind, where the blindfold was obscured by hair, so she didn't realise what it was, and thus didn't begin to wonder how could he see through it, and just what else he can see through. It was an easy mistake to make. Before she could even blink, the merman spinned around, grabbed and twisted her wrist with one hand so she let go of her wand, and pulled her in a choke-hold, pointing a gun at her head, and yelling "FREEZE, m*#@&*ers!!"... and they did.

As he grabbed the girl, she faded back to the visible spectrum, and now every member of the squad pointed something deadly at her. A heartbeat later, the remaining five merwizards got over their surprise and pointed their wands at them... this was about to get nasty, Toni realised. Trying to avoid bloodshed, he yelled again in Galiver: "You, five merwizards in front of me! We see you! I don't want to hurt her, so please end your invisibility and lower your wands!" Seeing that both sides were equally puzzled, but at least no-one started killing yet, he hastily added: "Squad, don't attack if they comply in five...four...three...two..." Before he got to one, the remaining five wizards shimmered into visibility, with wands no longer pointing at them. His squad quickly adjusted aim, but they were true to his word- no one attacked, yet. Emboldened by the success of his bluff, he decided to just go with it, and quickly ordered his team to restrain the shocked merwizards. Then, he got his radio and notified the HQ: "Headquarters, our objective was to capture or kill a merwizard. Do I get a bonus if I got six?"

To be continued...

-----------------
Update #310
-----------------
1314Z
Monday, August 5, 1996
DeLorean Motor Corporation Headquarters
Texas
United States of America

Michael J. Fox had thrown the letter out when it had come in, figuring that it had to be a joke. However, apparently it wasn't. A few days after discarding the letter, he had received a call from Christopher Lloyd, who had actually spoken with the president of DeLorean Motor Corporation.
The president had assured him that the prototype for the 1998 DeLorean Chrononaut was ready for its first test drive and that he and Fox would be the allowed to sit in the back seat.

Fox still couldn't even begin to believe it. Yet there it was, sitting in the back of a truck with the words "Brown Enterprises" written on it. He recognized it immediately, of course. After all, he had driven a similar vehicle in the movies.

The Chrononaut looked like an ordinary 1980's era DeLorean. It didn't have the futuristic engines and tail fins and God knows what other props had been added to the vehicle for the movie. There was no flux capacitor taking up most of the back seat, just a second row of seats.

There were a few differences, however. The wheel moved in and out, much like the steering column in the cockpit of an airplane. The sunroof had been replaced with what appeared to be a large parachute which would presumably open in case the flying enchantment failed while the Chrononaut was airborne. The speedometer had two speeds marked on it in addition to the traditional 55 mph: 80-85 mph in yellow, 86-87 mph in orange, and 88 mph in red.

Fox looked at the president of DMC in astonishment. "You've got to be kidding. When this thing hits 88 mph --"

The president threw Christopher Lloyd's line back at him as he lifted a panel in the driver's side door. "You're going to see some serious shit."

The panel revealed something four numeric keypads with two LCD displays above each. The lower display currently read 08 05 1996 150000. The top display read 08 05 1996 132153.

The president pointed at the panels. "That bottom display is the destination time when the system is engaged. Time is Zulu, which would be four hours ahead of us. This would be 11:00 Eastern Daylight Time. The top display is the current time in the vehicle's reference frame."

Fox gasped. "Good God. You actually DID it?"

"Indeed we did, Mr. Fox. The Time-Turner is hidden in the engine compartment somewhere and will be spun automatically when the car hits 88 mph. Once that happens, the vehicle and all of its contents will be transported through time if the control code has been entered, the system is armed, and the car is airborne."

"Control code?"

The president nodded. "The control code is a 20 digit number which will be given to customers once they have passed their pilot's examination and have taken all of the relevant training for using the Chrononaut. If there is no Time-Turner in the vehicle, it will still be necessary to get the car airborne."

Fox nodded. "The Time-Turner is optional, then."

"Indeed it is, Mr. Fox. It costs $75,000 extra and will not be released to the customer unless the customer has convinced the wizards holding the Time-Turners that they will travel through time responsibly."

Fox whistled. "How far back -- or ahead -- can you go?"
The president shrugged. "In principle, there's no limit. However, we've installed a 7-day window for safety purposes. In theory, someone can do a bunch of 7-day jumps, but that's a bit convoluted. Ironically, there's a minimum time jump of 10 seconds to make sure that the car doesn't crash into itself when it reappears."

Fox sat behind the wheel. "Can I drive it up to 88 mph in the demonstration?"

The president shook his head. "I'm afraid not. The wizard who provided the Time-Turner and assisted with the project is going to be doing that. He knows what's going on, and he is going to abort the mission immediately if there are any problems."

Fox was about to say something when he heard Christopher Lloyd enter the room and exclaim: "Great Scott! You've made a time machine out of a DeLorean!"

Fox grinned. "That's my line, Christopher."

"Indeed it is, Michael. What do you think? Impressive, isn't it?"

Fox nodded and turned back to the president of DeLorean. "Are there going to be fire trails and so forth when the vehicle transitions to the destination time? That could be problematic."

The president shook his head. "There's going to be a bit of a snapping sound similar to that of an Apparation, but that's it. No flames, no explosions, nothing. The car will disappear and reappear without much fanfare."

"Have you sent passengers through time before yet, either canine or human? In the movie, Dr. Brown tests the time machine with a dog before sending humans through."

The president smiled. "Yes we have, Mr. Fox. There's a brief moment of disorientation, but other than that there aren't any problems. Since the vehicle is airborne, it's unlikely to hit anything in the half-second or so it takes for the driver to figure out what's going on."

Fox nodded. "So that's why the vehicle has to be airborne to travel through time. You don't want it to appear on top of something. However, there's still another problem: what happens if there's an airplane or something occupying the space the car is going to appear at in the destination time?"

"The vehicle will be destroyed -- there isn't really much we can do about that. Hopefully, the driver will research the destination time enough to figure out where things are going to be. As far as airplanes go, the vehicle has to be at least 1000 feet up and at most 2000 feet up to transition. That's high enough to get away from the buildings but low enough to avoid airplanes. It also gives the parachute enough time to open in case of emergency. Bird strikes are possible, but the car will survive those without an issue."

Fox nodded. "What happens if the car is hit by lightning?"

"Nothing. The surface of the Chrononaut is made of a conducting metal, so the passengers will be unharmed. And to answer your other question: no, the time machine will not activate. I'm sorry to cut off the discussion, but we're getting close to showtime and we need to brief you and Christopher on the demonstration."

--------
1453Z
- - - - - -
The parking lot outside DeLorean's headquarters was thronged with people, many of whom were wearing Back to the Future shirts and paraphernalia. Virtually all of them were carrying signs which read either "Take Me Too!", "Fix This Thing Which Happened X Years Ago", and "I Love You Michael J. Fox!"

Fox and Lloyd, thankfully, didn't have to listen to all of the shouting fans and worry about the autograph seekers and news reporters. They had already done their pre-travel press conference in front of a gaggle of reporters, far away from the crowd. Now they were in the back seat, with a wizard in the driver's seat and the company president in the front passenger's seat.

The wizard closed a panel on the dashboard and nodded to the president. "Preflight checklist complete. We're go for launch, gentlemen. Current time is 14:53:46 Zulu. Let's get her airborne. We'll start the acceleration at 14:58:00. Everyone's seat belts fastened?"

There were nods all around the cabin. Seeing this, the wizard turned the key and started the engine. The crowd cheered loud enough to be heard over the engine.

The cheers doubled in volume as the driver pulled back on the steering column and the Chrononaut rose into the air. Once safely away from the buildings and telephone wires, he put the steering wheel back in a neutral position and pressed the accelerator. The vehicle slowly began to accelerate as he moved it away from the factory.

Lloyd frowned. "That's pretty slow acceleration."

The president nodded. "There isn't much we can do about that. Up here in midair, there isn't much traction. Most of the magic was needed to simply get the vehicle to fly like this. That's why we're giving it 90 seconds to get up to 88 mph."

The car flew around for a while as the people in the crowd took photographs. Finally, at 14:57:00, the driver moved it into position about a mile or so away from the factory and its attendant crowds. "Altimeter at 1300 feet, right on the money. Activating time circuits."

He entered the code into the control panel on the driver's side. An alarm started hooting, and the destination time display started flashing insistently. "So far so good. T minus 2:50 and counting. All systems go."

The wait seemed endless, and the driver looked at his watch over and over again. Finally, he shifted into high gear and gunned the accelerator. "Here we go. 14:58:00. Transition in 1:50 and counting."

Fox and Lloyd watched the speedometer as it slowly crept up to speed. 20 mph, 30 mph, 40 mph. The clock hit 14:59:00. The car passed 60 mph, and the hoot suddenly changed into an ear-splitting klaxon.

The car was now approaching the crowd. It was obvious what the wizard was going to do: transition right above the people.

The president started looking at his watch. "14:59:20 at 70 mph. 14:59:35 at 80 mph. Downrange looks clear. Transition imminent. It won't look like much unless you have something which changes with time -- look at one of those moving cars down there."

Fox did so. The car hit 88 mph, and the truck he was watching suddenly vanished. It took him a few seconds to realize that it had suddenly moved a hundred or so feet down the road...instantaneously.
He mentioned this to the president, who nodded.

"That's expected. Judging from my watch, the Time-Turner activated at 14:59:51 and transitioned 9 seconds into the future. The truck traveled 100 feet in those nine seconds. From the perspective of the people on the ground, we disappeared for 9 seconds and then reappeared. Once we get back to the ground, we'll compare this watch against the reference watch on the ground. They should be about 9 seconds apart."

Lloyd frowned. "That didn't look like much. You're sure we transitioned?"

The driver shrugged. "You can't tell with jumps into the future until we get the reference time back down to the ground -- the president here is checking this on the walkie-talkie now. However, roll down the windows. The crowd will probably tell us if the experiment worked."

Fox rolled down his window. The cheering was so loud that it could be heard over the roar of the engine 1300 feet up. Cars were honking, and people were getting out to see what was going on.

The president smiled. "The ground controller had 15:00:21 when we had 15:00:12. Nine seconds ahead, just as predicted. I'd say that was a successful test."

Fox and Lloyd looked at each other. They had just traveled through time in a DeLorean...this time, for real.

To be continued...

----------
Update #310.5
----------
Monday, August 5, 1996
Bentley Motor Corporation
Crewe
England
----------

Arthur Weasley shook the hand of the billionaire who had won the right to test out the Pegasus for a week. "I hope you like it, sir. If you decide you want to buy it after the test, we can talk about it. Keep in mind that this is still a prototype and it won't be going on sale for a while. There could still be defects here and there. Rest assured, though, that the parachute is working."

The prospective customer grinned. "A flying luxury car which can take off vertically and not need a few hundred meter runway? I'll take one of those over my Cessnas anytime."

Arthur handed over a notepad. "I want you to jot down your opinions about the Pegasus here. That way, we can learn from this. If there's something you think we should change, tell us."

The billionaire nodded. "I will, sir. Now, if you will excuse me, I've got to visit my daughter on the golf course."

Arthur waved and watched as the man climbed into the car and took off. Both he and the president of Bentley had been amazed at the interest the public had in the Pegasus. Granted, the vast majority of people weren't going to be able to shell out £500,000 to buy it. However, it was getting to the point where Bentley was considering renting Pegasi for £5,000/month. Although that was still out of reach for most people, it increased the prospective customer pool from maybe 0.01% of the population to 0.5%. 
The Pegasus vanished into the distance as Arthur walked back into his office to see his manager with a scowl on his face. Arthur froze. What happened this time? Cautiously, he asked the man what was going on.

The man grunted. "We've got a problem. An American company just announced that they are also working on a flying car...with an obnoxious twist. DeLorean Motor Corporation. Recognize the name?"

Arthur shook his head. "I'm afraid I don't, sir. Is it another luxury brand?"

The manager chuckled. "I'm not surprised that you don't recognize it -- it supposedly went out of business in the 80's. It was a low-range luxury brand with an unusual design: gull-wing doors. The only reason people remember it is because it appeared in a science fiction movie where it gets souped up and flies."

Arthur got the point immediately. "This competitor decided to make the car just like the one in the movie, so they got it to fly and figured the movie would advertise it."

"Exactly. The car is going for $100,000, or about £50,000. It's not as fancy as the Pegasus, of course. However, it's got a quirk that we don't have...one which is going to make or break it and has gotten the American Department of Magic completely riled up."

"Oh? What's that?"

The manager looked out the window in concern. "It's a time machine."

Arthur blinked. "Come again?"

"One of the options, albeit an expensive one, is one of those devices you Wizarding chaps call a Time-Turner. The car in the movie could travel through time and got a flight conversion when it was in the future. So, they made this one travel through time as well."

Arthur frowned. "Time travel is dangerous. My son is dating Hermione Granger, and --"

This time the manager looked surprised. "The teenage witch who saved half of London? I thought she was seeing King William."

Arthur hesitated. Ron had said Hermione had told him that she had gotten an audience with the king. However, she had insisted that it was unlikely that anything would come of it. Still, Arthur knew that Hermione tended to fall for important people and heroes: she had gone gaga over Quidditch player Viktor Krum as well as the wizard-turned-Muggle-fantasy-author Gilderoy Lockhart. For someone growing up with Muggle parents outside of London, you couldn't get more important than the king. If the king was interested in her, Ron would likely have a problem.

He wrenched himself back to the issue at hand and turned back to the manager. "As far as I know, they're still dating. At any rate, Hermione traveled through time and knows firsthand that time travel is dangerous. I suspect the Ministry of Magic is going to come down very hard on DeLorean. If the purpose of this new model --"

The manager broke in. "It's called the DeLorean Chrononaut."
Arthur nodded and continued. "If the Chrononaut is intended to be an exact duplicate of the vehicle used in the movie, either Atlantis or Secretary Radner is probably going to put it out of business by telling them they can't use the Time-Turner. Once that happens, they will either be forced to turn it into a flying car or discontinue it completely. If they do the latter, it's good. If they do the former, they're probably going to knock the price down, which would make it even more of a competitor than it is. You may be interested to know that due to an incident involving Time-Turners a few years ago, our Ministry of Magic enacted new rules regulating use of Time-Turners. If DeLorean had tried to develop this car here in the United Kingdom, it would have been illegal."

The manager whistled. "It's interesting that you bring up the American Secretary of Magic. Supposedly he went berserk when he found out about this. Too overworked to deal with the Chrononaut at this point, he's instructed the Deputy Secretary of Magic to come down on DeLorean like a ton of bricks. They've already got a missing Philosopher's Stone -- now they're going to have a bunch of time travelers as well? Let's hope whoever Radner's flunky is puts his or her foot down and allows us to keep our monopoly on flying cars."

Arthur shook his head. "They can always get rid of the Time-Turner option, rename it the Aviator or something like that, and sell it as a $100,000 flying car."

The manager drew a deep breath. "That's what I'm concerned about, Arthur. That's what I'm concerned about."

------------------------

Cromwell Residence
Huntsville, TX

Teresa Cromwell picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"Teresa? It's Joe from Union Industries. Your former manager."

Teresa blinked. "Uh, hello there. How are you?"

"Fine. I'd like you to know that we want you to come back. We've gotten rid of the wizard who took your position. Are you still available?"

Teresa's eyes widened, and she laughed. "Of course I'm available. I'll come back next week if you want."

"Fine with me. Same salary, and same seniority."

"Agreed. I must say, Joe, what prompted you to get rid of the wizard? Didn't you need the money? Did he misbehave at all?"

"He didn't, Teresa. Apparently the Department of Magic found out about your suit and realized that wizards taking Muggle positions during a recession would open a nasty can of worms. Radner told President Clinton and both men immediately started putting pressure on Eric Street to tell WSC to rein in what they were doing. Street eventually agreed that WSC should only be providing people with magical services which could not be performed by Muggles. He convinced our new employee to go to a different position. The wizard agreed, so you can come back."

Teresa punched her fist in the air. "I'll take it, Joe. I'll take it."

----------------

Enfield, MA
The wizard walked into Radner's office and saluted. "Sir, we've got a bit of a problem."

Radner winced as another brief bout of dizziness overtook him. Although wizards were in better shape that most Muggles, the simple fact was that he was 78. He couldn't take much more of this. The Department of Magic was still trying to clean up after Judgment Day as well as deal with counterfeit money, a missing Philosopher's Stone, another Philosopher's Stone in the hands of the military, and someone who was trying to make time-traveling cars. He hadn't slept for 36 hours. What next?

Holding onto the table for support, he tried to look dignified as the newcomer made his report. "Sir, you may want to know that Harold-Green just issued an advertisement for a wizard to help with Vitalix. They put it in, among other things, newspapers in the Dallas area and the Big Thicket Tribune."

Radner closed his eyes and swore. "Now that their wizard is dead, they need another if they want to make a new Stone, and they're going after WSC now that Street put a bunch of WSC'ers out of business by ordering that they not take jobs where they'd do the work of five Muggles."

"That's what it looks like, sir."

Radner's eyes widened. "That means they've still got another copy of the notes around there somewhere. Here's what I want you to do. Tell Ken Franco to send an Auror down there who knows enough about alchemy to get the job. Make sure the Auror gets the job -- cheat if necessary. Once he gets the job, have him tell Green that he needs the instructions. When Green takes them out, destroy them. In the meantime, I'll order that Green be subject to a Tracking spell. We have to assume that he's going to copy the instructions from the original source before handing them to the new wizard. Once we know where the originals are, we destroy those -- and Harold-Green is out of the Vitalix business."

Radner's guest grunted. "You can track Muggles? Is that...legal?"

"I'm not sure. However, I'm considering this a national emergency so we don't have much of a choice here."

"I see. What about the Pentagon? Doesn't the Pentagon have instructions and a wizard?"

Radner nodded. "They do. However, from what I've been told they actually seem to be dealing with them in a sane manner. They know how to keep secrets, after all. I can't believe I'm saying this, but we may actually be able to trust them."

To be continued...
Update #311 through Update #315

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Mislagnissa

Update #311
----------
Tuesday, August 6, 1996
DeLorean Motor Corporation
Humble, Texas
United States of America
----------

Kathleen Delavega, a mid-level manager at DeLorean Motor Corporation, could barely concentrate on her work with all of the distractions outside. She had thought it had been a zoo when the president had recruited the two actors to join him in that publicity stunt with the Chrononaut. That had been nothing, however, compared to what was going on now.

There were no fewer than three major news anchors with reporting stations outside the building. A movie buff was there as well, sharing a space with a representative from Wired Magazine. A couple of physicists were there as well, trying to convince the world that they had no idea how it worked.

Kathleen knew that the Time-Turner allowed the Chrononaut to travel through time. How the Time-Turner worked, on the other hand, was beyond her. She didn't know that much about the enchantment which allowed the vehicle to fly, though that WSC fellow had mentioned something about Wingardium.

The little she did know about the Chrononaut was that it was based on the classic 1982 chassis, the same model of the vehicle used in the movies. The president had gambled that people would be willing to shell out $99,995 for an old-model vehicle solely because it could fly. Judging from the reports that were coming in, that may have paid off.

Three of the other DeLoreans in the showroom were already rigged with the flying enchantment, and one of them was hovering a couple of feet above the ground. However, they were not yet airworthy in that they did not have the parachute attached to them yet. The mechanic in charge of the maintenance department, Brian "Biff" Lannen, had told her that they would be ready within a couple of weeks.

The phone rang on her desk. Hoping it wasn't another customer, she picked it up. "Hello?"

The person began speaking at once. "Good afternoon. I was wondering if I could ask you about the time machine vehicle."

Kathleen rolled her eyes and did her best to remain calm. "It's a concept car, sir. I'm not sure how much I'm allowed to divulge outside what you saw in the demo."

"Is there any way I can get the vehicle with just the Time-Turner? I don't think I can afford both the flying system and the Time-Turner."

Kathleen wanted to scream. "It's not on sale yet, sir. It's a concept car. Furthermore, you need to undergo a full week of training before you will be allowed to use the Time-Turner -- and we haven't even finalized the course yet."
"Who flew the car then?"

"A wizard familiar with Time-Turners. Believe me, he was very careful."

There was a pause. "All right, how about giving me the flying system without the Time-Turner?"

"I told you, it's not on sale yet --"

"What happened if I offered you $250,000 down?"

I'll believe that when I see it, she thought. Aloud: "I'm sorry, I'm not allowed to accept pre-orders. If you wish, you can put your name in the lottery which will determine who gets the first ten cars when it does come into production. One question, though. Are you a trained pilot?"

The voice sounded perplexed. "No. Why --"

Kathleen nearly swore at the man. "Without a pilot's license, you are not eligible to use the flying circuits or the Time-Turner. You can get one of our ordinary DeLoreans, without the flying circuits or Time-Turner, for $45,000. How about that?"

The man was barely able to stammer out a civilized response. "I'm sorry, ma'am, but I don't think that will work out. Sorry for bothering you."

Kathleen smiled -- this would be ending soon. "It's not a problem, sir. Thank you for your interest in the Chrononaut. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"No, ma'am. Goodbye."

The caller hung up, and Kathleen breathed a sigh of relief. She hadn't screamed at him, this time at least. However, she was rapidly losing her patience.

---------

A few hours later, Kathleen and the rest of the employees were called into one of the main conference rooms for a meeting. Biff, who had come in from the repair shop, looked at her in confusion. "What's going on, Kathleen? Did the government get involved and try to shut us down? I've heard rumors about that."

Kathleen shrugged. "We'll see in a few minutes."

They took their seats and the president began to speak. "Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming on such short notice. I must say, I don't think I've ever seen a publicity stunt work as well as the Chrononaut's debut did yesterday."

Everyone clapped at that, Kathleen included. No one could deny that.

The president, however, grew serious. "Although we've gotten a lot of attention, and rightfully so, thanks to our work on the Chrononaut, it appears that some of the people in high office are a bit concerned about what the Chrononaut can and cannot do."

Several of the people fidgeted restlessly as the president continued. "I received a call today from the president of the Federal Aviation Administration. He is threatening to take us to court, arguing that populating the sky with Chrononauts could threaten air traffic in and around populated areas."

Biff shook his head in disbelief. "That's not going to happen, sir. The Time-Turner doesn't --"

"This doesn't involve the Time-Turner, Biff. It involves the flying circuits. The car can reach altitudes of up to 10,000 feet, with or without the Time-Turner. That could put it dangerously close to low-flying aircraft like Cessnas. Which reminds me, Cessna is also complaining that our security systems aren't good enough. What happens if the parachute fails? These 1982 cars don't even have airbags!"

Biff glared at him. "The airbags are going to be in by the time the thing rolls off the assembly line, sir. I have it on my calendar!"

A salesman grunted. "Biff, you realize why they're doing this. Once we get this thing going, Cessna's going to go down the drain because these things are going to make a hell of a good commuter aircraft. The Chrononaut is going to put Cessna and most of the other small plane companies out of business, and they know it."

The president continued. "Several people talked to their state senators about this, and eventually someone contacted Governor Bush. Bush, after a lot of debate, asked that we spend more time looking over safety issues. Both GM and Ford concur."

Someone in the back of the room snorted. "My guess is that if this thing didn't have a 70 mpg fuel rating at 1500 feet he'd probably relent. The more oil that bastard gets us to use, the better. Hell, that 70 mpg fuel rating is probably why Ford and GM are ganging up on us."

The president nodded. "That's exactly it, Larry. However, that's not the worst of it. I also received a surprise visit -- in person -- from Shawna Santana, the witch who's in charge of the Big Thicket Facility. She wants her Time-Turner back, and she's not happy that it got out in the first place. Radner has just endorsed the United Kingdom's ruling that Time-Turners should not be used unless it's an absolute emergency. Atlantis supposedly is about to endorse it as well."

Everyone started shouting in unison, and Kathleen understood why. Ordinary wizards from WSC might be able to get the cars to fly, but they couldn't get them to travel through time. Without Time-Turners, the Chrononaut would become a Chrono-Not.

The president looked at the table. "I've tried to convince her that since we received the Time-Turner before the injunction came out, we should be allowed to keep this one. Yes, that would mean that would be only one possible time machine...unless one of the wizards in this room is able to reverse-engineer that thing."

One of the wizards shook his head. "Too dangerous, sir. I've never worked with Time-Turners before, and if we break this one you've got no --"

The president glared at him. "I'm paying you big bucks, Oscar. If you don't think you can handle it, we can always let you go and ask WSC for someone else. Someone's going to have to do it, however, as Santana didn't buy it."

The wizard deflated. "I'll do what I can, sir. In the meantime, do what you can to stall her."

The president chuckled bitterly. "You think like me, Oscar. She gave us a week to return the Time-Turner voluntarily. If not, she'll do it the other way."
Oscar blanched. "A week? That's not enough."

The president sighed. "Nevertheless, that's all I could wheedle out of her. I want you to go back to wherever you got your Wizarding knowledge from and find everything you can about Time-Turners. Tomorrow morning, when you get here, I expect you to start disassembling that Time-Turner and doing whatever you can to reverse-engineer it. Help me, Oscar ben Kenobi. You're my only hope."

Everyone in the room chuckled. Oscar, however, blinked. "Sir, I don't get that --"

Everyone just laughed louder. Oscar started at the president in confusion until someone whispered something in his ear. Seconds later, Oscar put his head in his hands in embarrassment.

Kathleen didn't like the sound of this. It sounded as if they would have to give up on the Chrononaut and turn it into the Aviator, a flying car. Granted, that would be better than nothing. However, it wouldn't be...the DeLorean.

Next to her, Biff was staring at the ceiling, a thoughtful expression on his face. He stuck his hand into his pocket, pulled out his wallet, and looked at how much money he had in there. Troubled, he pursed his lips and began pondering once more.

To be continued...

---------------

Update #312
---------------

Tuesday, August 6, 1996
Grand Mugwump's Office
Atlantis

Heydar Dagher stood at the podium. He should have thought of this earlier, when he had introduced the Aes Sedai oaths. Fortunately, it seemed as if countries were starting to figure it out on their own. North Korea certainly had, as had Great Britain (albeit at the prompting of Britain for Humans). Now it was time for the world to follow suit.

Cameras flashed as he spoke. "Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming this evening. I would like to inform you of a new law which has just been passed by the Wizarding community here on Atlantis concerning the Order of Aes Sedai.

"It is the decision of the International Confederation of Wizards that every single person elected to Minister of Magic take some of the Aes Sedai vows upon being sworn in. At the very least, he is to swear to at least Accepted level.

"Note that since Minister of Magic is not necessarily a permanent position, the Fourth Vow -- the one against renouncing the oaths -- will need to be modified somewhat for his swearing-in. It will require the candidate to not renounce any of the new oaths he has just sworn while he is in office. If he is already subject to the Fourth Vow as an Accepted or Aes Sedai, he need not swear any new oaths unless he wants to temporarily promote himself from Accepted to Aes Sedai during his tenure. In this case, he can swear the Sixth Vow and renounce it later. This is possible because he had not yet sworn the Sixth Vow at the time he became an Accepted and took the Fourth."

Dagher looked around the room. "It is the hope of the ICW that having Aes Sedai advisors at the sides of Muggle leaders around the world will help convince Muggles worldwide that wizards can be trusted. Since the local Minister of Magic is arguably the most visible Wizarding position a Muggle
will ever hear about, oaths that ensure that the Minister of Magic behave will go far towards improving relations between Wizards and Muggles.

"People who are currently Ministers of Magic have to the end of October to become Accepted if they are not already sworn to that level. If they choose to not become Accepted, they must resign by the end of October and hold elections to choose their successor no later than January 1st."

--------------------

New Parliament Buildings

Sir Otto Hodges had thought Hagrid was tall. However, the chap in the fur robes standing next to Hagrid was at least ten centimeters taller than Hagrid was and had to duck to ensure that he wouldn't bang his head on the ceiling.

The man in the robes began to speak in a booming tenor. "Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to introduce myself. I am High Chief Machus, and I'm the leader of the nation of Ietalis."

Hodges blinked. Where the bloody hell was Ietalis? Was this another nation where weird monsters came from, in this case giants? He looked at the people around him, who were talking excitedly to each other. It seemed like he was the only person who was curious about this.

Machus waited for the din to subside before continuing. "Many of you are probably wondering where Ietalis is. Well, it's a nation centered on a couple of islands in the Canadian Arctic. It's the homeland of the short giants and their cousins the half-giants. We call ourselves Ieti."

There was a gasp at that, which Machus noticed. "I see you're familiar with the Muggle legends of the Yeti, the Abominable Snowman, Sasquatch, and Bigfoot. Ietalis is in fact the source of most of those stories, particularly the sightings in the Canadian Northwest. Although for the most part we tried to make sure the Muggles didn't see us, I admit that several of my predecessors didn't have a very good track record of keeping everything under wraps."

Machus's face looked serious. "Be advised that the fact that we wear robes of animal skins and are eleven feet tall does not imply that we are a primitive hunter-gatherer civilization. Far from it, in fact. We have a state council, national library, and many of the other features of an advanced civilization. Furthermore, as you can tell, we don't talk in grunts and flail around with clubs. Granted, some of our words may be pronounced in odd ways, but that's because we're using an obscure dialect of English. The reason we wear animal skins a lot up there is because it's...well, cold. The only reason I'm wearing one here is because this particular skin is a ceremonial one used for public speeches."

The High Chief then gestured to Hagrid. "This man here, Rubeus Hagrid, has accepted the position as your first Ambassador to Ietalis. He is a half-giant, and as you can tell he's about my height. You're already familiar with him as a former Hogwarts instructor and zookeeper in the United States. He has extensive experience working with Muggles, and I believe that he will be a great asset in introducing the world to our community.

"As the head of Ietalis, I can say that we had been debating exposure for a while. The fact that you were already familiar with our species through Hagrid helped a lot, especially when people began to see him simply as a tall human. We watched closely when Xylenda and Roqteratl came out, and to the best of my knowledge we haven't had that many problems yet with them. So, I figured: why not?"

"One of the first things I intend to do is help the Muggles living up in the northern reaches of Canada. Life is difficult up there, especially for small roving bands of nomads. I plan to invite many of the tribal leaders up there over to Ietalis so they can start up trade. We can get some Muggle
Hodges listened for a few minutes, but eventually he began to doze off. He was brought back to his senses by the man next to him, who nudged him imperceptibly. Waking up, Hodges noticed offhandedly that the High Chief was pointing at places on a map.

The man who had nudged Hodges muttered something in his ear. "I can't help but think that 50,000 of those blokes can be a rather imposing force. Considering that they're all crammed together on those two islands and take up...lots of space, what's preventing them from taking over half of northern Canada? The entire area up there is sparsely populated, and as it is they may be planning to turn those Inuit tribes into vassal or client states."

---------------------------------

DeLorean Motor Corporation

---------------------------------

Kathleen Delavega was about to head home for the day when Biff ran into her in the corridor. He seemed nervous, yet determined.

She looked at him in surprise. "Biff, what's going on? You seem a bit disturbed."

Biff stared intently at the floor. "I'm just a bit concerned about whether we're going to lose our jobs if they walk away with our Time-Turners and the FAA makes it so we can't fly the car anymore."

Kathleen put her hand on his shoulder. "There isn't much we can do about that, I'm afraid. Just do your best in the time we have left, if we do get laid off. That will increase your chances of landing another job."

Biff looked up to her and nodded. "That's good advice, Kathleen. At any rate, I was planning on doing some work on the parachute in the time machine overnight to make sure that it works. Unfortunately, I forgot the 20-digit code to activate the flying enchantment. The parachute isn't going to do much good if it isn't hovering now, will it?"

Kathleen chuckled and headed back to her office. "No, it's not. Let me write it down for you, OK?"

Biff nodded as she looked up the number, jotted it down on a piece of paper, and handed it to Biff. A big smile flashed across Biff's face for a second as he picked it up. What was that about? She'd never seen him that excited for a while.

Biff looked at her in relief. "Thanks, Kathleen. I'll see you tomorrow."

Kathleen nodded and headed out the door. "Don't mention it. Tell me if you find any problems with the parachute."

"I will, Kathleen. You can count on me."

To be continued...

-------------

Update #313

-------------

0454Z
Wednesday, August 7, 1996
DeLorean Motor Corporation
Humble, Texas
Biff Lannen hoped that this would work. He knew enough about time travel from the Back to the Future movies to know not to create time paradoxes. He would likely be in two places at the same time, and he'd need to be careful to not interfere with his other self (or doppelganger, as Dialonis had called it).

He had brought along a spare tire and an extra tank of gas in case there was a problem with the car while he was in the future. It was urgent that the car get back to the time he departed from so he could close the time loop. Otherwise, God knew what would happen.

He had looked over some of the material Oscar had gathered in his office. It hadn't helped much, however. It simply reiterated that time paradoxes were bad. It didn't say what would happen if a paradox occurred, or if the time traveler would notice that a paradox was taking place or was about to take place. Biff soon realized that this type of experiment was so dangerous that very few people even tried it.

On the other hand, Dialonis had shown that it could work if handled properly. Besides, it wasn't as if Biff could afford to not do this. If he lost his job, he would need money in a hurry. He was moral person, so he wouldn't steal. The only thing he could do would be to trust the lottery and make sure that he'd win. He couldn't influence the balls, of course. All he could do was see what the result would be.

Making sure that no one was in the area, he illuminated the cabin lights so he could see the speedometer. He then opened the secret panel which held the time traveling controls. The current time read 08 07 1996 045821. The destination time still read 08 05 1996 150000.

Taking a deep breath, he entered the 20-digit code and heard a satisfying beep as it was accepted. He entered 08 11 1996 070000 into the computer: 2 AM Central on August 11th. Sunday morning. He then activated the time circuits and the warning tone began to sound. Biff looked around quickly to see if anyone had noticed anything, but the room was still empty.

Hoping he knew how to land the thing, he started the car and slowly allowed it to rise into the air. He had to keep the headlights off, and he couldn't put his foot on the brake because a pair of brake lights 500 feet up in the air would attract a lot of attention.

Thankfully, the moon wasn't up. His calendar said it was last quarter, so it was still below the horizon. He had wanted to try the mission later, when fewer people would be awake. However, he didn't want an ET moment when his flying vehicle was silhouetted clearly against the moon.

He eventually made it up to 1500 feet. Hoping that people would mistake the sound of the engine for a helicopter or something like that, he put his foot on the gas and the car began to accelerate. 20 mph, 30 mph, 40 mph. He flinched when the klaxon went on at 60 mph, and he winced when the vehicle hit a bird at around 70 mph and splattered its guts all over the windshield, forcing him to turn on the wipers. He sure hoped that the vehicle had good enough soundproofing to prevent the people down below from hearing the siren.

Making sure there were no hills to collide with -- not like this was likely in the area -- he kept his eye on the speedometer. 85, 86, 87...

-------------
0700Z
Sunday, August 11, 1996
Above Humble, Texas
United States of America
----------

...88. There was a brief moment of disorientation, and Biff panicked for a few seconds. Eventually, though, he remembered what to do. He put the car in neutral and allowed the air resistance to slow it down so he wouldn't have to use the brakes. He did what he could to steer the vehicle as it began to slow, heading towards what looked like a commercial parking lot.

He looked outside and couldn't find anything really different. He began to wonder if the vehicle had even worked when he slowly began to realize that fewer city lights were on and that the stars had shifted slightly. He checked the current time on the control panel and saw 08 11 1996 070032. It looked like the DeLorean had transitioned after all.

After what seemed like ages, the car slowed to a stop. Hoping he wouldn't land on someone's house, he slowly began reducing the car's altitude. The lights from the parking lot allowed him to fine-tune his landing, and he eventually found himself landing safely in the lot.

Biff breathed a sigh of relief. The first part of the operation was complete. Now he needed to get to a store which posted lottery results. Thankfully, he would be able to drive the vehicle normally now that he was on the ground.

He headed out of the parking lot and started looking for a 24-hour convenience store. It took him a while to find one with a Lotto Texas display, but he eventually did. He yawned, and suddenly realized that he had a valid reason to enter the store -- the place probably served coffee.

Trying to look nonchalant, he walked into the store and headed over to the lottery counter. He jotted down the numbers for the 8/10 drawing -- 2, 12, 19, 24, 25, 32 -- and stuffed it in his wallet. He then looked around the room for to see if anyone had a coffee machine which was working.

He couldn't find the cafe open. However, he froze when he stumbled across a newspaper and saw the headlines: "WIZARD ARRESTED FOR MAGICAL COUNTERFEITING" and "BIGFOOT DISCOVERED IN CANADIAN ARCTIC". Biff grunted -- since when did the Abominable Snowman merit a front-page headline?

He headed up to the counter and asked for some coffee only to find that the clerk had dozed off himself. Oh, well. He'd gotten what he came for, and it was time to make his escape.

He headed back to the car and suddenly realized he had a problem. There were still pieces of the bird splattered all over the windshield, and he needed to go to a car wash badly. He knew for a fact that there were no 24-hour car washes available. It looked like he would have to go back early and get the car cleaned off before he could return the DeLorean. He'd have to hang around here until the morning, apparently. He figured that as long as he didn't do anything crazy, he'd be all right.

He decided that he'd fall asleep in the car. There wasn't much else he could do for the time being, and he doubted anyone would notice. It wasn't worth him trying to travel into the future again to speed things up.

----------

1300Z
---

Biff's alarm went off, and he woke up with a start. After a brief moment of confusion, he realized why he had slept in the DeLorean. He headed over to the car wash just as it opened and cleaned off the vehicle.
The next step was to figure out how on earth he was going to get back. In theory, all he needed to do was get the thing up to 88 mph, and with all the highways in the area that wouldn't be an issue. Getting the car up to 1000 feet, however, would pose a problem, especially since it was daylight. He hadn't thought to bring any food, and he didn't want to leave too much evidence of his joyride.

He soon realized he had no choice but to drive out deep into the country and find a place where there was no one in sight. This took a good hour or so. Eventually, he managed to come across a suitable rural location. Hoping this would work, he re-entered the security code and set the Time-Turner for 08 07 1996 033000 -- 10:30. That would give him plenty of time -- an extra hour -- to get back to town and tie up all the loose ends.

Grinning, he rose into the air and accelerated back up to 88 mph.

---------------
0330Z
Wednesday, August 7, 1996
Rural Texas
United States of America
---------------

Biff lowered the Chrononaut to the ground and started on the return journey. He was making very good time, and he figured he wouldn't have problems replacing the car.

What he hadn't counted on, however, was the fact that someone could get disoriented out in rural Texas on a dark night. It had taken him a while to accelerate up to 88 mph, and by the time the transition was complete he found himself in unfamiliar territory. This posed a problem. He wished he had brought a map.

He found himself going down dead end roads for a while. Eventually, he made it back to the main highway and started heading back into town. The delay, however, had been costly. It was now 11:23. He had thirty-seven minutes to return the car.

At 11:25, he saw a sign that said "Humble 60 miles". He suddenly realized that he wasn't going to make it unless he transitioned again. And he wasn't going to be able to do that again anytime soon as there were lights in his rearview mirror -- they'd see him rise off the road.

He took the next exit, hoping to evade the car, and prepared to transition again. He soon made it back to the highway and began gunning the motor, hoping to get 88 mph on the ground and then take off at the last minute. Hell, that would avoid another bird strike.

He had hit 80 mph when he saw the flashing blue lights appear behind him...and gaining. Frantic, he didn't know what to do. If he flew off the road, he'd be giving away the fact he was in a DeLorean. And if that cop could do 90...

The clock struck midnight about five minutes after Biff had been handed his speeding ticket. Surprised that he hadn't blown up or turned into a frog, he headed back to the office and parked the car.

Only time would tell if he would get away with it. So far, however, it seemed promising.

To be continued...

---------------
Update #314
The synagogue's function room had been filled to capacity with the members of Students for Samuel. I had barely been able to make it in before they had run out of tickets and started turning people away.

Most of the people in the group, myself included, were following the updates from the Rhinebeck conference religiously. Samuel had rapidly determined that actually reunifying the three faiths would take much longer than he had hoped, so the conference would be focusing on setting up a panel to promote religious toleration which would have the authority to design Samuelist observances for all of the monotheistic faiths. The vast majority of the delegates, including of all people Celestine, had agreed to this. The outliers like Urban were being ignored for the most part.

The conference had proven a boon for Rhinebeck and the surrounding areas. Although the Omega Institute campus itself was off limits, people were flocking to the inns and B&B's to take part in the experience. About 85% of the hotel rooms within a five-mile radius of the campground were booked for the foreseeable future. Several of the inns had hired students from the Culinary Institute to cook meals for them in order lure prospective pilgrims to their establishments. I had glanced at the hotel prices for the surrounding areas and was horrified to see most of them going for over $150/night. Even with a software engineer's salary -- for the time being -- I wasn't going to try that.

The Students for Samuel movement had expanded rapidly and was already planning on having a convention at the Fleet Center over Labor Day to celebrate the six-month anniversary of its founding, which was generally assumed to have been on February 29th. Students were supposedly coming in from as far as Maryland and Toronto, and several people on the West Coast were trying to set up a chapter at UCLA. The founders -- primarily students from Brandeis -- had been interviewed by several major networks as well as been invited to write articles in some religious journals.

The journals hadn't been the only organizations whose interest had been piqued by our movement. Supposedly Samuel himself had found out and was delighted to hear that his views were spreading. That would have been a blessing in itself. However, the prophet's response had been even more astounding.

He had decided to send Tiqwael, one of his mentors, over to Waltham to introduce himself to the students and to give them a bit of a pep talk. Tiqwael -- whose name meant the Hope of God, using the original Semitic pronunciation where the Vav was pronounced as a W -- would be accompanied by the female interpreter.

No one had ever heard of Tiqwael before Samuel had brought him up. Samuel explained that Tiqwael had opposed Saul's plans to be king and had been stricken from most of the records by the exasperated monarch. Samuel had supposedly chuckled that he himself would have likely been expunged as well -- and Tiqwael killed -- had it not been for the fact that Samuel had been the man who had actually crowned Saul.

There was a hush in the auditorium as the interpreter made her way up to the front of the room. Seconds later, Tiqwael appeared in a flash of white light. He appeared to have died in his sixties, presumably of natural causes, and appeared to have been an ascetic. He was as bald as a Ping-Pong ball and had a thin mustache.
The interpreter began to explain. "Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to introduce Tiqwael, wizard and mentor to Samuel and colleague of Deborah. We can't get the chronology down perfectly, but we believe that he lived from 1102 to 1036 BC. He may be able to shed some light on what happened in the latter part of the book of Judges, prior to Samuel's birth. Recall that Samuel was born in 1073 and died in 1015. I have asked him to elaborate and comment on some of the stories in the book of Judges.

"One more thing -- please don't ask him about his family life or about the sword. I'll tell you everything you need to know -- thank God he doesn't understand English. He married Nuria, a Muggle, in 1085 and had two sons. One of them died in childbirth, taking Nuria with him. The other was killed in action fighting various other nomadic tribes. That sword that he has hanging from his belt apparently belonged to his son and was returned with the body. Needless to say, he doesn't want to talk about that."

Someone in the front raised his hand. "Is he going to tell us who in the Bible was a wizard?"

The interpreter shook her head. "No. Samuel has agreed that no one from the Bible will be exposed as a wizard unless he or she does it himself. From what I gather, there is growing consensus in Sheol that if other biblical wizards exist, they will not reveal themselves because doing so will undermine the religious beliefs and veneration of billions of people worldwide. It looks like Samuel, Deborah, and Tiqwael is all that you're going to get. Any other questions?"

There were none. Seeing this, she turned to Tiqwael and nodded.

The ghost began to speak. "Good afternoon, people. My name is Tiqwael, and I would like to thank you for your support of Samuel's goals. Samuel was one of my most gifted students, and it is not a surprise that he was chosen to anoint Saul king."

He chuckled. "I must say, had he had ME anoint him king, he probably wouldn't have harassed me about my anti-monarchical policies and made sure I was stripped from the records. That's why I'm not in the record books you use."

"I would like to update you a little on what's happening at the conference. Although I cannot understand entirely what is going on because of the language barrier, things seem to be progressing nicely. There haven't been any major squabbles yet which haven't involved the people under Urban IX -- the Celestines, I believe you call them. The delegates for the most part are eating together and praying together, albeit using varying rituals. That's a good start, of course, but we've still got a while to go."

Tiqwael looked around the room. "At any rate, he recommended that I talk to you about people from what you call the book of Judges. Be advised, however, I do not recall any judges living around my time. There were a bunch of warlords fighting against the Philistines -- and occasionally against each other -- while they weren't trying to occupy Canaan. I suppose that they could have been considered judges in that their whims served as law in those chaotic times. So, here's what I recommend. You give me names, and I'll tell you what I know about them. I'm also kind of curious whom you DON'T mention -- I want to see if anyone is missing other than me."

People started raising their hands, and Tiqwael chose someone at random.

"Joshua!"
Tiqwael shook his head. "He was well before my time. As far as I know, he was the commander in chief of the Israelite forces when we first got to Canaan. That appears to be public knowledge, however."

Another person called out. "Gideon!"

Tiqwael shrugged. "Warlord from before my time who tried to pass himself off as public hero -- one of those judges you were referring to. Lots of those."

"Jephthah! He's near the end of the book, isn't he? I figured you may know him."

Tiqwael was silent for a long time. It was clear that he recognized the name. Eventually he drew a deep breath and stared at his feet. He muttered something, and suddenly the interpreter's eyes shot up. She turned to him for clarification, and he said something which appeared to confirm his prior statement.

She turned in shock to the audience. "He says that although he never met Jephthah, his father did and told him the story. He mentions that if the kings paid more attention to what happened after soldiers got back from battle, tragedies like Jephthah's would have been averted."

A hand went up. "Did he actually sacrifice his daughter like in the text?"

The interpreter turned back to Tiqwael and asked him the question. Tiqwael rolled his eyes and grunted something. The interpreter chuckled and replied, "No, he did not sacrifice his daughter -- he claims that's a common misconception. However, his daughter did die by his hands, and it's a telling story. If you want, I can ask him to elaborate. He may not be up to it though, as it's clearly disturbing."

The crowd nodded, and the interpreter turned back to Tiqwael. They spoke in ancient Semitic back and forth for a few minutes, with Tiqwael clearly upset about what had happened and saying rather uncomplimentary things about Saul and Eli. Finally, the room was silent once more. Drawing a deep breath, the interpreter turned back to the crowd.

"I think I know what happened, ladies and gentlemen. I still can't believe it, but unfortunately I've heard of many cases of this myself."

She paused for a few moments and wet her lips. "Judging from what I am hearing, Jephthah came down with post-traumatic stress disorder after fighting a major battle. It's not well known, but PTSD is not uncommon for veterans, particularly if they fought in the front line like commanding officers tended to do in ancient times."

There was a collective gasp as she continued. "The Bible has the story partially right. Jephthah, a skilled swordsman from Tiqwael's father's time, pledged to sacrifice the first animal he saw if he was victorious and returned home safely from the battle. You probably recognize this part from the Bible. However, the actual nature of the sacrifice was far different from what the Bible depicts...and far more terrible.

"Jephthah won the battle. However, victory came at a grievous price. Tiqwael claims that the Israelites lost a good 40% of their forces, and the front lines were decimated by swords, spears, and arrows. Captain Jephthah watched in horror as Ammonite warriors surprised his formation and butchered most of the men he had sworn to lead. Jephthah himself lost an ear in the fighting."
She waited a few seconds before continuing. "The combination of the injury and the gruesome sights he saw triggered what is now known as shell shock or combat neurosis, a form of PTSD common to veterans. He became irritable and had serious personality changes. However, he didn't realize it until it was too late.

"He was discharged after the injury and sent home. He then made good on his promise to sacrifice the first animal he saw -- and this is where things got ugly. You see, the first animal he saw was the family's prized milch cow. You may not understand this, but a milch cow is an extremely valuable animal to a farmer. Without it, calves won't be able to feed and could die. Destroying such an animal would decimate the flock.

"Having partially lost his mind from the PTSD, he couldn't think of anything other than following through on the pledge. He told his wife and daughter, who promptly started arguing with him. Already made irritable from his new medical condition, warlike habits he'd picked up while on campaign, and the injury, he eventually lost his temper and attacked his family. His wife was injured badly, and his daughter was killed.

"Seeing the two people lying in a pool of blood temporarily brought him back to his senses. He tried to atone for what he had done, but it didn't work. To make matters worse, he followed through on the promise to kill the cow. Several calves died and the family began to run low on meat.

"However, the climax came when the army eventually found out when they came back to check on him. They were apparently looking for soldiers to go fight against the people of the rival Israelite tribe of Ephraim. He was immediately court-martialed for attacking civilians and executed.

"That, ladies and gentlemen, is what really happened to Jephthah. If Saul, Eli and the rest of those aristocrats realized how veterans could be permanently scarred by combat, they probably wouldn't be as willing to send people off to war. Now, if you don't mind, can we talk about something else?"

The room was silent for a long time. Two minutes. Three minutes. No one said a word, and I wasn't going to interrupt.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #314.5
-------------
1016 BC
Walled City #5
Valley of Elah
Canaan

Commander Eltzedek took one look over the wall and swore. "Shit! They've brought a giant. He's coming out to issue the challenge."

General Ishbaal grunted. "Great, just what we need. Who did those bastards send out this time?"

Eltzedek didn't get a chance to answer before the booming voice resonated throughout the encampment. "Attention, citizens of this city. I am Goliath, representing the Kingdom of the Philistines and the Principality of Nephilu. We have your city surrounded, and there is no way you're going to leave this place in one piece. If I were you, I would start praying to whatever gods you believe in right now."
Eltzedek chuckled. "Sounds like Goliath all right. He's got a flair for theatrics."

The giant continued. "Of course, if you want to surrender, be my guest. We'll deal mercifully with you. We promise to not to rape your wives. Granted, I doubt they'd do me any good since I'm about fifteen cubits tall -- if word leaks out that I dallied with one of your adult women, my king would likely call it child abuse."

Ishbaal looked at the giant and shook his head. "The guy's armed to the teeth and has got virtually impenetrable armor. I can barely see his eyes through that helmet. We can't take him out, and if we open the gates to send any more soldiers out those Philistines will just charge right in. We've got a problem, guys."

Eltzedek nodded. "I can tell that, sir. What do you suggest?"

Goliath talked right over Ishbaal. "All right, so you're a bit cowardly. I'll tell you what. You send out one of your fighters and duel me one on one. Whoever wins gets the city. How about that?"

There were no responses. It was fairly obvious that no one would be able to even stand a chance against the giant. The only shot the defenders had would be to hamstring him and knock him to the ground, and Goliath had anticipated that and donned heavily armored leggings.

Goliath, of course, took the opportunity to taunt them further. "I see no one wants to fight me. I apologize, ladies -- I didn't know the city only contained women and children."

Ishbaal swore. "That does it -- let's get this over with. Archers, loose!"

The herald conveyed the order to the archers, and the battle began. Within a few minutes, the area outside the walls was filled with the fog of war. Ishbaal watched as someone poured burning pitch outside the gates to try to prevent people from coming in. Several Philistines were already down, and Eltzedek cursed loudly as one of the archers toppled off the wall.

Ishbaal bit his lip as he scanned the battlefield. "We'd better keep Goliath away from the walls. Those fists of his could probably punch holes in them and let the army in. Send some of the reserves out to make sure he doesn't go anywhere. Send Sling Crew #2 out to cover them."

Having a moat filled with flame around the city helped. However, it would only delay the inevitable. It was obvious that someone needed to demoralize the enemy. The best way to do that would be to kill Goliath, but Ishbaal couldn't see how anyone would be able to do that short of a full tag team between Ba'al, Asherah, and Yahweh.

He sent the women and children out through the underground passages. Half of them refused to leave, of course. He had been afraid of that and had to use several of his men to force them to leave the city. He knew what usually happened after a city fell, and he wasn't going to let any civilians face that under his watch.

He had just finished clearing out the residential districts when there was a commotion outside the command area. He turned and saw several excited men were rushing towards his post. There was a brief moment of panic when a flaming arrow crashed to the crowd nearby, but the officers reacted quickly and smothered the fire before it got out of hand.

The herald who had been sent to talk to the slingers began speaking excitedly. "General, you've got to listen --"
Ishbaal barked something at him, who winced, saluted, and started his report again. "Sir, allow me to introduce Subcommander Dawid, head of the slingers. He believes that he may have a weapon which may be able to destroy Goliath and wreak havoc among the enemy."

Eltzedek looked at Dawid and snorted. A twentysomething kid thought he could take out Goliath with a slingshot? Eltzedek wondered if Dawid had gotten drunk on duty and wasn't thinking, which would be a capital offense. Waiting to hear the punch line, he nodded to Dawid, who saluted and began.

"General, I believe that my unit may be able to take out Goliath. We've got a special weapon which ought to do the trick."

Ishbaal shook his head in disbelief. "Subcommander, I highly doubt a bunch of slingshots would even put a dent in that man's armor --"

Dawid chuckled. "Not if this slingshot throws boulders about two cubits across."

The tent was silent for a good ten seconds. Finally, Ishbaal blinked. "WHAT? Granted, I can see how that would be an effective weapon in this case, but I don't see how you can even lift such a boulder, let alone throw it!"

Dawid beamed with pride. "I have a friend who is a wizard, sir. Ever since the Philistines allied with the giants, they've been working on inventions which can be used to deal with giants and other heavily armored people. I actually helped them develop this particular weapon. We call it the Sling of Yahweh. Here, I've got a picture of it. Basically, we've scaled it up to throw heavier projectiles."

http://www.google.com/imgres?imgurl=...ed=0CDcQ9QEwAg

Ishbaal and Eltzedek looked at the design and whistled. Eltzedek was the first to critique it. "Have you tested this out, Subcommander? You put a projectile in that and it's going to snap those tree trunks like twigs when you try to throw it. It's probably going to drop the thing on our heads and spray splinters everywhere. I'm sorry, but --"

Dawid's grin broadened. "The wood has been strengthened with magic, sir. We've already tested it out in the Wizarding school, and it seems to work. They've built three so far, and this city got one of them because in my opinion we would be a likely target for the next Philistine attack. We've got to show these people we can take out giants!"

Eltzedek's jaw dropped. "Where is it? I haven't seen it here!"

"That's because it's been shrunk with the Reducio spell, sir, along with its projectiles. We'll return it to its normal size before we fire it."

Ishbaal jumped to his feet. "You've got the wizard here?"

"Yes, sir. He doesn't want to make himself known to the Philistines because he doesn't want them to know we've allied with a wizard. Since this sling is a mechanical weapon, albeit a large one, he figures he can introduce himself by hitting the Philistines with it."

Ishbaal began looking around the tent excitedly and giving orders. "If we pin down Goliath in one place, do you think you can hit him?"
Dawid nodded. "I'll try. We may need to get a ranging shot here and there to calibrate the weapon, but if distract him with a whole platoon attacking him at once he may not notice the missile as it comes in."

This was a piece of cake, Goliath thought. The men were fighting valiantly, of course. But you can't take out someone three times your height and over twenty times your weight. His great strength allowed him to carry a huge, ten-cubit broadsword and several layers of iron armor. No one was touching him.

Slingshot projectiles banged off his helmet as he watched about fifty men try to rush him simultaneously. He frowned for a moment. Fifty against one could be a problem. He'd better pay attention here.

He kicked out with his huge feet, and Israelites went flying left and right. One of them landed in a Philistine scout group and promptly got hacked to pieces. He eventually found himself surrounded, but he wouldn't be surrounded for long.

He had just finished dispatching the ninth man when a huge scream suddenly burst from the Philistine lines, followed by a tremendous crash. Goliath wanted to help but he couldn't with all these midgets hemming him in. Presumably the general would be able to handle this threat on his own.

Someone suddenly yelled at him. "Goliath! On the wall! They've got some kind of sling designed for tremendous boulders! I don't know where it came from!"

Goliath glanced up at the wall and his jaw dropped. He couldn't see much of it with his attention focused on the Israelite soldiers at his feet, but whatever it was looked nasty. Kicking at more Israelites, he shouted, "Get rid of it! That's going to wreak havoc among our forces! Tell them to send the flaming arrows over!"

The soldier nodded and ran off. Goliath then turned back to the attacking Israelites, who were pressing their attack more strongly.

The contraption's third shot hit him right in the forehead and decapitated him.

The Israelites whooped in pride, and people began showering Dawid with congratulations. Ishbaal barked an order for everyone to return to their posts as there was still a large army of ordinary-sized people to deal with. Someone told Dawid to run for politics.

Eltzedek swore and pointed at the oversized sling. Apparently someone had set on fire and broken the string. The weapon suddenly disappeared and the wizards clusted around it. It was most definitely out of commission for the time being.

However, the Philistines had been absolutely shocked and demoralized by the appearance of the weapon. The Israelite forces slowly began to beat them back. As they advanced, they picked up what was left of Goliath's head and shield to return them to Dawid as a trophy.

To be continued...

Update #314.8

1063 BC
Colonel Neham had to fight to keep the excitement out of his face when he delivered his report. He didn't think he'd managed it perfectly, but he doubted that the general would complain once he heard this. "Sir, we've got an update from the Ammonite ambassador. The mission against Shimshon was a success, and the Israelite wrestler/strongman is dead. The king put the man's head up on a pole to try to scare off the Israelites. They wanted to take his shield but found it impractical to lift."

The general breathed a sigh of relief. "That's good to hear, Colonel. I must say, the Israelites pulled a major coup there when they converted him from an infantryman to an archer. All that extra muscle translated to increased range, and the fact that bastard could hit us when we couldn't hit him could have posed a problem for the entire region. Supposedly the fellow could draw a 200-pound bow and send arrows a long, long way."

Neham shrugged. "I must say, sir, he wasn't that bad of an infantryman or sapper either. I heard that one of the temples of Dagon went down when Shimshon led a bunch of guys down there and knocked out the foundations. The priests and soldiers tried to stop him, of course, but the fellow was carrying a gigantic shield which probably weighed 80 pounds. All he had to do was block the entire tunnel with the shield and bash people's heads in with it. No sword necessary."

The general grinned. "It's a pity he didn't have the shield on him when that hooker seduced him and let in Ammonite agents."

Neham stifled a laugh. "You got that right, sir. Judging from what that Delilah woman said, he didn't have anything on him whatsoever when they caught him. A rather embarrassing way to go, wouldn't you say?"

The general nearly fell over laughing and reached for the pitcher of pomegranate juice. Wine would do better, of course, but he had prohibited all alcohol while on duty. "Serves him right, Colonel. Let's toast this occasion: the champion of Yahweh gets the supreme honor by getting to meet Him face to face."

The two officers toasted the barbarian's death, at which point the general turned serious once more. "Now that Shimshon is out of the way, it's time for us to come up with our own Shimshons."

Nahem gaped at him. "Sir? How are you going to do that? The fellow was a freak of nature, from what I've been told. He was also a Nazirite, which means Yahweh --"

The general grunted. "Yahweh had nothing to do with it, Colonel. Shimshon was not in fact a Nazirite. Yes, he had long hair, and used that to his advantage, convincing his allies that he was in fact a Nazirite and as a result had been blessed by Yahweh with his great strength. However, he drank and caroused freely, which Nazirites are not allowed to do. The High Priest actually sent out a message trying to explain that he wasn't a Nazirite and his atrocities were actually giving that Order a bad name. Shimshon was just an ordinary soldier, albeit an unusually muscular one."

"I see where you're going, sir. You want to find out where he comes from and recruit some of his relatives, who are likely also strong."

The general shook his head. "That's not going to work, Colonel. I doubt they'll betray their own people."
"Could you find out who trained Shimshon and recruit him?"

"We can try, but I suspect he's an Israelite and won't talk. I'm not going to be working with a bunch of people who are as likely to turn on me as fight for me."

Neham frowned. "Then what's your plan, sir?"

The general grinned. "Simple. We come up with our own Shimshons, and make sure that the guys we recruit are stronger, taller, and more warlike than anyone they can."

Neham blanched. "Are you telling me that you're going to go to Nephilu? You're going to seek an alliance with the Nephilim?"

The general nodded. "I spoke with our king, and he agrees. If the Israelites wanted to start a muscular arms race with that Shimshon freak, we'll be more than happy to reciprocate. After all, Nephilu is very near our territory, and the Israelites will likely threaten Nephilu if they attack us. An alliance makes a lot of sense here."

Neham thought for a moment. "It does. However, what's to prevent the Israelites from doing the same thing? The giants can serve them as easily as they can serve us!"

"I wouldn't worry about that, Colonel. The Israelites apparently stumbled across the Nephilim during a scouting mission a couple of centuries ago, supposedly led by the fabled Joshua himself. The scouts panicked and decided that they really didn't want to go anywhere near the area. There hasn't been much diplomacy between the Israelites and the Nephilim ever since that incident."

"I see, sir."

"Oh, that's not all, Colonel. The Nephilim's first impression of the Israelites was of scouts armed to the teeth -- I suspect they had come to spy on the land, but no one knows for certain. This, combined with the rumors that a large band of people was migrating from Egypt to Canaan, immediately made the Nephilim think that the Israelites were going to conquer them."

Neham shook his head. "The Nephilim couldn't have thought the Israelites could take them out."

"Don't be so sure about that. Yes, one giant can probably take out twenty or thirty ordinary soldiers. However, there aren't that many giants, and the rumors estimated the size of the nomadic tribe to be as high as two million, of whom 600,000 were of fighting age."


The general chuckled once again. "They dismissed the idea of two million people leaving almost immediately as gross overestimate. The question was how much it was overestimated BY. The giants could have handled 20,000 people easily, especially if most were noncombatants. But 200,000 people, all warriors like the men the giants had just encountered? Goodbye Nephilu, and watch out Sumer. At any rate, Prince Agmo of Nephilu -- he was ruler at the time -- promptly started trying to set up alliances against the Israelites as they were coming in."

Neham saw where he was going. "And now that the Israelites are rampaging through the area, you want to send an emissary to Prince Valotha to see if they want to continue that tradition."
"That's right, Colonel. If we play our cards right, we'll be able to convince them to let giants join our forces. We've got more men than the giants do, but the giants are far stronger and more robust. Think Shimshon, but ten times worse. And working for us."

Neham smiled. "I like it, sir. I like it a lot."

"I'm glad you do, Colonel. If it's all right with you, I'd like you to take the lead on this mission. With Shimshon down and the Israelites scrambling to find a new hero, we may have time to pull this off."

Neham saluted. "It would be an honor, sir. However, I must say I do have one question. What happens if they don't want to deal with us or -- worse still -- have allied with the Israelites in a surprise move?"

The general shrugged. "Run, and hope they don't have horses."

To be continued...

-------------
Update #315
-------------
Friday, August 9, 1996
University of Oxford
Great Britain
-------------
Innes Taylor looked at the report in surprise. The physicists' investigation of the magical world was making discoveries every day, and the scientific study of magic was becoming a fast-growing field. Most of the new advances so far had been in biology, and from what he'd been told the people who had discovered the Q and Z genes had been nominated for the Nobel Prize in Medicine.

Taylor didn't need to shell out the £79.95 to be tested for Wizarding genes as it was fairly obvious he had the Q complex. Every single person who had been able to handle wands without being harmed had proven to have the Q, including dear old King William V. Supposedly there was a big debate going on as to whether Hogwarts would start accepting Q-only candidates as students. The bookies, at last check, had it at 2:1 against.

It appeared that he was only person in the physics department to have the Q. This soon made him the butt of Star Trek jokes, and people were soon flashing lights on and off whenever he walked into the room. He'd already picked up at least one nickname, "Mon Capitain", and if he heard it anymore he'd probably flip out.

Most of the grad students had tested themselves once he told them what he'd found. This, of course, had had another unexpected side effect. One girl in the chemistry department had the Z, and people promptly started trying to set the two of them up to see if they could produce "Muggle-born" children. Taylor found this amusing, yet rather disturbing: the girl was ugly as hell, and from what he knew she was married.

The fact that he could manipulate wands had suddenly made the professors take a hell of a lot more interest in him, and he had already received five offers from labs focusing on magical discoveries. He was flattered, of course, and had to explain that he couldn't work for them until his thesis was finished, at which point he would be able to sign on as a postdoc or perhaps as a permanent researcher. He laughed when he thought of the fact that he'd virtually secured himself a job. In an economy like this, leverage like that could come in handy.
He forced the future out of his mind as he put the report on the table and picked up the telephone. If these people from the University of Phoenix had discovered what he thought they had, he’d probably be able to co-author a paper with them.

Hoping that the people in Arizona would be up at this early hour, he dialed the number. Three rings later, a man answered. "This is Dr. Morton. Who's calling?"

Taylor hoped he wouldn't mess this up. "Dr. Morton, my name is Innes Taylor from the University of Oxford."

"The Brit who can hold wands and get away with it?"

Taylor grinned -- perhaps another prospective employer. "Yes, Dr. Morton. However, my ability to hold wands isn't what I'm calling about. I just read your article about Floo powder. I enjoyed it, and it was well-written. And I may be able to answer some of your questions."

Morton whistled. "Really? You've done some work with Floo powder?"

"No, Doctor. However I have done some work with wands, and believe I know what may be the driving force behind wand magic. If my hunch is right, Floo powder is going to be driven by the same thing."

There was a stunned pause on the other end of the line. Finally, Morton said, "That would be an amazing discovery if that's the case. What is it? All we could tell is that it goes beyond physics as we know it."

Taylor chuckled. "Oh, you got that right. You see, the wands are powered by what appears to be antigravity."

There was another pause, after which Morton sounded...uneasy. "Antigravity? There's no such thing as repulsive gravity!"

"Not anymore, Doctor. Do you by any chance have a gravimeter in the building with microgal precision? I want you to do an experiment for me."

Morton thought for a moment. "Hmm. Well, we don't have one, but the physics lab on the third floor has one. Give me an hour to set it up and I'll get back to you. What do you want us to do?"

"Bring the powder to whatever device you use to facilitate travel if you have one. Measure the gravitational constant, and then measure it again with the Floo powder near the machine. Then have someone travel using it while someone else is watching the gravimeter."

Taylor could hear Morton scribbling on a piece of paper. "Sounds simple enough. I'll get back to you in an hour."

One hour later, Morton called back. "All right, we've got 9.80662 in the room right now. We're bringing the Floo powder over -- no, that can't be right."

Taylor punched his fist in the air. Hello, Nobel Prize. Careful not to reveal any emotions, he asked for clarification.

"Well, it went up to 9.80665 when the grad student dropped off the packet. We first thought that it
was the mass of the student, but the readout didn't budge after she left."

Taylor nodded. "That's just what I saw with the wand, Doctor. Now try replacing the packet with something with the same apparent mass."

There was a pause, followed by an awed "9.80662. Are you telling me that this stuff increases the gravitational constant more than its mass would predict?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying, Doctor. Let's exchange email addresses. We have a lot to discuss."

Enfield, MA
------------------

Radner's dizzy spells were becoming more and more frequent. He couldn't keep up this workload, he thought. He made a mental note to start delegating more stuff off to Ariadne over the next week or so.

He did what he could to stay focused on the announcement. "Yes, people. It is possible for Muggles to fly brooms and flying carpets provided (a) that they have training, which is what the MIT students did not have when they experimented with the brooms, and (b) they have a wizard to make the object fly. The Levitation Charm is safe and effective, having been perfected many centuries ago. It provides easy travel, with a maximum of about 100 mph, in not two but three dimensions.

Radner paused for effect. "Yes, exactly three dimensions. If people try to use it to travel in MORE than three dimensions, the American Department of Magic will be most unhappy, especially Shawna Santana of the Big Thicket National Preserve facility in Texas."
--------------------------------

DeLorean Motor Corporation
- - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -

Biff looked up from his desk and waved as Oscar walked in. "Hi, Biff! I was wondering whether you can help me with something. I need to take the Time-Turner out of the DeLorean. I think I know enough about it to at least be able to take it apart and put it back together without breaking it. Whether I'll be able to reverse-engineer it before the Feds get their greedy hands on it is another question. However, I'll do my best."

Biff nodded, though alarm bells rang in his head. "Sure. I'll go and take it out. Wait here."

He started heading towards the car and frowned when Oscar tagged behind him. "I'll have to come with you, Biff. It's going to be hard to take that thing out without activating it. You're going to need my help."

Hoping that the wizard would help more than harm him, Biff led Oscar over to the car and pointed at the hood. "Let me get my equipment so I can open the hood. Don't touch anything until I tell you, all right?"

Oscar nodded and sat in the driver's seat. "Fine with me. In the meantime, I'll just make sure the time circuits are off. Where's that damn panel again?"

Biff gritted his teeth as he reached for his toolbox. When he returned, he saw that Oscar had an odd look on his face. The wizard was looking at him strangely.

"Was there a malfunction, Biff? I don't know why it's reading this, but it claims the most recent destination time was Tuesday morning, 0330 Zulu. That's 10:30 Monday night. You were here then,
weren’t you? Did anything strange happen then? Someone hit the door or something like that?"

Biff shrugged. "I was in the lab at 10:30, but the DeLorean was out at the time. Maybe someone else was working on it. I don’t remember, to be honest."

Oscar grunted. "Fortunately, we'll be able to figure it out. There's a secret spell I found which will allow the Time-Turner to issue a report on its last few uses. If it disappeared when we weren't looking, we'll know why."

Biff's face whitened, but thankfully Oscar didn't see him as the wizard bent down over the panel. This was not good.

To be continued...
Update #316 through Update #320

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Mislagnissa

Update #316
---------
Saturday, August 10, 1996
Department of Magic Headquarters
Enfield, MA
United States of America
---------
The aide barged into Radner's office. "Sir, we've got a problem!"

Radner groaned. "Now what? I'm a bit busy here, and I haven't slept for --"

"We've just received word that someone at DeLorean Motor Corporation just used the Chrononaut to
bring information from the future to the present! That's way too dangerous!"

Radner's vision blurred momentarily as his jaw dropped. "When was this? How do you know this?"

"An auto mechanic decided to use the car to take a joyride into the future. The Time-Turner recorded
the information on the transit, and that information was apparently retrieved by someone who was
trying to work with the Time-Turner."

Radner's face turned beet red. "I told Shawna to get that damn Time-Turner! What the hell is it still
doing out there?"

"It's not going to be out there for long, sir. Once the wizard working with the device realized what
had happened, he immediately questioned the mechanic. From what I've been told, the mechanic
traveled into the future to steal the winning numbers from today's Lotto Texas drawing, with an
estimated jackpot of $12 million."

Radner fumed. "Someone's been watching Back to the Future, I see."

"Sounds like it, sir. When confronted by the wizard, the mechanic tried to bribe him by offering him
a share of the pot. The wizard, afraid of being caught up in the DoM dragnet, appears to have spoken
to his manager. Our time traveler was promptly fired, and Chairwoman Santana is coming in as we
speak to take custody of the Time-Turner. They're going absolutely nuts down there, sir. No fewer
than three Big Thicket committees are demanding an explanation."

Radner steadied himself as another dizziness spell struck him. He'd take a long nap once this was
resolved. Trying to not let it show, he turned back to the aide.

"I want to know as soon as the Time-Turner is in our possession. DeLorean can make cars fly as
much as they want. However, if they do ANYTHING involving time travel, I want them out of
business. Obliviate all their employees if necessary. I want this thing sealed up tight!"

Radner shook his head in disbelief as another man rushed by him with a photograph and a document
in his hand. "Sir, I apologize for the interruption, but we've got some interesting evidence here
against Mr. Lannen, the fellow accused of using the Time-Turner."
The new advisor showed the objects to Radner. The picture showed a thirty-something man -- presumably Radner -- working at a desk in the lab with the car. The clock behind the desk read 11:31, August 6th. The other document appeared to be a police report about a speeding ticket. The Secretary's eyes widened when he noticed the date stamp: 23:31 Central on 8/6/96. They widened even further when he noticed the suspect: Brian Tannen in a 1982 DeLorean, a good 50 miles outside Humble.

The newcomer took the words right out of Radner's mouth. "Look, sir! The suspect is in two places at the same time, along with the car!"

Radner was furious. He immediately contacted Chairwoman Santana, who reported that the Department of Magic agents were running all over the DeLorean headquarters trying to convince everyone that the Chrononaut was actually a flying car called the Aviator which did not have the ability to travel through time. The tough part was trying to explain why the car had disappeared for nine seconds during the demo.

Radner thanked Santana profusely -- another crisis had been resolved. As the adrenaline slowly left his system, he suddenly found himself profoundly fatigued. The next thing he knew, the two agents were at his side looking at him with concern. "Are you OK there? You seemed to have spaced out for a second."

Radner nodded. "I'll be fine -- now that this Time-Turner's been taken care of, I'll go home and rest. Tell Ariadne to take the point while I'm --"

A third person barged in before he could finish his sentence. "Sir, we've got an unauthorized Geminio spell in Macon, Georgia! That's right in the center of the area where duplicated dollar bills have been found! We've sent -- sir, are you OK?"

Radner's vision swam for a second. He was about to dismiss the man when he felt a pain in his chest. He fell to the ground as everything went black.

------------------------

Presidential Palace
Land of the Houyhnhnms

Neihym didn't like what he was seeing. Although the mansion's security guards were putting up a valiant fight, there were simply too many of them. The fact that half of them were firing what appeared to be Muggle explosive devices from the air didn't help.

He had to admit that he was intrigued by the Muggle flying devices. Most of them were odd, bulbous-looking things with a rotating set of blades on their heads and explosive devices inside them. He winced as another of them sped towards the compound, detonated in a ball of fire, and knocked down part of a tower.

His advisor tugged at his shoulder. "Mr. President, we've got to get you out of here! We can't defend against --"

The window suddenly exploded, spraying glass all over the room. The advisor suddenly collapsed as a shard hit him in one of his rear legs, cutting it off. Neihym, who had been standing a few feet further away, barely had time to duck before the deadly fragments flew over his head.

He stared at his injured advisor. "Son, let me help you. I think --"
The guard could barely speak through his pain. "No -- get out -- OUT! Let me go! It's the only chance you have!"

Another explosion rocked the room, knocking the chandelier from the ceiling and setting the rug on fire. It slowly dawned on Neihym that the man was right. It was over, and he had to get out quickly. However, he wasn't going to leave the guard. He was the president of the Centaur Republic. It was his duty to protect his citizens.

He spent a precious twenty seconds lifting the injured man onto his back and headed out into the corridor, looking for a wizard or an emergency escape Portkey. He couldn't see much, though, as the corridor was filled with smoke and rubble.

He had gotten maybe thirty feet when he heard footsteps -- human ones -- coming down the corridor. Someone pointed an odd-looking device at him, gaped as he recognized him, and shouted, "Arret, Monsieur President!"

Neihym didn't know what the man was saying. However, that odd-looking device didn't look friendly. The injured man on his back reached for his bow but was felled by the human's device before he could fire it. Groaning painfully, the centaur fell off Neihym's back.

The human -- with an odd red, white, and blue logo on his uniform -- pointed his weapon at Neihym. Having seen what the weapon could do, Neihym hoped for the best. He raised his hands in the air and opened them.

Hoping they understood Galiver, he spoke precisely and clearly. "I surrender."

Amazingly, they understood his language. Still pointing their weapon at him, they tied his hands with a heavy cord. Then they stared at him hard, pointed at his feet, and barked something at him in garbled Galiver. "You hit us with feet, you die. You no fight, you be placed in secure location house arrest. You agree?"

Neihym nodded. "I agree, human. Rest assured, however, that this will just get you into trouble. My people will not surrender this easily. What I do, I do for the sake of my people."

The human prodded him with the weapon. "We see, Monsieur President. We see."

And with that, Neihym was marched out of the building to the cheers of the human attackers.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #317
-------------

Sunday, August 11, 1996
Windsor Castle
England

King William looked up as Headmaster Snape walked in with a girl in her mid-twenties. "Your Majesty, it my pleasure to inform you that we have found someone who will help you with your studies. You will be able to attend Hogwarts after all if you so desire. If you do so, keep in mind that you will be doing a double curriculum, your current school's classes as well as the magical ones. You will be exempted from Muggle Studies because of your background, which should free up some
The king smiled. "I'll give it a try -- I'm very curious as to what I can do."

"As are many people, Your Majesty. We are working on a combined Hogwarts/traditional school schedule, and you will be traveling to and from the two schools several times per day via Portkey. The schedule will be grueling, Your Majesty. First class will be at 8 AM and last class will end at 6 PM. What's more, both schools will be giving homework."

William grinned. "Maybe I can do what Hermione did and use a Time-Turner to --"

Snape's face soured, and the headmaster cut him off. "No. Absolutely not. Giving Miss Granger that device was a mistake, and my predecessor lost his position over it."

William's mouth clamped shut as the headmaster turned to the woman next to him. "Your Majesty, you will have two new tutors. One of them is a Korean man who also a Q-only wizard: we're working on getting a translator for him right now. This woman here is Lady Laura Spencer, Wizarding Queen of England. Hogwarts class of '89."

William's jaw dropped. "Wizarding WHAT? How --"

Snape talked over him. "You may have heard in the news that several of the world's royal families started out as Wizarding lines. Now that the Statute of Secrecy has fallen, the royals with both Q and Z are starting to come out. The Romanovs and Hapsburgs have already introduced themselves to the world, and the Wizarding kings and queens from those lines have taken a ceremonial role as the immediate supervisors of the Ministers of Magic. The fact that you have the Q in your genome is due to your relationship with the royal family."

William stared at Laura. "This girl here is my Wizarding counterpart? She rules Wizarding Britain much as I rule Muggle Britain?"

The woman nodded. "In theory, yes. There have been times when the British Ministry of Magic has answered to the Wizarding King or Queen and not the Muggle one. However, my father and I have both been rather introverted and are more than happy to stay out of the way. That's why the Ministry of Magic did a lot of work with the Prime Minister and your grandmother."

Snape took over from there. "Lady Laura is an accomplished witch, specializing in Transfiguration and Potions. She actually managed to get an E in my course without even being a member of Slytherin. That is not very easy. Be advised that her royal status did not grant her any unusual privileges -- the entire staff treated her just the same as any other student."

Laura nodded abruptly at that. "That he did, William. That he did. I suppose I should call you Your Majesty, but since I also go by Her Majesty from time to time that title tends to be a bit ambiguous in these circumstances."

William turned to Laura. "Did you do a double curriculum as well?"

"Yes I did, William. Normally, wizards don't do a double curriculum. However, longstanding tradition dictates that members of the royal family do a double curriculum in case the Statute of Secrecy falls during that person's lifetime. Headmaster Snape was my Potions teacher at the time, and I can tell you that the 8 AM to 6 PM class schedule is very close to what I had to deal with as a student. You'll be doing homework to 10 or 11 each night. It's going to be very tough. However, if
you make it through, you'll be the first acting Wizard King the Muggles have seen in over six hundred years."

-------------
Enfield, MA
-
-
-
-
-

The aide turned to Persephone Ariadne. "We have good news. The wizards took over as soon as he fell down and did what they could do reduce the damage. He's going to make a full recovery. However, he agreed to step down and retire for health reasons. Next time, he might not be as lucky -- particularly if he's out among the Muggles when it happens."

Ariadne frowned. "It's good to hear that Radner survived. That makes me Secretary of Magic, right?"

"It does. Congratulations, Madame Secretary. We've already organized a meeting so that Radner's advisors can get you up to speed. Supposedly they've already dealt with that renegade Time-Turner in the DeLorean and just arrested someone for Geminioing dollar bills. There's absolute chaos in Houyhnhnm territory as the yahoos just overthrow the government with a good infusion of Muggle weapons. Things are really ugly down there. The yahoos are trying to consolidate power, the upper class centaurs are fighting back, the lower class centaurs are trying to take advantage of the situation and improve their lot, and so forth. To make matters worse, Neihym was placed under house arrest by the revolutionaries shortly after he appealed to SPIW and Atlantis. Finally, a few French officers stationed in the Marquesas got involved with choppers and so forth."

Ariadne hissed. "Just what we need -- the French getting involved."

"Amen to that. However, those appear to have been the exception rather than the rule, as they had already been in the area at the time. The French and the Galivers have agreed to stay out of this. They don't want it to escalate into another war so soon after Judgment Day."

Ariadne frowned. "The Galiver Consortium came out? When did this happen?"

"It didn't, Madame Secretary. They used someone from Atlantis as an intermediary when they spoke to the French. France still doesn't know of any Hidden Nations other than Roqteratl, Ietalis, Houyhnhnmland, and Xylenda."

Ariadne shuddered for a moment, then chuckled bitterly. "I can see why Radner collapsed. Combining Muggle relations with the Secretary of Magic's traditional work can be enough to work anyone to death, let alone someone who is 78. I think it's about time to rectify that."

The aide blinked. "Ma'am?"

Ariadne looked out the window. "Would you agree that things would be best if the Secretary of Magic only dealt with internal affairs and didn't interact with the Muggles much?"

The aide thought for a moment. "It would probably help. However, SOMEONE's going to have to deal with the Muggles now that the Statute of Secrecy is down."

"Indeed. That's why we're going to do what Atlantis did. You know how they've got Dialonis in the UN and Dagher running Atlantis? I'm thinking of doing the same thing. We elect Wizarding representatives to the House and Senate to deal with Muggle affairs. If the Constitution won't let us do that, I'll recommend that I delegate magical internal affairs -- that is, those which don't involve Muggles -- to the next Deputy Secretary of Magic. I expect that will spread the work around enough
to prevent public servants from having heart attacks. The Secretary of Magic takes Dialonis's role and the Deputy Secretary takes Dagher's."

The aide whistled. "You know, that might just work. That might just work."

Ariadne continued. "Which reminds me -- I'm going to need to find a new headmaster for the school here. There's going to have to be a major shakeup -- school may be delayed for a few weeks while we sort this out. We're going to have to turn the school coed -- most of the men's school was wiped out when America for Humans destroyed Dana and Greenwich. We don't have enough teachers to go around anymore, particularly since many of the women's teachers lived in those two towns. I suspect that the Salem Witches' Institute will be discontinued and incorporated into an Enfield-based Quabbin Academy of Sorcery for both boys and girls."

The aide shook his head. "I doubt you'll be able to change the school charter on short notice like that. At the very least, you'll have to talk to the headmaster and the Secretary of Magic -- oh!"

Ariadne chuckled as the aide stared at her in realization. "Don't worry, sir. I highly doubt that's going to be a problem. In fact, I know exactly what the Secretary of Magic and the headmaster are going to say. What's more, I can't imagine them disagreeing with me."

The aide laughed at that as well. "Indeed, Madame Secretary, I can't imagine how they could POSSIBLY disagree with you."

-------------
Roanoke, TX
-------------
The excited lottery winner jumped even higher when the lottery official told him the news. "I don't need to split the pot after all? I get all $12 million?"

"That's right, sir. You get all of it. It's going to be maybe $8 million after taxes, but it's still double what you would have gotten earlier."

"But what happened to the winner from Humble?"

"He cheated, sir, and is currently spending time preparing for his trial."

To be continued...

-------------
Update #317.5
-------------
Sunday, August 11, 1996
Xukwudiz Manor
Roqteratl
-------------

The centaur looked doubtingly at the merman Jere Xukwudiz and the human - Theun Lentjes, a Spedarnian wizard who created the enchantments for the spider walkers, as he was told. After the events of the last few days, he found it hard to trust a human, wizard or not. Still, the magical machines of Roqteratl looked promising, and his kind desperately needed any advantage against the Muggle weapons of the yahoo rebellion.
Ambassador Aryhym was new to his post, replacing his predecessor who suddenly asked to be recommissioned elsewhere just last week. Officially, no reason was given. Personally, he thought the man came to hate the unholy screeching of merpeople out of water so much, he left. While he agreed that the underwater city wasn’t suitable for centaurs, he couldn’t hold the screeches against the merpeople— it’s not like they had much choice in that matter. It was Surface Mermish, or writing on a slate, and as he understood the language, it was polite to let the merpeople choose the more convenient form of communication...especially when one was asking them a favor.

"I'm terribly sorry to hear about the civil war on your homeland, Ambassador" said the siren inventor. "I wish I had a working prototype of powered armor specifically tailored to your kind's needs, but alas, I couldn't get all parts right. You see, the upper body and the horse torso is easily covered to the likeness of your people's traditional heavy armors, but we couldn't yet figure out what to do with the legs. While we could theoretically use the same solution as in our merpeople and prototype human models, hiding an entire centaur lower body, legs and all, in a thorax-like container and adding spider feet would lead to a result that's both too big and too heavy to be any good in a rainforest."

This was bad. "What do you mean, you have a human prototype?" The wizard answered: "It's not what you think. Our first prototypes were bipedal. Big, clumsy things, with the pilot in a sealed compartment, and his movements copied and amplified by an enlarged humanoid metal body around him. Tests failed when it was proven to be heavier than a giant, and it's legs very clumsy with merpeople pilots. However, after establishing trade and diplomatic relations with Muggle nations, we concluded that with minor modifications, the design could be better than what machines the Muggles now use for heavy lifting."

"And for war" grunted the centaur. The wizard no doubt thought about that. "Excuse me? We didn't incorporate any weapons in the walkers. Some tools and the amplified power itself, combined with the hard metal exoskeleton, can be used offensively, but it's no more a weapon than your hooves or a giant's strenght or a simple human's fist."

Jere interrupted: "But those walkers can carry heavy weapons and handle great recoil. And while it's offensive capacities aren't greater than a pissed off giant's, there is the matter of the defensive: it's armor is enough to shrug off most hand-held Muggle weapons, or Centaur arrows. And that's exactly why we didn't yet begin to produce them: we don't trust humans with such power, not when it's so easy to use it to wage war."

The centaur remarked bitterly: "So, you can't help us, but at least you won't help our enemies either? Good to know. You know, I expected the fabled friendship of our two species to get more tangible results."

-------
later-------

After a bad day full of pleading for assistance and receiving only empty promises or not even those, the centaur ambassador returned to his quarters, exhausted and angry. He closed the door behind himself, trotted to the bed, and without even bothering to undress, fell on it. A soft crunching sound from under his pillows made him bolt up in surprise. It was an envelope, sealed with an elaborate symbol. He recognised the style as ancient Mermish picture writing usually seen in the Portkey
Room to mark destinations, but he definitely hasn't seen this particular symbol before. He opened it and a short note unfolded, reading:

"We know your homeland is under attack, and we know you don't get enough assistance. We can help. Come to the Gnawing Grindylow tavern tonight, alone. Make sure you aren't followed.

Your Friends.

PS: this note will set itself on fire now."

True to the mysterious writer's word, as soon as he finished reading, the letter and the envelope burst into flames. After a moment's fright, he was relieved to discover the flames didn't burn him- it was a standard self-destruct spell, focusing it's damage on the target object only.

All of this sounded very unofficial. Then again, official channels seemed to get him no help, so it was time to look elsewhere. Tonight might end up being a good night...

To be continued.

-------------
Update #317.7
-------------
Sunday, August 11, 1996
Unknown Location
Nevada

John T. Lance couldn't wait to see his latest catch. An Auror in the service of the American Ministry of Magic, the henchmen holding him down keeping their eyes closely focussed on him. They couldn't allow themselves to forget. John T. Lance considered himself a clever man. He was a skilled wizard, had even made some new spells. He was also, above all, pragmatic. Why use an Unforgiveable Curse, when one could simply use a stunning spell on the heart, or set the enemy on fire? At least it didn't mean lifetime with the Dementors around.

And now he was going to take himself up from petty organised crime, to bigger things. He didn't exactly want to rule the world, but it had proven to be a mess - a mess he intended to fix. There were several things about John T. Lance that were also important. Such as the curious fact that nobody remembered him, if they put their eyes off him. He was thus almost untouchable by the Aurors.

Horcruxes are pathetic, he thought idly. He had never been particularly scared of death, and wanting to hold on to one's old life was...cowardly, somehow. Come the fire or the darkness, he wasn't gonna flinch.

He looked at the book, the old, leather-bound, parchment-made notebook in his hand. It had a picture in it, an old Roman lance made out of gold - above it the words 'LANCEA FORTUNA'. Spear of Fortune, of Fate, of...Destiny.

He idly scratched his head, the blond hair giving way to his fingers. They said the Spear of Destiny could make one man the equal of an army, and an army invincible. If that was even barely true...the major obstacle in his way, Atlantis, might as well disband itself.
He went up to the prisoner.

'We're letting you go,' he said, a touch of Legillimency making the voice impossible to resist. Implanting suggestions into somebody as he spoke was easier (at least for him) than Imperius, and more importantly, wasn't covered by the law. 'Because, we need you to help us find something very, very important, and then bring it to us. Go along with us.'

He showed him the picture of the Spear.

The Auror nodded, The henchmen released him. The Auror turned his back.

John Lance pointed his wand at the Auror, the Auror needed to forget the henchmen as well.

'Obliviate.' He was careful not to touch the suggestion he had so delicately implanted.

The Auror Apparated away, oblivious that any time had passed.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #317.9
-------------

Sunday, August 11, 1996
Gnawing Grindylow Tavern
Roqteratl

Rather than paying for intra-city Portkey or Apparition, Arhyym ended up hiring a wizard to cast a Bubblehead Charm on him for ten hours, paying a fee of one Sickle per hour, and walked. Unlike his predecessor, he was no wizard, so it was either that or Gillyweed, and while the plant was freely supplied to foreign diplomats, it's fixed durations and water breathing-only effect made it unpopular. The charm, on the other hand, will provide him breathable air for the next 10 hours, and will allow solid objects, such as food or a straw for drinks, to pass it's barrier unhindered. An ideal spell for a dinner and some shady business afterwards.

Entering the tavern, he saw the place's typical mixed clientele: merpeople of all shape and colour on the flooded ground floor, and human wizards, goblins, fairies and Veela on the air-filled first floor. He saw an unusually large number of centaurs, leaning together in groups of a few, speaking with soft tones and worried faces- refugees, no doubt. He frowned upon seeing a pair of humans wearing obviously Muggle clothing in a corner, loudly conversing in terribly accented Galiver. He almost jumped when he felt a hand clamping on his arm. Looking down, he saw a human, wearing strange wizard robes, his skin tone and facial features marking him as a mix of many different bloodlines.

The wizard spoke in Galiver, his accent hispanic: "It's curious how bold the city's government got, letting Muggles walk among us, don't you agree, Ambassador?"

His initial fears confirmed, Arhyym stummered. "Muggles? How can they be here?"

The wizard sneered. "Oh, supposedly they are only allowed in limited number and with serious background checks, only a handful of anthropologists and some scientists. The slant-eyed one over there, getting wasted on Goblin moonshine, is allegedly a respectable expert of air-filtration systems from Japan, no doubt brought here to work on the government's walker program. The pink-skinned
one is said to come from the USA, and studies dolphin behaviour... let me not tell you my honest opinion about researchers who don't notice their subject is sentient, even after centuries. The ladies here" - he nodded towards a pair of Veela- "should not hear such harsh language."

Looking back at the centaur, he added: "Oh, but I forgot my manners. My name is Thiago Abeyta from Chile, and I'm glad you're here tonight. We have much to discuss. But first, let's have dinner!"

-----

later

-----

Finishing the last of his oat salad, Aryhym leaned back into the chair -exclusively for centaurs- with a content sigh. Of course, eating was the least of what he'd done: as a diplomat, he got quite an experience observing everything his clients did, and analysing them. This fellow was a mystery: for being Chilean, his Galiver was surprisingly good, almost as if the accent was just for show. His table manners were refined, and he took great joy tasting his food, but despite consuming an ordinary human serving, his body language somehow faintly suggested he is used to eating much more. And the way he drank appeared to be very measured, as if he had to pay attention to swallowing, a perfectly normal bodily function that he did everyday in his whole life. The signs were miniscule, but they added up: this man was not what he appeared to be.

The wizard spoke: "So, care to go somewhere more private for our little chat?"
The ambassador wasn't so hasty: "Mister...what was it, Abeyta? I'm a diplomat of a government that's fighting a civil war, and losing to your kind. Forgive me for being mistrustful, but I have to ask you: who you really are?"
'Thia'go' laughed cheerfully. "A sharp one, you are, my friend. My true answer is only for you to hear, but here is a riddle for now. 'Standing in the shadows, vigilant, from a city of gems untouched by sunlight, we watch the world.' Does it ring a bell?"

Thinking for some minutes, the answer came to Aryhym and he snorted. "You've got to be kidding me. The Wandering City is a child's tale, and everyone knows there are no wizards hidden from Atlantis. And the tale says gold, silver and diamonds, not gems."
The wizard's face was entirely serious. In a low voice, he only said: "Crystals, actually." The centaur's eyes widened. "So, the story is actually true? F**k me sideways, there is no way I believe it!"

The alleged human chuckled. "I sincerely hope you spoke figuratively. While I do like centaurs, this affection if purely platonic and I intend to keep it that way. Now, shall we leave?"
Nodding, the centaur stood up and followed him to the nearest designated Apparition point*, in one of the side rooms. From here, they Apparated to another room, in an unknown building.

"We're safe here from unwanted ears and eyes, Mr Aryhym. This room is Fideliused to me and my associates. What's said here, stays here. Any questions?"
"Many," admitted the centaur. "But first things first: am I right to assume you aren't human? The tales were somewhat hazy in that regard, but I've watched you, and I found your behaviour strange." The 'wizard' smiled. "You got that right. I can't show my true form now, but I'm no more human than you. Is that a problem?"
"Hell, no!" said the ambassador. "I find it hard to trust a human, nowadays. But please tell me, what are you, then? A vampire?"
"Don't be ridiculous, that's a completely different hidden place. No, I'm a merwizard, a merman with all the skills of a human wizard, and more. Now, let's speak about you. I hear your President was taken prisoner yesterday by rebel yahoos, led by an outsider Muggle. Is that true?"

The centaur sighed. "While it's true, the whole truth is more complicated than that. I assume your people can't take our form, so your knowledge of Houyhnhnmland's day to day politics is fairly limited. So, allow me to fill in the gaps: out of 560,000 centaur citizens, only about 30% owns any yahoos. Out of these, the overwhelming majority has just 1 or 2 yahoos, usually as household tools and such. There are less than 1000 plantation owners, who have dozens or even hundreds of yahoos." The merwizard sarcastically interrupted: "Let me guess, those plantation owners run the country."

"Not exactly. The Land of the Houyhnhnms is a real democracy, at least for citizens- and all centaurs are citizens. However, it's true in a way: there are several parties, usually identifying with various layers of society, and currently, the Conservative Party is the leading faction of the Parliament with 40% at the last election, and most plantation owners support that one. But aside of independent delegates and minor power groups, there are two other major players worth mentioning: the Isolationists, and the Egalitarians. Now, as their name suggests, the Isolationists think we should live separately from the humans. Their party has much support, but since they can't come up with working solutions, their popularity waxes and wanes, and they are more often divided than not. At the last election, they were about to achieve about 30%, but their party was thorn in 2 mid-campaign when their leader died of old age and her successors became divided over whether to exile the Yahoos, or give them part of the continent. The latter are the Separationists, taking 10% from that 30. Then there are the Egalitarians, who say all yahoos should be freed and given full citizenship. Those nutjobs managed 20% at the last election, but claimed the election was rigged and they actually have more."

The wizard whistled. "Ah, the thrills of domestic politics. Looks like we're not so different after all. So tell me, which faction sided with the rebel yahoos?"

The centaur looked grim. "There were yahoo terrorist groups in the country for a while, but our police forces found it hard to track them. They were prepared for everything we threw at them, including Legilimency. More worrying, it's suspected they were secretly supported by centaur politicians and government officials. Fortunately, they are just as divided as we are, but sadly they all agree in one thing: they don't want to be slaves any longer. From what we know, it seems they were organised by the local population of Marquesas, a small Muggle island stuck inside our territory, and obtained advanced weaponry and flying vehicles. Centaur warbands wearing the sign of the Isolationists and the Separationists were witnessed in their company, but those are mostly just tolerated, they didn't recieve any Muggle equipment yet. They burn the plantation owner's mansions and hunted down several owners and their families, killing them in humiliating way. All the way from Marquesas to the capitol, cities are burning or in human hands, but other settlements are yet to fall. Some of the population is loosely organised into militias but most civilians simply fled into the forests- it's total chaos there."

"Weapons? Can you describe them to me?" The centaur reached into a pocket, and said: "Better yet, I can show one." He pulled out a small dark grey stick with a widening end and another metal part sticking out of it at it's half lentgh after a thinner part parallel to the main body, all 4 inch long, and
said: "This and several others had been taken from ambushed Yahoo rebels, and look like Geminio copies, all the same down to serial numbers and scratches. They had several types, but this seemed to be the most potent of them. It's been Reducio'ed 3 times by one of our wizards for concealed transport. Here, try it. We can't figure out how to operate..."

While he spoke, the merwizard quickly cast three Engorgios on the weapon, took it in his hands, then proceeded to flip some switches and let loose a quick trio of deafeningly loud shots into the wall. For a few moments, the centaur stood completely still in shock, only blinking to keep the dust out of his eyes, then shouted: "SEEN ONE BEFORE, I TAKE IT?!?"

'Thia'go' muttered an unheard apology, and quickly healed both their ear drums. "Sorry, they are very loud indoors. I familiarised myself with the weapon and many of it's kind some years ago in South America. This one is of French make and named FAMAS. Crude, completely magicless, and deadly in anyone's hand- typical Muggle tools for fools. It can indeed be Geminioed, and if I were you, I'd not hesitate to do just that, and arm all your remaining troops with this. Got any armor?"

Aryhym looked doubtfully at the smoking holes in the wall. A loosened bit of plaster chose this moment to fall on the floor. Shuddering, he said: "Our troops have armor on their torsos, but it's reinforcement magic is designed against arrows with cursed tips, not this. Our wizards could modify them, but they are too few, and our forces are too dispersed. And while armor might hold against penetration, helmets are useless: such an impact is more than enough to break one's neck if the head is hit. On the bright side, the rebels are completely unarmed. What do you suggest?"

The merwizard collected his thoughts. "You certainly need outside help. I'd suggest hiring human mercenaries, but they'd demand a lot of gold for fighting against their own species. Hiring certain merpeople tribes to attack human supply ships is a possibility, but that also requires investments to make their weapons adequately potent. Hiring wizard supremacists could work, but their ideologies usually contain parts that are unfortunate for us. You should call for help from any anti-human faction you find: some giants, and the goblins are a good possibility too. I'd leave other centaurs out of this, they might side with the rebel factions. And if you'd like, my city can provide both advisors and five thousand merwizards, free of charge, hardened by a lifetime spent duelling, smartened by infiltrating humans, strenghtened by don't being too proud to watch and learn. The only thing I ask is to keep this between your government and mine, better yet, you and us: it's for the best if no-one else knows that merwizards exist and can take human form. Your superiors can know about us, but for anything else, we'll be volunteers from all around the world, coming to do what Atlantis and the Consortium was too lazy to do..."

The centaur swallowed, then repeated it, to make sure he haven't misheard something: "Five thousand battlemages, for free? It sounds too good to be true."
'Thia'go' smiled, and replied: "Someday, and that day may never come, we'll call upon you to do a service for us. But until that day – accept this assistance as a gift from people who want to be your friends."

To be continued...
Ten-year-old Stefani Germanotta's world had changed completely over the past few months. She had been more than intrigued when she found out that wizards existed and had really wanted to visit the Quabbin Reservoir, less than three hours away. She had complained vociferously when her parents told her that the reservoir was certainly off-limits to children, especially after the bad guys had tried to attack the wizards there.

Stefani had heard stories about a bad wizard named Voldemort who had tried to take over the world, and she understood that many people had fought to make it so he was no longer a threat. However, she couldn't understand why the terrorists had attacked the Quabbin. Voldemort hadn't been in the Quabbin, after all.

Most of the witches and wizards she knew of in the area had been heroes, dedicated to helping society. Two young witches named Guinevere and Jelena had saved thousands of people in Massachusetts. The Quabbin's most famous resident, Travis Radner, had given adults tours of the Four Towns and had shown people wonders beyond their wildest dreams. It almost seemed as if these wizards were like the fairies she had dreamed about as a child.

As time went on, the fighting against Voldemort intensified. War broke out in the Koreas, and many people got nervous. Although Stefani's parents assured her that nothing would happen to her, she noticed that they spent a lot of time looking at the news.

On the evening of June 19th, the news had reported that Voldemort had been killed by a British agent who appeared to have been a very serious black. She hadn't seen her parents this happy for a long time, and the entire family had celebrated. They had gone out for dinner that night, something that they didn't do often given her parents' meager salaries.

Stefani had gone to bed that night dreaming of wizards, singing pretty songs, and ponies. She had no idea that her world would change forever the next morning.

She had had breakfast as usual the next morning and had been playing some games in her apartment when there had been a huge silent flash downtown, as if a tremendous flash bulb had gone off. Curious why there hadn't been a sound, she had headed over to the window to see what was going on. She had reached the window just in time to see a tremendous shock wave flying through the air, wrecking everything in its path.

Instinctively, she had ducked. This saved her life as the window suddenly blew in above her head, throwing shards of glass everywhere and impaling My Little Pony on the wall.

She hadn't known what to do. The weapon appeared to have been a lot like one of those big nuclear bombs her parents had told her about from the Cold War. She tried to call her father at work, but the phones weren't working. She had found herself heading for the door and had been just about to open it when someone banged on it from the other side. It had been her neighbor, telling everyone to get out of the building as soon as possible and to follow her down to the subway. The subway had been extremely crowded, and everyone had been scared.
She had tried to cheer them up by singing some songs for them. Amazingly, it worked, and they had claimed she was a very good singer.

Her family had been forced to evacuate the building for about a week after the blast. They had eventually been allowed to return home, but they were soon forced to leave once more after the rent had gone up and her father had lost his job. They had packed up all of their belongings and headed to a smaller, shabbier place on the Upper East Side, where they were forced to share a two-bedroom apartment with a family of four. Most of downtown had been destroyed, and what houses remained had become extremely expensive. People were being force to share apartments to make ends meet.

Her parents spent most of the time looking for a job for her father. Stefani, remembering the reaction the people had had to her in the subway, convinced her out of work father to go to various parks with her and have her sing to various audiences. She got lots of money from her perspective as a child, but her father said it still wasn't that much. He had to confess, however, that it was becoming increasingly obvious that she had talent.

On July 17th, a woman had approached her and her father and claimed that she was from a talent agency. She apparently liked Stefani's singing and wondered if she could speak to her father. Her father had looked very excited when she had returned. Apparently Stefani had enough talent to be noticed by a small music studio. Her mother had fallen to her knees in gratitude once he told her, and she mentioned something about becoming the new Jackson Five. She doubted that she was good enough to actually be on the same level as the famous Michael Jackson, but who knew?

Nothing had happened since then. Granted, Stefani was only ten and about to go back to school in the fall. She couldn't sing and go to school at the same time. However, maybe she could do some singing and help the family after school was over or during Christmas vacation.

At the moment, Stefani was watching television in the communal apartment. The program involved an interview between Barbara Walters and a young British witch named Nymphadora Tonks. Tonks looked to be in her twenties, if that, and she had purple hair which made Stefani salivate.

Tonks explained that she was a Metamorphmagus, a wizard who could alter her appearance with great ease. When Walters asked her to explain, she closed her eyes for a few moments...and turned her hair fluorescent green. The witch went on to explain that she concentrated fully on changing her facial features, envisioning them flowing slowly down her body, and it just...happened. It was a rare gift in the Wizarding community.

Stefani goggled at the screen. "Cool! Dad, I want to be a Metamorphmagus when I grow up. Can I, Dad? Can I?"

Her father rolled his eyes at her. "You can't become a Metamorphmagus, Stefani. Only witches can become Metamorphmagi, and you're a Muggle."

"Maybe I'm a half wizard, like the king of England!"

Her father shrugged. "It's possible. However, it's unlikely. Supposedly only one out of every 50 people or so is a half-wizard. I'm sorry, but you're more likely to become a famous singer than a Metamorphmagus."

Stefani tried to envision herself with green hair. "But I'd look so cool with funny hair! I bet I'll be the only famous singer with funny hair."
Her father looked at his feet and chuckled. "Stefani, back in the 80's, people had funny hairstyles and fashion galore in rock and roll. Just think: David Bowie, Kiss, Madonna, and --"

Her father stopped short as his eyes met hers and suddenly widened. Drawing a deep breath, he stared at her angrily. "Stefani, what did you just do?"

Stefani looked at her father, perplexed. "What do you mean, what did I just do?"

"You've painted a streak of green in your hair. Decent people don't do that. Wash it out right now!"

Stefani, even more confused, shook her head. "Can't be, Dad. I was just imagining myself turning my hair green, using the instructions from the witch on TV. I didn't do anything to my hair."

"You're lying, Stefani! You're not to lie to your parents!"

Stefani began sobbing in fear and began envisioning her hair back in its normal color. "I didn't do anything! I was just thinking about my hair being green! I didn't paint it! How can it be green?"

"It's green because --"

Her father suddenly cut off. "Wait a minute. The streak of green is gone. Never mind -- it must have been a reflection from the TV. Enough TV for now, Stefani. Let's do something else now."

Her father turned the TV off and led her out of the room. Stefani, relieved that her father hadn't gotten mad at her, tried to entertain herself by imagining that her hair was now fire engine red. Her giggling was stifled quickly when her father rounded on her again.

"DON'T PAINT PART OF IT RED EITHER!"

Stefani stared at him in disbelief. "I haven't done anything, Dad! I promise! I've just envisioned my hair red, after all. That witch is giving me lots of cool ideas --"

"NO POLKA DOTS, STEFANI! I --"

Her father's voice drained away as Stefani pushed the idea of polka dots out of her mind. Her father shook his head in disbelief.

"Stefani...this is impossible. God...works in unusual ways, it appears."

Stefani looked at him, completely up the creek. "What did God do? What did I do, for that matter? I swear, all I did --"

Her father cut her off. "Those polka dots slowly vanished from your hair as I watched. You didn't do anything, they just disappeared. Were you just thinking of your hair with polka dots in it?"

Stefani looked at him, realization dawning on her. "Yes. You mean to tell me that --"

Her father walked over to the telephone. "I'm calling a wizard. I don't know if it's just me, but what you're exhibiting sounds just like what that witch on TV was exhibiting. You could very well be part Metamorphmagus. We've already got half-wizards running around, for all we know, you're half Metamorphmagus."
Stefani jumped up in the air. "Cool! Maybe that's why I can only turn little pieces of my hair green."

"Perhaps, Stefani -- get rid of it! Thank you...at any rate, this could be very good for us, and it could make you an important person for scientists to talk to. Can you make me one promise?"

"What?"

"Don't tell your mother about this or she'll kill both of us."

Stefani nodded. "I'll promise. How am I able to do this, Dad? I don't know anyone else who can do this. Am I a witch?"

"Maybe. I don't know, Stefani."

He then looked at the floor and started talking to himself. "If it's genetic, all I can say is that it's recessive...I don't have it, and I doubt my wife does."

Stefani looked at him, confused by the big word. "Recessive? What does that mean?"

Her father threw up his hands. "Stefani, well...if it is indeed the case that you are a Metamorphmagus, all we can say is that...you were born this way."

Stefani thought to herself: I was born this way. It seemed to have a nice ring to her.

To be continued...

----------
Update #319
----------
Monday, August 12, 1996
Department of Linguistics
Massachusetts institute of Technology
United States of America

New postdoc Yuan Tao hurriedly clicked away his Netrek window when he heard the knock on the door. He had barely gotten back to his work when his advisor entered the room, followed by a very odd-looking man. It took him a few seconds for him to realize that it wasn't a man.

It was a merperson.

The fellow seemed to be a bit taller than ordinary humans, and he was scratching his arms and tail a lot. Apparently his species didn't like coming out of the water that much -- it looked as if he had picked up an itch or a patch of dry skin.

Adams -- the advisor -- looked extremely excited, and Yuan couldn't blame him. How many people could actually get a chance to speak with a merperson? He could only hope that this particular man spoke English.

Adams was barely able to speak. "Tao, I've got a really interesting project you may want to help me with if you get a chance. I have with me Professor Roje Xiluz of the Blue Star tribe of the merpeople. They're based in Lake Winnipesaukee. Professor Xiluz, this is Yuan Tao, one of my students."
Yuan's jaw dropped. "Wait a minute. There's a tribe of merpeople up in New Hampshire?"

"Apparently so. Let's head on over to the swimming pool so this guy here can actually talk. Their vocal cords are such that their voices sound like screeching tires when they speak in air. And trust me, Tao, you don't want to hear that."

Intrigued by this development, they all headed over to the swimming pool. Xiluz got several curious stares when he walked through the corridors, but he apparently took them in stride.

Tao suddenly realized something. "Do we need a towel? Also, I need to get my suit."

"Don't bother, Tao. We've got an underwater microphone system set up for two way communication. He jumps in and talks normally."

They reached the pool, startling the receptionist at the front desk. Everyone headed in through the men's locker room, and within thirty seconds Xiluz was underwater again. Yuan was curious how articulate these fellows were.

The first few words weren't promising -- they sounded like expletives in an unknown language. They were promptly followed by: "What in the name of the gods did you PUT in this water? It smells like my teenage son has been trying to cook, and it irritates my eyes!"

Adams gave himself a face slap. "The chlorine. Whoops. He's probably not accustomed to that. Wonderful first contact, there."

He headed over to a microphone off the deep end and explained. There was a pause, and Xiluz said. "What's wrong with plants in the water? They help us."

Adams didn't want this to get onto a tangent. "Professor, we'll discuss it later. Let's deal with the issue at hand right now. Dr. Yuan here wants to know about your tribe in the lake."

"Scientists in your culture go by their first names? How odd. At any rate, we do have a small community up there. It's pretty quiet, although occasionally one of the kelpies gets out of hand and starts causing a mess on the surface."

Yuan winced and cut him off. "Yuan is my last name, Professor. In my culture, the family name is mentioned first. What is a kelpie?"

"Kelpies are large creatures with sinuous necks and flippers. They're supposed to stay underwater, away from the Muggles, but sometimes they misbehave and attract undue attention."

Sounds like the Loch Ness Monster, Yuan thought. He wouldn't be at all surprised if all big lakes had communities like this in them.

"Fascinating. Do you have any pictures or evidence of them? The zoologists will want to take a look at these creatures."

"Not yet, Dr. Yuan. However, we'll probably have some out within six months or so. We've just introduced ourselves to the world, and our Elder has agreed that we need to break the news to the Muggles of the area gradually. After all, what would you have done if you saw a twenty-foot monster coming towards you in the water?"
Adams chuckled. "I see your point, Professor. At any rate, Tao, back to the issue at hand here. You like old languages, right?"

Yuan nodded. "I do, Professor...Adams. I'm working on that Anatolian project right now. Why do you ask?"

In response, Adams handed over a folder full of photocopied documents. "Professor Xiluz has just given us access to many documents written in Mermish, the language of the merpeople. It shows the evolution of Mermish over a long period of time, supposedly thousands of years."

The microphone spoke again. "We chose MIT because it is nearby and one of the best linguistics schools in this part of the Muggle world. In return, we got copies of old Muggle books written in English: Beowulf, some tales from a town in New Hampshire named Canterbury, Hamlet, and something called Ulysses which I think comes from the Trojan War."

Yuan nodded. "That's definitely a good start, Professor Xiluz. Those are very famous English works of literature spanning almost a thousand years. You'll have a lot to work with there. I take it you can read our writing as well as speak it?"

"Yes, Dr. Yuan. Can you read our writing?"

Yuan looked at his advisor, who grimaced. "I can't, Dr. Yuan. I've never seen this alphabet before. Tao, do you recognize it?"

Tao had a sinking feeling about this as he opened up the folder and took a look at the first document. It had a note on it claiming that it had been written around 1600 BC.

He stared back at the pool. "You've been in that lake for 3300 years?"

Xiluz climbed out of the pool to look at the document. Screeching to himself, he nodded and jumped back in. "Oh, that one. That's one of the old documents. It pertains to the second Judgment Day, if I recall. The one where that Hittite idiot let that plague of control. However, to answer your question, this particular document comes from an important book of historical texts which is a common household item in our culture. It is roughly on the same level as your Bible."

Impressed, Yuan looked down to see the writing itself. The chicken scratches down there looked like nonsense to him. There were a few pictograms here and there, but nothing that really stood out. This would be a tough task, he thought."

Yuan held up the first page. "I assume we'll be working together with this, all three of us?"

Both Adams and Xiluz nodded, though Adams warned Yuan: "Hope you like this pool, Tao. You'll probably be here for a while."

Yuan glared at Adams but didn't say anything. He turned back to the microphone. "What does this say? First, say it in your words. Then, say it in my words."

Xiluz shook his head. "Can someone send a copy of the document down here?". In response, Adams rummaged through his back, brought out a waterproof copy of the text, and threw it into the pool.

"Kiparu pade dikisi potokuru dupure setoija..."
Yuan cut in. "What does it mean?"

"In the days of Father Dikisi, Elder of Setoij..."

Adams's reaction was most unusual. He gasped, excused himself, and ran out the door. The other two men watched him leave, after which Yuan pointed down at the document.

"The words sound familiar, but I can't place them. Maybe Professor Adams can. At any rate, can you point out which pictogram means what? We can start with that."

Xiluz nodded. "Sure. First, keep in mind that there aren't spaces between the words and the words read right to left, top to bottom. It's also somewhat tonal, and the tone marks tend to get skipped unless it's impossible to determine from context. Now, let's begin. The first symbol there, with the arrow, indicates the start of a word. The next one is a warbling KI, and there's supposed to be a triangle over it which isn't there. For the most part, it's what you call a syllabary, with one symbol per syllable."

The two men had been working for about half an hour when Yuan heard a veritable stampede coming in from both locker rooms. Looking up, he noticed that Adams had returned with virtually the entire department focusing on ancient Greek languages. Xiluz stuck his head out of the pool to take a look.

Yuan stared at Adams in confusion. "Professor Adams, what's going on? Do they recognize the language?"

Adams didn't say anything. Instead, he asked one of the newcomers to step forward.

"Professor Xiluz, I apologize for bothering you. However, we may have documents in a language similar to this. Would you be able to verify that they are the same language?"

Xiluz hesitated for a moment. "I'm not sure, sir. This text we were studying is in ancient Mermish, and I speak modern Mermish. The alphabet's a little different now, as you'll see in the other documents, and if the word doesn't appear in the ancient texts I won't know what its ancient equivalent is."

"That should be sufficient, Professor. At any rate, I'm going to say some words to you. Tell me if you recognize them. All right?"

"Sure."

"OK, here we go. Asasarame."

"Gods help us, I can barely understand it spoken in the air. However, from what I can tell, I believe that's an ancient alcoholic beverage, but I'll double-check."

"Kiro" 

"Also in the text. It means 'debt'."

"Taja"

"I don't recognize that offhand. However, it's very similar to the modern word taija, which means the
The interrogation went on for a five more minutes, and it was soon obvious that the people in the back had encountered the Mermish language before...and were getting VERY interested in the proceedings. Xiluz laughed and said that it would make things a lot easier.

Adams explained. "You're not going to believe this, but we recognize the words, Professor. However, the texts we have aren't using the same alphabet. Whoever wrote the texts we have appears to have transliterated ancient Mermish into another alphabetic system. They seemed to do a lot of transliteration -- they've transliterated some Greek texts as well."

Yuan stared at Adams in disbelief. "You mean to tell me we've already gotten some ancient Mermish texts? That's amazing! Which language is Mermish related to?"

In response, Adams held a book up in the air. Yuan looked at it and nearly fainted. He was barely able to eke out. "Are you telling me --"

Adams nodded excitedly. "Yes, Tao. Everything makes a lot of sense, especially if you think that Crete is in the Mediterranean and surrounded by water...in other words, merpeople. One of linguistic's greatest mysteries appers to have been solved."

He threw his hands up to the sky in exhilaration. "Linear A is ancient Mermish! No wonder we didn't get it!"

Yuan couldn't believe it. If this was indeed true, this would be a great discovery. However, the transliteration troubled him. "This would indeed be a great discovery if this is true. However, the fact that the Linear A documents and these documents use different alphabets is troubling. Something doesn't seem right. Who would be transliterating both Greek and Mermish into a third alphabet? They'd have to be wizards pretty near Greece since they --"

The answer came to everyone in the room at once.

"Atlantis!"

.............
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Linear_A
.............
To be continued...

-------------
Update #319.5
---------------
Tuesday, August 13, 1996
Harold-Green Pharmaceutical Corporation
Charleston, SC
United States of America
---------------
Daniel Green looked hard at the new wizard. "All right, Antonio. You're sure you know what to do with this? From what I recall of the instructions, they're hard to follow."

Antonio shrugged. "I'm an alchemist, Mr. Green. I know what I'm doing."

"You're willing to swear an Unbreakable Oath that the Stone will not leave this building?"
Antonio shook his head. "Judging from what happened to your predecessor, that may not be a good idea. Would an oath saying that I will not do anything to help the Stone leave the building suffice?"

Green nodded. "That's close enough as far as I'm concerned. You will also swear that any Stone you create will become property of Harold-Green Pharmaceutical Corporation?"

"I will, Mr. Green."

"Good. Let me go get the instructions so you can start working on the Stone. I'll be right back."

Antonio looked around the room and pointed at a computer on a desk. "You haven't stored the instructions on the computer?"

"No, Antonio. Computers can be hacked, and they can lose power. Besides, we've already learned from our experience with Hendrickson that unscrupulous wizards can delete files. Go ahead and get lunch now -- I'll be back with the information in about an hour."

Antonio smiled and shook Green's hand. "That's a good idea, Mr. Green. I'm famished."

"Do you need help finding the cafeteria?"

Antonio held up a brown paper bag which appeared to have something in it. "Don't bother, Mr. Green. I've brought my own lunch."

Green shrugged and left the room. Antonio watched him leave, and once the man was out the door Antonio pulled out his wand and conjured up a Patronus.

---------------
Big Thicket Facility
---------------
Shawna Santana spoke with the glowing turtle for a moment and nodded. The Patronus disappeared as she turned and faced the rest of her team.

"That was Antonio. Green just left the building, and we have about an hour to pull this off. How's the tracking spell coming?"

One of the Aurors gave her a thumbs up. "He just left the building, ma'am. I don't know where he's going yet, however. Did Antonio say anything about it?"

"No, Vickie. Just review your plans for getting into the places which seem to be most likely from his current travel plan."

Another Auror frowned. "I'll follow orders, ma'am. However, I must admit that I'm starting to wonder if this is legal."

"We have a warrant, Joe. Besides, we all know how important the Stone is. Think of it this way. We're doing the public a service by making sure that the Elixir of Life goes to the Red Cross, which needs it most and won't try to profit from it."

"We're not going to destroy the instructions? We're going to still keep making Stones?"

Santana shook her head. "I spoke with Ariadne about this at length and eventually convinced her. Once we have the instructions, we confiscate them and send Green back with an incorrect set and
with a Geminioed Stone which won't work. We bring the instructions down into the Department of Mysteries and create a Stone. This Stone never leaves the Department of Mysteries, Joe. All that the people see will be the Elixir of Life, which will go to the Red Cross and only to the Red Cross."

Joe nodded. "I see where you're going. The Red Cross is almost certainly going to use it to heal injuries and not make people immortal, and by holding onto the Stone we've made it means no one can make the Elixir without going through us or the Pentagon."

"Exactly. In the meantime, we work with the Stone and see if we can modify it to produce something which can cure cancer and do nothing else. If we do that, we start supplying Harold-Green with it at the same price one of his hired alchemists would have cost. Harold-Green is betting everything on this cure for cancer, people. They've invested a lot in it, and even though I personally detest Mr. Green we're honor-bound to provide them with a replacement for their cancer cure if we take theirs."

"Clever, ma'am. Are you going to recruit Nicholas Flamel?"

Santana shook her head. "Dr. Flamel is extremely busy right now as Minister of Magic, so he can't spend a lot of time working with us. He's promised he'll do what he can, though. Keep in mind that he's forgotten a lot of the recipe himself over the years. Hopefully seeing the instructions will remind him."

The room watched the displays in silence as the tracking spell followed Mr. Green around the city. Eventually, the signal became stationary and began moving at about 3 mph.

Vickie looked at the display in excitement. "He's stopped, gotten out of the car, and is walking now! This must be the place!"

"Where is he?"

"Bank of South Carolina, Main Street!"

"Apparate over there now and stall him! Get into Muggle clothes and stand in line trying to open checking accounts and stuff! It's probably in the vault. We need to find out which vault it's in and grab it!"

Joe spun and stared at her. "We can't just Apparate into the bank like that! Everyone will see us!"

Vickie's voice was shrill. "He's opening the door the bank right now! Chairwoman Santana, we're running out of options if we want to do this in secret!"

Santana thought for a moment more. Suddenly, she smiled. "I've just got a better idea. We'll only need a couple of people there. One to distract Green if necessary and the other to swap in the falsified instructions."

"But how are we going to hold him there?"

Santana chuckled. "Ever seen a car try to drive on completely blown tire? I'd say a Diffindo spell will come in handy here."

---------------------------

Bank of South Carolina
Main Street
- - - - - - - - - - - - - - -
The security guard delivered the folder containing the replica of Flamel's diary to Green, obviously not knowing what it was. Green signed all the forms and told the staff he would be returning the object by the end of the day. The Department of Magic had failed again, and thanks to Antonio Poole he would once again have access to the Philosopher's Stone.

He headed over to the car, put the folder in the trunk, and began heading out of the lot. He had gotten maybe 20 feet before he realized something was terribly wrong. Pulling into another parking spot, he inspected the vehicle and saw that the passenger's side front tire had blown.

Green swore. This was NOT a good time for it. Particularly since the spare tire was in the trunk with the diary -- and he didn't know how to change a tire.

He had hoped to not call AAA. He was concerned that the Department of Magic could be tracking him, and once the information about the tire change was in the database they could conceivably take the diary. He decided that he was going to move the diary to a different bank after this was done.

He was pondering what to do when another car past him, slowed, and then parked a few spaces away. A man got out and came over.

"Hello there! I see your tire is flat. Need a hand with it? I know how to change a tire."

Green whistled -- it looked like he was going to get out of this. Trying to hide his relief, he nodded at the good Samaritan. "If you can help, that would be most appreciated."

"No problem. Where's the spare?"

Green gestured towards the trunk. "In the trunk. I'll get it."

Green headed to the trunk, put the folder on the side for a moment, pulled out the tire, and put the folder back in. He then slammed the trunk shut.

The second agent, the one who had blown the tire, watched Flamel move around the folder from under the Invisibility Cloak. All he needed to do was get his hands on that folder. Once he did that, he could swap diaries and be done with it. Opening and resealing the folder with magic would be a cinch -- the trick was getting the folder without opening the trunk as that would be a dead giveaway.

He looked towards his accomplice, hoping the accomplice would know what to do. He had no reason to worry, however. The accomplice had this down pat.

The first agent turned to Green. "Do you have a jack in the trunk?"

Green nodded. "I'll go get it."

The second agent pulled out his wand as Green approached the back of the vehicle. He popped the trunk and pulled out the jack. He was about to slam the door when the accomplice called over -- "Keep it open for the time being, we may need stuff from it later on -- oil and so forth."

Green hesitated for a moment, then shrugged and slammed the door. "I've got some valuables in the trunk, sir. I don't want to lose them."

The first agent looked around. "No one's here, sir. I'll keep an eye on things for you. Now, bear with me here. The tire's going to have to come off. See this wrench here? We're going to need to get those
lug nuts off. If we work together, we'll be able to get you on your way more quickly. Go back into the trunk and see if you can find a wrench. You take two nuts and I take two. And this time, keep the door open in case there are more complications."

Green walked over to the back of the car again, popped the lid, and fished around for the wrench. He eventually found it, moved to the front of the car, bent down, and began fighting with the lug nuts.

The second agent smiled. It was showtime.

Thanking his boss for teaching him nonverbal magic, he pointed his wand at the back of the car and cast his spell. The package flew out of the trunk and into his hand. Unsealing the folder, he withdrew its contents.

It was the diary. Bingo. And it looked just like the fake -- except that the fake had instructions for making a magical talking fish.

Keeping an eye on the work on the tire, he stuffed the fake diary into the folder, resealed it, and levitated the folder back into the trunk. The entire operation had taken ten seconds, if that. His mission complete, he Apparated back to Big Thicket with his prize in hand.

Even with two people working on the tire, it took a good half hour to change it. Eventually, though, he got it done. He thanked his visitor profusely, put the shredded tire back in the trunk -- thankfully the diary was still there -- and drove back to the office. He had eventually managed to convince his new friend to close the trunk door again shortly after withdrawing the wrench. The friend couldn't imagine what was so valuable, but he didn't want to pry and readily agreed.

Antonio was waiting for him at the office. Grinning like a maniac, Green handed the diary over to him. "Sorry I'm late -- I got a flat tire en route. Here it is, Antonio. You can have it just long enough to make the Stone. Once you're done, it's going back where it came from."

Antonio nodded. "I'll do that. I'll have the Stone for you by the end of the day."

Green nodded and left the room. Making sure the cameras weren't on him, Antonio pulled one of the fake Stones off of the shelf and Geminio'ed it. He then put the fake Stone back where it had been and put the new copy in the bag. Finally, he poured a couple of flasks of mercury into the hazardous waste bin.

After waiting a couple of hours and goofing around with some of the beakers and stuff in front of the camera, he called Green and told him everything was ready. Making sure his body was blocking the camera, he dumped the contents of the bag onto the table. Out came the fake Stone, accompanied a large amount of leprechaun gold which was set to disappear in about 15 hours.

Green came in, and Antonio pointed at the desk. "Mission accomplished, Dr. Green. There's your Stone and proof that it works. The mercury has been changed into gold, just as Flamel said."

Green punched his fist in the air. "Thank you, Antonio! You've been a great help. Now, if you don't mind, can you give me the book back? I need to put it back in a safe place."

Antonio shrugged. "Fine with me. We've both gotten what we want, it seems. However, can I make at least one suggestion?"

"Sure."
"Can I keep the gold?"

Flamel shrugged. "I don't see why not. You certainly deserve it."

Perfect, Antonio thought. The last possible complication had been dealt with. Now Green wouldn't bat an eye if he saw the gold missing.

Piece of cake. All they had to do was corral Hendrickson and the Stone was out of play completely.

To be continued...

Update #319.6

Tuesday, August 13, 1996
Near the shores of North-West Houyhnhnmland

The honor guard of Roqteratl merpeople and Houyhnhnmland centaurs stood at attention as Ambassador Aryhym appeared in the air-bubbled Portkey Network station, but stared openly at the human wizard accompanying him. The merwizard known as Wizard Thiago Abeyta from Chile glared at them. The tension was broken by one of the centaurs, a wizard himself. "You're back sooner than we anticipated, Ambassador. Your search for allies was successful, I take it?"

Careful not to tell anything he didn't want to share with the Portkey station's merpeople crew, he replied: "Yes, but I was away from my homeland's forests for too long. I'd like to return there now."

The centaur wizard nodded in understanding, then frowned as he glanced at the human standing by the Ambassador's side. "Is he with you, Sir?"

"Mr Abeyta is my honored guest. Can you grant him the Mark now?" Aryhym replied. His wizard compatriot nodded and conjured an amulet, a plain black coin on a red string. He gave it to the human, and instructed him: "Push it's middle with your finger. Now, it's inscription will turn silver and will stay so until you're wearing it. Do not take it down until you leave our land: without it, we must consider you compromised and your identity- and your freedom- forfeit. Such is the law for humans." Thiago did so, and said: "Thank you, good sir. I'll keep it in mind. Now, are we ready to go?" The centaur wizard nodded again, then motioned to them to hold on to his arms. As they did so, he Apparated out.

They rematerialised on the edge of a mountain summit, overlooking slopes of hills covered by lush rainforest, thinning northwards to form a peninsula. Treeless expenses, farmland and cities dotted the forest, smoke rising from many. Fear crossed Aryhym's face as he asked his compatriot: "Are those our manors and towns burning? Has Raagyhm also fallen, then?"

"None of that" the centaur mage reassured him. "The governor and the local garrison stayed loyal to us, and proven to be surprisingly competent. He ordered the bridges between the province and the capitol destroyed, and organised a loyalist militia to patrol the mountain passes and the forest. He also kept the yahoos from rebelling in force and cooperating with the traitors: he declared that for every loyalist centaur killed, ten random yahoos will be executed. The smoke you see is in fact piles of
bodies burning."

Thiago spoke for the first time. "I see your leadership doesn't hesitate to make hard decisions. Good. If you bring whoever is legally in charge here, we can get down to business- I have an army waiting for permission to Apparate in." The centaur wizard looked at him quizically, but ultimately Apparated away when Aryhym nodded at him reassuringly. Some minutes later, he returned with 2 others in ornate armor, showing high rank. They introduced themselves as Vice President Kyhnam, and Raaghym province's governor Tiashyn. With the President captured by the rebels, the former held his authority. The latter was brought along as a recognition for his competence. Naturally, they had some questions to ask.

"So you say your people aren't human at all? How can we trust you without knowing who you are, where you came from, and what you want?"
Thiago expected these questions and responded calmly. "I can reassure you by truth saying enforced by Unbreakable Oath that what I said about our identity is true. Our intention is to help your government restore order, for which we'll only ask a favor in the uncertain future. All I can say about my origins is that I come from Trapananda, known to your kind as the Wandering City from legends. Any attempt to divulge the location of the city would claim my life by Unbreakable Oath, and the same goes for my compatriots."

The centaurs thought it over. "Good enough for me" said Tiashyn. "Tell me about the assistance you can provide!"
The merwizard told them. "My city offered 5000 of our finest wizards. They will arrive from a secure location, already transfigured into human form and outfitted with the necessary provisions, including Invisibility Cloaks and brooms. Sadly, our surface magic cannot provide friendly fire management for invisibility spells, but even so, these will come handy. A handful of specialists will also arrive, the first, myself, being already here. We will bring some Muggle weapons and the expertise required to train your people to use them."

The centaurs were surprised. "Muggle weapons? Where did you learn to use them?" Thiago responded: "I'm not allowed to share specific information, but in general, we infiltrated any organisation, be it Wizard or Muggle, that we could. Given our natural appearances and the fact that we are unable to use Polyjuice Potion to impersonate other humans, this means mostly South and Central America, and organisations that can't run too detailed background checks. In practice, this includes several armed insurrectionist groups, hence the weapons and the familiarity with them. While we have no experience leading a Muggle army, we can train your troops to use their weapons."

The houyhnhnms liked what they heard. "When will they arrive?"
The response, "I already notified them yesterday, and they are ready to Portkey in in small groups in a moment's notice. All I need is your leader's permission to send them an authorised Portkey, and your wizard's help to outfit them with these Marks, lest they cause friendly fire accidents with the locals," -was much to their liking.

The short and chaotic days of Yahoo dominance was about to come to an abrupt end. A new part started in the civil war... the time of the wizards has come.
Hermione Granger had finally managed to convince the paparazzi to leave her alone. Although she was getting more and more comfortable dealing with the press, she had to start getting ready for school. She had to get new robes, pick up her new spellbooks, and so forth.

She had finished her internship at the dentist's office last Friday and was taking a couple of weeks off before going back to school. Her family had gone on several vacations to the north of England, and she had introduced the Grangers to Hogsmeade for the first time since the fall of the Statute of Secrecy. As she had expected, her father became hooked on butterbeer and had come home with a whole carton of it.

She tried to think back to what had happened over the past year and could not believe how much had changed. At this time last year, she was the only person in the area outside her immediate family who knew about the wizards. Voldemort was still alive, Dumbledore had been in charge of Hogwarts, and she had just been an ordinary student. Very few people outside the Wizarding world had known about her or Harry Potter. Atlantis had still been a legend, Gulliver's Travels had still been fiction, and fighting had still been going on in the Middle East. Downtown London had still been intact, with now-lost attractions like Big Ben, the Ministry of Magic, and Buckingham Palace. What a difference a year makes.

Her train of thought was interrupted by a distinctive metallic pecking sound which she recognized immediately as an owl or other flying creature pecking on the bug screen in the window. She turned to let the animal in and was astonished by what she saw.

It was a dwarf hippogriff holding a letter with an ornate seal on it.

She immediately thought of Buckbeak and wondered how he was doing. Did he miss his owner? Buckbeak -- who still went by Witherwings as the exoneration of Sirius hadn't done anything to rescind the execution order -- seemed to be happy with Harry. However, the hippogriff had spent a lot more time with Hagrid than with Harry. Hagrid probably missed him, and she believed the feeling was mutual.

Wondering what the seal was, she accepted the message and gave the hippogriff a couple of Knuts. The animal didn't leave immediately, however -- a sign that she was supposed to reply.

She took a look at the letter and her eyes widened. The letter had been addressed to the headquarters of the Society for Preservation of Intelligent Welfare. And it bore the seal of the President of the Republic of the Houyhnhnms.
She could only think of one explanation for this. Neihym was appealing to SPIW for support in throwing out the yahoos, or at least convince the yahoos that the centaurs weren’t as bad as they had seemed.

What the hell was she supposed to do now? She suspected that Neihym didn't realize that she was turning seventeen next month. The Houyhnhnm leader likely figured she was a major, experienced social justice activist. She had to admit that such a mistake would be easy to make given all the press she had gotten of late. She didn't have any experience in international politics. Hell, she hadn't done much with SPEW itself over the past few years!

If she sided with the centaurs, she would likely be branded a collaborator and be seen as an enemy of the humans. If she sided with the humans, on the other hand, she would be seen as betraying SPIW and could possibly antagonize Neihym further. This could pose a problem if Neihym ever regained power.

She unrolled the scroll, noticing that it was on parchment which bore the presidential letterhead and that it was of higher quality than she had seen in her entire life.

---------------------------
August 10, 298 AG / AD 1996
OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT
CENTAUR REPUBLIC OF THE HOUYHNHNMS

To MS. HERMIONE GRANGER, Founder and President of the Society for Preservation of Intelligent Welfare.

Dear Ms. Granger.

As you are undoubtedly aware by now, a great tragedy has struck the Centaur Republic. A yahoo resistance group known as Two Exceeds Four inserted an agent into the Golden House and sabotaged the Protector, the device which has shielded us from the Muggle world since 20 AG. For the first time in almost three hundred years, our fair land was made visible to the Muggle world.

This hideous act of vandalism has had worldwide consequences. Over one hundred fifty cubic miles of water was forced into the atmosphere, an event which has altered weather patterns all over the globe and almost certain to impact the growing season in Houyhnhnmeland. My wizards do not know how long this anomalous weather will last. However, from the little we can tell, there is no end in sight.

However, that was not all. The destruction of the Protector had one even more terrible side effect. When our fair island reappeared, the gaps in the coverage of the Protector -- which had been known to the Muggles as part of the Marquesas Archipelago -- suddenly found themselves part of Houyhnhnm territory with nothing separating our people from the Muggles. Our humans flooded across the border and eventually managed to conveyed to the Marquesan natives the fact that the centaurs have traditionally been in a higher class than the humans.

Understandably, the Muggles in the Marquesas were angered by this, and they promptly provided weapons to the escaped yahoos in solidarity. Our peace-loving people was caught completely off guard by these barbarians. Within a matter of a week, my government was overthrown.

I was initially taken prisoner by the human revolutionaries. However, before they could do me harm,
a group of centaur wizards rescued me and escorted me to the Houyhnhm sector of the Dominion of Glubbdubdrib. I have taken advantage of the fact that the rebels cannot fly easily from Houyhnhnmland to Glubbdubdrib and have set up a government-in-exile for my people. Rest assured that I will do everything I possibly can to get this situation under control. There is little we can do from Glubbdubdrib, however, and Houyhnhnmland is slowly sliding into a long-term, and bloody, civil war.

Many people in my government are willing to share power with humans if necessary. I have explained to my cabinet that in a world where Muggles can communicate instantaneously and the Statute of Secrecy no longer exists, maintaining the caste system will not only put my species in jeopardy but may also destabilize the entire region. A fight between the humans and the centaurs could splinter the Galiver Consortium, and the fact that the Marquesas are tied to the Muggle republic of France could cause this to escalate into a war between the Galiver Consortium and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. This would be a Muggle/Wizarding world war which could easily bring about the end of civilization due to the fact that the Judgment Day protocol may not be used twice in five years. In case you are wondering why NATO and the Consortium are not getting involved in the revolution, that is why. They have agreed that it may be necessary to sacrifice one nation in order to prevent the world from going up in flames once more.

As you are undoubtedly aware, we centaurs are sentient and have a unique culture. I freely admit that Houyhnhnmland has some faults. The traditional subjugation of the yahoos is one of the most obvious, and many attempts have been made to improve the lot of the humans over the years. However, traditions are difficult to change. We would like to remind you, however, that the whip is no longer used for punishment of the yahoos and that the yahoos do get a small salary to compensate them for their work.

We believe that some sort of compensation should be awarded to all of the yahoos for the time they served in the underclass. We were also forced to concede that the yahoos should have at least some time getting all of their anger out of their system. However, the rebels have gone far beyond what we believe is fair retribution. Not content with the government, they are doing their best to round up centaurs and put them to death using Muggle weapons.

One of the aspects of this situation which is most troubling is that several of the human military officers who are now running what is left of Houyhnmland have acknowledged that the revolution is getting out of hand. They are arguing that they should be content with taking over the government and forcing us to treat humans as equals. In particular, they have threatened to court-martial and execute any human who kills an unarmed centaur other than his or her immediate master. Unfortunately, the government is slowly losing control as the civil war expands. Centaurs and humans are killing each other at a dreadful rate. If this continues much longer, all of the centaurs in Houyhnhnmland will be dead and the humans from abroad will rush in and claim our territory as their own.

In short, the humans are waging a campaign of genocide and intimidation against my species, precisely the type of activity the Society for Preservation of Intelligent Welfare was founded to prevent.

Your organization seems to have done well so far with the elves and dolphins. Now it is time to help us. You need to convince the rest of the humans that we must not be slaughtered. As the saying goes, a first impression lasts a lifetime. We want the first Muggle impression of my people to be one of a stable, prosperous civilization which has lasted over 800 years and was one of the founding members of the Galiver Consortium. We do not want to be seen as people who go out of their way to persecute Muggles.
Our nation is threatened in a spiritual as well as in a physical manner. For the past six hundred years, we have worshiped the Five Gods of Earth, Air, Fire, Water, and Spirit. They have protected us over the centuries, and we owe Them a great deal of gratitude. We would not be who we are to day were it not for our devotion to Them. Unfortunately, the Muggles appear to be intervening there as well. There are reports that a man named Father Nereu Martinez has landed on the eastern side of the island and are teaching some of the yahoos there stories about a man known as Jesus Christ. Although from what I have been told Jesus Christ was truly a great man and a credit to your species, Christian priests are well known for supplanting the spiritual background of other cultures with that of Jesus Christ. We are concerned that if Father Martinez -- who appears to be from the country known as Peru -- replaces our believe in the Five Gods with that of Jesus Christ, a major cornerstone of our culture will be lost forever.

Ms. Granger, I appeal for you to call together a meeting of all of your chapters and urge their members to write to their political leaders. This bloodshed has to stop, and the only way to do that would be for someone to educate the humans that we are not the monsters we seem to be at first glance.

I have sent a similar letter to Atlantis as well. Unfortunately, I do not expect much help from Atlantis. Recall that Atlantis cannot intervene in a nation’s internal affairs, and the revolution in Houyhnhmland qualifies as an internal affair -- particularly since all of the other major powers are not interfering. Furthermore, Atlantis cannot get involved unless it is at DEFCON 2, and at last report the revolt in my land has raised the DEFCON status from 4 to 3. That is correct, only 3.

I have authorized my government to provide you with any assistance necessary to accomplish this task. With our first ambassador, Raach, killed in the fighting, I am appointing you as interim ambassador. You should come to Glubbdubdrib as soon as possible to learn what you can about our culture.

I hope to hear from you soon, Ms. Granger. You and people designated by you may visit Glubbdubdrib at any time simply by presenting this document with my seal on it. As a free token of our appreciation, you may keep this dwarf hippogriff named Silver Moth as a pet or as a familiar. She is from Lilliput and is a typical example of one of the dwarf animals there.

May the Five Gods be with us all.

Sincerely,

Neihym
President of the Houyhnhnms

Hermione collapsed in horror. What was she going to do now?

Flamel. She had to talk to Flamel, and hope that he wasn't busy working with (or chasing down) Hendrickson and the Stone.

She had set up SPEW to help Dobby and save a few dolphins. It had never dawned on her that it could turn into a major international organization.

She knew deep down inside that she had to help Neihym. The problem was that she was underage and didn't have enough real world experience. Bloody hell, she couldn't even Apparate yet!
She put her head in her hands. For the first time in a long, long, time, Hermione Granger was out of her league.

To be continued...
Update #321 through Update #325

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Mislagnissa

Update #321
------------
Wednesday, August 14, 1996
Chestnut Hill Mall
Newton, Massachusetts
United States of America
------------
NEXT UP: The Muggle Apparation Network
------------
Jason Morgenstern still didn't have a job, and he was starting to get worried.

He had thought that an MIT degree would be an extremely valuable commodity when it came to looking for new jobs. Unfortunately, the recession was still continuing. Granted, the stock market had stabilized around 2800. However, the economists didn't see it going up anytime soon.

If there was a silver lining, it was that oil prices had stabilized somewhat now that the Middle East was starting to settle down. Although the Hamas civilian organization had gone out of its way to help some of the Israelis, it would take a long time -- probably decades -- for all of the bad blood between the Palestinians and the Israelis to disappear. Most of the issues which were left involved the land grabs Egypt and Iraq had made after Judgment Day. Gas was still hovering around $2.85/gallon, which was still extremely pricey. Thankfully, he didn't drive much so he didn't have to worry about shelling out money for that.

He had asked Guinevere and Kurchatova to do what he could to help him. Unfortunately, both witches had refused. Although conceivably it would be possible for them to make sure he GOT a particular job, it (a) would be unethical to do so when so many people were out of work, and (b) it was quite possible that he might not be able to do perform the required tasks when push came to shove. Jason was an MIT graduate, but one who was still untested.

Guinevere had told him to not lose hope, as she and Kurchatova apparently had something up their sleeves which might help him somewhat. She wouldn't say what it was, however, until the two women were sure that their plan would work.

That had been two or three weeks ago. Jason hadn't heard anymore about the witches' mysterious plans until about 9:00 this morning, when Guinevere Apparated into his apartment with a big smile on her face. She had explained that the plan appeared to have succeeded and that she might have an opportunity for him.

Guinevere had simply chuckled and said: "We're in business". When he asked her to explain, she simply repeated the same three words.

Had the two women founded a company? How would they staff it, and how would Kurchatova manage to juggle graduate school, teaching 19.00, and working for this company at the same time? Granted, she was brilliant, but she couldn't do everything. Guinevere forestalled all his questions, when she grabbed onto his arm and Apparated him over to the Chestnut Hill Mall.
Jason didn't like being Apparated. He felt as if he were being squeezed through a tube of toothpaste, and half of the time he nearly vomited when he arrived at his destination. All the nausea fled from his system, however, when he saw where Guinevere had taken him.

He, Guinevere, and Kurchatova were standing in the middle of what appeared to be a Crate and Barrel store. This particular chain sold various household products: glassware, silverware, tables, and so forth. Apparently, they picnic blankets and rugs as well. He found himself staring at a large pile of rugs standing against the wall. He looked at a pricetag and was astonished to see that a 4x6 rug was going for $399.95.

He pointed at the rugs in disbelief. "Rugs that size for $400? Who would buy such a thing? Is everything in this store expensive like this? They don't seem to be very high quality, either."

Guinevere chuckled. "They don't have to be high quality, Jason. Take a look at the sign hanging from the ceiling."

Jason looked up and nearly fell over when he read the sign.

GUINEVERE'S FLYING CARPET
Safe and Secure Magical Transport
SMALL: 4x6, 1 person, $399.95.
MEDIUM: 6x9, holds 2 people, $699.95.
LARGE: 9x12, holds 5 people, $1199.95.
Maximum Height: 6'8"

Guinevere looked at him and chuckled. "Well, what do you think?"

Jason could barely speak. "Uh...how..."

Kurchatova giggled. "We bought a bunch of cheap carpets and enchanted them. We'd have tried the Duplication Charm except that the spell has been Taboo'ed so we can't use it."

"Do they actually fly?"

"Yup. We tested each of them out before we brought them here."

Jason whistled. "Have any of them sold yet?"

A woman's voice answered. "Only one so far, a Small. However, a LOT of people have been looking at them."

Jason turned and faced the newcomer, who explained that she was one of the main sales managers here. "Judging from what Guinevere has told me, they're going to be a surefire hit. They're much cheaper than cars, are eco-friendly, and are good for a short trip. You won't even get rained on."

Jason turned back to Guinevere. "How did you manage that?"

She shrugged. "Impervius Charm activates as soon as it becomes airborne. It prevents rain from falling in and, more importantly, prevents people from falling out."

"What's the maximum height for?"

"The Impervius Charm protects an area 8 feet high starting at the surface of the rug. We were
concerned that if people are standing during a trip and jump for some reason, they'll hit their head on the top and injure themselves. We're witches, not lawyers."

He glanced back at the sales manager. "You've already sold one? Wow! How much money did you make off of it, Guinevere?"

"$200. We get half the proceeds. The store gets the other half."

"How much did it cost to buy the rug?"

Guinevere grinned. "$39.95. We just bring the rugs over after we enchant and test them. Want to take one out for a test flight? We'll take one of the big ones -- it will support all three of us, and it will serve as a pretty good advertising tool."

Jason grinned. "This I've got to see. Can I fly it? If it's designed for Muggles, it would make more sense for a Muggle to fly it."

Kurchatova rolled her eyes. "Trust a geek to think like that. Sure, go ahead. You would likely be a very good test subject. The instructions are written on the bottom of the rug."

She pulled out one of the big rugs and turned it over.

**INSTRUCTIONS FOR USE, FLYING CARPET VERSION 1.0**

Sit in the center of the rug, inside the square.
To go forward, touch the front of the rug outside the square.
To go backwards, touch the back.
To turn left, touch the left side of the rug.
To turn right, touch the right side of the rug.
To go up, touch the front side of the square itself.
To go down, touch the back side of the square itself.
To speed up, touch the right side of the square itself.
To slow down, touch the left side of the square itself.
Maximum speed is 20 mph.
Do not drink and fly.

Jason began salivating. "I definitely want to try this out."

Guinevere grinned and told the sales manager to announce that they were going to do a demo of the rugs. The sales manager ran off to make the announcement as Jason grabbed a big rug -- with the Bed and Bath label still on it, apparently -- and carried it into the central atrium.

The Chestnut Hill Mall was an ideal place to demonstrate the rug. It had a large open area surrounded by stores and a glass ceiling far above. It was completely enclosed, so there would be no wind to interfere with the demo.

By the time everyone had made their way out onto the rug, a good ten people had gathered outside Crate and Barrel. Telling everyone else to move out of the way, the three of them sat in the square. Hoping that this would work, Jason touched the front end of the square.

The rug slowly began to rise into the air, eliciting applause from the people in the store. The applause suddenly began to spread throughout the Mall as people began looking towards them to see what was causing all the excitement.

Guinevere pointed at the far end of the Atrium. "Head over there so everyone can see you."
Remember, forward is the front of the rug."

Jason put his hand down on the front of the rug, and it immediately ceased its ascent and began moving forward. He looked down in disbelief at the stores and people sliding by under him. At this point, virtually everyone in the immediate area was looking at him.

Kurchatova nodded. "So far so good. Let's scare everyone by having him run into that wall over there."

Jason spun and stared at her. "Are you out of your mind?"

Guinevere nodded. "She isn't. Trust me -- do this."

Dubiously, Jason accelerated forward and headed towards the wall. Ten feet from the wall, however, he found the rug slowing of its own volition. Eventually, it came to a halt touching the wall.

Guinevere explained. "It's smart enough to make sure it doesn't crash into anything at high speed. I've seen flying carpets run into things at 10 mph and injure people. Those won't sell well."

She made a circle with her hand. "Make a loop around the Mall and then go down to maybe 15 feet above the lower level and fly around down there. We want everyone to see us."

He did that and chuckled as the people raced to follow him around the building. This was going to sell, all right. He flew around a bit more and eventually headed back to Crate and Barrel. He pressed the back of the square one last time, and the rug slowly made its way down to the ground.

Kurchatova stuck her hand over the side when it touched the ground and confirmed that the Impervius field was gone. She got off, and the other two riders followed.

The applause was deafening -- the sales manager had to wait a good fifteen seconds before it had quieted enough for her to get a pitch in.

"That, ladies and gentlemen, is the first public demonstration of one of Guinevere's Flying Carpets, now on sale in this store starting at $399.95. Hurry before they sell out!"

Jason, the two witches, and the salesperson walked back into the store, followed by a horde of potential customers. Many of them were turned away by the high price. However, Jason watched as they sold five Smalls, two Mediums, and one Large in a span of ten minutes.

He turned to Guinevere and nodded. "I can see what you meant when you said you were in business."

Guinevere chuckled. "Indeed. And while you're waiting to get a new job, you can go to various rug stores and start buying up their rugs for us to enchant them. We'll make our own rugs by taking them from Bed and Bath, and we'll start up an existing rug enchantment service for fancy Oriental rugs. I think we're going to make a lot of money here. You'll get 20% of the profits, I'll get 40%, and Jelena will get 40%."

Jason whistled. "I think you're right, Guinevere. I think you're right. This job will probably keep me solvent until I get a real one."

To be continued...
Rebecca Richardson smiled at the audience. "Why use a rug to travel from place to place when our service can get you there instantly?"

Muggle floodlights shone in her eyes, as well as those of her five closest friends. All six of them had been forced to leave their jobs when WSC had clamped down on wizards taking Muggle positions. The obvious solution was to start their own business and offer a portion of the proceeds to Eric Street and his organization.

This was going to be a cakewalk, she thought. Those kids from Cambridge had given her an idea, and she doubted that they knew what they were getting into. Granted, one of them was an engineer, one of them was a witch, and one of them was both. However, they'd never tried starting a business before. Hell, she doubted that any of them was over 25.

Kurchatova and de Mornay had both won several awards for ingenuity and bravery. Being able to protect people from harm, however, did not necessarily translate to strong business skills.

Richardson resumed her speech. "Our Muggle Apparation Network taxi service will take you wherever you want instantaneously for a small, reasonable fee. The procedure is simple. You call us, and we'll send one of our Apparators over to your front door. Grab onto his or her or hand, and within a matter of seconds you will be at your destination via Side-Along Apparation.

"Imagine the convenience. You can get from Boston to Los Angeles in no time, and you don't need to shell out $400 for a competitor's product which will spend most of its time sitting in your storage room. Why buy a rug or broom when you can effectively rent one through us?"

"We will offer four pricing options for our program. Option 1 gives you a flat $19.95 per Apparation on a pay as you go program. Option 2 allows you to purchase five Apparations for $89.95. Option 3 will get you ten Apparations for $175, and Option 4 will get you 25 Apparations for $395.

"In addition to the above, we will offer a monthly subscription service. For $595, you can Apparate as much as you want for one month, anywhere in the continental United States. Think of it as a monthly pass to let you travel wherever you want. One year subscriptions will also be offered for $6995."

"You have all had to deal with the experience of waiting at the airport, waiting at the bus station, waiting at the train station, and waiting for your carpool. You have all been stuck in traffic jams and found yourselves jammed between two people on seven-hour plane flights. You have all heard about global warming and how burning fossil fuels has jeopardized the climate. Apparation is clean, fast, and eco-friendly. You don't have to wait any longer, and you and your business can travel more quickly than ever before."

Richardson looked over the crowd. "All right, everyone. Who wants to go on a free trip?"
Everyone cheered as an assistant brought over the bowl of raffle tickets. Richardson had told everyone interested in the product to submit their contact information in exchange for a raffle ticket.

She pulled out a number, read it off, and glanced at the back of the room where a forty-something woman had begun jumping up and down excitedly. Richardson told her to come to the front of her room, confirmed that she had the winning number, and shook her hand.

"Congratulations! What's your name?"

"Natalie Caron, Ms. Richardson."

"Where are you from? Natalie?"

"Albany. I had thought that I had caught a break by being one of the first Muggles to go on a tour of the two remaining Wizarding towns. But then I win this! Wow!"

Richardson looked at her. "Is there anywhere you really want to go that you haven't?"

Caron nodded her head so fast she looked like a bobblehead doll. "Yeah! Hawaii!"

Richardson shook her head and chuckled. "We can't go outside the 48 contiguous states. Anywhere else?"

Caron thought for a moment. "Well, how about the Grand Canyon?"

Richardson smiled. "That we can do. Do you have a camera?"

Caron nodded and brought out a digital camera. "Yeah, Ms. Richardson. I brought it for the tour. Are you actually going to take me to the Grand Canyon?"

"For ten minutes, Natalie. Then we're going to have to come back so I can resume this press conference. Are you ready?"

"Yeah!"

Richardson breathed a sigh of relief as she held out her arm. She knew what the Grand Canyon looked like, so she could envision the South Rim in her head. She couldn't tell this to the customer, however.

"Good. Here, grab onto my arm and don't let go. On the count of three, I'm going to transport us over there. Ready? One, two, three!"

Richardson and Caron disappeared in a blaze of camera flashes. While they were gone, one of the other people associated with the Muggle Association Network stepped forward and asked if there were any questions.

One man raised his hand, and the new speaker called on him.

"Will you always have people ready to Apparate customers on a moment's notice?"

The new speaker paused a minute before he replied. "It will depend upon demand. Right now, we've
only got six people but hope to expand that in a hurry if there's interested in MAN. We will do everything we can to make travel as easy as possible. However, think of this as a taxi service. If there are 6 cabs and 600 passengers, there may be a line even though the trips themselves are very short."

"Will the wizard wait at the destination so that the customer can make the return journey?"

"No, sir. The customer will be given a little button which he can press to summon the wizard for the return trip."

"What is it feel like to Apparate?"

"There's a bit of a squeezing sensation, but it's temporary. You'll get accustomed to it."

People were jotting down notes feverishly as first audience member sat down and another woman raised her hand.

"How many people can you Apparate at the same time?"

"Up to two, ma'am. We only have two hands."

"Can these two people travel to different places?"

"No."

"How safe is it? Are there any accidents? Can you rematerialize inside something like in those bad Star Trek episodes?"

"It's perfectly safe, ma'am. The trip will take you right where you want to go, and if there is something already there it will take you to the closest place which will be able to accommodate you and your passenger."

"Can Muggles learn to Apparate on their own?"

"No."

"What about people with only one of the Q and Z complexes?"

The speaker hesitated for a moment. "We do not have enough information at this to answer that question. After all, Q and Z have only recently been discovered."

The speaker held up his hand. "Ladies and gentlemen, there will be time for more questions. However, they will be answered by Rebecca Richardson, who is about to return from the Grand Canyon with our winner."

The speaker moved out of the way as Richardson and Caron reappeared onstage. Caron was rubbing her side a little, as if it ached her. However, her face was absolutely glowing.

Richardson put her hand on Caron's shoulder. "You all right?"

"Yup. My side aches a little, but I guess I'll get accustomed to it."

"What did you think of the Grand Canyon?"
Caron's looked up to the sky. "It was amazing! I didn't know it was that beautiful. It's HUGE!"

"Want to show them what you picked up from there?"

She nodded, reached into her purse, and pulled out a Polaroid photograph. Cameras focused on it as she showed it to the audience. It was a picture of her and Richardson with the Grand Canyon in the background...and some stupid teenager waving at the camera about twenty feet behind them.

The audience clapped wildly as Richardson thanked Caron for her help in the press conference and told her that she'd get a free one month Apparation pass at no charge. Caron gave Richardson a hug and sat down.

Richardson then took the stage once more to answer more questions.

"How do you think the airlines going to handle this development?"

Richardson chuckled. "Something tells me they won't like it."

----------------

Granger Residence
Outside London
----------------

Hermione Granger looked the email over. It seemed reasonable, and she prayed that it would work.

The message would go to every person who had founded a SPIW chapter since it had gone public. Each person was to delegate one member to join a committee to discuss the treatment of the centaurs and to help Neihym through these troubled times. Although Hermione herself longed to participate, she had to admit that this was beyond her -- and she wasn't experienced or mature enough to do anything on this scale. Besides, she was in school. She couldn't be in two places at the same time anymore, which meant that she'd have to give up on Neihym to continue her lessons at Hogwarts.

The committee was to focus on preserving the centaur culture as well as convincing the rebelling yahoos that the two species could live as equals, possibly by splitting the island of Houyhnhnmland into two separate states, one for humans and one for centaurs. There was more than enough land to go around, after all.

Once the committee was organized, it would be brought to London and one of the members would be given the message she had received from Neihym. That would allow them access to the centaur president's stronghold and permit them to start negotiations.

She recalled hearing that one of the hallmarks of a good leader was not to try to do everything by him- or herself. She hoped that this would apply in this case.

To be continued...

------------

Update #322.5
------------

Thursday, August 15, 1996
Matarani
Arequipa Region
Republic of Peru
------------
Somewhere in an abandoned warehouse at the outskirts of the port city Matanari, shady men gathered. They were members of The People's Guerrilla Army, the armed division of the Communist Party of Peru... one of the several splinter groups contesting for the name, anyway. Much of the world knew and feared them by another name: Sendero Luminoso, the Shining Path. Their organisation, branded as terrorists by the filthy capitalists and revisionists, worked relentlessly to defeat the reactionary forces of the corrupt government and the vile clergy, and to bring forth cultural revolution and a dictatorship of the proletariat, inevitably sparking a glorious world revolution and remaking the Earth into a worker's paradise by true communism.

How they ended up trafficking drugs and brutalising peasants for the oh so serious sin of burying their dead or having a market, all within a decade of proclaiming such noble goals was beyond Zafareth's understanding. Honestly, he wanted to get whole thing over with. The leadership of the Watchers had deemed the group harmful 4 long years ago, and he, along with other agents of his city, covertly helped the Peruvian government to capture the Shining Path's founder and leader, the philosopher Abimael Guzmán, known to his comrades as Presidente Gonzalo, together with most of his lieutenants... but not all of them. The Shining Path was weakened, and most of his compatriots were allowed to fake their deaths and return to the sea, but it survived. He was one of the few to stay back, salvaging intel... from a bunch of ignorant Muggles. Ah, irony.

It was made worse by loneliness. The only time he'd seen his people in the last decade was when he Apparated to the designated safe houses at the designated times and gave his report... it could have been worse, of course. They could have just left him a Pensieve...at least every now and then, he spoke with a fellow merwizard, if only for a few hours in a month. Still, he didn't like being in a wrong body at the wrong place in the wrong company.

But perhaps today's catch will make it worthwhile: a message from Comrade Feliciano, known by a few as Óscar Ramírez, the current leader of the Shining Path, ordering this group to get on a boat and go to Houyhnhnmland. They were to land on the western side of the continent, where the human slaves have already overthrown their "beastmen" masters. Peru's workers were less than enthusiastic about the great revolution... perhaps actual slaves might be more receptive to their ideas. And they had to hurry, too: people whispered that the rotten Chilean clergy was already involved there, in all their misguided self-righteousness. Zafareth, known to these Muggles as Comrade Vázquez, thought about that part: to their knowledge, a few missionaries often led to great wars, when they suffered martyrdom and prompted their brethren to avenge them. Clearly, they had to go... and without pinning the blame on the centaurs, if this conflict was to remain within the borders of Houyhnhnmland, as Trapananda seeked. "So" he mused "in the end, this half-forgotten band of delusional criminals will actually be used to promote the Greater Good? I hope there will be a promotion in it for me somewhere."

----------
Syrahym
Southern Houyhnhnmland
----------
The small fishing village wasn't one of the significant settlements of Houyhnhnmland, it's never been. Centaurs didn't like sailing, and consequently, avoided giving their human subjects an opportunity to flee by ship. Syrahym's fishermen used small canoes for their work, staying close to the shores. That's why, while there was a dock on the shore, Captain Taliesen found it woefully inadequate. After all, his ship, the mighty Elfrida's Revenge, needed much more for a safe docking than a puny fishing canoe.

And of course, the ship was much smaller on the outside... it housed hundreds of Beings, many of them above human size.

Fortunately, some wizards in the company had known the necessary spells to create a suitable dock. Taliesen's Troll Tamers were a mercenary company recruited from all around the magical world. Besides the squad of troll shock troopers (doh, who's have guessed?) clad in magic-resistant armor, they had wizards from over a dozen nations, fairies, house-elves (some of them even free), goblins, a few Giants and centaurs, and Veelas. They even had a few hundred merpeople, ever since a nomadic tribe decided to earn it's living by following their ship around, helping them doing their job: hurting people and breaking things for money. Outfitted with enchanted melee weapons, they were deadly for both sailors and their ships. The company made itself a name in the last Syrdan-Nestor war, assisting the Veelas quite effectively against the slavers.

Perhaps this was what prompted a local politico to hire them: from what they learned, Lord Garhym, the apparent leader of the dominant rebel faction here in the Southern Coast, was an Egalitarian: member of a centaur faction that wanted to make yahoos and centaurs equal. He himself was a large manor's owner with ambitions of governorship, but he'd always gone out of his way to make his yahoo servant's life better... of course, rumors said he also supported Yahoo terrorist groups. With the breakdown of the central government, he could free them openly at last, and organised a militia from loyal individuals of both species to keep things in control. However, without access to enough Muggle arms or wizards, and without decent generals and discipline problems in the troops, similar militias of rebel factions and the remnants of the old government's forces posed them a problem... that's how the Troll Tamers came in the picture.

Lord Garhym came at last to welcome them, as the first of the troops got off the ship. He didn't make a good first impression on Taliesen: the centaur lord was visibly too young and inexperienced for his position, and somehow managed to mix foolish idealism and oily manners into one big six-limbed pack. nonetheless, his galleons were as good as anyone's... but he paid them to fight for him, not to believe him themselves. He didn't hesitate to let the noblebeing know this: to Garhym's spirited proclamation, "With you on our side, our just cause cannot fail, Captain", his own response was: "The only 'just' I do is 'just pay us on time'. I'm not interested in your preaching, Garhym."

To be continued...

-------------

Update #323: Deathgate SG-1
-------------
Friday, August 16, 1996
Department of Mysteries
[location classified]
Department of Magic
United States of America
Commander Joseph Hugeley looked at the contraption in disbelief. "You're going to send THAT in? It looks like something my kid got out of a Muggle toy store!"

Michael Durrant nodded. "It looks ridiculous, but it should work. It runs by remote control, and it doesn't have anything organic in it which can disintegrate."

Hugeley groaned. "What is it supposed to be, a tank of some sort?"

"Yup. It's an M1A1 Abrams. I got a one foot model, complete with remote control and treads, out of a hobbyist store. It's took a week or so to put together, and much to my amazement I was able to assemble it without breaking anything."

Hugeley put his hands over his eyes. "That's very reassuring. I really needed that."

Durrant shrugged. "If it's any consolation, sir, it only cost $99.95 -- er, 10 Galleons. For something that cheap, it's worth trying it at least once."

Hugeley, resigned, stared at the closed Deathgate. "Well, I suppose we can give it a shot. How exactly are you going to do this?"

Durrant pointed at some of the other Muggle equipment on the table. "Well, we've got an old Muggle video camera here which we're planning on attaching to the top of the tank. It's got an electrical cord coming out the back, which we've plugged into the generator on your right. If there's any problem, we can always pull on the cord and yank the thing back out."

Hugeley wasn't convinced. "That is, assuming that the cord doesn't break when it goes through."

Durrant sighed. "There isn't much we can do about that, I'm afraid. We can only hope that this backup measure will work. At any rate, we're going to put some other equipment inside the tank as well."

He moved on down the table. "This is a thermometer. We're assuming that the other side is at normal temperatures, but we're not sure. This here is a Muggle light bulb which will come in handy in case we can't see anything. Finally, we've got a little note saying that we came in peace and are simply trying to explore."

"You think they'll believe it?"

"I don't see why they shouldn't, sir. It's not like we can just walk in there and conquer it. After all, it's a one way trip."

Hugeley looked down at the little tank and laughed. "I must say, Michael, this is probably one of the most bizarre ideas you've ever thought up, and that's saying something. You've definitely piqued my curiosity, however. How long will it take to make final preparations?"

Michael bent down and picked up the tank. "I'd say a couple of hours, sir. I'll call you back when I'm ready to go."

Hugeley nodded. "Make it so, Michael. I'll be back in a couple of hours."
Two hours later, Durrant and Hugeley were sitting the observation room above the Death Chamber. The model tank had been moved into position about five feet from the Deathgate, whose door was still closed.

Hugeley suddenly thought of something. "You're sure this isn't going to kill us all? I mean, messing around with a Deathgate -- particularly trying to get information from them -- is probably something whoever designed them isn't going to like."

Durrant grinned. "That's why we're up here, sir. I've also taken the liberty of moving everyone in the two adjacent labs down to the lower levels in case there's a problem. I know, I should have probably gone through you --"

Hugeley shrugged. "Don't worry about it. Has the remote control been tested?"

Durrant responded by pushing a button on a Muggle gizmo in his hands. The tank moved forward a foot or so.

"How about the recording device?"

Durrant pushed some more buttons, and a view of the door to the Deathgate appeared on a Muggle TV monitor. "Everything's working fine, sir. In addition, we'll be able to see what the camera is seeing in real time. Everything's go, sir. Just give the order."

Hugeley grunted in satisfaction. "Commence the operation."

Durrant nodded and brought out his wand. Pointing it at the Deathgate, he shouted "Aperio!"

The metal plate sealing off the Deathgate slowly slid aside, revealing the entrance to the Deathgate itself. As usual, it had the appearance of a black curtain which was fluttering slowly even though there were no air currents in the room.

The opening of the Deathgate triggered Caterwauling Charms throughout the immediate area. In addition, a huge circle of flame surrounded the Deathgate, hovering a couple of feet above the ground. The fire ignited automatic to prevent people from accidentally running into the Deathgate while it was open. The barrier was far enough above the ground to not interfere with the electrical cords connecting the video camera with its power supply.

Durrant glanced at Hugeley. "I'll start moving in now. Keep an eye on that display."

Hugeley watched the Muggle screen as the Deathgate grew closer and closer. Meanwhile, Durrant kept on calling out the distance. "Three feet. Two feet. Eighteen inches -- I'm slowing down. Fifteen inches until camera penetration, two inches until the front of the gun touches the barrier."

Hugeley found himself holding his breath. "Take it in, Michael. Nice and slow."

Durrant nodded and continued the operation. "Fourteen, thirteen, twelve...sir, the end of the gun has made contact with the Deathgate. It's about one inch in now."

Hugeley looked at the screen intently. The Deathgate didn't seem to have changed much. It was almost as if it hadn't felt the gun poking into it.
Durrant pressed another button. "I'm backing up now. Let's take a look at the end of the gun."

The tank slowly retreated from the fluttering black curtain. Both men gasped when they noticed the shimmering on the front part of the gun.

Durrant whistled. "Good God, that looks like ice!"

Hugeley nodded. "I think it is ice. It doesn't look like we're going to be able to study it much, though. I can see it disappearing as we speak."

Durrant jotted down some notes. "Interesting -- it's colder in there than it is out here. That's a useful thing to know, sir. It's good we brought that thermometer. May I proceed with the experiment?"

Hugeley nodded. "Go ahead. Take her in the rest of the way."

Durrant didn't need to be told twice. He pressed some more buttons, and the little tank resumed its trip forwards.

"Ten inches. Nine. Eight. Seven. The gun is almost completely immersed now, and I can't see it on the monitor anymore. Six. Five. Four -- sir, we're starting to get a bit of resistance in the model's treads. I think they may be starting to freeze up as they're starting to enter the Deathgate."

Hugeley spoke urgently. "We need to get in there before the thing stops moving. Damn Muggle contraptions. Hurry!"

Durrant pressed the accelerator, and the little tank slowly forced its way forwards. "Three...two..."

Hugeley looked at the screen. The fluttering curtain seemed the same as it had before...or was it? Was he imagining something, or were spots starting to appear in the distance beyond the veil?

"One..."

The folds in the curtain were growing rapidly now from the perspective of the camera.

Durrant pushed the stop button in excitement. "Contact! I -- what the..."

Durrant stared at the screen, and then at Hugeley. Both men were struck speechless.

The filmy curtain had vanished, parting to reveal an almost featureless void. The only things he could see were what appeared to be faint gray dots, slowly moving around. Several of them appeared to be heading towards the camera.

The image began to warp and shimmer as the objects approached. It was as if -- of course, Hugeley thought bitterly. The camera lens was likely starting to ice over. The device didn't have much time left.

Hugeley turned to Durrant. "Pull it back, Michael. Pull --"

Durrant shook his head. "I want to see what -- WOW!"

One of the objects had approached within a few feet of the camera. Both men gasped when they realized what the object was.
It was a spirit. A ghost in Sheol, its natural habitat. It was almost unrecognizable because it wasn't glowing.

As the image on the camera faded, the two men heard the object speak three unmistakable words in a decidedly feminine voice. It was an obvious question.

"Apa apaan ini?"

Hugeley was suddenly distracted by motion in the Death Chamber. Horrified, he watched as the electrical cord connecting the electrical generator and the probe suddenly jumped into the air and lurched forward as if the spirit on the other side had tried to pick it up. A portion of it fell into the protective ring of fire, and the wire snapped in two. The controls and camera went dead as the far end of the cord was suddenly yanked into the Deathgate.

There was a bit of a commotion on the other side of the Deathgate for a few minutes. The curtain fluttered wildly, Durrant's wand pointed at the Deathgate, ready to slam the door shut if anything came through. Eventually, the disturbance abated and the curtain began moving around lazily once more. They waited a couple of minutes, but it soon became obvious the show was over. Hugeley closed the Deathgate, and the alarms and rings of fire vanished.

The two men stared at each other. Finally, Hugeley whistled. "Good God! We can send messages through, and they can speak to us by inanimate proxy! Do you realize what this implies?"

Both of them did. They just didn't want to say it.

Durrant grinned. "We've GOT to do this again, this time with a better probe. And make sure this doesn't leave the Department of Mysteries."

Hugeley nodded brusquely. "I totally agree. There's only one problem I can think of, though, with our communication strategy."

"Really? What's that?"

"What the hell do those three words mean?"

To be continued...

---------------
Update #324: Pissy Pissy Boeing Boeing
---------------
Monday, August 19, 1996
Boeing Company
Seattle, Washington
United States of America
---------------
NEXT UP: That's No Bird
---------------
The president of Boeing leaned over the table and brought out an Extendabag. "Ladies and gentlemen, we appear to have a problem. A big one."

One of the vice presidents grunted. "Let me guess. DeLorean has decided to stay in the flying car business despite our pressure. They can't exactly cancel the project after that demo of the Aviator
back at the beginning of the month."

"Oh, it's worse than DeLorean. It looks like we're about to upstaged by a bunch of witches from Massachusetts, two of whom are probably barely out of college."

The vice president chuckled as the president reached into the bag and began pulling something out. "I highly doubt that, sir. If all else fails, we can just buy them out and destroy their technology. We're a big company and can easily afford a small startup even in this economy."

The president finished withdrawing the object from the bag, unfolded it, and showed it to the rest of the people in the room. It was a small rug, about 4x6 feet, with pictures of unicorns and other toys on it. Someone had drawn a large square in the center, neatly slicing off a unicorn's horn.

There was nervous rustling in the room. Finally, one of the other vice presidents spoke up. "Sir, are you sure that's what you wanted to bring out? That looks like a rug from a nursery school or something like that."

The president, who had been reading the words on the back, nodded. "Looks like an ordinary, albeit childish, rug, doesn't it? Well, it's got a little secret to it. Watch this."

He placed the rug on the floor and sat in the square. Somewhat apprehensively, he touched part of it. The rest of the people in the room gasped as the rug began to lift him into the air. Making sure not to hit anyone, he flew around around the room, lowered the rug back to the ground again, and got off.

He turned around the rug so that the rest of the board members could see the instructions on the back. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is problem number one. A flying carpet. Those two famous witches from Massachusetts have decided to go into business selling flying carpets. They went on sale Wednesday and made the Boston Globe. Someone in the Lexington office thought we ought to know about this, so they bought one and sent it over using next-day shipping."

The first vice president chuckled. "'Don't drink and fly'. I like that. Seriously, though. How are these guys going to compete with us? I mean, that rug only supports one person and maxes out at 20 mph. It's not like someone's going to be able to take that from here to Miami."

The president nodded. "You're right. These flying carpets can't do that...yet. What I'm concerned about is that once these things starts selling -- and they are -- those two girls are going to get more creative. All they need to do is start enchanting things like blankets and you've got commuter aids which can enter Cessna's market. I also highly doubt that 20 mph is a real limiting velocity. My guess is that these rugs can go faster. Much faster. At the rate things are going, people will be able to have their own airplanes for under $1000. This little thing cost $400."

He paused for effect before continuing. "And if Kurchatova and de Mornay don't think about things like this, you can reset assured that copycat artists who are trying to compete in this new market are going to try it. The two witches may have bought themselves some time with the patent office, but inevitably someone else is going to get involved."

Another board member looked at him curiously. "Bought themselves some time with the copyright office? What do you mean?"

The president explained. "One of the side effects of having a company being founded by two MIT graduates -- both graduated this year -- is that the founders have access to a lot of VERY smart classmates. Apparently someone at Sloan told them to patent the flying carpet before someone else
The first board member whistled. "Clever. It's descriptive, yet it's ambiguous enough to cover virtually anyone else's idea. If they've got themselves good lawyers they could make a killing. Come to think of it, they'll have to show how to make one of them in the patent application, but if no one else can get their hands on a wizard --"

The president stuffed the rug back in the bag. "You see where this is going. Those kids could become a threat at some point. However, Guinevere's Flying Carpets will have to be placed on the back burner for the time being. We've got an even more pressing threat: the Muggle Apparation Network, founded by Rebecca Richardson of Prescott, MA."

The board members began muttering among themselves. Finally, one of them voiced what all of them were afraid of. "Prescott is one of the Wizarding towns, right? Are you telling me that this witch is teaching Muggles to Apparate? That would be...catastrophic."

The president nodded. "Indeed, it would be. It's actually not that bad, but it's close. Let me explain. Most wizards consider Apparation to be similar to Muggle driving. What Richardson has founded is, in effect, a taxi service. The company sends a cab over, lets the people in, drives to the destination, and lets the people off."

The first board member shrugged. "So? What's the point? Muggles can't Apparate."

The president came to the punch line. "Yes, and the five-year-old in the back seat of the cab doesn't need to know how to drive in order to reach the destination safely. The only person who knows how to drive is the driver."

The board member got it. "Wait a minute. Are you telling me that these wizards are able to take Muggles as PASSENGERS on their Apparations?"

"Exactly. Supposedly each wizard can transport two passengers through something called Side-Along Apparation. Apparently all the passengers have to do is tell the wizard where they have to go, grab onto his hand, and he'll Apparate over there. The only requirement is that the passenger has to provide the wizard with a photograph of the place they want to go -- the wizard has to envision his destination in order to Apparate properly."

The president continued with the bad news. "MAN has now provided the Muggles with a way to travel all the way across the United States, virtually instantaneously, for $80 round trip. That is very bad news, and it means we have to think about doing something else."

He paused. "Ladies and gentlemen, it's about time we started venturing into space travel."

---------------
Cambridge, MA
---------------

Guinevere Apparated into Jason's living room with a frown on her face. "Jason, we may have a problem. It looks like some wizards in Prescott have started offering Apparation services to Muggles. That's going to compete with us. One of the new company's selling points is that you don't need to buy a $400 carpet to go from one place to another. They can also travel instantaneously all across the country."

Jason swore. "That's not good. What are we going to do?"
Guinevere grinned. "Simple. We're going to start renting carpets as well as selling them. $39.95/month for a small, $79.95 for a medium, and $139.95 for a large. For short commutes which occur several times a month, we're going to be able to corner the commuter aid part of the market. Sure, the Muggle Apparation Network has monthly passes as well, but they go for almost $700."

Atlantis

Dagher looked around at all of the Aurors in the room. "Ladies and gentlemen, we have him. We've just received a tip that he's in Ecuador at a birding resort and that he just healed someone who had been bitten by a venomous snake. I want you to confiscate the Stone if you can. If you can't, destroy it. Do not kill him unless it is absolutely necessary. Keep in mind that since he has already shown that he is a Dark wizard as far as we're concerned, the Aes Sedai restrictions against offensive magic do not apply."

One of the Aurors frowned. "He's not in Houyhnhnmiland trying to sell the Stone to the highest bidder? That's very strange, with all of the mercenaries running around in the center of the country."

Dagher shook his head. "Apparently not. He must worried that he's going to get an arrow in the chest, a bullet in the head, or an Avada Kedavra before he's able to heal himself with the Stone. That may have been a mistake on his part, and we're going to take advantage of it. Go, and may Allah go with you."

To be continued...

Update #325: That's No Bird

Tuesday, August 20, 1996
Bellavista Cloud Forest Birding Resort
Ecuador

NEXT UP: The Prophet Samuel and the Last Crusade? (325.5)

David Hendrickson couldn't understand where all the birds had gone. Normally, the sunrise birdwatching session allowed the guests to point out several different types of birds: parakeets, gray jays, and so forth. Although he had seen a few cowbirds on this morning's hike, there hadn't been much out there. No one else seemed to know why, either.

Granted, it was still raining, as it had done for the past three days. Ever since those idiots in the Pacific had launched a few zillion cubic miles of water into the air, weather patterns around the world had run amok. It would take a long time for all of that liquid to drain out.

Perhaps the worst thing of all had been the fact that SALT WATER was falling out of the skies. Large numbers of trees were dying off, and people all over the world were now faced with yet another problem with the environment. Simply reinstalling the Protector wouldn't work as all that would do would throw LAND into the air. It would do nothing to remove the water already launched. Besides, there wasn't really any government left in Houyhnhnmiland responsible for installing the Protector. The entire island had fallen into chaos, with various warring factions and mercenaries running everywhere -- not to mention Christian missionaries who were having a field day with the human population.

The rainforest here still seemed pretty normal. Granted, you could lose a bunch of trees in a forest this dense and not see any changes. The only signs the climate was changing was the fact that several
animals seemed to be trying to flee their burrows and move somewhere else. Taking an awful gamble, he had brought out the Philosopher's Stone after someone had been bitten by a newly-emerged venomous snake and saved the woman's life. Granted, he had been forced to Obliviate everyone around him and make them think that the woman had cut herself by falling on a splinter. Although this was certainly a case where the Stone was not being abused -- a woman have died, after all -- he didn't like using it in public like this.

It was obvious that he'd managed to escape. He had nearly thrown a fit when word had leaked out that the entire Second Division of the Wizard's Standing Army, led by the famous Albus Dumbledore himself, had been ordered to track him down. There were unconfirmed rumors that Dumbledore's Army was focusing on Houyhnhnmland, a tactic which made sense if Atlantis considered him a mercenary who would be trying to unload the Stone in order to elude the pursuit.

Hendrickson wasn't a mercenary anymore, however. He realized that the Stone was dangerous and was determined to keep it away from governments and politicians who would abuse it themselves.

Wondering where all the birds had gone, he followed the birding party back into the main tree house, where the senior staff had prepared breakfast. Everyone sat down to discuss their plans for the day.

Hendrickson took one sip of the juice and frowned at the taste. He called one of the staff members over and asked him what it was, and he said that it was a rare fruit only found in the forest around Bellavista. This brought a lot of cheers from the crowd, cheers which vanished abruptly when the staff member tried to pronounce its name and failed miserably.

The breakfast continued, and several people said they didn't feel well. The staff members eventually took away the juice and replaced it with water. The water, thankfully, tasted the way water should have.

At the table next to him, an old woman showed her blouse off to her husband and asked him if she looked fat. The man hesitated for a moment, and then said yes. She glared at him for a minute but didn't say anything. Meanwhile a couple a few tables away got into a fight when one of them let slip that one of them was having an affair. The jilted partner suddenly said she'd married him for the money, and fights broke out there as well.

Hendrickson frowned. This didn't seem right. It almost seemed as if everyone was being forced to tell the truth.

His eyes widened when he recalled the strange taste in the juice -- and the fact that the staff member obviously didn't know what it was (otherwise he would have been able to pronounce it). It was obvious the juice had been spiked with something that changed the taste.

Veritaserum.

Hendrickson had to get out of here. He got up and left the room so he could turn on the spot and Apparate out of there. The Apparation was blocked.

He tried another destination only to find that it didn't work either. Meanwhile, couples downstairs were continuing to argue with each other. Hendrickson couldn't believe what was coming out under the Veritaserum.
He had a problem. Thank God the Stone was Fideliused.

A booming voice -- obviously Sonorused -- suddenly overwhelmed the fighting couples. "Attention, please. I'm Wizard Felipe Negrete from the Ecuador Ministry of Magic. I'm looking for someone named David Hendrickson. Is he here?"

Hendrickson didn't dare breathe as the people downstairs said they didn't recognize the name. That made sense, of course -- he'd been going under Harley Lamar ever since he'd gotten here.

Negrete continued. "All right, let's try something else. Did anyone here get bitten by a snake recently?"

More NO's. Thank God for that Obliviation, Hendrickson thought.

"OK, I'll try describing him. He's about 190 cm tall, weighs 100 kilos..."

Hendrickson swore as one of the other guests began to speak. "Possibly, Senor Negrete -- I know a man who looks like that, but his name is Harley Lamar. He was here a minute ago. I think he went upstairs."

Hendrickson winced. He was in big trouble. He couldn't fly away as he had hidden his broom in a different room. He couldn't Apparate. Hell, he couldn't even run away as the only way out of the tree house was down the trunk into the breakfast room!

Someone downstairs shouted "Revelio Hominem", and Hendrickson winced as he felt the chill of the spell detecting him. Seconds later, he heard people making their way up the ladder leading to the upper levels of the tree house.

Hendrickson considered hiding in the bathroom, but ruled that out quickly because that would be the obvious place they'd check since they'd already tracked him down to this room. He'd have to make his stand here.

Three men made their way into the room and pointed their wands at him. "Are you David Hendrickson?"

Hendrickson wanted to say no, but the Veritaserum wouldn't let him. "Yes."

"Do you have the Stone on you?"

Once again, Hendrickson's mouth hand a mind of its own. "Yes."

"Give it to me, Senor Hendrickson, or I will be required to take it by force."

Hendrickson shook his head. "I can't. It's Fideliused to me, and I'm not willing to give it up until I'm sure that your Ministry will not abuse it."

The wizards stared at him in disbelief for a moment. Then someone remembered that he was under Veritaserum and had to be telling the truth. They talked quickly among each other for a few minutes. Hendrickson knew enough Spanish to realize that he had caught them off guard.

The lead wizard spoke again. "Tell me why you stole the Stone."
Hendrickson didn't need to worry here. "Originally, I did it for profit. However, when Dr. Flamel's warning came out, I realized that it was too dangerous a magical object to allow in society. I originally intended to destroy the Stone, but then I realized that if I could discipline myself to only use it for good purposes, it would be better than not having it at all."

The wizard shook his head. "Senor Hendrickson, it is the belief of Grand Mugwump Dagher and Dr. Flamel that no human being can be entrusted with the Stone -- with the possibly exception of the people who work in the Department of Mysteries. I do not think you are qualified to be the Stone's keeper. Tell me what you've done with it so far. And don't keep me waiting long enough for the Veritaserum to wear off."

Hendrickson was happy to oblige. "Well, I saved a woman's life after she was hit by a car, I healed someone who had broken her leg, I cured a person here from a snakebite..."

As he ran down the list, his interrogators' eyes widened. Finally, he reached the end, and the wizard resumed his investigation.

"Did you ever use the Philosopher's Stone to benefit yourself in ways which were unnatural?"

"No."

"Were you tempted to, Senor Hendrickson?"

"Yes."

The wizard thought for a moment. "Here is what we will do. I am willing to take an Unbreakable Vow to say my mission is to return the Stone to Atlantis, where it will be confiscated and studied by the Department of Mysteries there -- possibly under the tutelage of Nicholas Flamel, if he has the time. You are familiar with the Department of Mysteries, Senor Hendrickson. You are aware that they are capable of keeping secrets and are sworn to never reveal what they discover. In return, you give me the Stone. It will be safe with us. Safer, in fact, that it would have likely been with you."

"But I didn't do anything wrong with it once I changed my ways!"

The wizard shook his head gravely. "In time, you would have. You were tempted, and unless I'm badly mistaken you used it more and more often as time went by. Is that true?"

Hendrickson got the point, and he hung his head. "Yes."

The wizard put his hand on Hendrickson's shoulder. "It is a slippery slope, Senor Hendrickson. Even Nicholas Flamel himself abused it at the beginning. It is for the best, my friend. I urge you to give it up now, before your self-restraint weakens to the point which could push you over to the dark side."

Hendrickson stared at the wizard for a long time. Finally, he shrugged, removed the Fidelius from the Stone, and handed it over. The wizard handed it to one of his subordinates, who turned and left the room.

Hendrickson had one last question. "What happens to me now? Are you going to execute me?"

The wizard shook his head slowly. "Originally, we had considered it. However, it is obvious -- especially with the Veritaserum -- that you handled the situation better than any of us could have"
expected. Gracias a Dios that we reached you before you were corrupted. The only thing that will happen to you now is that you will be Obliviated to remove any knowledge of the Stone. In addition, you will be fined 10,000 Galleons for stealing valuable property from Harold-Green Pharmaceutical Corporation. This fine will be reduced by 1,000 Galleons by every life saved by the Stone."

Hendrickson thought about it. "That's only 4,000 Galleons now. A lot, but not insurmountable. How long to I have to pay it?"

"Ten years, Senor Hendrickson. I trust that will be enough time for you?"

Hendrickson nodded. "I think so, sir. Thank you for your mercy."

The wizard shook his hand and prepared to take his leave. "You are a good man, Senor Hendrickson. Make sure you stay good, and who knows? Perhaps the Ministry of Magic would be willing to pay part of this in gratitude. Now, if you would excuse us, we have several other guests here who need their memories Obliviated."

To be continued...

-----------------
Update #325.5: The Prophet Samuel and the Last Crusade?
-----------------
Tuesday, August 20, 1996
Omega Institute
Rhinebeck, NY
United States of America
-----------------
NEXT UP: A Wand Fit For A King
-----------------
Samuel watched as John Paul hurried into the conference bunkhouse. The leader of the Christian sect had a worried expression on his face.

"Holy One, an issue has come up in South America."

Samuel frowned. "South America? Where is that?"

"It's a large landmass due south of here, in the southern hemisphere. There are several countries down there, most of which speak Spanish. One of these Spanish-speaking countries has done something rather...rash, and I need your advice as to what to do."

"Really? What happened?"

"To make a long story short, they're preaching Christianity to the inhabitants of Houyhnhnm."

Samuel scratched his beard. "I see how that can be a problem, John Paul. They're supposed to be preaching the unified Abrahamic traditions, not those of your sect."

John Paul rolled his eyes. "Uh, that's not it, Holy One. For one thing, I did not authorize this mission. For another, various organizations, including the United Nations and the Society for the Preservation of Intelligent Welfare, are advocating that we not interfere with Houyhnhnm religious practices, at least until we are able to study them more."

"Houyhnhnm? Is that the religion of the native population we are trying to convert?"
John Paul had a bad feeling about this. "No, Holy One. Houyhnhnmland is a large island off the coast of South America. It has about a million inhabitants, most of whom are either centaurs or humans. There is currently a war between the centaurs and the humans on this island."

Samuel stared at him blankly. "Centaurs? What are they?"

"Sentient beings which are half man, half horse."

Samuel nodded in recognition. "Ah, horse people. I have heard about the horse people, though I have never met any. What is the war about?"

"The centaurs subjugated the humans for a long time, and now that the Statute of Secrecy is down the humans convinced some of the Muggles to help overthrow the centaur leadership. It's really ugly down there, Holy One. Both sides are committing atrocities left and right."

Samuel nodded. "Sounds like a mission to provide spiritual guidance is warranted. The question now becomes whether our missionaries should uproot their religion and introduce them to the God of Abraham. You may recall that I and my predecessors spent a lifetime trying to wean the Israelites off worship of idols and corporeal gods like Ba'al and Asherah. It didn't work perfectly, but it was a start."

John Paul shook his head. "I would strongly advise against destroying their existing traditions. The Muggles have just found out about this new culture, and it may make sense for us to study it more before intervening with it. Besides, there's a war going on there. People who find it difficult to switch to our traditions may be going through troubled times there and will need to fall back upon their old ones for comfort. These aren't Molech worshipers or Amalekites, Holy One."

Samuel thought some more. "How close are the Houyhnhnm beliefs to those of the God of Abraham?"

John Paul hesitated -- he had been afraid of a question like this. "We know little about their traditions, Holy One. They worship the Five Gods of Earth, Air, Fire, Water, and Spirit."

"Are these gods seen as aspects of one abstract principle? You see where I'm going with this."

"I do, Holy One. Unfortunately, all I know is what I hear from Father Nereu Martinez, the man who took it upon himself to minister to the Houyhnhms."

"What has Father Martinez discovered so far?"

John Paul really didn't want to say this, but he had no choice. "Well, they have holy lakes, holy mountains, holy fires, and so forth. They've got rituals centered around these sources which they use to try to calm and guide them."

Samuel frowned. "Has Father Martinez determined if they actually worship Earth, Air, and so forth, hoping that these elements will save them? If so, they are using these elements as idols. That is wrong, and they should stop doing that."

John Paul raised his hands in supplication. "Holy One, these aren't Molech worshipers. They had a very stable civilization, and --"
Samuel shook his head. "The horse people subjugated humans, did they not? That is not a sign of a healthy civilization, where there should not be upper and lower classes. You know how I preached against the Israelites having a king until I realized there wasn't much I could do about it."

John Paul nodded. "I do, Holy One."

Samuel began pacing around the room. "Good. At any rate, I believe the subjugation of the humans is because their spiritual practices need modification. Here is what we'll do. Can you summon this Father Martinez to Omega? He'll give us his latest report on what he's seen so far. Based on this information, we will determine if the Houyhnhnms' spiritual practices are viable. If they are, we will instruct Martinez to return with medical support and non-denominational motivation, much like Dalai Lama does."

John Paul winced, but had to ask. "And what happens if the committees here don't find their religious practices to be...viable?"

Samuel shrugged. "Then we fall back on the common practices from my time: tell Father Martinez to knock down their idols and convince them do what we do. What's wrong with that?"

John Paul closed his eyes in horror. Plenty, he thought. Plenty...

To be continued...
Update #326 through Update #330

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Mislagnissa

Update #326: A Wand Fit for a King
------------
Wednesday, August 21, 1996
Vertic Alley
Hogsmeade
United Kingdom
------------
NEXT UP: Carpet Bagger
------------
HOGWARTS SCHOOL OF WITCHCRAFT AND WIZARDRY

Headmaster: SEVERUS SNAPE

Dear Mr. Windsor,
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment. Term starts on September 2.

Yours sincerely,
Filius Flitwick
Deputy Headmaster

---------
UNIFORM

First-year students will require:
1. Three sets of plain work robes (black)
2. One plain pointed hat (black) for day wear
3. One set of dress Muggle clothing (note: new requirement)
4. One pair of protective gloves (dragon hide or similar)
...

=======
King William looked at Hermione. "Where are we? And how did Minister Flamel get us over here by grabbing onto his hands?"

Flamel, whose workload had finally lightened a little with the capture of the final Stone, explained. "Your Majesty, we've traveled from Windsor Castle via Apparation. Wizards use it to teleport instantaneously from place to place."

William whistled. "That's really cool. Hermione, do you know how to do it?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, Your Majesty. You need to be seventeen to get a license."

"Will I be able to learn?"

Hermione and Flamel looked at each other, and then back at William. Flamel hesitated before
responding. "I've been around a long time, Your Majesty, but I've never seen anything like this before. To be honest, no one has never tried teaching a half-wizard to cast spells for the simple reason that prior Wizarding tests would have passed you off as a Muggle. There could be things which we can do which you can't. For all we know, you can Apparate forwards but not backwards. We're in completely unexplored territory here, Your Majesty. Hopefully we'll have everything sorted out by the time you turn seventeen."

William nodded and looked at the storefronts. "I've never heard of these stores. Gregorovich's Fine Wands, Britain Office? Petunia's Potions? Zonko's Second Joke Shop? Is this the Wizarding version of a strip mall?"

Both Flamel and Hermione laughed. "Believe it or not, Your Majesty, you're not that far off. There are -- well, were -- three major shopping areas in Wizarding Britain: Vertic Alley, here in Hogsmeade; Horizont Alley, in Manchester; and Diagon Alley, in London. Of these three areas, Diagon Alley was by far the most upscale and the most famous. However, Voldemort's nuclear bomb took care of that. This has forced students to get their Hogwarts school supplies at Vertic Alley or Horizont Alley."

William chuckled. "Let me guess. Someone's going to make a Kirstie Alley next."

Flamel looked him in confusion, and Hermione was forced to explain. "Dr. Flamel, Kirstie Ally is a Muggle actress. You probably weren't familiar with her. And Your Majesty, I highly doubt that they would make a Kirstie Alley. It would come across as too much of a joke, especially with the Statute of Secrecy down now."

William nodded and looked around the area. "You think you're going to be able to find all this equipment in here? Even the stuff about the toad and so forth? I don't know about you, Hermione, but I don't fancy the idea of carrying around a toad the whole time."

Hermione smiled. "You don't have to, Your Majesty. I've spoken with Professor -- now Headmaster -- Snape and he has agreed to let you keep Silver Moth as your familiar if you want her."

"Familiar? You mean like a companion animal or pet for a wizard?"

Hermione showed him the cage containing the dwarf hippogriff. "Yes, Your Majesty. We've got Silver Moth here in this cage. She comes from Lilliput, a land filled with fairies and small creatures. All of the Gulliver's Travels islands exist, including poor Houyhnhnmland, which is currently in the middle of a disastrous civil war. If you wish, you can keep her as your familiar."

William looked at the hippogriff in shock. "What is this, a bird or a horse? I've never seen anything like this before."

Flamel answered the question. "Both, Your Majesty. It's an extremely rare species, especially in its dwarf form. If I were you, I'd keep her just to be different. Remember that once you set foot in those doors, you will no longer be king. You will be Mr. Windsor, first year student. If you want to stand out at all, this animal could help."

Hermione nodded and continued. "An animal like this can also be useful for delivering letters to and from home. First year students are not allowed off the Hogwarts campus, though they may make an exception for you because of your age. Flying creatures are extremely desirable in that regard, and that's why many people use owls."
"Why do you have a cat then?"

Hermione shrugged. "I like cats."

William grinned at her. "I like you."

Flamel coughed and looked around nervously. "Uh, Your Majesty, we're in a bit of a hurry, so let's head into Gregorovich's London Office and get you a wand. Normally, we'd have gone to Ollivander's in Diagon Alley, but that option is no longer available. We'll get you a wand fit for a king."

William frowned. "I've already got a wand. Besides, shouldn't I have a wand by some British chap if I'm going to be king?"

Hermione chuckled. "You can use the wand you got from Ziggurat, Your Majesty. However, wands are somewhat alive in that they can choose to serve a particular wizard. If you want to get the most from your wand, you're going to want to find one which likes you. As far as this particular wandmaker goes, Gregorovich makes extremely high quality wands. If it's any consolation, one of the best Quidditch players in the world used a Gregorovich wand. I met him personally, and he died a hero's death in Korea fighting Voldemort."

"Voldemort was the bad wizard who tried to become Prime Minister, right?"

Hermione nodded. "That's right."

"Cool. Oh, and what's Quidditch?"

Hermione and Flamel looked at each other. This was going to be harder than they had thought...

---------------------

Miller Household
Kilsyth, England

---------------------

Isabel Miller was getting angrier and angrier. It was becoming painfully obvious that the wizards weren't planning to change their behavior. Sure, they had instituted oaths which would supposedly prevent abuse of power. However, it was becoming evident that people were just working around the oaths. You can't lie? Just say a half-truth or interpret something differently. You can't use magic as an offensive weapon against anyone who isn't a Dark wizard? Convince yourself the opponent is a Dark wizard and you can fire whatever you want at him. You're forced to follow the laws of the land? That doesn't prevent you from going out of your way to interpret the laws the wrong way or lynch someone in vigilante justice.

Sure, the Wizarding authorities were going to provide counseling for wizards. But what good would that do if no one took them up on it? And as far as psychiatric evaluations of new wizards went, those evaluations wouldn't become mandatory until the 1997-1998 school year. Some help those would do now.

There were still many, many wizards who hadn't taken the vows. Even worse, there were stories coming out of that ridiculous centaur island where magical mercenaries of all stripes were hiring themselves off to the highest bidder. One of them -- a certain Hendrickson -- had even stolen the Fountain of Youth or something like that, and the authorities were trying to track him down. Most of the Second Division of the Wizarding Standing Army, also known as Dumbledore's Army, had been sent off to Houyhnhnmiland to find this fellow -- Dumbledore suspected that he may try to offload the
loot there.

Just what the world needed, she thought. More immortal wizards.

Isabel had to admit that the wizards had tried to rein in abuse. However, it was obvious that they had failed. Voldemort may have been killed, but who else was waiting in the wings?

It was looking increasingly like the wizards were refusing to adhere to the terms of the Britain for Humans ceasefire. Isabel vowed to herself that if things didn't improve within a couple of months, she and her colleagues would take action to MAKE them improve.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #327: Carpet Bagger
-------------
Thursday, August 22, 1996
Kolgian Oriental Rug Gallery
Brookline, MA
-------------
NEXT UP: Lawyer Apparition Network
-------------
How convenient, Jason thought. This place was on the C line and he could get there without having to even worry about buying a car. It would be a bit of a pain to lug all of the rugs home on the subway, though. It was a pity that the two girls couldn't just come over, enchant the rugs there, and fly them off.

He opened the door and started looking around the room. This supplier would work out pretty well, he thought. They looked much fancier than the stupid Bed and Bath rugs that they'd been sending to Crate and Barrel, and although the rugs at Crate and Barrel had been selling, the idea of grown men riding around on fluffy pink carpets with unicorns and dolls on them had nearly dissuaded a few of the customers.

He liked the fact that most of these rugs had designated border areas where the patterns were different -- and which were separated from the main body of the rug by a distinct divider. It looked like the two girls wouldn't have to draw squares on these: here, form provided for function.

One of the salespeople came up to him. "Good afternoon, sir. Can I help you?"

Jason nodded. "I hope so. I'm looking to buy six rugs: three small, two medium, and one large. What would you recommend?"

The salesman brought out a sheet of paper. "We'll start with the large one. By large you mean something like a 9x12?"

"Yeah. That's just the right size."

"Splendid. Which room are you decorating for, sir?"

Jason chuckled. "We're not decorating for a room, sir, though I suppose that the rugs can be used indoors as well. If things go as planned, these rugs are going airborne."

The salesman stared at him. "Good grief! You must be involved with Guinevere's Flying Carpets!"
Jason nodded. "Yup, I'm Jason Morgenstern. Guinevere de Mornay is my girlfriend, and I'm rounding up some more carpets. This time, we're going Oriental so we can get fancier stuff and increase our variety."

The salesman thought for a moment. "This could benefit both of us, Mr. Morgenstern. I must say that as soon as you people introduced that store in Newton, part of the store's customer base defected over to you. If you start enchanting our carpets -- and we have the owner set up a contract making sure that keep on funneling you rugs -- we can both make a tidy profit on this."

Jason nodded. "That's exactly what we're thinking, sir. A flying Oriental rug will likely go for two or three times the price of a boring Bed and Bath one. We're figuring that a rental of a normal small rug will go for $40/month and an Oriental small rug will go for $90/month. You pay for the quality and design, after all."

The salesman nodded. "These rugs aren't cheap, you know. A high-quality 9x12 can go for $1000 or more."

Jason shrugged. "A rental of a large flying Oriental rug will probably go for $399/month or so, and it will probably cost $5000 or more to buy. Trust me, all we need is to sell one of these things and we'll have more than enough money to buy more."

The salesman frowned. "$5000? You're sure those will sell? We're talking around the price of a used car here, and a car can go much faster than 20 mph."

"I hope so, sir. The rugs won't have to deal with traffic jams or gas, for one thing."

"What if stops working in midair? What happens if someone falls off? You're taking an awful risk, Mr. Morgenstern."

"Guinevere claims that they've planned for that in their next model. Although she and Jelena don't think it will ever be necessary, they're thinking of attaching an emergency parachute on the bottom which will be triggered automatically a few seconds after the flight enchantment falls apart."

The salesman still wasn't convinced. "I must say, if I already had a car, I wouldn't be willing to spend $5000 on a flying carpet just to get off the ground."

"You don't have to, sir. If all else fails and none of the big Orientals fly, we'll stop buying them. We'll still get some of the smaller ones from you."

The salesman hesitated before continuing. "May I ask which other companies you've spoken with to get rugs from?"

Jason shrugged. "You can, but I wouldn't be allowed to answer."

"Fair enough. You're going to put the instructions on the bottom as usual?"

"Yup. There's plenty of space down there, especially with the big ones."

The salesman thought for a moment. "Mr. Morgenstern, I've got a couple of ideas. I'll have to discuss these with my manager, but I want to see what you think of it. Most of the people are going to be looking at these rugs from the ground, right? So they'll only see the bottom while they're flying?"
Jason nodded. "That's correct."

The salesman grinned. "I wouldn't suppose it would be possible for you guys to put 'Kolgian Oriental Rug Gallery' on the bottom in large letters?"

Jason's eyes widened. "I never thought of that! You want to turn them into flying billboards and advertisements?"

The salesman's grin widened. "The customer doesn't care about the bottom, does he? When he's flying it or is walking on it in his house, he's only going to be looking at the top!"

Jason considered this. "I'll have to talk with the girls, but that actually isn't a bad idea. We probably get a discount on the rugs in exchange for advertising space. The net result is that you get more business and we make more money."

The salesman nodded. "It's a win/win situation, don't you think?"

"Definitely. What's your other idea?"

The salesman looked at him hopefully. "Can we sell of them in this store once you've enchanted them? We get an unusual product, you get another distributor, and you get extra space for some overstock. You'll get a part of the proceeds, of course."

Jason took out a pad of paper and started jotting down notes. "I like that as well, sir. You talk to your manager, and I'll talk to the two witches. If we both agree, we'll set up an arrangement. In the meantime, how much does this red one cost?"

To be continued...

-------------
Update #328: Lawyer Apparation Network
-------------
Friday, August 23, 1996
Fourth Mesa
-------------
NEXT UP: Space Station Invaders
-------------
Sanders looked at Strong Bear and frowned. "I didn't think pregnant women were allowed to Apparate. Wasn't it considered a high-risk proposition?"

His wife grunted, and he turned to look at her. She was almost eight months along now, and she looked VERY large. He couldn't imagine that she still had a month to go.

Melissa looked down at her grossly distended belly and chuckled. "Dave, at this point in the pregnancy WALKING is a high-risk proposition in all likelihood, let alone Apparating. They've even gotten to the point where they're not going to let me Floo in soon."

Strong Bear nodded and turned to Sanders. "We generally discourage use of the Floo Network for women who are eight months along or more. We're concerned that the stress and confusion associated with the Floo Network could force the mother to have a premature delivery. At any rate, back to the issue at hand. The Muggle Apparition Network has gotten a lot of press over the last few days, and there are people lining up to Apparate. The Muggle news reporters have been claiming that
Rebecca Richardson's Muggle phone lines have been off the hook for people waiting transport. She's been forced to recruit more wizards to help chauffeur people around, and apparently she's up to 25 employees now. The problem is, of course, that they have no idea what they're doing and are throwing pregnant women around. I'd hate to be MAN's lawyers when those women start suing MAN for causing miscarriages."

"Don't the wizards realize that pregnant women can't Apparate? The woman in charge is a witch, after all, and she's old enough to have had children. Surely she must know about this."

Strong Bear made a sour face. "The issue appears to be that some of the other MAN employees -- particularly single men who need money -- are Apparating women unless the passengers are visibly pregnant. This is highly discouraged, Dave. The Wizarding journals all agree that women can lose fetuses as early as the end of the first trimester. The odds that a three-month fetus will be lost is roughly 3% per Apparition, and the odds increase after that."

"Can MAN buy some of those flying carpets and start shuttling pregnant women around that way?"

"In theory, yes. In practice, MAN is aware that Guinevere's Flying Carpets is likely to be their biggest competitor and doesn't want to do anything to support them."

Sanders pointed at his wife. "Do you think she would have lost the baby had she been Apparating over here the whole time?"

Strong Bear nodded. "It's quite likely, though thankfully there's no way to tell for sure."

Melissa shuddered at this. "Strong Bear, what are you going to do about this? Someone's got to tell MAN to stop doing this, at the very least for their own good."

Strong Bear smiled. "I've got Two Bear working on that right now. He's going to talk to Ariadne, Guinevere, and WSC. Hopefully one of those three will get them to listen to reason."

Department of Health and Human Services
Washington, DC
----------------------------------------

The head of the Department of Health and Human Services blinked and stared at his secretary. "You've got Persephone Ariadne on line 2? The Secretary of MAGIC?"

The secret nodded. "That's correct, sir."

"What the hell does she need US for?"

"She claims it involves the Muggle Apparition Network. She wants you to warn the nation that pregnant women should not be Apparating."

The department head whistled. "Patch her through."

The secretary nodded and sent the call in. She returned to her desk as Health and Human Services picked the phone up. "Hello?"

Ariadne's distinctive voice was clear on the other end. "Is this the Secretary of Health and Human Services?"
"It is, Madame Secretary. I've been told you're concerned about pregnant women Apparating and that MAN may be getting itself into trouble?"

"Precisely, sir. Although Rebecca Richardson has supposedly told her employees to not serve pregnant women, there have been many, many, cases of people who are not obviously pregnant being transported. You need to warn Muggles that women can lose their babies during Apparition even if they aren't showing yet."

Health and Human Services frowned. "Can't they just check if the girl's pregnant before sending her through?"

"In theory, yes. Unfortunately, you have to keep in mind that the Apparators go to the customer's house to transport them and don't have all of the specialized healers and spells at their disposal to check if a woman is pregnant. Furthermore, you have to understand that most of the people involved in MAN lost their jobs when WSC banned them from taking Muggle positions. Wizarding healers would not have lost their jobs in this manner, so they would be extremely unlikely to be involved with MAN."

"What are the odds that a pregnant woman will lose the baby?"

"Considerable, sir. It's about 3% per Apparition for a three-month fetus, 5% for a four-month fetus, and 11% for a five-month fetus. It gets worse after that, but by this point the woman is obviously pregnant and won't be transported. It may seem low, but you have also consider that if the woman is Apparating OUT, she's going to have to Apparate BACK. That makes the risk of a miscarriage 6% or more."

The Secretary of Health and Human Services jotted down some notes. "I'll issue a statement, Madame Secretary. Thanks for the tip."

-------------------
Boeing Headquarters
-------------------

The president of Boeing chuckled. "Here, Mr. Parker, look at this. Looks like the Department of Health and Human Services is suing Muggle Apparition Network. It seems that the government wants them to shut down until they figure out how to transport pregnant women safely or find a reasonable alternative for transporting pregnant women."

Quentin Parker, the company lawyer, chuckled. "It sounds Clinton and his friends are getting involved as well. Has anyone else taken advantage of this and started supporting the government in this noble effort?"

The president handed over a list. "A few: McDonell-Douglas, Airbus, the FAA, Cessna, GM, Ford, Amtrak..."

Parker whistled. "Looks like MAN has made itself a LOT of enemies. Sure, we'll join the party. There's no way they're going to win this, sir. No way."

The president grinned. "That's good to hear. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to get back to organizing the new spacecraft development department. Even if the government does take MAN down, we'll still have the flying carpet kids to deal with. Besides, if we hire a wizard, I suspect space travel is going to become much, much easier."

To be continued...
Update #329: Space Station Invaders

Friday, August 23, 1996
Mir Space Station

NEXT UP: The Mole

Cosmonaut Valery Korzun was minding his own business, looking out the window, when something hit him in the head. He had just drawn a deep breath to yell at his fellow crew members when he saw that neither of them were in sight.

The module he was in wasn't supposed to have anything substantial floating around in it. Usually, things were tied down to make sure they didn't fly around in microgravity. Occasionally, though something came loose and started meandering through the station. These objects occasionally made a mess of the modules and in some cases became serious obstacles. However, for the most part the projectiles were lightweight and/or caught very quickly.

It didn't take a long time to figure out what hit him. It appeared to be an old sneaker -- an American Nike brand. He frowned and looked down at his work boots. Who on earth had come up in sneakers? He certainly hadn't!

There were two other cosmonauts on board, including a few Americans and a Frenchwoman. Aleksandr didn't seem to be the type to bring sneakers on board. It must have been one of the Westerners.

Hating to think how much fuel and money it took to send this stupid shoe up to Earth orbit, he grabbed the intrusive footwear and swam through into the next module, where Aleksandr was working. He tapped the second cosmonaut on the shoulder with the shoe to get his attention.

Korzun held the shoe up. "Aleksandr, whose shoe is this? It got loose in my module?"

Aleksandr frowned. "I don't think I've seen anyone wearing sneakers up here."

"How the hell else did it get up here?"

"Beats me, Valery. Could it have been on one of the Americans? What about the French astronaut? Nike is a Western brand, after all."

Korzun looked at the living module and fumed. "Let's find out. I need to remind these newcomers that they shouldn't let things float around like that."

The two Russians made the rounds of the space station and interviewed each of the other cosmonauts. To their absolute amazement, none of them recognized the shoe. All of them were wearing the appropriate work boots as well.

Korzun growled. "Someone's lying. Look everywhere for the matching sneaker, and tell that practical joker to behave or we'll send him out the airlock!"

The space station wasn't that big, and an hour later it was fairly obvious that there was no matching footgear anywhere on board. What was even more amazing is that no one had seen the sneaker before.
Every single crew member looked surprised, and Korzun could tell immediately that they were sincere. None of them had brought the shoe up. But if they didn't, who did? Did someone from an earlier crew leave it here? Unlikely, he thought. The people up here are smart enough not to go back with one shoe off, let alone wearing sneakers!

Korzun stared at the shoe in disbelief. He was going to get to the bottom of this as soon as possible. He couldn't imagine someone trying to send some kind of bomb into the space station (it's not like the attacker could occupy it easily), but the entire incident unnerved him a bit.

Extremely suspicious, he told everyone to take off their work boots and see if the shoe fit any of them. As the rest of the cosmonauts were taking their shoes off, he reached into the sneaker to take out anything else which had floated in there.

There was a small piece of paper folded neatly inside the sneaker, taped to the sole. Wondering whose notes it was, he unfolded it and saw that it was in Russian and English. His eyes widened when he saw the message.

"To the Astronauts of Mir: greetings from Witch Linda Warren. I am performing a magical experiment and have used magic to send this old shoe to the space station. If you receive this message, please slide a pen into the shoelaces or tape a piece of scrap paper to the sole of the shoe where this message was. Ten seconds later, if everything goes as planned, the shoe will disappear and return to Earth. I apologize for the surprise and inconvenience.

"Sincerely, Linda Warren, Jacksonville, North Carolina".

There was silence for a good half minute. Then, one of the American astronauts swore. "This has GOT to be a joke. And I know it ain't me."

Another stared out the window skeptically. "I'm not sure, Will. The wizards are capable of doing some rather strange things. Why, I've heard that they've got flying carpets and stuff now."

The first American chuckled. "I'll believe that when I see it."

Korzun was losing his patience. Hitting the American on the head lightly with the shoe, he held it up to the crowd. "All right, here's what we'll do. Someone get me a pen and a piece of paper. I'm going to do exactly what this Warren witch wants: write a scathing message telling her not to mess with space missions, stick the pen in the shoelaces, and tape the message to the sole. What do you think of that?"

The first American grinned. "You're calling her bluff, heh? I'd like to see that."

Aleksandr grinned. "So would I. All right, let's do it."

Korzun laughed and wrote out the memo. He attached it to the insole and stuck the pen in the shoelaces.

"All right, in four seconds we'll know if this is a joke. I --"

His mouth slammed shut as the shoe disappeared in a burst of light. Seconds later, the module was empty once more. The shoe had gone as quickly as it had come, and it had managed to leave the spacecraft without compromising the hull.
No one spoke for several minutes. Finally, one of the American astronauts spoke up. "I think NASA may have a problem."

Hogsmeade

Dumbledore's Army had returned home.

People cheered and waved congratulatory banners as the Second Division of the Wizards' Standing Army returned to civilian life. Although they had not actually been involved in the capture of Hendrickson, they had visited a foreign country and in some cases put themselves in danger in their attempt to track down the Philosopher's Stone.

Albus Dumbledore took the podium and announced that he would be returning to Hogwarts in a couple of days. Snape, who had expected this, agreed to step down as headmaster and resume his Potions duties. The gaping hole at Potions Master had been filled just in time for the school year, which started in ten days.

The crowd cheered as the rest of the Hogwarts staff welcomed him back. Everyone seemed happy to see him. Snape briefed him on the most recent developments at the school. Dumbledore's eyes widened when he heard that King William had been admitted. He tried to talk Snape out of it, but Snape confessed that it would likely be too late to call off the king now. Besides, there were two people who would be willing to help him out if necessary, one of whom was a Q-only wizard.

As the group prepared to return to Hogwarts, he saw Professor Baldwin -- the Muggle graduate student -- walking towards him with a somewhat dazed expression on her face. Wondering what was wrong with her, he asked her what was wrong.

She looked woodenly down at the ground. "I'm sorry to do this to you, but a family emergency has come up and I'm going to have to return to Oxford. I'm sorry, Headmaster. I'm not going to be able to teach this semester. Hopefully I'll be able to come back next semester."

Dumbledore froze: just his luck. The rest of the Hogwarts staff seemed equally surprised. He had to say something, however. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Unfortunately, no. I appreciate your offer, though."

Dumbledore didn't know what to say. He just shook her hand and spoke somewhat awkwardly. "We'll hold onto your position for the spring of 1997. In the meantime, see what you can do to find a graduate student who'll be willing to take over for the fall semester. Do you think you'll be able to do that?"

Baldwin nodded. "I think so. I hope I was a good professor. I must say, it felt weird being a student and professor at the same time."

Dumbledore smiled. "You were indeed a good professor, Miss Baldwin. You will be welcome back at any time."

Baldwin nodded, shook everyone's hand, and walked away. Once again, the Hogwarts staff was short one instructor.

Dumbledore had a week and a half to find a replacement. This was not going to be easy.
The door to Dumbledore's office opened, revealing Professor Flitwick and an elderly man he had never seen before. Flitwick looked relieved and cautiously optimistic.

Flitwick indicated the new man. "Headmaster, I'd like to introduce you to Yevheniy Romanovych Zygonov, a possible new Muggle studies teacher. By sheer luck, he happened to be visiting Hogsmeade for a job interview at the time Baldwin left. Once he heard about what happened, he contacted me. Mr. Zygonov, this Albus Dumbledore, our headmaster."

The newcomer shook Dumbledore's hand. "Pleased to meet you, Headmaster."

Dumbledore nodded. "Same here, Mr. Zygonov. So, tell me about yourself. Have you taught Muggle studies before, and if so where?"

Zygonov shrugged. "I taught biology at a small Muggle school in Odessa for a while, so I have a great deal of experience interacting with Muggles and working with the Muggle world. I retired a few years ago at 63 and had been planning to spend my golden years alone with my wife Halyna Wasylyevna. Everything changed, however, when the Statute of Secrecy fell and Ziggurat Labs came out with its genetic testing. After thirty-five years of pestering by my wife about my ability to see strange things, I took the test and came out a Z-only wizard. I was intrigued by my Wizarding genes and took it upon myself to study about your culture a little. I find it fascinating, Headmaster. It's a pity that Voldemort gave wizards such a bad name."

Dumbledore nodded gravely. "I can't agree with you more, Mr. Zygonov. Voldemort -- or as he was then known, Tom Marvolo Riddle -- was actually one of my students for a while. He was a brilliant wizard, and it is a pity he turned to evil. He would have been a great asset to society."

Zygonov looked at Dumbledore intently. "I hope I can help in the training of new wizards. After all, I have some Wizarding genes and was raised as a Muggle. I figured I'd fit the bill pretty well."

Dumbledore thought about it and slowly nodded. "You may very well, Mr. Zygonov. Would you be willing to start in a couple of weeks? The term starts a week from Monday, and we can't hold off Muggle Studies for long -- especially given the Super Bowl Breach."

"I will do my best, sir. It may take some time to convince my wife, but growing up in the Ukraine under the Iron Curtain she always wanted to come to the West. I expect she'll agree."

"Does she have a job?"

"No, Headmaster. She's retired."
Dumbledore smiled. "It sounds like you are indeed a good candidate, one of the best we've seen so far, in fact. I'll keep you in mind and give you our final decision within 3-5 days. How is that for you?"

Zygonov smiled. "I'll be awaiting your decision eagerly, Headmaster."

"So will I, Mr. Zygonov. Would you like a tour of the school?"

Romanovych laughed. "Sure!"

--------------------
Zygonov swore under his breath as the naive headmaster showed him around the building. ONE OF the best he'd seen so far? Surely Dumbledore hadn't stumbled across another half-wizard that quickly!

Dumbledore must have asked Baldwin to try to recruit another grad student from her school when she left, he thought. It would make sense for him to do so, particularly if Baldwin had done well and the students had bonded with the younger teachers. Besides, a good Muggle Studies professor would likely be someone who knew a lot about foreign cultures -- such as, say, an anthropologist.

He kicked himself mentally. When he had caught Baldwin waiting for Dumbledore, called her aside, and Imperiused her to make her resign, he should have included a command to not try to recruit any replacements. He hadn't expected any competition here!

He had to salvage the situation, he thought. Otherwise, Rasputin would be very displeased.

---------------------
Jacksonville, NC

"Dear Ms. Warren. DO NOT DO THIS AGAIN, AND TELL THOSE WAND-WAVERS TO STOP IT AS WELL! That damn shoe of yours could have floated into a lever or pushed a button! Hell, for all we know it could have punctured the hull and depressurized a module! IF YOU ARE NOT AN ASTRONAUT, YOU DO NOT BELONG HERE AND YOU SHOULD NOT BE SENDING STUFF UP HERE! You DO realize that we are floating several hundred miles above the Earth and our only escape is a Soyuz! I'm the captain of this space station, and I am responsible for its crew -- "

Linda winced at the tone. She should have known, she thought. However, the fact that she had gotten the message through meant that the experiment had been a success. As far as she knew, she had been the first witch ever to send a Portkey to space -- and to send one to a moving destination as well.

Very interesting. Now that the first experiment had succeeded, it was time to put her name on the map for good.

She looked up at the sky, where the stars were shining brightly. She knew enough about astronomy to realize that trying to send a Portkey to the stars would be a fool's errand. Nothing traveled faster than light, and it would take decades or centuries to make it to the stars.

However, there was still one option. She looked at the gibbous moon in the sky and then at the box which was designed to retrieve dirt and rocks and return them to Earth. Next to the box was the image which inspired her and had helped her set up the spell: the Apollo 11 landing site, complete with the lunar lander and the flag.
Hoping that this would work, she touched her wand to the box and the box disappeared. It would likely take days, if not longer, to make the trip to the moon. She gave it a maybe 50% chance of making it back in one piece.

There was nothing she could do now but wait.

To be continued...

----------
Update #330.5: The Best Kind of Boredom
----------
Saturday, August 23, 1996
Southern Houyhnhnmland
----------

The old south-north barge road followed the river Issala through grassy plains, shrubby hills and then, finally, mountain rainforests. Of course, reaching the rainforest would take another week, even travelling lightly... and in good weather. As it was, rain poured down every day for hours ever since the Protector's end, unnaturally prolonging the wet season. The river, despite it's length, wasn't known for it's discharge- without tributaries, much of it's water was lost on the long way south, at least in dry season. Now, however, the Issala overcame it's feeble dams, and washed away much of the roads on the river banks, forcing travelers to find other, not as well-built paths.

A mixed army, mostly centaurs and humans, along with a few odd creatures and beasts marched on struggling in the mud, up north towards the capital. Wizards on carpets and brooms and Veelas in harpy-form circled over them. A vanguard of heavily armored trolls moved before them, and invisible flying wizards patrolled the forest for miles in both direction, keeping an eye out for any sign of an ambush. For now, that was merely a formality: apart from a few groups of trees, one could see a day's march ahead on the empty, dull plains. They left Hylonome the day before yesterday, after a day's rest, resupply, and recruitment. The stay in the province's capital was peaceful: by the time they arrived, the governor and a few hundred others had already fled north, and the rest of the city was openly supportive of their case. They spent a day feasting there, while Lord Garhym organised a new regional government accepted both by the centaurs and the liberated yahoos. The army that left was over five times bigger than when it arrived: yahoos and centaurs alike volunteered, and offered several caravan's worth of supply wagons, and the trolls for drawing them.

Most of the army was only very hastily trained, but thanks to the recently hired wizards, very well equipped with Geminioed Muggle equipment, or enchanted weapons. Groups of yahoos armed with unfamiliar but powerful assault rifles, all wearing kevlar vests, marched side by side with centaurs with their trusty bows and arrows magically empowered, the human torso part of their traditional armor ditched in favor of kevlar. The Muggle protective clothes also served as uniforms: all bore the mark of the Egalitarian party's militant branch: a single rune in a square. (OOC: yes, faction banners will be on the map... soon )

Some of the mercenaries walked with the main army. A few of them were centaurs themselves, recruited from hidden tribes in other lands for their famed skills as archers and trackers. One of them, Xymustus, just noted a peculiar detail in the native armor. "Hey, guys, may I ask a question?" A few of his fellow centaurs measured him up: kevlar vest- like on virtually everyone, but bearing the insignia of the mercenary band 'Taliesen's Troll Tamers', an ornate composite bow and an enormous bladed weapon visibly enchanted by runes, facial piercings,
rippling muscles, and a painted mohawk—a curiously mixture of savagery and refinement, but no doubt a formidable warrior. One milicist, a young stallion, replied cheerfully: "Sure, as long as you too answer one of our questions. So, out with it!"

Xymustus tentatively began: "I've heard of Houyhnhnm armor, but the descriptions were mostly about the types used in the north, and they said those had spikes on the backs to prevent anything from jumping up there."
The boy caught on quickly. "I can guess they also told you some really wind rumors about southern armor, then. Well, to spare the awkward question, yes," he pointed to his horse-back, "these really are saddles, for humans."

The mercenary cast him an amused glance. "You've gotta be kidding me. You guys let yahoos ride you like a horse? That's scandalous!"
An older centaur interrupted. "It is, and was, a part of Southern military traditions. Before the Unification, we had many wars, and our tribes faced rival factions of overwhelming numbers. We let our human vassals to join the fight, but even that wasn't enough: they were even fewer than we were, and only slowed us down. Then one of our ancestors came up with an idea: to make the humans sit on our backs, protecting each other's weak points in melee. But of course the whole fighting style was forgotten centuries ago...yet, we can use these saddles to speed up a great number of our infantry."

"So it's true, then? Strange, it's almost like as if your historians would want to cover it up," Xymustus said. "Then again, the North, West and East had access to much more resources and numbers, yet it really took them a long time to subdue your ancestors here in the Plains. I wouldn't be surprised if the whole yahoo system were forced on you just to keep your auxiliaries from having any weapons skills."

All the natives murmured in agreement, and one of them added: "And that's why there are so much of us Egalitarians here in the South. Virtually any manor lord or yahoo owner treats the humans well as much as possible, and the only exceptions are so visibly under Northern influence that even the angriest, most abused yahoo rebel can tell we're on his side..."

Another finished for him: "And now we march north, to show the haughty gold-miners how we can get along with the humans peacefully and without slavery."
Xymustus, for his own part, had some doubts about the chances of their success in this, or about reaching the capital at all. As they traveled north, they met refugees fleeing south, spreading horrible tales about the fights: Muggle weapons and flyers causing all sort of gruesome injuries and collateral damage, the Loyalist Remnant lining the Northern Road with heads on pikes, blood-crazed yahoos skinning the entire families of their former masters alive, invisible wizards raining curses on people... if even half of it was true, this would be nastier than the Syrdan-Nestor war.

But as he looked at the cheerful faces of the locals, he remembered that today, despite all those terrible gossips, was still a good, boring day: the kind of day that brings payment, and doesn't cost the company any life or limb.
He also remembered that he promised them an answer in return. The question was quite predictable, from fellow warriors: "What are your weapons made of?"
So, he began telling them about dragonbone and Abraxan tail strings, runes increasing accuracy and amplifying drawing power, spells sharpening blades...
then, all of a sudden, a body landed next to him with a sickening crunch. One glance at it told the tale: it was one of the wizards of his company, fallen from his broom, no doubt slippery in the rain. They stood around the mangled carcass in shock. For a fellow warrior to die in such a way... it was unbelievable. Xymustus looked angrily up to the sky, uncaring for the raindrops falling into his eyes... and he saw something he did not expect.

A barely visible distortion, above them. It was the characteristic sign of an invisibility spell or cloak in heavy rain- subtle, not easy to spot, but he was trained and trained over two decades for the very purpose of spotting the subtle details. "So, the part about the invisible wizards is true, then... now, let's go to one of our wizards, slowly, without spooking that bogie, and ask some soul detection for a little target practice..."

To be continued...
Update #331 through Update #335

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Mislagnissa

Update #331: Uh, I've Never Taught a Course Before

Sunday, August 25, 1996
Russian House
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Cambridge, MA
United States of America

NEXT UP: Zygonov Switch

Jelena Kurchatova could not help but glance at MacGregor as she made her way into New House. The destroyed portions of the dormitory -- F, G, and H Entries, not to mention I -- were covered with scaffolding. Occasionally, there were holes visible in the forest of cranes which hinted that something quite impressive was on the horizon.

Although the original plan had the rebuilt sections of MacGregor ready for occupancy at the beginning of the school year, it was painfully obvious that was not going to happen. Magic could only go so far, after all. The latest schedule had the students moving into new sections in the middle of October. In the meantime, they would be put up in hotels.

Kurchatova had nearly had apoplexy when the issue of the Tech had come out splitting what was once MacGregor into three connected dorms. The high-rise, which still contained A through E, would continue to be known as MacGregor. J-Entry had been given its own front desk and renamed de Mornay Hall after Guinevere. As for F, G, and H...Kurchatova Hall seemed just...wrong. She tried to convince the staff to name the new building after Radner, Black, or some other famous wizard. However, the Corporation would have nothing of it. Radner hadn't done much to save Cambridge, whereas she and Guinevere had.

She grunted. Well, if they're going to name the dorm after me, I'm going to make sure that the damn carpet is in a color I like. And if they DO decide to make me housemaster at some point since the previous housemaster's apartment had been washed away, they can at least have the decency to do so before I unpack!

Guiding her suitcase with her wand, she used her ID card to open the New House door and made her way into Russian House like she had done so many times before. A few students were there, moving their stuff in, and they waved to her. She had nearly reached her room from last year when she realized: I don't live there anymore. Sheepishly, she turned around and headed for her new home: the one-bedroom apartment reserved for the Russian House graduate residence tutor.

The new accommodations were extremely spacious compared to a typical dorm room, and she suspected that she had a private bathroom and a sitting room. The only way to have gotten a room this size as an undergrad would have been to agree to hole up with three other girls!

Wondering how long it would take her to learn to stop walking to her old room, she dropped her suitcase on the floor and began unpacking. Although packing had been easy -- wave the wand at the stuff she wanted in the suitcase and say "Pack" -- unpacking had to be done manually as the spell
wouldn't know where each thing was supposed to go.

It took her a good hour to unpack to the point where she felt she could leave the rest until later. Her
bad was made and enough stuff was organized so that she could at least know where the essentials
were. This made her start considering her next options: finding some teaching assistants.

For the first time in her life, she would be teaching a major course at MIT: 19.00, Introduction to
Magic. She had roughly a week to prepare a basic syllabus -- and it finally dawned on her that she
had no idea how to give lectures to the large numbers of students the school officials were expecting
to attend her class. She knew what it was like to hide among the throngs of students in the back of
10-250, watching the professor standing in the front of the room. Now everyone would be looking at
her, and she wasn't just scared. She was terrified.

Granted, she didn't have to do much research -- she would just explain what she knew about magic
at a relatively high level. She'd have to give homework, of course, though most of it would be
reading basic magical textbooks as well as wizard fiction like the now-popular Adventures with
Arachnids. She couldn't exactly do magical lab work with a bunch of Muggles, after all.

She was going to need several teaching assistants to ensure that each student got personal attention
(and to grade all those papers). The problem was that only a wizard could grade 19.00, which meant
that she would have to kidnap Guinevere's entire circle of friends in order to find enough people to
do the job. Guinevere had told her that she could think of at least five people who would be willing
to help out in exchange for free flying carpets. She had also received the resume of a Baker House
student who had come out as a Q-only wizard, but she was forced to dismiss him as the ability to
hold a wand did not make a person knowledgeable enough about magic to grade a class.

Guinevere had been surprised at first when Kurchatova recommended that the flying carpet company
be called "Guinevere's Flying Carpets" and not "Guinevere and Jelena's Flying Carpet's". Kurchatova
knew that there would be absolutely no way for her to handle 19.00, the bureaucracy
surrounding the flying carpet business, and her ordinary grad school courses at the same time. She
had known from the beginning that Guinevere would have to be the senior partner in this and
Kurchatova herself would eventually serve as a member of the board or advisor.

Guinevere had soon found out that she herself would need a lot of assistance getting the business off
the ground, especially now that the Muggle Apparition Network was trying to compete with her.
Fortunately, the door swung both ways. Just as Kurchatova had co-opted half of Guinevere's
Wizarding friends to help serve as teaching assistants for 19.00, Jason had convinced several
members of Alpha Chi Gamma to head over to Enfield and help out Guinevere. These included
several people from course 15 -- management -- including one Next House girl who had graduated in
1993.

Getting the Alpha Chi Gamma men to help Guinevere was about as easy as getting water to run
downhill. Most of them had been fascinated by Guinevere when they had visited Jason during the
school year, and several of them had been acting like typical clueless twelve-year-olds when it came
to trying to get her attention. Considering that MIT was roughly two-thirds men and that Alpha Chi
Gamma didn't have any girls living in it -- officially -- it didn't take much to get them to follow
Guinevere around like puppy dogs chasing a ball.

In return for their support, Guinevere had given Alpha Chi Gamma a free rug. Kurchatova hadn't
seen the first issue of the Daily Confusion yet -- the leaflet which listed the various MIT fraternity
and house rush events for the incoming class of 2000 -- but she would have bet large numbers of
Galleons (or dollars) that trips on the flying carpet would serve as a major recruitment tool for future
brothers. The fact that the rug Jason had picked out for them had the starship Enterprise on it all but sealed the deal.

Kurchatova wondered if Guinevere was tiring of Jason and was thinking of going after another guy. She hadn't heard anything about that, but who knew?

The business was continuing to expand, though a little more slowly than it had before now that the Muggle Apparation Network was in play. In addition to the Crate and Barrel in the Chestnut Hill Mall, flying carpets were being sold at Kolgian in Brookline, Able Rug in Brighton, and a couple of the Bed and Baths which had provided the first batch of rugs. The only problems which had cropped up so far with the carpets had been the various car accidents which had taken place when people took their eyes off the road to figure out what those odd rectangular objects were hovering overhead.

She headed over to the Athena computer cluster to check her email. There were several good luck wishes for her new course and business and a couple of applications for new 19.00 TA’s or flying carpet business partners. A store had asked her to enchant her rugs, and the school had decided to make 19.00 a HASS-D -- one of most important humanities courses.

Kurchatova’s eyebrows shot up at the next few emails. Three schools -- one in Needham and two in Newton -- had asked her to speak to the students. It seemed as if her celebrity status was starting to catch up with her. How the hell was she going to handle this? She was already cutting back on the flying carpet business to pursue her studies!

She really needed a Time-Turner here, she thought. She doubted, however, she would be able to obtain one given the flap over the DeLorean.

She was going to have a very, very busy semester ahead of her. And that didn't even include the responsibility of mentoring and advising dozens of Russian House students, including a large number of new freshmen.

To be continued...

---------
Update #332: Zygonov Switch
---------
Monday, August 26, 1996
University of Oxford
United Kingdom
---------
NEXT UP: Man, I Feel Like A Woman
---------
Megan Baldwin felt like an idiot. She'd gone home convinced there had been a family emergency, going so far as to resign her commission at Hogwarts. As it turned out, however, her mother was not dying and no one had any idea as to who had started the rumor.

She needed to tell Dumbledore, Snape, or whoever was in charge now that the emergency had been a false alarm and that she was ready to return. She had just logged into the computer to send an email to Hogwarts -- albus@hogwarts.uk -- when Amelia Bell, one of the other grad students in her department, burst into the computer cluster with a piece of parchment in her hand.

Amelia shoved the parchment in her face! "Check it out, Megan! It's from Dumbledore! I got the job! Here's the signed contract!"
Conflicting emotions raged through Megan's head. She was friends with Amelia, and she had forwarded her the new job opening as soon as she had left. Although Megan really wanted the job back, she couldn't just take it from Amelia. Besides, if Dumbledore had already signed the contract, there wasn't much anyone could do about it. Breaking magical contracts with Albus Dumbledore tended to lead to rather nasty consequences.

Trying to not let her disappointment show, Megan hugged Amelia. "That's wonderful! What are you going to do now, rent a room in Hogsmeade?"

Amelia nodded. "Yup. I don't know if they take pounds, though. Does Hogsmeade have a bank which converts those Galleons to real money?"

"Yup. Gringotts had an annex there which is now the firm's central office. I'd see if you can get into the Shrieking Shack now that they've renovated it."

Amelia jerked back a step. "The Shrieking Shack?"

"It's an old house connected which is linked to the Hogwarts grounds by a secret tunnel. Apparently there had been a werewolf as a student a while back and they bought the house so that he could transform without hurting anyone. It's protected by a nasty tree which likes to hit things --"

Amelia shuddered. "I think I'll pass on that. Is there a place where the 20's and 30's tend to hang out?"

"A couple -- Perth Square and Vertic Alley are fairly popular. They aren't going to be cheap, though."

"I'm renting, Megan, not buying. Don't worry about it. At any rate, do I have to make a syllabus or something like that? I haven't thought this through entirely yet."

Megan fiddled with her computer for a while, found what she had been searching for, and printed out a document. Handing it to Amelia, she chuckled. "Here's the syllabus right here. I was planning to use it for this semester before that stupid rumor came along that my mum had died."

Megan hesitated, and then let everything out. "I must say, Amelia, that I didn't really want to leave. I feel like I got screwed really badly."

Amelia frowned. "You want the job back? Do you want me to tell Dumbledore I can't do it?"

Megan shook her head. "That won't work. You've already signed the contract, and from what I know about magical contracts breaking them is a very bad idea. How long is it for?"

"One year."

Megan nodded somberly. "Good. You can have next year and I'll have the year after that. Come to think of it, since I'm probably going to be graduating this year, I may be able to work there full time starting in the '97-'98 school year. You can be my TA or something like that."

Amelia saw the disappointment on Megan's face. "I can see you're upset about that false rumor. Where'd you hear it from?"

Megan winced and shook her head. "I honestly don't remember, Amelia. It was almost as if it had
magically appeared in my mind shortly before Dumbledore's Army returned home. What's done is done, however. Good luck, and keep in touch."

White House

Bill Clinton stood with Persephone Ariadne at the podium. If this spell worked as advertised, the country would never have to deal with counterfeiting again.

He began to speak. "Ladies and gentlemen, it is my great pleasure to announce that thanks to the power of magic and the advice of the Xylendan ambassador, all American currency produced after January 1st will be enhanced with an anti-Duplication Charm. This will ensure that it cannot be duplicated or counterfeited.

"This spell has been in use for centuries in the Wizarding community, and thanks to the fall of the Statute of Secrecy we will be able to apply the same protection to the American dollar. Any attempts to duplicate a dollar bill or coin using magical means will produce a copy which will look like an obvious fake: too big, too small, too heavy, and so forth.

"The Geminio Taboo will remain in effect even after the new currency is introduced. This is because even though it no longer makes sense to duplicate American money, we need to only look at the destruction in New York and Miami to understand what the Duplication Charm can do in the wrong hands."

San Juan County Hospital
Monitcello, UT

"Dr. Workman, we lost the baby!"

Bobby Workman spun and faced the nurse. "What do you mean, you lost the baby? I don't remember anyone in the delivery room complaining about any complications. Besides, with the wizard there, what could possibly go wrong? Wasn't he just going to shrink the baby to make the delivery easier now? Everyone's doing that now!"

The nurse flushed a little. "Er...the wizard is the reason we lost the baby."

"Of course, Doctor. That's why we lost him!"

"What did he do, Lisa?"

The nurse fidgeted nervously. "Well, he shrunk the baby as usual, delivered him, and cut the cord. We talked to the mother a little. Then...we lost him."

"How could you lose him? I'll need to write up a report."

The nurse threw her hands in the air. "The baby was only a couple of inches long when he came out. Do you realize how easy it is to misplace something that small?"

Workman was about to scream something laced with expletives when he heard some high-pitched crying and saw the wizard racing out of the delivery room. "We've got him, Dr.
Workman. We lost sight of him for about twenty seconds, which caused Lisa to panic. Apparently one of the little blankets had fallen on top of him, temporarily covering him. This can happen, Dr. Workman, and I was prepared. Lisa ran out about ten seconds before we found him again. I've restored him to his normal size and he's crying normally, as you can hear."

Workman stared at the wizard and shook his head. "Next time, Watkins, can you tell everyone not to panic? It's going to take a while for everyone to get accustomed to this new style of delivery!"

The wizard nodded. "I will, Doctor."

To be continued...

--------

Update #333: Man, I Feel Like A Woman

Tuesday, August 27, 1996
Black God Safe House
United Kingdom

NEXT UP: Moon Rocks Are Falling On My Head

Zygonov walked into the ladies room and realized immediately that he had a problem. Sure, he was wearing a dress and had Polyjuiced himself to look like his wife. However, it dawned on him that he had no idea how to go to the bathroom. As if that weren't bad enough, he had forgotten what it was like to be in his mid-twenties. He found himself ogling half of the men in the area, something which was most disconcerting -- especially since it made him wonder if his wife was cheating on him!

This was the perfect time to try Polyjuicing into a staff member. No one at the school knew Amelia Bell's personality, so he didn't need to worry about behaving in a way which would have been inconsistent with her real personality. The fact that she was teaching Muggle Studies helped as well in that he didn't need to a master at various arcane studies to be able to fake his teaching abilities.

The only problem was that he happened to have more Y chromosomes than Professor Bell. Just one chromosome made all the difference.

Zygonov shuddered at the thought of returning to Rasputin empty-handed. The Mad Monk had told him to kill Dumbledore and take Dumbledore's wand at all costs, and Zygonov knew that Rasputin did not take well to failure. It finally dawned on him that he would have no choice but to ask his wife to attempt this mission in his place.

Both he and his wife believed in Rasputin's motives and plan to bring black Koschei and rule the world in the name of the Black God. Both pledged their lives and health to his cause. However, he had to admit that he was not keen on asking his wife to actually put her life in danger. He would have done everything he could to prevent her from coming to harm. However, it seemed that he had no choice here.

Halyna wouldn't have any trouble fooling the students. For all Zygonov knew, his wife could make up some stories about Muggles and the wizards would accept them since they didn't know any better. The biggest problems would involve magical methods of seeing through the disguise.

The first involved the use of Polyjuice Potion. From what Rasputin had told him about Harry Potter's exploits at Hogwarts -- thank you, Jo Rowling -- it would be foolish to try to steal Polyjuice components from the Potions master's office. Fortunately, Rasputin had offered to supply him with
enough Polyjuice paraphernalia to last him a few months. This, combined with the fact that no one would know that he wasn't mimicking Miss Bell's real personality, covered that possibility.

The second involved Harry Potter himself. According to J. K. Rowling, Harry Potter happened to be the owner of a remarkable magical item called the Marauder's Map. This object would not only show where everyone was in the school, but it would also see through Polyjuice and identify people by their real names. Halyna would have to confiscate that as soon as possible. Otherwise, Mr. Potter would be able to blow her cover before she finalized her plans to kill Dumbledore.

The scheme Hogwarts had used to confiscate the map three years ago wouldn't work here for one simple reason: Alastair Moody, the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, would wind up with the map, not Halyna. The most obvious solution of going invisible and stealing the map would not work as (a) Moody was an adept Auror, and (b) his magical eye saw through Invisibility Cloaks. The Zygonovs would have to think of something clever in order to get this done.

Unfortunately, Zygonov couldn't think of anything clever. Even if his wife did officially confiscate the map on behalf of Hogwarts, it would look very strange for her not to immediately give it to Moody. It slowly dawned on him that if there was no way to have Harry relinquish the map to his wife, she'd have to do it the old-fashioned way.

Harry Potter had to die. Only then could she go through his pockets and grab that map.

Ideally, she'd kill him in a way which made it look like an accident. However, they couldn't use Avada Kedavra because that curse had apparently backfired when Voldemort had used it on Harry as an infant.

Fortunately, thanks to the fall of the Statute of Secrecy, they had several weapons at their disposal which had not been available to Voldemort during his first encounter with Harry Potter. Rasputin had insisted that a Muggle weapon be used to kill off Dumbledore -- otherwise, Dumbledore would be able to defend himself and start a duel. Needless to say, one did NOT want to start a duel with Albus Dumbledore. It had to be a Muggle weapon, and it had to be a surprise. If all else failed, she could test out the technique for Dumbledore on Harry and see if it worked.

Zygonov winced as he felt an odd cramp. It looked like he was about to get his period. Hopefully the Polyjuice Potion would wear off before it got too bad.

----------------------------------------------
Muggle Apparition Network Headquarters
Prescott, MA
----------------------------------------------

Rebecca Richardson nearly jumped out of her shoes when one of her new employees raced into the room with a piece of paper in her hand.

The new employee waved the paper in her face in excitement. "Ms. Richardson, you've got to read this! It's better than we could have ever anticipated!"

Richardson looked at him in confusion. "Really? What happened?"

"We're in the clear! MAN can still keep operating!"

Richardson's eyes widened. "Wow! Let me see that!"

The employee handed her the paper, and she started reading it. Midway through the second
paragraph, she began to smile. By the time she reached the end, they were hugging each other.

The Muggle Apparition Network lawsuit had been settled out of court. MAN would still be permitted to Apparate people once they signed a document indicating that they understood all of the risks associated with Apparition.

The document included a list of all of the known risks associated with Apparition. The warning against pregnant women Apparating was one of the first things listed, in bold type.

Richardson grinned and pointed at that clause. "Very interesting, Lou. If I'm reading this correctly, they can't prosecute us if they Apparate while pregnant."

The employee nodded. "Yup. Legally, it would go down as user error because supposedly they'd read the fine print."

Richardson continued his thought. "We don't even have to ask them if they're pregnant now. If a woman is two months pregnant, we no longer have to go out of the way to ask her if she's pregnant - she would know enough not to try to Apparate. And if a woman doesn't know she's pregnant and loses the baby, she'll probably think that she had a weird cycle and not blame us."

"Exactly, Ms. Richardson."

Richardson couldn't help but think of one thing. "How on earth did we manage to overcome all those lawyers?"

Lou shrugged. "The Vice President liked our idea and pitched it to Clinton."

"The Vice President? Al Gore?"

"Yes, Ms. Richardson. Once he realized that we didn't use any greenhouse gases or oil, he became very, very, interested."

To be continued...

--------
Update #333.5

--------
Tuesday, August 27, 1996
Tragura Island beach
Baltic Sea

Grand Nocturnal Andrei Drakovski took a deep breath.

He hated swimming, but now he had no choice.

The wizards would soon realize that the ash in his house wasn't vampiric and that he is alive.

He looked around to see if anyone was watching and then jumped into the water.

He WILL leave this island, no matter what.
Ever since Judgement Day, Drakovski felt that the Death Barrier which surrounded Drakura was somehow weaker.

Andrei was surprised that nobody else noticed that yet, except him of course.

Perhaps they thought that it was resistant to Judgement Day protocol?

"Who knows, who cares." he thought.

The important thing now was to reach Denmark, which was a country outside the Vampire Control Treaty.

He was strong, he could swim (even though he hated water) so he didn't see any problems.

Thanks to his vampiric speed, he reached the now-weaker Death Barrier.

Still somehow unsure, he touched it with his finger.

Nothing happened.

He grinned. "Great."

After swimming through it, he felt that his powers were slowly returning to full levels.

By definition, the wizards couldn't harm him beyond the barrier.

He knew of course that not everyone followed the rules, so he decided to swim faster.

Andrei thought how damned his people were by the VCT wizards.

Forced to be prisoners on that island for hundreds of years, ever since his stupid grandfather, Vlad Drakul, was defeated.

Drakovski felt nothing but shame when he thought about him.

It was all about to change now.

"Now, they'll see what it means to mess with Nocturnals." he said to himself and continued swimming.

-------------

Glubbdubdrib

-------------

Ever since the discovery of the Glubbdubdrib landmass, the efforts of exploration and colonisation were equally distributed among the members of what would later be named the Galiver Consortium. Over the course of centuries, the vast tropical island's festering swamps were drained, it's raging rivers regulated by dams, it's vast distances connected by stone roads, it's soaring mountain ranges crossed by bridges and tunnels. Glubbdubdrib's natural resources were methodically surveyed, then mined, harvested and hunted. The consortium's members profited splendidly from the precious metals and gems, rare potion ingredients, and exotic animals.
Of course, it was not a venture without risk or hardship. The mountain ranges of the island were the nesting grounds of dragons, and those weren't happy to give up their hard-earned place as local apex predators. They were more numerous and fierce than even the ones living on Spedarno... it's no wonder that no Muggle ever visited the island and lived to tell the tale. And even if one stayed under the dense canopies, hidden from the eyes of the airborne monsters, it was far from safe: Devil's Snare and other carnivorous, poisonous or otherwise deadly plants waited to kill the unwary, and that was only if the giant snakes, the lethifolds, or the acromantulas accidentally introduced in the 18th century didn't get them first.

This was one of the reasons why the island's colonisation progressed so slowly. Too many interests collided: many of the beasts and weeds were precious resources themselves, and with no way to domesticate them, the investors were better off sticking to only the most vital parts of Glubbdubdrib and letting nature rule the rest. The Houyhnhms didn't do otherwise in their slice of the island: the Presidential Residence stood in the middle of a small but thriving city on the shores of a navigable river section's upper end, at the foot of the waterfall where it ended. Roads connected the city to important mining towns and the coastal ringroad.

Life was a bit different here. The centaurs brought along their biped servants, but only the trolls were treated harshly: with all the other humans running around, the yahoos were treated fairly here. Also, the island had many universities and joint scientific projects, and spending some time in the multicultural atmosphere usually shaped a centaur's views into more human-friendly, pro-liberation thoughts.

Neihym didn't like being here. Sure, the place was secure and far from the fighting, but he had to live together with possible traitors of his kind. It was an open secret that the Egalitarian Party strongly overlapped with the youths sent here to the universities. He admitted that their intentions were good: after all, the official policy ever since Gulliver's visit was to slowly uplift the yahoos, so that one day they can become the centaur's equals. What the young fools failed to see was this: they weren't ready yet, neither of their species. The centaurs desperately needed the work of the yahoos, and the yahoos desperately wanted to escape from that very work, and do whatever they wanted to. "Rolling in the dirt and flinging poo at each other, most likely" thought the president. But of course, the foolish foals couldn't see past the tall tales of the South's glory, about humans and centaurs living in peace and fighting together.

Today, he'd meet some of his remaining supporters. Neihym hoped that at least they'll bring him good news- he didn't hear any of those ever since his remaining wizards rescued him from the rebel's clutches. He did what he could do to help his nation from here- now he would see what others have done to do so.

At last, the guests arrived: a small group of centaurs, and surprisingly enough, a human. The centaurs, he knew: here was Aryhym, the ambassador to Roqteratl, along with Vice President Kyhnam, and Raaghym province's governor Tiashyn. The human was a male and judging by his robes, a wizard from a far away land. Sensing his gaze, the wizard bowed formally and introduced himself: "Thiago Abeyta, wizard from South America, advisor and liaison officer to 5000 of my compatriots fighting for your government, at your service."
The president of Houyhnhmland blew out an impressed whistle. "Five thousand mages on our sides? Kynham, is it your doing?" The vice-president shook his head and pointed at Aryhym, who said: "It was me, and they only asked a favor in the distant future. We haven't had the opportunity to unleash their troops in a decent battle, but their services and their advice have already proven invaluable."

Neihym lifted a brow. "Advice? Since when do strangers know our homeland better than ours?" The ambassador replied: "They do not. However, they are very familiar with the Muggle world we suddenly found ourselves being part of. They helped us to avert many fatal mistakes."

The president sighed. "Tell me everything, son."
"By the time of your capture, the yahoo rebellion had spread over all of Houyhnhmland. The main rebel army, over 10000 strong, equipped by Muggle firearms and supported by their flying vehicles had solidified their control over Hynhynm and most of the Lowlands. Much of the centaur population fled north or east, hearing that the yahoos are committing revolting acts of cruelty. The Western Horseshoe Mountains are at war, as guerrilla war parties hunt each other down in the forests. The tunnels and the bridges had been sabotaged, so the yahoo forces had problems reaching Kynnaraas, but they are laying siege to it as we speak. Caught between the worst of the yahoo onslaught and the rebellious South, the West is finished. Speaking of the South: Lord Garhym had sacked the rightful governor of Hylonome, and is marching up north on the river road with an army of 5000 and several mercenary wizards. To make matters worse, other foreigners had made an appearance: one Father Nereu Martinez is trying to convert the yahoos to his own faith, and he is disturbingly successful at it. Other foreigners were spotted by our scouts, trying to convert yahoos to some absurd not-religion called Communism. Fortunately, it seems those two groups hate each other- with some luck our problems will solve each other. Finally, we also have problems in the East. The governor of Chiron's Landing went mad with grief over the death of his youngest son, and called for a radical solution for the yahoo question. Warbands of the Separationist militia and other radicals fly his banner as they raid humans, sadly including non-combatants. Worse still, he also hired mercenaries and got an arrangement with Syrdani wizards, probably promising yahoos to them. As for our own forces, our hold is firm on everything north of the Vashoth's spring, and we had our wizard helpers fly on scouting and hit-and-run operations over the entire North in the last few days. The success is remarkable: the yahoo advance effectively stopped, they fear to come up in the open, and those machines of them don't fly that much anymore either."

"And what of the yahoos in our territory?" inquired Neihym "I hope you didn't do anything rash to them..."

"Our first reply was to promise the death of 10 yahoos for any centaurs slain," replied Governor Tiashyn. Seeing Neihym's horrified expression, he quickly added: "but after only a few dozen executions, our friends came and advised us to lock the yahoos up in camps instead. So, now all yahoos are either doing essential work under strict supervision, or are gathered in these 'internment camps' where they are guarded but also taken care of- our advisors explained how any 'death camps' would cause the whole Muggle world to condemn us. This will tie down some of our manpower, but we can afford it. While I don't like to stand by and not retaliate while the yahoos slaughter our kind, I understand now the necessity of committing as few of these 'war crimes' as possible. Now, Mr. President, do you have any news for us?"

The president seemed sad. "Yes, I have... but you won't like it. It looks like we have supporters..."
among the Muggles, but they are in favor of dividing our nation into two halves, one for us and one for the humans. It is evident that they don't know anything about our situation... and from what I've heard, misinformed and ignorant people like these, bring important decisions that would affect us all, like the idiotic Muggles who forced a bunch of Oaths on their wizards... a bunch of oaths taken from a book of theirs, and those were flawed even in their fiction! So, I hope we can either tell them more without losing their sympathies, or managing without them, because as things are now, we won't see any more serious international help coming our way."

To be continued...

------------
Update #334: Moon Rocks Are Falling On My Head
------------
Thursday, August 29, 1996
Warren Residence
Jacksonville, NC
United States of America
------------
NEXT UP: He Obviously Wants the Cigars
------------
Linda Warren was reading the Smoky Mountain Sentinel when she heard a tremendous crash followed by the distinct warbling of a car alarm. Seconds later, her Muggle husband suddenly started swearing. Wondering what had happened, she ran outside.

The windshield of Alvin's new Corolla had been smashed, as if something had fallen on top of it. He followed her husband's gaze and her eyes quickly alit on the object which had done the deed. It appeared to be a large metal box, still sealed tightly. It took her a good ten seconds for her to realize what it was: her Portkey to the Moon. She watched in alarm as her husband started reached for it. She couldn't tell what exactly he wanted to do with it, but she had a horrifying vision of him throwing it into the trash.

Alvin put his hands around it and tried to lift it. He didn't get very far, however, as all he managed to do was tilt it somewhat. Linda heard something rattling around inside, and it took her a few seconds to realize that those were probably moon rocks. She couldn't wait to open it and see what was in there. However, she knew enough about the moon to know that the box could not be opened in the presence of oxygen. Oxygen was a corrosive gas, and there was strong possibility that the moon rocks would be damaged or modified by oxygen.

Alvin lowered the box and grunted. "Jesus, that's heavy. No wonder it smashed the windshield. Linda, you're not going to believe this, but this box fell out of the sky and hit the car. I don't know what's in it, but there's something rattling around in there. Look what it did to the windshield. Some airline is going to get sued big time!"

Linda bit her lip: she couldn't tell if it was good news or bad news. "Uh, Alvin, you're not going to believe it, but that's my box."

Alvin stared at her. "Christ, Linda! Didn't those Russian astronauts tell you to not send those Portkeys around? What's rattling around in there now, satellite panels or airplane parts? If I were them, I'd go out of my way to make sure you're won't interfere with the mission and threaten the safety of my ship and my crew! Hell, considering they already warned you about interfering once, I bet those are probably hand grenades!"
Linda chuckled. "Trust me, Alvin. Where that box went, there aren't any astronauts. Well, there were at one point --"

Alvin groaned. "OK, here's the excuse..."

Linda talked over him: " -- but no one has visited this area in a quarter century. Furthermore, only twelve people have set foot there. It would have been fourteen had it not been for the explosion in the Apollo 13 fuel tank."

Alvin's jaw dropped in realization, and he slowly turned to stare at the box. "Are you telling me this sucker went to the MOON?"

Linda nodded. "Yup. I sent it up back on Saturday and figured it would take two or three days to travel each way. It's Thursday, so that's a five-day round trip. It's quite plausible, Alvin. I didn't expect it to land on the car, but if that's where I sent it from, I apologize. It's designed to go back where it was sent."

Alvin still didn't like it. Glaring at her, he roared: "We're talking a good $1000 of repairs here, probably. That's 100 Galleons. This is a BRAND NEW CAR!"

Linda shrugged. "Don't worry, we can afford it. After all, moon rocks are extremely valuable."

Alvin froze, then slowly turned to look back at the box. "Are you telling me that there are MOON ROCKS in there?"

Linda nodded. "I hope so. The spell was supposed to open the box when it reached the destination, bury itself a few inches under the surface, skim across the ground for a few dozen feet or so digging up rocks, reseal the box, and send the box back. Considering that there's something in there, the box is sealed, and there was nothing in there when we sent it, there's a strong probability that the spell worked."

"Wow!"

Linda grinned. "Oh, there's more. You see, I attached a few mounted cameras to the underside of the top of the box. They were supposed to take pictures out the front when the door was open. Hopefully that will provide proof that the mission was a success. The odds of any of them surviving impact, I had to admit, were low, even with magical protection. However, I thought the odds were worth a try. Can I take a look at for a second? I want to see if the cameras have a shot here. If it landed upside down, the rocks will have crushed the cameras. Hold on a second here."

She walked over to the box and frowned. "Yup, it landed upside down. That could be a problem. Not only are we going to need to open this in a vacuum, we're going to need to do it in the dark as well if we have any chance of retrieving the photographs."

"Why?"

"The cameras may have been damaged on impact and possibly exposed parts of the film. We don't want them to be exposed to light too early. What time is it now?"

Alvin looked at his watch. "8:21. I was about to go to work, but I think I'm going to have a bit of a problem driving if the windshield has that nice hole in it. Why do you ask?"
"If we're lucky, someone at UNC Wilmington's physics department will be in and we can talk to him. Let's call the school and see if they have a vacuum chamber or a room which can be filled with argon or another inert gas. And one which doesn't have any lights in it."

Alvin rolled his eyes. "And how are we going to get there?"

Linda shrugged. "By broom."

Alvin flinched and looked longingly at the car. "WHAT?"

"Yup, by broom. Here, help me pick this thing up so we can strap it to the back. And BE CAREFUL! This side up!"

-------------------------------

Physics Department
University of North Carolina
Wilmington

-------------------------------

Professor Dylan Long looked at Linda in disbelief. "Wait a minute. Are you telling me that you sent one of those Portkeys to the MOON and came back with MOON ROCKS?"

"Yes, Professor. We've got the rocks over there on the back of the broom. You can see I'm a witch, sir. After all, you saw me come in."

Long shook his head. "How the hell did you manage to send one of those things to the moon? Are you sure you didn't make a mistake and it wound up in Canada or something?"

Linda grinned. "It worked, all right. I tried a Portkey to Mir and got a nasty letter written back by one of the cosmonauts."

Long drew a deep breath. "You're the one who did that? I've heard crazy Russian rumors about something like that happening, but most of us had passed it off as a joke."

"It's not a joke, Professor. If you wish, I can go back and retrieve the piece of paper. I assure you, it's real."

Long glared at her. "You realize that you put those astronauts' lives in danger, Ms. Long. You could be arrested for that."

Linda shrugged. "I used an old shoe -- I didn't think it would be that much of a problem. I must have forgotten the weightlessness. Trust me, I won't do that again. The experiment did what I wanted it to do, and that's all that matters. Now, if you wouldn't mind, can we see what we've picked up here?"

Still not convinced she was on the level, he booked some time for the vacuum chamber and weighed the box: 120 pounds. Seeing Linda was frowning, he explained that he wanted to determine how many pounds of moon rocks had been brought back. This could be done by comparing the weight of the empty box to the weight of the full box.

Linda nodded. "The empty box weighed about 50 pounds. That's about 70 pounds of moon rocks. Is that a lot?"

Long's eyebrows shot up. "A lot? All six Apollo landings brought back less than 50! Granted, you have no idea what you picked up, or where -- which reminds me, where did you take this from?"
"The Apollo 11 site, the first place I could think of."

"I see. That could be useful -- we could confirm the origin of your rocks by comparing them to known samples from Armstrong and Aldrin. First things first -- let's get everyone out of here, throw in the argon, and see what we've got. Everyone into the bunny suits."

"Argon? Do you have Ar-38?"

Long shook his head. "No. I take it you need to use magic to open it?"

"Yes. The problem is that without Ar-38, anything electric in these suits you're talking about will stop working when I cast the spell. Could that cause complications?"

Long grunted. "Yes. What's plan B?"

Linda chuckled. "Well, we can always find a drill or saw capable of cutting through this stuff."

Five hours later, all the preparations were complete. Red lights were filling the lab for photography development and protection, and the team had suited up and was about to start drilling into the box. Part 1 of the plan was the breach the vacuum seal and let the argon come in. Once pressure was equalized, they'd slice off the top of the box with a sawlike contraption.

It took them a while to open the box. However, it was worth the wait. The bottom half of the box was filed with all sorts of rocks, mostly mare basalt and regolith. There were two big surprises, however. The first of these was something which looked to be extremely reflective in the red light. It took them a good thirty seconds to realize that it was likely part of the lander, possibly a flaked-off piece of Mylar from the heat shield.

The second surprise was much less pleasant. Seconds after opening the lid, large quantities of silvery dust began wafting out of the box into the room. Long swore when he saw this and told everyone to take the cameras off the lid, put the lid back on, and get out.

Linda frowned. "Why?"

"That's probably moon dust. It's extremely fine and made of silica, and it's very good at damaging things like bunny suits. It's also a health hazard. The rest of the investigation has to be done by NASA in a specially designed vacuum lab. How are those cameras doing?"

Linda turned over the lid. "Most of the cameras appear to be in ruins. However, one of them appears to be intact."

"Is the film integrity compromised?"

"I don't think so, no."

"Good. Take out the camera, replace the lid, and let's get out of here!"

It was almost 8:00 by the time the students in the photography lab finished developing the pictures on the surviving camera. Many of the views were blocked by rocks or the snowplow of regolith being pushed in front of the speeding box. Several of them had the horizon at an angle, as if the box had been moving across uneven terrain.
Four of them, however, stood out. Apparently the camera -- and therefore the shots -- had been pointing in a different direction from the previous ones. Three shots showed the clearly recognizable, though somewhat micrometeorite-scarred -- spider form of Eagle standing on the lunar surface (albeit sideways as the box had likely been sliding into a crater). The fourth showed the American flag, faded badly by the blinding sunlight.

The four images were immediately stored to disk and analyzed with software. One of the lander shots was clear enough to make out part of a placard placed on its legs.

FOOT UPON THE MOON
JULY 1969 A.D.

Everyone looked at each other in disbelief as someone else ran in. The preliminary report indicated that 72.53 pounds of rocks had been brought in.

It was likely too late to talk to NASA. However, there was still tomorrow.

This was going to be big. VERY big.

To be continued...

------------
Update #335: He Obviously Wants the Cigars
------------
Thursday, August 29, 1996
Oval Office
White House
Washington, DC
United States of America
------------
NEXT UP: Three's a Crowd
------------
President Clinton never imaged that he would be holding a press conference with Fidel Castro in the Oval Office. How the world had changed, he thought. Less than a year ago -- come to think of it, less than three months ago -- Cuba had been a pariah state and one of the United States's most insidious adversaries.

The world had changed forever on Judgment Day, when both Miami and a location near Havana had been hit by nuclear blasts. Both Florida and Cuba had been thrown into turmoil, and people had to ask for help all over the world to deal with the disasters.

The attack near Havana had come first, when a multinational force consisting of both wizards and Muggles had tried to blow away the Death Eaters who had had been let into the country by Castro and had promptly started running amok. Cornered by Atlantean agents, the Death Eaters had done the only thing they could to deal with such a dangerous threat: detonate one of the 25 kiloton mini-nukes which Voldemort had sent to Cuba.

Needless to say, the surviving Death Eaters had not been happy, blamed Atlantis and the United States for the explosion, and vowed revenge. Figuring that Castro would have wanted such an attack anyway at some point, they had sent another mini-nuke over to Miami in a retaliatory strike. Much of the city had been leveled, and part of the shoreline had been washed away to become a brand-new Dialonis Bay.
The two attacks had been almost lost in the chaos of Judgment Day, seen as minor skirmishes in the attacks on London and New York and the worldwide operations to destroy the Death Eaters and al-Qaeda. This fact added insult to death and injury, as for the people in the affected areas their lives had been radically changed and in all too many cases ended prematurely.

Donations of food and supplies had flooded in to both targets shortly after the attack, and this had resulted in an unprecedented sharing of culture and resources between Cuba and the United States. Over the past two months, Clinton had watched in amazement and pride as more and more people in Cuba began to think of the United States as an ally state and not a capitalist adversary. Castro, of course, still wanted the United States put in his place. However, he was not in much of a position to bargain as antagonizing the United States would choke off the aid for the people of Havana.

Slowly but surely, Castro had begun loosening the Communists' grip on the country, allowing first a couple of reforms and a few weeks later a bunch more. The changes soon snowballed, and the entire nation soon found itself petitioning for more and more changes. The Cuban leader soon found himself trying to stop a cultural landslide with his bare hands, and a few weeks ago he had finally given up. Cuba was going to return to a more capitalist system, and there wasn't much anyone would be able to do about it. His final attempt to restore order two weeks ago had been met with nationwide protests and another warning from President Clinton.

Clinton saw that Castro wasn't happy. The Cuban leader just looked resigned. He had tried to make Cuba Communist, and he had seen his dream through for four decades. Nevertheless, all dreams had to come to an end. Clinton had tried to console him by saying that very few cultural institutions could have survived a nuclear exchange and Judgment Day without major changes.

Determined to save face in front of the camera, Castro nodded to Clinton and to the cameraman. The cameraman counted down from ten and pointed at the president as the red light turned on.

Clinton smiled into the camera. "Good afternoon, my fellow Americans. I hope you are doing well, and I hope you have been weathering the storm from Judgment Day -- June 20th -- the best you can. Rest assured that the federal government has done, is doing, and will do everything in its power to end this economic downturn and bring the country back to prosperity.

"I have called a press conference to announce a major change in policy towards Cuba and its people. As many of you are aware, New York, London, and Miami were not the only cities attacked by nuclear weapons on Judgment Day. A bomb exploded in upstate New York, Tel Aviv took a hit, and several bombs exploded in the Koreas.

"What many of you may not remember is the fact that a nuclear weapon detonated outside of Havana. Our sources believe that it was a suicide bombing triggered by a Death Eater wizard when he was about to be overcome by the forces of morality and law. Although Havana itself was spared by the blast, many people were killed and Cuba was thrown into chaos and confusion.

"Breaking from longstanding policy, Fidel Castro appealed to America for emergency assistance. We honored his request and sent over desperately needed food and supplies. What happened next, however, astonished most of the people in Washington. American aid rapidly began to erode decades worth of animosity between the United States and Cuba. Fidel Castro, realizing that he could not stem the tide, slowly began to introduce democratic reforms. This accelerated the process, and soon reforms were coming at a very brisk pace.

"Today is August 29th, barely two months after Judgment Day. I have the pleasure to announce that
Cuba is slowly starting to transition from a fully Communist society into one which is becoming more and more democratic by the week. President Castro and I recognize that changing Cuba into an American-style democracy will take many more years, but it is clear that the process is underway and is likely irreversible.

"To thank the Cuban people and President Castro for their faith in our way of life, it is my pleasure to announce that the embargo on Cuban goods and travel will be lifted September 1st. For the first time in decades, Americans will be able to travel to Cuba as full tourists, and Cubans will be able to do the same. In addition, Americans will be able to purchase souvenirs in Cuba from private companies and vendors. This will help nurture Cuba's budding democratic movement as well as provide the stricken nation with extra cash and supplies.

"Both President Castro and I have come to believe that both nations will benefit from this change of policy. The two nations will be beating swords into plowshares, and enterprising members of the Cuban lower classes will be able to make their way out of poverty and begin their pursuit of the American dream."

"Cuba has a lot to offer in terms of art and culture. However, it is best known for its cigars. Keep in mind, though, that smoking is bad for your health, so if you choose to use the cigars you do so at your own risk."

Clinton couldn't help but think of another use he had for a cigar. However, he doubted the American people really wanted to know about it.

---------------------
Perth Square
Hogsmeade
- - - - - - - - - - - -
"Gene and Eileen Sigmund" -- also known as Yevheniy Zygonov and Halyna Zygonova -- took a look at the house. It was small but serviceable, and it was available for a six-month lease. The real estate agent had been a bit surprised that the forty-something couple had wanted to live in a place with a bunch of twenty- and thirty-somethings, but Zygonov said that he and his wife still felt young at heart.

Zygonov looked at his wife, who nodded. Smiling, he turned back to the real estate agent. "Well, my wife likes it, and what she says goes. I think we'll take it."

The real estate agent grinned and handed over some sheets of parchment. "Excellent choice, Mr. and Mrs. Sigmund. We can start on the paperwork right here."

Zygonov hated paperwork, but he didn't see any way to avoid it here. He began filling out forms. This left his wife free to talk to the real estate agent.

Halyna looked around their new home. "Is there a phone or Apparation book around here? I want to see what resources we have available here. A map will help as well."

The real estate agent nodded and headed through the door. "Sure, Mrs. Sigmund. I'll go get one one of each."

Zygonov was about a third of the way through the paperwork when the realtor came back with two documents. "Here are a map and a phone book. Just write the name of the person you want to see on this parchment and it will print out his address and phone number."
Halyna looked at the document skeptically. "Is it up to date?"

"Of course, Mrs. Sigmund. It's magical, after all."

Halyna nodded and started writing down obvious locations like POLICE STATION and FIRE STATION. Although those locations were useful, they weren't really what she wanted. It took a good two minutes for her to bore the realtor enough to have him turn back to her husband.

Now was her chance, she thought. She scratched out BANK and wrote down BELL, AMELIA.

The address came back: 59 GREY STREET, PERTH SQUARE. Phone 077 555 2373.

Halyna smiled and wrote that down under BANK. This phone book was indeed up to date.

To be continued...
Update #336 through Update #340

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Mislagnissa

Update #336: Three's a Crowd

Friday, August 30, 1996
59 Grey Street
Perth Square
Hogsmeade

NEXT UP: Space Race II

Halyna ZYGONova found the street very quickly. Making sure to not do anything suspicious, she headed over to the front door to see if she could find Amelia Bell's home.

59 Grey Street proved to be a small apartment building. Halyna estimated that it probably held 6-9 units, two or three to each floor. This worried her a little. She had hoped that the new Muggle Studies teacher would be living by herself in a house of her own, in which case getting rid of her and Polyjuicing into her wouldn't be of a problem as no one would be there to see her. Unfortunately, that was not the case. She could only hope that her target was a bit of an introvert and didn't talk to that many people in the other apartments.

She saw a directory listing for the apartment on one of the walls just inside the front door. She looked for Amelia's name on the wall and came across an even more unpleasant surprise.

UNIT 8
Amelia Bell
Abigail Pope
Demi Woods

Merlin's beard, she thought. Not only did the girl not live in her own building, she had roommates as well!

This was going to be a big problem. Even if Amelia were an introvert and didn't interact much with the rest of the people in her building, there was no way that Halyna could get rid of her without the roommates noticing. She couldn't go over there, ring the bell, and Polyjuice into the first person she saw there because odds were that the person she chose wouldn't be Amelia.

There was another issue as well. Even if she did manage to Polyjuice into Amelia, she would have to go back to this apartment every night after work because otherwise the roommates would wonder where she was. This would leave her husband alone by himself. She didn't THINK he would be the type to start sleeping around, but who knew?

Could she convince Amelia to move out and then get her while she was alone? That was possible, but it still required that Halyna identify which of these three women was Amelia in the first place. Furthermore, the possibility of her writing a letter in Amelia's parents' names asking her to move out (trusting the owl to deliver it) wouldn't work for several reasons. First, she suspected Amelia's parents were helping out with the rent as this was an expensive area (which explained the roommates), and it wouldn't make sense for the parents to want to pay more rent. Second, the parents
were Muggles and wouldn't send mail by owl. Third, Halyna and the parent she was trying to impersonate would likely not have the same handwriting. Finally, Amelia would naturally want to try to talk to her parents and discuss this change of plans. Since the parents hadn't sent the letter in the first place, they would be quite surprised at this.

Killing the two roommates was out of the question. She didn't like killing much, for one thing. For another, the more dead bodies showed up, the more likely it was that she would be caught before she completed her mission of killing Dumbledore and retrieving his wand. For all she knew, Amelia could be enough of a suspect in the deaths of the two roommates for her to be fired from her job, removing Halyna's access to Dumbledore!

What a mess!

The more she thought about it, the more she came to realize that there was only one plausible solution. Sneak into Hogwarts during the start-of-term feast and be in the Great Hall when Dumbledore introduced the new staff members. That would tell her what Amelia looked like. The next step would be to have her husband ask Rasputin to send over another woman to be willing to become a SECOND Amelia clone. At the end of each day at Hogwarts, Halyna would return home to her husband while this second woman Polyjuiced herself to continue fooling the roommates. This second Amelia would be in a more dangerous position than Halyna herself as she faced the possibility of being detected in her true form, either while she was asleep (God help them all if the three woman shared the same bedroom) or if the Polyjuice Potion ran out. However, that would no longer be Halyna's problem.

Waiting until the start-of-term feast was dangerous. However, it made it possible for Halyna to come up to Amelia to talk to her without thinking of an excuse. Once Amelia introduced herself as the Muggle Studies teacher, she would likely be a bit of a celebrity in town -- the second Muggle ever to teach at the school. If Halyna came over, claimed she was a reporter, and pulled Amelia aside for a private interview, that could work.

She would have to become Amelia's double as soon as possible after the start-of-term feast, preferably that night. The more the students and teachers interacted with Amelia, the more likely it would be that Halyna would do something Amelia didn't do. Granted, Halyna planned on using Legilimency to pick Amelia's mind so that she could learn Amelia's habits and lesson plans. But that wouldn't be perfect.

The question now was: how was she going to break into Hogwarts for the start of term feast? There would probably be high security and press coverage as the Muggle king of England was supposedly going to become a student --

Press coverage.

Halyna grinned. She had an idea.

------------------
Jacksonville, NC

Thankfully, the second Portkey didn't land on her husband's car again. However, it was obvious that the experiment had been a failure. The box had made it to the moon and back in only three hours, just as she hoped. Unfortunately, the ride had been so turbulent and the accelerations had been so high that the box had broken up either during transit or at arrival at the moon. It looked like she was going to have to stick to Apollo-level speeds for the time being.
Her impromptu moon mission had made the news. She wondered how NASA was reacting to this.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #337: Space Race II
-------------
Friday, August 30, 1996
Goddard Space Flight Center
Washington, DC
United States of America
-------------
NEXT UP: Aim for the Illudium Q-36 Explosive Space Modulator
-------------
Jeff Glover stared at the newspaper in disbelief. This had to be a joke.

NORTH CAROLINA WITCH SENDS PORTKEY TO MOON
Returns with 70 Pounds of Moon Rocks and Photographs of Apollo 11 Lander

ASSOCIATED PRESS -- In a major breakthrough for magical technology and space travel all over the world. Witch Linda Warren from Jacksonville, NC, has just completed the world's first amateur moon mission. Warren, 44, enchanted a steel box with a Portkey charm and sent it to Tranquility Base, the location where man first set foot on the moon. This unmanned probe burrowed into the lunar surface, shoveled some soil into the box, sealed the box, and returned to Earth after taking photographs of the site.

Warren explained that she did a great deal of research and experimentation before embarking on this mission. "I know a lot about Portkeys, but I didn't know how fast I would be able to transport them or how far they could go. So I went one step at a time. I first sent a Portkey from my house to Las Vegas. When that came back intact, I sent another to Mt. Everest with a camera. The third Portkey was sent to a moving target, a friend of mine flying a broom at a few thousand feet."

The witch explained how the experiments continued until she was able to send a Portkey to the Mir space station, much to the surprise of the cosmonauts on board. This last test paved the way for the moon probe.

The seventy pounds of moon rocks retrieved by the probe does not seem like much compared to the 850 pounds picked up during the Apollo missions. However, sending a Portkey to the moon is many orders of magnitude cheaper than launching a lunar probe, let alone a sample return mission. In Warren's words, "I only spent $300 on the box and $50 each on the cameras. That's $500". Compare that to the Apollo 11 mission, which cost roughly $1 billion in 1996 dollars.

Warren explained that she read a lot of Muggle material on the moon missions and moon rocks before she sent the probe. "I realized that it would be important for the moon rocks not to be exposed to air once the box brought them in, and I realized that the surface temperature of the moon can be very high when the sun is out and very cold when it's not."

The samples returned from the moon included a piece of Mylar heat shielding from the lander, which had been stripped by micrometeorites [continued, page 3]

-------------
He turned to page 3 and nearly dropped the paper when he saw the four pictures featured on that page. One was of the American flag, which looked as if it had faded a bit under the high
temperatures and the unfiltered sunlight. The other three were of the lander, albeit tilted at bizarre angles. One of them was apparently sharp enough to read some of the text on the placard mounted on the lander's legs.

He was about to start reading page 3 when one of his officemates burst into the door with the paper in his hand. "Jeff, you're not going to --"

Glover held up the paper. "Let me guess, Michael. You're about to tell me some witch figured out how to send something to the moon for $500. Yup, I saw that as well. Impressive, yes. Whether it really happened, I'm not sure. Remember you've got wizards involved, and I wouldn't be surprised if they have the same penchant for practical jokes that some of us do."

Michael nodded. "It's real, Jeff. The Air and Space Museum just picked up the negatives from Linda's camera along with a very irritated note from one of the cosmonauts on Mir. Debbie claims to have seen them herself on display. There's also a good three-pound moon rock there which wasn't there before."

Glover frowned. "That's a lot of evidence. However, you have to understand there was magic involved here, and we don't know --"

Michael pointed at the paper again. "Take a look at the bottom of page 3. The preliminary tests -- albeit very simple ones -- on the rock given to the Smithsonian seem to indicate that it's the same type of material retrieved by Armstrong and Aldrin. If it's a hoax, it's a good enough hoax to fool even a couple of people from the Smoky Mountain facility. Ariadne has already issued a statement claiming that the moon rocks are real, and there have been several messages from Mir which seem to support this witch's theory. There are even a few shots of a Nike sneaker floating in space where it shouldn't be and disappearing a few moments later. The astronauts had covered it up for the most part because they didn't want everyone on Earth to think they were crazy."

Michael paused for a moment. "You do realize what this means, Jeff. We may have competition to deal with, competition which is MUCH more affordable than the traditional methods, so to speak."

Glover grunted. "You're thinking that our funding is going to get cut a little, especially if this Warren woman decides to start her own private spaceflight company and can start shooting things up there for a zillionth of the cost?"

"Quite possibly. One advantage we do have, however, is the fact that this probe was unmanned. We still have the American monopoly when it comes to manned space travel. The question is: how long is it going to be before Warren sends herself somewhere?"

"I see where you're going. I --"

Glover clamped his mouth shut as he saw his boss walk into the room with his own copy of the paper in his hand and a big grin on his face. Glover scratched his head: what was he so happy about?

The boss didn't leave him waiting. "There's a very strong probability that you're about to get a new coworker, guys. Her name is Linda Warren, and she'll be commuting in from North Carolina via Apparition. Unless you've been sitting under a rock for the past few hours, you probably recognize the name."

Michael cheered. "That's very good news, boss. My guess is our space program is going to advance much more quickly than we had ever dreamed. What's she going to be focusing on at first?"
"If we get her, she's going to try to see what she can do to increase the speed of the Portkeys and ensure that the boxes have been completely sterilized before they begin their journey. Granted, that box was traveling much faster than usual, but you know how big the Solar System is. The Portkey wasn't going that much faster than Apollo, and at that speed it will still take a very long time to get anywhere outside the inner Solar System. And unless she can figure out how to travel faster than light, you can forget anything outside the Solar System. I doubt people will want to wait nine years to get to Alpha Centauri and back. Once she's beefed up the velocity of the Portkeys, she's going to try to beef up the size of the Portkeys and see if they can be used to transport humans."

To be continued...

--------------
Update #337.5 Prophecies
--------------
Friday, August 30, 1996
Hiyan
Foothills region
Houyhnhnmiland

Hiyan was just another town on the road, the penultimate before the Issala widened into a lake and the north-south road branched off west towards Kynnaras. The settlement had a population around 2000, some of whom have fled north or east like Mistress Hahach and her husband, Lachshan, or have gone to war like the most hot-headed of the local yahoos. Strong Hoof Manor, dominating a plantation near the town, was slightly scorched, but fire damage was thankfully reduced by the neverending, oddly salty rain, and the general absence of the anger's target.

The army of Lord Garhym, now numbering in the tens of thousands, had some difficulties housing all the troops. Some of them, like the mercenaries, had 'Bigger on the inside' magic tents, but the majority had only normal ones or nothing at all. Garhym made the decision to ask for an equal number of yahoos- no, humans and centaurs to be taken in by the locals for the night. The rest huddled together in the tents, in several smaller camps on the top of hills surrounding Hiyan. High ground was important: this year's wet season wasn't over yet, nor the salty rains. Wizards and medics walked the army restlessly, looking for signs or hazards of illness. They couldn't afford an outbreak now.

At least the town's population was welcoming. Earlier that day, he'd been worried by rumors that centaurs from the North have been sighted lurking around, but surely they would not attack such a large army?

As it turned out, they had no intention of attacking. Shortly before sunset, his eyes picked up a wailing chant, coming from the shrublands in the east, approaching. Shortly afterwards, just about when his men came asking for his presence for the reception of a most surprising group of supporters, he could pick up the meaning of the chant. It was an old centaur dialect, predating Galiver and barely ever used anymore except for names, but as a member of a great old family of the South, descending from the last khans before Unification, his teachers made sure he learned it. As he translated and recognised the text, waves of dread swept through him.
"The Lord of the South is coming, 
I hear the thunder of his hooves. 
On the road north he rides. 
His enemies will cower before him. 
The sky itself will weep tears of grief, 
the earth itself will tremble in fear, 
the very waters will turn into poison, 
and hellfire will consume even the stones of houses. 
He is the Lord of Doom, 
and he will bring forth the change of the world."

Would it be him? The foretold Lord of Doom, bringing forth a great cataclysm? It was not his intention, but if it was written in Fate... it doesn't matter now, he decided. What matters is that some people, who would otherwise be his enemies, heard the ancient prophecy and decided to side with him. As for the ominous lines- he would worry about those when they happened. After all, there were other prophecies, yet to be triggered about the future of the Houyhnhnms- a man of reason like him would clearly see that the described events would not be the end of his people.

To be continued...

----------
Update #338: Aim for the Illudium Q-36 Explosive Space Modulator
----------
Friday, August 30, 1996
Warren Residence
Jacksonville, NC
United States of America
----------
NEXT UP: I See Dead People
----------
It was good thing she had Geminio'ed that second box, she thought. The first box had been completely destroyed in the most recent experiment, and she didn't want to spend $500 more to buy another one. There had been a brief and embarrassing interview with the Department of Magic, who had showed up at her house shortly after she had Duplicated the box. Fortunately, it had been easy to convince him that she had copied the box -- after all, he couldn't avoid seeing two identical boxes in her driveway. She was let off with an official warning and an unofficial wish for good luck with future Portkeys.

The latest experiment had been to get some sediment from the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean, many miles down off the continental shelf. Not knowing if the spell would work, she had focused on a point on her globe in her head, weighted the box down enough so that it would sink to the bottom if it materialized on the sea surface, and cast the Portkey charm.

Judging from the crushed remains of the box which had fallen out of the sky, she had a strong suspicion what had happened. The Portkey had successfully made it to the destination and had slowly started descending to the ocean floor...at which point the water pressure had become so great that it had overcome the defenses she had put around the box and destroyed it.

The Smithsonian isn't going to like this, she thought. They had already taken the note from Mir, a moon rock, and some of the photographs. She had promised them that she would hand over the box
once she was done with the latest set of experiments. That wasn't going to happen, however.

She planned to send over this new box as soon as she was finished with this latest experiment.
Getting samples from the Moon had been impressive. However, it would be nothing compared to this latest attempt: getting samples from the surface of Mars.

She had tinkered with the recipe for the Portkey and had managed to speed up the box enough for it to get to Mars and back safely in approximately a month and a half. That would be significantly longer than the trip to the moon, of course. However, there wasn't much she could do about that. Mars was much, much further away from the Earth than the moon was.

The preparations for setting up the Mars box were similar to those for setting up the moon box. She would sterilize the box and the cameras to the best of the her ability before sealing it, and this time she would make certain that the box landed rightside up. The Mars mission, however, had several complications which the moon mission had never had to deal with.

First and foremost was the fact that the books claimed that Mars may have once had water -- and if so, primitive life. For all the scientists knew, the water and life may still be down there somewhere. She had read that oxygen was a very reactive gas, one which could damage all sorts of unusual lifeforms if they still existed on Mars. She therefore had to make certain to remove all of the air from the Portkey before sending it on its way. In addition, Mars had a thin but distinct atmosphere. She figured that the Portkey should at least try to bring an air sample back to Earth. Sealing a vacuum in the box would help here as well in that air would rush in as soon as the box was opened on the surface of the Red Planet. Bringing an air sample along for the ride could be important for the health and well-being of any Martian lifeforms which were going to be traveling back to Earth.

The second major complication came from the fact that it would be unwise to open the box at her home or even the UNC Wilmington lab. The combination of Martian air along with possible alien lifeforms required that it be opened in a place with far better quarantine...such as NASA itself. NASA would also be much more qualified to capturing and studying the Martian air than some physics lab in Wilmington.

She looked forward to working with NASA. Magic would likely allow the space program to expand beyond the Muggles' wildest dreams. What's more, if the rumors were true that Boeing was thinking of getting into space travel, manned interplanetary spacecraft might not be as far away as she had thought.

Looking at the star chart to make sure that Mars was visible in the sky, she nodded and tapped the Portkey to send it off on its mission to Vallis Marineris. Six weeks from now, if everything went as planned, the human race will have retrieved its first Martian rock and air samples.

The Portkey disappeared...along with virtually all of the streetlights in the area. People came out of their houses to ask where the power failure had come from, and the neighbor across the street suddenly started screaming that his microwave oven had shorted out and was on fire.

Linda had a horrible suspicion that she knew what happened. The sheer amount of magical energy required to send the package to Mars at a high rate of speed had been enough to short out electrical systems in a good 100 foot radius. Thankfully, cars kept on operating with their metal Faraday cages shielding them from the electronic interference. Her husband began complaining that the TV had shorted out, and she began to worry if the power surge had been enough to make it through the Ar-38 barrier. She hadn't seen this effect with the moon Portkey, though her neighbor had eventually told her in passing that his phone lines had been garbled momentarily.
This would be the last interplanetary Portkey to be sent from this house, she decided. The next ones would be sent from a secure, safe location on NASA property.

------------
Xylend Embassy
Xylenda/Roqteratl Trading Post

------------------

It hadn't taken Megan Baldwin much convincing to let Oxford University to send her on this mission. She had started to make a name for herself and the university through her link to Hogwarts, and both parties wanted to promote themselves still further. That mental screwup which convinced her that her mother had been deathly ill may have cost her her position at Hogwarts, but that didn't mean she could take on something possibly even more important.

Right now, she and a group of ten other anthropologists were sitting in a meeting room in the trading post on Kodiak Island, in the United States. They had been selected by the Xylend ambassador to be the first group of Muggles to visit Xylenda.

Sitting across the room from them were ten citizens of Xylenda, three men and seven women. The ambassador claimed that they were anthropologists as well and would be undertaking a similar mission studying the Muggles of the United States.

This mission would be easier than many other investigations of new cultures because the language barrier, while there, was relatively minor. Most of the Xylend spoke Galiver, a bizarre dialect of English which seemed to be a cross between Shakespeare and some unknown language. People would sometimes have to repeat their requests to get the messages across, but communication was at least possible.

Megan was starting to have an awful suspicion about what she'd find out there. First a previously unknown territory called Houyhhnmland had a revolution, and now another country in the Pacific spoke a language whose name sounded a lot like the fictional character Gulliver. Combine this with the discovery of a kingdom of giants up in the Pacific Northwest, and it made her start wondering whether the Gulliver's Travels expeditions had actually took place. Swift had claimed that Houyhnhnmland had been a country where talking horses had ruled humans, a description which had proven to be almost exactly correct. Could this Xylenda have been visited by Gulliver as well? Had this particular nation been edited out of Swift novel because the humans were...boring?

The Xylend representatives looked at her and fidgeted a little. Finally, one of them basically shrugged. "You're going to find out anyway, I suppose, when you come over. Yes, the other islands exist. The Dread Galiver visited us as well, and we Obliviated him when he left so word of our existence never made it back to the Muggle world. However, I plead with you to not reveal information about Lilliput and the other nations to the Muggles. They have not yet agreed to reveal themselves to your world, and it would be discourteous in the extreme to expose them without their permission. Houyhnhnmland, incidentally, hadn't planned to come out either -- they only exposed themselves because some human rebel sabotaged the device hiding them from your world to try to get the United States's attention after the Americans interfered with Syrdan."

One of the other Muggles frowned. "Interfered with what?"

The Xylend swore and looked around for support. Eventually, he explained that Syrdan was another nation-state and that its location and existence must also be kept secret.

Each emissary was given an Invisibiliity Cloak to ensure that he or she be able to study the
inhabitants of the target society without interference. The Xylends had been inoculated against Muggle diseases, and the Muggles were currently working on a shot which would ensure that the Muggle anthropologists not get sick on Xylend soil.

The Muggles had naturally been extremely excited when they first received their cloaks, and there had been several experiments which inevitably resulted with people bumping into and scaring each other. The ambassador, who had expected this, had rolled his eyes and told everyone that these cloaks were not toys and should be treated with care.

The latest reports had the vaccinations against the Xylend diseases ready for use by Tuesday. Once the shots were out of the way, the two missions would begin. The ambassador would escort the ten Muggles over to a Portkey capable of transporting multiple people and the expedition would begin. Meanwhile, the ten Xylend would be placed on a boat and sent to Juneau, where they would start their observations.

Megan couldn't wait for this to get started, and she could tell that her impatience was shared by the other scientists.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #339: I See Dead People
-------------
Friday, August 30, 1996
Department of Mysteries
[location classified]
Department of Magic
United States of America
-------------
NEXT UP: If You Lose, Bite Him
-------------
Michael Durrant burst into Joe Hugeley's office with a sheepish look on his face and a book in his hand. "You're not going to believe this, Joe, but I finally figured out what 'apa apaan ini' means."

Hugeley's eyes widened. "That's great! What did that woman say?"

Durrant chuckled. "Think about it for a second. You're flying around in Sheol, minding your own business, when all of a sudden you see something unusual. What is the first thing you would likely ask your friend?"

Hugeley thought for a second, then shrugged. "'Hey, what's that?'"

Durrant nodded and showed him the book, which appeared to be a Malay-English dictionary. "That's exactly how that woman responded. It's Malay, Joe. That expression means 'what the hell is this?'".

Hugeley nearly died laughing. "We should have known. We send the probe in, this lady sees it, wonders what it is, and picks it up. We spent all this time thinking it was a hex or curse or something, but it's not. All that worry for nothing. We definitely learned something, though."

"Indeed, Joe. And judging from the fact that a new, more extensive probe is ready, we're going to learn a lot more in a few minutes. We've finally figured out how to get it to fly around in there, and it cost under $400."
Hugeley whistled and got up. "Really? How'd you do it?"

Joe chuckled. "Flying carpet. Those two kids have set up a store in Prescott, conveniently located right next to one of the MAN Apparition points. Come on down and I'll show you everything we've got here."

The two men went down to the Death Chamber. The entrance to the Deathgate was closed, as usual. Sitting a few feet in front of the entrance was a small flying carpet festooned with images of Kermit the Frog and Bugs Bunny. The edges of the carpet had odd magical contraptions placed on them, presumably to push the borders to steer the carpet remotely. The center of the carpet had a large glass box on it filled with instruments. A long wire snaked out of the glass and over to a power generator.

Durrant pointed at the box. "Look what we've got in here, Joe. We've got a camera like last time, this time enhanced by a two-way communication system so that we can talk to the dead people. There's a thermometer, barometer, and a whole bunch of Muggle instruments to sample the environment. At the front of the box are two Muggle illumination devices which will allow us to see the immediate vicinity."

He lifted the rug up a little so that Hugeley could see the writing on the bottom. "We replaced the Guinevere's Flying Carpets logo with a message to the dead written in Malay, English, Chinese, and Hindi. We're telling them that we have come in peace and would like to learn more about their world."

Hugeley clapped his hands as Durrant let the edge of the rug drop. "Bravo, Mike. That's impressive. How long did it take you to cobble that together?"

"Not that long, Joe. That astronaut witch gave us the idea for the box, and most of the time was spent going to various Muggle stores trying to purchase the Muggle equipment."

Hugeley looked around the room. "I see. You're still planning to pull it back by yanking on the cord? I suspect that carpet is made of organic materials, so it may not be able to come back."

Durrant nodded. "We're planning to use the cord in case the carpet doesn't want to come back. I suspect the carpet will go in and out without any issues, though. There isn't an organic thing in it."

Hugeley laughed. "Muggles can be so funny sometimes."

"Amen to that. And as far as the cord goes, we've deactivated the alarm around the Deathgate so that the ring of fire doesn't pop up. Instead, we'll just seal the door to the room before opening the Deathgate."

Hugeley pursed his lips, impressed. "You've done a good job here, Mike. Let's head up to the control room and begin the mission."

The two men headed up to the control room and turned on all the Muggle television monitors. Everything appeared to be in working order, and the cameras were broadcasting images of the closed door to the Deathgate.

Hugeley made sure that the entrance to the Death Chamber was sealed and opened the Deathgate. The door slid aside as Durrant picked up the Muggle remote control device, got the flying carpet off the ground, and carefully flew it into the Deathgate.
There weren't any spirits in the immediate vicinity, though Hugeley suspected that they would investigate as soon as they could. Durrant manipulated the remote control some more, and the carpet began to move away from the Deathgate on the far side.

He turned the carpet around so that they could see where they had come from. They were surprised to find that spirits on the other side saw the same filmy curtain from Sheol that the Muggles did from the real world. Both men had thought that they should have been able to see into the lab. Well, apparently they had been mistaken.

Durrant looked at some of the equipment and whistled. "Temperature is about seventy-five below zero Fahrenheit. No wonder people die when they enter the gate: they freeze to death almost immediately. Air pressure is 320 millibars, about a third the pressure at Earth's surface. Most of the gas here appears to be methane, ammonia, neon -- this is weird stuff, Joe."

Hugeley wrote down some notes. "Any oxygen?"

"Not that we can detect. If the cold and low pressure didn't finish off people who stumbled in here, the lack of oxygen would."

"Do you see any land in the area?"

"Not that I can tell. We can't see very far, though. The --"

Suddenly a man's voice burst out from behind the probe: "What is this?"

The two men stared at each other. The man had spoken in modern English!

Durrant suddenly thought for a second. Covering the microphone, he spoke quietly. "This isn't as crazy as it seems. The world population was relatively low until recently, which means there is a surprisingly high probability that if a random dead person was contacted, he would have died within the past few hundred years. And you can probably guess what the most popular languages have been over the past century: English and Chinese. The fact that that woman spoke modern Malay also testifies to this."

Hugeley's eyes widened as he spoke into the microphone. "Hello there, sir. How are you?"

The man hesitated for a moment, as if he hadn't expected this. Eventually, he replied. "Good heavens, a machine which can talk. How curious!"

Durrant spoke quickly in Durrant's ear as he began turning the carpet around. "I'm thinking eighteenth or nineteenth century -- he isn't familiar with microphones and recording equipment. Sounds British or Canadian."

The man continued to talk. "Hello, Mr. Machine. Are you alive? If so, how did you get here? Are you a spirit of a dead machine? When you broke, did you come here?"

Hugeley had to improvise. "Actually, sir, this device is a machine which allows living people to explore your realm without dying. My name is Joseph Hugeley, and I am contacting you from the town of Prescott, Massachusetts in the United States of America. Today's date is August 30, 1996."

The man whistled. "Ingenious, sir, but not that surprising considering how fast technology has ben
advancing. I would like to speak with my descendants, if that is possible, and see how they are
doing. My name is Bartholemew Sykes, and I was born and raised in Ottawa, Canada. I was born on
June 4, 1832, and died on July 7, 1904. Do you by any chance know about me? You must know a
lot in 1996."

Durrant bit his lip as the carpet continued to turn. "I'm afraid I don't, Mr. Sykes. Technology is not as
advanced as one might have thought. Tell me a little more about yourself."

"I was born in Ottawa and moved to New York after I got married in 1855. I worked as a
shopkeeper for a couple of years before being called upon to serve my new homeland in the war
against the Confederate States of America. I served in the 52nd New York Infantry Regiment and
saw some action in the war."

Hugeley couldn't believe what he was hearing. This man was a Civil War vet!

"I saw horrors during this war that I do not wish to discuss, and many of the other veterans I have
spoken with here agree that it was all a pointless waste of lives. I've even run into two men from my
regiment who fell in battle: John Porter and Asa Johnson."

"I returned home in 1863 and continued to raise my family. I had four children, three of whom
survived to adulthood. Their names were Elizabeth Sykes, Mary Sykes, and Irving Sykes. My store
went under in 1877, at which point I worked as railroad technician. I was eventually promoted to
manager and was responsible for laying many miles of track in the New York area and southern
Canada."

"I retired in 1895 and spent the last few years of my life in the care of my wife, my three children,
and my ten grandchildren. I lived long enough to see Mary's eldest, Sarah, get married in 1901."

Durrant looked at Hugeley and whistled. "If this guy had ten grandchildren he's GOT to have
descendants who are still around. We've got to get these two together..."

Hugeley waved him off impatiently and continued to talk. "Mr. Sykes, this is the first time we have
been able to interact with someone who has passed on. May we ask you a few questions?"

By this time, the carpet had made its full 180 degree rotation and was illuminating a blurry image of a
short, bald man in nineteenth-century dress. He wouldn't have looked out of place in a Civil War
photograph.

The man nodded. "I will do my best to answer, but keep in mind that I am not a wise man."

"That's all I can ask, sir. What is death like?"

Sykes shrugged. "I do not know, sir, as I died in my sleep. I fell asleep next to my wife, and when I
next opened my eyes I was here."

"Have you been able to contact God at all in Sheol?"

Sykes frowned. "In what?"

"Sheol, sir. That is the word we use for the location you are in right now."

Sykes suddenly nodded. "Ah -- I recall the term from the Old Testament. Most of us here refer to it
as Purgatory, the World to Come, the afterlife, Hell, Hades, or Heaven. However, Sheol also makes sense. At any rate, to answer your question, I have not been able to contact God in this location. However, I feel He is with me in that I have been privileged to be given the opportunity to speak once more with the world of the living."

"Were you a religious man?"

Sykes nodded. "I went to church two or three Sundays a month to try ask guidance from Him and to help recuperate from my experiences during the war."

"What denomination were you?"

"Presbyterian."

"Are there people from all faiths here?"

"Yes, sir. I have met Muslims, Jews, Hindus, pagans, and atheists. Everyone appears to come here."

"Do you know of any situations where a particularly righteous or evil person passed on and did not come here?"

Sykes shook his head. "No, I do not. However, I cannot rule out the possibility that people go directly to the classical Heaven or Hell."

"Were you a wizard?"

Sykes blinked. "A what?"

"Wizard, sir. Someone who casts spells."

Sykes looked amused. "You mean to tell me that you have discovered magic in 1996? Most fascinating. Then again, it seems a logical extension of the ability to fly and the ability to use horseless carriages."

Durrant spoke urgently in Hugeley's ear. "Joe, he died before the Statute of Secrecy fell. If he's a Muggle, as appears to be the case, he doesn't know wizards exist."

Hugeley rolled his eyes and continued jotting down notes. "Indeed. We have learned to many things in our time. Magic is just another of those things which is just coming over the horizon, similar to your horseless carriages and airplanes. I've got a couple of more questions. Have you ever wanted to come back to the real world and contact your descendants directly?"

Sykes's eyes widened. "Are you saying you know how to reverse death as well? Most remarkable!"

Hugeley laughed. "I'm afraid death is still absolute, sir. However, have you tried to return to the world of the living at all?"

"Of course. Who wouldn't?"

"How did that go?"

Sykes face fell. "I was unsuccessful. Either I did not know how to do it or I could not make it
through the black curtain."

"Black curtain?"

Sykes pointed at the Deathgate. "A door such as this. I have heard stories about people crossing over, but they are few and far between."

"Really? How many people are able return to the world of the living like this?"

Sykes thought for a moment. "I would say roughly one in every one hundred. The reason I think they know something I do not is that when they go through the opening, they glow. I do not recall seeing people glow, though."

Durrant whistled. That was roughly the same ratio as the Q and Z genes, and the description on the spirit of the other side seemed a lot like that of a ghost. That could not be coincidence.

Hugeley had to cut the interview short. "I'm sorry, Mr. Sykes, but I believe we have to go soon. Would you be willing to chat again at some point this week? If you want, we will see if we can find some of your descendants and have them visit."

Sykes nodded quickly. "I would like that very much, in fact. Until then, farewell."

The spirit floated away as Hugeley and Durrant pulled the flying carpet and box back into the Death Chamber. The carpet somehow managed to make it back through completely intact.

They were putting away the carpet when Durrant suddenly realized something.

"Joe, do you realize that we're going to have to bring this guy's descendants into the Department of Mysteries for this?"

Hugeley froze. "Oops. I'll have to read up on Obliviation again..."

To be continued...

--------------
Update #339.5 Useless inventions
--------------
Friday, August 30, 1996
Eastern Pacific, north of Spedarno
--------------

Flying over the rain clouds, the boat whizzed past a flock of seabirds, it's fine-tuned repulsing charm slightly altering the flight path of those that otherwise would get too close. The boat belonged to Samanar Naztheros, exile of Syrdan, citizen of Roqterat, but it was a far cry from the improvised aircraft confiscated by the Cape Verde Ministry of Magic a month ago. This was the third such vehicle: the second one was hastily enchanted just like the first, and sold after a week to a curious Laputan.

Sam's idea to buy Muggle goods at the Kodiak Outpost, fly them to various Hidden Nations and sell them there proved to be highly profitable, so they could afford the best of the best: the third boat was carefully selected for perfect aerodynamics and quality, it's cargo bay magically enlarged to four
times the size it was from the outside (or rather, the cargo was shrunk to quarter it's size), it's controls upgraded so that instead of driving with the original steering wheel and a wand for altitude, it was now entirely Muggle-compatible- this was to please the Veela Myrtille, who, as their house-elf shamelessly put it after requesting to speak freely of his master's girlfriend, 'sucked at magic big time'.

To avoid any further run-ins with any sort of flight control, this boat was highly visible: painted bright red with a reflecting silver pattern, and sporting a set of lights for night... and last but not least, a Wireless. The little magical radio, present in almost every wizarding household in the Unhidden Lands, was a rare commodity in the Hidden Nations. But now, they not only could afford it, they had to... all three of them knew they already got lucky once when they didn't notice the Muggle flight control hailing them, and telling they are about to collide with a fricking airplane.

The wireless was on, but for the most time, it's only sound was statics. Not surprising, this far out above the ocean, but suddenly, a voice began to speak. Myrtille, sunbathing on a rug spread over the deck, lazily reached out to turn the volume up. It was the newsreel, speaking in Galiver- meaning they were getting close to their destination.

...in North-west America, Mutsu Bay and Noto Island in Japan, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy in the Russian Far East, Sur in Oman, Cape Town in South Africa, Lagos Lagoon in Nigeria, Roqteratl and the affected Muggle governments announced the commissioning of two new trading outposts, this time in South America. The La Plata Delta facility will be shared between Argentina and Uruguay, and the Isla Puná Outpost, itself in Southern Ecuador, will also be a free trade zone open to Perú. The Eldest voiced his best wishes for the cooperation between the nations, Roqteratl, and the local merpeople tribes.

In other news, the Cape Verde Ministry of Magic announced a new, patented magical solution for the protection of jet aircrafts. The spell combination offers a relief from the eternal fear of collision with birds and small particles such as ash or sand blocking the intakes, and even offers some countermeasures against collision with other aircraft. Just as much as the device's first test run a month ago nearly caused an accident, they hope this invention will ultimately help prevent an untold number of accidents.

The crysis of Houyhnhnmland apparently reached another turning point yesterday, when the involvement of both Christian and Communist Muggle agents were confirmed...

Myrtille's head perked up as an idea occurred to her. "Honey, how much do you think these Cape Verde guys would pay you if you went back and told them the repulsing charm is your invention? I mean, you can prove you did it first, with Priori Incantatem. That patent is rightfully yours."

The wizard thought over it. "Well, I suppose I could, and I would if I had no better ways to earn money. However, I think they added a lot to the spell, last I checked the version I used back then didn't include protection against flying ash. Also, the patent is not for the spell itself, it's for using it on Muggle jet aircraft- this I didn't do, ever. And even if they were willing to give me a share, that only goes after each piece of those aircrafts outfitted with that specific magic... and with magical flight no longer a secret, I don't see much of a future for those. It'd be better to patent the flying boat
enchantment package, like those American girls did with the flying frigging carpets, but somehow after more than a decade of living like a damned criminal, I'd rather earn my money as an honest merchant instead of claiming the ideas of long-dead great wizards and witches as my own. Now, what did it say about Houyhnhnmland?"

Floppy the house-elf dutifully replied: "That after nine days from the ghost of the Propher Samuel's summonings, Father Martinez excused himself from returning to him, and claimed he can't abandon his flock in such dangerous times, lest their hearts are swayed by the false promises of Communism or other heathens. Apparently, members of the Peruvian terrorist organisation Shining Path have also gathered quite a following there, and the two groups are getting hostile. Also, there was an expert who guessed that the presence of these groups might be the prelude to a land-grab by Muggle nations. Meanwhile, the rebellion's advance has come to a halt in the north and the east."

Saying his thanks to the elf, Samanar looked forward at a strange cloud formation: normal clouds stretched as far as their eyes have seen, but there was also a second, ghostly set of clouds, lifting as they used to when the sea wind hits mountains. And faintly visible under them, there were mountains: like a mirage first, but as they reached the point where the first ghost clouds appeared, they underwent a sudden change: the 'normal' set of clouds disappeared, and the 'ghostly' set became real, along with the mountains under it, their jagged edges and canyon wall towering only a few miles away. The land, wherever it was anything close to horizontal, was covered by lush rainforests, or the charred remains of those- an obvious sign of dragon habitation.

Speaking of which, the three travelers had the luck to witness a dragon catching a shark in the coastal waters. Seeing the fear crossing his girlfriend's face at the sight of the flying beast, the wizard told her: "Don't worry, Little Fruit. Dragons are slow to gain altitude, even without the burden of their prey. We only have to stay above the clouds and keep looking up, and we'll be prefectly safe." Then, as he spotted humans on brooms in the distance, he smiled reassuringly at Myrtille, and, for the bazillionth time, cast Sonorus on her. To their experience, "Muggle crafts! Fine Muggle and Merpeople crafts, directly from Kodiak!", spoken by the silky voice of the Veela, was one of the most profitable thing to say, when confronted by local border patrol and customs.

To be continued...

--------------
Update #340: If You Lose, Bite Him
--------------
Saturday, August 31, 1996
Cooper Household
United Kingdom
--------------
NEXT UP: First Years, This Way
--------------
Harrison Cooper was having more and more trouble sleeping, and he doubted it was because of his recent transformation. The last few changes had been relatively benign, and he had spent most of his time either in windowless rooms or sleeping.

The Wolfsbane Pill experiments were still going on. However, it was fairly obvious that the pill was working well enough for it to be endorsed by the British Ministry of Magic and the emperor of
Luggnagg. All that was left was to determine if the preservatives needed to extend the life of the drug caused the werewolves to experience any additional medical side effects. Rumor had it that the invention of the Wolfsbane Pill had earned Severus Snape a nomination for the Nobel Prize in Medicine. Whether he would win it was anyone's guess.

The most exciting news in "Animal House", as the new werewolves were calling it, was the fact that Lauren Mistry had gotten herself pregnant and the scientists were placing bets as to whether the infant would be a wolf, human, or lycanthrope. Supposedly it all depended on what time of the month the baby was conceived. Lauren had admitted that she couldn't remember when it had happened, so all of the options were on the table.

The arrival of the moon rocks had thrown the entire medical establishment into a tizzy. Realizing that small amounts of the infectious agent could be helpful in creating vaccines, people were already clamoring for access to Linda Warren's moon rocks. NASA had supposedly nearly had apoplexy when the request had come in, and odds were that the request would be denied. Still, one could only hope.

Harrison's primary concern involved his upcoming trial in the Dutch courts for the damages he had inflicted on his victims during his first transformation, back on the Noordam. Although he had no memory of the attacks, he had been told that he had attacked many people, including several of the people who were being held in Animal House. Even more worrisome was the fact that three people who had lost loved ones in the attack were trying him for murder.

He had spoken with many of the people he had bitten and managed to convince most of them that he hadn't meant any harm. He had explained, under Veritaserum, that he had not known that he was a werewolf prior to the attack. Yes, he had gotten sick a week before the full moon, but he and his wife had passed it off to mundane effects such as food poisoning and allergies. Hell, he hadn't even known that werewolves actually EXISTED prior to the attack! It had never occurred to him that this monster which had attacked him in the football stadium had actually been a former Hogwarts professor!

He had several lawyers on his side, both Muggle and Wizarding. They suspected that the plaintiffs would concede that premeditated murder was likely not going to stick and consequently try to get him charged with involuntary manslaughter. If that happened, the lawyers advised him that it would likely stick. The attacks were, indeed, involuntary as he had no control of his actions at the time. If he were convicted of this, he would likely be facing a couple of years of prison time.

Prison time in this case didn't make much sense, however. Prisons were designed as "correctional facilities", and the inmates were supposed to be held there until the authorities considered them to have reformed enough to return to society. In Harrison's case, however, he didn't think he need reforming. If anything, Snape's assistance had provided him the training he needed to return to society. He didn't need prison time.

He looked at his wife, whose pregnancy was most definitely showing now. The most recent estimate of her due date was November 18, and as far as the doctors could tell everything was developing according to plan. Although the wizards had assured him that he couldn't transmit the werewolf genes to Courtney or the baby through anything other than a bite, he had been playing it safe ever since he had first found out about his condition. As a result, he had convinced his wife to abstain from relations in the week prior to his transformation.

As far as the civil damages went, the wizards suspected that the fines and penalties would be steep. Many people had been bitten, and several of them still refused to talk to him. However, there were
rumors that the British Ministry of Magic would pay most, if not all, of the fine. After all, he had only
found himself in a position to harm those people on the boat because the Ministry had been negligent
in their abilities to track him down on the boat.

There was nothing anyone could do at this point, however. What was done was done, and all he
could do was wait.

--------------------
Headmaster's Office
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Amelia Bell flinched as the staircase leading to the Headmaster's Tower suddenly began pushing her
up towards the ceiling. A few minutes later, she found herself in Dumbledore's office, where the
headmaster greeted her with Severus Snape in tow.

Amelia nodded to the headmaster. "You wished to see me, Professor Dumbledore?"

Dumbledore nodded. "Indeed I have, Amelia. How have your lesson plans been going? Do you
think you're going to be able to teach the class?"

Amelia nodded. "I think so, Professor. Megan gave me some of her notes, and she told me about
some of the students. At the very least, I'll be able to start with Muggle England. I know my own
culture pretty well, after all."

"Indeed you do, Amelia. I'm sure you'll do fine. If it's any consolation, you seem at least as
competent as Megan was, and the students loved her."

Amelia blushed. "I hope I can fill her shoes, Professor. Speaking of the students, I have heard rumors
that King William will be attending Hogwarts this year. Is this true?"

Dumbledore nodded. "Indeed, he is. To the best of my knowledge, he is going to be the first reigning
monarch -- let alone Q-only wizard -- to attend Hogwarts. If he makes it through his first year, we'll
think about keeping him here all seven years. Be advised that he will be exempted from Muggle
Studies, so you won't have to teach him."

Amelia nodded. "I understand, sir. To be honest, I wasn't sure what I was going to do if I had to
teach him. I mean, I grew up with Elizabeth as queen, not Laura. I don't think I'd be comfortable
treating him like any other student. I couldn't imagine the amount of trouble I'd get into by
accidentally killing the King of England."

"His Majesty is going to in very safe hands. There are going to be several British secret agents in
Hogwarts as long as William is here, including several experienced SAS men. They will be armed
with Muggle weapons and only with Muggle weapons, and they will not interfere with his studies
unless he finds himself in a life-threatening scenario, which the rest of the teachers are going to try to
avoid."

Dumbledore then stared at her, hard. "The issue of the king's security -- and that of the students in
general -- is the reason I have brought you here. It's going to be a formality, to be sure, but you
should at least know about it."

Amelia frowned. "What's going on?"

Dumbledore explained. "As you may or may not be aware, one of Voldemort's agents, a man named
Bartemius Crouch Jr., was able to neutralize and impersonate one of our staff members a couple of years ago. We had hired Alastair Moody to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts, but Mr. Crouch incapacitated him and took his place for the semester. Crouch did a very good job, studying Moody well enough to completely fool the staff. Thinking himself beyond suspicion, he rigged the Triwizard Tournament so that Harry Potter would win and transport himself to Little Hangleton to serve as an unwilling accomplice in Voldemort's return. Because of Crouch's subterfuge, Voldemort was able to return and begin his takeover of the world.

Snape handed her a bizarre, yellow drink which smelled horrible. "Miss Bell, we have changed the security policies of this school when it comes to new teachers. When it comes to existing teachers, we are counting on their experience and our familiarity with their mannerisms to ensure that people do not impersonate them like they did Professor Moody. With new people, however, we realize that we have no way to tell if you indeed are Amelia Bell or someone impersonating her. To prevent people from impersonating you, we demand that you drink this potion."

Amelia looked at it warily. "What is it?"

"This potion will counter the effects of Polyjuice Potion, a draught used by evildoers and spies to impersonate other people. If someone under the Polyjuice Potion were to consume this drink, it would cause them to revert back to their original form so we would be able to catch them. If you aren't using the Polyjuice Potion, it will have no effect. Now, be a good girl and drink this up."

Amelia took a few sips and nearly threw up. "Bah -- it tastes awful! Do I have to drink all of it?"

Both wizards nodded. Bracing herself, she shook her head in disbelief and drank it all down.

The wizards looked at her for a few minutes. Seeing that she wasn't turning into a frog or anything like that, Snape shook her hand. "You see, nothing happened. It's just a formality for a security protocol. I apologize for the taste, but that's the best we can do."

Dumbledore continued. "You'll get a couple of spot checks, roughly once every other month or so. They'll be unannounced, so if people do try to impersonate you -- which I doubt will happen -- we'll be able to get them. Rest assured that you won't have to drink that again until at least November."

Amelia barely heard the last sentence as she was busy at the water fountain trying to get the bad taste out of her mouth. How the hell did these students take a potions class without killing themselves, or at the very least their taste buds?

To be continued...
Update #341: First Years, This Way

Monday, September 2, 1996
Platform 9 3/4
King's Cross Station
London
United Kingdom

NEXT UP: The Sorting Hat and the King (.5)

The first thing Harry Potter noticed when he first boarded the train was that there were many fewer students than last year. The reason was painfully obvious: they had been killed when Voldemort's surprise had detonated in the Ministry of Magic. The Patil twins were gone, Dean Thomas was no more, and Colin Creevey -- he of the Muggle camera -- had also been killed. Hermione could have very easily been killed herself had she not taken quick and decisive action after the bomb had gone off. Rumors were spreading that Susan Bones had been forced to withdraw from the school because her mother, who had been the family breadwinner, had been killed in the blast and the Boneses were having trouble paying the tuition.

And that had just been Gryffindor. All four houses had been affected, even Slytherin. No one had come away unscathed.

Kings Cross Station had been repaired quickly after the bombs had gone off and was back in business. Platform 9 3/4 hadn't been touched, thanks to the fact that the portal connecting it to the rest of the station had been closed at the time of the blast. The students had headed over there as they had done for so many years.

For the first time in a long time, Harry was not the center of attention. That privilege had gone to King William, who was sitting in his booth on the train along with Ron, Ginny, and Hermione. The compartment was surrounded by paparazzi, both Muggle and Wizarding. He caught a brief glimpse of Rita Skeeter -- in her bug form -- perched on the window and had to convince Hermione and William not to swat her. He had passed J. K. Rowling in the corridor, where she had been gawking at some of the bizarre foods on the trolley.

Ron looked at the king in disbelief. "I must confess, Your Majesty, I never thought I'd see the king of England actually attending Hogwarts. Are you sure you know what you're in for?"

William nodded. "Snape told my mother, who relayed everything to me. My mother tried to talk me out of it, but I told her I thought I could handle it. It looks like I'm going to be given special training by the Witch Queen and some Korean chap."

Harry blinked at him. "The Witch Queen? Who's the Witch Queen?"

Hermione explained. "You know how the Wizarding Romanovs and Hapsburgs came out and offered to serve as ceremonial Muggle co-rulers? Britain was like that as well. There was a line of Wizarding royals similar to the Romanovs and Hapsburgs. William here had a colleague he didn't
know about, a woman named Laura Spencer. Her Majesty has offered to help train William."

William looked at her in confusion. "My grandmother did what?"

Hermione mentally kicked herself. "Oh, I'm sorry, William. I keep on forgetting that when you think Her Majesty, you think Elizabeth. You're going to have to start getting accustomed to that."

William rolled his eyes. "I'm barely accustomed to being king at this point! Which reminds me, I also need to start getting familiar with all these bizarre treats on that trolley. How can people eat those All Flavor Beans? The first few I tried tasted like liver and tripe! Do wizards have different taste buds which make those things taste good?"

Ron looked at William and handed over a Chocolate Frog. "You just got bad luck, Your Majesty. Try the Chocolate Frogs. They're much more reliable."

Curious, William accepted the Chocolate Frog and opened the box. He nearly dropped it as a brown frog suddenly leaped out of the box and scurried for the window.

William pointed at the creature. "What the bloody hell was THAT? Is it something that prankster brother of yours concocted?"

Harry chuckled when he realized how much William still had to learn. "It's a Chocolate Frog, Your Majesty."

"You turn frogs into CHOCOLATE?"

Ron looked at Harry. "Indeed, he DOES have a lot to learn."

Hogsmeade Station

Hidden under her Invisibility Cloak, Halyna Zygonova watched from a half-open broom closet as the Hogwarts Express pulled into the station. The platform was packed with reporters and well-wishers. She could barely make out Wilhelmina Grubbly-Plank in the mob, who had been assigned to accompany the first-year students to the boats.

Cameras began to flash as the students got off the train. The sight of Harry, Ron, Hermione, and William getting off together proved to be an irresistible draw, and at least three-quarters of the reporters took five or six pictures of them. Zygonova was fairly certain that this photograph was going to appear in every single Muggle magazine in Britain. She wondered if any of the Muggles would even recognize their king in wizards' robes.

The king had apparently managed to secure a dwarf hippogriff named Silver Moth as his familiar. How that had happened, Zygonova didn't know. She could have sworn that dwarf hippogriffs were somewhat endangered and endemic to the island of Lilliput. Then again, she could have been mistaken.

She caught movement out of the corner of her eye and saw one of the reporters heading to the ladies' room. This woman seemed to be close enough to her height and figure for her to try to impersonate. Making sure the Polyjuice Potion was close at hand and the Invisibility Cloak was secure around her, she crept out of the broom closet and followed her into the bathroom. She could only hope that the reporter had the whole ladies' room to herself.
As a matter of fact, she didn't. There were three other women visible in plain view at the time, and she could tell if there was anyone in the stalls. It sounded as if she would have to improvise a little.

Pointing her wand at the door to the reporter's stall, she whispered a spell which would jam the lock. That would make sure that she would be the last person out. In addition, she conjured a sign saying LAVATORY CLOSED and sent it outside the bathroom. That would prevent people from coming in.

All she had to do now was wait.

J. K. Rowling cursed when she found the door had jammed. Of all times for something to malfunction, it had to be now! She really wanted to capture footage of him entering Hogwarts and being sorted into a house!

She banged on the door, trying to get out. A couple of people cast spells at the door to try to open it, yet for some reason they didn't work. Telling her to sit tight, they told her that they were going to go and see if they can get help. Within a few seconds, she was alone in the bathroom.

She was wondering how long it would take for help to arrive when she heard movement nearby. It appeared to be near the door, yet she couldn't see who made it. She breathed a sigh of relief -- she'd be out of here soon.

Then she heard a woman whisper an odd word.

"Somnolens!"

She suddenly felt very tired and decided that this toilet stall would be a good place to take a nap.

Making sure that the reporter was asleep and had been Obliviated, Zygonova undid the charm locking the stall door and walked into the stall with the reporter. She pulled some tufts of hair from the woman's head and dropped them into the Polyjuice Potion, which promptly began to fizz. Bracing herself for the transformation, Zygonova knocked it down.

Thirty seconds later, she found herself in J. K. Rowling's body. She had to work quickly before anyone else showed up trying to force the door. She hurriedly undressed, put on the reporter's clothes, and picked up her camera (Zygonova hoped she knew how to use it) and press pass. She managed to wrap the reporter's body and Zygonova's old clothes in the Invisibility Cloak just as the door the bathroom opened and someone called in.

"Hello, in there! I've been told that the door is stuck. Stand back -- I'll let you out!"

Hoping that the Polyjuice Potion would capture the reporter's voice, she called the woman off. "I got it open, ma'am. Don't worry about it. I'll be done in a second."

The intruder nodded. "Good to hear that, ma'am. I just hope you don't get trampled by the people about to come in -- there's a bit of a line now that the lavatory is back in business."

Zygonova looked through a crack in the door as she saw no fewer than seven women walk into the bathroom. This would be tricky, she thought. She would be able to get out fine by herself. The problem lay in the fact that she needed to get the real J. K. Rowling's body out of there and back in the broom closet before she woke up. It looked as if she was going to have to try out the Reducio Charm.
The charm worked...like a charm. Grinning, she put the sleeping J. K. Rowling in J. K. Rowling's own purse and opened the door.

Three women stared at her. "Bloody hell, it's J. K. Rowling, the Muggle columnist and reporter! Hurry up, they're about to send William off in the boats!"

That was all Zygonova needed to hear. Telling everyone to get out of her way, she raced out of the bathroom and joined the gaggle of reporters following Wilhelmina Grubbly-Plank. The woman was shouting, "First years, this way", and herding a bunch of little kids off towards the boats. One of the kids was significantly taller than the others, and he had a very excited look on his face. The height advantage was exacerbated somewhat by the fact that a good 30% of the other kids were constantly bowing to him.

She didn't know how long the Reducio Charm would last. She needed to put J. K. Rowling SOMEWHERE before it ran out...but where?

To be continued...

---------------
Update #340.5 Opportunities
---------------
Saturday, August 31, 1996
Hynhynn
Houyhnhnmiland

After a month of rainfall, the sun finally emerged from beyond the clouds over the capital of Houyhnhnmiland. The city of Hynhynm was built 8 centuries ago, to signify the peace and fresh start brought by the Unification. It was built with trade and large gatherings in mind, with no significant fortifications, no one ever expecting a war to reach it. Consequently, when war did reach it, the city fell in a day with most of the population electing to flee rather than stay and fight, and thus the city was remarkably intact, with the exception of a few sites of resistance such as the bullet-torn Presidential Palace.

Here and there, more recent damage spoiled the landscape: the result of invisible wizards flying over and taking potshots, sometimes with Fiendfyre, or dropping salvaged Muggle explosives. Secondary fires started by the Ashwinders born from the magical fires aggravated the situation. This threat was greatly reduced a few days ago, when a Muggle technician rigged up a radar system and a grid pattern, enabling makeshift AA crews to take down the infiltrators in a hail of lead poured in their general direction, overwhelming magical barriers. The bullet-ridden remains of the mages were often too damaged, but they were still able to identify a few of them (mostly Syrdani) and salvage some wands- it was a pity the Invisibility Cloaks were always ruined by the bullet holes and the splattering bodily fluids.

After a thousand years of living in a magical society that didn't allow them to learn magic, the yahoos were overjoyed by the prospect of being able to do so. Following the rumors from the Muggle World, people no longer accepted that being a wizard required the ability to see magic- and with no lack of volunteers, despite the touch of a wand hurt like hell if you happened to be a Muggle, they soon found dozens of 'half-wizards' wishing to learn magic. Finding tutors had been more tricky, but
thankfully some of the yahoo revolutionary groups had the foresight to hire foreign wizards to help
them in their struggle, and while they were no professional teachers, they could share some of their
knowledge of spells and runes. The runes were very popular: even Muggles could carve them, then
have a half-wizard to power them up. By now, virtually all the buildings in the city were warded by
simple, but reasonably effective magic.

Narrowly escaping numerous strafing runs by wizards, Father Martinez had conflicting feelings
about magic. On the one hand, he had seen it used to destroy, and it was horrible. On the other hand,
even he admitted that supplying the rebel army or the civilians would have been much harder without
charms, and it was hard to think ill of these poor souls, oppressed for a thousand years, and now
saving his life by carving a ward on the roof under which he rests.

Also, some of their innocent questions momentarily had him doubt his own faith. After some
awkwardness, he managed to concentrate on the message of love and equality by Jesus, not the
miracles associated with him... feeding a whole crowd with only a handful of fish and bread seemed
like the everyday routine in these parts now. But then, he remembered that the real message was not
power, but peace, mercy, kindness, charity, forgiveness and compassion. The yahoos liked that, too-even
the parts about forgiveness and mercy. While some of them committed brutal acts of retribution
on their former overlords, those were a small, but vocal minority. Most of them were tired of war and
were open-minded enough to accept the solution he seemed to offer.

Of course, converting the yahoos wasn't without difficulties. He faced a serious dilemma with the
centaurs- some of them were siding with the rebels, and they appeared to have souls just like
humans... but appearances may be deceiving, and he didn't find anything about them in the Bible. He
also couldn't run for his superiors for an answer, as they were fully caught up in the power struggle
resulting from the return of the alleged prophet Samuel of the Old Testament, a creature he did not
trust. After all, why did this ghost return only now, and not earlier when the schisms and heresies
plaguing the church could have been easily stopped before they truly began?

His brooding was interrupted by the sound of explosions and panicked screams- it looked like the
enemy wizards have come back for another round. He looked up uneasily at the roof- it was a simple
thing, built of wood and ceramic tiles to keep the wind and the rain out. He knew there fireproofing
runes carved in the support beams and some other wards offering generic protection, but still, it
seemed uncomfortably thin. He heard a series of popping sounds, the ones he learnt meant wizard
teleportation, then a heavy, clattering thunk on the flat roof, followed by the grating sound of rigid
objects rolling on each other. Patches of sunlight entered the room as the tiles were cracked, but there
was no other apparent damage. He blew out a breath in relief... then all of a sudden, the world
exploded, and he blacked out.

-------------
same house, outside
-------------

Lurking in the shadows under his Invisibility Cloak, Zafareth jumped into cover when he heard the
sound of incoming Portkeyed grenade clusters, and casted the most powerful shielding charm he
could. When dealing with Muggle explosives, there was no such thing as using too much defense.
Seconds later, explosions rocked the nearby streets as hundreds of Geminioed grenades, portkeyed dozens of feet above Hynhynm, fell from the sky and exploded at the same moment.

As the dust began to settle, he surveyed the damage. The shack where his sources said the priest rested was badly damaged by a direct hit. While some of the grenades rolled down and exploded on the ground, their blast largely absorbed by the brick walls, some got lodged in the roof, and showered the neighbourhood with shattered ceramics and shrapnel. Any guards standing nearby were gutted or thorn apart, leaving no witnesses. Quickly entering, he saw the interior didn't fare better. As he cast "Revelio Hominem", he saw the priest was the only living human in the building, and barely. The kevlar vest his followers insisted he wears protected his torso, but his legs were trapped beneath fallen debris, and a vicious looking splinter sticked out of his neck.

The merwizard hurried over to kneel at the padre's side, as he hurriedly casted a few diagnostic spells. They revealed that the splinter narrowly missed the carotid artery, and pushed against it in a way that partially blocked the blood flow, hence the lack of consciousness. The human's legs weren't in better shape either, with only the crushing weight keeping the open fractures from causing critical blood loss. Noting the delicate state of the halfway caved-in roof, he cautiously levitated the pile of rubble up, and when nothing happened, pushed it aside. Then, he quickly healed the damaged bone, muscles, veins and skin on the human's leg as well as he could on short notice- he had to replace some of the debris to imitate a less severe injury, he decided, unsatisfied with his work there. Lastly, he removed the splinter from the priest's neck, and healed that wound.

Blinking, dizzy, Father Martinez opened his eyes and took in the silhouette of a man in plain clothes and a worried expression looking around, then pointing a wand at him and uttering something latin. Then, he felt like blacking out again... only this time, it was like taking the back seat in his own body. He waved and flailed and shouted, but his body was unresponsive. Pointing the wand at him again, the stranger whispered in his ears in Spanish: "Don't struggle in vain, Padre. Fear not, I'm not your enemy, and it will soon appear to be obvious for you. I will even let you go freely, with just a few suggestions..."

A blink of an eye, or an eternity has passed, when other Spanish voices filtered in from outside. "Comrade Vázquez, say something! Where are you!" The man hurriedly tucked away a discarded cloak of strange silvery matter, and shoved the wand into a concealed sheath in his sleeves. All this seemed perfectly OK and unworthy of remembering for Martinez. Then the stranger yelled back: "In here! Cautiously, the house is badly damaged! Help me taking this man out!"

Three others entered and looked at their comrade and the incredibly lucky man who got off by having some light part of the roof falling onto his legs, when all around him, deadly shrapnel and splinters were embedded in the wall. Then, looking closer, one of them recognised the tattered priest's robes on the kevlar vest and stared quizically at 'Comrade Vázquez'. The undercover merwizard stared back sternly, and spoke in a voice that did not tolerate objection, but at least promised an explanation later: "Help me free Father Martinez. We are returning him to his flock."

To be continued...
King William followed Professor Grubbly-Plank over to the shores of a large lake, where a fleet of small boats awaited the first-year students. There was a brief moment of confusion when they tried to figure out how exactly they were going to fit William into a boat with two other students -- after all, he was significantly taller and heavier than the standard eleven-year-olds. Eventually, they all made it into the boats. The Herbology professor -- what did she teach, gardening? -- tapped her boat with her wand, and William gaped as the boats started making their way across the lake under their own power.

As far as he could tell, there was nothing propelling the boats. He looked for a motor but couldn't find any, and he certainly didn't see any sails. This had to be magic, he thought, and he definitely wanted to study the phenomenon. However, he knew enough to not try standing up in a boat which looked like it could tip over at any moment.

One of the other students in the boat spoke up. "The boats are powered by magic, my friend. You seem really tall, by the way. What's your name, and why is everyone bowing to you? Are you Harry Potter? I heard he goes here."

William was barely able to prevent himself from reacting. "I'm...William, the...er, king of England. I just found out that I may have magic ability, so I decided to start lessons this year."

The little girl giggled. "Ooh, cool! You're a king! Can you cut people's heads off whenever you want? My name's Patricia Prince, and I was wondering if you could cut off my brother's head. He's really obnoxious."

[Yes, Fake Name Generator came up with this name after I threw out the first attempt, Shirley, since no kids are named Shirley in this generation.]

William chuckled. "In theory, yes. In practice, it doesn't happen. Besides, I doubt that whatever he did is enough for warrant getting rid of him. How familiar are you with Hogwarts, Patricia?"

Patricia giggled some more. "Well, my dad's cousin teaches Potions."

William thought for a moment. "That would be Severus Snape or Horace Slughorn, if I remember correctly."

"Yup -- it's Professor Snape. Most of my family has been in Slytherin, and I think I'm going to be there as well."

William smiled. "Well, best of luck to you and see what you can do to have the teachers put you in Slytherin. You'll probably find it easier to work with staff members who know your relatives."

Now both of the girls in the boat with her started chuckling. "No, silly! William, the teachers don't tell you which house you're in. The hat does!"
William blinked as the boat made its way around a bend in the lake. "How is a hat supposed to -- WOW!"

William's mouth clamped shut as he saw Hogwarts Castle for the first time. It looked as if it had been taken right out of a children's fantasy novel or a medieval painting. It had four huge towers, and he could see evidence that someone was trying to build a fifth in a hurry.

Patricia, who apparently was familiar with the layout of school, nodded. "Impressive, isn't it? That fifth tower is going to be the future home of Black House, the house dedicated to wizards who want to help Muggles. It's going to be admitting its first students next year."

William smiled. "Maybe I can be part of that house. I have Wizarding ability and I need to be a king for both Muggles and wizards. Would that be a good match or what?"

Patricia thought for a moment. "Probably. Unfortunately, the building isn't ready yet, and once you're put in a house you stay there for seven years. Had you come in one year later, you'd have been put in Black. Unfortunately, I don't think that will be an option for you unless people are allowed to move into Black at the beginning of next year."

The boats made their way across the lake and came to rest on the far side, near the entrance to the castle. Professor Grubbly-Plank told everyone to leave the boats and line up outside the front door in alphabetical order by last name. It took them a while, but they eventually all got lined up.

The doors opened momentarily, and William caught a brief glimpse of a candlelit hall filled with students. He watched as Snape emerged from the hall and addressed the new students.

"Welcome to Hogwarts. I'm Deputy Headmaster Severus Snape, and it is my duty to inform you that as new students, you will be required to participate in a ceremony which will sort you into one of five houses: Slytherin, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, Black, and Gryffindor. This will ensure that you will be placed with students with similar interests and motivations. When I give the signal, you will all walk into the Great Hall and stand quietly as I call your names and place the Sorting Hat upon your head. The Sorting Hat will examine your motivations and choose the correct house for you.

"Note that the Sorting ceremony will be a bit unusual this year due to the addition of Black House to the school roster and the fact that Black House will not officially open until the 1997-1998 school year. If you are sorted into Black House, the Sorting Hat will ask you to choose a temporary house for you to live in until construction of the Black House Tower is complete. This secondary house can be chosen for you by the Sorting Hat, or you can request a house for yourself. At the beginning of next year, you will be asked to move out of your temporary house and into Black House.

"Each House has its own personality and house ghost. Black House is dedicated to wizards who wish to help Muggles, and at present there is no house ghost for it. You are probably all familiar with the traditional four houses, so I don't need to get into them."

Snape glanced back over his shoulder into the main hall and nodded. "All right, first years. Follow me in, and stay in line until your name is called. Once your name is called and the Sorting Hat has chosen your house, sit at the table with the rest of the people in your house. If you have been assigned to Black House, sit at the table associated with your secondary house."

Snape pushed the doors wide open and William followed him into a huge room filled with candles hovering in midair...things...which looked liked ghosts talking with the students. There were four long tables on the floor filled with students, and the front of the room was highlighted by a fifth table.
occupied by staff members. The king recognized Dumbledore at the front of the room, standing at a podium. Dumbledore waved at the first years and handed Snape an old hat.

Snape glanced at a sheet of parchment and stopped the procession in front of a small stool. He then called out a name: "Adams, Madison."

A small blonde girl walked up to the stool and sat down. Snape put the hat upon her head and it announced its verdict: Hufflepuff. One of the tables cheered -- presumably the Hufflepuff one -- and the girl walked over there and sat down.

The next person to be sorted was "Benson, Frederick". He was assigned to Black House but was temporarily placed in Ravenclaw. The Ravenclaw table cheered as he headed over.

The Sorting ceremony took a while. William was pleased to see that Patricia Prince was indeed placed in Slytherin. The line dwindled and dwindled, and eventually there were two people left: a redhead named Pamela Woody and William himself.

Snape looked at the next name on the list. "Windsor, William."

Cameras flashed and several people came to their feet as he headed over and sat down the chair. Snape put the hat upon his head, and William nearly fell over when he heard the hat start talking to him.

"Let's see here. You seem really brave, and you also have a lot of the characteristics of Muggles. To be honest with you, I don't think I've ever seen anyone like you before."

William chuckled. "No, hat, I doubt you have."

"I didn't think so, young man. At any rate, you sound like you would be a good candidate to be someone who would like to help Muggles. Am I right?"

William nodded. "I sure hope so, hat. I'm their king."

The hat seemed surprised. "I apologize, Your Majesty. I didn't realize that. I think Black would suit you very well in that case. That's settled. Now it comes time for your secondary House. Most of the royal family I've sorted over the past few centuries" -- William nearly fell over when he heard that -- "were placed in Hufflepuff. You're very brave, however, so I can't figure out whether you should go in Hufflepuff or Gryffindor. Do you have a preference?"

William looked at the Gryffindor table, where he saw Hermione looking at him. "Gryffindor, if you don't mind."

The hat agreed. "Sound good to me!"

Halyna Zygonova wasn't really interested in King William, yet she couldn't help but wonder which house the British monarch would wind up. Virtually the entire room was staring at the Sorting Hat.

The Sorting Hat announced its verdict. "Black House, with Gryffindor as a temporary residence!"

The Gryffindor table erupted and cameras flashed as the king made his way to the Gryffindor table. There was a bit of confusion as he couldn't seem to decide whether to sit with the first years or Hermione. Eventually Hermione and her friends helped him make the decision by moving to sit
Pamela Woody was sorted into Slytherin, and Snape picked up the hat and stool and removed them from the room. He then took his position at the head table. If Dumbledore was true to form, he would now give his speech and introduce any new teachers.

Dumbledore tapped his wand on the podium and cleared his throat. "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Hogwarts. I would like to begin this meal with a moment of silence to commemorate members of our community, both Muggle and Wizarding, who died in Lord Voldemort's attack on London."

The room was silent for a few minutes, after which Dumbledore continued. "The attack on London is just one of the many ways in which the world has changed over the past twelve months. As you are undoubtedly aware, the Statute of Secrecy suffered an irreparable breach when footage of a wizard managed to be broadcast to the Muggle world during a popular Muggle sporting event back in January. The Muggles found out about our world, and for the first time in centuries we had to deal with Muggle interference and intervention.

"The merging of the Muggle and Wizarding worlds is far from complete. However, it is obvious that some changes have taken place for the better and for the worse. Combinations of Muggle and Wizarding abilities have allowed for exploration of the moon, transportation revolutions among the Muggles, and great strides in medicine. Unfortunately, the two disciplines have merged to produce more sinister applications as well, not the least of which is the ability to use Portkeys to deliver weapons to their targets using almost unblockable methods.

"It is the goal of this school to produce students able to function in both the Muggle and Wizarding worlds. Voldemort may be gone and the Death Eaters destroyed, but we cannot let down our guard. Only time will tell if another Dark wizard will emerge among us."

Zygonova watched as Dumbledore continued his speech. He was a pretty good speaker, she admitted. Eventually, he reached the end of his talk and began introducing the head table.

"We have several new teachers this year and several reassignments of teachers to different positions. We'll introduce the new teachers first in alphabetical order. To my left here is Amelia Bell, our new Muggle Studies teacher. She will be replacing Megan Baldwin this year due to a family emergency in the Baldwin household. Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Professor Bell."

Zygonova looked at the woman Dumbledore was pointing at, who was waving her hand at the crowd. She appeared to be in her mid-twenties, was a little chubby, and had bright red hair. She would be quite noticeable and easy to pick out in a crowd. Her mission was complete. She now knew whom to impersonate to get close to Dumbledore.

Hoping that the Polyjuice Potion wouldn't run out and that J. K. Rowling wouldn't revert to her normal size, she waited through the rest of the introductions and then headed out of the Great Hall as the students began their meal. She eventually headed into a spare bathroom, brought the reporter out of her bag, and reverted her to her normal size. She then handed over the camera -- which thankfully she had managed to operate and the reporter had ensured would work in the presence of magic -- and magically transported all she had seen into Rowling's head. If everything went as planned, Rowling would wake up thinking she had been in the Great Hall the whole time and the camera had recorded everything. Zygonova didn't have anything against Rowling personally, after all, and figured that woman deserved to have SOMETHING to report.

Zygonova cast the countercharm to wake Rowling up and put it on a delay to make sure that
Zygonova got the Invisibility Cloak on and made it out of the bathroom before the reporter woke up. Once this was done, she headed back to the Great Hall.

The next thing she had to do was to wait until Alastair Moody was distracted by something -- hopefully his food -- before she could leave the castle. Harry's interviews had reported that he could see through Invisibility Cloaks and out the back of his head. Eventually, she saw her chance when Moody found himself talking to Dumbledore and the route she had to take to get from her section of the Hall to the entrance was blocked from Moody's sight by other students. Trying to act nonchalantly, she made her way out of the Great Hall and returned to Hogsmeade.

Piece of cake. All she had to do now was to pick up Amelia Bell on the way home from the feast, Polyjuice into her, and sneak back into the school without the Invisibility Cloak the next day.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #342: Unorthodox Wrinkle Remover
-------------
Monday, September 2, 1996
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
United Kingdom
-------------
NEXT UP: Nerd Witch Teacher
-------------
Amelia Bell looked over the class of sixth years. Some of the boys were in fact cute, particularly that blond one in the corner. She had to forcibly remind herself that these were not only her students but they were underage to boot.

This class combined students from both Glycerine -- sorry, Slytherin -- and Gryffindor, and as usual the Slytherins sat separately from whomever they were sharing the class with. She didn't really understand why everyone seemed to hate the Slytherins. Granted, the Slytherins tended to be loud-mouths who bullied other students and looked down upon people of Mugle birth. However, not all of them were like that. Snape and Slughorn had both been members of Slytherin, and they had been excellent school officials.

She picked up a piece of chalk and began pointing things out on the blackboard. "All right, guys. That's the end of the course syllabus, and now that we've got some time at the end of the class we can start teaching you about Muggle culture. We'll start with the culture you know best: Muggle Britain."

She chuckled. "In case you haven't found out by now, the British Muggles have a king, William V of the House of Windsor --"

One of the Slytherins raised his hand. "I thought he was in Black House."

Amelia stifled a laugh. "The House of Windsor in this case refers to the fact that his family comes from a clan whose last name is Windsor. Well, it was recently changed to Windsor --"

A girl in the front of the room raised her hand and cut in: "from Hannover at the time of the First Muggle World War because the Germans were England's enemies at the time and it didn't seem right to have someone with a German name ruling the British people."

Amelia whistled. "That's right, young lady! What's your name, and which House are you from?"
The girl smiled. "Hermione Granger, Professor Bell. I'm from Gryffindor."

"Five points to Gryffindor, Miss Granger -- I'm impressed. Then again, I've heard several amazing things about you. You're supposedly very bright, and you were responsible for the defensive shield around that dental office after the bomb went off. Is that true?"

Hermione blushed and nodded. "That was I, Professor. However, I couldn't have saved the world all by myself. I had a lot of help."

Amelia nodded. "I'm sure. I can tell that you're going to be an asset to both the Wizarding and Muggle communities when you get out of this school. In the meantime, though, let's continue on with the history lesson. The British nation is headed by a king, though he hasn't really had much real power since the Magna --"

Hermione cut in again. "Carta was signed back in the thirteenth century."

Amelia laughed. "Five more points to Gryffindor, Miss Granger. You definitely seem to know your stuff. However, if you don't mind let's have some of the other people chime in at this point and see if they have any questions. If you want to talk about stuff that's more advanced than one would expect for a wizard newly exposed to the Muggle world, you may want to wait until after the class."

Hermione frowned a moment, then shrugged and sat down again. Meanwhile, the blond boy in the corner chuckled and muttered something to one of his classmates.

Amelia called on him. "You in the corner -- please don't talk in class. I know, I may be boring from time to time, but like it or not you're going to have to learn to deal with Muggles now that the Statute of Secrecy is down and they're likely going to start giving Muggles tours of Hogwarts one of these days. What's your name, my blond friend?"

"Draco Malfoy, Professor."

Amelia nodded. "I recognize the name, Mr. Malfoy. You're Professor Snape's adopted son, right? He told me about you."

"Yes, Professor."

"I thought so, Mr. Malfoy. In that case, you may want to be extra careful in your studies. You don't want to do something foolish in the presence of a Muggle and have your faux pas ruin your father's reputation. For all we know, he could lose his job because he insulted a Muggle. I've already had to take points from Slytherin because Snape's cousin's daughter, a first-year, misbehaved in class. He wasn't all that happy, but he agreed that it had to be done."

Virtually the entire room started murmuring at that, and Amelia was stunned to watch Malfoy's jaw drop halfway to the floor. She told everyone to be quiet, but it didn't do much good. She eventually had to threaten to start taking points away in order to bring the class back to order.

This particular group of students had several famous people in it. In addition to Hermione Granger and Draco Malfoy, Harry Potter was there as well. He admitted that he had been the wizard seen in the Super Bowl Breach and that no one in the convoy from 4 Privet Drive had had any intent of exposing the Wizarding world to the Muggles. Had it not been for that soft drink company filming that Super Bowl commercial on the boat, the wizards would almost certainly still be hidden from not
just Amelia but from the rest of the world as well.

-------------

Harry liked the new Muggle Studies teacher. She, like Professor Baldwin, was much more laid back than most of the other teachers. Furthermore, since she was also no more than 26 or 27, she could relate to the students much more than the older instructors. Neville Longbottom had spent a good five minutes complaining he had a crush on her, something that Harry fervently hoped would not reach the ears of Hannah Abbott, Luna Lovegood, or any of the teachers.

He looked at Ron and giggled. "What do you think, Ron? Do you think she's related to you?"

Ron shook his head fervently. "I don't think so, Harry. Yes, she's got red hair, but how many Muggles in Britain have red hair? Besides, if one of our relatives wound up going to a Muggle graduate school, we would have likely heard about it."

Ron rounded on Hermione. "You're lucky she didn't take points from you for not raising your hand in class. Remember what happened with Umbridge?"

Hermione sniffed. "This woman is not Umbridge. She's probably a third Umbridge's age and three times her height. Bloody hell, if Umbridge even heard that she was in this school she'd probably try to have her expelled."

Harry laughed. "She's going to be an interesting teacher. I found her talk with Draco hilarious. She has no idea that Draco's father hated Muggles and Muggle-borns, and she has no idea that Draco himself is a reformed Death Eater."

Ron grunted. "Reformed Death Eater? Considering his muttering with Crabbe and Goyle, I'm not convinced."

Harry rolled his eyes. "He talks with Crabbe and Goyle all the time, and we know that he doesn't like Hermione. As far as I can tell, he's reformed, and I don't see how he'll be able to stray very far living in the same House -- both inside school and outside it -- as Snape."

Ron frowned. "Unless Snape defects and starts throwing Dark Marks around. I've never really trusted him."

Hermione threw her hands up. "Snape defect? Defect to WHOM? Voldemort's dead, and the Death Eaters are in ruins. If Snape were to defect, he would be captured and killed in an instant."

Ron thought back to the class. "Speaking of Snape, who's this first year Bell was talking about?"

Harry answered that. "That's Patricia Prince, a new Slytherin. Apparently King William and she became friends on the boat ride over here. She doesn't seem all that bad, according to William. He doesn't get much of a chance to talk to her, though, given the double curriculum and the fact that she isn't in Gryffindor -- or Black for that matter."

Ron and Hermione stared at each other for a good ten seconds before Ron spoke. "Let's hope things stay that way. We don't want Dark wizards influencing the King of England."

-------------

It had been a long day, but it had been worth it. When 5:00 came around, Amelia Bell packed up her stuff, shook hands with the rest of the professors, and started the walk back to Hogsmeade and her apartment. She started to understand why Megan hadn't wanted to leave, and in one sense she felt a little sorry for Megan.
She was surrounded by reporters as soon as she entered Hogsmeade. She gave as many interviews as she could. However, eventually she started getting hungry and had to think about getting dinner. She eventually was able to rid herself of all the reporters and make her way back to 59 Grey Street.

She was about to enter the building when one more reporter tapped her on the shoulder. "Excuse me, Miss Bell, but would you be willing to answer a few more questions? It won't take long."

Amelia was really starting to get hungry -- she had to cut this short in a hurry. "Five minutes, tops. I'm really hungry."

The reporter nodded. "That will do. I'm Darlene Lisa Wilkins, and I'm with Witch Weekly."

---

Daryna Vovchanckaya went over the plan with Halyna Zygonova. "All right, let me get this straight. You give me some of the Polyjuice Potion. I pose as a reporter, snatch Amelia Bell as soon as she gets home after work, and then become her double. I then enter the house to fool her roommates as you return home to your husband."

Zygonova nodded. "That's about it. Each morning, you say goodbye to your roommates and call me. I head over to the school while you hide under that Invisibility Cloak, go to a big city, and try to study Muggle behavior around you. I teach the classes, take the Marauder's Map, and -- after a few weeks or so -- eventually kill Dumbledore, take the wand, and cast that Dark Mark spell the Daily Prophet told us about to implicate the Death Eaters."

Vovchanckaya continued with the plan. "When we decide to kill Dumbledore, you go invisible and I make my way into the school from the apartment so the staff will suspect you were there the whole time. It's a perfect alibi. On other days, we'll just follow the usual routine. I leave the school and come here. You brief me quickly on what you learned about the Muggles so I can fake her lessons. Then you return home to Amelia's roommates."

Zygonova whistled and handed over a map. "Clever, if I should say so myself. In the meantime, get ready and start heading over to the apartment. It's at 59 Grey Street -- here's a map and some Polyjuice Potion along with a bunch of her hairs. Good luck, Daryna."

Vovchanckaya thanked her, picked up all her paraphernalia, and headed over to Grey Street. She had just started wondering whether Amelia Bell had gone out partying when she saw her approaching. The red hair stood out easily.

Vovchanckaya pulled out a piece of parchment and tapped the new professor on the shoulder. "Excuse me, Miss Bell, but would you be willing to answer a few more questions? It won't take long."

The professor said she could spare a few minutes, so she followed her over into a little alcove so they could have some privacy for the interview. Amelia thought it was a bit strange, but she didn't say anything.

Finally, the two of them were alone. Vovchanckaya knew what she herself looked like at age 54, and she had to admit that Amelia was not unattractive. Her face was unlined to boot, and Vovchanckaya found herself wishing she could keep that Polyjuiced face forever.

Not knowing any of this, Amelia turned to her and asked, "So, Ms. Wilkins, how can I help you?"
Vovchanckaya just smiled and brought out her wand. "Somnolens!"

The spell hit Amelia in the chest, and she slumped to the ground. Vovchanckaya pulled out some more of Amelia’s hairs for good measure, Obliviated her, swapped clothes with her, and then shrunk the poor woman with Reducio just like ZYGONova had done with the reporter. Halyna had been pleased to know that Reducio was permanent until reversed with an Engorgio or Finite Incantatem.

Hoping that the rough handling wouldn't kill the woman, Vovchanckaya stuffed the woman in her bag and drank the Polyjuice Potion. Once the transformation was complete, she took the victim's keys and passes to Hogwarts and walked into the apartment.

Each of the three women had her own room, which was a relief. As long as she told everyone that she wanted no intrusions while she slept -- and she kept the windows closed -- no one would be able to break her cover.

The Polyjuice Potion apparently managed to transfer the fact that Amelia was hungry as well, so the first thing Wolanski did was look for the kitchen. She found it pretty quickly, along with both other girls.

The black-haired one rounded on her. "Hi, Amelia! How was your day? Abby and I helped make dinner -- we'll rotate. Is that OK?"

To be continued...

------------
Update #343: Nerd Witch Teacher
------------
Tuesday, September 3, 1996
1241Z
10-250 Lecture Hall
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Cambridge, MA
United States of America

NEXT UP: Girls, Girls, Girls

Jill came into the lecture hall early, hoping that she would get a seat. Unfortunately, that was not the case. Every single chair was taken in the lecture hall, and people were already talking about the possibility of moving it to the even-larger 26-100.

It looked like a lot of the students were freshmen, which made sense as 19.00 was a HASS-D. However, the fact that upperclassmen like herself were thinking of taking this course even though they had fulfilled all of their humanities requirements testified to the great interest in the new department.

A good half of the upperclassmen knew the teacher from her days as a student in Russian House -- at least by sight. Jill actually knew her a little better, through several mutual friends who were involved with Kurchatova's social circles and former sorority. Several of these friends had reported that Kurchatova had been prepping frantically for the new course over the past couple of days, editing the syllabus over and over again. Magic could only get you so far, she thought.

Kurchatova's social circles had gone bonkers when she had come out as a witch. Although several of the more conservative members had stopped talking to her, the vast majority of Kurchatova's friends
had been supportive and had for the most part been mature enough to not ask her to concoct love potions for them.

She looked around the room and saw the vast majority of Kurchatova's friends here. Several members of her sorority were here, as was a good two-thirds of Russian House. There were even a few people from the classes of 1994 and 1995 who had stopped by to see the young witch in action.

She took a look at the syllabus. It looked like a typical humanities course in that it was primarily reading. However, there were a few differences in that many of the teaching assistants were witches and/or of a different species:

-------------------
19.00 -- INTRODUCTION TO MAGIC, FALL 1996
TR 9:00-10:30, 10-250

Primary Lecturer: Ms. Jelena J. Kurchatova G -- jkurcha@mit.edu

Alternate Lecturer
Ms. Guinevere de Mornay, Salem Witches Institute '89

Teaching Assistants
Mr. Terry Powers, Quabbin Academy of Sorcery '93
Ms. Lissette Caban, SWI '91, veela*
Dr. Keith Rieder, QAS ’81, PhD
Mr. Tyler Tidwell, Smoky Mountain Wizarding School '92
Mr. Goldbrick, goblin
Ms. Susan Ryles, SWI '90
Mrs. Sierra, centaur**

COURSE OBJECTIVES
This course is designed to introduce Muggle -- that is, non-Wizarding -- students to magic, its history, and what it can and cannot do. There will be a brief discussion of Wizarding culture and the world which had been long hidden by the Statute of Secrecy.

Most of the coursework will consist of reading assignments and discussions in recitations. There will be, on average, a good 100-150 pages of reading per week, sometimes in the unusual dialect of English known as Galiver. Depending on which aspects of the Wizarding world are exposed during the semester, the course may be changed to include different readings.

There will be four papers during the course of the semester, each counting for 10% of your final grade. The midterm will be 20%, and the final will be 30%. The remaining 10% will be dedicated to independent research on the Wizarding world, which students will be expected to perform outside of class and will be able to consult the teaching assistants at any time.

The following books will all be available at the MIT Coop thanks to a generous donation by the American Department of Magic.

Adventures with Arachnids -- Lockhart, 1983
The Tales of Beedle the Bard -- unknown
Wizarding for Dummies -- various Muggle presses, 1996
Magical Theory -- Koenitz, 1992
A History of the Magical World -- Upton, 1986
Reflections on Judgment Day -- Dialonis, 1996
Noah, Utnapishtim and the Hammer of Ra -- Dialonis, 1996

* Note that this recitation section is available only to women and will be held at Wellesley College.

** Mrs. Sierra is not originally from Houyhnhnmland and hopes to take this opportunity to show the world that centaurs and humans can coexist peacefully. She, like the rest of us, is horrified at what has happened in her homeland and is praying fervently for peace.

Jill put down the syllabus, impressed. It looked like a pretty substantial course, and judging by all the books on the list it would have a lot of reading. Granted, from what she had been told the Lockhart book was essentially a first-person fantasy novel written by a wizard.

The only thing missing from the course at the moment was the professor. Checking her watch, she noticed that it was 8:59. The excitement was building, though there was an undercurrent of worry as well. Had something gone wrong? Had Kurchatova realized that it would be almost impossible to handle that flying carpet business, her regular grad school studies, and 19.00 at the same time.

Jill knew the truth, however. One of Kurchatova's friends had tipped her off. Grinning, she smiled at all of the students glancing towards the blackboards and the main entrance and then craned her head to look up.

The clock hit 9:00, and less than a second later a flash of light startled everyone in the room. When it had cleared, a huge flying carpet was hovering in the front of the room, above the blackboards and the desk. The lecture hall took up most of three floors, with the chairs rising up from the entrance hall like banks of seats at Fenway Park. The carpet had appeared level with the topmost row of seats, near the ceiling -- and a good thirty feet or so above the place where Kurchatova would give her lecture.

The crowd cheered as the carpet circled the room and touched down in the front of the room, next to the desk. It was carrying nine passengers. Jill recognized Jelena and Guinevere immediately, as did everyone else. One of them seemed to be very short and reminded Jill of Thomas from the initial I-Entry tour; he had to be the goblin. The centaur was obvious as she had four legs -- and TWO ponytails, one on her rear end and one on her head.

The rest of the TA's seemed like ordinary people, as far as she could tell. There were a few guys and a few girls. She wondered if the veela was there. She had to be -- all the people listed on the syllabus were there. If the veela was there --

She didn't need to look far to determine if the veela was there. The three boys in her row had their eyes open large enough to fit bowling balls. One of them was actually sighing uncontrollably, and one was drooling. There was a thud as one of the people in the back row fell onto the person in front of him.

Kurchatova chuckled and turned to a woman wearing an amused smirk on her face. "That's enough, Lissette. I'll talk to you later."

Lissette looked around the room and chuckled. "Hey, I should have gone here instead of the SWI."

Kurchatova winced. "Don't egg them on, Lissette. Get ready for your recitation session, and remember that if there are any horny boys send them to Sierra."
Lissette looked longingly at the crowd, where many men were starting to whoop it up. "But..."

Kurchatova put her hands on her head. "No. Nyet. Non. You're supposed to be helping me teach the course, not pick up guys. All right, you've gotten your practical joke out of the way. Get out of here and head over to Pomeroy Hall at Wellesley."

Grimacing, the veela grunted and vanished. Seconds later, every single boy in the room blinked as if he had come out of a trance.

Kurchatova walked to the podium and stood there motionless for a few seconds. Jill read the expression on her face quite plainly: shock and stagefright. One of the TA's started walking over to help, but she quickly shook him off and began the lecture.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to 19.00. I'm Jelena Kurchatova, trained witch, current MIT graduate student, and graduate residence tutor of Russian House. The world has changed forever, and there is no way the magical and Muggle worlds will be able to isolate themselves again. It is my duty as an MIT student and practicing witch to prepare future generations of geeky wizards and Muggles to work, live, and play together.

"I know, you've read about us all the time. We are not, however, like the books in the fantasy section of Barnes and Noble. We cannot raise the dead. We cannot travel faster than light. If you want fantasy, stay with the books. If you want reality, listen to me."

With those words, course 19 was re-introduced at MIT.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #343.5: No plan survives...
-------------
Tuesday, September 3, 1996
Hynhynn
Houyhnhnmland
-------------

After the brief portkey-grenade bombardment on Saturday, the yahoo rebellion's forces, led by the Marquesas garrison's French commanding officer, hastily began to fortify the capital. Apparently, Hynhynn was not the only city the old government's forces sought—other, smaller but strategically important settlements in the Lowlands were also subjected to similar bombardment. At this point, the rebels had some difficult decisions to make: even with the 50 wizards sent forward by the centaur lord Garhym, leader of their incoming southern reinforcements, their forces were insufficient to protect all of their territories.

Two days of debating strategies, and many exhausted messenger birds later, the plan was ready: the main human rebel army would retreat to Hynhynn and fortify. Occupied... or liberated (depending on who you ask) lands east of the capital and north of the river Vashoth were to be evacuated, their human and friendly centaur populations relocated to towns in the west and into the capital itself. The army besieging the citadel of Kynnaraas was to leave behind a skeleton crew to guard the so far impregnable mountain stronghold looming over the charred remains of the West regional capital, and march on the high road back towards the capital. They would arrive in a week, two days after the South's main forces— they would be the reserve force of the reserve force.
To complicate matters, anti-portkey wards of any significant effect were notoriously difficult spells, so teaching them properly to the experimental half-wizards was out of the question. They wouldn't have had time for that anyway: the few dozen of them that had access to salvaged wands were taking turns casting Geminio on anything from ammo to food and medicines, and the wandless, runic alternatives required great precision and insight, and rare spell components—none of which were available now. Also, the number of available tutors drastically diminished as real, experienced wizards were called back for more urgent duties. On the other hand, this had a very neat side effect: instead of a few large Portkey Barriers shielding whole regions, dozens of smaller barriers were conjured, each protecting a town, or a district of a bigger city. This way, the enemy could not resume the bombardment by just walking over the barrier on foot.

In the end, this meant that fortifying the city was very much the same as in the Muggle world. Trenches were shoveled, sandbag walls, machine gun nests and barricades were erected, and supplies were stacked up in sheltered cellars. There was no heavy artillery on the continent, nor designated anti-aircraft cannons, but they solved these more or less successfully by massing conventional firepower... and as long as the enemy didn't possess such strike capacities either, it worked. The barrier spells preventing Apparition and Portkey meant they could not rely on instant magical reinforcements or resupply—this was all fine for the French officers, as long as the same restrictions were applied to the enemy: at least this way, they could command their battles in the way they were taught to, without nasty surprises.

It is said that no plan survives contact with the enemy. Knowing this, Lt. Col. Marcel Lebrun was only slightly surprised when rocket-like explosives began raining down on the city, arching with physics-defying grace from beyond the mountains in the east, some dozens of miles away. As the first projectiles hit their mark, the earth began rumbling unnervingly— he found it a bit odd, as the explosions were by several orders of magnitude smaller than anything that would warrant this.

---------------
Summit of Mt. Rakh, 40 miles east of Hynhynn
---------------

Thiago remained impassive as he passed the omniculars to Governors Tiashyn of the North, and Kragach of the East. The former was apparently shocked by the sight of the capital's bombardment by their inventions, but the latter was visibly satisfied with the sight of mud, rubble and fire erupting into the skies with every impact of the magical missiles, murmuring "Yes, yes, merwizard, burn them all!". This confirmed his previous informations: something was amiss in the head of the governor of Chiron's Landing. The Syrdani standing besides them took over, and whistled, one battlemage approving of another's work.

Another salvo of the weapons flew overhead, their warping contrail-like traces only visible to his magical sight. The missiles were a curious design: large trees were felled, their woods usually used for crafting brooms. Instead, they were hollowed out, like giant wands, and filled with the deadliest 'core' imaginable: tons of Muggle-made explosives, enchanced with other deadly surprises, like explosive gases (OOC: Thermobaric and fuel-air explosives have been used in guerrilla warfare since 1983, requiring only propane, butane or acetylene) or napalm. Then, the filled 'wands' were
enchanted to fly like brooms, in one, easy but breathtaking arc at their master's command. Of course, these missiles were far from perfect: up to this point, he observed a good 60% rate of successful explosion upon impact, and he had enough first hand experience with explosives to know: even in those bombs, only part of the payload exploded at once.

But it didn't matter. In the last few days, these devices, nicknamed the Wands of Destruction, were made by the hundreds, even thousands, tying down most of the Trapanandan forces. Now, the tree trunks, thinned down to shatter upon impact as soon as the strengthening runes in the front touched earth, were powered up by the merwizards who did recon and strafing runs over Hynhynm in the last week. Checking their targets on the maps one last time, they concentrated on their target locations and the trajectory leading there, touched their wands to the hovering tree trunks, and WHOOSH, another salvo was sent off from behind the mountain.

Suddenly, the ground began shaking. Confused, Thiago lost his footing, just like the ones standing near him. Lying on the ground, he pressed his ear to the stone, and heard a cracking grating sound that sent shivers up his spine. He knew this sound. He heard it, when the earth rumbled and shook, back in the Andes, when earthquakes started... landslides. Whipping out his wand, he sprung up and took to his broom, flying over the launch site, that suddenly fell silent.

Silent was a strange word in context. It stood for 'not launching Wands of Destruction', not for 'not screaming in shocked horror'. The mountain side, beginning from the summit, swayed, trees twisted as roots tried to keep the rocks together, ultimately in vain. As the gigantic avalanche started rolling towards the launch site, the merwizard officer snapped out of his shock. Thinking quickly, he casted Sonorus, and yelled at his troops: "All of you, on your brooms and fly the hell out of here, primary evacuation locations, NOW!"

In the end, when the landslide reached the missiles thirty seconds later, setting off an impact rune and causing a chain reaction of fiery hell clearly visible from the city, only a handful of unfortunate merwizards were caught in the blast, with a few dozen others suffering serious burns and other injuries. The majority of them, along with the governors, managed to get far away enough that their shields could take the worst of the shockwaves and fireballs. But getting off without major loss of life was an illusion: now, their main weapons were lost for the time being, giving the enemy plenty of time to ready it's defences. In the end, this accident would claim much more lives, and influence the outcome of this civil war.

To be continued...

---------
Update #344: Girls, Girls, Girls
---------
Tuesday, September 3, 1996
1400Z
United Nations Building
Geneva
Switzerland
---------
NEXT UP: Anyone Here Speak Xylophone? (.5)
Anastasios Dialonis looked hard at Andrea Markali. "You're sure you want to do this, Madame President? Once you do this, there's no turning back. And if they discover that men aren't allowed to hold office in your nation, you can get into big trouble for it."

Markali shrugged. "I doubt that it's going to be a problem, Ambassador. It's not like we're going to take the Protector down. After seeing what happened to the environment after those idiots in the Pacific pulled that surprise on the centaurs, we're going to be VERY careful."

"You're not going to take down the Protector? Then how --"

Markali winked at him and said, "You'll find out. I've made arrangements."

Dialonis suddenly found her VERY attractive. He was barely able to restrain himself from trying to give her a kiss after that wink. Gritting his teeth, he told her to not play around with her charming ability. Markali slapped the palm of her hand against her head. "I thought most of that had worn off. After all, I'm 66."

"You don't look like it, Madame President."

Markali grunted. "I don't see how you humans manage it. All right, let's make the announcement."

"What prompted this all of a sudden?"

Markali chuckled. "It's mating season down there in one of the big towns. They're sick of the guys they normally fool around with, and they're worried about inbreeding. They REALLY want to have some visitors. Considering they helped me win re-election last time, I figured I should help them out."

Dialonis nearly choked. "Madame President, this is not a very good idea --"

Markali cut him off. "Just do it. Trust me, this will work."

Grumbling, Dialonis strode to the podium and faced the crowd. "Ladies and gentlemen, it is my great pleasure to announce the president of a nation that very few of you, if any, have heard of before: the Republic of Nestor."

There were a few seconds of silence, followed by some excited murmuring. Dialonis saw that people were asking each other if they knew about Nestor. Someone mentioned that Nestor had been a character in Iliad, but that didn't do much good. What a surprise -- no one knew.

Dialonis explained. "There is a very good reason that you don't know about this nation. It's another hidden nation, this time in the eastern Atlantic. It is the home of the humanoid creatures known as veela, which normally take the form of...well, extremely seductive women..."

Several of the men started talking to each other. Dialonis let them chew on that for a moment before adding an offhand comment:

"...who can turn into vicious flying monsters when they get ticked off or...touched in places they don't like."

The side conversations stopped as Dialonis relinquished the podium. "Ladies and gentlemen, please
Markali came up to the podium and posed for some Muggle photographs. The representatives of Sweden and Djibouti promptly started ogling her from the back of the room, prompting her to glare at them and raise her hands into the air, curling the fingers so they looked like claws. The two diplomats changed their demeanor very quickly.

She began to speak. "Ladies and gentlemen, the time has come to reveal my nation to the world. Our homeland is off the coast of Africa, in the Atlantic. Although most of my species live there, there are groups of veela scattered all around the world. For the most part, Nestor has kept to itself for the past few centuries. That has not always been the case, however. If you know of any legends about the islands of the Amazons, those are most likely derived from accidental visits to Nestor.

"We're Homo sapiens, just like you are, and have given ourselves the scientific designation Homo sapiens nestorae. About 1 in every 10,000 of us have the ability to become wizards, just like you. This likely means that the Q and Z genes have the same frequency with us as they do with you. We can breed with humans, we are as intelligent as humans, and we have a stable civilization like yours.

"There are several differences, however. First, there is no such thing as a male veela as those die in utero. It is possible, however, for a woman who is half-veela to marry another Homo sapiens and bear a male child.

"People who are more than 1/8 veela may have the ability to turn into harpies, the dangerous flying creature Ambassador Dialonis mentioned earlier. Approximately 20% of female veela and 1% of male veela descendants have this ability.

"Another major difference is that there is very little marriage on the island. Although couples do exist and are protected by law, people tend to like to play the field a lot down there. Given the seduction issues, people can understand why.

"The most famous attribute associated with veela is extreme beauty, few signs of aging, and the ability of people who are more than 1/8 veela to charm people of the opposite gender. I saw that some of you were...intrigued...when you first saw me. I may look like I'm in my mid-30's, but I'm actually 66. If you think that I am attractive, imagine veela in their 20's and 30's."

Judging from the reactions of the men in the room, several people were fantasizing about that.

She continued. "A large number of supermodels and...niche actresses are actually part veela. I cannot say who without their permission, however. Some of them may not realize they are in fact partially veela.

"Due to the fact that there are no full male veela, Nestor is primarily female. To prevent complications from the seduction charm, members of the government must be at least 50 years of age, and ambassadors must be at least 60. Half veela between the ages 17 and 35 are not permitted to leave the island without government approval and at least two chaperones. Rest assured that if some of these women got loose among the Muggles, people would find it hard to do any work. Full veela are under even more restrictions, having to stay on the island until age 45.

"Each town has a brief mating season where the people are allowed to...increase the population. Mating activity is forbidden the rest of the season on penalty of death. This is because with all of the young women around down there, no one would be able to get any work done if it were open season 365 days a year."
The crowd chuckled as Markali looked over the crowd. "Now let's get to some of the logistics. Unlike Houyhnhnmland, we are not going to be removing our Protector. We had considered it, but after seeing what happened to the centaurs and to the environment after the Houyhnhnm Protector went down we decided against it. If Muggles want to visit Nestor, they have to visit one of our new embassies in the Canary Islands or Cape Verde. We will be running shuttles from there. At most 5,000 Muggles will be permitted on the island at any one time."

Markali hesitated for a moment, but she eventually drew a deep breath and continued. "You may ask what prompted us to come out at this moment. The simple truth is that we're starting to have some inbreeding issues and need to expand the gene pool. With so few men living on the island and limited interaction in the rest of the world due to the Statute of Secrecy, there isn't much to pick from."

The representatives started talking among themselves excitedly, and Dialonis had this horrifying vision of Nestor becoming the world's biggest spring break destination. He fervently hoped Markali knew what she was doing.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #344.5: Anyone Here Speak Xylophone?
-------------
Tuesday, September 3, 1996
2300Z
Public School #2
Xylix
Xylenda
-------------
NEXT UP: Stick To Making Lucky Charms
-------------
It's a good thing they let me go on this trip, Megan Baldwin thought. Otherwise, they would have likely been completely up the creek.

Hidden under the Invisibility Cloak, she watched as the teenagers played Quidditch in the schoolyard. Having never seen the sport, the first anthropologist to visit the school had no idea what they were doing. He had originally thought it was some kind of hazing or religious ritual where kids threw balls at each other.

The school seemed to have two divisions when it came to Quidditch, one for ages 11-13 and one for ages 14-17. She suspected that it was because the older students were much stronger than the younger ones and had a tendency to shove the first-years off their brooms. In addition, it looked like the students were strapped to their brooms as well to make sure they didn't fall off. Megan found that most fascinating and made a mental note to tell Dumbledore about this when she came back for the 1997-1998 school year.

The score was 50-50 when the principal called everyone in from recess. The kids grumbled a little, but they packed up the Quidditch equipment and walked back into the building. Megan followed them in, invisible.

The halls looked strange without lockers. The replacement for lockers became obvious when one of the children toting the Bludgers touched her wand to the wall and drew an intricate symbol. The wall disappeared and revealed what were obviously the contents of a traditional school locker: books,
lunch containers, and so forth. The girl shoved the Quidditch equipment in and headed back to class.

She walked down the hallway and stopped when she saw a class schedule for one of the school years. It looked similar to Hogwarts, but not quite:

---

**MONDAY:**
8:00-8:50 Muggle Studies
9:00-9:50 Galiver
10:00-10:50 Astrology
11:00-11:50 Math
1:00-1:50 Russian
2:00-2:50 Potions
3:00-3:50 History
4:10-5:00 Wandwork
5:10-6:00 Inuit Literature
---

She jotted down the schedule in amazement. It looked like all of these students were doing a double curriculum, with both magical coursework and traditional courses like math, history, and so forth. She had a strong suspicion that the Xylend school board had been busy during the summer.

The Inuit Literature and Russian threw her for a moment before it finally occurred to her why they had been included. Xylenda was in the Pacific, due south of the Bering Strait. What this meant was that the most common Muggle languages Xylend would encounter would be English (which presumably they used Galiver for), Inuit (the traditional trading partner), and Russian.

Officially, the Muggle researchers called the Xylend language Galiver. Unofficially, however, they were calling it Xylophone. It made sense, after all. An Anglophone country spoke English. What type of country would speak Xylend?

She continued down the hallway and saw one of the children lugging around a basketball. Judging by the fact that the kid had a large following despite the acne on his face, it seemed that the fans were more interested in the basketball than the kid himself. One of the other kids promptly tried to take the ball, at which point the child who had brought in the prized Muggle relic threw it at his head. He missed, and the ball promptly started bouncing down the hall.

The kids looked around at each other for a second. Megan could see the gears churning in those young minds.

Finally, one of the kids came out with it. Pointing at the ball, which was now in one girl's arms, he said: "Forsooth, 'tis Muggle Bludger. I dinna ken Muggles had Bludgers. They are more akin to us than we thought."

That, of course, proved to be a mistake as the kids started trying to pelt each other with the ball. Inevitably, the teachers stumbled into the fight and confiscated the valuable Muggle artifact. The kids complained, of course, but they inevitably returned to class. Megan imagined that they didn't want detention when their school day got out at 6 PM.

The teacher who had eventually wound up with the ball looked at it thoughtfully for a few seconds. Glancing at the schoolyard, he got up and started walking towards the Quidditch pitch. He chuckled for a moment and told the man next to him, "I have an idea. Ensure the students dinna see me."

Megan followed the teacher outside, where he walked over to the playground, rummaged in a
storage cabinet, and brought out an extra Quidditch scoring ring along with its post. The posts were made out of ten-foot increments, as the three rings were 30, 40, and 50 feet in height.

He took a look at the ball, brought out his wand, and shrank the ring somewhat. He then took out one of the ten-foot pole pieces, attached the shrunken ring to the top, and jammed it into the ground at one end of the playground. Nodding at it in approval, he picked up the Muggle ball and tried to throw it into the circle ten feet above the ground. He eventually succeeded after a few tries -- it was harder than it looked. Each time it went through the circle, the HOME side of the magical scoreboard incremented by ten points.

"'Tis very interesting."

He then walked over to the contraption and then bent the scoring ring ninety degrees so that the top was parallel to the top of the pole. He tossed the ball in a few more times, making sure that it was still possible to get the ball through the hoop. Finally, he Geminio'ed the entire contraption and placed the second copy at the other end of the Quidditch pitch. He tossed the ball through and the GUEST side of the scoreboard incremented by ten points.

He returned to the center of the arena, bounced the ball around, and looked at his handiwork. "Very interesting, indeed. Two points for the ten-foot ring, six for the thirty, eight for the forty, and ten for the fifty. Aye, and no brooms."

Megan stared at the teacher in amazement. Had he just introduced basketball to the world of Quidditch or Quidditch to the world of basketball?

-------------------

Juneau, Alaska

Xolee the witch couldn't pass up something like this. The big sign on top of the building said INDEPENDENCE DAY 4:30 8:30. She figured this had to be a cultural reference, possibly a museum. This would be a good chance to learn about the United States's history.

Wrapping her broom in the Invisibility Cloak and hoping that she would be able to speak Muggle English, she headed over to the woman in the little booth. "I'd like to see Independence Day, please."

"Certainly. I assume the 4:30 showing?"

Xolee nodded. "That's right."

The woman manipulated the odd-looking machine in front of her. "That would be $8.95, ma'am."

She handed over a bill which said TEN DOLLARS on it and got back some change along with a little piece of paper which looked like her ticket. She followed the directions on the signs, handed the ticket over to a clerk, and found herself in a room filled with people. Presumably they also wanted to learn more about the country's independence.

There was a big white screen at the front of the room. Were they going to be displaying images from the country's founding on that screen? Was that a curtain which was hiding a stage behind it filled with actors? She'd find out soon enough, she supposed.

She saw that the people next to her were drinking an odd, fizzy brown drink and were eating something called popcorn. This must be an American celebratory custom, she thought. She headed over to the front desk again and bought some of these two products.
The popcorn tasted pretty good. The drink, however, tasted awful and it burned going down her throat. How could Muggles drink this? Were their digestive systems different from those of wizards? That would be a useful thing to know!

The screen eventually lit up and showed previews of various shows. Most of them seemed to have a lot of violence and death in them, and one of them had a scantily-clad woman in it. She frowned -- wouldn't that encourage young people to behave violently? Why did the Americans do that? Did it have something to do with the Independence Day celebration?

Finally, the lights dimmed and the main feature began. Much to her surprise, the story about Independence Day was going to be shown on the screen as well -- she had managed to convince herself that there were actors hiding behind it which had needed some extra time to get ready.

The opening scene showed a picture of something which looked like the American flag against a starlit sky. There was virtually nothing in the foreground, just an area with a lot of holes in the ground. Someone was talking about exploration -- something about taking one small step for man. Presumably this was discussing how the American nation had been founded.

The movie went on, and the wind started blowing and started moving around the flag. The scene widened slightly and showed a large Muggle vehicle heading towards something which she recognized as the planet Earth. Most fascinating, she thought. Apparently the Americans' ancestors came from outer space! Did Muggles originate from outer space? Is that why they had trouble casting spells?

That Muggle vehicle looked huge, she thought. There could be lots and lots of Muggles in it, she thought. For all she knew, the entire founding population of the United States could have arrived in that vehicle.

She brought out her Quick-Quotes Quill. This would be most educational, she thought.

To be continued...

------------
Update #345: Stick To Making Lucky Charms
------------
Wednesday, September 4, 1996
Dublin
Ireland
------------
NEXT UP: The New Gold Standard
------------
Brogan Lonán was talking down the street, marveling at all of the Muggle stores. He thought it was hilarious that they needed wheeled vehicles to travel all over the place and knew nothing about Quidditch.

By his very nature, he had been unable to interact much with Muggles prior to the fall of the Statute of Secrecy. Now, of course, everything had changed.

He couldn't understand why Muggles needed all these things. Who would want to play chess on boards where the pieces didn't move? Why would some need more than one television set if they couldn't even show 3-D images? It boggled the mind.
Brogan Lonán had been about to give up on this street when a sign in the display window of Robert's Pawn Shop caught his eye.

WE BUY GOLD! £350.00/OZ!

Brogan Lonán stopped in his tracks as a plan began to take shape in his mind. He was a prankster, like most of his kind. This would be the ideal place to try a practical joke, and if everything went as planned he'd get really rich. However, he had to think this through. He couldn't just walk in there without giving the game away. After all, he was only six inches tall and would very easily be overlooked by the tall humans behind the counter. Blimey, it was possible that people would step on him, an extremely embarrassing way to go.

Brogan Lonán shrugged. He was a smart leprechaun, and he knew he'd figure something out.

----------------------

Robert O'Malley returned from his bathroom break to find another envelope in the mailbox. Wondering how much he would have to shell out this time, he opened it and nearly fell over in astonishment.

The envelope was filled with old gold coins. He didn't recognize the people or nationalities, but he suspected they were Roman. He pitied the poor soul who would be willing part with his antique coin set in order to pay the rent in this economy. However, he had to admit that reselling these coins at £400.00 per ounce would get him a lot of money.

He examined the coins critically and was soon convinced they were genuine. He then carried them over to the scale and determined that they weighed 17.4 ounces in total. Bloody hell, over a pound of gold. If he could sell the coins to gold buyers, he'd make a fortune.

There was a piece of paper inside the envelope. Frowning, O'Malley unfolded it and read it.

"Dear Mr. O'Malley:

"It pains my heart to do this, but I am going to have to start parting with my set of gold coins from the era of Diocletian. I need to put food on the table, and I have run out of all other options.

"I intend to repurchase these coins after I become solvent again. In the meantime, take care of them for me. I have heard rumors that gold sellers have been stealing gold coins and ingots from their stores to try to resell them at these high prices, and I don't want you to fall victim to the same trap. Keep an eye on these coins and place them securely in your vault. If any of them disappear, please talk to your employees and see where they went. I'm willing to pay an extra £50/ounce in insurance: if they disappear, I want their value repaid in full at the standard £350.00/ounce.

"Please send the check to Brogan Lonán, 35 Mayfield Drive, Dublin. It has been a pleasure doing business with you.

"Sincerely, Brogan Lonán."

O'Malley wrote out a check for £5220 and put the coins in the vault. These coins weren't going anywhere. No way. He'd heard of unscrupulous people working in pawn shops, but he'd been in business for many years and had weeded out all the bad apples. If this Brogan Lonán was willing to part with £50/oz because he didn't trust the dealers, tough luck for him.

----------------------

South Boston
Red Auerbach couldn’t believe the old fellow was still alive. Then again, leprechauns were strange creatures. For all he knew, they were immortal.

He had first Lorcán Iarfhlaith back in 1957, while he was managing the Boston Celtics. The meeting had been more or less accidental, and had nearly been a disaster when he barely had missed stepping on the little guy.

Lorcán had confirmed that he was in fact a leprechaun who was currently living in South Boston. Lorcán had then pleaded with Auerbach to give him a place to live somewhere else because he was being harassed by some gangs in the area. Eventually, the two men made a deal: Auerbach would allow Lorcán to live in the Boston Garden rafters in exchange for Lorcán not Obliviating him.

As it turned out, having a leprechaun in the building had been beneficial in more ways than one. The Celtics’ luck had improved greatly over the next few years, and the team had won eight championships in a row. Unfortunately, by the late sixties, rumors began circulating about a leprechaun in the building and Auerbach had been forced to kick Lorcán out.

The Celtics fell apart soon after Lorcán left. For a long time, Auerbach refused to bring Lorcán back for the simple reason that (a) it wasn’t sportsmanlike, and (b) other teams deserved a chance to win from time to time. Unfortunately, Auerbach had found Lorcán banging on his door with a bloody nose in March 1979, pleading for asylum. Against his better judgment, Auerbach let Lorcán back in from time to time, allowing him to spend half his time at the Garden and the other half in South Boston. By the time the mess in South Boston had cleaned itself up in the mid-80’s, the Celtics had won a few more championships and Auerbach was having second thoughts about having the leprechaun in the building. Lorcán left after 1985 and the Celtics returned to mediocrity.

The leprechaun’s beard had gotten a little gray, but Lorcán was still sharp as a tack. He listened as Auerbach proposed his deal: now that the Statute of Secrecy had fallen, Lorcán could become the team’s official mascot and fly around in the Fleet Center during basketball games. He would get paid in Galleons and could live there in perpetuity. In exchange, Lorcán would refuse to improve the Celtics’ luck or cause the opponents to have bad luck.

Lorcán didn’t like the idea of refusing to provide people with good luck. However, he acknowledged that he was out of a job and money would be quite useful at this point.

The negotiations took less than half an hour, and when it was over Lorcán Iarfhlaith was once again an employee of the Boston Celtics.

-----------------------------------
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
-----------------------------------

Professor Flitwick couldn’t deny it anymore. Although he had tried to keep everything under wraps, the results of his Ziggurat Labs test had leaked out. The results had included Q, Z…and B.

The B had been the big surprise. It was goblin DNA.

He soon found himself standing at the podium, explaining that he was 1/8 goblin. He just hoped that the school would react favorably to this.

Thankfully, for the most part, they did. A few Slytherins scowled at him and called him derogatory names, but they tended to do that to everyone.
To be continued...
Anastasios Dialonis had heard of strange things before coming out of the Muggle world. However, this took the cake.

He looked at the economist in disbelief. "You want some of the Muggle nations to start accepting Galleons?"

The economist shook his head. "More than that, Ambassador. We want the Galleon to become the world's new gold standard, with all Muggle currencies eventually backed by the Galleon."

Dialonis shook his head. "How is that possible? We don't have enough Galleons to cover situations where large numbers of Muggles try to turn their paper currency into gold!"

"You don't need to worry about that, Ambassador. First, very few people will actually WANT to be using Galleons. Besides, I've heard you have a lot of gold and that it's difficult to counterfeit. You'd be surprised how much that's worth in Muggle currency."

Dialonis threw his hands up. "But we still don't have that much gold to make Galleons out of. I mean, last time I heard we had maybe a billion kilograms in the international vaults --"

The economist chuckled. "That's a lot of gold, Ambassador. $550/oz is $8800/pound or about $20,000/kilo. You're sitting on twenty trillion dollars, my magical friend. That's a lot of money."

"I still don't get how this is going to help you, sir."

"There seems to be less volatility in the Wizarding economies than in the Muggle economies, so the Galleon is pretty stable. Second, from what you've told me wizards all over the world use Galleons regardless of which country they're in. If there is anything better suited for an international currency, I don't know of it. There are plans in the works to try to give most of the countries in Europe a common unit of currency called the euro, but no one knows if that will actually work."

Dialonis disagreed. "There's definitely volatility, sir. You've only been aware of our existence for less than a year, after all. If anything, the first interaction with the Muggle world could cause some dangerous fluctuations in prices as Muggles try to buy magical equipment."

The economist began pacing around the room. "I see your point. What do we need to look out for most of the time?"

"International Wizarding wars aren't that much of an issue, especially worldwide ones, as we figured
out many years ago that the ability to cast spells tends to lead to mutually assured destruction. Countries do fight from time to time, but the wars rarely spread. Let's all pray that the chaos in Houyhnhnmland doesn't spread any further."

"Was Judgment Day an international Wizarding war?"

"No, sir. Judgment Day was basically a scaled-up version of a typical Wizarding situation where a Dark wizard emerges and tries to take over his or her local area. I'd say a good 60-70% of Wizarding confrontations are like that. Had the Statute of Secrecy not fallen and Voldemort not been given access to Muggle technology, I doubt the scenario would have gotten past DEFCON 4. Voldemort would have likely been a local nuisance to the British Isles and that's that. Now that we know what to look for, we can try to stop these situations before they get too far along."

Dialonis smiled. "Put it this way. Voldemort did something very similar to this in the late 1970's and early 1980's. Many people were killed, and the British Wizarding community was thrown into turmoil. And you didn't hear about it."

"What about the other two Judgment Days?"

Dialonis shrugged. "One was a comet impact, as you know. The other was back in the 1600's BC when a Dark wizard tried a primitive form of biowarfare against his enemies and it spread into the Muggle world. In retrospect, that should not have been considered a Judgment Day because the people in the Americas would not have succumbed to the disease. However, you have to realize that back in those days people still thought the world was flat and all of the major civilizations known to the ancients were in the Fertile Crescent, Egypt, India, and China. If a plague takes out the Fertile Crescent and is on the verge of making it into India you've got problems. The wizards of the time had no idea that they were overestimating the chances of the end of civilization."

The economist whistled. "Sounds like the Black Death."

Dialonis nodded. "Indeed, the situation was very similar to the Black Death, which got to DEFCON 1 but no further. Had the Norse explorers not discovered evidence of distant lands in what would now be called the New World, that could have reached Judgment Day as well."

"Was there a Dark wizard involved with the Black Death as well?"

Dialonis hesitated for a moment before responding -- he knew things had to be kept classified here. "We're not sure, sir. There are many Muggle legends from that time which discuss sorcerers, but there's no way to tell if they're related to the Black Death. What I can tell you, however, is that Flamel was inspired to work on the Philosopher's Stone by the Black Death. He was still in his first century at the time -- not as knowledgeable and wise as he is now, but still a formidable force."

"At any rate, back to the subject at hand. The chaos involving the Black Death caused people to start hoarding and faking Galleons in the fourteenth century and the value of a Galleon depreciated greatly -- by almost 10,000. Thankfully, volatility like that is EXTREMELY rare -- there's been nothing like that since. The Galleon's been very reliable over the last couple of centuries."

The economist winced as Dialonis continued. "If you do switch over to using the Galleon as your monetary standard, I'd recommend two things. First, wait until 2001 or so -- a good twenty-first century advance -- for all of the repercussions of the falling of the Statute of Secrecy to sort themselves out. And second, give us time to start producing Galleons made out of something other than gold. Now that the Statute of Secrecy has fallen, that has to be one of our primary concerns."
The economist blinked. "You're going to stop using gold? Why?"

Dialonis chuckled. "A Galleon is worth about £5 right now thanks to the Black Death depreciation. From a Muggle perspective, its value as bullion is greater than its face value. If Muggles start melting them down we've got problems. What we need to do is make Galleons out of something which is much less valuable than its face value, maybe lead with gold leaf. The traditionalists won't like it, but I don't see how we have much of a choice here. We won't need to worry about Muggles duplicating them because of our special spells."

The economist got up. "That's good to know. I'll keep you posted on the proceedings. So far, this is all theoretical. Whether we will actually DO it or not depends on the opinions of the Muggles. The United States and other powerful countries probably won't like it all that much, and they've got veto power in the UN and so forth. It's probably going to be a long, hard fight. But in my opinion it's one that's probably worth it."

-------------
Kirkuk
Iraq
-------------
Mahmoud Singh chuckled. The pompous dictator of Iraq had no idea that the wizards who were seeking asylum in his nation had included all seven Indian Death Eaters who had survived Judgment Day.

Singh didn't have enough to take over the government yet and turn it into another Death Eater state. Voldemort had been a far more powerful leader than he, Singh, could have possibly been. He had told everyone to wait until they had at least 200 members before proceeding with the coup. Voldemort may have been dead, but that didn't mean that there were no people left who were convinced that wizards were superior to Muggles. Singh couldn't imagine how someone could NOT think that. Wizards could cast spells and use technology if trained. Muggles could only use technology. Who was supposed to rule whom here?

On the surface, all of the Death Eaters had agreed to serve as philanthropists and benefactors, similar to what Lucius Malfoy had done. They had been welcomed by Saddam personally -- those who had not actually had the Dark Mark branded on their arms, of course. The others had to stay hidden because a Dark Mark would have been an obvious sign.

There had been only one case where some Iraqi Muggles had figured out something was wrong. The Death Eater in the area, due to the grace of Allah, had been a master Obliviator and had manged to deal with it without resorting to murder or anything else which could have ruined his reputation.

The seven Death Eaters had been joined by fifteen other freedom fighters who had been too nervous to come out when Voldemort had returned. That was twenty-two partisans. A good start, but there was still more work to be done.

He needed to find a source of wizards who thought they were superior to Muggles and were itching to get back at the Muggle world. Fortunately, such a place was not so hard to find. It may have been reformed on the surface thanks to Muggle technology, but he was sure that there were still citizens who preferred the old ways. You couldn't shout at equipment and use machines as scapegoats and punching bags if you were stressed, after all.

Grinning, he placed the map of Syrdan in his pocket and made his way to the new Syrdani embassy to Apparate over there. Syrdan fit perfectly. They didn't like the United States, they believed wizards
were superior to Muggles, and they were pagans who needed conversion to Islam. What could possibly go wrong?

To be continued...

-------------

Update #346.5
-------------

Wednesday, September 4, 1996
Merpeople Trading Outpost
Noto Island, Ishikawa prefecture
Japan

The days of the Five Fins Merchieftainness, Asmara, were busy since the events of the first week of August. She had to reassert her dominance over the renegade elements of her tribe, who came back to her after the demise of the demon... no, merwizard Sarebas. Luckily, they could solve that conflict with minimal bloodshed: the abomination's personal guard was neutralised by nonlethal magic before bullets and blades would have been needed, and the rest of his tribe saw reason and surrendered after a warning shot from a Muggle submarine's torpedo launcher... a lucky thing, as it later turned out, their weapons were enchanted well enough to possibly pose a threat even to the submarines. On the other hand, the death of the tattooed wizard would have been more than sufficient to kill five others, and proved to be very memorable in it's own nauseating way.

This memory has driven her to make some hard decisions. She allowed the Trapanandans to take away as many members of the defeated tribe as they pleased, and they were off with seven of Sarebas's dozen children before the blood stopped oozing from his scattered remains. Their withdrawal was hasty, and probably without immediate Obliviations - judging by what they learned, this would not stay so for long. As the pieces began falling together, a sense of dread settled over her: apparently, a group of powerful wizards of her species had at least one hidden base unknown to anyone, including the mighty Atlantis of the humans. Also, the knowledge that there were no wizards born to merpeople was a lie, and these mages have spirited these children away and Obliviated the tribes. Her own memories of having some imaginary friend for years were suspicious... very likely residual memories from Obliviation, explained away by her mind. "Those bastards took my friend away..." For some reason, they didn't do that in Roqteratl, and this way merwizards appeared there from time to time, ending up as secret superweapons in the power struggles between factions, or causing accidents by not receiving proper training, or just living normal lives in blissful ignorance. Her suspicions were confirmed by the Eldest, but the old merman asked her to keep it secret for now, as Trapananda is too powerful to attract it's wrath. On the other hand, there was nothing wrong in finding a way to passively fend off these supernatural stalkers, and the Roqteratl leader gave some clues about that.

What did Roqteratl have, that they lacked? The answer was simple: wizards. A month has passed and none of her tribe was Obliviated, as far as they could tell, as ever since they were in the company of roqteratli and japanese wizards. Also, as far as she could guess, the merwizards chose to stay in isolation because they saw the rest of their kind as primitive and too much a danger to their precious pure blood. "Screw them, hypocrite scum, for sticking with that lame excuse. They could have stayed with us to build an advanced society together, just telling people that they had to keep wizard bloodlines pure, but nooo, they had to go hide from the rest of the world, don't giving a sh*t about our problems," she thought.
This will teach them: trading outposts opening all around the world, wizards and muggles of all race invited to visit the tribes or even live among them- after all, every city wanted at least a healer. It provided employment for wizards, health care for merpeople, and by having a wizard in town, scared the Trapanandans away. Win-win-win. She smirked when she remembered another detail: unlike her, the Japanese mages could not be convinced so easily to keep the secret. They only promised to keep it classified, but that still meant sharing it with the Grand Mugwump after their investigation is closed. Any day now, and Dagher Sedai will unleash a big can of butt-hurt on that selfish scum... surely the wizards can find a way to contact them and demand a drastic change in their policies. Or if not, she could go to the Muggles: learning more about airbreather politics, she found groups For Humans quite sympathetic. Of course, the name would have to go- they weren't human. But they were muggles, and suffering for it.

Her musings were interrupted by the doorbell and the yelling: "Merchieftainess, your guest will arrive in five minutes!" She remembered her schedule: a meeting with a strange muggle was about to start. The meeting will take place in one of the recently finished Roqteratl styled underwater buildings near the shore, with a flooded basement and an air-bubbled first floor. She was in her own apartment a couple of buildings away, preparing for the meeting and many others to follow- a surprising amount of Muggles was interested in her people’s products and abilities.

So far, the Noto Island Outpost, shared by a dozen tribes normally living near the shores of Honshu, grew into a small amphibious town over the course of a month, complete with docks and an airport on the land. Relations between the tribes were surprisingly amiable, in light of their past clashes. But then again, there was plenty for all to take: the Japanese were interested in everything they had, from edible aquatic plants to exotic fish they caught and minerals and magical ingredients they gathered from the sea. And their services too: the marine divisions of the human police and defense force were eager to employ merpeople, not to mention the dozens of them finding diving guide or coast guard jobs, or contracts for surveying rivers and lakes or recovering submerged goods.

Today's guest, Noboru Kamitani, wanted something else. At first, she thought it's a prank, but thinking it over, the man's idea of a mermaid chorus performing to human audiences was more genius than mad. Checking her new human wristwatch, she grabbed her slate from the table and swam out of the house, thanking her tribesman at the door for checking in on her, then approached the meeting hall, going for the top floor- courtesy dictated that she allowed the human guests to speak, while she wrote down her part of the dialogue. Entering the airlock, she found two humans in the comfortably furnished room waiting for her. They looked somewhat familiar...

-------------
250 miles north of Syktyvkar
Komi Republic
Russian Federation
-------------

Sevastyan Orlov swatted another loud, fat and ugly horsefly away. Summer in Siberia was apparently just as bad as winter, only with mud and lots of insects instead of deadly cold.
Volunteering for this mission was decidedly a bad idea, but it seemed easy at the time: their dear leader Rasputin had stashed away a few things back in his day near his birthplace Pokrovskoye, and around it. Their job was to go and check on some of those, following his instructions. Unfortunately, some stupid bloke half the world away thought it'd be a good idea to smash a powerful magical artifact into pieces, and consequently 'blessed' the entire world with a month of rainfall, may the thousand vanguard spirits of Tchernobog feast on the whining shards of that fool's soul.

Their group was 8 men strong, and led by a mage, a young witch named Sofya. Having learnt a bit about wizards, Sevastyan didn't really understand why Rasputin had to delegate the task to them: he was a wizard, able to teleport anywhere at will, and as he placed this treasure himself, he should have no trouble picturing the place. Of course the Mad Monk didn't give them an explanation... well, maybe to the witch, but she didn't tell them either, thinking her pretty little self above them- a pity, she was quite the looker, and not above some flirting with him. "Perhaps it's just a test of faith" he thought. "Rasputin will just Apparate over there to see if we really did check on his stuff... and he'd punish us if we reported him that it was just not there, probably eaten by a wolverine, like his last 2 worthless pile of letters and books should have been. Seriously, sending them to check on letters and have the witch copy them? So far their only use was when they had to solve some riddles to get the hidden 'treasure', and any novice of the cult with half a brain could have answered those questions.

And here they were, marching through this mud-soaked wilderness, the roads hopelessly flooded and even the frightened superstitious locals shouting strange things at them, telling to stay away... as if he didn't want to do it anyway. And now, the sun was going down. As short as the summer night was this far up north, it still meant stopping and setting up camp. The witch pointed at the next hilltop, showing where their tents will stand. Taking a look at the setting sun, Sevastyan stopped as he spotted a silhouette, standing about 50 meters away. A voice reached them, crystal clear and audible despite the distance, the words flowing like the water of the purest mountain spring despite the funny accent.

"Well, well. What have we here?" The rest of the group turned there as one, and stared with gaping mouths at the approaching woman. She was without doubt a woman, she was the most feminine being the cultist has ever seen. It shined from every particle of her being, promising him untold pleasure, but also threatening agonising pain - there was no greater torture than withholding that pleasure... And suddenly, an ugly, screeching, grunting voice dared to distract him.

"Look away from her, fools" said Sofya, pointing her wand at the beauty. "She's a Ve... a rusalka!" - she improvised, knowing that the two are pretty much the same, with the latter being the more fearsome and malevolent aspects of the nice folk distilled into Muggle myths. If convincing the men that this creature charming them into brainless puppets was an undead revenant seeking to lure them into an undignified death was not enough, she was in deep trouble.

The Veela spoke again, and the witch swore as the men glanced back at her, and stayed that way, hopelessly mesmerised. Worse, the bitch was calling her men, calling them to herself, and calling them hers. Gritting her teeth, she opened her mouth to cast a curse at the insolent slut- just paradise her, shut her up, letting the brainlessly horny idiots give her more than she bargained for... but she never got there: all of a sudden, she felt the impact of a curse at her back, and she fell forward into oblivion.
Already moving towards the girl, Sevastyan didn't even notice the dull thump of his leader's body hitting the muddy ground. Pretty soon, they stood in a loose half-circle in front of the beauty, who swept her seductive gaze over them, and said in her most charming voice: "Oh my my, so many men, for a single girl... how come you're not fighting for me?" At her words, adrenaline burnt through the cultist's veins, and all eight of them were at each other's throats before she could even finish the sentence. After a minute of chaotic free-for-all with fists and knives and guns and even a clumsily wielded rifle, Sevastyan shot the last bastard who dared to set his filthy eyes on his mistress, and stood panting with a nasty stab wound in his feet barely registering, despite the knife still nailing him to the ground. As he tried to limp toward his delightful prize, the girl laughed mockingly, a noise like glass shattering, and he faintly heard a plain female voice behind him saying 'Stupefy!'. A second later, something hit him in the back and knocked him forward. He was unconscious before he hit the ground.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #347: Werewolf On Trial
-------------
Thursday, September 5, 1996
Amsterdam
Holland
The Netherlands
-------------
NEXT UP: The Lightning-Struck Tower
-------------
Harrison Cooper stood at the defendant's podium as the cameras flashed around him. The judge had only allowed Muggle cameras in the courtroom as the smoke emitted by the Wizarding ones tended to set off the sprinklers in the ceiling. That didn't prevent the Wizarding reporters from flooding into the room, either as Patronuses or in person with quills.

There was a veritable who's who of Wizarding notables in the room. The British Minister of Magic, Nicholas Flamel, had flown in for the first part of the trial. Neele Schuurman, the Dutch Minister of Magic, had come as well. A few people from Atlantis were in attendance as well. Both Ministers were planning to take the stand in Cooper's defense. Severus Snape, the genius behind the Wolfsbane Pill, would have come as well, but he had been forced to decline because he had to teach at Hogwarts.

Harrison had also been told that there would also be testimony from another werewolf, a man who simply identified himself as Luggnagg. When Harrison asked Schuurman who he was, all Schuurman could say was that he was a werewolf. He suspected, however, that there was something more to this. He could have sworn that he had heard the name Luggnagg before, but he couldn't remember where. For some reason, English class came to mind.

He looked over at the plaintiff’s podium, where he actually recognized many of the people from the cruise. Many of the plaintiffs were elderly, and he shuddered at the thought that his werewolf jaws could have killed people that frail. One man in a wheelchair had nearly clobbered him with a cane as he came into the courtroom.

He was facing four pairs of involuntary manslaughter/animal attack charges and no fewer than eleven civil suits for monetary compensation for the plaintiffs' emotional and physical distress as a
lycanthrope. His lawyers had told him that they'd likely merge everything into a class-action lawsuit. Although that made it more likely that he would escape unscathed, it also raised the harrowing possibility that he'd be convicted of EVERYTHING and be in really big trouble.

The Dutch government had provided no fewer than seven interpreters. Two-thirds of the plaintiffs didn't speak Dutch, and Harrison couldn't understand a word. What's more, the jury had trouble understanding English. Supposedly Minister Schuurman had sent someone to the Ministry of Magic in Rotterdam to see if she could get her hands on some Language Lozenges.

Harrison watched as someone walked to the front of the room and barked something in Dutch. The interpreter translated: "Attention, please. All rise for Judge Reda Alofs."

Everyone stood as a balding man with a mustache entered the room and sat down behind the judge's platform. One of the clerks brought a folder filled with photographs and other evidence to the front of the room, and the judge thanked him and opened it.

"This is case #1353, Cooper vs. Michaelson et al. Are the defendants and plaintiffs both present?"

Both sides said they were there.

"Good. Now if you would, please stand and swear an oath that you will tell the truth throughout these proceedings. You may choose to swear on a Bible or do so as an Unbreakable Vow."

Not surprisingly, both parties chose the Bible. Harrison wasn't particularly fond of turning himself into mincemeat because he accidentally spoke a lie.

It took five minutes or so to swear everyone in. Once that was done, Judge Alofs told the plaintiffs to make their introductory statement. Harrison winced as someone with a big bite mark on his arm took the stand. Displays like that could easily move the jury. Someone had clearly done his homework.

The plaintiff began to speak. "Your Honor, my name is Brian Michaelson. I was on the m/s Noordam on the night of June 1st, 1996. I was listening to a concert in the top deck's cocktail lounge when this man transformed into a rabid wolf and bit me. The bite infected me with the condition as well, and I have been transforming into a wolf every full moon since then. I'm seeking $50,000 USD per year in compensation for the physical and emotional trauma associated with being a werewolf."

That's over half a million a year if it's a class-action case, he thought. There's no way I'd be able to pay that!

The judge wrote down some notes and turned to Cooper. "Mr. Cooper, how do you plead to this charge?"

Harrison spoke without hesitation. "Not guilty, Your Honor." It wasn't really a lie, after all. The nasty wolf part of him did the biting, not Harrison himself. If anyone was guilty, it was that fellow who had bitten him in the first place at the football stadium.

The plaintiff nodded to the judge and sat down as another man took his place. "Your Honor, I'm Allen Malloy, from Cincinnati, Ohio. My wife and I were on the boat as well when the defendant attacked us. He bit my wife first and then went after me when I tried to get him off of her. I survived unscathed, but my wife didn't. She died a few days later. I'm asking for a charge of involuntary manslaughter."
The judge turned back to Harrison. "How do you plead to this charge, Mr. Cooper?"

"Not guilty, Your Honor. I would never do such a thing."

The judge jotted down some more notes. "Your pleas have been noted, Mr. Cooper. Mr. Michaelson, would you please begin presenting your case? How exactly can someone involuntarily bite someone and rampage through the ship?"

Harrison could answer that easily. "People in wereform have no sense of self and have no knowledge as to what they're doing. Mother Teresa would have done the same thing had she been afflicted with this condition, though to be honest I wouldn't wish it on anyone."

The judge called him off. "You'll get your chance to defend yourself later, Mr. Cooper. Right now, we'll listen to Mr. Michaelson's case."

Harrison listened as Michaelson began going into detail as to what happened on the boat. He wondered whether he should start talking to his lawyers about an insanity defense.

---------

Dublin

Robert O'Malley stared at the newspaper in amazement. They had finally finished counting the votes in North Korea, and the people had chosen to rejoin the South. A man named Park Wan Min had been given the office of interim president, and he would be in charge of North Korea until reunification was complete.

It had taken almost half a century to resolve the crisis in the Koreas, but resolved it had been. American troops left in the Koreas would be coming home soon, and the First Division of the Wizards' Standing Army was going to be sent home to Sweden or wherever it had come from. The last vestiges of Kim Jong-Il's despotic regime were finally beginning to be erased.

Elated, O'Malley walked into his office to check on the goods he was pawning. As usual, he walked into the vault to make sure everything was there. Everything looked fine...until he saw the envelope from that Brogan fellow which had arrived chock-full with gold coins.

The envelope was empty. The coins were gone.

Horrified, he searched the room frantically for the missing coins. He couldn't find them, however. Telling some customers to hold on for a few minutes, he spent another half hour rummaging through the vault. Nothing.

He couldn't believe it. Someone must have seen the gold coins on the way in, broken into the vault during the night, and stolen the coins. At first, he couldn't imagine why they hadn't stolen anything else. Then it occurred to him that the coins were small and could easily be hidden in a pocket. Some of the other items in the vault were too large to escape with easily.

Hoping his fear wasn't visible on his face, he made a mental note to get a video camera for inside the vault and check to see if the security camera above the store had caught anyone entering during the night. It had to be one of his employees, he realized. Who else knew the code to the vault?

He resolved to watch his employees closely until he got a chance to look at the security cameras. If anyone called in sick or was acting strangely...well, then he'd know.
That Brogan fellow had warned him about possible bad apples in the pawn shop business, and O'Malley hadn't taken the threat seriously enough. He needed to do something to allay his new customer's fears.

To be continued...

------------

Update #347.5
------------

Thursday, September 5, 1996
Fideliused safe house
Russian Federation, somewhere north of the Arctic Circle

The doors in the side of the small mound opened, revealing a descending tunnel illuminated by the cold glow of bottled Blueball Flames hanging from the walls. A slender woman with flowing black hair and revealing pure white clothing led a group of seven withered walking corpses, carrying two bound and gagged prisoners on their wiry shoulders, in. Lastly came a witch of completely average built, with short-cropped brunette hair and plain, but practical green-grey clothing. She turned to look at their tracks in the mud, frowned, then uttered a few spells to make the footprints disappear and reappear in random places. Closing the vault doors behind herself, the witch then followed the Inferi down the tunnel, and kept casting Tergeo on their muddy footprints and finally at the legs of the undead.

"I can understand they can be quite useful, having the brute force you squib weaklings lack, but would it really be too much to express some gratitude by ordered your pets to use the doormat?" she snarked at the Veela leading the group. The seductress blushed in shame, and said nothing. "Obviously, you haven't commanded this kind of underling before", continued the lecture, "and apparently watching the rest of your clan doing so only got you so far. I'm sure you were told before, but I'll tell you again: these guys are mindless. They do what I order them to do, and as our rites dictate I ordered them to follow your orders, and they will do just that: nothing more, nothing less. And don't get your expectations up, they can't be taught any useful skills."

The veela blurted out a quick question: "Can't they shoot Muggle weapons?"
The witch huffed dismissively, but gave it same thought. "Well, you could, but you'll have to order them to every required motion. That sounds slow and impractical in battle, doesn't it?"
The novice Inferius Controller's eyes lit up with an eerie gleam. "Oh, but I can give them definitions for composite orders. My sisters do that sometimes. I can lead my troops just as well as they do theirs... and better. Just wait and see, Sabine, I'll be the best Controller these lands have ever seen, and our Queen Mab will honor me for it!"

"Just be careful not to draw too much of her attention" came the dry remark from Sabine the witch. "It is known that young, beautiful and skilled ladies tend to be taken to her court, and never to come back..."
"Witch ladies" quipped the Veela, and pointed at herself: "Squib, here. I ain't gonna disappear. Speaking of which, now that you got those two captives, shouldn't you be taking the long flight over the Pole to the Queen with them? She might be interested in a group of muggles led by a witch, wandering in her territory, and this means a personal interrogation not just a relay by Two-way Mirror. Just take care not to disappear yourself," she jested.
"Not gonna happen" said Sabine. "I'm no beauty. The blondie I've caught... *sigh* okay, we have caught, I'll mention it to her, isn't half bad. And while I don't intend to disappear, a promotion to somewhere better would be great. If she likes this gift, who knows, perhaps she'll give me a new position in Chicago..."

To be continued...

--------Update #349: High Holiday Preparations
--------
Saturday, September 7, 1996
Main Hall
Omega Institute
Rhinebeck, NY
United States of America
Kennedy Space Center
--------
NEXT UP: Amazon Dot Comes
--------
John Paul II looked around the room where Samuel was leading Saturday morning services. At first glance, it would have passed for any other Jewish service. However, there were several subtle differences.

The Shema, the traditional Jewish declaration of faith, had been done silently as to allow every single worshiper to recite whichever declaration of faith suited them best. The cabinet which held the Torah scrolls had space to include several other religious texts, such as books from the New Testament and the Qu'ran. The traditional Torah reading had been accompanied by excerpts from the other monotheistic texts and from the Buddhist sutras. Finally, the Amidah -- the most important Jewish prayer -- had been replaced with silent standing meditation.

The services were still separated by gender, as they had been the case since the beginning. However, it was fairly obvious that women were starting to make inroads into the proceedings. Deborah, inspired by the Christian and Jewish laywomen, had stopped wearing her veil and had taken it upon herself to lead the women's services. For the first time in millennia, men were allowed to see her face. John Paul had to admit that had it not been for some missing teeth, she was not that unattractive. Then again, she had been assassinated in her thirties and had not lived long enough to look like an old crone.

The pope chuckled when he recalled the first time Deborah had taken off her veil. He had been with Samuel and Tiqwael at the time, and he remembered vividly the two ancient men staring at each other and rolling their eyes. The expression on their faces was priceless and obvious: "There she goes again, and it's not MY fault!"

It was now widely accepted that John Paul II was the only pope who mattered anymore. The original rationale for the Celestine movement had been abruptly negated when Celestine himself had returned to the fold. Although there was still an organization called the Celestine Church, it was increasingly obvious that it was slowly transforming itself into a quasi-religious order dedicated to the persecution of wizards. Several people had taken to calling it "Christians for Humans", something John Paul resented bitterly -- no true Christian would do what the new Celestine branch was proposing! The man who had declared himself Urban IX had conveniently disappeared just about the time the first
rumors about Christians for Humans had emerged.

The pope watched as various participants carried Torah scrolls, Qu'rans, and a Buddhist text around the room. Several people walked behind them in what appeared to be walking meditation. The texts were returned to the Ark, a final prayer was recited ("This is a tree of life for those who adhere to it"), and the door to the Ark was closed. Everyone then sat down to listen to the sermon.

Samuel and the interpreter walked up to the podium to deliver the speech, and the pope could tell that this was going to be important. Samuel seemed resolute, and the interpreter seemed...nervous. Several of the congregants began talking quietly to each other, and the pope eventually made out two words: Rosh Hashanah.

The pope nearly fell over as realization hit him. This was indeed going to be big. And it would likely be controversial.

Samuel began to speak. "Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to take this opportunity to discuss the upcoming High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. As you are all undoubtedly aware, Rosh Hashanah starts a week from last night and Yom Kippur is September 23rd."

Judging by the reaction of the crowd, Samuel had in fact caught several of the people off guard, particularly some of the more conservative Muslims. Some of the Hindus had looked around the room in confusion.

"The ten days between Rosh Hashanah -- the Abrahamic New Year -- and Yom Kippur are intended to be devoted to contemplation and introspection, where people review their conduct over the previous year and resolve to improve their actions. When I was alive, the High Priest would blow a ram's horn to encourage people to wake up spiritually and psychologically so they can put themselves in a position to meditate on what they have done. The introspection period begins on Rosh Hashanah and concludes on Yom Kippur, which is designed to be a full-scale one-day ascetic meditation retreat for secular and religious people alike. Worshipers are expected to impoverish their souls through fasting and other ascetic renunciation practices on that day and accept responsibility for their mistakes over the past year. Only by learning from past experiences and admitting one's failures can a person grow."

John Paul nodded. This seemed more or less consistent with what he knew about this season. It hadn't occurred to him that the Hebrew text anitem et nafshotekhem could mean anything other than fasting. However, if one simply looked at the text, it literally said "impoverish your spirits/souls". That sure sounded like renunciation practice to him. Although some of the people around him were grumbling that they weren't accustomed to fasting, that didn't seem anything particularly controversial.

Samuel continued his speech. "As you may or may not be aware, the priests have special ceremonies to perform at the Temple on Rosh Hashanah. In addition, the High Priest has an extremely important one to perform on Yom Kippur. Because of this requirement, I am asking every single man here who is an ordained priest to go to the Temple in Jerusalem next week to minister to the faithful and perform these rites. This includes Tiqwael, who was a priest; and I, who was the son of High Priest Eli. This practice has been performed for many centuries, and it would be remiss of us to stop doing so at this point, especially since the world needs guidance after an extremely tumultuous year. We will be in Israel for the two days of Rosh Hashanah and the one day of Yom Kippur."

John Paul's jaw dropped, and he wasn't alone. What was THAT supposed to mean? Was he going to start sacrificing animals in the Temple again like they did in Samuel's day? He sure hoped not, as
doing so would likely be a serious desecration of the venerable Islamic shrine. Who was supposed to be running the show here when everyone else was out in Jerusalem?

He turned to look at the Kohen Gadol, who had realized what he was going to be asked to do. He looked at the pope and whispered quietly in John Paul's ear.

"Has he gone nuts? We can't sacrifice animals in there without offending many Muslims! Although I am more than willing to do something to provide guidance for our flocks, I'm not doing that!"

The pope spoke urgently in Suleiman's ear. "I suspect Samuel has a trick up his sleeve. He isn't stupid. Let's hear what he has to say."

Samuel continued. "People who are not ordained priests are welcome to either come to Israel with us or stay here, where the Dalai Lama will be running the conference in my absence. He will lead Rosh Hashanah services. Anitiel will stay behind as well in case you need assistance from someone from my era."

John Paul shook his head in disbelief. He liked the Dalai Lama and believed he was a great leader, but shouldn't a monotheist be leading the conference in Samuel's absence, let alone running Rosh Hashanah services? And who was going to rule on arcane Abrahamic laws in Samuel's absence? Deborah?

The pope winced when it dawned on him that this could be a setup for disaster. Deborah was already gaining a big following among the women. Without Samuel and possibly Tiqwael to keep Deborah in check, she'd probably start ordaining a few female priests and rabbis as the most senior member of the group left in New York. Although the pope was starting to understand why female priests were feasible -- Jesus did have female disciples, after all -- he doubted everyone was as progressive as he was, and he was reluctant to start ordaining female priests lest it split the Church...again.

The pope glanced into the women's section and caught a glimpse of Deborah. She had a sly expression on her face. It was obvious that the implications of Samuel's absence hadn't been lost on her.

Samuel continued. "Once Yom Kippur ends, there will be a few more days here in New York before the rest of us join the priests on the pilgrimages for Sukkot, the harvest festival when we celebrate our bounty."

Judging from the reaction of the crowd, Samuel could have just introduced a festival for John Wilkes Booth instead of a festival for booths in general. He understood the theory, of course. Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot were the three Jewish pilgrimage festivals, holidays in which every able-bodied Jew was traditionally required to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. It hadn't occurred to him that Samuel was actually going to expect everyone to go to Jerusalem.

The pope frantically looked back over the past year. Samuel had already been in Israel for Passover, and he probably thought everyone would come and was surprised when they hadn't. He had been on hiatus over Shavuot, which had been in the late spring, so he hadn't had a chance to discuss this issue. Now, however...John Paul shuddered. Did Samuel seriously expect a few billion Abrahamics to pile into the Temple? And he had thought that the hajj was crowded!

This was going to be complicated.

----------------------------------
National Air and Space Museum
Linda Warren led the four astronauts into the Selene, a former Apollo command module which had been kept in storage at the National Air and Space Museum. Making sure that the module was filled with argon before she cast the spell, she cast the charm on the module which gave it Extendatent properties. This would allow the crew to move around freely without constantly bumping into each other. And it would also allow them to consume less oxygen, which would be important for a trip like this.

For this first trip, they had chosen a location on the Sea of Tranquility a few hundred miles away from the Apollo 11 landing site, near the edge of the basin. The goals of this mission would be to see if the melt rock varied across Mare Tranquilitatis the site and to return rocks from the edge of the mare.

Each astronaut had been provided a spacesuit for EVA, which they would be wearing at the start of each leg of the mission just in case there was a problem. The bottom of the capsule had also been padded with foam to cushion the travelers in case there were high G’s on takeoff. Judging from the experiments with the animals and her own experiences with Portkeys, the G’s shouldn't be a problem. However, it didn't hurt to be cautious, especially when there was no one around to help you if you were injured.

Making sure everyone was strapped in, she activated the final thirty-second timer. The countdown hit zero, and with a lurch the Selene launched itself into the air on the first manned moon mission in a quarter century.

To be continued...

------------
Update #350: Amazon Dot Comes
------------
Sunday, September 8, 1996
Nestorian Embassy
Praia
Cape Verde
------------
NEXT UP: It Isn't Easy Being Green (.5)
------------
Plínio Raul Henriques couldn't believe it. Against all odds, he'd been one of the lucky few to actually win a chance to visit Nestor with the first group of Muggle tourists. He was 23 and in very good health, and his friends were telling him that he should go after every woman he could get his hands on.

He soon discovered that in addition to the large numbers of single men who had been chosen to go on this expedition, there would be a large number of anthropologists. Not surprisingly, every single one of the anthropologists was female. There were supposedly two very good reasons for this. First, scientists had to remain objective and not allow themselves to be distracted by veela glamour. Second, there were rumors that Nestorian society was heavily matriarchal, where women tended to be in positions of power more often than men. It occurred to him that if he DIDN’T wind up picking up a veela girl, he could always hit it off with one of the scientists. They probably spoke Portuguese, at least.

He looked around the room where the visitors were going to meet the Nestorian ambassador. As far as he could tell, there were no married men in the entire expedition. He supposed that it made sense given that married men may want to cheat on their wives. He would have had no way to know, of
course, that the entire purpose of his visit would be to increase the veela gene pool.

Three of the men next to him were placing bets on who would sleep with the most women. Henriques could not help but chuckle. Considering that they would only be there for a couple of weeks, he highly doubted that they would be able to conquer THAT many women in that time. Besides, Henriques was totally convinced that the veela would go after HIM.

Heads turned as the travelers heard footsteps in the front of the room. Henriques saw an old man, presumably the Cape Verdean Minister of Magic, walk into the room. Somewhat disappointed, he was about to turn his attention back to the grandiose plans of his colleagues when a woman walked in and the Minister of Magic closed his eyes.

Henriques's jaw dropped when he saw that she was the most beautiful woman he had seen in his entire life. Every single man turned to stare at her, and some of them began inching closer to try to talk to her. He discovered, with some embarrassment and alarm, that the lower parts of his body were about as interested in her as his eyes.

The woman had wavy blond hair flowing down her back and blue eyes that he could drown himself in. She looked like she could have put supermodels to shame, and she seemed to have muscles to match her figure. Her complexion was marred only by a small beauty mark or tattoo on her forehead in the shape of a star.

She looked at the crowd with a combination of interest and amusement. Finally, she shook her head and closed her eyes for a moment. Henriques suddenly found his interest in the woman fading somewhat, dropping from goddess level to Cindy Crawford level.

The Minister of Magic opened his eyes and turned to face the Muggles. "Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to introduce the Nestorian ambassador to Cape Verde, Dorothea Stora. She has been maintained stable public relations with me...er, our nation for the past four years. She received her doctorate in political science in June 1990 from the University of Amuzana, one of the most important cities on Nestor. She, like most educated Nestorians, is fluent in Portuguese, Spanish, Nestorian, and an obscure dialect of English called Galiver."

Henriques gasped at the name, and he wasn't alone. The Minister smiled at that. "Ah, I see you recognize the name. Yes, the Muggle myth of the island of the Amazons comes from stories of Nestor. The same is true for the goddess Venus, who was named after the powerful Nestorian queen Wynedra who reigned in the late third century BC. After all, if most of the people look like Dr. Stora over here, what else would you expect?"

Stora looked like she wanted to kick him, but she restrained herself. Instead, she looked over the travelers and nodded. "All right, here's how things are going to work. Since we're on Nestorian soil right now, it's going to be possible to Apparate and Portkey from here directly to Nestor. We're going to start by dropping off some of the anthropologists in Nestora, the capital, where they're going to get a chance to talk to some of the politicians and meet with some of the local population. Since real sociological research has to come out of their visit, we've made a restriction that only female researchers will be able to participate in the program."

"The men, however, will be traveling to the city of Erasia where they are going to be...entertained to the best of our ability."

Henriques hooted at that. Was this what he thought it was?
The ambassador looked over the crowd, hard. "Yes, ladies and gentlemen. Part of the reason we've opened up is to expand the gene pool, which has gotten a bit inbred over the past few centuries. Since there aren't any full male veela, our species is primarily female. As a result, we need...assistance...in order to keep ourselves going."

The crowd hooted even louder. What was this, spring break? Risa from Star Trek? Come to think of it, the city's name was Erasia...

"Since men tend to have trouble operating around us because of our ability to charm them, there are explicit rules regarding sexuality on Nestor. Sexual displays and come-ons are strictly forbidden ten months of the year, with the exception of between members of married couples. This allows the government to actually function most of the time. Each town has a two-month period where...shall we say, everyone is allowed to run wild if they so choose. We call it mating season, and for good reason. It just so happens that Erasia happens to be in the middle of this season right now, so that's where the men are going to be going."

"In theory, once you get over there you are going to probably be picked up by no fewer than five women at the same time. I'd recommend waiting for them to come to you, not the other way around. If you try to go after a woman who doesn't feel like playing at the time, she might get angry. And when veela get angry, we sometimes turn into these."

Stora closed her eyes for a second. There was a brief flash of light, and when it had cleared she had transformed into a hideous bird maybe six feet tall with a half-human face, wings the color of blood, human hands under the wings with something which looked disturbingly like balls of fire in them, and claws six inches long.

There was a loud shriek as the men, Henriques included, retreated towards the back of the room. Henriques noticed that his private parts were retreating as well. Ouch.

Having made her point, she changed back to her normal form and chuckled. "Those claws can be very good at disemboweling people and tearing off men's private parts. Needless to say, you do not want to hit on a veela who isn't interested in you."

The men looked at her warily. Henriques couldn't believe it, but was he actually having second thoughts?

She pointed at the little star on her forehead. "This is how you figure out if a woman is interested in you. If she wants to fool around, she'll have a little mark painted on her forehead like this. If she's actually at the time of the month when she can have children, she'll have two marks. If you do end up fathering children, we'll tell you and you'll get visitation rights. Rest assured that we'll take good care of them. If they DON'T have marks on their foreheads, stay away unless you want to lose body parts."

The Minister of Magic looked around the room and frowned. Turning to the veela, he said, "Er...Dr. Stora, may I recommend that we head over to the island now before the men here lose their interest? And next time, please don't turn harpy on them!"

The veela looked at him like he was nuts. "You want them to go over there thinking that they can screw whomever they want?"

"No, Dr. Stora. Just tell them the rules and don't demonstrate the harpy form. That will be enough, at least for now."
She thought for a moment and nodded. Turning back to the prospective tourists, she reached into her blouse -- half the men craned to look -- and pulled out a long piece of rope. She unrolled it and tossed it to the floor. "All right, anthropologists. I want all of you to grab onto this rope and not to let go until I say so. It's a Portkey, and it will send you to Nestora where President Markali and the welcoming party will greet you. The landing's a bit bumpy, so brace yourself."

Henriques watched as the anthropologists reached out for the rope. Seconds later, they disappeared along with Stora. Several men groaned.

About fifteen minutes later, a flash of light announced Stora's return to the room. Unrolling the rope again, she turned to face the crowd.

"Ladies, you're next. We're going to be sending you to Erasia's town square so you can talk to the people."

The ladies grabbed onto the rope and disappeared. Fifteen minutes after that, Stora returned. She looked...hungry.

"All right, gentlemen, your turn. Everyone, hang on tight."

Henriques grabbed onto the rope. He heard a brief slap followed by "The ROPE, you idiot! Not ME, at least yet!"

Soon, Henriques was flying through the air over what appeared to be an ocean. About eight minutes later, he found himself falling onto what appeared to be a beach drenched in sunlight. Getting up, he saw that he was on what appeared to be a tropical beach. Palm leaves danced in the breeze as waves lapped against the shore. There were several bungalows in sight, and he hoped his guess as to what they were for was right.

He didn't need to wait long. Seconds after their arrival, the doors of the bungalows opened and a woman with a mark on her forehead emerged from each little house. Amazingly, they were even more attractive than the ambassador. They were wearing VERY revealing robes, and it didn't take long for him to realize what they wanted. He couldn't help but think: monster or no monster, I'll take them!

One of the women approached him as he heard Stora's voice a few feet away: "All right, let's head over to that bungalow. THEN you can grab onto me". Meanwhile, Henriques's suitor looked him over and nodded. "You'll do. What's your name, sweetie?"

Henriques could barely talk. "Plínio Raul Henriques...uh, what's yours?"

"Gabrielle Iundora. You ready for some fun?"

Henriques grinned ear to ear. "Hell, yes. I haven't been able to find a girlfriend in over two years. Where's Xena?"

She looked at him in confusion. "Who? I don't think I've ever met her. You mean to tell me you've been here before and met someone? How?"

Henriques winced. "Muggle television had a show with powerful women named Gabrielle and Xena working together to fight off monsters and stuff. I thought it would have been based on Nestor given
what I heard about Muggle myths."

Gabrielle laughed. "Fighting off monsters, I can't help you with. However, I'm fairly certain I'll be able to help you with something else."

As a matter of fact, she WAS able to do so.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #350.5: It Isn't Easy Being Green
-------------
O'Malley's Pawn Shop
Dublin
Ireland
-------------
NEXT UP: Moon Patrol
-------------
Robert O'Malley tried to calm down his outraged employee. "I'm sorry, Seamus, but I don't know what to think! I know I didn't take the coins, and whoever did it had access to the vault!"

Seamus swore. "There have been more valuable things than gold coins in that vault, Bob. I haven't taken any of them, and you know it. If you want, you can call in a wizard and I'll swear it under oath!"

O'Malley's mind raced. Seamus had a point, he said. There were more valuable things than gold in there, including expensive heirlooms. If someone had gone through all the trouble to break into the vault, why would he only take the contents of the envelope? Come to think of it, how would the thief have known that the envelope had gold in it to begin with? It had been sealed when he had first opened it and read Lonan's note. No one else had seen the coins outside the envelope!

He had worked with Seamus long enough to know that the man wasn't lying. Seamus hadn't done it. Maybe Seamus could now help him track down the perpetrator.

O'Malley headed for the security room and told Seamus to follow him. "This is ridiculous, Seamus. Maybe you can help me figure this out. I can tell now that you didn't do it and are as surprised as I am. Let's see what the video camera tells us. The security officer says he'd have it by this afternoon."

Seamus nodded and followed him into one of the back rooms, where the security guard was staring at the screen in disbelief -- and horror. The guard turned to him as soon as he entered and pointed furiously at the screen.

"You're not going to believe this, but I think we're going to have to call in a wizard."

O'Malley blanched. "You think a wizard did this? Not one of us?"

The guard grunted. "Unless one of us has an six-inch long pet capable of wearing humanoid costumes and carrying around envelopes, I'd say we're pretty much off the hook."

Seamus winced. "Wait a minute. Are you telling me that...an animal did it? How would the animal be able to open the envelope?"

"We don't know who opened the envelope, Seamus. However, we have footage from the time the
envelope arrived in the store. Take a look at this recording and see if you see anything unusual about it."

The three men crowded around the display as the security guard began the playback. At first, nothing happened. Then something which looked like a little green stick figure meandered into the empty room with the envelope in its hand. It flew up onto the table -- yes, it flew -- and dropped the envelope on the desk. Then it jumped to the ground and walked away before anyone else could intercept it.

O'Malley drew a deep breath. "What the bloody hell was THAT?"

The guard rewound the recording and played it again, this time under slow motion. The strange figure flew onto the desk and dropped the envelope on the table. The guard then froze the image, zoomed in on it, and jabbed a finger at the screen, which was showing a clear shot of a person six inches tall wearing a green tunic.

"I'm not sure what it is, Bob. For all we know, it could be trained monkey or dog. However, what I can tell you that it sure matches the traditional descriptions a leprechaun."

Seamus snorted. "Leprechauns don't exist, Dan."

The guard chuckled. "Yes, and a year ago wizards didn't exist either. Coincidence? I think not. If I were you, I'd get in touch with the Minister of Magic and tell her that one her underlings has been playing games with us."

The secretary for the Irish Ministry of Magic had been about to hang up the telephone when the Muggle mentioned seeing a little green man bring in the envelope. Intrigued, she returned the headset to her ear and asked the Muggle describe the creature. She recognized the being immediately and realized what had happened. Telling the Muggle that the Ministry would look into it, she hung up the phone and briefed Miranda Delaney, the Minister of Magic, on the incident.

The Minister cursed under her breath. "Are you telling me that you've got a leprechaun trying to sell gold to Muggles?"

The secretary nodded. "It appears so, ma'am. This has all the hallmarks of a scam, particularly if the Muggles don't know that leprechaun gold tends to disappear."

Delaney nodded. "I agree, Maureen. Everything fits perfectly. The leprechaun brings in the envelope and provides a return address. The pawn shop owner writes out a check not knowing that the coins in the envelope weren't actually real gold. Remember that leprechaun gold will past virtually all Muggle tests."

The secretary winced. "I think I see where this is going, ma'am."

"Indeed, Maureen. Twenty-four hours later, the coins vanish and the owner immediately suspects someone's been raiding the vault. He suspects all his employees, who counter the accusation by saying that any sane thief would have stolen everything from the vault and not just the gold coins."

"That's the way I see it as well, ma'am. Even more interesting is that in this case, the leprechaun said he'd fork over £50 per ounce in insurance to make sure that he'll be repaid in case an employee steals the gold."
Delaney whistled. "That's very clever -- we tend to forget that people that small can be intelligent. Instead of taking £350 per ounce, he £300 pounds per ounce knowing that he can get even more later when he comes to 'retrieve' his gold."

"That's...disturbing, ma'am. What are we going to do now?"

Delaney stood up and headed towards the door. "I'll go down there myself. We need to nab this guy and warn the Muggles to pay careful attention to their gold. Let's just hope he doesn't give his friends ideas. Call them back and tell them we'll be en route. Oh, and see if you can get your hands on some Felix Felicis. We'll need it for this case."

The secretary looked at Delaney, baffled. "Felix Felicis? The luck potion?"

"That's it, Maureen. As you probably know, leprechauns are famous for bringing people good luck. What people don't realize is that if you irritate them, they can give you bad luck. We can assume that this con artist is going to do everything he can to make sure we're either hit by cars or fall off our brooms en route. We'll need the Felix Felicis to counter that when we spring our trap."

The secretary nodded and picked up the phone. "Makes sense to me. I'll make the call now."

To be continued...

-------------

Update #350.8

-------------

Sunday, September 8, 1996

Arctic Ocean

-------------

The frigid shores of Northern Eurasia and America surrounded an expense of water, known to the world as the Arctic Ocean. Thanks to the harsh weather, muggles and mages alike chose to stay away from the region most of the time, and even the Inuit people have only probed it's borders. Their tales of Ishigaq fairies, shaman-killer Kigatilik demons, the giant lupine Amarok, an orca-wolf shapeshifter named Akhlut, a great sea serpent named Tizheruk and the Aglooliks, helpful spirits under the ice have lured some curious wizarding explorers here over the centuries.

They explored and catalogued the local fauna, and found that the Ishigaq are the sentient Fey version of fairies preferring to be left alone, the Amarok is identical to the Waheela (XXXX), the sea serpent (XXX) is domesticated by the primitive and secluded local merpeople who themselves are the Aglooliks. Akhluts (XXXX) and Kigatiliks (XXXXX) were indigenous, just like a few other, less prominent (or dangerous) creatures, and the masses of mundane polar bears, seals, and whales. Other than these few expeditions, human involvement was limited to the Inuit and a few traders occasionally visiting them, and the only mages living in the area were their shamans.

Other than those few who came there for secrecy. The frozen lands of the Arctic held many secrets, most of them forgotten by all: the permafrost of the local soil was seen as an ideal storage place for everything from surplus meat to enchanted ceremonial jewelry. Humans and other Beings sometimes came here, to hide themselves or others, but never to conquer: somehow, no one ever did that in any meaningful way. Most people didn't even try- the land was barren and huge, no man could keep it in hand. And there were also the whispers of a great power up in the north: Mab, the Fairy Queen. Her
name surfaced periodically for over a millennia, told in conflicting ways: some said she was a small fairy, other said she was a human, or even a giant, prompting reasonable outsiders to assume she's just a mythical person.
The people living in and near the Arctic Circle knew better, but kept their voices low in fear.

Breaking from the glaciers of Greenland, icebergs floated in the white ice wasteland like islands. Some of them grew to colossal sizes, stretching over a hundred meters above sea level. Muggles observes these white giants keenly, as they were very dangerous for passing ships—horribly demonstrated by the fate of the Titanic. But no matter how many sentry ships and satellites watched them, some icebergs were simply invisible to spying eyes.

----------
Icicle Citadel
Arctic Ocean
----------

Mab's seat of power was one such hidden iceberg, though the word utterly failed to describe the place: 'frigid, monochrome, chillingly beautiful mostly-submerged Atlantis knock-off' was much more fitting, though Sabine guessed the Ice Queen would remove her tongue if she dared to say this out loud. The massive block of ice was formed into a citadel by powerful magic, it's sides going on for miles, and many hundreds of meters between the top of it's many spires and the underwater bottom of the iceberg, itself carved full of cavities, some sealed, others flooded. Mab's powerful magic anchored or moved the citadel at her will, and also kept it from rolling over, or melting. It also warmed the air inside and somehow the ice itself to provide comfortable living conditions to the residents and visitors. Deep in the bowels of the city, there was even a garden, planted in conjured dirt and bathed in magical light, complete with birds singing and flying around.

The city was very sparsely populated at the first glance: sure, there were tens of thousands of residents, but when most of them were 5 inch tall fairies, that wasn't such a large number. Then there were the merpeople of the Silver Walrus tribe, about a thousand strong, but being stairs-hating Beings, they mostly kept to the lower levels where they lived and deposited their catch of fish, squid, seal and other sealife, which provided most of the mobile settlement's food. Other than them, a clan of Veelas and a small tribe of Giants who served Mab have occasionally been stationed there, along with the Handmaidens of Mab, a small group of witches.

Sabine had arrived here 3 days ago, after contacting her Lady by two-way mirror. Mab had been very interested in the information she so far managed to Legilimens from the captured pair of Tchernobog cultists, and apparently the captured witch interested her in other ways too: Mab had her examine the prisoner's teeth and eyes, then even parade the Imperiused girl naked before the mirror. The cultist, Sofya, was a fine specimen, her body firm and perfect in ways only a very lucky 20 year old could be... but the Ice Queen's fascination with the Russian blonde was odd for Sabine: it was not one beautiful woman's admiration of another- for Mab was a beauty too, with flawless white skin, silver hair and green eyes, if a bit more on the petite side than the well-endowed Sofya. But Mab's gaze wasn't that of a horny lesbian, or even a starved cannibal... it was the gaze of a pompous lady, eyeing a fine fur coat, and that sent the whole thing into the 'seriously messed up' category in Sabine's head.
The brunette witch anxiously walked the endless, abandoned corridors of the white city. Since she arrived with the prisoners, they were locked away and she was escorted to her quarters by a handmaiden. Her queen didn't speak of reward yet, she didn't say a single word to her... and now, Mab requested her presence in the top room of the highest spire, above her throne room. That was the queen's private study, forbidden territory for even the handmaidens, no doubt a place of great magic. Climbing the stairs, she arrived at last to a silver door, that opened noiselessly before her on it's own.

Walking in, Sabine surveyed the scene. Bookshelves lined the wall, as well as miscancellous items hastily shoved into alcoves. The room was vaguely circular, with intricate geometric patterns covering every inch of the floor in the middle. A dozen handmaidens stood on marked places in the floor forming an ellipse, facing inwards, looking at the grimoires in their hands. In the middle of them, stood two figures in the ellipse's focal points, dressed in white: Mab, and the blonde cultist, the latter certainly against her own will. The brunette witch felt some pity for the girl, but also great curiosity: this ritual was like nothing she'd ever seen... at last, she'll be able to learn some really powerful magic from her employer.

Mab looked at her, and motioned her closer. Careful not to step on any runes, Sabine walked to the Queen, who now gave her a vicious looking ceremonial dagger and whispered instructions: "On my mark, cut my wrist deeply, both of them, then walk over to the girl, force her to kneel with Imperio, cut her palms, and press them to the floor there" she pointed. Swallowing, and for a minute really contemplating a hasty escape, the witch nodded and took the knife.

Mab motioned to the handmaidens, who began a chant. All around them, glyphs in the floor lit up with the color of magic, washed through each other in ripples, growing brighter and brighter. As they reached a crescendo, a barrier of some sort sprang up around them, and Mab said: "Now!"

Moving quickly, Sabine slid the knife deep through the queen's wrists, nicking both arteries, then, wand in the other hand, moved on to the girl. Sofya looked like she's about to break whatever control she was under, so Sabine quickly cast the Imperius curse at her, commanding her to kneel and put her hands in front of her as she did the cuts, then to press the bloody palms to the designated spot. Looking back, she saw blood flowing from Mab, filling a series of arcane runes on the floor, and spreading towards them... and also Sofya's blood spreading towards Mab in a similar manner. When the two flows met, they glowed with magic for a moment, then both participants slumped forward on the bloody floor, convulsing. The chanthers fell silent, and the barrier dissipated.

In front of their eyes, both bodies changed. Mab's hair darkened into grey, her skin became more wrinkled and speckled. Her eyes ceased to be striking emerald and became dull brown, then her body stilled. The only noise in the room was the wheezing of the blonde cultist, whose sun-kissed skin paled into the color of porcelain and honey-blond hair became silvery white. At last, she opened her eyes, now Mab's piercing emerald instead of Sofya's sky blue, and snapped at Sabine: "You, servant, heal my hands." Her voice was the Ice Queen's.

To be continued...

Update #348: The Lightning-Struck Tower
Bill Clinton flinched as the world went white momentarily and he was nearly deafened by a monstrous clap of thunder. He looked around the room to see if there had been any damage.

The chairman of NASA chuckled and shook his head. "Everything's fine, Mr. President. I saw the bolt as it came in -- it hit the lightning rod on top of Launch Platform 39A. Don't worry, the tower's all right. We'll still be able to launch space shuttles."

Clinton looked back at him archly. "If we're still going to be launching space shuttles. Judging from what you've told me about Linda Warren's invention, I suspect those huge behemoths are going to become outdated rather quickly."

The chairman nodded. "$I wouldn't be surprised, Mr. President."

Clinton nodded pointedly at the documents in his hand. "$Do you think these deadlines are feasible once we get out of the economic recession?"

"It would be a stretch, Mr. President. However, if we were able to do it for Kennedy, we'll be able to do it for you...assuming you don't cut our budget too much."

Clinton shrugged. "We'll have to cut something, Chairman. However, remember you've got magic at your beck and call now -- you can do things without building expensive machines now. How's that Portkey to Mars doing?"

"According to Linda, it's still heading outbound. ETA at Mars is expected to be between 9/18 and 9/21. It should get back to Earth between 10/7 and 10/12. We're working on a Venus sample return now as well as a manned moon mission. Boeing has been extremely helpful with this, sir."

One of the reporters coughed delicately and looked at his watch. "$Mr. President, I hate to break up the festivities, but it's getting close to air time. I'd recommend that we finish getting set up for the announcement."

Clinton nodded, loaded the final copy of the speech into the teleprompter, and positioned himself so that the audience would see the banks of computers and monitors behind him. He had wanted to have the shuttle's launch facility in the background, but the thunderstorms in the area had forced him to scrap that plan. Announcing a new initiative in space travel when launch complexes were being bombarded with lightning bolts wasn't a particularly good idea.

The cameras focused on him and the reporter counted down. When he hit zero, the red lights flashed on the cameras and the reporter pointed at him.

Clinton looked into the camera and began reciting his speech. "$Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I hope that you are well, and that you are weathering this economic storm as well as you can. Rest assured that your government is doing everything possible to get the country back on a solid financial footing again."
"I have reason to believe that the economy has hit bottom and may turn around soon. People are slowly beginning to recover from the loss of the New York, London, and Miami markets and are realizing that the world may have overreacted to the events of Judgment Day. Sales are starting to pick up again, and the stock market is up 5% over the past week. Rest assured, my fellow Americans, prosperity will return to our fair land.

"In the meantime, it is incumbent upon me to help create new jobs and give our nation a goal to strive for. This is why I have come here, to Kennedy Space Center. I am here to announce a bold new space exploration initiative which will provide hundreds of new jobs and take advantage of our new liaisons with wizards.

"You may recall recent reports that a witch in North Carolina was able to send a Portkey to the moon and have it return with moon rocks. This indeed happened, and the rocks are being studied as we speak. She has spent the time since then improving on these Portkeys, speeding them up and making them more robust. There is a Portkey en route to Mars as we speak, expected to return to Earth with Mars rocks sometime around Columbus Day. Yes, that is a six-week round trip. One must keep in mind, however, that Mars is much further away than the moon. Furthermore, plans are in the works for a Venus sample return mission, as well as for a manned moon mission."

Clinton smiled into the camera. "Yes, that is correct. A manned moon mission, far more sophisticated than anything in the days of Apollo. Thanks to generous support of the employees of Boeing and Secretary of Magic Ariadne, the Selene is planning to be launched with a crew of four to a location on the Sea of Tranquility. Climbing into the capsule will be Linda Warren; geologist Gene Dumas from Wichita, Kansas; Chinese astronaut Li Qin Hsing; and Russian cosmonaut Grigoriy Markovic.

"Manned moon missions cannot help but give people of my generation thoughts of John F. Kennedy and his challenge to put a man on the moon by the end of the 1960's. Space exploration may have plateaued since then, but due to the untapped power of magic I believe it is time for my administration to issue its own challenge.

"I call upon the American people to spearhead a program which will reach the following ten milestones. Had it not been for the economic recession, I would have expected these to been accomplished even earlier than this.

"1. Launch a manned mission to Mars by 2006. Yes, that is by the end of the decade starting today.
"2. Create a one-stage reusable manned spacecraft by 2008.
"3. Construct a space elevator by 2010.
"4. Build a space station capable of supporting 100 humans by 2015.
"5. Create a permanent moon base by 2020.
"6. Create a permanent Mars base by 2030.
"7. Construct bases in the asteroid belt and on Mercury by 2035 which will allow for mining of extraterrestrial resources not found on the surface of the moon or Mars.
"8. Construct a manned station orbiting Venus by 2040.
"9. Send manned missions to Europa and Titan by 2050, and finally
"10. Begin terraforming the moon by 2075 to provide more space and relief for our polluted and overcrowded Earth."

Clinton looked at the camera. "There we have it, my fellow Americans. A challenge to inspire us and future generations. Once the recession ends, and I am confident that it will, the combination of magic and technology will allow us to boldly go where no one has gone before."
To be continued...
Update #351
----------
Sunday, September 8, 1996
Selene
Outer Space
----------
NEXT UP: The Harrison Cooper Verdict (.5)
----------
TRANSCRIPT OF MISSION SELENE 1, CONTINUED

MET 00:23:11:35 DUMAS -- I told you, Linda! It's going to be dark where we're going! I can't believe we didn't think of this earlier!

MET 00:23:11:38 LI -- I agree. I don't think we should have gone here.

MET 00:23:11:41 WARREN -- That's why we brought the flashlight. We should be able to see in the dark. You don't know what the moon is like at night.

MET 00:23:11:46 MARKOVIC -- Darkness isn't the problem. It's the cold.

MET 00:23:11:52 WARREN -- How bad can it be? I mean, if they can handle vacuum...

MET 00:23:11:57 MARKOVIC -- Try 120 Kelvin. For you Fahrenheit fanatics, that's around 250 below zero Fahrenheit, -153 Celsius. Can your magic handle THAT?

MET 00:23:12:14 WARREN -- Uh....

MET 00:23:12:17 DUMAS -- I didn't think so. Houston, we have a problem.

MET 00:23:12:22 HOUSTON -- Acknowledged, Gene. You're saying that the temperature drop is too much for Linda to handle?

MET 00:23:12:31 DUMAS -- That's affirmative. Can the suits handle temperatures this low?

MET 00:23:13:41 HOUSTON -- Hold please while we check that out.

MET 00:23:13:44 DUMAS -- Acknowledged.

MET 00:23:13:53 LI -- I say we turn around and go somewhere else on the moon, somewhere where it's light out and we can see.

MET 00:23:13:59 MARKOVIC -- I agree. Linda, can you turn this thing around and have it go somewhere else?

MET 00:23:14:04 WARREN -- I don't know. I've never tried it, and I doubt this is a good time for experimentation. We're going to have to land and then take off again.
DUMAS -- Huh. Maybe we can take advantage of the situation, open the door, and take some pictures by the light of earthshine. Which reminds me -- that spell of yours designed to keep air out will keep air IN as well, right? I really want to know that before we open that door.

WARREN -- It will, Gene. Trust me.

HOUSTON -- Selene, this is Houston. That's right at the edge of the safe range, guys. I'd say you'll be able to stay out there for maybe ten minutes or so, but not much longer. However, I don't think you should try going outside. It's going to be dark out, and if you wind up falling into a crater you can't see and break your faceplate you may have a few problems.

MARKOVIC -- Oh, great. Trust someone with her head in the Middle Ages to run a space mission.

WARREN -- Don't panic. Let's salvage the situation. Here's what I propose. We land and open the door. I get into the suit, go outside VERY carefully, and tell the ship to Portkey itself somewhere else. In the meantime, people here can take pictures of the moon at night from inside the ship. I must say, a photograph of an astronaut holding a wand is going to be, different. I'd be willing to try to rotate the ship around so the view outside the door changes, but I don't want to use too much magic just in case. Once that's done, we go inside again and jump to the new place.

HOUSTON -- That's safe?

WARREN -- Absolutely. I cast a few spells on the module from outside the ship before we left Earth and they had no adverse effects on the ship or the crew. With this plan, we get our nighttime pictures, travel somewhere else, and have people walk on the moon in the daylight.

LI -- I say we go for it. Let's hope we can get some good geologic samples.

MARKOVIC -- I agree.

DUMAS -- Me too.

HOUSTON -- All right, let's try that. I'll brief the rest of the team, and we'll start figuring out where to go. Keep in mind, though, that there's limited real estate out there that's both in sunlight AND visible from Earth.

--------

HOUSTON -- We have you rematerializing 50 seconds from now. Are all of you strapped in?

DUMAS -- Affirmative, Houston. We're coming in heat shield down -- thank God we don't need that on this trip, and thank Him again for having all of the mass down there. Looks like everything is rightside up here.

HOUSTON -- Close your visors and prepare for arrival.

HOUSTON -- Fifteen seconds.

HOUSTON -- Ten seconds.
MET 01:01:53:35 LI -- Eek!
MET 01:01:53:35 DUMAS -- Oof!
MET 01:01:53:35 MARKOVIC -- That was quite a thud.
MET 01:01:53:36 WARREN -- Yeah...you're right. I'll need to fix that next time around.
MET 01:01:53:38 HOUSTON -- Selene, we copy you down. Are you OK?
MET 01:01:53:44 LI -- I hit my funny bone when we landed, but I think I'm OK.
MET 01:01:53:47 DUMAS -- I bumped my elbow a little, but I'm fine. The rest of us are OK.
MET 01:01:53:50 WARREN -- Congratulations, lady and gentlemen. We've reached the moon. Let's stick to our checklists and make sure everything is OK before proceeding.
MET 01:02:36:43 HOUSTON -- All right, Linda, you are go for your EVA to go outside and change the Portkey destination. Are the IMAX and the rest of the video cameras set up?
MET 01:02:36:53 LI -- They are, Houston. They're rolling right now.
MET 01:02:36:57 WARREN -- Do you want me to say anything special when I set foot on the lunar surface?
MET 01:02:37:05 HOUSTON -- Just say whatever comes to you. You're American number thirteen, after all.
MET 01:02:37:10 DUMAS -- Oh, great. Thank you.
MET 01:02:37:15 WARREN -- OK. I'm opening the door now. It's awfully dark out there, and I can see a lot of stars. I can get a VERY faint glimpse of the surface, but it's not much to go by. Can these IMAX cameras do a long exposure?
MET 01:02:37:28 HOUSTON -- I'm not sure. Gene, how about illuminating the area around Linda with that flashlight. I don't know what good that will do, though. At least try it.
MET 01:02:37:40 WARREN -- OK, I'm outside the ship now. I really can't see much other than the Earth, which is glittering in the sky like one of those blue glass paperweights. Hold on a second as I jump onto the ground.
MET 01:02:37:47 WARREN -- That's one small step for a woman, one giant leap for womankind.
MET 01:02:37:54 DUMAS -- Couldn't you think of something better?
MET 01:02:37:56 LI -- It's about to be two giant leaps for womankind.
MET 01:02:38:03 MARKOVIC -- Cut the chatter. Let's take these pictures and have Linda change our Portkey destination again.
MET 01:02:38:13 DUMAS -- Looks pretty cool out the window.
MET 01:02:38:17 MARKOVIC -- I agree. It will be exciting to go outside and walk on the moon for the first time.

MET 01:02:38:30 LI -- I think I should have brought a flash.

MET 01:02:38:37 MARKOVIC -- No point worrying about it now. Do what you can.

MET 01:02:38:41 WARREN -- I'm casting the spell now.

MET 01:02:38:45 DUMAS -- Gee, what's that? It looks like a big black monolith!

MET 01:02:38:54 WARREN -- Really? Where?

MET 01:02:39:00 HOUSTON -- Gene, that's not funny. She isn't familiar with the movie.

MET 01:02:39:05 WARREN -- What movie?

MET 01:02:39:11 HOUSTON -- Never mind, we'll explain later.

MET 01:02:39:17 WARREN -- All right, it's all set. Expected departure at 01:02:45:00. Let's spend the next three minutes taking pictures and the rest of the time strapping ourselves in again.

MET 01:03:11:53 WARREN -- All right, this looks better. I can see we're in the crater right now. Lots of lava down here, sort of like in those Apollo 11 site pictures. I see a mountain range nearby.

MET 01:03:12:05 HOUSTON -- We copy you in Grimaldi Crater, Selene. So far, so good. Let's follow the plan. Linda, you and Gene are going to go outside and set up the cameras while the rest of you get ready for your EVA's. Everything goes out, guys. The IMAXes, the 3-D stuff, the dynamic photograph cameras, everything.

MET 01:03:12:12 WARREN -- All right, we're heading out now. Gene, you can go first.

MET 01:03:18:18 DUMAS -- I'm about to jump out onto the ground. Are the cameras running?

MET 01:03:18:23 WARREN -- They are.

MET 01:03:18:34 DUMAS -- Houston, this is Grimaldi Base. Let's rock and roll.

MET 01:03:18:44 HOUSTON -- Congratulations, Gene. How do you feel?

MET 01:03:18:50 DUMAS -- This is just...surreal. I mean, I'm on the moon. When did this happen?

MET 01:03:18:57 LI -- Less than an hour ago.

MET 01:03:19:12 WARREN -- All right, help me set up the cameras. I'm not as familiar with these as you are.

MET 01:03:19:22 DUMAS -- Houston, what do we have out here? Who's broadcasting here?

MET 01:03:19:36 HOUSTON -- One of them's for National Geographic, one's for CNN, one's for the Chinese news agency, one's from the Russian news agency, and one of them's ours. That
stereoscopic one is an experimental one created by some people who were inspired by dynamic photographs. The big one is an IMAX one, and the garish purple one...well, you can guess whose that is.

MET 01:03:20:01 LI -- The wizards, I presume?

MET 01:03:20:08 WARREN -- Yup. Persephone Ariadne, our Minister of Magic, sent it over.

MET 01:03:20:14 MARKOVIC -- Is it designed for use in vacuum and extreme temperatures environments?

MET 01:03:20:20 WARREN -- They said it was. However, considering how I messed up with the suits and the night side, it makes me wonder. Let's hope for the best.

--------

MET 01:03:39:44 HOUSTON -- All right, Li, you can come out now.

MET 01:03:40:00 LI -- And with that, the comrades of the People's Republic of China leave their mark on the moon.

MET 01:03:40:10 MARKOVIC -- Hello there, fellow comrade. You look great out there.

MET 01:03:40:19 LI -- I sure hope that's not a pickup line.

MET 01:03:40:25 WARREN -- It's not. Stop jumping around -- I can't get a good picture.

MET 01:03:40:31 LI -- Is there a way I can keep all this weight off when I return to Earth? It's amazing out here! That mountain range seems close enough for me to touch.

MET 01:03:40:40 HOUSTON -- Li, your premier sends you his congratulations and wants you to visit on the way back. He also wants some moon rocks.

MET 01:03:40:51 LI -- Tell him it will be my pleasure to visit. I'll start examining some rocks here so Greg can have his moment in the sun.

MET 01:03:40:56 MARKOVIC -- Linda, point that camera back at me. I'm about to come out.

MET 01:03:41:01 WARREN -- Oops. Here we go. Be careful.

MET 01:03:41:15 MARKOVIC -- We sent the first probe into space, and we sent the first person into space. Although we weren't able to reach the moon first, our country has persevered and finally caught up. Praise God for preserving us, defusing the Cold War, and giving us the opportunity to reach this momentous occasion.

MET 01:03:41:26 HOUSTON -- Well done, Greg. You should see the scene in Red Square right now -- people are shooting off fireworks.

MET 01:03:41:34 MARKOVIC -- I'm flattered. Is Yeltsin going to make a statement?

MET 01:03:41:43 HOUSTON -- Probably, but CNN hasn't mentioned it yet. At any rate, can you all walk over to the front of the ship so the camera can see all of you?

MET 01:03:41:55 LI -- Sure.
MET 01:03:42:33 HOUSTON -- That's a National Geographic shot right there, guys. Congratulations, ladies and gentlemen. You have helped breathe new life into the world's space programs.

MET 01:03:42:44 DUMAS -- Indeed, we have. However, let's focus on what we came here for. We've got 24 hours on the moon and 24 hours to get back. Let's get cracking with our geology research, rock collection, and experiments.

To be continued...

Update #351.5

Monday, September 9, 1996
Amsterdam
Holland
Netherlands

NEXT UP: Make Sure He Doesn't Fly Out Between the Bars

Harrison Cooper watched as his lawyer frowned and put down the phone. This didn't look good, whatever it was.

The lawyer turned to him. "That was from Judge Alofs. The jury has reached a verdict, and they want us to come back so they can announce their decision."

Harrison grunted. "That was fast, much faster than I expected."

The lawyer nodded. "Indeed, which means it doesn't sound good. To be honest, though, involuntary manslaughter fits the situation pretty well. As soon as they added the manslaughter charge, I was concerned we might be in for a fight."

Harrison wrung his hands. "But I didn't mean to do it! Hell, I had no idea that I was even a werewolf at the time!"

"Correct, and that's exactly what involuntary manslaughter is about. The defendant doesn't mean to kill anyone, yet people die."

An awful thought occurred to him. "Are they going to execute me?"

"I doubt it, Mr. Cooper. At most, you'll get a few months of jail time and a big fine. I take it you'll be able to use that anklet of yours to get out of jail and transform in Hogsmeade?"

Harrison's eyes widened. "Shit, I hadn't even though about that. I wouldn't be surprised if jails are designed so that people can't Apparate in and out of them. Otherwise, people with Wizarding friends would be able to break out all the time. If I can't get out of jail and have a roommate..."

"I don't want to think about that, Mr. Cooper. However, keep in mind that's the worst-case scenario. For all we know, you won't get put in jail, so whether the anklet will let you out is a moot point. If I were you, I'd be more concerned about the fines. That's a lot of money for emotional and psychological damages. I hope you've got a lot of rich friends -- or Wizarding ones -- or you're going to wind up in jail because you're unable to pay the fine."
"Maybe my wife can help out."

"Possibly. However, since she's expecting, that may cut into your funds for raising your child. All we can do at this point is pray and hope for the best."

Cameras flashed as the judge came to his feet. "This court is back in session. Headman of the jury, I believe you have reached a verdict?"

One of the jurors nodded. "We have, Your Honor."

"On which counts, headman?"

"All three of them, Your Honor."

"Have you filled out the appropriate paperwork?"

The juror pulled some sheets of paper out of his pocket. "We have, Your Honor. Everything is all set."

Alofs stood and asked the clerk to collect the paper. "Thank you for your services, ladies and gentlemen. Mr. Cooper, Mr. Michaelson, we have reached a verdict. Please rise."

Harrison's face was white as he came to his feet along with the lead plaintiff.

"Are you prepared to accept this verdict, regardless of how it comes out?"

Michaelson nodded. "I am, Your Honor". Harrison shook a little, but he eventually managed to blurt out that he would accept the verdict as well.

Alofs nodded gravely and opened the document the juror had handed him.

"On the charge of murder, not guilty."

Harrison breathed a sigh of relief. However, he had to confess that he had more or less expected acquittal there. Several of the people supporting the defendants muttered to themselves.

"On the charge of involuntary manslaughter, guilty."

Michaelson smiled, and the plaintiffs began shaking each other's hands. Several of them started staring at Harrison smugly. Harrison was crushed and hoped that the jail term would be short enough for him to be able to see Courtney give birth.

"On the charge of civil charge concerning damages for psychological and emotional distress, liable."

The plaintiffs celebrated a bit more. Courtney and the lawyer tried to console Harrison, but it was obvious that neither of them knew exactly what to do. Harrison had a scary thought of having the plaintiffs beat him to a pulp and kill him just to put him out of his misery.

The judge had to bang his gavel a few times to get the plaintiffs to stop high-fiving each other. Eventually, Michaelson calmed down enough to allow the judge to continue on to the sentencing guidelines.
"Now it comes to the sentence. We'll first start with the prison term, where the base sentence for one conviction is twelve months. This is an unusual case, however. First, it is clear that the defendant had no idea that he was a werewolf at the time and had no way to even know he was a threat. That would recommend a shorter sentence. However, many people were killed, which would recommend a longer sentence. We'll split the difference and stay with the base sentence.

"It is the decision of this court that the wolf spend its next twelve months behind bars at a special facility in Hogsmeade, England."

Harrison stared at the judge in horror. Twelve months behind bars? What happened if he couldn't get out next time he transformed? Would he even be allowed out to transform? It was obvious the judge was after him -- why else would Alofs have called him a wolf and not a man?

Suddenly, it occurred to him: a reference to Hogsmeade. As far as he knew, there was no prison in Hogsmeade. Could the judge have something up his sleeve?

Courtney howled in anger and glared at the judge. "Your Honor, my husband is still a man, not a wolf. You've already hurt him greatly by your sentence. Don't insult him any further."

The judge smiled. "I'm aware of that, Mrs. Cooper. That is why I sentenced the wolf to prison and not the man."

Michaelson's eyes narrowed in confusion. "Your Honor, I don't understand. Aren't they the same person?"

The judge's smile broadened. "Yes and no. The wolf is a threat, but Mr. Cooper himself is not. Let me explain the details of this sentence, as its terms will be slightly irregular. The sentence is indeed imposed on the wolf and ONLY the wolf. One day out of every month, for the next 365 months, Mr. Cooper shall be confined to a special facility in Hogsmeade so that the wolf within him can be properly contained. He can emerge the next day once his transformation is complete and he is no longer a threat to society. Prisons and places like them are correctional facilities, ladies and gentlemen. Once the inmate is no longer a threat to society, he can come out a free man until he does something which warrants his incarceration once more."

Courtney gasped when she realized what the judge had just done. She screamed and gave Harrison a kiss. "Harrison, do you realize what just happened?"

Harrison couldn't believe it. "He's effectively sentencing me to time I'd have to serve in Hogsmeade anyway! I'm not going to jail!"

Michaelson looked surprised, but even he was impressed by the verdict. Harrison looked back up at the judge, who nodded.

The lawyer put his hand on Harrison's shoulder. "Wow. WOW. Congratulations! The only time you're going to run into trouble will be if the Wolfsbane Vaccine is perfected in the next 30 years and werewolves will be no longer transform -- "

Harrison shook his head and cut the lawyer off. "I don't think so, Mr. Means. If I don't transform, the sentence won't be imposed as I'm not a wolf! Ha!"

The judge cleared his throat. "Now let's press on to the civil case. It is the ruling of this court that
50,000 pounds be given to each of the surviving bite victims at the beginning of each year for emotional and physical distress."

Harrison's euphoria evaporated instantaneously. 50,000 pounds? He couldn't afford that for even one of the plaintiffs! How was he going to be able to pay that off? Was he going to go to jail after all?

The plaintiffs cheered once more. Harrison put his head in his hands. His life was ruined. They should have just killed him and put him out of his misery. He was barely able to hear a woman's voice over the noise.

"Your Honor, these fines will be paid by the Dutch Ministry of Magic, the City of Atlantis, and the British Ministry of Magic. The British will pay 20%, Atlantis 40%, and the Dutch 40."

Virtually every person in the room gasped and turned to the back of the room, where Neele Schuurman had appeared with Nicholas Flamel and Heydar Dagher. Harrison stared at Flamel in shock, and the ancient sorcerer winked at him.

Schuurman spoke once more. "The only reason the defendant was able to wreak havoc on the Noordam was because Rufus Scrimgeour, the British Minister at the time, and I were negligent in our attempt to track down all of the new werewolves created by Professor Lupin at the football stadium. Had our offices done their work properly, we would have contacted Lupin and placed that ankle bracelet on him well before June 1st."

Flamel continued. "Minister Scrimgeour did everything he could, but he found his hands tied once he found that Mr. Cooper was on a Dutch-flagged ship. By the time we finished sorting through all of the international paperwork involving Atlantis and the Dutch Ministry, it was too late. Too late by only a few minutes, but still too late."

Alofs stared at the wizards in shock. "You're going to pay the fines? That's a lot of money."

Flamel chuckled. "For an individual such as Harrison Cooper, it is indeed a lot of money. However, when we have three nations working together like this, we believe we will be able to find enough to compensate Mr. Michaelson and the other victims for their troubles."

The judge nodded. "So be it. Case closed."

People began filing out of the room as Harrison and his wife hugged each other in jubilation. Against all odds, they'd managed to pull it off.

To be continued...

------------
Update #352: Make Sure He Doesn't Fly Out Between the Bars
------------
Monday, September 9, 1996
35 Mayfield Drive
Dublin
Ireland
------------
NEXT UP: How About Extendatenting the Temple
------------
Brogan Lonán liked the way things were going. He'd sent in another batch of gold coins with another extremely apologetic note, and he expected to get another check within a couple of days.
These Muggles were so easy to manipulate, he thought. At the rate things were going, I might get successful enough to actually convince the Lepre Cons to let me in.

The Lepre Cons made up the most powerful leprechaun crime syndicate in Ireland. Their traditional modus operandi was to force people to hand over money to prevent them from getting extremely bad luck. In return, the donors would get either average luck or good luck. Most people got average luck as to not raise any eyebrows. Occasionally, though, people "donated" enough money to merit something good.

Whether or not the organization did well depended for the most part on who was running the Ministry of Magic in Ireland. Strong Ministers tended to clamp down on the Lepre Cons and occasionally imprison some of their leaders. Others tend to focus on public works projects and let the Lepre Cons get away with a few "encouraged donations" here and there.

The current Minister, Miranda Delaney, was fairly strong. Installed in 1992, her standing had risen a bit thanks to the destruction of the British Ministry of Magic, the revolving door of British Ministers, and Britain's obsession with Voldemort. The Green Knight -- the enigmatic leader of the Lepre Cons -- had learned very quickly not to trifle with wizards under her rule.

Everything had changed, however, when the Statute of Secrecy fell. The Green Knight had pounced on the opportunity to extort gold from Muggles by conjuring up fake gold and selling it as bullion. They could use the cash to either bribe other Muggles or convince the wizards to stop chasing them down.

Lonan didn't know who the Green Knight was. However, at the rate things were going, he probably would someday. Who knows, with luck he could become Green Knight at some point!

He heard footsteps outside. Probably the same of the naive Muggles who lived in the apartment complex, he thought. Although the mailbox for apartment 3 said LONAN on it, no one ever saw him. As far as they knew, Mr. Lonan kept to himself and spent much of his time traveling. In reality, though, apartment 3 was empty. Lonan had been sending over the condo fee -- a pittance in the world of organized crime -- once a month to make it look like someone still lived there. In practice, however, no one did. Lonan occasionally cleaned the rooms up from time to time to prevent the dust from making him sneeze. That was that.

Lonan nearly jumped out of his tunic when someone knocked on his door. He stared at the wooden rectangle, baffled. What on earth was going on here? Had there been a flaw in his alibi? It suddenly dawned on him that he'd given a different alibi to the pawn shop owner than he had to the rest of the apartment. Well, he'd fix that after this.

The knocking continued. "Mr. Lonan? I was wondering if you could open the door for us. It's important."

Lonan didn't move. Could they have caught him? He started looking around for an escape route, and his eyes darted to the windows. He opened one of them a crack and saw five people on brooms looking down at him. One of them, alerted by the moving pane of glass, suddenly pointed down at him. "There! I see him! He's trying to fly out the window!"

Swearing in ancient Gaelic, Lonan cast a charm which would cause brooms to malfunction, birds to relieve themselves on the wizards' heads, and cause all sorts of unseemly things to happen to them.

Nothing happened.
Lonan stared at his hands in disbelief. What the hell? Had he done something wrong? That should have worked! All five of those agents should have fallen out of the sky at the very least!

Time for Plan B, he thought. He raced back into the house and hid under the radiator, holding his nose to prevent years of dust bunnies from irritating it and causing him to sneeze. This proved to be a good move, as the window slammed open even further and three wizards flew into the room.

All three of them started cursing and rubbing their eyes, and one of them started sneezing and complaining about the dust. Looking out from under the radiator, he saw two of them start searching the room while the third went over to the front door and opened it, letting four more wizards into the apartment.

One of the wizards who had just come in sneezed and swore. "What the bloody hell is going on here? This place looks like it hasn't been used for years! You're sure he's in here?"

Another wizard -- Lonan couldn't see who -- replied. "He's got to be here -- we saw him. You've got both the exits blocked and the other two guys will notice him if he tries to fly out the window."

"Is there a staircase in here to get down to the basement?"

Lonan swore silently to himself. Why hadn't he thought of that earlier instead of hiding under the bed?

The second wizard started issuing orders. "Christ -- that's a possibility. I'll look around and see if he's got another exit. Don't worry, sir. We'll get him."

The second wizard ran off as a third one grumbled. "With all this dust, it's going to be pretty easy for him to hide. I can barely see. The only suggestion I have is if you see green, blast it."

The first wizard chuckled. "He's not going to be able to hide from this if he's still in here. Revelio Fey!"

Lonan winced as he felt the spell detect him and report back to the caster, who shouted. "He's in the big room over there! Go get him! Check everywhere!"

No fewer than seven agents ran into the room and began looking around. For the first time, he began to rue the fact that there was nowhere to hide here other than the radiator. It would be the obvious place for them to look.

He was running out of options. Hoping this would work, he cast the bad luck spell once again and was pleased to see five of the wizards trip, their wands falling out of their hands. Figuring this was the only shot he was going to get, he darted out from under the radiator and headed for the stairs. His luck held as the first Stunning spell missed him.

Unfortunately, enough of the Felix Felicis remained functioning to ensure that the second Stunning spell didn't miss.

Miranda Delaney marched into the apartment, covered her nose, and looked down at the stunned leprechaun. The man looked furious, thought whether it was at himself for being caught or at his attackers no one could tell.
She swore vehemently. "Send him to Azkaban for the time being and make sure he can't escape. Tell the Muggles to watch out for leprechaun gold -- there could be more of them. And finally, search the room. Let's see if there's anything else in here."

Selene
South Pole-Aitken Basin
Moon

TRANSCRIPT OF MISSION SELENE 1, CONTINUED

MET 01:23:49:06 MARKOVIC -- How many pounds of rocks can that flying carpet hold?

MET 01:23:49:12 WARREN -- From what I've heard from people familiar with Guinevere's Flying Carpets, about 300 kg.

MET 01:23:49:19 MARKOVIC -- Then why have you put 700 kg worth of stuff on it? I'm not going to pick that up myself! I -- of course! The mass is the same, but since we're on the moon you get 1/6 the weight for the same mass!"

MET 01:23:49:28 WARREN -- Exactly. Granted, it's probably going to rip in two once we arrive back on Earth, but we've got everything we want in there.

MET 01:23:49:36 DUMAS -- Yeah. And let's hope that this bucket actually TAKES OFF with an extra 700 kg in there.

MET 01:23:49:44 LI -- And that all those rocks don't fall on our head when we land.

MET 01:23:49:52 HOUSTON -- You have a place to put all those rocks, Linda?

MET 01:23:50:00 WARREN -- None of these things should be a problem, Houston. Remember the Extendatent is going to reduce the mass of the rocks and shrink everything relative to the size of the spacecraft. The box may be big, but from our perspective on board the ship the ship's the size of a decent-sized apartment. We're just going to stick the box on one side and put ourselves on the other.

MET 01:23:50:16 HOUSTON -- All of the samples are labeled and documented, right?

MET 01:23:50:24 DUMAS -- That's affirmative. We've got red numbers for Grimaldi sites, yellow numbers for Aristarchus and green numbers for the far side. The South Pole rocks are going to be in a separate box, as you know.

MET 01:23:50:43 HOUSTON -- You're sure you got a crater in permanent shadow?

MET 01:23:50:53 WARREN -- I think so. The Earth and Sun were barely above the horizon where we were, and most of the craters only had their lips visible. At any rate, I went about as close to South Pole as I could risk given the limitations of the magic and the cold temperatures. I then instructed the box to head for the deepest crater it could find within five miles, dredge some stuff out of the bottom, and return it to us.

MET 01:23:51:12 LI -- That's about right. The only problem I have is that we didn't get a chance to see what the rocks looked like before box resealed itself. The box IS sealed, right?

MET 01:23:51:23 WARREN -- It is. Yes, if there's ice in there, it's probably going to melt on the
way back. However, recall that the whole mission here is to check for water at the south pole. If we open the box and water comes out, we've gotten what we came for.

MET 01:23:51:40 HOUSTON -- That's good enough for now, I suppose. I must say, ladies and gentlemen, this has been an outstanding mission. Half of the photographs are already on the Internet, and our site has crashed a few times as people have been trying to download them. Come to think of it, with those four flags there as an Apparation target, you could very well have picked the site for a future lunar colony with plentiful sunlight yet access to water...if the water's there.

MET 01:23:51:54 DUMAS -- It's strange to think that had Linda actually sent the Portkey somewhere useful to begin with, we wouldn't have thought of the possibility of jumping from place to place on the moon. We'd have probably stayed on Tranquility the whole time.

MET 01:23:52:02 LI -- I agree. It looks like we just got lucky.

MET 01:23:52:11 HOUSTON -- I concur as well, Selene. We should take advantage of this luck while we have it. At any rate, let's walk through the rest of the schedule. You're going to be starting back around 02:00:00:00, which is a little under eight minutes from now. Have you already programmed in the destination?

MET 01:23:52:26 WARREN -- Yes, I have. The National Mall, right in front of the Air and Space Museum. ETA 03:02:04:01. That should be about 2 PM Eastern time. Make sure to clear a space for us.

MET 01:23:52:37 HOUSTON -- Will do. We'll have the medical personnel check you out while NASA staff start picking up the rocks. Do you feel any problems from the low gravity?

MET 01:23:52:51 LI -- I don't have any as far as I can tell, and no one else here has complained about anything. My head feels a bit swollen, but from what I've been told that's normal in weightlessness.

MET 01:23:53:00 HOUSTON -- Seven minutes to liftoff.

MET 01:23:53:07 DUMAS -- I'm worried that we'll just run into medical complications on the ground when we get back. Didn't some of the Apollo astronauts have to deal with that?

MET 01:23:53:18 HOUSTON -- They did, and that's why we're going to check you guys out. You weren't in space as long as they were, however, and you spent more time in a 1/6 G environment than they did. The medics here think you're going to be OK.

MET 01:23:53:40 WARREN -- If we do have bone loss, we can always use Skele-Gro.

MET 01:23:53:49 DUMAS -- Say what?

MET 01:23:53:53 WARREN -- It's a magical potion which will regrow broken or atrophied bones.

MET 01:23:53:59 HOUSTON -- Six minutes. That sounds like a useful thing for space missions, especially those with long periods of zero-G. Can you get some for us?

MET 01:23:54:07 WARREN -- I don't have any, Houston. However, I can probably find someone who does.
MET 01:23:54:16 HOUSTON -- That would be quite helpful. At any rate, you should start going through your checklists now and strapping yourselves in. Congratulations once again on a successful mission, and we'll see you in a little over 24 hours.


To be continued...

-----------
Update #353: How About Extendatenting the Temple
-----------
Tuesday, September 10, 1996
Omega Institute
Rhinebeck, NY
United States of America
-----------
NEXT UP: Houston, Tranquility Base Here. We've Wrecked the Lawn (.5)
-----------
Samuel blinked at the Kohen Gadol in confusion. "What do you mean, you're not all going to go on pilgrimages to the Temple? That's what we've been doing for centuries!"

The Kohen Gadol smiled slightly. "That's what YOU were doing for centuries, Holy One. Things have changed somewhat since you were last around. Put it this way -- you've been inside the Temple. You know how big it is, right?"

"Yes."

"There are two billion Abrahamics currently on Earth, Holy One. There's no way they're going to fit into the building all at once, and even if you had them all line up and come for a visit, it would take more than seven days for everyone to even get into the building."

Samuel frowned. "I see. How about having all the heads of household come over? That was common practice at the time."

"All right, that cuts it down to a few hundred million, which is still too high. Put it this way, Holy One. Half the Abrahamics, those from my sect, are required to make a pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca once in their lifetime. Even in this case, where the pilgrim must visit Mecca once, the shrine is completely overcrowded and takes up a plaza far larger than that of the Temple. Oh, and one more thing. Many of these families are too poor to afford air travel and can't exactly walk from places like here to Jerusalem."

The Pope cut in. "He has a point, Holy One. The pilgrimages were still going on around the time of Jesus and the population density was high enough even back then to cause the Roman authorities concern. We can't have all those people in there at once."

Samuel thought for a moment. "All right, let's compromise. All the priests stay in Jerusalem as they have to go anyway, and all of the laymen choose a place of spiritual meaning for them and make a pilgrimage there. What about that?"

The pope smiled. "That might just work, Holy One. Muslims can go to Mecca, Christians can go to Rome, and Jews can go to what's left of the Western Wall. People in poorer countries can go to other sites. However, we're still left with a logistical nightmare getting all those priests into Jerusalem to begin with."
"Really? How many do you have? A few thousand maybe?"

Celestine was barely able to stop himself from laughing. "Well, according to the latest report there were over 350,000 Catholic priests. This list of course does not exclude Protestant ministers, Muslim clergy, rabbis, and so forth. It's going to be a rather large traffic jam, I'm afraid. Even if everyone did make it over, that's 50,000 people per day. Can you imagine 50,000 people cycling in and out of that building while being able to spend enough time there for spiritual development?"

Samuel put rubbed his beard. "I'll think about that. Meanwhile, let's make the announcement about the laymen. Hopefully they'll have enough time to go somewhere appropriate for them. One more thing. Since this is the harvest festival, I recommend that all worshipers provide food for those in need to be dedicated for various food banks. 90% goes to those in need and 10% goes to feed the Temple staff."

The Kohen Gadol beamed. "That's a very good idea. I'm not exactly sure what the people in South Africa and places like that will do, where it's still winter, but I suppose they can just go to the supermarket and buy stuff."

The Pope nodded but still looked troubled. "I agree. However, I'm still not sure where exactly we're going to house a few hundred thousand clergy for a week in Jerusalem. Where are they going to sleep? Outside? In hotels?"

Rabbi Waldoks chuckled. "I don't see a problem with that, Holiness. After all, it's Sukkot we're dealing with here. The Jews have been eating and in some cases sleeping outside on this holiday for millennia."

The Dalai Lama nodded. "It's wonderful how things just come together like this. However, may I make a recommendation?"

"What?"

"If you have a store like REI Adventures or something like that near you which sells camping equipment, I'd highly recommend getting over there before everyone else finds out about this."

----------

Hogwarts
----------

Harry Potter was watching Hermione and the king with growing alarm. There HAD to be something going on between them, and things were slowly reaching the point where Ron was going to start to get jealous. He hated to think what would happen if a fight broke out between Ron and the King of England.

He was in Muggle Studies class with Professor Bell, who had become a little stricter since her first day. Still, he was doing well in the class. He was surprised with all of the references to Russian culture, though. There was a lot of British stuff, but more Russian stuff than he'd expected. Then again, Russia was still a very powerful nation.

He jotted down his latest homework assignment -- a reading from a Russian folk novel -- and was leaving the room when the professor called him back for a moment. Curious, he told Ron and Hermione he'd meet them later on and hurried over to talk to Bell.

"You wished to see me, Professor?"
Bell nodded. "Indeed I did, Mr. Potter. I've heard that you've been working with a very useful tool called the Marauder's Map."

Harry's mind raced. How had she found out about that? One of Rowling's interviews? Cautiously, he said: "I've heard of it."

Bell smiled. "You've more than heard of it, I've been told. At any rate, I was wondering if you could do me a favor. A friend of mine, who will remain nameless, is a member of the SAS and was acquainted with your late godfather. He found out about this artifact and was wondering if you could let us borrow it for a few weeks while they figure out how to duplicate it."

Harry certainly didn't need it as much as he used to anymore. With Draco reformed and Harry already knowing about most of the secret passages, he generally didn't have to refer to it. Granted, he did sneak out of his room from time to time to go out with Ginny and tended to use the map to make sure teachers weren't around. However, he was fairly certain he could get away without it -- especially with his Invisibility Cloak.

There was one problem, however. Turning to Bell, he asked: "I'll hand it over on one condition. I get it back when we're done with this, and you don't tell the staff. I nearly got into trouble with this in my third year when the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher confiscated it."

Bell shrugged. "I promise I won't tell anyone. However, I'll see what I can do about ensuring that you get it back. There's always the chance the SAS people may damage it during the investigation. That's unlikely, though, as we've got a few wizards working with the SAS here thanks to Sirius's involvement with them and HMSS."

Hoping that this wasn't a mistake, he pulled the Marauder's Map out of his pocket and handed it over. The professor thanked him and pocketed it. "Thank you for your support, Mr. Potter. I'll make sure I get it back to you as soon as possible."

Harry nodded, picked up his books, and headed for the exit. He could imagine Sirius, Lupin, and his father radiant with joy...wherever they were.

To be continued...

---------------
Update #353.5: Houston, Tranquility Base Here. We've Wrecked the Lawn
---------------
1750Z
Tuesday, September 10, 1996
White House
Washington, DC
United States of America
---------------
NEXT UP: There Goes Our Four Day Weekend
---------------

Hillary Clinton had given up trying to work. She had a lot on her plate, and she was spending a lot of time trying to support her husband's presidential campaign. Unfortunately, the first staffers had left around 1:00, and a couple of more had left around 1:10.

By the time 1:40 had come around, the only person left was her secretary. Even the secretary, however, proved to not be unaware of the events happening a block and a half a way. Hillary could
hear her listening to the radio in the other room, and the program was currently reporting that the capsule which had been eventually rechristened Selene had started out life as Columbia, the Apollo 11 command module.

At 1:45, the secretary told her she was leaving. Resigned, and admitting to herself that she was curious about this as well, she pressed the button connecting her to the Secret Service agents.

"Brad? Patrice? I don't really have time for this right now, but would it be possible for you to escort me down to the landing site? My curiosity is starting to get the better of me."

If there was anyone she could count on having stern discipline, it was the Secret Service men. Sure enough, two bearded, burly men walked through the door and saluted. "Mrs. Clinton, we're all set. Come with us, please."

Hillary followed the two agents outside, where they were accompanied by three other men. Gingerly, she and her guards left the White House and started making their way down the block towards the National Mall.

One look down at the National Mall made Hillary wonder if she was even going to make it down there. The Mall was already packed, and a steady stream of people was trying to force their way down towards the National Air and Space Museum. The radio had reported that there had already been a good hundred thousand people on the Mall about ten minutes ago, and the number was probably going to grow quickly.

Someone had managed to set up a TV near the Washington Monument. The screen was currently split three ways, with the top showing a series of flickering numbers: MET 03:01:54:34, 03:01:54:35, 03:01:54:36. The two panels under the numeric display showed a person interviewing Jim Lovell and footage of the eastern end of the Mall, which was blackened by a writhing mass of people. There was only one clear spot remaining on that side of the Mall, right in front of the National Air and Space Museum. That section, bordered by Seventh, Fourth, Madison, and Jefferson, looked unusual in a different way: instead of having throngs of people instead of an normal number of tourists, it was completely empty. It didn't take a high-powered lawyer or First Lady to realize that something was about to land somewhere in that vicinity, crushing anything it fell on.

Normally, she would have used the helicopter to fly over to the border of the secured area. Unfortunately, the chopper had already left with her husband, who was already at the landing site with Yeltsin, the Chinese premier, and scores of NASA personnel. She and her escorts would have to make their way in the old-fashioned way.

The Secret Service agents shoved their way past tourists, congressmen, and God knows who else as they reached the Washington Monument and headed east towards the landing site. People hollered and swore, but they moved. Hillary winced as her disturbance popped up on the TV, and everyone else started clamoring to get a closer look. Eventually, the Secret Service men found themselves face to face with a senior officer name Long who had hurried over to see what the ruckus was all about. He was followed by large numbers of police officers in riot gear.

Long frowned. "Out of the question, Mrs. Clinton. We can't let you in. It's too dangerous. As it is, we have no idea if that thing is even going to land on target -- for all we know, it will hit you. Besides, that's a very excited mob out there, many of whom will likely be voting against your husband. Mobs tend to act in very...irrational ways."

Patrice shook his head. "This is the First Lady we're dealing with here -- she gets special treatment.
There are five Secret Service agents around to protect her, and you and your men are welcome to join us."

Long stared at Hillary for a long time. Finally, muttering beneath his breath that this was against his better judgment, he turned to his men. "All right, let them in and provide her with an extra layer of protection."

It took them a good two or three minutes for them to make it over to Seventh Avenue, where forward progress was blocked once again -- this time by a large number of concrete barriers and troops with billy clubs. Hillary pleaded with an officer, some Thomas fellow, to let her in. Not surprisingly, he also turned her down flat.

She considered trying to convince him to change his mind as well when it occurred to her that she'd be able to see as well from here as she would have next to the President. Besides, if she stood next to Clinton when the ship arrived, she'd probably have to say something intelligent to the astronauts -- and she hadn't spent the last half hour composing a good speech.

She looked back up at another of the TV screens littering the Mall, which was now reading 03:02:03:15. NASA was reporting that if everything went as planned, the ship would arrive in less than a minute. The crowd was starting to get more restless, and all of the Secret Service agents went on full alert. Someone started counting down the seconds, and soon the entire crowd was screaming. Hillary could see her husband across on the other side of the cleared area, but she doubted he could see her.

He lost sight of her husband completely at 03:02:04:14, when a huge flash off light in the middle of the cleared area took everyone by surprise, followed by a heavy THUD. A couple of people panicked, Long put his hand on his firearm, and one woman screamed. The flash disappeared as quickly as it had come to reveal an Apollo-era space capsule sitting in the middle of the clearing, right outside the National Air and Space Museum.

The crowd cheered wildly and pressed forward against barricades and the riot gear. The guards told everyone to back away as NASA personnel headed towards the capsule. They studied it for a few minutes, nodded, and headed towards the other side of the landing zone, where the politicians were.

As luck had it, the door of the capsule was facing Hillary when it landed. She watched as a couple of people in uniforms headed over to the door and banged on it. The crowd quieted momentarily as it waited for a sign that the astronauts had survived. Was the door going to open?

Nothing happened for about ten seconds. Finally, just as Hillary was starting to get nervous, the door opened from the inside and a tall man in a spacesuit suddenly materialized outside the capsule. He turned back into the capsule and muttered something at someone else inside it, only to give up when the crowd exploded with even louder cheers.

The astronaut blinked in astonishment, shrugged, and finally waved to the crowd. He slowly made it out of the spacecraft and buckled momentarily as a full Earth's gravity hit him for the first time in three days. NASA officials helped him out of his spacesuit as they give him a brief medical inspection. The television reported that he was Gene Dumas, an American scientist. Hillary caught a couple of words from the reporters before the crowd roared again and the second astronaut, the Chinese woman, climbed out. Hillary wondered how all four people had supposedly managed to spend three days in that cramped thing.

Once all four astronauts were out and had been given a quick medical examination, ceremonial
guards brought out the flags of China, Russia, the United States, and Atlantis. The astronauts saluted as the four national anthems were played. The Atlantis anthem seemed as dignified as the other three, slow and stately. In another world, separated by the Super Bowl Breach, people would have recognized it as the primary theme from the Harry Potter movies.

The anthems were followed by a good hour of political speeches and award presentations, interrupted from time to time by cheers. Although some of the people found the speeches boring and left, the vast majority stayed to get a possible glimpse of the moon rocks, autographs of the astronauts, or a possible glance into the ship.

Linda Warren -- the witch's robe clearly visible under the spacesuit -- brought the crowd to screaming once again as she brought out her wand and disappeared back into the ship. Twenty seconds later, she emerged on top of a flying carpet filled with moon rocks. The carpet groaned desperately under a weight it had never been intended to carry, yet some extra spells applied by the witch made sure that it lasted long enough to be able to make it to the ground intact so the crowd could see them.

The little bags that had enclosed the rocks clung tightly to them as the air pressure outside pressed them against the rocks. The astronauts explained they were color-coded to indicate which part of the moon they were from.

The NASA scientists began carrying off the rocks while Warren pointed her wand back into the ship and shouted "Accio Box". The crowd gasped once more as a large box filled with even more rocks flew out of the capsule and landed on the ground. The box was sealed, and Hillary couldn't see inside it.

Taking care not to break the seal on the box or let any air in, the scientists carried the box over to a cart and started rolling it away. Dumas explained that the rocks in question came from the south pole area in a region which may have water ice. The plan was to fill the box with one atmosphere's worth of argon (assuming there was no gas already in there, which was highly likely) and see if any meltwater poured out once temperature and pressure was equalized.

People began clamoring to be given moon rocks, but the scientists ignored them. The astronauts explained that the ceremony was over and headed off to a medical tent as the NASA personnel continued removing rocks from the landing site. A couple of people climbed into the ship, came back with cameras, and carried them directly into the Air and Space Museum. Once all of the cameras were removed, they began talking with museum officials about turning the Selene into a permanent exhibit for the museum. It would stay where it had landed, in the middle of the National Mall, a few hundred feet away from the Roqteratl obelisk.

To be continued...

Update #353.4

Tuesday, September 10, 1996
Abandoned facility
Trapananda
South Pacific

The hidden 'city-state' of the merpeople was more like a flooded version of the Underdark of D&D
fame: over the course of five thousand years, the original vault was expanded into a labyrinthine
dimensional maze of tunnels, artificial caves and domes, then as time passed and earthquakes
damaged these, artificial tunnels were blocked and natural ones opened. The sounds of cave-ins were
muffled by a mile of bedrock and twisted by magic to resemble innocuous voices of sealife, but even
so, the larger ones created so much noise that the Muggles started to investigate the so called 'Bloop',
so far finding nothing.

Sometimes the damaged facilities were important enough to be repaired or rebuilt (if not enough to
warrant sufficiently powerful wards in the first place), but often the merwizards just shrugged and
built a new one elsewhere. When Trapananda was founded, all kind of flora and fauna was brought
along for the ride to provide nourishment and potion ingredients. Many species only grew in the
magically reproduced 'sunlight' in special greenhouse rooms, but thanks to experiments and natural
adaptation, a great number of them now dwelled in the less inhabited parts of the cave system. Along
with the uncomfortably unexpected results of failed and abandoned research projects, they made
large parts of Trapananda dangerous even to trained merwizards, but as some of the beasts and plants
were valuable but impossible to domesticate, these zones were effectively proclaimed as natural
reserves.

Sprawling around the currently inhabited city parts and the passages connecting them, these
abandoned places served as reliable secret meeting places for many. Of course it wasn't without
danger: the creatures roaming there often had to be repelled by magic and that showed up in the
Watcher's Trace spell. Or the misfortunate merwizard was simply killed and devoured by spell-
resistant monsters, regardless of magic use. But in the gloomy political atmosphere of the hidden city
of the merwizards, this was an acceptable risk for many.

In the remains of a partially caved-in building, a small group of merwizards have gathered. Most of
them were members of the Watch themselves, somewhat raising the stakes: they knew exactly what
they were hiding from, but also if they got caught, punishment would be more serious... especially
considering the topic of the conversation.

"We have known for some time, that the Archon cannot be trusted to rule fairly anymore." Said
Dalila Sargassus, the merwitch who removed Sarebas from the realms of the living and the consistent
objects larger than five kilograms. "The remaining free Oldblood families still stand an excellent
chance of overthrowing him if..."

"-Not good enough" interrupted Willa Whitespear, sister of the imprisoned Benon Whitespear who
led the ill-fated expedition to Japan's sea. "Powerful as those families are, they lack the desire to
change things. And we have to change, ladies and gentlemen, because our old way of life isn't
viable anymore. We have seen the signs, we know where it inevitably leads, there is no use denying
it: all our Muggle kindred will either embrace mages as a part of their everyday life, or die trying.
Either way, no more new recruits for us. Combined with the advance of human technology, I say we
have a generation at best until all our infiltrations are foiled and we have to go into total isolation...
which would compromise the most basic mission of our kind, the ability to protect Gaia."

"Oh, it would be even worse" sarcastically added another. "Archon Isalas of the House ÄweŁus,
the Worst of His Name will find a solution. Oh, it will probably be something like restoring the
balance of nature by exterminating every last technological society down to the last child, but hey,
they should have been stopped when they chopped down the first forest to feed to the first steam
engine... or to make place of the first ploughing ever, and they are only Muggles anyway. Now, seriously, how come that nutjob is still our ruler?"

Murmurs of agreement all through the group. Willa added: "There are newbloods and oldbloods, but the archon's family is a damned fossil. The Àwe'Łuses are an ancient dynasty, they had over five thousand years to degenerate. Still, if any of us had an ancestor who had intentionally delayed the warning of the stargazers to the rest of the world to maximise Muggle casualties and create his own secret pureblood paradise we all live in now, I'd damn well shut up about it instead of bragging with it as he does. And all that wizard honor bullshit he forces on us... seriously, as if we weren't an organisation specifically founded, by his aforementioned ancestor might I add, to protect the world by all means necessary?"

"Agreed" said Dalila, who remembered being branded for losing her honor and forced to reclaim it by victory in a fight to the death, for allowing a Muggle to capture her- never mind the guy had concealed magical eyes and a gun to blow her head clean off if she tried anything. "There might be something to get the Newbloods to support us too: remember the tattooed errant wizard guy we hunted down? He had a harem of 'seers', with lots of children... half of whom were full mages like him. It really seems to support what the Muggles say about how magic works with humans, all that Q and Z or whatever. Now, if you take our 50000 or so males, and tell them that out of the 1.5, maybe 2 million mermaids in the world every 100th or quite possibly 50th has a 1 in 2 chance of concieving a mermage child with them... well, our cause have just gained the support of every male who would be happy to take a second wife, or a lover...all for the good of the race." she finished sarcastically.

"Well, as the humans say, all men are pigs, or at least that's how your idea makes us seem," replied the sarcastic one from before, "but if true, this is a very strong counter-argument for our current policy of blood preservation by isolation. And it brings up our problem: with genetic testing available, Q and Z merpeople out there will be able to pair up to intentionally create merwizard offsprings... and being aware of the child's magic, they will set up alternative magic schools with the aid of the humans, sooner or later discovering Mermish spells on their own, but still causing lots of accidents while they learn from scratch. It's for the best if we help them... but they won't accept us as we are now."

"Agreed" replied Willa. "The Archon must be dealt with, permanently. He and his ancestors can be the scapegoat for the abductions, and the infiltrations if those are busted. I'd prefer if they weren't, and we should pull out all our agents as soon as we can without blowing their cover... scratch that, people will see the link once the humanform spell is known and we know too much to be isolationist wizards, anyway. We should still pull out infiltrators who are in compromising positions, but the vast majority of them is either the harmless incognito traveler merchant, or a brick in criminal organisations- offering cooperation to bring those down will gain the favor of many governments. And then we have a little problem of some of the five thousand 'volunteers' assisting the government of Houyhnhnmland in the civil war."

The others paled. One meekly asked: "They have behaved exceptionally well so far, didn't they? I mean, their reports said they actually stopped genocide and war crimes instead of committing them. Maybe they had a change of heart..."
"Good conduct is a reasonable behaviour for a prisoner when his guards see him. Those guys were..."
conscripted into a penal legion for being more supportive of Death Eaters than our blood purist nutjob archon. And for our plan to succeed, we'll have to destroy the very device that tracks them."

"We have to either bring them back, or to remain in control of them through conventional means. Here's the deal: we knock the Observatory out after the expedition force's next scheduled resupply. That way we'll have a few days to proceed with the plan and consolidate power, so when we contact them again, we can send over enough loyal officers to keep them disciplined. After all, they won't dare and try to figure out by trial and error that the system reporting their misdeeds isn't online anymore, right?"

To be continued...

Oldblood and Newblood are similar terms to Pureblood and Muggleborn, slightly altered in meaning to fit the specifics of the Trapananda environment. Basically, Oldblood is everyone who has an ancestor who was among the founders of Trapananda.

-------------
Update #354: There Goes Our Four Day Weekend
-------------
Wednesday, September 11, 1996
Omega Institute
Rhinebeck, NY
United States of America
-------------
NEXT UP: Mother Teresa Gets a Promotion
-------------
Samuel's jaw dropped. "What do you mean, people went to the moon?"

The Pope paused in his packing to explain. "It's just like I said. A witch helped design a spacecraft which took four people to the moon and back. They picked up a few hundred kilograms of rocks and came back."

Samuel looked even more stunned. "There are ROCKS on the moon? I thought it was just a big round white light!"

"Nope, Holy One. It's a big ball of rock just like our world, except that it doesn't have life, an atmosphere, or water. It's just...well, a big rock."

Samuel reeled. "Are you telling me that all of the stars and the sun are all big balls of rock?"

"The stars and the Sun are big balls of gas. The planets and moon are big balls of rock, some of which have thick atmospheres which hide their rocky cores."

"All five of them?"

The pope froze, and it took him a good five seconds for him to realize what Samuel was talking about: back in those days, there were only seven planets, Earth was not one of them, and the list included the sun and moon. The prophet was referring to Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. Eventually, he nodded: "Yes, Holy One". He figured this wasn't the time to get into Uranus,
Neptune, Pluto, and the asteroids.

Samuel eyebrows shot up. "Ah. When they fall out of the sky Judgment Day happens. Those must be very big rocks. This means there must have been more than five planets before Noha-Pishtin and the Hammer of Ra."

The pope didn't know what to say. "We've learned a lot since then."

Samuel grunted. "Indeed, but like I said earlier you future people still are not very wise. You are arrogant. You send people to the moon less than three months after a Judgment Day. You repeat the sin of the Tower of Babel when you should be trying to mature enough to use your knowledge wisely. Sometimes I wonder if trying to reform you is a lost cause, but God kept your civilization going for a reason. It is clear that He intends you to have another chance, and who am I to disagree with Him?"

The prophet winced. "Holy One, we're doing what we can! For all we know, God returned you to us so you could help teach us! You are aware that the Kohen Gadol thinks you may be the Islamic Mahdi, the man who will rid the world of evil and injustice."

Samuel sighed. "I pray that is the case, for all of our sakes. Technology can work wonders, but it can also cause great destruction. You need to train yourselves to only use your new powers for good. At any rate, back to the moon. In order to travel to the moon, you need to know where it will be, right?"

The pope looked at him quizzically. "Yes, Holy One."

Samuel looked at him intently. "Does that mean you know where the moon is all the time and can predict with certainty when the new moon is months, if not years, in advance?"

John Paul stared at him quizzically: where was this going? "Yes."

Samuel smiled. "Good. If that is the case, why do you still have two days dedicated to Rosh Hashanah? The law stipulates only one, and from what the Jewish sect leaders told me the second day was added because it took a while for people to receive the announcement about the new moon. In addition, is the new moon indeed on September 14th? If not, we need calendrical reform."

The pope drew a deep breath -- Samuel wasn't going to like this. "Uh, Holy One, if you go by science the new moon is...tomorrow, the 12th. This would likely move Rosh Hashanah to the 13th because you can't see the tiny crescent which begins the next month until about 24 hours later because it's lost in the glare of the sun."

Samuel rolled his eyes. "Indeed, it is time for calendrical reform. I suppose it's too late to get rid of the second day of Rosh Hashanah this year and move everything over to the right time of the month. I take it this odd custom of having eight days of Sukkot outside Israel is the same thing, where they couldn't figure out when the full moon was in time?"

The pope bit his lip. "Yes, Holy One. Although the need for it is gone, the custom remains."

Samuel snorted. "Custom isn't law, John Paul. Tell all the sects that starting with Cheshvan 5757, everyone is going to use one-day and seven-day holidays tied to the scientific dates of the new moon plus one day. People outside Israel can optionally include the second and eighth days in their holidays."
The pope groaned. "I don't know how well that will go over, but I'll talk to them about it."

"Good. Do your sect and the Muslims also have calendrical problems like this outside Rome and Mecca?"

"My sect has some odd calculations to determine the date of Easter, but those use the scientific full moon. The Muslims, from what I know, have the same problem with their calendar that the Jewish sect does. In addition, their year is always twelve lunar months, without leap months, so the month of Ramadan precesses."

"Ramadan's the month dedicated to renunciation practices such as fasting, right?"

"Yes, Holy One."

"Such an important month should stay put, preferably near the equinox so people all over the world aren't incapacitated by a summer fast. When did it start this year?"

"Late January. If it were up to me, I'd move it to the Omer period after Passover, or possibly around Lent, to unify the sects, but it will take several decades for Ramadan to precess to that point. It is not up to me to rule on that, however. You need to talk to Suleiman."

Samuel shook his head in frustration and said something which the interpreter didn't translate, which the pope took to be expletives by the tone of voice. "We'll deal with this after Rosh Hashanah. Tell everyone that in lieu of sacrifices, worshipers can give to charity and/or donate to the Temple. Now that people use papyrus money instead of livestock to determine wealth, the animal sacrifices can become optional."

The pope smiled. Suleiman would be pleased at that as he wouldn't have to worry about animals desecrating the mosque.

"As far as the readings from the Bible go, they can be accompanied by excerpts taken here from the Ram Dass Library. We're fortunate that such a wise man can help us -- we should invite him to join these discussions as well when we get back from Israel."

He thought for a moment, and the pope took the opportunity to resume packing. "Maybe we can have the Ram Dass excerpt replace the excerpt from the prophets on one of the two days. What's the prophets text for the first day about?"

The pope's eyes widened, and he began to laugh. Shaking his head, he continued packing. "You're not going to believe it, but I think replacing that text would be very appropriate."

Samuel folded his hands across his chest. "What's so funny? I don't want to replace a text unless it's either wrong or the worshipers don't think it's meaningful to them. Just answer the question, John Paul. What's it about?"

John Paul barely managed to compose himself. "Well, it talks about a woman named Hannah being barren, going to the Temple, and praying for a son. The High Priest Eli berates her for being drunk and --"

Samuel started laughing uncontrollably, probably the first time John Paul had ever seen him laugh. "They STILL believe that? The High Priest made that up shortly after I was born to try to hide the fact he and Hannah were my parents! In all seriousness, though, that's a perfect place to introduce the
Ram Dass. I tell them what really happened, and after that we read the Ram Dass. God works in mysterious ways, apparently. Who was the idiot who let that into his book? David? Saul?"

John Paul winced and shook his head. "No, Holy One. It wasn't David or Saul."

"Who was it then?"

The pope reached for a Bible and turned it to the passage in question. Printed prominently above the text of the story were the phrases

BOOK OF I SAMUEL
Chapter 1

He held it out to Samuel. "Uh...you."

Samuel's jaw dropped as he and the interpreter started arguing over the text. This allowed John Paul to continue packing, which was good as he had a lot of stuff to pack.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #355: Mother Teresa Gets a Promotion
-------------
Thursday, September 12, 1996
Omega Institute
Rhinebeck, NY
United States of America
-------------
NEXT UP: A New Protector for an Island
-------------
Anitiel the wife of Lapidot and Barak, also known as Deborah the Prophetess, had been waiting for this moment for millennia.

Not content with the idea that women could be seen as inferior to men, she had worked hard and honed her skills at leading and mentoring people. She soon became recognized by most of the common people as a judge and seeress, and she was chosen by a young captain named Barak to accompany him on some of his campaigns. Eventually, she and Barak had started up a torrid affair, which she contrived to hide from her husband with great success.

She didn't see it as an affair, of course. Men were allowed to take multiple wives. So why was it forbidden for women to take multiple husbands? It's not like she was going to be able to spend time with Lapidot when she was out fighting to ensure the survival of Lapidot and the rest of the community!

She had convinced many people to join her cause. After all, after they saw how well she had encouraged the Israelites during the interminable war to conquer Canaan, it's not as if they could deny it. Unfortunately, word had inevitably leaked out to the more conservative religious authorities, and they had taken it into their hands to silence her before she became too much of a cultural threat. She had come home one day and had her dinner only to find, too late, that it had been poisoned. She had gone to sleep that night and had woken up in Sheol. Determined to find her killer and to keep the movement going, she returned as a ghost to fight on.

It soon became evident that several of the priests, including High Priest Eli himself, had been beind
her assassination. They had eventually passed it off to an Edomite spy, but it was fairly obvious to her what had happened. She had considered haunting them for a while but soon realized that it wouldn’t be very productive. Instead, she turned back to her followers to see how they were doing.

It didn’t do much good, however. Most of them were Muggles, and they couldn’t see her as a ghost. She watched in horror as they were either captured or forced to return to the fold. Within months of her assassination, her movement had been wiped out and stricken from the records as if it had never existed. The only things she was remembered for were her exploits as a prophetess, mediator, and advisor to Barak. None of her magic ability was passed on to future generations, and none of her feminist work.

She was mortified to find that she wasn’t the only person executed by the conservative priestly authorities for her reform work. The founder of John Paul’s sect, a reformist rabbi by the name of Joshua of Nazareth, was eventually arrested by the religious authorities and then handed over to the Roman Empire for execution on a trumped-up charge. Over a millennium after that, a reformer named Martin Luther was persecuted for similar reforms and nearly executed by the leader of John Paul’s sect. The founder of Suleiman’s sect had also been forced to flee his homeland after antagonizing the authorities.

Joshua, Mohammed, and Martin's sects had flourished since their leaders had faced these terrible obstacles. She expected hers would as well. And it would, albeit three thousand years later.

She looked around the main hall, where the vast majority of the Abrahamic men had already left for Israel to handle Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and possibly parts of Sukkot. The Dalai Lama, a Buddhist, was currently in charge of the people who remained. A good 75% of the people who were left were women, most of whom admired her at least as much as they respected Samuel and Tiqwael.

Female dress codes were more relaxed, and many of the women were even wearing men’s clothes. Most of the women had their hair down and were wearing makeup, attire which would likely have gotten them burned as prostitutes in the old days. Women were often allowed to sit with men (but not always), and in some cases they were allowed to speak, participate in, and give sermons during services.

However, with the possible exception of the more reformist Jewish and Protestant sects, none of them were allowed to become priests, rabbis, or imams. Yes, Wizarding women were allowed to become pope, but they were only considered after it became obvious that no Wizarding men, even with worse qualifications, existed.

Anitiel smiled to herself. With Samuel and Tiqwael gone, she was realistically the most respected religious authority left at the conference and the only one left from classical Israel. The Dalai Lama, the official interim chairman and the man in charge of the optional Rosh Hashanah services Friday night through Sunday, came from a tradition where women could become ascetics -- nuns, he called them -- as often as men. He would have to buy her idea lest he antagonize all of the Buddhist nuns.

Grinning, she spoke with her interpreter and asked her for a request. The interpreter tried to talk her out of it, but she was adamant. Muttering something beneath her breath, the interpreter nodded and left the room.

--------------

Mother Teresa looked up from her meditation text and made her way over to the door. Due to her great age and immense reputation, she had earned herself a cabin all to herself. Very few people had been given such an honor.
She opened the door and Deborah's interpreter stepped in. "I'm sorry for bothering you, Mother, but I was wondering if you would be willing to stop by the main hall for an audience with Deborah at 6:00."

The famous nun frowned. "Why can't she come here, Meira? Can't she stop by here with you?"

"She's busy gathering the rest of the delegates, testing out her broken English. She's decided to give you an award for your pioneering work, and she wants everyone else to witness this."

Teresa was confused: something didn't make sense here. She of all people did not need an audience to boost her ego -- she was beyond then. Then again, she saw herself as a lowly servant of God, not worthy of all of these awards she had been given over the years.

She studied the interpreter's face and noticed that her visitor looked nervous. The last time she had seen one of the interpreters this way, it had been when Samuel had surprised everyone by forcing all the men to go to Israel. Whatever this award was, it was had been a hard sell.

Gently, she asked: "What exactly is this for, and what does it consist of?"

Checking to see no one else was around, the interpreter told her.

Teresa was silent for a good five minutes. Finally, she drew a deep breath. "I can see how that is controversial, and I hope she knows what she is doing and how this will affect this community."

The interpreter looked at her. "Will you accept it?"

Teresa closed her eyes, and the interpreter could tell that she was looking for guidance. Finally, she opened them again and nodded. "I have spent my lifetime trying to prevent injustices. Although I had never really considered this, I cannot help but admit that this is an injustice. I also admit that this will be a hard one to resolve, perhaps the hardest I've ever been involved with. Nevertheless, I cannot stand back when God sends His emissaries, especially those from the Bible, to contact me. Yes, Meira. I'll do it."

"Good. I'll see you at the hall at 6:00."

Karen Armstrong walked into the main hall at 5:55 wondering what this was about. It wasn't an ordinary religious service, as far as she could tell. Clearly, something was up. Perhaps the Dalai Lama and Deborah were going to finalize plans for the Omega Rosh Hashanah observation, which would be starting up in about 24 hours.

She heard rumors that Deborah was going to give Mother Teresa some kind of award. Although Armstrong couldn't deny that Mother Teresa was one of the most respected and revered spiritual leaders of her generation, she found it odd that she would be willing to accept the award in front of everyone else.

She watched as Deborah, the interpreter, and the venerable nun made their way to the front of the room. Audience members shuffled in their seats as Deborah began to speak and the interpreter began to translate with fear on her face. Armstrong grunted, and she wasn't alone. Why would the interpreter be afraid of about giving Mother Teresa an award? That this humble woman would turn it down? She'd find out soon enough.

Deborah looked determined -- and smug. "Ladies and gentlemen, the time has come for our
community to begin to undo one of the greatest injustices of the Abrahamic faiths, one which has been plaguing our faiths since even before I was born. That was long time ago, my friends.

"I recognized this particular problem many years ago and took a stand against the bigoted religious authorities of my time to combat it. Many people agreed with me, and I became very popular for many reasons. Unfortunately, the High Priest and several of his subordinates -- including Samuel's father -- believed that I was a threat and had me poisoned. That, ladies and gentlemen, is why I look like a vibrant woman of 39 and not like an old crone. I died an untimely death -- something which is not mentioned in the Bible as you know it."

The audience members began muttering excitedly to each other. They had heard rumors of Deborah being assassinated before, but they had never heard any proof from Deborah herself.

Deborah continued. "Yes, there was corruption in the Temple even then. How else would you explain Eli having a child out of wedlock with some woman named Hannah? Granted, the man produced by that union became a great spiritual leader much more open-minded than Eli, but one has to think about what Eli's personality was like."

The muttering became louder. Armstrong became very curious where the ancient Israelite was going with this.

"Well, it's about time that I resumed the mission that I was assassinated for, one which I can safely start discussing for the first time today. Society has changed over the years where what was once considered a vile heresy is slowly becoming accepted in some sects."

She turned to Mother Teresa. "Mother Teresa, everyone here agrees that you are probably one of the most venerable, revered, and saintly people of our era. If anyone is deserving of an award such as this, it is you. May your example serve as an inspiration to people around the world, especially women."

The predominantly female crowd began talking excitedly, and Armstrong's mind suddenly raced. Was Deborah going to use her authority as a biblical figure -- and seniority at the conference -- to do what Armstrong thought she was going to do? With Samuel and Tiqwael gone, the audience primarily female, and the Dalai Lama looking nervous...

Deborah came over to Mother Teresa and placed her ghostly hand over the nun's head. "By the power invested in me as the senior member of the Abrahamic faith at this conference, I propose to ordain this woman as the first Abrahamic priestess, female rabbi, and female imam. Several of our sects accept female clergy, and I request that we make it that all of them do. I died for believing that women and men could be equals, and I intend to ensure that my death not be in vain."

The room exploded. Women cheered enthusiastically while some of the men started screaming at her and saying that she didn't have the authority to do so. These arguments were countered by other men saying that "modern people" couldn't argue with someone who was revered in the Old Testament and who was closer in time to the revelation at Sinai than the people from the modern era.

Karen Armstrong watched in shock and jotted down notes as Deborah held up her hand to quell the noise. "Yes, it is unorthodox. However, this woman's example shows that women can be as inspiring spiritual and religious leaders as men can. How many of you have won the Nobel Peace Prize? Times change, ladies and gentlemen. We've already started unifying the calendar. Now we have to unify the gender bias in the priesthood and clergy. Since one cannot go from higher holiness to lower holiness, we cannot evict women already ordained from the clergy. That means their ordinations
have to stand, which means everyone else has to start accepting women as well."

She held up her hand to forestall more arguments. "I can see that this is controversial. So, let's have a vote. Who's for it, and who's against it? That's the way an Abrahamic court would have handled it."

Armstrong knew what the results would be even before she asked for the votes. With all the women in the room, it would be a forgone conclusion.

Deborah smiled ear to ear as the interpreter shook Mother Teresa's hand. "Congratulations, Mother, Rabbi, Imam, and Priestess Teresa."

The crowd started talking among itself excitedly. Armstrong, however, held her breath for a long time and then let it out. She sure as hell hoped this wouldn't cause another schism when Samuel -- let alone the regular Abrahamics not involved with "Samuelism" found out about this.

To be continued...
Update #356 through Update #360

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Mislagnissa

Update #356: A New Protector for an Island
-------------
Friday, September 13, 1996
Royal Palace
Laergib City
Laputa
-------------
NEXT UP: Happy New New Year
-------------
The storm raged all across southern Laputa. People were reporting waves twenty feet high crashing into the breakwaters outside the southernmost islands. Lowne Paolte, newly promoted to Prelate, listened anxiously as the reports began to come in all over the nation.

The traditional seawalls were failing left and right, and winds in excess of one hundred miles per hour were reported in some parts of the country. This was probably the worst storm in a good fifty years, he thought. Rain was coming down in sheets, trees and debris were flying everywhere, and visibility was minimal. There were odd stories of the water level rising even before the waves got to Laputa, and an even more bizarre report where someone mentioned a small pocket of clear sky and calm winds in the middle of storm -- followed by an area where the winds blew the other way. Wizards were doing everything they could to keep everything in order and prevent people from panicking.

There was one strange observation, however, which was being confirmed all over the nation. The seawalls had fallen, and the huge waves and high water had encroached to maybe 500 feet of the shoreline -- only to slam into an invisible wall and spray hundreds of feet into the air. Instead of a flood reminiscent of the Judgment Day stories, the wall of water served as a partial shelter from the wind.

Utlar III smiled and slapped Lowne on the back. "My good man, you've just become a national hero. Had it not been for your invention, a good five or six islands would have been completely submerged and possibly destroyed permanently by this ferocious storm. You're going to get a reward for this, Prelate Paolte."

Lowne blanched. "I have no right to any reward in this case! My invention doesn't work well enough!"

The king shook his head. "I don't deserve it, Your Majesty. I was not able to prevent the damage from the wind. Many people will still lose their lives in this storm. I cannot allow myself to benefit from something which is still an awful tragedy."

The king looked at his notes. "On the contrary. According to the latest reports, we've got maybe 1,000 houses damaged and maybe 200 dead --"

Lowne blanched. "I have no right to any reward in this case! My invention doesn't work well enough!"

The king nodded impatiently and continued. "Even though the predicted reports for a storm of this caliber would have wrecked 13,500 houses, destroyed several coastal cities, and killed 5,000 people?"
"Yes, Lowne. You've just saved 4,800 lives and the homes of over ten thousand people. Trust me, my friend. You've earned it. What's more, Queen Liseth of Lilliput wants you to teach her how to protect their islands as well. Since they're shorter than we are and their islands are smaller, they are more susceptible to floods."

"Really? How does she know about it?"

"She came here a few weeks ago and was wondering why the tide was acting strangely outside Laergib City. I explained your invention to her and she was more than intrigued. She wanted to see if it would work on a national scale, something which was put to the test today. As far as I'm concerned, the invention has passed with flying colors and is ready for use by the Lilliputians. The queen has already told me that she is in your debt and is willing to provide you with a small monetary bonus of 50,000 Galleons. She has also recommended that I make you an ambassador to Lilliput since you're probably going to be seeing her a lot."

Lowne Paolte's mind raced. He uses an obscure spell to protect his house, gets promoted to Prelate, and now finds himself about to become a possible ambassador? How in the name of all five gods did THIS happen? Gulping, he explained that he wasn't a diplomat. He didn't know how to relate to the Lilliputians! Hell, he wasn't entirely sure where Lilliput was!

Utlar III tried to comfort him. "Just show them how you put up that shield against the water. Once you start talking about something you know and she starts asking you questions you can answer, you'll find it much more comfortable. I can only make one suggestion, however."

"Oh, what's that?"

"Watch where you step. Lilliputians don't like it much when we stomp on their loved ones."

Persephone Ariadne stood in front of the cameras next to the Secretary of the Treasury. She had been hoping to not have to make this announcement. However, judging from what had just happened with that Lonan fellow in Dublin, she figured she had no choice.

She began to speak. "Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming. Today, the secretary and I would like to announce a new requirement for dealing with transactions made in gold bullion. Starting tomorrow morning, banks are required to wait 24 hours to register any transaction involving gold bullion and ONLY gold bullion.

"This may sound like an odd request. However, there is a reason for this. Now that the Statute of Secrecy has fallen, it is my duty as Secretary of Magic to warn you about the threat of the leprechaun. Yes, you heard me right. The leprechaun.

"Leprechauns are mischievous little creatures. They are usually six inches tall, and they like to dress in leaves. They like to play jokes on people from time to time, and they have an amazing sense of humor. However, they also have an ability which can interfere with our economy. You see, they are able to create false gold out of nothing, a substance which is indistinguishable from true gold. This gold vanishes after 24 hours, however, so any ore you have left after 24 hours is guaranteed to be the real thing."
"It has come to my attention that a leprechaun crime syndicate in Ireland is trying to make money by having the leprechauns send fake gold to pawn shops and getting cash for them. To prevent similar fraud in the United States, we are instituting this new program."

Ariadne summed up her speech. "We already have enough trouble in the economy right now to worry about gold disappearing. Let's make sure that the expression 'good as gold' lives up to its reputation for the duration of this crisis."

Hogwarts

Dumbledore jumped in surprise as the glowing white owl soared into his office. He recognized it immediately as Sybil Trelawney's Patronus.

He was glad to find that Professor Trelawney had found a job after leaving Hogwarts. On a whim, she had taken up a position in the Muggle world as a psychic and fortune teller. Unlike the Muggle fortune tellers, she could actually read the future to some extent. Many celebrities were now coming to see her, including several members of the royal family and Liverpudlian football players.

Dumbledore smiled at the owl. "Good afternoon, Sybil. How have you been?"

Trelawney promptly spent twenty minutes crying, reminiscing about her time at Hogwarts, and complaining about how much she had hated Professor Umbridge. Eventually, though she got to the point.

"Headmaster, I've had another prophecy. It was two days ago, when I had a Muggle in my store. The Muggle jotted it down and relayed it back to me."

Dumbledore gasped. "Really? Let's hear it."

"The prophecy reads as follows. 'When Mercury is seen in conjunction with the Great Bear, the victor shall be the vanquished and the vanquished shall be the victor.'"

Dumbledore thought about it for a second. "The Great Bear is obviously Ursa Major. However, I could have sworn that it was impossible for Mercury, or any other planet, to get that far out of the plane of the zodiac."

Trelawney grunted. "You are correct, Headmaster. That's impossible, and I would know because of my astrological skills."

"Could it be something involving space travel? A spacecraft like the one which went to the moon flies somewhere where Mercury is seen in front of Ursa Major?"

"I don't know, Headmaster. I can't figure it out myself. All I can recommend is relaying it to Minister Flamel and seeing what he makes of it."

Dumbledore nodded. "Will do."

To be continued...

Update #357: Happy New New Year
Saturday, September 14, 1996 / 1 Tishrei 5757 [1] / 1st Day Rosh Hashanah
Al-Aqsa Mosque
Jerusalem

-------------
NEXT UP: Lowne Paolte's Maldives Vacation?
-------------

Samuel looked at the newspaper and at the interpreter in disbelief. "She did WHAT?"

There wasn't any time for this, he thought. There were only about fifteen minutes before the services in the Temple were about to start, people were trying to force their way in among the television reporters and security guards, various clerics were struggling to keep things under control to ensure that the ceremony had the appropriate dignity and somber tone, and now this?

The interpreter repeated his report. "She just ordained Mother Teresa -- the nun you were speaking with a few days ago -- as an Abrahamic priestess, rabbi, and imam. She asked everyone to vote on it and they let it through. Female clergy have become part of our platform for all sects, and several of the more conservative religious leaders here are...troubled."

Samuel put his head in his hands. "That's...problematic. Although I do not know of anything legally forbidding women from becoming priests, rabbis, and so forth, there have never been mainline Abrahamic priestesses in any of the core sects: Catholicism, both branches of Islam, and Orthodox Judaism. Judging from all of the arguments you've been reporting among the clergy here, I'm worried this could cause a schism."

The interpreter hesitated for a moment and then dove in. "What's your view on this, Holy One?"

Samuel paused for a good twenty seconds. "To be honest, I'm a bit uncomfortable with it as it's a radical change from what I'm accustomed with. However, I cannot deny that the women ordained so far by the more liberal sects have been as worthy of ordination as their male counterparts. This Mother Teresa, from what I recall, is one of the best. If Anitiel had to choose one of them, she would have been an excellent choice."

He looked gravely out of the office where, several months earlier, Suleiman had nearly been assassinated by Muslims for Humans. "Times have changed, and I will have to get accustomed to the new situation. We'll tell everyone that people can ordained female clergy at their discretion. Those who do not believe in ordination won't have to, and those who do will be able to. Hopefully, that will appease both sides. The big question is whether these women will be able to find a pulpit or a congregation."

The interpreter frowned. "That is a legitimate concern, Holy One. Most of the pioneering female clergy had trouble finding pulpits after their ordination."

Samuel shook his head. "We'll deal with this later. We're not supposed to be dealing with mundane business on important holidays like this, so get back to preparing for the service. Did any of you people bring a ram's horn? That instrument has traditionally been used to sound the wake-up alarm."

The interpreter shook his head. "None of the rabbis have, Holy One. Because it is the Sabbath, it is customary not to sound the horn on the Sabbath [2]."

Samuel rolled his eyes. "I don't want to know. Tell them that I want them to sound the horn anyway. If they prefer, someone who does not observe this prohibition can do it -- maybe a Muslim or Christian. Had we already decided to only observe one day of Rosh Hashanah this year and not
sounded the horn, we wouldn't have gotten any warning blasts at all. The Sabbath can wait -- this holiday cannot."

The interpreter nodded and stuck his head out the door for a few moments. He then returned with a somewhat bemused expression on his face.

"Someone's going to go and get a horn. In the meantime, is all right if someone tries out a military bugle?"

---------------------
ORDER OF SERVICE, Abrahamic New Year
Day 1 -- September 14, 1996 / 1 Tishrei 5757
---------------------
Sounding of Shofar / Call to Prayer [3]: Muezzin, Al-Aqsa Mosque

Welcoming Speech: Samuel

Introductory Psalms and Suras [4]: Rabbi Michael Cohen, Kohen Gadol Suleiman I, Celestine VI

Declaration of Faith and Service [5]: Pope John Paul II

Silent Meditation Period #1 [6]

Sacred Foundational Text Readings [7]
1. Old Testament: Tiqwael
2. New Testament: Rabbi Levine
3. Qu'ran: Kohen Gadol Suleiman I
4. Sutras: Celestine VI
5. Hindu Texts -- Patriarch of Constantinople
6. Old Testament -- Pope John Paul II

Prophetic Text Readings [8]
1. Old Testament -- Samuel
2. New Testament -- John Paul II
3. Qu'ran -- Kohen Gadol Suleiman I

Sermon: Samuel, Kohen Gadol Suleiman I, John Paul II, Patriarch of Constantinople

Sounding of Shofar: Muezzin, Al-Aqsa Mosque

Silent Meditation Period #2 [9]

Presentation of Donated Food and Monetary Pledges[10]

Lecture and Exercises #1: Transcending Boundaries and Envisioning Yourself as Part of a Greater Whole -- Samuel [11]

Sounding of Shofar: Muezzin, Al-Aqsa Mosque

Lecture and Exercises #2: Remembering the Past Without Clinging -- Nonattachment: Pope John Paul II [12]
Sounding of Shofar: Muezzin, Al-Aqsa Mosque

Lecture and Exercises #3: Self-Awakening, or How to Leave a Mindful Life -- Dalai Lama (delivered by Kohen Gadol Suleiman I) [13]

Silent Meditation Period #3

Priestly Blessing: Kohen Gadol Suleiman I, Tiqwa, Rabbi Cohen, Pope John Paul II [14]

Concluding Remarks: Samuel

Sounding of Shofar: Muezzin, Al-Aqsa Mosque

Food and Refreshments

End of Service

---------------

To be continued...

---------------

[1] Tishrei is the first month of the Jewish ceremonial year. 1996-1997 is the 5757th year since from the traditional creation of the world in the Jewish calendar. The Jewish civil year starts in Nisan, six months earlier, and the month before that is occasionally duplicated to insert leap months.

[2] The prohibition is traditionally due to the fact that although the Shofar (the horn) can be sounded in theory on the Sabbath, there is a prohibition against carrying objects in place on the Sabbath and the elders were concerned that people would violate the Sabbath by carrying the horn to the place of worship. Since the holiday is two days, the Shofar would be sounded on the second day to alert the congregation.

[3] The Shofar is being used as a muezzin call here as well as a mindfulness tool. This is not a traditional time to blow the Shofar during the service.


[12] Equivalent of Zikhronot section of Rosh Hashanah Musaf service, traditionally discussing God's promise to remember His faithful.

[13] Equivalent of Shofrot section of Rosh Hashanah Musaf service, focusing on the blowing of the Shofar.


----------
Update #358: Lowne Paolte's Maldives Vacation?
----------
Sunday, September 15, 1996 / 2 Tishrei 5757 / 2nd Day Rosh Hashanah
Paolte Residence
Fern Island
Laputa
----------
NEXT UP: The Galiver Consortium Exposed
----------
Lowne Paolte could tell from the ruckus outside his house that Utlar III had returned. He turned and bowed as the Laputan ruler stepped out of his flying chariot and shook his hand.

"How are you doing, Lowne?"

Paolte shrugged. "Fine, Your Majesty. I still don't know what I'm going to do with all the money I got from Queen Liseth, though. I'm a simple man, Sire. I don't need all of those crazy houses and fancy spell components that some of the more ostentatious wizards need."

"You haven't splurged at all, Lowne?"

"Not really. I got myself a new broomstick and that was it. I'm thinking about paying for an addition to my existing house, but we'll see how that works out."

"I see. What did you think of Lilliput?"

Paolte smiled. "I didn't realize they were that small, Your Majesty. Everything's small over there, even the animals. They were telling me stories where gigantic rats from Lamel Galiver's ship nearly overran the island back in 9 AG. Thankfully the wizards took care of that. And no, I did not step on anyone. You have my word on it."

"Did you put the storm shield around Lilliput and South Lilliput as well?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. There was good weather there when I visited, so I can't tell for certain that it worked. However, from the little I saw as the tide came out it looked like everything is in place. Unless I'm badly mistaken, they should be protected from the storms as well as we are now, Sire."

"Good job. Now, I've got another interesting mission for you. I've just received an owl from one of the wizards living in the Maldives
Paolte scratched his head. "The Maldives? I don't think I've ever met them. Are they a guild of some sort?"

"No, Lowne. They're a country."
Paolte frowned. "A COUNTRY, Your Majesty? How come I've never heard of it?"

"It's because it's a Muggle nation, and one which isn't in the Pacific. It's in the Indian Ocean near India."

"Huh. What do these Maldives want with us?"

"The same thing that Lilliput wanted, believe it or not: your invention. This nation consists of a large number of small islands barely above sea level. They are increasingly concerned that rising sea levels will flood their islands and destroy their nation. This wizard apparently heard about your visit to Lilliput and wants you to help his nation as well."

Paolte scratched his head. "Am I allowed to do that? If those islands are full of Muggles, it's only a matter of time until they start wondering what's going on. I'm not sure how to behave around Muggles, and I don't want to do anything which will expose our nation prematurely."

The king nodded. "You're the best person for the job, Lowne, and you're doing these Muggles a great favor. Had it not been for your invention, the sea level rise would have likely destroyed that country's livelihood. You're going to be as much as a hero to them as you are to Lilliput."

Paolte didn't like the idea of interacting with the Muggles, as dealing with the cultural differences between Laputa and Lilliput had been bad enough. However, if the king was correct and human lives were at stake, how could he refuse?

Drawing a deep breath, he nodded. "All right, Your Majesty. I'll try it. Do they speak English or Galiver?"

The king bit his lip. "Neither, unfortunately. They speak an odd language known as Dhivehi which is local to the Maldives."

Paolte frowned. "Never heard of it. I take it someone is going to provide me with an interpreter?"

Utlar nodded. "Yes, Lowne. The wizard who first found out about your mission, Gamini of Kandooma, said that he would be willing to serve as your guide and interpreter. You will be staying at his place while you're there."

Paolte looked thoughtfully past the king, out the window where waves lapped gently against the sand. "It may be best for me to teach them how to create these protective shields. There's no telling if they may need to be used for something else."

"That's not a bad idea, Lowne. Who knows, you may be able to adapt them to keep out things other than water."

Paolte chuckled. "I may have to learn how to adapt that spell pretty quickly if this Gamini fellows has cats -- I'm VERY allergic."

----------------
Malé
Maldives
Indian Ocean
----------------
It had taken Paolte a good ten hours to put the water-repelling shield around most of the inhabited islands. There had been some resistance on the first few islands, where the local fishermen had
complained that their vessels weren't designed to sail on an ocean which abruptly rose or dropped five feet in height. He'd been forced to go full tilt, adding the extra magic which would allow the government to raise and lower shields for various islands by pressing the appropriate locations on the wall of the president's office. If people chose to fish, the shields would be lowered so that the fishermen could get in and out. If it was high tide or a storm was on the horizon, the shields were put up to protect the villagers.

The citizens of the Maldives had been extremely grateful for this protection. After giving him a reward equivalent to 76,000 Galleons, the president had presented him with a medal, a decorative mask, and a vial containing a tasty fruity liquid. Curious about this beverage, he drank a glass and was immediately hooked. He had asked for some more, and they had promptly given him some more. They claimed that he could have been a blessing from Allah, whoever Allah was.

The island nation reminded him a lot of Laputa, with the only difference being the lack of flying brooms and chariots. Figuring that no one else could understand Galiver, he mentioned the similarities to Gamili.

His host agreed. "I've never been to Laputa before. However, your description of your homeland does sound a lot like here. The islands are made out of different materials it sounds like -- they don't have coral where you are, and of course they don't have wizards. The people here worship Allah, the Islamic god, and not the Five Gods. That makes for another major difference."

Paolte nodded. "Whatever works. I'm not one to judge on people's religious beliefs. How do those women manage to survive under those black robes and stuff without getting really hot?"

Gamili shrugged. "Religious customs. They're accustomed to it. To be honest, though, I'm kind of relieved I don't have to wear those. I'd probably broil."

Donald Dean, a retired literature professor from Indiana who had decided to spend his golden years traveling the world, looked at the two men in surprise. Had it been his imagination, or had they been speaking a strange dialect of English which even he didn't recognize? His first impression was that it sounded like a cross between Shakespearean English and something Polynesian with a bunch of foreign loan words.

He couldn't help but be intrigued by the odd dialect. He soon found that both men were wizards, and that one of them had done something to the islands to prevent rising sea level from inundating them. Judging from what he'd heard about global warming and having seen the low-lying coral atolls, that would be quite important for this island nation.

He fingered his drink as he listened to the people talk. They seemed to be talking shop for the most part, with one of them telling the other about some magical enchantment. Dean's eyes had begun to glaze over when one of them mentioned the word "Laputa".

Dean frowned. Laputa could refer to one of two things, a Spanish whore or a fictional flying island city. Highly doubting that they would discuss prostitution in an Islamic country, he perked his ears back up again. The wizards seemed to be saying that the Maldives and Laputa looked the same.

Very curious, he thought. Dean had read Gulliver's Travels and had heard stories about Laputa, a flying city, and an island archipelago. Could it be that the Laputa story was true and this particular island was actually visited by Gulliver? Normally, he would have dismissed that out of hand. However, with Xylenda, Nestor, Ietalis, Houyhnhnmland, and Roqterat out, who knew?
The two men continued speaking and one of them mentioned Lilliput and a very short queen, which made him even more curious. Laputa and Lilliput both existing, complete with tiny people on Lilliput and a Laputan archipelago? That couldn't be coincidence, he thought. All that was missing was the flying city...which in turn could have been a reference to Atlantis.

It suddenly occurred to him that Houyhnhnmland had also been mentioned in Gulliver's Travels. Gulliver had claimed that it was a land of talking horses, and reports coming out of the war zone claimed it had centaurs enslaving humans. Another interesting coincidence.

Could Lemuel Gulliver have been a real person, possibly a wizard? Had Gulliver's Travels been an actual documentary of a visit to Hidden Nations which had been Obliviated by the wizards to protect those nations? If so, why hadn't he visited Xylenda and Nestor?

He wanted to ask the two wizards about this possibility. He began walking in their direction but never got a chance to talk to them as they got up and left before he reached them. Figuring he'd run into them later on, he sat back down and thought about what to do next.

He had to start spreading the word that wizards had developed a way to protect places from sea level rise. These two fellows definitely sounded like they'd be willing to help, and Venice would probably pay an arm and a leg for something like this! While he was at it, he'd start asking various scholars, historians, and news reporters to look into the possibility that Gulliver's islands actually existed.

To be continued...

--------------
Update #359: The Galiver Consortium Exposed
--------------
Monday, September 16, 1996 / 3 Tishrei 5757 / Fast of Gedaliah
Galiver Senate
Glubbdubdrib
Galiver Consortium
--------------
NEXT UP: Whaddaya Mean, Low-Flying Aircraft?
--------------
WIZARD FROM ISLAND NATION OF LAPUTA INVENTS SPELL TO SAVE COASTAL TERRITORIES FROM SEA LEVEL RISE

Laputan Wizard Lowne Paolte Protects Islands in the Maldives from Flooding Induced by Global Climate Change

Mentions Kingdom of Lilliput in Discussion, Raising the Possibility that the Islands in Gulliver's Travels have Existed and been Hidden All This Time

City Councils of Venice, New Orleans, and Amsterdam Reportedly Interested As Well
--------------
The Premier pointed at the newspaper in disbelief. "All right, Utlar. 'Mentions Kingdom of Lilliput in Discussion, Raising the Possibility that the Islands in Gulliver's Travels have Existed and been Hidden All This Time'. I want some answers now! How could you let this happen? Do you want the Muggles to start swarming all over us and turning all of our nations into more Houyhnhnmlands?"

Utlar III cringed momentarily but soon regained his composure. "I spoke with Prelate Paolte this morning, Premier. He swore that he didn't mean any harm, and he confirmed that he didn't realize that there would be people there who spoke English well enough to understand Galiver. Remember,
sir, that they speak an obscure local language there called Dhivehi -- not English. I must confess, however, that we got a bit of bad luck there. Unlike places like Lilliput, Laputa is not very well known in the Muggle account of Gulliver's journey. Had this tourist not been a retired literature professor, this wouldn't have leaked out."

The Prime Minister of Brobdingnag wasn't happy. "You do realize, Your Majesty, that once the Muggles find out about Lilliput it won't take them long to realize that if Lilliput exists, the rest of the nations mentioned in that damn book must as well. Particularly since information about Houyhnhnhmland has already leaked out. My guess is all of us are going to come out."

The Dalernic representative chuckled. "Good thing Gulliver didn't come down to my place. Dalernus may be able to stay out of it."

The First Citizen of Xylenda nodded at the Dal. "It's possible, my lord. For all we know, Spedarno, and some of the other nations who Obliviated Gulliver before he jotted down his notes may be able to stay hidden."

The Premier shook his head gravely. "I'm not sure. There are rumors running around of drunk Xylend anthropologists talking up a storm in Anchorage, Alaska. Supposedly at least one of them mentioned Festandri before one of his colleagues shut him up. First Citizen, don't your people know how to hold your liquor?"

The Xylend recoiled. "We thought we did, but perhaps the Muggle stuff is stronger than ours."

The diminutive Queen Liseth amplified her voice and started flying around the room. "Ladies and gentlemen, calm down. If you think about it, we'd probably have to come out eventually once the Statute of Secrecy fell, and particularly after that saboteur exposed Houyhnhnhmland. There are probably Muggles looking all over our stuff right now back on that island. Presumably they've got maps over there."

President-in-exile Neihym nodded somberly. "That is indeed the case, Premier. There are several mosaics in the presidential mansion showing the whole world, complete with the Hidden Nations. It's not like we were expecting Muggles to walk in on us!"

"Do the maps have the names of the nations on them?"

Neihym sighed. "Yes, Your Majesty, they do."

The First Citizen suddenly realized something and winced. "We've got Muggle anthropologists on Xylend soil right now. From what I've been told, they've been completely discreet. However, there are a few rumors here and there of people letting things slip they didn't realize could be problematic. There was one case where a woman sent back a Xylend children's book which happened to have a geography lesson in it, complete with a map of the Pacific. Those anthropologists tend to put things on the Internet and publish papers, Premier. If that gets onto the Internet, we could be in big trouble. One or two pieces of evidence we can probably cover up or say it was a hoax. Once you've got six or seven, however, things become a lot different. Particularly if said evidence is coming from multiple countries, plus a book that predates the fall of the Statute."

The room was silent for a few moments. Finally, the Premier spoke. "I don't like it, but I don't see we have much of a choice. It sounds like we're going to have to start coming out, or at least telling the world we exist. It's better to reveal ourselves on our terms than to let the Muggles do it for us. Just ask Neihym over there."
Neihym nodded, and everyone else followed. Seeing that everyone was in agreement, the Premier continued to speak. "All right, here's what we'll do. Laputa and Lilliput will come out first since there's no way they can hide it anymore. Just tell the Muggles you're there and that's it. Do not, under any circumstances, deactivate your Protectors. Hopefully the Muggles will forget about us or ignore us once they realize they can't get to us all that easily."

Utlar nodded. He didn't like the idea, but it was too late to turn back now. "I agree. I'll make the announcement within a few days."

The Premier then turned to Tolivan of Brobdingnag. "Prime Minister, you will likely have to come out next. The Muggles already know about the giants thanks to those imbeciles from Ietalis coming out without consulting us. If there's any nation associated with Gulliver's Travels other than Lilliput, it's Brobdingnag. Make whatever preparations you need for your exposure."

The giant nodded. "I will, sir."

The Premier then turned to the Festandri representative. "For those of you who are not in the Muggle book, stay alert. You can stay hidden for now. However, if evidence starts to leak out that may expose you, you are to come out. Is that understood?"

The other representatives nodded. "Understood, sir."

The Premier nodded. "Then good luck, ladies and gentlemen. Make sure to brief your citizens before the exposure to make sure they don't panic. Meeting adjourned."

---------------
Jerusalem
---------------
Samuel looked at the rabbi in confusion. "What do you mean, it's a fast day? I thought Yom Kippur was next week."

The rabbi explained. "It's the Fast of Gedaliah, Holy One. It commemorates the fall of the last significant authority figure of the classical Jewish state back around the time of the founding of John Paul's sect."

Samuel grew even more confused. "It commemorates the end of the Jewish state? That doesn't make sense, as we've got one right now. What's wrong with this one? I don't think we need the fast anymore if that's the case. If you want an extra fast, you could do it on 3 Tammuz, Judgment Day. If you want another renunciation event, the whole week is dedicated to it so you don't need to add anything there. I don't get it."

"Holy One, we fast because Israel is not a theocratic state of the form you were familiar with in the Bible. Besides, many people keep the fast as a tradition linking them to the past."

Samuel shrugged. "I don't see what the problem is. This one seems to be working pretty well, especially since the Arabs and the Jews aren't fighting each other as much anymore. Michal Oved supposedly is helping keep things under control."

The rabbi looked a little flustered. "It's become tradition, like the second day of Rosh Hashanah and the other holidays."

Samuel thought for a moment. "Hmm. Maybe we can make it optional for people of your sect. Is this
fast day observed by most Jews?"

"No, Holy One. Only the more observant ones know about it."

Samuel breathed a sigh of relief. "All right, we'll say it's optional and advertise it as a miniature Yom Kippur where people meditate on what they discovered over Rosh Hashanah. Is that all right?"

The rabbi nodded. "I guess. It maintains the tradition and it fits with the theme. Good idea, Holy One."

Samuel nodded and floated away with the interpreter. It didn't take long, however, until he saw someone in Muslim garb explaining he wasn't going to be eating anything either. Confused why one of the Muslims would be observing this odd fast, he asked the man for clarification.

The Muslim jabbed his thumb in the direction of the departing rabbi. "The Jews gave me the idea. If they're going to fast, I will as well. It's easier for me since I'm accustomed to dealing with Ramadan."

"You do realize, sir, that the fast is somewhat obsolete because the State of Israel has been brought back? This classical Israelite political leader no longer needs to be mourned."

"Oh, it's not Gedaliah. To be frank, a lot of us are a bit miffed that you've allowed female clergy and we decided to have a one-day fast as a protest."

Samuel shook his head as he had a brief vision of himself wringing Anitiel's neck. Anitiel was a smart woman and a fair judge, but he admitted that she had probably gone too far too fast with her ordination of the Indian nun. He was stuck with it, however, as belaying her orders would antagonize the women and likely discredit his whole conference.

Samuel tried to salvage the situation. "If you don't feel like ordaining women, you don't have to. Only those comfortable with the practice will likely do so."

The Muslim frowned. "But will we still have to listen to their rulings? How will we be able to participate in services if everything's on the women's side of the curtain? I must say, I'd find it a lot easier if my services were being led by a man."

"Ask your wife or some of the other women, sir. How did she handle services when you were leading them? It may be easier than you think. As far as you listening to the women's rulings goes, do you believe that Mother Teresa is a good spiritual leader?"

The Muslim nodded. "Yes, I do. It's just that I'm not accustomed to listening to women yet. Where I come from, women tend to be subservient to men."

"Do you see any evidence that her teachings and deeds are not consistent with furthering personal and spiritual growth? She certainly is big on charity and helping people in need, which are two of the major requirements for being a good spiritual leader."

The Muslim looked a bit flustered. "Not offhand, but --"

"Give it time, my dear man. Give it time."

To be continued...
Atsidi Dawkins, a full-blooded Dine, drove his all-wheel-drive pickup truck down the roads in the eastern part of the reservation. Having been raised in the relative poverty like all too many members of his tribe, he had been determined to improve his standard of living and if possible that of the Dine as well. It had taken him a while to figure out something which would work, but when he had it had been a doozy.

He had found it amusing that the white men would pay to visit the Painted Desert, just outside the reservation, even though much of the same geography existed in the reservation itself. So, Dawkins had come up with a clever idea: buy out some of the land in the remote eastern parts of the reservation, turn it into a Painted Desert style park, and start charging Muggles less than the National Park Service did. Dine and other Native Americans would be able to visit free of charge. He figured he'd a third of the proceeds, send a third to his colleagues, send a third to the tribal council.

So far, everything seemed promising. A few of the Muggles had come and visit, and word was starting to leak out. The only difficulty he had had was convincing the people who owned parts of that land to come on board with his idea. Doling out a third of the income in exchange for Muggles exploring their land had solved that problem, however.

He had found that adding roads to the area had been easier than he could have ever imagined. By sheer luck, he had stumbled across a witch shortly after he had started exploring. The woman had seemed amused when he mentioned his plan to her, and he was astonished to find that she would do everything she could to make it easy for the Muggles to visit the area. He had been a bit skeptical at first. However, the witch had been true to her word. He didn't know what the new roads had been made OF, but they were there.

He turned off the main road and back onto a somewhat-maintained dirt road so that he could examine one of the striated rock formations up ahead. This region looked like it would be a good place for him to try to expand the park into. He needed to find who owned it, however, and at least get the man on board.

He had been musing over how much he'd have to shell out for this new owner when there was a tremendous flash. Swearing, he slammed his foot on the brake, which proved to be a wise decision. This was because the road, which had been running straight as an arrow, had suddenly taken it upon itself to turn about ninety degrees to the left. The packed dirt in front of him had suddenly turned into a large stand of yucca plants which would have punctured even his tires.

He stared at the plants in disbelief. What the hell was going on here? He turned to look back at the rock formation in front of him and received an even larger shock.

The rock formation had disappeared. In its place was a tremendous butte, probably large enough to be considered a mesa in its own right. He could have sworn he'd never seen anything like that before anywhere in the area. Then again, he could have sworn that roads didn't abruptly turn, either.
He examined the mesa more closely and was astonished to discover that it was inhabited! He could see lots of buildings on it, several of which looked like they had been taken out of children's stories. He saw several multicolored specks moving around between the buildings, presumably wondering what had just happened.

This had to be magic, he thought, and he suddenly found himself forced with a difficult decision: stay or go? He eventually decided to continue on and visit the new rock formation. From what he'd seen of the wizards and witches, they seemed to be decent people. He debated bringing his gun but decided against it. The wizards would probably be able to kill him even if he did bring his gun. Furthermore, someone very wise had said that carrying a gun was an open invitation to get yourself shot at.

Leaving the gun in the back seat, he slowly made his way over towards the mysterious rock formation. Judging by the excited reactions of the people nearest him, it was obvious they had spotted him. Trying to stay calm, he continued on towards the mesa.

He soon passed a large sign chiseled into a cliff. He took one look at it and swore even more loudly.

-------

SOUTHWESTERN FACILITY
FOURTH MESA, ARIZONA
DEPARTMENT OF MAGIC
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
Thomas Bernard "Two Bear" Pine, Chief Executive Officer
Alexander Oswald "Strong Bear" Parkman, Chief Obliviator
Derek Michael "Red Fox" Moore, Headmaster of the Dine Academy of Sorcery and Shamanism
Isaac Joseph Sanders, Muggle Liaison
Melissa Elizabeth Sanders, Muggle Liaison
-------

He knew enough about Fourth Mesa to know that he wasn't supposed to be seeing this. Regretting that he left his gun in the car, he immediately turned around and started heading back to his vehicle.

He had barely taken three steps when there was a flash of light and three people materialized before him. Two of them appeared to be Dine like himself, or at least partially Dine. The third appeared to be a white man who had been clinging onto the arm of one of the other two people.

Dawkins jerked backwards, trying to figure out how he was going to get out of this without being Obliviated or worse. The men seemed to understand his reaction and raised their hands to show they were unarmed.

The white man spoke. "Good afternoon, my friend, and welcome to Fourth Mesa. I'm Isaac Sanders, head Muggle liaison officer. I also serve as one of the Muggle Studies teachers at the Dine Institute of Sorcery and Shamanism. How can we help you?"

Dawkins got very wary. "Well, for one thing you can help me by letting me escape with my life. I didn't mean to intrude, gentlemen. I know I'm not supposed to be seeing stuff like this, and I know that roads aren't supposed to reconfigure themselves spontaneously so that big mesas can appear out of nowhere. If you don't mind, I'll just walk away and promise not to reveal anything."

One of the Native Americans laughed. "Don't worry, good man. After much deliberation, we've decided to reveal Fourth Mesa to the world. Don't think of yourself as someone who's stumbled across a secret base. Think of yourself as our first Muggle visitor."
Dawkins tried to take this all in. "You're actually coming out? You're letting the Muggles see you now?"

The second man nodded. "Yes, sir. I'm Two Bear, head of this facility. The head of American Wizarding Internal Affairs just announced that each of our facilities may reveal itself to the world if it so desired. Considering that we were the first facility involved with the Super Bowl Breach, I figured it would be appropriate for us to come out."

Sanders nodded and pointed at the third man. "Prior to my receiving my position at the Institute, I worked for Blast Cola. I was the first person who saw the anomaly on the video recording and figured that it was a kid on a broomstick and not a bird. Several other people thought so as well, but all of them were Obliviated. I had the good fortune of being picked up by Strong Bear after the Breach had already occurred and Strong Bear realized that further Obliviation would be pointless. That's how I got here. What's your name?"

Dawkins had to wet his lips to continue speaking. "Atsidi Dawkins, sir. Full-blooded Dine. I've been doing some research in this area. Do you own all the property here? If so, I apologize --"

Two Bear grinned and cut in. "Ah! Betty told me about you. You're thinking of setting up a Dine tribal monument here similar to the Painted Desert site?"

Dawkins blinked. "Betty? I -- oh, she was the witch I bumbled across a few days ago. The one who helped me with the roads."

Sanders nodded. "Exactly, Mr. Dawkins. You had no idea at the time that you were near Fourth Mesa, and there's no way you could have known that we were thinking of coming out and needed to provide means for Muggles to access our facility. When Betty saw you outside her house and heard you were interested in making roads, she saw the implications immediately."

Sanders chuckled. "I must say, having roads coming here is going to make things a lot easier for my wife, who is due have a baby in less than three weeks. When you're that far along, Apparition and Floo travel are both too dangerous to use."

Dawkins smiled. "Congratulations, Mr. Sanders. Is it a boy or a girl?"

"Thank you, Mr. Dawkins. And yes, it is a boy or girl. Which, however, I don't know."

Two Bear glanced sharply at Strong Bear, who nodded. Making sure Sanders wasn't looking, Two Bear chuckled, pointed to Sanders and mouthed the word "GIRL" to Dawkins. He then put his finger in front of his mouth.

Dawkins was starting to feel more at ease now -- apparently these wizards had a sense of humor. It seemed more and more obvious that he wasn't going to get Obliviated. Feeling a little bolder, he asked the wizards if they could do anything to help support his business venture, possibly by making the scenery around here prettier.

To his astonishment, Two Bear shook his head. "Although in principle we could make the scenery look better, it would not be natural in that regard. If I were making a tribal park, I would ensure that everything was left intact. No embellishments. However, we will do what we can to help you get the park off the ground. At the very least, having the park so close to Fourth Mesa will allow tourists in one place to see the other as well."
Dawkins bowed in gratitude. "Thank you, Two Bear. I am in your debt."

Two Bear shrugged. "Don't mention it, Mr. Dawkins. As a good wizard, I feel obliged to do everything I can to help people without violating our code of ethics and conduct. We'll see what we can do. In the meantime, would you like to take a tour of our facility? If you wish, you can jot down notes and bring your camera."

Dawkins looked up at the fanciful buildings and grunted in approval. "Sure, why not?"

--------
Atlantis
--------

Anastasios Dialonis was getting sick of answering the same question over and over again. "I'm sorry sir, that's impossible. Wizard Paolte's invention only deals with protecting coastal areas against sea level rise. It does not do anything to prevent global warming or to reduce the amount of carbon dioxide currently in the atmosphere. Engineering on a planetary scale is far beyond the capability of even the most powerful wizards. Furthermore, even if it were possible, experiments in this area would be extremely dangerous and put millions, if not billions, of lives in danger. The best shot the human race has at preventing climate change would be if the Muggles and wizards pool their resources and do things which the two groups would not have been able to do independently."

An idea suddenly came to him. Bill Clinton, the leader of the United States, had just challenged the American people to a ten-point program to revitalize the American space program through the use of magic. Might he, Dialonis, be able to use the same tactic to inspire the world to deal with climate change? Unless the Muggles he had spoken with were badly mistaken, climate change would be one of humanity's biggest problems over the next century -- and possibly millennium.

Dialonis grinned. Millennium Problems. The phrase had a nice ring to it.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #360.5:
-------------

Wednesday, September 17, 1996
south of Hynhnym
Houyhnhnmland
-------------

The last weeks has been all about surprises and modifying plans on the run, for everyone involved. The unprecedented earthquake critically damaged both side's infrastructure, starting a series of rockslides that blocked mountain passes. The settlements themselves have suffered remarkably little, courtesy to the magically aided woodcraft and stonemasonry traditionally used in the centaur lands. Not that it helped the capital much: the bombings have leveled most of it, and the majority of the smaller settlements in the Lowlands were leveled by overwhelming numbers of flying wizards, their conquests marked by smoking piles of rubble. The inhabitants have usually had the time to hide in the forests, but some were captured by the attackers and taken to prison camps in the north.

Resistance was sparse and not organised. The western peninsula, so far the main base of the rebellion, was thrown into chaos by the earthquake, and a few days ago, other worrying signs were detected: Hitikau, the sleeping volcano making up the entire former island of Ua Huka, had started to spew ash, and poisonous gases leaked from cracks of the ground all around the island. Fortunately,
Hitikau was a so-called shield volcano, which- as some Muggles told- meant a relative gentle, low level eruption unlikely to endanger the rest of the continent or throw too much ash into the atmosphere, but it was still necessary to evacuate it's three villages: Vaipaee, Hane, and Hokatu, along with a handful of nearby settlements. It also meant the shutdown of Ua Huka Airport, severely limiting the air support of the local French garrison.

The rebel reinforcements coming from the South were similarly slowed down by the stream of refugees and the ruined roads. On the bright side, this allowed them to wait for stragglers, and when they descended from the mountains into the Lowlands, their numbers were close to 30000. Fanning out in several groups, they moved across the southern Lowlands slowly, but unstoppably. Disorganized centaur warbands and foolhardy mercenary wizards, Syrdanis judged by their bullet-thorn remains, have tried hit-and-run ambushes, but failed to cause harm proportionate to their own losses. The other wizards of unidentified nationality have vanished into thin air.

Reasonably deducing that the lack of resistance between them and Hynhynn was a trap, the southern army took it's time to liberate and fortify as many settlements and strategically important locations as possible. Understandably, that took time, and displeased many as the increasingly desperate pleas of the besieged capital's defenders came in, but in the end, the other option was to run headlong into a trap. As Garhym and his officers stood on a hill and watched the once proud capital of the centaur republic burn on the northern horizon, they still wondered: did they make the right decision?

-----------

Hynhynn
Houyhnhnmland
-----------

Zafareth had an increasingly hard time explaining his frequent visits, and lack of enmity towards Father Martinez and his growing flock. More alarmingly, the merwizard realised, he had a hard time explaining some of his own actions: staying near the Padre to nudge him towards the desired course of action was necessary for the mission, but having lenghty conversations with him and creating an uneasy cooperation between their two groups was not.

The priest, with a few mental blocks and suggestions he secretly added, has proven to be more than just a useful tool. The merwizard envied his faith, which must have been there before his tampering (which just ensured that the priest would choose conversion of life and peace over spreading his religion, whenever the choice presented itself)... he and his kin had nothing like that. The people of Trapananda believed in Gaia, but she was not a real God, just the vaguely personified balance of life on Earth. A sentient being expecting personal help or even guidance from her would be crudely disappointed. Worship of Gaia hardly even qualified as a proper religion, it was more like a not spectacularly successful spiritualization of Trapananda's mission. And while it was good for that, 'life, all life, is in the service of Life' didn't sound half as good as some of Christ's teachings.

------------

Nazca Desert
Peru
Avernus Qelthas flew over the desert, looking down at the Nazca Lines illuminated by the last rays of the setting sun. He thought he wasn't noticed by anyone, and when a merwizard of the Watch thought so, he was usually right. He flew at a low altitude to fool any possible Muggle radars. He was Disillusioned to fool any observing humans. And knowing how his own organization worked, he also made sure they had no way of tracking his presence: he wore an Invisibility Cloak instead of casting the spell at himself, he came on a broom instead of using Portkey or Apparition. As far as the Observer showed (by tracking his use of magic), he was still at his post a hundred miles away, observing a Muggle crime syndicate. The tracking system used by Trapananda's leadership ensured that any spell cast by merwizards would be recorded, just like the Trace used to report underage magic in other wizard jurisdictions. This, combined with Priori Incantatem in ambiguous cases, enforced a total control over the merwizards.

That would end tonight.

For the Observer to work on a global scale, extreme solutions had to be applied. The core device itself was in Trapananda, but it required two focal points to work. One of them was under a magically hidden moai in the Easter Islands. The other was here, under the Nazca Lines, it's position marked geometrically by designs of orcas, fish and sharks. The device itself was a collection of a dozen wand cores, one end braided together and directed towards Trapananda. It was underground, in a protective casing, guarded by magical booby traps. Simply beginning to dig nearby would set off alarms, unless you happened to have the identification amulets of the Watch... which Avernus had.

After shoveling for a while, he approached a layer, which could not be crossed without the appropriate spells. Casting those would have registered in the Observer, resulting in his detection and arrest within minutes. But he didn't need to dig anymore, or to cast any spells. Removing his backpack, he pulled out two objects. One was a big block of C4 with a timer, more than enough to blast through any shields or at least critically weaken them. The other was a whole bottle of basilisk poison, capable of destroying even Horcruxes. Knowing that another Watcher was doing the same on the Easter Islands, he looked at his own watch, and began to set the timer...

Thiago Abeyta sat on his broom high in the air, watching his army with pride. In the last few days, the joint forces of centaurs and wizards have turned the enemy's stronghold into little more than piles of ash. Resistance was still present, but he estimated that by now, enough enemy spellcasters were neutralised to strain the rebels beyond the critical point. Tomorrow, the centaurs and Syrdanis and everyone else on their side would have more than enough to take Hynhynm, along with the incoming rebel reinforcements.

Catching that Garhym's army out in the plains below the city walls would allow them to eliminate
most of the resistance, and combined with the work of his fellow agents infiltrating the outlanders, peace could be restored under the government... a government that would be indebted to Trapananda, despite being unable to tell this to anyone- you see, anyone who was let in on their secret has agreed to take Oaths to keep it a secret. And all for the prize of a few hundred Death Eater supporters... the Archon couldn't have found a better place for that scum. Of course a few good merwizards were endangered in the process, but their presence was necessary: the fools in the penal legion lacked the ability to summon Patronuses, so a few dozen non-Dark mages had to be assigned as communication specialists, doubling as political officers. Being Observed was good for discipline, but the threat of summary execution was very effective to increase it further, or so it seemed. Of course these officers were to stay further away from fighting, not to fly into the fiery, gaping maws of death commonly known as Anti-Aircraft fire.

He looked down at the blazing ruins of Hynhynm, the patheric yahoos cowering in trenches and tunnels, then looked back at the marshalled forces of his side. Without serious misfortune, the civil war would end here tomorrow.

To be continued...
Update #361 through Update #365

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Mislagnissa

Update #361: Jim Butcher, Meet Harry Dresden
-------
Wednesday, September 18, 1996 / 5 Tishrei 5757 / 5 Days to Yom Kippur
Butcher Household
Independence, Missouri
United States of America
-------
NEXT UP: But I Want to Knight Her With My OTHER "Sword"!
-------
Jim Butcher looked over his manuscript for his new sword and sorcery novel, Storm Front. This project was based on a rather unusual premise: monsters, werewolves, evil wizards, and other nasty enemies were hiding in Chicago and were responsible for many inexplicable crimes. Fortunately, his protagonist, Harry Dresden, advertised himself in the Yellow Pages as a wizard. Dresden, a member of the city's council of wizards, would serve as a liaison between people whose houses were infested by demons and so forth and the wizards who would help deal with the problems.

The book had started off pretty well, and he had almost finished the draft of the text. Things had ground to a halt, however, shortly after the Statute of Secrecy fell and the wizards announced themselves to the world. They had done so because the fictional characters in the book seemed to bear an uncanny resemblance to many of the people associated with the Chicago Wizarding Institute.

Butcher was a Muggle, or at least he thought he was. But if that were the case, how had he managed to base two magical characters off of Morgan Dresden, the head of the Chicago Wizarding Institute? In addition to Harry Dresden himself, Storm Front featured a Warden (a position similar to an Auror) named Donald Morgan who often butted heads with Dresden. How had Harry Dresden's sidekick, Karrin Murphy, come out so similar to a reputed Auror named Karina Murray? Come to think of it, why had he chosen Chicago as a base of operations even though he found it easier to work with a city closer to him...say, St. Louis?

He had paid an arm and a leg to get tested by Ziggurat Labs. If he was a wizard who had been involved with the CWI, he ought to know about it. Was he a disgraced wizard whose power had been removed? If so, why hadn't they Obliviated him to make sure he wouldn't expose their world? The test results hadn't come back yet, and he didn't know whether he was more nervous of coming back Muggle or wizard. If he was a wizard, that could mean he was in fact an outcast and the wizards might go after him. If he was a Muggle, on the other hand, that might raise some unsettling questions. For all he knew, the CWI would clamp down on his book and prevent him from publishing it.

He turned to the computer and was halfway through the next paragraph when it suddenly shut down, as did the rest of the lights in his house. Hell's bells, he thought. Power failure. Hoping that it wouldn't fry his system and erase his manuscript, he took all the disks out of the drives and put them back in the box. Figuring he'd go get something to eat, he got up and headed to the kitchen only to hear his dog barking furiously. He was halfway through trying to figure out what he was barking at when it occurred to him that the lights next door were all still on.

He muttered something about a blown fuse, turned on his heel, and started walking over to the fuse.
box to check it out. He froze in his tracks, however, when he heard a man's voice utter strange words from the kitchen.

"Somnolens! Revelio Hominem!"

The dog stopped barking almost immediately, allowing him to hear footsteps walking in his direction. Wishing he had access to a gun, he made his way over to a closet so he could hide from the intruders.

Looking through the crack in the door, he managed to squeeze himself in with the mops and brooms just as three men and a woman walked into the room with wands in their hands. Two of them were dressed as wizards, and two of them were dressed in Muggle clothing in a scene which looked like it could have been taken directly out of Storm Front. Muttering some of the strange words again, the man pointed towards Butcher's closet and began to speak.

"We're sorry for the intrusion, Mr. Butcher, but we need to discuss something with you. Rest assured that we mean you no harm. In case you can't see us, we're putting our wands away. I'm an Aes Sedai, and in case you're not familiar with that term I'm not allowed to lie. You can trust me. If you wish, I can show you my Silver Card to confirm this."

Butcher could see them, of course, and saw to his surprise that they were indeed pocketing their wands. That was promising, but he didn't think he was out of the woods yet. Still wary, he opened the door and stepped out to face the intruders.

He looked them over suspiciously. "You're wizards, I take it?"

The speaker nodded. "Yes, I'm Wizard Morgan Harold Dresden, head of the Chicago Wizarding Institute. With me are my colleagues, Karina Murray, Jared Kincaid, and Mike Winthrop-Carpenter."

Winthrop-Carpenter rolled his eyes. "Jesus Christ, what a mouthful. I'm tempted to switch back to Carpenter right after the honeymoon. Granted, Carrie is probably going to kill me, but I suspect she'll come around and switch to Carpenter as well."

Kincaid chuckled. "Be prepared to have her want to stay Winthrop, Mike. You're lucky you two are devout Catholics, otherwise that would be a very short marriage."

Butcher reeled back and looked at his four guests in amazement. Michael Carpenter was yet another character in his book, a classic Dungeons and Dragons paladin to boot. He had notes on a Jared Kincaid as well. Barely able to speak, he stammered: "This is impossible!"

Dresden chuckled. "Let me guess. You're wondering why you're writing books about us. I take it you have people named Ana Archeleone Luccio and Nick McCoy as well?"

Everything went black for a few seconds, and the next thing he knew he was on his couch with the wizards looking around him in concern. Kincaid propped him up and gave him something to drink which woke him up VERY quickly and cleared his mind. He figured he'd been Obliviated -- wonderful. Then again, had he been Obliviated, why had he been allowed to keep the knowledge that one of these men had been named Kincaid? Was that leftover from the books?

Dresden knelt at his side. "Sorry about that, Mr. Butcher. You fainted, and we carried you over here so you wouldn't hurt yourself. At any rate, you're probably wondering why we're here."
Butcher's face was white. "You've probably come to Obliviate me, I take it?"

The wizards' reaction was most unexpected: they all started laughing outrageously. Butcher's face darkened: what was so funny about this?

Dresden shook his head. "You're not going to believe this, Mr. Butcher, but we already Obliviated you about eight years ago."

Butcher was now hopelessly confused. "What? How --"

Murray cut in. "Let me explain. Back in 1988, you stumbled across something you weren't supposed to see in downtown Independence. It was something called a Portkey, and it took you to the headquarters of the Chicago Wizarding Institute. You met all of us back then and overheard stories about demons, vampires, fairies, werewolves, and other creatures which you normally don't run into at the zoo."

"I did?"

"Yes, Mr. Butcher, you did. You gave us a merry chase for a while there, but we eventually managed to corner you. We were about to Obliviate you when you pleaded with us to make a deal. You explained that you wanted to be a fantasy or science fiction writer, and it occurred to you that what you had seen would make for a very good fantasy series. You asked us to mangle the memories enough that you wouldn't be able to expose our society, yet keep them intact enough to serve as the basis for a Muggle fantasy series. It was a most unusual request, and it took us a few days of deliberation to decide to accept your terms and decide what could stay and what could go. I expect that you began working on your novel soon after that, never realizing that the ideas for your story had been based on real life."

Butcher put his hands on his head and began shuddering. "Yes, it was 1988. But how --"

Winthrop-Carpenter chuckled. "God and magic work in mysterious ways, my friend. If you want, we can go back to the CWI and replay the interview for you. I was a new hire at the time, so I wasn't in the room with you. A lot of the rest of these people were, though."

Butcher tried to make sense of what was going on. "Wait a minute...if you're taking me back to the CWI, are you going to Obliviate me again, this time for good?"

Dresden's response nearly knocked Butcher back into unconsciousness again.

"No. We're not. You may not realize this, but the Chicago Wizarding Institute is about to come out and reveal itself to the Muggles. Fourth Mesa, in Arizona, has already done so. I suspect many of the other facilities will follow."

Murray continued. "In fact, one of the reasons we've come here is to apologize for Obliviating you and offering you a position as our Muggle liaison and news correspondent. You're the Muggle who knows the most about the CWI, albeit in a somewhat mangled fashion. To compensate you for the partial loss of your memories, you're going to receive a $100,000 signing bonus. Furthermore, as you must be a skilled writer in order to put yourself in a position to write fantasy novels, we're thinking of offering you a position at the Midwestern Arcane as a columnist. Your knowledge of the Muggle world will help prepare our wizards for more contact."

Butcher thought about his mangled memories from Storm Front. "You seriously think that we
Muggles are ready to deal with monsters like this? Some of them seem very frightening...assuming they're real and I didn't make them up."

Dresden smiled. "In my opinion, Lord Voldemort was probably the most powerful human adversary the world had to face since that Russian maniac triggered the Black Death. He was an extremely skilled wizard, and he took advantage of the Statute of Secrecy to catch the Muggles in North Korea and beyond with their pants down. I trust Atlantis, Mr. Butcher. I think we'll be able to handle this without a problem. You may be reassured to know that in all likelihood, the Muggles will never have to deal with the 'monsters', as you call them. That's our job. Just like ordinary people call the cops to deal with burglars and so forth, people will call us to deal with vampires."

Butcher couldn't help but crack a smile. "Oh yes, I've definitely been having my characters call you to deal with vampires."

The wizards chuckled as Dresden folded his hands across his chest. "So what do you think, Mr. Butcher? Want to sign up? You'll get to put your writing skills to good use, and you'll make a living doing it. For all you know, we may be able to publish your book using the real events underlying your corrupted memories."

Butcher didn't have to think twice. He nodded and said, "I'm in, Wizard Dresden."

The wizards cheered and helped Butcher to his feet. Dresden shook his hand and slapped him on the back. "Good to have you, Mr. Butcher. If you grab onto my hand here, I'll be able to Apparate you over to Chicago. Oh, and before I forget, can I make a suggestion?"

"Sure. What is it?"

Dresden winked. "Don't call me Harry."

To be continued...

------------
Update #361.5: Tempting Fate
------------
Wednesday, September 18, 1996
Nazca Desert
Peru
T:0100

A thundering explosion tore through the night, throwing a hail of pebbles and rubble high into the air. At the moment the timer reached zero, merwizard Avernus Qelthas, waiting on his broom near the predicted blast zone, casted his shield charms. As soon as the worst of it has cleared, he used another spell to blow the smoke away, and flew in over the crater as fast as he dared. He did not need a Lumos to see: down there, a scorched but obviously still functioning magical artifact glowed with a bright red light. Unscrewing the bottle of basilisk poison, the merwizard positioned himself over the lights, and poured the foul liquid. He heard the angry hiss as the world's most powerful magical poison ate through rocks and reinforced casings alike, and the red light flickered and disappeared. Counting the seconds ever since the explosion, he quickly summoned a pillar of Fiendfyre into the crater just to be sure, then Apparated away.
The great chamber with the globe was a place of utter chaos. Less than a minute ago, alarms flashed for both focal point facilities, then before anyone could process what happened, the multicolored dots signifying merwizard activity have flickered and blinked out on the map, all at once. Seconds have passed in stunned silence before any of them said a word... and when it happened, it was a shout.

"You, there, Octulavia! Summon your Patronus and tell the Archon that the Observer has been sabotaged! Jowon, Sasheera, Urthes, with me! The rest of you, go get some more Watchers and Portkey to the coastal safe houses at Easter Island and Nazca, turn humanform, grab a broomstick and a cloak and SEE WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED THERE!! NOW NOW NOW!!"

The magically amplified voice of Archon Isalas of the House Āwe'Łus have drowned out other noises as it spoke, by the power of magic audible in all the caverns of the city-state: "Merwizards of Trapananda! Our realm is under attack by foolish outsiders! They can't comprehend our power, can't stand a chance against it, and can't be forgiven for provoking our retribution! Brothers, sisters, ready yourselves! The time to unleash our might has come!"

Too shocked to question her orders, the Watchers, most of them outranking Willa Whitespear and suspicious of her since her brother's fall from grace, obeyed and departed, leaving her alone in the chamber with the ones she called by name... the ones she could trust, her co-conspirators. Their plan was not overcomplicated, they left sufficient margins of error, and they had more than enough fallback plans. Tonight, the Archon would die.

So far, things went according to the plan. Lord Garhym's army had charged the enemy laying siege to the capital, and have already cut through most of their lines south of Hynhynm, depositing quickened infantry (yahoos riding on centaurback) to hold critical positions. Currently, enthusiastic cries like 'Fight them to the river!' and 'Make safe the city!' rang in the fields surrounding the smoking city. Captain Taliesen, riding his broom low and overseeing his ground forces (complete with lumbering armored trolls) charging along the army wasn't smiling. He thought there was something amiss here...

A few explosions in the ranks of his allies, then screams and fireballs among the group of Syrdani wizards diving in through the clouds straight from above - "sneaky sons of mudbloods, they learned quickly how to avoid arrows and bullets, but they didn't expect Veelas hiding in the same clouds" - reminded him what he forgot: enemy fliers were suspiciously rare today. He had a little surprise for them. Sending his Patronus to another army group a few hundred meters away, he ordered them to
shoot the Syrdanis with guns only- from that angle, the bullets would move beyond friendly lines before falling back. Then, motioning to his own fliers, he pulled his broom up to meet the bloodied bogies head on in a dogfight.

A few blurring minutes, and it was over. Unharmed, the mercenary captain descended back to Garhym's side, to the hill the centaur leader stood on to watch his troops engage the enemy ground forces, about to link up with the city's defenders. The rebel leader idly asked him, pointing north: "What is that?" Not too eager to miss the sight of his trolls with maces crushing enemy centaurs clad in spiky, but this time ineffective armor, he cast a quick look and replied offhandy: "Nothing, it's just a wisp of cloud."

Garhym's response, "It's moving fast, against the wind", made him freeze. His heart sinking, he pulled up his Omniculars and zoomed on the 'cloud', seeing it for what it really was: thousands of wizards on brooms, coming at them with top speed. Trembling, he turned to his employer. "My Lord, there is a small forest a mile to the south. I advise you to move there with a small force of bodyguards, preferably including my available soldiers."

---------------

Shrublands near Hynhynn
---------------

Prometeo Amaya, member of the Communist Party of Peru, lay flat on his belly in the concealing vegetation. He estimated his position to be 5.5 clicks behind the frontlines on the enemy side, which was okay for him. Adjusting the scope of his Barrett M82, he heard the whisper of his spotter, Comrade Nadir. "Next hill on the right, two centaurs, two wizards, looking high-rank. Take your time."

--------------

A little further from there
--------------

Thiago Abeyta found it hard not to laugh out loud. Soon, his army will plow through the rebels, find their leadership, and capture it. He just had to resist the urge to gloat... ehh, no way, that was too perfect. Out loud, he said: "I don't see how can any general be foolish enough to run into our trap. His stupidity will be remembered by your coming generations, I presume."

Governors Tiashyn of the North didn't see it that way. "They fight bravely for a case they believe in, wizard, and their only mistake is impatience. Tell me, wizard, would you not go to You-Know-Where's aid if your beloved city was in danger?"

The merwizard huffed arrogantly. "It is hard to say what I would do, as until now I hadn't ever imagined such an unlikely scenario. I mean, look at our enemies, my city is hidden and far away and we stand here and they still ca-"

He was cut off by the cracking sound of his head splitting open like a ripe melon thrown on the ground. No sooner than the thunder-like boom of a so far unheard Muggle weapon reached their
ears, the remaining three leaders were on the ground, gingerly creeping behind better cover. Wiping some brains from his curly hair, the Syrdani spoke out loud:

"Note to self: the Muggle deity named Murphy is not to be angered."

-------------
forest clearing south of Hynhynm
-------------

"The fools almost made it", thought Rasegar, merwizard and convicted Death Eater supporter, member of the Trapanandan penal legion, as he pointed his wand at the centaurs and wizards below. So far, nobody fired a shot, but he knew this standoff wouldn't last. His political officer has just cast her Patronus to notify their Expedition Leader... who, from the looks of it, had became permanently unavailable in a grisly way. The merwitch seemed at a loss what to do, so he insolently but helpfully suggested she contact Thiago's superiors, namely the Watchers or the Archon.

But when she did so, things went funny. The officer's Patronus returned and shared what it has seen and heard, and the woman went pale and started shaking, eyeing the rest of them with tangible fear. Acting on a hunch, Rasegar looked her in the eye, and used his mediocre Legilimency. Normally, it would have been detected and deflected, with him being executed for treason, but the witch was seriously weakened and shocked by what she had seen. So, without meaningful Occlumency barriers in the way, he saw it too:

The Observer, blinded to all magic.

The Archon, dead.

Trapananda caught up in a coup, and already falling to pro-Atlantis rebels.

Without warning, a green beam erupted from his wand and knocked the merwitch from her broom. Then, he turned the wand on himself and said Sonorus Maximus.

All across the battlefield, fighting stopped as a mighty voice boomed: "Brothers and sisters from We-know-where! The foolish Archon is dead! The Observer is gone! The lackeys of Atlantis are taking over, but they have no power over us anymore! The time for freedom has come!"

To be continued...

----------
Update #362: But I Want to Knight Her With My OTHER "Sword"!
----------
Thursday, September 19, 1996 / 6 Tishrei 5757 / 4 Days to Yom Kippur
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
United Kingdom
----------
NEXT UP: Foxwoods Felicis
Hermione Granger shrieked in ecstasy as Ron Weasley tore off her clothes. Somehow they'd managed to sneak over to Hogsmeade through one of Harry's old tunnels and managed to find a hotel room before Snape and Dumbledore figure out what they were doing. As if that hadn't been enough, Ron had somehow managed to nick William's crown. He sure looked different wearing a crown.

She ripped open Ron's shirt -- he was more muscular than she remembered him -- and began exhorting him to boldly go where no man had gone before. He just grinned, took off his pants, and...

"Hermione, wake up! You're going to miss class!"

The dream vanished, and Hermione jumped out of bed with a start. Not sure whether to thank Lavender Brown for making sure she didn't get into trouble or to kill her for interrupting the dream, she got dressed in a hurry and headed downstairs.

She felt different for some reason, much more grownup. She couldn't tell if it was because of the dream she'd just had, though. She figured it out about two minutes later, when she found herself in Ron's arms in the Muggle Studies classroom.

Ron gave her a big kiss, one which made her wonder if she was still half-asleep. The cake he presented her with, however, resolved the issue once and for all. "Happy 17th, Hermione. You can cast magic spells outside of class now, and for all I know you can head to Hogsmeade whenever you want now."

Hermione looked down at the cake. It was obvious that Ron had apparently tried to cook and that it hadn't come out all that well -- for one thing, the R in her name looked a lot like a P. She had a disturbing vision of George trying to help him out, in which case one bite would probably turn both of them into toads.

She winced. "If Professor Bell sees us with this cake, she's probably going to give both of us detention."

Ron shook his head emphatically. "I don't think so, Hermione. You see, she helped us with it. I don't think she's all that good at it -- she realized she'd written a P instead of an R just before she spilled frosting all over herself. If you're wondering why she's late for class, it's because she's cleaning herself up."

Hermione looked around. "Where's Harry?"

Ron rolled his eyes. "Snape gave him detention again for yelling at him to put him back in Potions. I hate that greasy old git. Snape knows all too well that Harry wants to be an Auror, and he's probably beside himself with glee that Harry didn't get a high enough mark to get into Snape's NEWT class."

Hermione groaned. "What does Harry have to do now?"

"Clean out Dumbledore's office. Speaking of Dumbledore, I've starting to see evidence that our dear Professor Bell is interested in Dumbledore."

Hermione stared at him. "Bell tried to snog him or something like that?"

Ron face reddened as he envisioned that. "Not that I've seen. However, she has been watching him a
lot of late, and doing so with great interest."

Hermione laughed. "Ron, Dumbledore is probably a good ninety years older than she is. I've heard of dating older men, but that is ridiculous. Who is she going to go after next, Flamel?"

Ron chortled. "I doubt she'd go after Flamel because he's married AND has he has his wife on the staff. However, there's always Hugh. I've seen her glance at Wong and Hugh a few times, but not nearly as much as she does with Dumbledore."

Hermione couldn't believe what she was hearing. "If a ninety-year age gap is bad, I'd say six hundred is --"

She broke off as she heard someone running towards the room. It was Harry, with Professor Bell in tow. Her hair was a bit disheveled, but she managed to regain her composure before she entered the class and began the lecture.

Seeing Bell's attention elsewhere, Harry sidled up to Ron and Hermione and spoke quietly in their ears. "Ron, Hermione, we may have a problem. Something's going on."

Keep an eye on the teacher, Ron grunted. "Really? What's happening?"

Harry drew a deep breath. "For one thing, someone's nicked the sword of Gryffindor. I checked out the little compartment it's usually kept in while I was cleaning Dumbledore's office and saw it was gone."

Hermione's eyes widened. "The sword is gone? That's very odd. Does Dumbledore know about it?"

Harry shrugged. "I haven't had a chance to talk to him yet about it. However, that's not all. The Muggle Prime Minister, Michael Heseltine, is also here, as is Dr. Flamel. Yes, you heard me right. Both Ministers are here."

Hermione was about to reply when Ron hissed a warning. Harry and Hermione separated quickly, but not quickly enough. Gryffindor promptly lost four points, and several of the Slytherins started cheering.

They resumed their conversation after the class. With Potions next, they needed to wrap it up as quickly as possible as Snape would probably take fifty points from Gryffindor instead of four.

Harry continued where they left off. "Neither of those is the biggest surprise, however. Princess Diana is also here, and I saw her looking for Laura Spencer."

Ron's eyebrows shot up. "The Queen Mother wants to talk to the Wizard Queen? What the bloody hell for? Are they going to fight over the throne?"

Hermione chuckled to herself. "Girls just wanna have fun."

Ron looked at her in confusion as Harry shrugged. "I don't know, Hermione. I don't think I've seen this many Wizarding and Muggle notables in one place since right around Judgment Day."

Then the light bulb went on in Hermione's head. "It's got to involve the king. Why else would all of these people be here? Is he having trouble with classes? Are they going to kick him out? From what I've been told, he's doing fine. Lady Spencer and Wong are helping him out a lot, and he's also
getting a lot of support from his fourth-year roommates."

Ron shrugged. "Maybe they're going to start letting in more Q-only wizards now that they've seen that the king has been a decent student."

Harry cut in. "Like I told you, I have no idea what's going on. What you say makes sense, but it doesn't explain why Gryffindor's sword is missing."

The tedium of Potions was broken up when Dumbledore walked into the classroom and made an announcement to the astonished students, "I apologize, Severus, for the interruption, but I need to make an announcement to the students. There will be a special ceremony at 6:00 this evening in the Great Hall. Wear your dress robes and be prepared to interact with Muggles."

Snape nodded in understanding, and Hermione had the odd suspicion that he knew what was going on. She didn't bother asking him, as he would probably just yell at her and deduct more points from Gryffindor. The students, naturally, started talking quietly to each other. One of the Slytherins claimed that Patricia Prince, a first-year who had befriended "Mr. Windsor", had told her that she (Patricia) had seen William talking with Dr. Flamel. She wanted to learn more, but Snape had had enough. Two points were taken from each talking Slytherin and four points were taken for each chattering Gryffindor.

The rest of the day passed in a blur. Various professors offered her congratulatory birthday wishes, and Dumbledore told her that she was now permitted to use magic outside of school (as if she didn't already know). As far as he was concerned, Hermione was now an adult. Granted, she didn't know how to Apparate yet, but it was a good step. She ran into William a few times, who bade her happy birthday as well but said he didn't want to ruin the surprise.

Hermione blinked in astonishment. This didn't look like a case where Dumbledore was going to announce the school was going to accept Q wizards. It was obvious William knew what was going on and that he was in on the surprise. She couldn't figure out what the sword of Gryffindor had to do with this, but she figured she would soon enough.

Finally, at 6:00, everyone filed into the Great Hall for the mysterious ceremony. The long House tables were gone, and the chairs were arranged in neat rows. Paparazzi filled the back of the room, much as they had done when the king had been sorted into Black House. She could barely think over the noise of the students trying to figure out what was going on.

The front of the room still featured the head table, as usual. There were several new faces at the table, however. Diana, Dr. Flamel, Prime Minster Heseltine, and Prince Andrew were all there, along with several people Hermione didn't recognize. That surprise paled, however, in comparison to the scene in front of the head table, where King William and Laura Spencer were standing. The king was wearing a full Muggle royal uniform, and Lady Spencer was wearing a very fancy robe. Both of them had crowns on their heads. As if that hadn't been enough, William had the sword of Gryffindor in his hand.

So that's where it went, she thought. Nevertheless, her mind raced. Was William going to get married to Laura Spencer? Hermione didn't like the idea, of course. However, it would neatly solve the problem of having two royal lineages. Granted, William was only fourteen, but if they had a long engagement this might actually be plausible.

Or was it? Laura was in her twenties. If William waited to get married until 25 or so, Laura would be in her mid-thirties, at which point pregnancies started to become high risk. Furthermore, wasn't
Princess Diana a Spencer? Was William going to marry his COUSIN? That made no sense either.

Dumbledore rose to his feet. "Ladies and gentlemen, please rise for Their Majesties, William V and Laura II of Great Britain."

Hermione reeled. They'd already married? It finally dawned on her that both were in fact royalty, albeit from different lines.

William waved to the crowd -- judging from what Hermione recalled of his grandmother, it was probably in his genes -- and began to speak. "Ladies and gentlemen of the British Commonwealth, we are reporting from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, where British heroine Hermione Jean Granger has just celebrated her seventeenth birthday. According to the Wizarding world, she is now an adult."

The Muggles in the back of the room clapped. The Hogwarts students, however, looked at her in confusion. So she turned seventeen. Big deal. What was so important that the king tell the world about her? Hermione suddenly had the bizarre idea that the king was going to propose to HER. That didn't explain what the sword was for, though.

Suddenly it hit her. The king was there in formal robes...with a sword. And he was using the royal we.

She turned to Ron and Harry in disbelief. "Oh my God. Is this what I think it is?"

Ron looked at her blankly. Harry, however, understood from his experience in the Muggle world. "It could be, Hermione. He always told you that there was one more award you were going to get, but it would have to wait until you came of age. This makes a lot of sense, Hermione."

William continued. "After consultation with several members of our government, both Wizarding and Muggle, we have deemed it well and good for Miss Granger to receive her final set of honors. Miss Granger, would you come forward please?"

Students' jaws dropped and cameras flashed as she made her way up to the front of the room, stopped in front of William and Laura, and bowed.

William looked at her intently. "Are you ready to receive your awards, Miss Granger? You are now an adult. Do you deem yourself mature enough to accept this burden?"

Hermione looked at him and nodded. "I am, Your Majesties."

William nodded, lifted the sword, and spoke one word which caused the entire room to gasp in unison.

"Kneel."

Thinking the whole scene was just surreal, Hermione fell to her knees. Reaching out with the sword of Gryffindor, the king tapped her lightly on the shoulders. Lifting the sword into the air, William was able to get one sentence out before the entire room erupted in cheers.

"Rise, Dame Hermione Granger, First Countess of Hogsmeade."

Hermione stared at him in disbelief as she rose to her feet and shook William's hand. Taking
advantage of the cheers of the students, she was able to mutter something to William. "You made me a noblewoman, Will? What the bloody hell am I supposed to do now?"

William shrugged. "It's more ceremonial than anything else. You'll get free housing in Hogsmeade, of course, and people will start paying you rent. In theory, you could serve in the House of Lords. That might actually not be a bad idea, Hermione."

Laura laughed and looked at the king. "You know, William, you hit it right on the head. She reacted exactly the way you thought she did. Let's finish the ceremony. Can someone shut the crowd up so I can knight her with my wand with at least a semblance of decorum here?"

Ron look at Hermione in disbelief. "Bloody hell, Harry! At the rate things are going, I'm going to be a COUNT or something like that!"

Ginny looked at him and chuckled. "I just had this vision of George complaining that you don't even know how to count."

Harry laughed as well, then his own eyes widened when he realized that if all of the current relationships survived, he'd married to the sister of a count? Would that make him a nobleman as well?"

Ron's suddenly gasped in shock and turned to Ginny. "Can you imagine our mother's reaction to this? She went nuts when I got the prefect badge. Now this?"

Judging from the expression on Ginny's face, it was obvious that the she could imagine Molly Weasley's reaction. Trying to salvage the situation, he looked up at the head table with a sense of relief.

"Think of it this way, my friends. I doubt you'll ever hear Draco Malfoy and the Slytherins calling her a Mudblood ever again."

To be continued...

------------
Update #363: Foxwoods Felicis
------------
Thursday, September 19, 1996 / 6 Tishrei 5757 / 4 Days to Yom Kippur
1153Z
Vincent Residence
Colchester, CT
United States of America
------------
NEXT UP: Ever Thought of Obliviating the Lawyer? (.5)
------------
Charles Vincent looked at the bottle of Felix Felicis which he had brewed in his spare time. He had originally planned to give it to his wife Rose to improve her chances at landing a job. He didn't know how well it would work, as it wouldn't be of much use if she actually GOT the job. If his wife wound up in a position which didn't suit her, she could find herself out on the street again. With two-year-old Becky a bit behind schedule on her college fund, it was imperative that both he and his wife start working again as soon as possible. His job was pretty stable, and he Apparated over to the Four Towns (though he couldn't understand why they weren't being called the Two Towns at this point) for work. His Muggle wife's, however, hadn't been.
Everything had changed, however, when Rose had told him that she had no choice but trust her luck. She had come to tell him that she and her sister Ellen were going to be going to visit the casinos at Foxwoods. Normally, he would have tried to discourage her from gambling as everyone knew that the House had the advantage.

With Felix Felicis, however, everything had changed.

Charles's mind raced. All he had to do was spike the two women's drinks with the potion before they went on the trip and tell them to trust their instincts. The less the girls knew about the potion, the more natural their reactions would be. They would truly believe that they had just gotten insanely lucky (which would in fact have been the case) and not pass it off to anything magical or illegal. Rose knew her husband was a wizard, but she didn't know that his magic extended to giving her unusual amounts of luck.

The more he thought about it, the more he was convinced Foxwoods was going to fall for it. Inevitably, they were going to add more safeguards to prevent Felix Felicis from being used at the casino. Under the current rules, however, they weren't doing anything wrong -- particularly if they managed to make all their money off of games which would not be able to benefit from strategy such as roulette and slot machines.

Hoping that he would be able to set everything up before he left for work, he poured most of the Felix Felicis -- a tasteless yet effective draught -- into the coffee pot. That would take care of his wife. However, it wouldn't necessarily take care of Ellen. He needed to make sure that Ellen managed to come over here for breakfast before heading off on the Foxwoods trip. This was problematic, as Rose normally didn't have Ellen come over to visit before going off on the trip.

He downed the rest of the Felix Felicis himself. Unless something truly remarkable happened, Charles's improved luck would ensure that his wife would convince Ellen to come over now. And to top it all off, he'd probably get a lot done at work today.

----------------------

1242Z

Rose Vincent looked at the scratch ticket in disbelief. She'd actually won $50 on it! This was the first winning ticket she'd had in several months. Ecstatic, she pocketed the ticket and picked up the phone to call Ellen.

Her sister picked it up on the first ring. "Hello?"

"Ellen? This is Rose. We've GOT to go to the casino today. It looks like it's going to be my lucky day -- I just won $50 on a scratch ticket, and I've got a whole bunch of them I haven't tried out yet!"

Ellen squealed excitedly. "That's wonderful, Rose! Can I have some of those tickets? You can bring them to the casino when we go!"

Rose's eyes widened as a little voice told her to keep the tickets at home and have Ellen come to them. Figuring that the casino wouldn't really like its patrons using scratch tickets instead of slot machines, she told Ellen to come over before the casino trip and try her luck with the tickets at the Vincent house. "It's all for the best, Ellen. Besides, we've got lots of coffee and croissants left over -- Charlie had to leave in a hurry. Stop on by."

"Will do. See you in a little while."

----------------------

A little over two hours later, Rose pulled her car into the Foxwoods parking lot. Much to Ellen's
chagrin, there had only been one winning ticket: the $50 one Rose had picked up first. Her husband would have been able to tell her that this was because she had chosen the tickets before drinking the Felix Felicis, but Charlie was not there to tell her.

She expected that it would take her forever to find a space to park. However, she caught an unbelievable break when someone pulled out of a spot right near the entrance. She squealed in delight as she parked, exclaiming that she wouldn't have to worry about misplacing the car in the lot this time.

They agreed to only spend $100 each in the casino. Since all gambling institutions favored the House, they could hope for a big windfall but had to act under the assumption that they were going to lose a large portion of their wager. The little voice in Rose's head told her to try out the roulette wheel while Ellen walked over to the Texas Hold 'Em table.

- - - - - - - -

The problem with roulette, Rose though, is that you couldn't really figure out which number to pick. It's not like there was a real strategy to determine which one would come next. However, this time she seemed to have her instincts working for her. They had discovered the winning scratch ticket first, and they'd somehow managed to convince her to drive around until that parking space opened up right in front of her.

She decided to start out conservatively: put $5 on the first twelve. The host spun the wheel and dropped the ball in, and the ball bounced around for a while before settling on the number 4. So far so good, she thought. Already up $10. Pocketing the winnings to make sure she didn't reuse them, she tried to figure out where to put her next wager.

The little voice in her head told her to look at the 19-21 row. Shrugging, she stuck another $5 on 19-21. The host spun the wheel, and the ball landed on 20. This was getting serious, she thought. She was wondering if she should stop at this point, now that she was up $65. However, the temptation to keep on going was too strong. Hoping that she wasn't coming down with a gambling problem, she pocketed the extra profits and looked over the board again. Where should she go next? Trusting her instincts a little more than she probably should have, she put $15 on the number 1.

Amazingly, a 1 came up. She was now up $530 on three spins of the wheel, and people she didn't know were clapping her on the back. Trying to restrain herself, she want back to putting $5 on 16 -- as did probably everyone else at the table. Not surprisingly, 16 came up and everyone started screaming. She was now up almost $700 and realized that she had to stop now -- there was no telling how long her luck would run. Trying to put herself out of her misery, she took the scratch ticket out of her purse and asked if the table would honor it. It would, and she stuck it on 00. Seconds later, the ticket was rendered almost invisible under stacks of chips.

The host looked at her a bit strangely, and it suddenly occurred to Rose that they were suspecting her of cheating. She wasn't cheating, however. All she was doing was listening to the little voice in her mind -- one which had gotten really lucky today.

People cheered as the host dropped the ball in again. This time, however, the host pressed a button under the table to make sure that the ball suddenly switched direction at the last minute to fool the customer. It bounced around wildly for a while before settling on...00. Rose was now up almost $2500, and she had just gotten here.

On the other side of the table, the host looked at her once again, this time with deep suspicion. There had to be cheating going on here somewhere, but he couldn't see it. Then again, he was a good judge of facial expressions, and judging by the player's reaction she had no idea what was going on. He
thought about reporting it to the authorities but eventually decided against it.

Rose figured enough was enough. Squelching the little voice on her head telling her to bet it all on 9, she left the table to cash out her chips. She started searching the room for her friend just as the host shouted, "Nine!"

It didn't take long for her to find Ellen as Ellen was surrounded by a large number of people. She was sitting in front of a slot machine which was warbling a victorious tone. One glance at the display explained everything: DOUBLE SUPER JACKPOT, DOUBLE SUPER JACKPOT, DOUBLE SUPER JACKPOT, DOUBLE SUPER JACKPOT.

Rose hugged Ellen in amazement. "Oh my God! You're getting lucky too! Look at that! How much did you win?"

Ellen could barely speak. Nodding weakly at the display above her, she said: "I got the Super Progressive bonus. I don't know how I did it, but I did it. I check out this machine, put in a $5 bet, and kablam."

Rose looked up and nearly fell over. The display said $106,322.63. And it was flashing wildly. Turning back to Ellen, she shouted. "You won $100,000? And you don't even play slot machines!"

Ellen nodded. "That's what it looks like, but that can't be right. That can't be me! And as far as the slot machines go, there was a wait for the poker table so I decided to check out this slot machine in the meantime. I'm not sure whether to quit now or try for the high stakes poker."

Rose frowned. "Quitting may make a lot of sense, to be honest. However, I've never had a run like this before, and I doubt you have either. If your luck continues in high stakes poker, you can make a killing."

Ellen grunted. "I suppose you're right. I'll tell you what -- I'll save $80,000 and go to the high stakes table with $20,000. I'll probably get in there before I get into the $1 table. How have you been doing?"

Thinking it was a bit anticlimactic after this, she replied: "I went to the roulette wheel and somehow managed to win every roll. I'm up $2500 and just quit."

"Smart move. Let's hope this high stakes poker isn't a mistake."

Rose grinned. "Enjoy yourself -- you're already up $80K no matter what. Anything you win here would just be the icing on the cake."

The two women laughed as they walked over to the high stakes poker room, where Ellen got into a $250/$500 table. Rose thought the diminutive woman looked out of place next to all of these tough-looking people. In fact, the man next to her was...no, it couldn't be...

But it was. The host told everyone to go around the table introducing themselves, and the man introduced himself as Phil Hellmuth. Rose frowned: luck would only get you so far in poker, especially against top players like Hellmuth who were masters at reading body language. On a whim -- though she was starting to wonder if it was more than whim -- Rose raced into one of the stores, bought a goofy-looking wide-brimmed hat which she thought would fit Ellen, and jammed it onto Ellen's head so that Hellmuth couldn't read her as easily.
The dealer distributed the cards, and Ellen looked at her hand: ace of hearts, king of diamonds. Rose gasped momentarily and then shut her mouth quickly as to not betray the strength of her sister's hand. Fortunately, Hellmuth was looking at his own cards at the time.

Ellen raised to $1000 on the deal. Not surprisingly, five of her competitors called, including Hellmuth. That was unusual, especially in high-stakes no limit games like this. Rose began to realize that she was an amateur playing way out of her league here -- and it wasn't just Hellmuth. She had a horrible suspicion that Ellen would misplay her hand and blow everything very quickly. On the other hand, both she and Rose had been extremely lucky so far today. Perhaps their luck would continue here.

With $5750 in the pot, the dealer dealt out the flop: three of hearts, three of diamonds, and queen of spades. Ellen had to act first, and Rose fervently hoped she would fold as she hadn't gotten anything there. She looked at her cards, flinched a little (which Hellmuth noticed). Any sane player would have folded. However, she placed her bet. Two people folded. The next player called, and Hellmuth raised. Ellen thought for a moment and called. The third player did as well. There was now $20,000 in the pot.

The display above the table showed the player's hands where the players couldn't see them. Ellen had her ace-king. Hellmuth had ace-three of spades and had hit three of a kind of on the flop. The third player still in had queen of hearts and ten of clubs.

The turn came out ten of spades. Hellmuth now had a flush draw, the third player had improved to queens and tens, and Ellen had a straight draw.

Ellen bet $5000. Hellmuth grinned and promptly went all in. The third player thought for a moment and called. Rose suspected that Mr. Queen-Ten thought Hellmuth had a pair of jacks and had figured Ellen probably had no idea what she was doing. Ellen looked at her hand and thought for a moment. Then, amazingly, she called.

Everyone turned over their cards. Hellmuth was in the lead with the three threes. Queen-Ten needed a queen or ten for a full house. Ellen was in big trouble -- she needed a jack or she was dead meat. And that jack couldn't be a spade. The screen displayed the odds: Hellmuth 83%, Queen-Ten 10%, Ellen 7%.

The dealer dealt out the river. Jack of clubs.

Ellen gasped, and Hellmuth's eyes widened. Congratulating Ellen and hoping to see her on the World Poker Tour at some point, he got up and left the table. Rose watched as Ellen put $54,000 worth of chips in front of her. As if that hadn't been enough, the table director awarded her a $10,000 bounty for taking out Phil Hellmuth.

Rose tried to take it all in. There were eight other players left at the table. How far was this going to go?

It took five hours to eliminate all the players. When the dust had settled, Ellen had come out $600,000 richer. She spent the next twenty minutes talking with casino officials and signing autographs. Finally, after a long day, she turned back to Rose, who was starting to wonder why she had chickened out so quickly at the roulette wheel.

Ellen looked at the table in disbelief. "Can you believe it? What the hell is going on here?"
Rose frowned. "I don't know. I'll ask Charlie -- maybe he can explain. You've got to admit, this is not normal."

Ellen nodded. "Indeed, it is not. I'll take it, though. You want to see if your luck keeps on holding? How much money do you have left?"

Rose thought for a moment. "I've got $2500. Maybe if I keep $2000 and gamble $500 more I may get another break. If Charlie DID do something, it may be a good time to take advantage of it."

To be continued...

-------------
Update #363.6: Aftermaths
-------------
Thursday, September 19, 1996
Hynhynn
-------------

And then, it was over.

With the Archon dead, the Trapanandan expedition force quickly crumbled. Most Death Eater supporters have slain their officers and fled the battlefield, though not before laying waste to the rebel armies, and not without sending a salvo of highly destructive curses at their former centaur allies. The remnants of the centaur militias and warbands of foreign wizards would remain a threat in the times to come, but their offensive had been ended, before it had truly began.

But not all of the merwizards have fled. Out of the 5000 convicted as Dark wizards, about one in five wished to remove the stain on their name by other means than killing yet more Beings. These individuals, seeking forgiveness, have volunteered for non-combat roles, and ended up guarding the prison camps set up for the yahoos, using their magic to heal and nourish.

When a great host of pro-Atlantis merwizards arrived a day after the coup, when they have managed to secure most of Trapananda with the exception of a few isolated strongholds where the old regime's most fanatic supporters made their last stands, they found these atoners at their assigned posts, where they were allowed to stay under supervision.

With both the expedition leader and the Archon (along with his inner circle) dead, the original plots hidden in the mission were lost forever. The forming new leadership of the merwizard's hidden nation has decided to seriously reform their way of life and relations with the rest of the world, the first time after more than five thousand years. As one of the first gestures to show this, instead of helping the centaur government's remaining troops to mop up the surviving rebels, their actions were limited to damage control. Even after a day, unusual and powerful curses lingered where the deserting Dark merwizards have cast them, and knowing the counterspells has proven vital.

And as the battered armies put out the fires and tended to their wounded, a new task presented itself: to arrange a ceasefire, and hopefully, peace. But there was one thing they had to do before that.
Lawrence Maynard needed money in a hurry. And he knew exactly where he was going to get it from.

The newspaper had mentioned that a fantasy author in Missouri had been contacted by the Chicago Wizarding Institute, the North Central headquarters of the American Department of Magic. The article explained that this man, Jim Butcher, had apparently been writing a book based on memories which he had accidentally uncovered when he encountered members of the CWI. When the Aurors finally tracked him down, he managed to make a deal with them which would mangle the memories enough to let them serve as a basis for his novel. The novel, featuring a wizard detective named Harry Dresden who had presumably been a mangled version of CWI chairman Morgan Dresden, was going to be published as fiction and sold in the fantasy section.

The most interesting part, however, had come later. Once the CWI had come out, the Aurors had returned to Butcher to apologize for his Obliviation. The author had been offered a position as the CWI's Muggle liaison and had been granted $100,000 in compensation for the Obliviation.

Maynard's mind raced. How many more people had the wizards Obliviated over the years? If this author had been entitled to $100,000 with his memories partially modified, how much would someone who had been COMPLETELY Obliviated be entitled to? $300,000? $500,000?

Maynard had to admit that he had no evidence to support his claim. However, the lack of evidence was something which was not inconsistent with an Obliviation. He was certainly a prime target for Obliviation -- after all, the Big Thicket Facility was in HIS STATE, and God knew what those WSC goons had been doing before the Statute of Secrecy fell! It would be up to the defense to prove that an Obliviation had NOT occurred, which could be quite difficult.

That didn't mean that he couldn't get involved with a lawsuit sponsored by someone who was convinced the wizards HAD tampered with his memory. Steve Carillo, a construction worker who had been living in San Antonio for the past five years, had already announced that he was going to file paperwork for a class-action lawsuit against the wizards. Carillo had nearly alienated his wife over repeated claims that aliens had abducted him, taken him away in their UFO, and done terrible experiments on him. He had eventually managed to convince himself that it hadn't happened and that he had suffered from some traumatic disorder which had tampered with his memories.

Everything had changed, however, after the wizards had come out and started flying around on their brooms. The photographs of the wizards zipping around the sky casting beams of light from their wands resonated VERY strongly with Carillo's memories of the reputed alien encounter. After consulting with a lawyer who agreed that he may have a case if he got his hands on some evidence,
he had decided to sue for the same amount of money Butcher had received, $100,000, on the premise that he could have gotten an Obliviation which allowed him to keep his memories as a possible plot for a science fiction book.

With images of moneybags dancing in his head, Maynard called up Carillo only to find the line was busy. It took him a good ten minutes to get through to him.

The man on the Carillo other sounded exhausted, yet excited. "Hello?"

"Good evening. Is this Mr. Carillo?"

"That's me. How can I help you?"

"Simple. My name is Larry Maynard, and I live in Texas City. I heard about your class-action lawsuit against the wizards for Obliviating you. I want to join as well."

Carillo chuckled. "You were Obliviated too? That makes fourteen already. What did they leave you with? Bizarre scars? Memories where you had sex with seven-tentacled aliens? Science fiction novel plots like they did with me?"

Maynard grunted. "To be honest with you, nothing. I'm concerned that they may have done a complete Obliviation with me and left me with nothing."

Carillo paused for a moment before continuing. "I'm not sure if I can help with that, Mr. Maynard. Without evidence, you have no case."

Maynard had been afraid Carillo would say that. Fortunately, he had a backup plan. "Actually, Mr. Carillo, I'm not so sure. What happens if as part of your trial you ask the wizards to publish their Obliviation records? If your claim is correct, you're going to be on them, and the wizards will have to provide them as evidence to show that you are NOT on them."

Carillo let out an evil chuckle as he finished the thought: "Clever, Mr. Maynard. Instead of providing evidence to support your case, you wait until the wizards incriminate themselves in mine and then hit them with their own records."

"I couldn't have said it better myself. Once we know who's on that list, I start my own class-action lawsuit for the people who don't remember anything."

Carillo paused once more. "I'll talk to my lawyers about it. One thing I can tell you, however, is that your trial will have to come after mine. No offense, Mr. Carillo, but until we get the wizards to publish the Obliviation records you don't have a chance -- and getting involved with the class action suit is likely going to weaken our own claim. Would you be willing to wait until my trial concludes? Then you can do whatever you want."

Maynard smiled. "That would be fine with me, Mr. Carillo. Good luck with your case, and I'll keep tabs on the news."

"Thank you, Mr. Maynard. If the wizards do manage to incriminate themselves, you'll be the first to know."

Maynard laughed. "Excellent. By the way, I'm curious...you said you already had thirteen people involved in your suit so far?"
"Yes, Mr. Maynard. I can't say who, of course, until the trial starts."

Maynard paused for a moment, and then blurted it out. "I have to know. What did the wizards do to the rest you guys?"

Carillo laughed. "Again, I can't say right now. However, trust me that you'll like these stories when they come out. Someone in 'Oz' has a very perverted imagination."

To be continued...

-------------
Update #364: Hey, Ariadne, You'll Like Foxwoods! Don't Be So Hasty...
-------------
Friday, September 20, 1996 / 7 Tishrei 5757 / 3 Days to Yom Kippur
New Department of Magic Headquarters
Enfield, MA
United States of America
-------------
NEXT UP: Now Why Can't We USUALLY Eat on Yom Kippur?
-------------
Persephone Ariadne looked her advisor and then back at the Hartford Courant in disbelief. The now-retired Radner had figured something like this could crop up, and had tried to warn people about it as soon as Slughorn had publicized the use of Felix Felicis. No one had believed her then. Fortunately, she wasn't one to strut around saying "I told you so!"

-------------
Sisters from Colchester Win $900,000 at Foxwoods
One Woman Hits Roulette Spins 11 Times in a Row while Other Hits Super Jackpot on Slot Machine and Defeats Elite Poker Player in Texas Hold 'Em
Casino Official Estimates Roulette Odds Alone To Be More Than 900 Trillion to One, Yet Sees No Obvious Evidence of Cheating
Department of Magic Called In to Investigate: "That Was NOT Natural"
-------------
COLCHESTER -- We get lucky from time to time. Depending on the roll of the dice or bouncing of the balls, we can find ourselves with a million-dollar windfall after buying a $1 ticket. However, there is luck and there is LUCK. Considering what just happened to Ellen Parker and Rose Vincent yesterday, those two women could very well be in a position to debate Lou Gehrig for the position luckiest people on the face of the earth.

In an amazing streak of good fortune, the sisters left Vincent's house in Colchester and headed to Foxwoods for a day gambling. Managing to find a parking spot right near the entrance, which was lucky in itself, they entered the casino planning to spend $100 each. They had been hoping to bolster their families' meager salaries to survive the recession, a tactic which is highly discouraged as the House eventually wins at the casino.

Normally, the House wins. However, it appears that someone forgot to inform the staff of Foxwoods and eight astonished poker players, including elite World Series champion Phil Hellmuth.

Vincent explains. "It was is if I had a sixth sense that day, telling me what to do. If it said 'Put it all on 15', that's exactly what I did. Amazingly, it was right every time. I told the casino staff afterwards that I had no idea what was going on. I was telling the truth, and they found that out pretty quickly with their polygraph testing. $300,000 playing roulette. Who would have thought it?"
Parker experienced a similar sixth sense when she played. "I picked that slot machine at random and was floored when I got that jackpot on the first roll. Figuring I'd keep $80,000 of that $100,000 and risk the remaining $20,000 on the poker table, I managed to get into a high stakes poker game. I remember going all-in on the first hand against someone who turned out to be Phil Hellmuth. I thought I was toast, but then I got a straight on the river and managed to knock him out even though he had flopped three 3's. He looked as shocked as I was, yet he congratulated me and hoped to see me on the World Poker Tour at some point. I doubt that's going to happen, though -- I'm not nearly good enough to compete with Hellmuth on a regular basis.

"I couldn't believe what my sixth sense was telling me to do sometimes. However, there are times when you have to go with your gut. Calling an all in against Phil Hellmuth with only a draw seemed suicidal, yet for some reason I had a good feeling about it. Against my better judgment, I called and got an amazingly lucky break. I was very much tempted to leave the table then, but the voice in my head told me to continue. That proved to be a good thing, as I got two queens [continued, page 2]

------------

Ariadne slammed her finger down on the article in fury. "Rose Vincent. Recognize the name, Sarah?"

The advisor shook her head. "No, Madame Secretary."

"All right, how about Charles Vincent?"

The advisor shrugged. "He's a wizard, isn't he? He lives -- good God!"

Ariadne nodded sharply. "Yup. In Colchester. And he happens to be married to a Muggle named Rose who wasn't making much money. Oh, and did I mention that he's a master potioneer?"

The advisor whistled. "You really think he gave them Felix Felicis?"

"I wouldn't be surprised, Sarah. The descriptions in the article match Felix Felicis very well, and it's quite possible that he spiked their orange juice with it or something like that before they went to the casino. Remember that it's tasteless. The two Muggles head off, make their fortune without even considering the possibility that someone had cheated, and then come home thinking they got lucky. Rinse and repeat."

The advisor swore. "We've got to stop this, Madame Secretary. NOW. Once word of this gets out into the magical community every casino is going to be screwed. Though to be honest people shouldn't be risking their money in casinos during a recession."

"Correct on both counts. I'll have to run this by Travis or someone like that to make sure it's legal, but I'm going to recommend that casinos adopt spot checks for Felix Felicis and other magical enhancements. We know that can be done as the examiners check for Felix Felicis during Quidditch matches, OWL tests, and NEWT exams. In addition, I'm going to suggest that casinos become no-Apparition zones. We don't want wizards running amok in there tampering with the machines."

The advisor jotted down some notes. "I'll see what I can do, Madame Secretary. In the meantime, what are we going to do about Vincent? Do we arrest him?"

Ariadne fumed. "Ideally, yes. In practice, however, there is technically nothing he did that was illegal. There was no law preventing use of Felix Felicis at Muggle gambling establishments, and this
was simply because no one had thought of magical interference before the Statute of Secrecy went down. The only major Muggle occasions which had a luck restriction prior to the fall of the Statute were major sporting events, and that rule was passed only recently, in 1966."

The advisor nodded. "The Celtics dynasty and the purported leprechaun."

"Indeed. We don't know if the leprechaun was actually there, but it was plausible enough that we took precautions. Back to the subject matter, however. He's going to keep the money, though we're going to warn EVERYONE that if anyone tries this again they'll be in BIG trouble."

The advisor nodded and left the room. Ariadne had about five minutes to herself before a paper airplane flew down the hall and into her hands. It was marked with seal of the Chicago Wizarding Institute. Wondering what this was about, she opened it up and began to read.

"Madame Secretary, we have a problem. A Muggle in San Antonio claims that we Obliviated him and has sued. He believes that his stories of alien abductions and UFO's are evidence of Obliviation tampering, similar to what we did with Jim Butcher. He has filed a class-action lawsuit against us, requesting that each person Obliviated in this fashion be entitled to $100,000, the same sum of money we gave to Butcher. At present, 67 people have joined the suit."

Ariadne gasped. Although Obliviations had been commonplace in the days before the Statute of Secrecy had fallen, the vast majority of the Muggles had no memories left of their intrusion into the magical world and had nothing to base a lawsuit on. Could there have been a lazy or incompetent Obliviator out there who left just enough behind to get the wizards into trouble?

The note went on. "The main plaintiff is a man named Steve Carillo, age 42. We have looked him up in our Obliviation records and do not see him there. I have no idea where these UFO stories came from, but rest assured it wasn't from us. Would you be willing to ask around to see if one of the other six offices Obliviated him?"

Sweating, Ariadne pulled out a piece of parchment and wrote back that she would follow through on his request. She fervently hoped that this Carillo fellow had in fact not been Obliviated, or at least there wasn't any evidence to prove that he had been Obliviated. A conviction here would likely embarrass the Department of Magic and open the floodgates for a whole lot of lawsuits.

Three hours later, the results were in. No one had ever Obliviated anyone named Steve Carillo. The man was obviously mad and needed psychiatric or magical help. The problem now became proving the Department of Magic's innocence through evidence...evidence which would almost certainly be used by additional Muggles to prove that THEY had been Obliviated.

What was she going to do now?

To be continued...

----------------
Update #365: Now Why Can't We USUALLY Eat on Yom Kippur?
----------------
Sunday Evening, September 22, 1996 / 10 Tishrei 5757 / Yom Kippur
Omega Institute
Rhinebeck, NY
United States of America

NEXT UP: To Boldly Go Where No Paramecium Has Gone Before
Karen Armstrong chuckled. Judging from the ruckus outside the main hall, it was obvious that either Deborah or Mother Teresa had been given the honor of running the Kol Nidre service in conjunction with a traditional male rabbi. Ideally, it would have just been one of the two women. However, Mother Teresa had confessed that she didn't think it would be appropriate for her to perform such an important Jewish ritual, and Deborah wasn't even familiar with the Aramaic language as she had lived a millennium before it became the Israelites' vernacular.

The more conservative delegates to the conference had naturally gone ballistic when the Dalai Lama had announced his proposal. It wasn't as if he could deny her ordination: Buddhism had nuns (who had, not surprisingly, all fallen in line behind Deborah), and in all fairness Mother Teresa was the best consensus candidate when it came to the respect of all three Abrahamic faiths. Several of them had threatened to have their own service, at which point the Dalai Lama argued that the traditional rabbi leading the service could satisfy the more conservative faction's requirements. The group had grumbled about it a little but eventually caved in.

That had been, of course, right after Deborah had argued that the fast was optional and could be replaced with at least one other type of renunciation/asceticism practice. If the discomfort of the fast got in the way of introspection, the worshiper was allowed to eat sparingly to keep his or her mind clear in an obvious case of the end justifying the means. The Dalai Lama had recommended the Buddhist practice where people didn't eat after noon, and many of the Christians bought it. The Jews, however, didn't like it all that much, as they had grown up doing a fast and found it hard to imagine a proper Yom Kippur without it. The Muslims tried to convince the Dalai Lama that a proper fast could be quite helpful and not impossible to deal with thanks to their experience with Ramadan. The Dalai Lama agreed but had to explain that most of the delegates hadn't prepared properly for a full fast.

Armstrong looked around the room. It was obvious that most of the women were there, as were most of the Christians. There were rumors that many of the Jewish and Muslim men had gone up to the meditation building to perform their own introspective service...which was very likely going to look remarkably like a traditional Kol Nidre service with the fast. She really hoped that this somber day wouldn't mark the collapse of the conference and final proof that the faiths couldn't be merged. Yom Kippur changes could have been managed, and Deborah's feminism could have been managed. Put them together, however, and there could be problems.

The service began more or less as expected. Rabbi Waldoks led the congregation in the traditional Kol Nidre formula and gave a little talk asking participants to discuss what they discovered about themselves since Rosh Hashanah. Many congregants had actually found the seven days between the two holidays to be quite meaningful and had responded quite enthusiastically. People from all five faiths rushed to discuss soul-shattering discoveries.

After the call to prayer, the Declarations of Faith and the standing meditation period -- formerly known as Barchu, the Shema, and the Amidah -- Deborah and her interpreter took the floor. Tradition dictated that penitential prayers be said at this point which asked for God's forgiveness and reminded the congregants that God would have mercy on sinners. Armstrong wondered what she was going to say now. Was the prophetess going to try to anoint more people as religious leaders?

Meira -- the interpreter -- stared at Deborah in disbelief for a few moments. Biting her lip, she said something about wizards getting into trouble. Deborah just glared at her and muttered something which clearly boiled down to "I think it is true, so just say it".

Shaking her head in disbelief, the interpreter threw up her hands and began translating. "Ladies and
gentlemen, Deborah here claims to recognize some of the unusual types of vows listed in the Kol Nidre prayer. Although she doesn't understand the Aramaic completely -- it would be like Chaucer trying to read modern English -- she believes that she can bring us up to speed on what exactly each type of vow is. This is possible because Hebrew, like most Semitic languages, has most of its words derived from three-consonant roots. Some of the other letters may have moved around over the past thousand years, but enough of them are in place for Deborah to understand what's going on.

"First things first. Deborah thinks the entire concept of renouncing vows like this is nonsense and thinks that people should be focusing on correcting their mistakes instead of trying to pretend they didn't exist. You can't improve your behavior or conduct by spending the next twelve months in denial. Nevertheless, if the people of this era are accustomed to it, she'll keep it in the service for the time being."

Armstrong's eyebrows shot up. That's a pretty profound observation, she thought. The ancient prophetess would have made a good therapist.

"Be that as it may, she recommends a change to the formula. She wants us to replace the word" -- the interpreter said something -- "with the following word" -- and she said something else. "This new word is Hebrew, not Aramaic, and it refers to a magical vow which does not involve other human parties and which is not unbreakable."

Everyone started talking in unison. Modifying the Kol Nidre prayer would be a major change, one which would almost certainly be resisted by the conservatives meeting in the meditation hall. However, that was not the only surprise. The fact that Deborah -- a former seeress -- had brought the wizards into it had caught everyone off guard.

Deborah explained through the interpreter. "This modification tightens the restrictions on magical vow annulment to not cover Unbreakable Vows. The traditional version allows the petitioner to renounce any magical vows which do not involve a second human party. Although it seems to be a case of semantics -- after all, we don't need to worry about breaking Unbreakable Vows, which is what Kol Nidre is designed to prevent -- the issue has become much more urgent given what has happened since Judgment Day."

Armstrong blinked. What was this?

Deborah continued. "As most of you are aware, the anti-wizard organizations comprising World for Humans have forced wizards all around the world to take what are known as Aes Sedai oaths. Wizards take either two, five, or six oaths depending on how trustworthy they want to appear. These are always sworn as Unbreakable Vows.

"Although in principle this is a good idea, the simple fact is that the traditional Kol Nidre formula used in 1995 caused Jewish wizards who have sworn Aes Sedai oaths to not actually have those oaths binding. In principle, that could have caused them to misbehave, though from what I have been told they have all acted as if they had been bound. Despite this error, they have served their role in the new world with integrity and honor."

People started talking again, and Armstrong's eyes widened. Several wizards near the back of the room started arguing with each other vociferously, and it soon became obvious to Armstrong that the wizards had indeed run into cases where candidates for Aes Sedai oaths had trouble registering their oaths. The candidates' names had been Glickman, Stein, and Cohen, and no one had understood what had been going on at the time.
"To make matters worse, we have just recited the traditional oath renunciation prayer. This makes it impossible for Jewish wizards, or anyone else who has recited Kol Nidre today, to swear Aes Sedai oaths until the fall of 1997. Considering that Britain for Humans and the Revelation Party are arguing that the wizards are violating their probation, so to speak, by working around these oaths already, it is imperative that we do something which will allow the world to restore their trust in the Order of Aes Sedai for the next twelve months.

"I call upon all wizards who wish to be members of the Order of Aes Sedai to go to their managers or heads of state and swear an Unbreakable Vow TO HIM OR HER that the wizard will follow the appropriate level of Aes Sedai oaths. Since this vow has been made to a human representative, it is not covered by Kol Nidre. This will allow the wizard to serve as an Aes Sedai, bound to the Vows."

Armstrong smiled. That actually wasn't a bad idea. It would serve as a good stopgap measure to keep Britain for Humans from picking on the wizards, and by the time the fall of 1997 came around, the religious leaders would have managed to browbeat the conservatives into using the new version of Kol Nidre.

The smile quickly vanished, however, when she realized that there was no policy in place which would force the Aes Sedai candidates to actually SWEAR this new oath to cover the next twelve months. There was still a loophole, and Armstrong hoped that Britain for Humans wouldn't find out about it.

And judging from the number of television cameras in the room -- which in itself had triggered a third debate over paparazzi intruding upon a somber religious ceremony -- Armstrong highly doubted that Britain for Humans would kept in the dark for long.

Maybe the world would get lucky and they would all be watching Samuel doing his thing in Jerusalem. The time zone fit better for the British, after all. Then again, how lucky could you get?

To be continued...
Update #366 through Update #370
Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Mislagnissa

Update #366: To Boldly Go Where No Paramecium Has Gone Before

------------
3,800,000,000 BC
Vallis Marineris
Mars

------------
NEXT UP: Hope You Like Hot Sulfuric Acid

The bacterium floated through the water in the deep ocean trench looking for food. Food was starting to become pretty scarce, however. The atmosphere had been getting thinner and thinner over the past few hundred million years, and life had ben forced to adapt in a hurry. Many species died, which only exacerbated the problem as dead species couldn't reproduce and feed their colleagues.

It wasn't as if the atmosphere was empty, however. Meteors were crashing into what was left of the global ocean at an unusually brisk pace, which naturally made matters worse. Water was launched into the atmosphere by tremendous impacts and had a tendency to not come back down. The primitive lifeforms, fighting for their survival in a doomed biosphere, had no idea that 99.9999% of all life would be wiped out over the next billion years. The few lifeforms that were going to survive would be huddled deep underground near the equator, far beyond the reach of any future space probes from the Solar System's other blue world.

Fortunately for the bacterium, it was fairly robust. It had three nuclei and had evolved so that if one of them fell apart, another one could just take over. It had developed a fractal structure which would allow it to achieve as much surface area as possible for the same amount of protoplasm. Occasionally bits and pieces of it would break off and join the detritus of the deep.

One would have wondered why life would have evolved something so fragile which could fall apart so easily. It made sense, however. As long as the little cell was afloat, it had no weight to worry about. Losing pseudopods and cilia was also a quite useful defensive technique when the larger animals a few millimeters across felt like taking a bite out of it.

The bacterium had not eaten for a long time, and it was starting to get very hungry. Usually it had been able to gorge itself on organic matter falling down from higher levels in the water column. However, three days ago powerful waves had made their way through the water column, a clear sign that something huge had impacted the surface nearby. Sure enough, the organic material which had been filtering down from above disappeared and was replaced by a steady rain of ash.

Smoke and ash were not edible, and they had a disturbing tendency to kill things which were. The bacterium did not know, however, that there would not be that much food coming along anytime soon. All it knew was that it was hungry and it had to look for anything it could get its cilia on.

A few days went by, and the ash fall continued with no end in sight. Not having enough weight to fall to the ground and possibly consume some of the rock down there, it found that it had no alternative but to try to eat some of its own cilia in a last-ditch effort to stave off starvation. The food kept it going for a few more hours as it continued to hunt for a more substantial meal.
Suddenly, the bacterium caught a break. A heavy, dense ash particle fell right on top of one of the nuclei and started dragging it downwards towards the bottom of the rift. The organic material around the nuclei were fairly well-protected, and the bacterium stayed in one piece as it landed on the bottom of the rift. The bottom of the rift tended to have a lot of organic material, and cells which had the good fortune to drift down there were able to eat a great deal.

The bacterium stretched out with its cilia to try to eat the food in its vicinity, only to find that there was nothing in its immediate area. It tried to make its way down the rift but found itself pinned to the rock by the ash particle. With no ability to leave its current location and no food in the vicinity, it had no way to feed itself. The end was nigh.

As a last desperate measure, it consumed maybe 90% of its cilia, but even that was not enough. It tried to go after an extra nucleus but found itself unable to reach the nucleus with the ash particle in the way and most of its cilia missing. Bereft of all sources of food and with nothing left to hunt down more, it expired a few hours later.

The ash continued to fall into the trench, and within a day the bacterium's intricate structure was perforated by little pieces of rock. One of the nuclei had been punctured, but the other two were still intact. The tiny microbe eventually vanished under the ash, never to be seen again.

2,600,000,000 BC

For the first time in two billion years, Mars was devoid of surface water. The last pockets of surface life, crammed into a small area by the receding waterline, were all exposed to the air simultaneously. Several of the centimeter-long organisms promptly started panicking and eating each other, but that didn't last long before the they dried out and died.

Collapsing under weight they didn't know that they had, the animals' bodies fell on top of the rock which had protected the bacterium for over a billion years.

Time went by, and the animals slowly began to fossilize as minerals made it into their cellular structure. Fossilization was difficult, and only 2% of the corpses trapped in the rocks were able to fossilize. Nevertheless, that included three of the larger animals and -- amazingly -- the old bacterium.

2,000,000,000 BC

The Martian atmosphere was just about gone now, and the surface was now completely devoid of life. Dust blew through the rift valley and covered the rocks filled with the bodies of dead bacteria and animals which had never existed on Earth.

For the next two billion years, nothing happened as the ancient rocks were buffeted around by landslides and buried in the sand. Some of the fossils found themselves under a thousand feet of sediment. Others, such as the rock with the bacterium and the three large animals, managed to stay on top.

September 20, 1996

Had there been any surface lifeforms left, they would have likely been astonished at the unusual sight. A large, unusually angular rock had fallen out of the sky and entered the rift. Usually, these rocks caught fire in the atmosphere and announced themselves with a streak of light. Most of these burned up in the atmosphere, and those which hit the ground tended to make a big mess.
This rock, however, was different. It appeared to be made of metal, and it was rectangular in shape with all eight corners at right angles -- most unnatural. What had even been more unusual had been the fact that there had been no streak of light announcing its arrival. It was as if it had just arrived in the rift by magic.

What happened next had been even more amazing. The rock, which had buried itself in the ground a few feet away from the one containing the fossils of the three centimeter-long animals and the bacterium, suddenly shuddered. Was it alive? How could metal be alive? How had it survived all these years?

The observers would have gasped in terror as the boxlike animal opened its mouth, revealing a hollow interior. The box then charged, scooping up over a hundred kilograms of rocks. The ancient rock with the three animals and the bacterium vanished into its mouth, and the observer would have wondered how an advanced organism like this one would have survived eating rocks.

Less than a minute later, the visitor had finished eating. It closed its mouth, paused for a moment, and then vanished as abruptly as it had come. Vallis Marineris was silent once again with just the dust devils for company.

-----------------------
September 23, 1996
-----------------------

The three Martian animals and the bacterium were long dead. Had they still been alive, they would have likely been happy to find themselves weightless once again, just as they had been before the waters had receded.

They would have likely been confused, however. How could one be weightless yet not have water around to support you? And what had been that huge shove about three days ago which seemed to have launched them into the air? Why was there nothing to eat in this area? And why was this animal not digesting them?

The reason was obvious. The animal had already digested them, as far as it was concerned. It had disproven the theory that animals, particularly large ones, could not be content with consuming rocks. The four fossils would have likely wondered where the animal's lair was and whether its colony mates were going to be as merciful as it had been.

They would have been correct in assuming that their eater's colony mates would take care of them. However, any guess for the location of their eater's lair would have been off by over a hundred million miles.

-----------------------
Goddard Space Flight Center
-----------------------

Michael Amato spoke into his phone excitedly. "You heard me right, Debbie. We just got an update from Linda Warren. The Portkey reached Vallis Marineris three days ago and picked up some rocks. She doesn't know how many rocks it got, however. It's on its way back now."

"Cool! I need to tell Becky, Heather, and the rest of the MIT friends. Is the Portkey designed to host living organisms?"

"I don't think so, Debbie. However, a corpse is better than nothing."

"What are the odds that there are going to be some fossils in there?"
"No one knows for certain. I've heard probabilities ranging from 1% to 70%.

"Let's hope it makes it back. This is very exciting! Imagine, a Mars sample return mission! When's it supposed to get back here?"

"She's expecting between October 8 and 10 at this point. It's headed down to her house in Jacksonville."

"Not to NASA?"

"I'm afraid not, as she launched it before joining NASA. However, she agreed that no one is going to be opening the box until it's in a safe quarantine area deep inside the NASA labs."

To be continued...

-------------
Update #367: Hope You Like Hot Sulfuric Acid / 11 Tishrei 5757 / 4 Days To Sukkot Pilgrimage Festival
-------------
Tuesday, September 24, 1996
Goddard Space Flight Center
Near Washington, DC
United States of America
-------------
NEXT UP: What Would I Use A Gun For?
-------------
Linda Warren looked at the crushed box which had once been a Portkey. She had tried to obtain a sample from an undersea vent about two kilometers down in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. The Portkey had made it down there in one piece. Unfortunately, exposing it to almost two hundred atmospheres of pressure had been a wee bit of a problem. It had come back leaking like a sieve and about a third of the size it had started with.

She nodded slowly. "I figured that would happen. If we want to explore down there at some point, we're going to need to talk to the merpeople and have them do the same thing for us that they did for the party who visited the Hammer of Ra crater. Fortunately, the one kilometer test seems to have passed. And that's the important one. We have now demonstrated that a Portkey should be able to survive 90 atmospheres worth of pressure. The two boxes we have here are made out of stainless steel, which melts at 1636 K -- still higher than the surface temperature. If we cast a spell around them to ensure that they're immune to acid, we may be able to get away with this."

The NASA scientist scratched her head. "Is your spell going to work under such extreme conditions of temperature and pressure?"

Linda shrugged. "To be honest, I have absolutely no idea, and I don't want to put myself in a position to test it. However, I recommend that we try it. It can't hurt, and if we get lucky it may actually work. The one which is going to come back with the rock sample isn't going to be on the ground for very long, and the one with the camera should survive long enough for it to send back a few pictures before the camera melts. If everything goes as planned, it should also make it back in time."

The scientist looked over her shoulder at the second box, which had gone completely transparent. "I must confess, I've never seen transparent steel before. That sounds like it would be a very useful invention."
Linda chuckled. "Standard transfiguration spell. Don't worry about it. Where do you want me to
send them? Keep in mind that they have to go to a place which I can envision or at least see."

The scientist thought for a moment, then grinned. "You know, this could work to our advantage.
We'll send both of them to the Venera 8 landing site to start with as we have photographs from there.
The one with the rocks will come back first, of course, as obtaining the Venusian rock samples
should probably be top priority. Which reminds me -- the Portkey will likely have to deal with the
possibility of explosion as well as implosion."

"Explosion?"

"Yes, explosion. Think about it. As soon as the door opens to let the rocks in, air at 90 atmospheres
and high temperature enters the box. The box then starts flying back to Earth through vacuum. That's
an awfully large pressure differential. That could be a big problem. Is there anything you can do
about that?"

Linda's brow creased in a frown. "You're right, of course. I hadn't thought of that. Well, I suppose I
could cast the same pressure-resistant spell on both the inside and the outside of the box. Would that
help?"

The scientist thought for a moment and nodded. "That should work. However, we're going to have
to be very careful in letting the air out once we get back here. One hole in the box and the thing is
going to go flying like a balloon with a rocket engine strapped to it. At any rate, back to the issue at
hand. We'll send both of them to the Venera 8 site. The camera pans around inside the transparent
box, which of course does not open. It then comes back and cools off a little. We then study the
images and choose a location within sight of the first landing position. You then send the transparent
box and the camera over there to check it out again and take more pictures. We then look for a place
on the horizon there to explore and go there. Rinse and repeat."

Linda's smile was vicious. "Very clever. We jump in and out, in and out. I don't know if it's going to
work, but we can definitely try it. It's going to take a long time, though."

"Oh?"

Linda looked at the scientist apologetically. "I can't change the destination of the Portkey remotely. I
have to be there, and although I trust my magic a lot I'm not crazy enough to try to be the first
woman on the surface of Venus. What this means is that we're going to have to go in and out, in and
out. That's two weeks round trip each time."

The scientist glanced at one of the TV monitors, which showed another group of scientists preparing
the quarantine room for the incoming Mars rocks. "Well, it's better than nothing. How long will it
take you to prepare the inside of the box so that it will not explode when it starts the return journey?"

Linda shrugged. "Ten minutes or so. It shouldn't be a problem. I'll do both of them -- might as well."

Fifteen minutes later, people all over the Goddard Space Flight Center began cursing that all of the
lights had gone out and the computers had started emitting the odors of burned wiring. It took a long
time for Linda to convince them that this sacrifice was worth the opportunity of the third Venus
surface mission and the first one to return a rock sample.

------------------------

Chicago Tribune Newspaper
The Dresden Files: Tales from the Chicago Wizarding Institute
A Column by Jim Butcher

This column is the first in a weekly series of articles reporting on the activities of the Chicago
Wizarding Institute. My name is Jim Butcher, and I was chosen as the Muggle liaison for the CWI.

My association with the CWI is, quite simply, accidental. While near my home in Independence,
Missouri, many years ago, I stumbled across something which appeared to have been a piece of
trash. I picked it up, planning to throw it out, when I suddenly found myself flying through the air at
a high rate of speed. I had no idea that I had encountered a Portkey whose purpose was to transport
the holder to the CWI.

I had no idea where I was, of course. Keep in mind that this was before the Statute of Secrecy had
fallen, so we had no idea that wizards existed. I figured I was in some kind of military facility and did
what I could to see if I could get out without getting myself killed in the process.

I learned very quickly that I had arrived in what appeared to be a secret magical base. I heard stories
about several important people: CWI head Morgan Dresden, Auror Karina Murray, Auror Ana
Luccio, and several others who will be mentioned in future updates of this column. These men and
women risk their lives every day to prevent the rest of us from having to deal with monsters straight
out of our nightmares. I soon came to realize that we owe facilities like this a great deal of gratitude --
even though we weren't supposed to know that they even existed.

Eventually, the wizards realized that I was not supposed to be there and told me that they would have
to kick me out and erase my memories in the process -- what we now know as Obliviation.
Somehow, I managed to convince them to mangle my memories enough to allow me to publish what
was left as a fictional fantasy novel in a way which not expose the CWI.

I returned home with my memories entirely modified and burning desire to write a series about a
wizard/detective in the Chicago area named Harry Dresden -- the mangled version of Morgan
Dresden. I was making good progress on the initial book, Storm Front, when the Statute of Secrecy
collapsed and the CWI people who had Obliviated me -- whom I no longer knew -- suddenly appeared in
my house and apologized for their disruption of my memories. I received $100,000 in compensation
and was allowed to become their liaison.

I have spent the last few days reading up on the actual events behind what would have eventually
been Storm Front. What I am about to tell you is all true. You can ask Wizard Dresden yourself if
you wish.

The first incident I will discuss starts with weather. If you have ever wondered why there have been
strange storms from time to time seemingly coming out of nowhere which catch the weathermen off
 guard, this story is for you. Wizard Dresden and Auror Murray were working on a case when a
woman walked into their office and...

Preliminary Hearing for Carillo v. American Department of Magic Scheduled for 1/8

REUTERS -- According to a highly-placed source speaking on condition of anonymity, the
preliminary hearing for what is being billed as "the Obliviation of America Trial" has been scheduled
for January 8th, 1997, in a major court in San Antonio.
The tipster was excited about this development. "It's about time that the wizards stopped doing things behind our backs. We have the right to know what's going on and we don't need some magicians to start modifying our memories."

As of yesterday, 155 people have signed onto the class-action lawsuit served by Carillo. There will likely be more before the case goes to trial.

---

Yom Kippur Passes at Omega and in Jerusalem with Few Major Incidents

RHINEBECK, NEW YORK -- Highly modified Samuelist Yom Kippur services took place at the Omega Institute and in Jerusalem on Sunday night and Monday to observe the most important holiday in the Jewish calendar. As usual, the holiday focused on introspection and confession. The differences, however, were striking.

At Omega, Deborah ruled that the traditional fast could be discarded if it interfered with a worshiper's ability to reflect and learn from the past year's mistakes. Samuel, who had run his own service in Jerusalem with the help of Rabbi Levine and the Kohen Gadol, seemed to have been taken aback by this for a moment but eventually admitted that any form of asceticism would do. Most of the Jewish participants fasted, as did many of the Islamic ones.

Many of the prayers were replaced with meditation sittings and mindfulness lessons which seemed to be more Buddhist than Abrahamic. That should not have come as a surprise, however, given what has happened over the past month and a half at Omega.

There were only two major hot-button issues. First, the choice of Deborah to lead the Kol Nidre service at Omega appeared to have troubled the more conservative members at Omega to the point where they had their own service. Recall that most of these clergy come from traditions where women were not ordained as priests or rabbis until Deborah began the custom with Mother Teresa. One can only hope that this does not split the conference and send Samuel's vision for world peace into the dustbin of history.

The second issue involved a technicality with the Aes Sedai oaths sworn by wizards. The Kol Nidre prayer is actually a declaration that proactively renounces all vows between a person and the Almighty sworn over the next twelve months. This posed a problem with Jewish wizards who had wished to swear Aes Sedai oaths and were astonished to find that the oaths were not binding. Realizing that Aes Sedai violating their oaths would be a major blow to the acceptance of wizards, Deborah recommended that wizards who recited Kol Nidre reswear the Aes Sedai oaths as the form of promises to another person that he or she would obey the oaths. This form of oath is not eligible for renunciation during Kol Nidre, which in turn will make it binding on the oath taker.

A spokesman for Britain for Humans admitted that he had been horrified to find that the Jewish Aes Sedai had not been able to swear their oaths. However, he was encouraged to hear that all of the wizards in question had acted as if they had sworn the oaths over the previous few months. The spokesman was hopeful that spellcasters who found themselves unable to swear binding oaths in this fashion would do so under the new protocol.

To be continued...

-------------

Update #368: What Would I Use A Gun For? / 12 Tishrei 5757 / 3 Days To Sukkot Pilgrimage Festival
Gerardo Siciliani had finally decided to take the plunge. He was going to get involved with the 'Ndrangheta criminal organization, hoping to avenge the death of his brother Uriele.

As a member of the Italian Ministry of Magic, he had originally been tasked with the mission of keeping tabs on this particular criminal organization and make sure that they didn't start attacking people who were not already involved in the various Italian crime syndicates. He had done well at his job and knew a great deal about most of the group's leaders.

His department, thankfully, had been quiet for a long time. The group's primary concern was the possible re-emergence of America and Britain for Humans, who had reportedly had talks about restarting the attacks given the obvious inability of the Unbreakable Vows to keep the wizards in check. They were too easy to circumvent, half of the wizards in the Hidden Nations weren't even swearing them, and word had just come out that at least one major ethnic group hadn't been able to bind themselves to the vows for supposed religious reasons. Since the Britain for Humans truce was contingent on the wizards obeying the vows, this was a major problem.

Everything had changed, however, when Uriele was found dead outside Uriele's house in the southern part of town. The shooter was quickly apprehended and determined to have been a member of Christians for Humans, the anti-Wizarding hate group officially known as the Celestine Church. It would have ended there had it not been for the fact that the killer had immediately blurted he had been forced to commit this act by a member of 'Ndrangheta who had happened to have been a wizard.

There was no evidence, of course, linking the shooter to 'Ndrangheta. However, Gerardo had always worried about the possibility that someone could leak his association with the Ministry of Magic to the various crime syndicates. Once that happened, it would only be a matter of time until 'Ndrangheta tried to get rid of him.

He knew how to defend himself from Muggles. Unfortunately, it hadn't occurred to him to tell Uriele to keep his guard up. Now, unfortunately, it was too late.

A few days after Uriele's death, a mysterious letter had appeared in his mailbox. The text was short and to the point.

"Don Gerardo. As you can see, Uriele is now dead. Your mother Bruna, your wife Emanuela, and your daughter Camelia are all being tracked by people with Wizarding expertise. We are working on tracking down your cousins even as I am writing this message. You have exactly twenty-four hours from the receipt of this message to stop monitoring our organization and resign from the Ministry. If you do not do so, one of these women will be killed. Further relatives will die each day you delay. If you do not change your mind by the time we've run out of cousins, you yourself will be targeted by a high-ranking wizard in our organization. Do the right thing, Don Gerardo, and save your relatives."

Gerardo had shuddered at this point. There had been unconfirmed reports of wizards in the organization, and many people in his office had spent the last few months looking frantically for...
proof either way -- and finding none.

The letter continued. "The 'Ndrangheta Syndicate acknowledges that your livelihood will be ruined if you are forced to resign from the Ministry of Magic. Your daughter, should she survive, still has to go college. Therefore, the Godfather has agreed to provide you a stipend of 20,000 euros per year to cover the expenses from your lost job."

Gerardo had known immediately that it wouldn't be enough, considering his wife didn't work. There would be a catch, naturally, and he had suspected what it would be.

He hadn't been disappointed. "The Godfather apologizes that the organization cannot pay more than that. However, if you agree to join us after renouncing your affiliation with the Ministry, we will be able to supplement the stipend with a 80,000 euros per year salary."

The letter concluded with typical nonsense. "May Our Lord Jesus Christ grant you the wisdom to accept this generous offer. Your obedient servant, the Godfather."

What a surprise, Gerardo had thought. Join our organization and we'll be able to send your kid to college. Your wife won't have to get a job at all, and you will likely have a very easy lifestyle. Of course, if you do anything to betray us, we will kill you. And if you don't do anything to betray us, the Ministry will kill you.

-----------

That letter had come yesterday morning, about 23 hours ago. He needed to think, and think quickly. There was an obvious solution, of course. The problem was that it was TOO obvious -- he couldn't imagine someone in 'Ndrangheta not thinking about it. Nevertheless, it was the only thing he could do.

He sent a Patronus over to his boss's office. "Don Amaranto, I need to talk to you."

Amaranto, not surprisingly, responded immediately. "I am always at your service, Gerardo. How can I help you?"

"Simple. I take it you know about the letter I got sent by 'Ndrangheta?"

"I do. I feel for you, Gerardo. What are you going to do?"

Gerardo drew a deep breath. "I'm going to turn double agent. I'm going to tell them I'm going to work for them while sending information to you."

Amaranto whistled. "It's a clever idea, Gerardo. Unfortunately, it's too obvious. The Godfather has to figure that you're going to try it."

"I fully agree, Amaranto. Unfortunately, I don't think we have much of a choice. Rest assured, I will be very careful here. I know what to do. Do you know of any more information about whether they've got wizards? There have been a lot of disappearing wizards of late, and we're still trying to track down whether they're being killed or taken hostage by some of these groups."

"Not yet, Gerardo. I -- Jesus Christ, can you hold on a second? We've got a report of a dead witch. I sure hope it's not what we think it is."

Gerardo blanched, and he lost his concentration long enough for the Patronus to nearly vanish. "I hope so too, Amaranto. And I am praying."
The delay stretched on interminably. Finally, Amaranto spoke once again. His voice was hoarse.

"We've just got an ID on the body. Bruna Siciliani, age 69. Bullet hole in the head. I'm sorry, Gerardo. We'll do everything we can to help you and track down the killers."

Gerardo nearly broke down. However, he steeled himself -- he could grieve later. "That does it. I'm going in. I can't risk anyone else dying on my behalf. I'll keep you posted."

"Gerardo, wait a few minutes for your emotions to calm down! You're grieving right now, and --"

Gerardo cut him off. "I can't, Amaranto. This cinches it. If I wait to calm down, they'll kill even more people! It's obvious they're not bluffing now. We have no choice. Rest assured, that if it's a trap I'm going to blast them into so many pieces that the Devil will have trouble finding them. And if it's not a trap I'll probably blast them anyway for killing my brother and mother."

There was a pause on the other end. Finally, Amaranto sighed. "I see your point. You're probably going to go in no matter what at this point, so it isn't worth fighting anymore. Good luck, and may God be with you."

----------------

[location classified]

'Ndrangheta Syndicate Safe House

----------------

Gerardo knew he was in trouble when the man who blindfolded him and handcuffed him greeted him with the word "Expelliarmus". Son of a bitch, he thought. They DO have wizards. He immediately tried to send a Patronus but of course couldn't because his wand was gone. Horrified, he tried to Apparate out of there only to find it blocked.

The man who had Disarmed him spoke in a voice which was actually somewhat apologetic -- and sounded vaguely familiar. "Don't fight it, Don Gerardo. You can't get out. You're trapped, like the rest of us."

Gerardo didn't like the sound of this. Like the rest of us? What was going on?

The wizard continued. "Again, I apologize in advance, but I have no choice, as do you. You'll soon see why. Petrificus Totalus."

Gerardo's limbs froze as the wizard left the room momentarily. Seconds later, another man walked in. "Good evening, Don Gerardo. I take it that you were unharmed on the way here? I speak for the Godfather, and rest assured I will punish anyone who overstepped their boundaries."

Gerardo could barely speak. "I am unharmed. I don't recognize your voice, sir."

The speaker laughed. "That is to be expected, Don Gerardo. I am disguising my voice thanks to one of my wizards. You see now, of course, that we have wizards in our group. You have undoubtedly tried to Apparate out of here and found you could not."

Gerardo couldn't nod, so he simply said. "That is correct, sir."

"As I would suspect. You Ministry people are very good at spells like that."

Gerardo's jaw dropped. You Ministry People. Suddenly, he recognized the first speaker's voice.
"Don Cristian Padovano! Mother of God, you have turned!"

The first speaker nodded. "Indeed, Gerardo, it is I. Rest assured, the turning was not voluntary. I was trapped and had no choice, as do you now. Like it or not, you are now working for 'Ndrangheta."

Gerardo was furious. "I'm stronger than you are! I'll get both of us out of here!"

The spokesman for the Godfather laughed. "I don't think so. Cristian, would you be so good as to cast the spell that initiates the Unbreakable Vow?"

Gerardo couldn't see the various lights through the hood. However, he understood the incantation and felt the tingling sensation as the spell took him in its clutches. This was followed by something cold prodding him in the back of the head.

"Don Gerardo, the pressure you are feeling is a gun pointed at your back of your head. If you do not renounce your oaths, allow Cristian to Obliviate any plans you have, and follow all 'Ndrangheta commands within one minute, we will kill you and then promptly kill all of your relatives. You have already lost two, sir. Please do not put the blood of more innocents on your hands."

Gerardo shook his head. "I can't renounce my oaths. I am an Accepted and have sworn an oath not to renounce oaths."

The Godfather's representative chuckled again. "I highly recommend that you do it, sir. You will feel a great deal of pain when you renounce the oath to not to renounce other oaths, which is the only one which will be problematic. However, it is far more pleasant than getting a bullet in your head. Pain is temporary, sir. Death is not."

Gerardo swore. However, he knew what to do. He had to die for his country. He had always figured this could happen.

Then it occurred to him that he couldn't. If he refused, his family would also be killed. God knows how far this would go. He knew one thing for certain, however. He knew why all of the Italian wizards had been disappearing now, and unless he was badly mistaken, he'd see them all again as a member of this organization.

Cristian sounded apologetic once more. "I'm sorry, Gerardo. I can understand what you're going through. I thought the same thing, and it didn't work. Like I said, you're trapped. If it is any consolation, consider the fact that you are going to be given a generous salary for your work. Your family will also be helped out a great deal."

Gerardo grunted. "A salary won't go far if my own Ministry comrades shoot me within a few weeks."

The Godfather's representative laughed even louder. "You will be able to enjoy it much longer than if you refuse and die on the spot. All you will have to do for us is follow our instructions and do what we tell you to do. Simple as that, and once you join we will protect you from the Ministry. Now, you have approximately fifteen seconds left. What is your decision?"

Gerardo stared at the floor in resignation. He knew what he had to do, and he didn't like it. But his family meant too much to him. Who knows, at some point in the future someone could come in and free him from the group's clutches...at which point they would fall into the same trap he did. Come to think of it, the Ministry could have easily sent him in at some point to try to get Cristian out!
The pain of renouncing the oaths was indeed excruciating but temporary.

To be continued...

Update #369: But Mommy, They Said It Was a MAGIC Kingdom! / 13 Tishrei 5757 / 2 Days To Sukkot Pilgrimage Festival

Thursday, September 26, 1996
Magic Kingdom
Orlando, Florida
United States of America

NEXT UP: You DO Realize They'll Ask You for $13.8 Billion As Well

Kenneth Franco chuckled when he saw the presentation. "I was wondering when this would happen. Now that you've actually gotten yourselves access to wizards, you really want to make the Magic Kingdom...well, a magic kingdom."

The Disney executive nodded. "That's right, Wizard Franco. First came the kids who started complaining that the little Mickey Mouse mascots and so forth were people in costumes and not walking mice. Then the adults started complaining that the older displays looked a bit cheesy and needed to be redesigned. It's only going to be a matter of time until people sue the Magic Kingdom for being false advertising."

"How could it be false advertising? For Muggles, you've done a very good job. It's the closest thing to magic you've been able to produce."

"Indeed it has, sir. Unfortunately, you're American, and you know Americans. We want it all, and we want it big. Once they realized that the possibility of a theme park based on magic was actually available to them, they immediately started clamoring for it. Granted, a lot of the stuff they're asking for is probably impossible, but since when do Americans pay attention to real life?"

Franco nodded. "I totally agree, Chairman. To be honest, I think our country is a wee bit too materialistic and TV-centered for its own good. Being able to reproduce things with magic may help a little, but it's only a matter of time until that just makes us even more greedy. However, back to the subject at hand. Judging from the presentations you've shown us, you'd be surprised at how much of the stuff we're going to be able to pull off."

The executive gasped. "Really? You can actually DO lots of that stuff?"

"Indeed, we can. Keep in mind that since Muggles can't see the entire realm of possibilities as we do, they can't get as creative as we can. At any rate, we'll start with the centerpiece attraction here in the Magic Kingdom. You want a floating palace? That's pretty straightforward. It's going to be a bitch to maintain, but it's doable."

"What about allowing the guests to fly up to the castle?"

"That we can't do -- we can't make people fly. However, what we can do is use the Levicorpus spell to lift people up and then move them around in a way which makes them feel like they're flying. It's going to be awkward at first, but I suspect they'll manage to convince themselves that they've actually flown -- especially if you attach wings to them."
"Can't you give them wings?"

"In principle, yes. In practice, Transfiguration of people against their will and without their knowledge is highly discouraged and in some cases is considered criminal. I don't want to start with that. Besides, the fact that the person has wings doesn't necessarily mean he'll be able to USE them or that they'll be powerful enough to provide enough lift to get him off the ground."

"I see. What about having real elves, fairies, and so forth running around here?"

"That's questionable. They're sentient beings and so forth, and we can't compel them to do what we want. You'd have to hire them, pay them, house them, and so forth. Furthermore, keep in mind that the Muggle idealization of an elf or fairy is not necessarily going to match reality."

"Can you animate a Mickey Mouse doll?"

"That should not be a problem, Chairman. Animating the doll and enlarging it to human-size is a common magical technique. Keep in mind though that it will cause the employee currently inside the mascot to lose his or her job. Furthermore, the doll will still not be able to speak easily, and if someone from Japan tries to speak to the doll while it is being animated by an American wizard you will have a language barrier."

"I thought you had Language Lozenges for that."

"We do, but each language has a different Lozenge for it. You would have to guess which language is going to be used by each customer and have the wizard pop a Lozenge at the right time."

The executive jotted down some notes. "I see. Can you handle parts of the Cinderella story, changing a child's clothes into a gown and so forth?"

"That's doable. However, it will require consent from both the child and his or her guardian. That's going to add some paperwork, which will interfere with the illusion."

The executive slapped the palm of his hand against his head. "Illusions. I should have thought of that. Can wizards produce illusions?"

"Yes."

"Including dynamic illusions which can interact with the customers?"

Franco frowned. "If two people view an illusion, they will see the same thing. Personalized interaction will be difficult."

"Well, forget that. How about sending passengers to the moon or stars?"

Franco shook his head fervently. "The Selene lunar mission is the best we can do at this point. It will take 24 hours and still not allow the customer to travel outside the spacecraft without protection. As far as the stars go, don't even think about it. Even if we did beat the 24 hour barrier for the moon to the point where Solar System travel would be easy, there is still no way we can exceed the speed of light. A round trip would take nine years or more no matter what."

The executive was about to start speaking once more when something suddenly occurred to Franco.
"You know, it just occurred to me that we may have an artifact available which will be a perfect fit for the new theme park. It's in England right now, and I'll have to ask Headmaster Dumbledore about it."

"Really? What is it?"

"It's a magical mirror which allows the viewer to see his or her dreams coming true. The child will look into the mirror and see him in the best situation he can think of. It would be perfect for the new Magic Kingdom. It's called the Mirror of Erised."

"Can multiple people view this mirror at the same time?"

"Yes. However, I recommend that people line up and pay for it so as to give themselves a personal experience."

The executive grinned. "That would be an excellent idea. See if you can get Dumbledore to let us have this mirror. In the meantime, let's switch over to the Animal Kingdom. What do you think about that?"

Franco shook his head in disbelief. "We're going to have to tone this down a lot. I'd say 95% of those animals won't work. There's a reason Hagrid put the animals he chose in that zoo in DC. You may be able to get Deirdre over here, but she's a major draw there and I doubt the new Magical Wing manager will part with her."

"But people LOVE dragons!"

"Indeed, and dragons love people as well...fried, and possibly with ketchup."

I was tempted, very tempted. However, I was concerned that it would be too cold and too crowded. I had looked into getting a hotel room in Rhinebeck but found out very quickly that they had suddenly started selling for $200/night or more. Besides, I'd have to leave work early to get to New York before sundown and I didn't think I could spare the time.

Samuel's suggestion that people embark on a pilgrimage to a site important to them had thrown the Students for Samuel movement into a tizzy. With Rhinebeck a scant five hours from Boston and even less from New York, reports were coming in from Brandeis, MIT, and Harvard that no fewer than 250 people had decided to pool their resources and start heading over to Rhinebeck...from those three schools alone.

Samuel had declared the Omega conference site off limits while the conference was in session. Unfortunately for him, he was stuck in Israel at the moment and had managed to overlook the fact that common people would find traveling hundreds of miles relatively easy. Once he had found out that Omega was going to be a major destination, he realistically had no choice but approve the visit.

I suspected that Samuel would have his hands full in Israel. People all over Israel, and possibly the rest of the Abrahamic world, were likely going to fly in to the Temple for Sukkot and call it Samuel's "personal pilgrimage". If Samuel had to okay Omega, he HAD to do the Temple as that's where the original pilgrimage had been. Michal Oved was supposedly up to her neck trying to figure out where to put the predicted 3,000,000 people about to show up on her doorstep.
The biggest problem with the pilgrimage to Jerusalem was the fact that large numbers of people already lived in Jerusalem...and for the most part they WEREN'T Samuelist. Even worse, many of them considered Samuelism to be a kind of heresy. Although al-Qaeda and Hamas had been more or less disarmed, there were still flareups here and there between the Israelis and the Palestinians which the former Hamas wizard and Michal Oved clamped down on immediately.

Jerusalem had been a powder keg even without Samuel. Samuel's suggestion just added large sprawling tent -- well, Sukkah -- cities with pilgrims from all over the world who were seen as heretics by many of the traditional Abrahamic faiths, and forced everyone to live in close proximity for seven days. Not to mention the fact that many of my friends were still angry that the Western Wall had been demolished. Hopefully the wizards would be able to take care of this before it turned into...well, a disaster of biblical proportions. And if they had Deborah lead the services at some point...I shuddered.

Thankfully, I didn't need to worry about that. I was going to stay put, and hopefully the world wouldn't blow up over the next seven week and a half.

To be continued...

-------------

Update #369.5 Nuke Winter Queen

-------------

Thursday, September 26, 1996

Icicle Citadel

Arctic Ocean

-------------

She didn't know where she was, all she could see was a cold white glow. She didn't feel any floor or wall, she was floating in a terrible empty nothingness. She didn't hear any voice, the silence was complete... and trying as she was to make any noise, she had no body. She had no sense of time, or magic, or self. Sofya, cultist of the Black God, disciple of Rasputin, was unaware that her body, possessed and altered by the creature known as Mab since more than 2 weeks ago, was walking through a cavernous room filled with ice sculptures towards a magnificent ice throne. Her master, her god, even her own existance was fading away like a dream.

In the real world, the white-clad woman reached the throne and sat down, closing her eyes.

In the bright void surrounding the consciousness of the russian witch, a pair of emerald eyes opened... then another, and dozens more. One pair of them was bigger and somehow more clearly defined, less ethereal than the others. A cold voice came from it, like freezing wind through delicate crystals, and it echoed from the other eyes all around. Suddenly, forgotten -or Obliviated, she had no way to tell- memories came to Sofya, about countless interrogations before... and by remembering, her surroundings instantly changed.

Images flashed, too quick to fully comprehend, yet their meaning was crystal clear, as if they had already happened. Wizards and Muggles fighting each other across prairies, in streets, in trenches, in grasslands, in frozen tundras, through deserts, on the sea, in the air, committing act of war that can
occur upon this earth. These were images of war, a merciless, bloody war, a war so grand as to make
Hell itself tremble. A war whose fury is built with iron, and lightning, and fire. A war to sweep in
like a tempest, leaving not even ravens to scavenge, from this Earth!

And then the light of atomic explosions, followed by rolling mushroom clouds covering the skies,
and years and decades of darkness and poisonous snow. Sofya felt herself corporeal then, standing in
a wasteland of ruins covered by snow. She looked around and recognised the gutted buildings as
those of her home town in Southern Russia. As she took a step she felt something crack under her
feet, and knew that it was bones, human bones under the snow. Slowly, she looked around. In place
of the ethereal eyes, ghost-like figures surrounded her, every one of them constantly changing it's
form between two states: a bleached white woman with emerald eyes, and what was their original
form. Humans, Veela, even Fairies and a few Giants. Beautiful daughters offered to the mighty
Queen in the North as tribute, would-be apprentices fooled by promises of power, formidable foes or
their beloved kin taken as trophies... and occasionally, devoted followers who actually volunteered
for this. Their minds were open to her, pouring information even without Legilimency on her part,
even despite her Occlumency barriers held in place.

The witch spoke softly. "You are insane, you know, all of you."
The ethereal chorus snorted, and spoke as one. "Did we just hear a follower of Tchernobog
questioning our sanity? Then let me ask you, if your 'God' would allow my madness to flourish
across the globe..." Mab paused, possibly savoring their next words, then continued,
"Then, wouldn't it seem to you, that any 'God' like that would be just as mad as we are?"

Sofya gritted his teeth and let out a low growl, almost sounding like an animal, and spat: "We will
stop you!" Mab ignored his reaction and continued,
"We are Mab, the Queen in the North, the Queen of Air and Darkness and Winter. Do you have any
idea how many people your ancestors have sacrificed to me? How can you bow to a false god, when
you know that the one who your ancestors truly worshipped is real? How can you deny the millions
knowingly thrown at our mercy? Napoleon, Hitler, it wasn't Tchernobog that saved your people
from them, it was Winter. The millions carried away to die in the frozen lands of Siberia, they
weren't sacrificed to the Black God, their soul is ours! How can you still underestimate our power?

The witch stomped defiantly, her will seeing to it that the bones-that-weren't-really-there under her
feet didn't snap. "You are in my mind, bitch! State your business if you insist then get out, and no
more of your games!"

Cruel laughter from around, and piercing stares from every eye. She recognised it as Legilimency
and concentrated on her barriers. Stone walls were cracked by freezing ice, but she quickly erected a
steel wall in her mind's fortress. Yet, she felt some fragments have slipped out, just like last time and
before that.

"Oh, but together we could be so much more!" sighed the chorus, and it was impossible to tell if it
was mocking or honest. "You are the first Muggleborn to be our mortal vessel in centuries... look
around, it's your mind that provided us with this beautiful vision of everlasting winter. Together, we
shall make it real!" Predictably, the girl screamed "NEVER!"
Mab just laughed. "I am in your blood, mortal. Your fate is sealed. Your body and life is no longer yours, and you WILL merge with us, the only thing you decide is how much you want it to hurt. There is no escape. But know this, mortal, I'll savor your defiance... it will make turning you all the more enjoyable."

To be continued...

-------------
Update #370: You DO Realize They'll Ask You for $13.8 Billion As Well / 13 Tishrei 5757 / 2 Days To Sukkot Pilgrimage Festival
-------------
Thursday, September 26, 1996
City Hall
Boston, MA
United States of America
-------------
NEXT UP: I'm a Prophet, Not an Editor
-------------
Mayor Thomas Menino shook his head. "This is getting ridiculous," he mumbled. "They're raising the price tag again and saying it will take even longer? How hard is it to just dig a hole in the ground and get rid of the old one?"

The advisor tried to explain. "Plenty, if you consider the fact that if we don't do this right we'll wreck the entire city. Sure, we can dig a hole and finish it very quickly, but in order to do so we would have to tell people they can't use I-93 for a few months. Do you want a reminder of what traffic was like here BEFORE they put the interstate in?"

"Nevertheless, I still can't believe that it's gotten so out of control. With my luck, the tunnels are going to collapse and the one leading to the airport is going to flood because people used shoddy equipment in order to reduce the cost. That's not going to happen on my watch."

"We'll see that it doesn't, Mr. Mayor. In the meantime, all you have to do is sign here and we'll get back to work."

Menino looked out the window. "You do realize we're in a bit of an economic downturn right now. How are we going to PAY for all of this stuff? We can't raise tolls on the Turnpike as people will scream. We can't put tolls on I-93 as people will scream even more. And I can't raise taxes without risking myself being kicked out of office. Whatever happened to the idea of civic responsibility?"

The advisor rolled his eyes. "Mr. Mayor, don't dwell on the past. It's not like we can magically go back in time and -- or can we?"

Menino shot a questioning glance at him. "Frank, what are you suggesting?"

The advisor began laughing. "We may have a solution after all, if one of them is actually smart enough to figure out how to do it. And I bet it's going to be a hell of a lot cheaper than Bechtel-Parsons."

Menino snorted. "Oh really? And what's that? You just wave a magic wand and everything gets built?"
The advisor's response floored him. "That's exactly right, sir. We ask a wizard to do it."

Menino's eyes widened. "You want a WIZARD to bid on the BIG DIG?"

"Why not, Mr. Mayor? You've been to the Four Towns. They've got the ability to do stuff we can barely dream of -- and do it UNDERWATER. The fact that they even have a spell to keep the water out is going to help by itself -- we won't have to worry about waterproofing a lot of the materials in the tunnel. Hell, we can have a big holiday downtown and the wizard can just Evanesco the old elevated highway when it's time to demolish it."

Menino whistled. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"Completely, Mr. Mayor. I suspect that hiring a few wizards at $1 million each will bring us a long way. There are only three problems, though."

"Oh? What's that?"

"First, there may be people reluctant to use the tunnel if it's built by a wizard. If only 10% of the cars wind up on the city streets downtown Boston is going to be gridlocked. Second, maintenance may be a little more expensive. We'll always need to have wizards around to fix things if there are problems. Finally, WSC won't be able to help us here because of the Cromwell case."

"The Cromwell case?"

"Yes. A few people had their jobs replaced by one wizard, and one of the women sued. The courts ruled that the wizards should restrict themselves to doing stuff Muggles couldn't do and not taking Muggle jobs."

Menino thought for a moment. "You know, you may be onto something here. Judging from what I've heard so far about the Big Dig, it sounds like Muggles can't do that job here."

"They did the Ted Williams Tunnel fine, sir. It's just the I-93 one which is problematic."

"All right, so they can get half the job done and only find much too late that they can't do the rest of it. Meanwhile, the price tag goes up and up. I can't believe I'm saying this, but I think we need to reopen the bidding process again and this time have them include wizards. At the very least, that's going to hint that Bechtel-Parsons be much more careful about keeping costs under control."

The advisor nodded. "I see where you're going. Bechtel-Parsons is going to have a fit, but you can just say you've worked with them long enough and would be more than willing to keep them on if you had the money to pay for it. And now since we're in a recession, we don't."

"Exactly. Let's issue a statement. We'll cap the bidding at $5 billion. At the very least, the bidder has to finish the Central Artery. If he can do that and still stay under budget, we can have them tack on the Green Line extension to Medford and Somerville, the North-South Rail Link, the I-695 belt, and a whole bunch of other goodies. Whatever they can get under $5 billion"

The advisor goggled at him. "You're going to revive the I-695 belt? People in places like Brookline and Somerville aren't going to be particularly happy when we kick them out to make room for a new highway. And don't forget Charlestown, whose residents will be helping choose the next mayor of Boston. Remember what happened with the West End and the Turnpike extension."
Menino's response was to show the advisor a picture of a DeLorean Aviator. "Not if the cars fly, my friend. Not if the cars fly."

To be continued...
Update #371: I'm a Prophet, Not an Editor / 15 Tishrei 5757 / Sukkot Day 1

Friday Night, September 27, 1996
Al-Aqsa Mosque
Jerusalem

Michal Oved looked at the former Hamas wizard in disbelief. She turned to her colleagues in the Israeli Ministry of Magic and found her concern reflected in their faces as well.

The Hamas wizard shrugged. "Inshallah, everything will be all right. However, I must freely confess that although there are a lot of Samuelist pilgrims here, the majority of the inhabitants of Jerusalem are still members of the three traditional Abrahamic faiths...and they still tend to get on each other's nerves."

Oved bit her lip. "Unless they find a common enemy, which is precisely what I'm afraid of."

The Hamas wizard nodded as he looked out at the scene stretching out before him. "I agree, Madame Minister. You've got everyone in the Ministry out there right now?"

"Most of them, Wizard Amirmoez. We've got to keep some in reserve in case someone tries to do something stupid somewhere other than at the Temple. Hopefully, that won't happen."

Her colleague grunted. "I sure hope not. However, remember we've got eight days of this. There's plenty of time for something to go awry, particularly during the middle days. Besides, once Shemini Atzeret comes along there's going to be a mad scramble for hotels once people realize these little huts of theirs aren't going to be particularly comfortable."

Oved could not help but admit that the man was right as she looked out from her vantage point several hundred feet above the Temple Mount. Many of the Jewish wizards had argued that it would be disrespectful to position themselves above such an important shrine, particularly when the location of the Holy of Holies from the prior temples was still somewhat unknown. However, she was adamant as the possibility of disaster was just too high.

Spread out before her was a huge tent city which had sprung up over the past forty-eight hours. Although Samuel had agreed that worshipers would not have to go to Jerusalem for their pilgrimages, the prophet hadn't expected them to want to fly over there voluntarily. About two thirds of the people had come in tents, RV's, and other unusual dwellings. About a quarter of the visitors had brought honest to goodness Sukkot with them, the traditional boxlike temporary houses which had been built on site. One out of every twelve people had come with barely a sleeping bag and not much else.

There had already been a few fights as people started fighting over who got the tents, who got the Sukkot, and who got the RV's. Thankfully, it wasn't raining...yet. If these fights were an omen, she hated to think what would happen if it started raining. The wizards, realizing all too well what would
happen if the confrontations escalated into a religious war, broke things up IMMEDIATELY each time. Thankfully, though, the pilgrims had been quite well-behaved for the most part. After all, they were almost all Samuelists who were treating the gathering similar to the American concert at Woodstock.

The big problems would involve how the religious extremists living in Jerusalem would react to the people whom they considered heretics. Many of the ultra-Orthodox Jews in the Mea Shearim district of Jerusalem had gotten into fights with several of their Samuelist brethren, excommunicating a few of the rabbis and reprimanding women who were not dressed modestly. To make matters worse, some radical Muslims had actually gone out and stoned a Samuelist passerby. Thankfully, the pilgrim had been healed quickly by the doctors and the attacker had been placed in the custody of the Israeli police. Someone had nearly hit Celestine with a thrown citrus fruit which was a traditional Sukkot ritual object, and had John Paul not put up a defensive shield around the Kohen Gadol, Suleiman would have likely gotten its partner -- a stalk of palm with a very sharp tip -- in the eye a few seconds later.

There were already eleven people in jail, most of whom were pilgrims, and the holiday had barely started. It occurred to her that this must have been what Pontus Pilate had felt when he had to deal with similar pilgrimages during Passover -- particularly with a popular religious maverick in town. Hopefully these Samuelists would not meet the same fate as Jesus of Nazareth.

The problems here, however, were nothing compared to what had supposedly been going in at Mecca. Many Muslim Samuelists figured that this would be a perfect time for them to perform their mandatory pilgrimage to Mecca. That made perfect sense, after all, as it was a shrine which meant a great deal to them. Unfortunately, many extremists there no longer considered the Samuelists true Muslims and had been meting out the traditional punishment for infidels desecrating Mecca: execution. Supposedly 150 people were already dead and pilgrims were running for their lives. The situation had reached the point where Dagher himself, as a devout Muslim and the former Saudi Minister of Magic, was actually going to be intervening himself as a former Saudi and not a member of Atlantis. Oved knew enough about Dagher to realize that he was going to come down hard on the attackers, particularly one of his own country's holy shrines.

Trying to put the problems in Mecca out of her mind, she watched as the people tried to make their way into the Temple courtyard for the first service of the evening. People had supposedly been camped out for ten hours outside the old mosque, as one of the advantages of carrying around a temporary house was the ability to set up shop wherever you wanted. She knew immediately that the wizards wouldn't be able to let even 1% of the pilgrims into the shrine. Many people began arguing for shrinking the pilgrims when they entered the mosque. However, the executive committee had vetoed that proposal as some people would likely refuse to use magic in the Temple on personal religious grounds, which in turn could result in them stepping on their pint-sized colleagues and killing them.

The government had eventually decided to televise the ceremonies inside the Temple and broadcast them on large closed-circuit screens outside the Temple. The Jewish authorities had refused, of course, arguing that use of electricity was forbidden on the holiday. The broadcast was eventually handled by a religious Muslim who considered supporting the ceremony his charitable and moral duty.

Oved looked at the wizards next to her once again. She sure hoped that this was going to work...and that Samuel wasn't going to try something stupid.

-----------------------

Rabbi David Levine was barely able to make it into the mosque before the wizards and security
officers barred the door and explained that they couldn't fit any more men into the building. The women's side was still filling up, but he suspected that it would also close up soon.

Thanking God that he was six foot four, he looked up to the front of the mosque to see what was going on. Samuel was there, of course, along with his interpreter. He saw a few lulavim in the room, which was a bit unorthodox as the palm stalks weren't generally used on Shabbat. He supposed that Samuel had figured the ceremonial plants were all right to carry on the Sabbath -- after all, he'd ruled that the Shofar was OK. Celestine, John Paul, Suleiman, and the rest of the executive committee was there as well.

Next to the executive committee was a huge pile of canned goods to be given to the poor. There was an even larger pile somewhere outside Jerusalem, he'd been told, as many of the pilgrims had brought food which violated the kosher or Halal laws and as such were not appropriate for the Temple. There had been a brief flap over genetically engineered crops (especially when Samuel didn't recognize the species) but Samuel had eventually let them in.

Samuel looked resolute and excited. The interpreter, however, seemed a bit nervous. Even worse, so did the other executive committee members. Levine sure hoped Samuel was going to do something crazy again. He still had a problem with female clergy, but he supposed he'd get accustomed to it.

Samuel raised his hand and began to speak. "Thank you for coming, ladies and gentlemen. For the first time in a long time, you will be able to celebrate a pilgrimage festival the way people did in my time and in the time of Rabbi Joshua of Nazareth: by going to Jerusalem, the center of the Abrahamic faiths. I have become accustomed to your world, and it is fitting that you can be introduced to mine at this point."

There was scattered applause, as people couldn't tell whether they should clap or not. Meanwhile, Levine's jaw dropped when he realized who Rabbi Joshua of Nazareth was.

Samuel chuckled. "At least we have a centralized Temple now. When I was alive, they were still thinking about it. Dawid had some plans about it but hadn't finished designing the building until after I died."

Samuel's face grew serious, and the interpreter drew a deep breath when Samuel spoke once more. "Before I begin the service tonight, I would like to introduce you to a new initiative which will help you understand our shared traditions better and with greater accuracy. I have read much of what you call the Old Testament, including a book which apparently was written by me."

Samuel shrugged. "I must say, this Book of Samuel is very interesting reading. It would be even more interesting if most of the events in that book actually happened. I don't know who wrote this, but it's all wrong. I never said half of those things, and I certainly wouldn't have approved of ordaining Dawid king after I'd gone out of my to warn the people to not anoint a king. My guess is Dawid wrote it but I'm not sure. It sound like my era's most powerful warlord apparently wanted to give himself additional supernatural support as a propaganda campaign while he and his son were fleecing the populace to try to plan and/or fund his temple to Yahweh. As if that...what do you call it now, trebuchet...he killed Goliath with hadn't been good enough to make him a temporary regional power."

Levine stared at Samuel in shock. Samuel was thinking of changing the text of the Bible? That was going to raise a few eyebrows.

The prophet continued. "There is a lot of information missing from this book. Tiqwael isn't there."
Someone left out the prophetess Nazirah, the powerful Philistine witch Ulitara, the Philistine/Nephilu alliance, as well as Michael Oved and the whole Ministry of Magic. I can understand them leaving the witches out when the Statue of Secrecy was up, but we don't need to leave them out anymore. And of course the story starts with that fable Eli thought up to explain how I came to be.

"After much discussion and debate, we have agreed to modify the text of this book to indicate what really happened. Since this is a fundamental text of your shared heritage, I expect that you will appreciate changes which I can promise to you are true. It will teach you more about my era, at the very least. For a fundamental cultural text like this, accuracy is crucial."

The muttering in the crowd grew more intense. Samuel, sensing the problem, tried to explain his decision. "We already changed the story of the Deluge to refer to Noha-Pishtin, which was a similar situation. This is for the best."

Levine frowned. It actually wasn't the same, he thought. The Noha-Pishtin story was more or less kept the same -- there had still been a flood and so forth -- and the details had been changed somewhat. This, however, was much different. Entirely new characters would be added, Samuel's words would be changed, and so forth. David probably would get much more bad press, as would possibly Solomon if Samuel had known much about David's successor. He wondered how well this would go over with the non-Samuelist Abrahamics. Not well, he thought.

Samuel continued. "Anitiel and Tiqwael have offered to amend the latter parts of the book of Warlords, which you know as the book of Judges. They lived through that era and can help clarify some of those stories as well. I believe Tiqwael already told you what really happened to Jephthah, Shimshon, and Goliath."

Levine didn't know the true story. However, he'd heard that the Students for Samuel in the room had received one hell of a surprise. Something about Jephthah having PTSD from the war, the Nephilim being real giants, and so forth?

He looked at the rest of the executive committee and saw the expressions on their faces. It sounded like amending the text of Judges and Samuel had been a very close vote. Most of them had realized that it was the right thing to do (or had been badgered by Samuel) but were balking at what they would have to do to enforce the decree. Levine suddenly had a terrible vision of someone putting a bullet through Samuel's head and the whole movement collapsing in an instant.

It hit him a few seconds later. How could one kill Samuel if Samuel was already dead?

He hoped the man knew what he was doing.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #372: 1.5 Day Holiday / 16 Tishrei 5757 / Sukkot Day 2
-------------
Sunday, September 29, 1996
Omega Institute
Rhinebeck, NY
-------------
NEXT UP: Maybe That's Why Radioactive Isotopes Vanish
-------------
Michael Sternberg couldn't help but laugh. For a convention which was supposed to be unifying the Abrahamic faiths, the people couldn't seem to make up their mind whether or not work was
supposed to be forbidden.

Officially, Samuel had decreed that the second day of Sukkot, which was a work-free holiday for people not raised in Israel, would be work-optional. The custom of focusing on the harvest and spending time in the Sukkah would still be in force for all seven days, however.

A third of the Jewish pilgrims were of the people were following their prior traditions and not working today. Half had taken advantage of the fact that the second day happened to have been a Sunday and gone exploring. The remainder appeared to be REALLY wanting to go on vacation with the explorers but were a bit worried about defying tradition.

Most of the Muslims had raided the cafeteria for Halal food and promptly gone off on day trips. About a third of the Christians had stayed behind, figuring a work-optional day meant no work since it was a Sunday. The rest had joined the Jews and Muslims on vacation.

The place was still jammed, however. With New York, Montreal, and Boston so close by, the population of Rhinebeck had exploded from the customary 7,000 to approximately 600,000. People were crammed into hotels, and Deborah had eventually found herself forced to admit the pilgrims onto Omega property. The overcrowding problem was alleviated somewhat by an enterprising witch, on a pilgrimage of her own, who started turning everyone's Sukkah, tent, and whatnot into an Extendatent. Suddenly, tents which could have slept 4 people could now sleep 80. But that didn't prevent virtually every park and field within five miles from be covered completely with tents. There were several shots of nuns, imams, and at least three Buddhist monks helping someone build a Sukkah.

The use of magic on the Extendatents on the first day of Sukkot had been controversial. Some of the rabbis left at Omega had complained that use of magic was forbidden on the holiday, seeing it as a form of constructive work similar to building an extension onto the tent. The arguments intensified when Deborah had offered to rule on the issue; many of the rabbis involved were still not accustomed to female rabbis. Deborah had eventually ruled that since the use of magic was not hard physical labor and did not require much creativity -- just reuse of existing spells -- it would be permitted. One of the rabbis naturally balked, at which point she had smiled sweetly at him and told everyone to sleep in HIS tent and kick out the host in favor of the guests if there wasn't any space. Considering that it had rained the previous day, that had settled the argument very quickly.

For the most part, the first day of Sukkot had been quite inspirational. Everyone seemed to be getting along pretty well. He had once found himself chatting with an imam, a nun, and a young Orthodox rabbi (or rabbinical student -- he couldn't remember which) from Calgary named Seth Binus who had been curious about Omega and decided to check it out as a miniature second honeymoon. Normally, putting together an Orthodox man, an imam, a secular Jew, and a devout Christian would be a recipe for disaster. Fortunately, the meeting had helped all four parties learn more about their shared traditions.

The pilgrimages had not all gone according to plan, however. There were rumors of chaos at Mecca where radical Muslims had attacked Muslim Samuelists at the shrine, arguing that they were no longer Muslim and therefore not welcome there. Several hundred people had been killed, and non-Samuelist pilgrims on their on hajji had been found their quest for spiritual guidance turn into a nightmare. Rumor had it that Heydar Dagher, the Grand Mugwump himself, had led several Saudi Muslim wizards and Muggles into Mecca to deal with the attackers. Although he himself was an Aes Sedai and therefore not allowed to create magical weapons or attack Muggles, he served as a negotiator while issuing battle orders through a Muggle so he could get around the restriction of turning the wizards into magical weapons.
The net result was that every single one of the attackers had been Stunned, brought inside the shrine, and found themselves facing a furious religious leader who declared them infidels and ordered them led out of Mecca and then executed on the spot. It had been a neat reversal of the radicals' own plan.

The biggest surprise, however, had been in Jerusalem. There had inevitably been several fights between the Samuelists, Muslims, Jews, and Christians forced to set up their little tents and Sukkot within walking distance of the Al-Aqsa Mosque. Supposedly the Kohen Gadol had nearly lost his eye to a thrown lulav. The real problems, however, had started when some idiot had thrown a rock at Samuel's interpreter after Samuel had announced his plan to modify the text of Samuel and Judges to base itself on Samuel's actual experiences.

The rock had hit the interpreter in the head, and the man had crumpled to the ground. John Paul had immediately Apparated himself and the injured man to safety while a riot broke out as the Samuelists had tried to restrain the rock thrower. The man had eventually announced that he was a member of Christians for Humans and that more attacks would be on the way. Within five minutes, a good hundred people had been fighting and blood had been flowing freely. Enough policemen had been reluctant to shed blood in the Temple for it to escalating long enough for it to spread into the pilgrims crammed outside. The TV shows had been showing wide shots of masses of people fighting.

That was when things had really gotten...strange. No one knew exactly what it was, but they agreed on what they had seen. Apparently an angel with a flaming sword had flown out of the sky and had informed the crowd that God had chosen Samuel as His prophet and as a result the people should listen to Samuel. He then demanded that the man who started the fight step forward and face justice. Not surprisingly, all fighting had stopped immediately and people started pointing at the rock thrower, who found himself unable to move due to the crowd in the Temple.

The angel had pointed his sword at the man's neck, told him that he would be in trouble for a long, long time, and then manually PICKED UP the instigator and flown out of the Temple with the man dangling from his hand. They had flown into a cloud bank and vanished. The services had resumed maybe ten minutes later, at which point Samuel appeared to have gained MANY more converts.

That had been Friday evening. This morning, Israeli newspapers had scoured television footage of the angel and concluded that his features did not match those of any of the wizards. Many people argued that it could have just been a Transfigured wizard trying to calm everything down. Others, however, were fairly certain that an angel had actually visited them and provided proof that God actually existed. Las Vegas supposedly had already placed odds on this proposition: right now, it was about 3:1 that it was a wizard trying to stop the fighting (or an evangelical Samuelist wizard) and that's that. But no one knew for sure, and Pascal's wager had suddenly became a common water-cooler topic. Realistically, though, did it even matter? Whatever it was, it had piqued the world's interest in the Samuelist sect -- a sect which seemed much less radical, and less prone to violent behavior, than its parent religions.

Most of the people here at Omega thought that God had actually spoken through the angel. At first glance, this didn't mesh very well with Deborah and Samuel's theory of a completely abstract God. However, Deborah explained that the two views weren't entirely contradictory. Perhaps God really existed, and He had created humanity knowing that their society would work best if they followed an abstract notion of a deity and not the Deity Himself. If this were the case, God would not have to reveal His existence, allowing the human race to have free will. It would also allow Him more time to deal with pressing issues in the heavens and in Sheol.

Sternberg made his way through the forest of tents and Sukkot over to the hill near the cafeteria,
where a large communal tent had been constructed for the people to eat outside as was the custom on this holiday. There were already complaints that the camp was running out of food, and most of the Kosher restaurants in New York and Boston naturally weren't open today. The witch who had introduced the Extendatent naturally offered to go to the Four Towns to see if they could help feed everyone. Realizing that there wasn't much of a choice -- the Culinary Institute was overbooked as it was and half of the Jews weren't spending any money anyway -- Deborah agreed to this. This promptly brought up an argument over whether magically produced food was Kosher and/or Halal, which Deborah promptly ruled that it was and added that anyone who continued arguing with her would have to choose between excommunication or having his wife ordained as a rabbi or imam.

Sternberg set down to lunch. He was halfway through his vegetarian meal when someone asked him if he wanted to part of a panel.

He turned to his interrogator, a Buddhist monk. "A panel? Where? On what?"

"Trying to make it so the secular and religious communities of all Abrahamic faiths can work together. You're a secular man, I've been told. We need to have a few secular people on the panel."

Sternberg blinked for a moment, then shook his head. "I'm not very familiar on religious matters, I'm afraid. I'm not sure I deserve this honor."

"On the contrary, Mr. Sternberg. That's exactly why we need you. Most of the world is secular, and we need to take the secular people in mind as well when we make laws and so forth. If we're trying to reunite the Abrahamic faiths, why can't we do something to stop the secular and religious worshipers from being at each other's throats?"

Sternberg thought for a moment, then grunted. "Huh. I see your point. In that case, I'll be glad to accept. I must say, Brother, how did you find out about me?"

The interrogator laughed. "Sister Anne mentioned you about an hour ago when we were discussing what we've learned so far. You seem to be articulate. She's actually trying to get all four people from your group there -- the rabbi, you, her, and the imam. And that's just a start. The rabbi was actually born secular and found religion later in life, which is even better for this group."

Sternberg's eyes widened. Could he be on the verge of something big here? Well, well, well, he thought. Maybe God DOES work in mysterious ways.

To be continued...

-------------

Update #373: Maybe That's Why Radioactive Isotopes Vanish
-------------

Monday, September 30, 1996 / 17 Tishrei 5757 / Sukkot Day 3 / 5 Days To Shemini Atzeret
Hansen Experimental Physics Laboratory
Stanford University
Palo Alto, California
United States of America
-------------

NEXT UP: Maybe I Can Get Him to Put Me Back in the Will
-------------

Graduate student Mary Soderberg nearly dropped the ingot of erbium on her foot when she heard the whooping of some of her colleagues in the lab. Spinning to see what was going on, she was startled to see a man in a strange robe holding a box the size of a football festooned with lots of warning
She stared at the man in surprise. "Who are you? What's going on here?"

The man introduced himself. "I'm Wizard George Wilson, and I'm associated with the Mt. St. Helens Wizarding Facility. I've got a little present for you, and I've even got permission to make more of it for you. I've been told that your group is doing a big study on the properties of a group of chemical elements known as the lanthanide metals. Is that true?"

One of her coworkers nodded. "It is, Wizard Wilson. The lanthanide metals can be found at the bottom of the periodic table, beginning with lanthanum and ending with lutetium. There are fifteen of them in total, and we've got ourselves fourteen of them which is more than we can ask for."

The wizard shrugged. "So I've been told. Well, you've got fifteen now."

Mary gaped at the wizard. "That's impossible. You can't get all fifteen. Promethium, element 61, doesn't occur naturally. The tiny amounts science has produced have come out of nuclear reactors."

Wilson nodded. "I'm aware of that. After all, that's where I got this sample from."

The first colleague whistled. "You've actually got promethium in that thing?"

Wilson shook the box. "Yup. It's only about 10 grams or so, but it's going to be enough. The box is lead-lined so it won't hurt you. However, I highly recommend that you put on radiation gear when you work with it...especially after I Engorgio it so you've got maybe 5 kilograms of the stuff. I figure you can actually do real experiments with it and figure out some of its properties."

Mary shook her head. "You can't Engorgio things anymore, Wizard Wilson. It's illegal."

"Not in this case, young lady. I've pulled some strings and managed to convince the people in charge that the benefit to science in this case is worth the Engorgio."

A second colleague frowned. "That's dangerous. What if someone used this technique to get material for a dirty bomb? You don't need a radioactive element to be fissile to make a dirty bomb out of it."

Another wizard walked into the room. "You are correct, ma'am. That's why I'm here. I work for Mt. St. Helens and will be supervising the operation. I personally trust George here, but regulations are regulations. Now, I suppose you want to see what's in this box. If you do, I highly recommend putting on your radiation suits so you can get started."

Forty-five minutes later, everyone was suited up. They walked into the clean room, and the wizard put the box on the experimentation table. "All right, let's see what we've got in here. If anything good came out of the Voldemort disaster, it was the discovery that magic works in the presence of radioactive materials. All I can say is that I hope we don't blow your lights when I cast the spell."

Mary looked on in excitement as the wizard cracked the seals, opened the box, and pulled out a glass vial with a small chunk of silvery metal in it. There wasn't much of it, of course. However, it was enough to send radiation alarms blaring through the room. Irritated, the wizard pointed his wand at one of the loudspeakers and shouted "Silcenio!". The alarm turned off abruptly...as did all of the lights in the clean room.

Wilson winced. "Oops. I -- whoa! Take a look at that!"
Mary gasped, as did virtually everyone else in the room, as their eyes immediately riveted to the one thing which was still emitting light. It was the small piece of metal, lit with a menacing green glow.

The wizard grinned. "I can't see well here. I recommend that we make more of this stuff so we can see what we're doing, right? Once we've enlarged the chunk of metal, we'll enlarge the lead box, copy it with Geminio -- no, don't look at me like that, Sam, I know you're probably glaring at me right now -- and put little chunks in each of the boxes so people can do multiple experiments with it. All right? Well, let's get a kilogram of this stuff and see what we can make with it."

The wizard placed a lead sheet on a scale, weighed it by the light of a flashlight, and then poured the chunk of promethium out of the vial onto the lead sheet. The mass went up by 10g.


The wand flashed, and the green chunk of metal suddenly expanded. Mary frowned: if this element had the same density as the other lanthanides, that sure didn't look like 5 kilograms. It looked more like 500 grams.

The wizard beamed with pride. "There we -- whoa? How did that happen?"

The wizard had gotten halfway through his sentence when the chunk of metal suddenly swelled once more, about three seconds after he had cast the spell. Now it looked like it was up to 580 grams.

The wizard frowned. "This doesn't make sense. I only cast Engorgio on it once. Why would expand twice? Sam?"

Mary saw the other wizard try to scratch his head and fail due to the radiation shielding. "To be honest, George, I don't know. I've never seen this happen before. How much do we have now?"

There was enough light to see the scale clearly now. "About 570 grams. Well, I wanted 5 kilograms, but this is more than enough. All right now, let's start copying those lead boxes and putting samples of this in each."

Copying the boxes was relatively easy for the wizards. Ten minutes later, with three boxes filled, the sample suddenly grew again.

Wilson now sounded uneasy. "This is not right, Sam. We've just gone up another 100 grams. We're at 670 total now. Did you do anything?"

The other wizard also sounded troubled. "No. It wasn't me. Hold on a second...Revelio Hominem!"

Mary shivered as the spell detected her. Seconds later, the second wizard shook visibly. "There's no one else here. And I highly doubt any of these people are wizards. Otherwise, they wouldn't have needed us. Besides, none of them is carrying a wand. Something damn peculiar is going on here. I think we'd better check out your wand back at base once we're done packing all this up."

Wilson nodded. "I agree. Let's get out of here before I do something else weird."

They resumed packing the boxes. It took them another hour and a half to package the rest of the radioactive element. The clump had spontaneously grown to about 1.03 kg a few minutes later ("I wasn't even pointing my wand at it!"), followed by another jump to about 1.4 kg. Eventually, it
seemed to stabilize at about 1.6 kg.

With all the promethium finally packed up, they closed up the clean room, thanked the wizards, and left the clean room to call the facilities department so they could fix the lights in the clean room. Three hours later, after the radiation-suited team had begun running their experiments, the facilities manager tapped Mary on the shoulder and chuckled. "You don't need us to change the light for you, my friend. Looks like someone left some Kryptonite on that scale there. I'd say we've got a good half pound of that stuff in there."

Mary snorted. "Kryptonite?"

"What else could it be, ma'am? I can't think of anything else that's green and glows."

Mary gaped at the man in horror and told him to down some potassium iodide pills and see the doctor. She glanced through the peephole into the room -- thankfully, the door had closed on its own -- and saw that the chunk of metallic metal had reappeared.

She rounded on him. "Don't go in there until I tell you. It's dangerous. Hold off on changing the lights for a while."

The facilities man stared at her. "What?"

"Don't talk. Go to the doctor. Now."

Radioactive Isotope Physics Laboratory
Riken Research Institutes
Japan

Sachiho Hagiwara blinked. The 16 gram block of promethium she had been working with had suddenly vanished in the blink of an eye. Sure, she knew that the stuff was radioactive, and that it would eventually disappear in about 18 years or so. But it couldn't disappear all at once. The probability that $6 \times 10^{22}$ atoms suddenly decided to decay at the same time was...as close to zero to even be considered. And even had they all decayed, they would have decayed into another of the lanthanide metals!

Cursing, she looked around in her radiation suit to see if it had fallen into a pocket. She doubted it had, and a good five-minute investigation revealed nothing.

Frantic, she reached for her Geiger counter. The walls of the lab were lead-lined, so no extraneous radioactive sources could interfere with the experiments. Any radioactivity detected by the Geiger counters would have to come from inside the room.

Convinced that this would help her find her missing piece of promethium, she turned on the Geiger counter.

Zero.

Hagiwara couldn't believe this. She had to be hallucinating. Maybe she had gotten too much radioactivity somewhere along the line. She couldn't see how, however.

Hoping that she wouldn't have to explain how that sample of radioactive material just disappeared on her, she left the lab, changed out of her radiation suit, and headed down to the doctor to see if she
had picked up any radiation poisoning. The doctor looked her over for a good twenty minutes and concluded that she had not. She seemed perfectly healthy.

Something very fishy was going on here.

To be continued...

-------------

Update #374: Maybe I Can Get Him to Put Me Back in the Will

-------------

Tuesday, October 1, 1996 / 18 Tishrei 5757 / Sukkot Day 4 / 4 Days To Shemini Atzeret
Peconic Bay Skilled Nursing Facility
Riverhead, NY
United States of America

-------------

NEXT UP: A Horse is a Horse is a Horse, Off Course

-------------

Edward Morton felt pretty good today. His legs weren't aching all that much, and the food had actually been somewhat good. Then again, his hernia was acting up again and his granddaughter had just gotten a C in one of her courses in college. His daughter-in-law had naturally been furious. He was fairly certain, however, that she would soon learn the discipline to stick to her studies. After all, she was in Navy ROTC.

Edward couldn't get over the fact that they were allowing women in the service now. He was from a family with a long tradition of soldiery: he had fought on the beaches of D-Day on the Second World War, and his son had served in Vietnam. His father had been gassed in the First World War on the western front, and his great-grandfather Bartholemew Sykes had been in one of the New York militias during the Civil War.

War was never pretty, but it was a family tradition and someone needed to make sure that the country was safe. Judging from the horrors his father had told him about from the trenches in the First World War, he had thought that he had prepared himself for everything. And he had been...until that day in April 1945 when he had been part of the unit which had liberated Buchenwald. The sights he witnessed in that camp had scared him for the rest of his life. It occurred to him that he shouldn't be complaining about the nursing home food when he had seen people getting barely any food at all.

He had spent months denying that he needed a nursing home. However, time waited for no one, and he had just turned eighty-three. He had gotten pretty weak over the past few years and was starting to have trouble walking. Eventually, he gave in when both Danny and Rachel threatened to stop bringing the grandchildren to his old house.

There was a knock on the door. Turning off the television, which was still going over the bizarre events in Jerusalem (the odds that a wizard had been involved were now up to 8:1 in favor -- there were reports that a wizard had disappeared from the area shortly before the incident), he told the doctors to come in. He wasn't sure why the doctors would be seeing him at this time -- it was somewhat off their normal schedule.

The door opened, and the doctor entered followed by a man in suit. "Good morning, Edward. How are you doing today?"

Edward shrugged. "Pretty good, I guess. What brings you over to my neck of the woods this time of day?"
"You have a visitor. He claims to be a wizard."

Edward let out a big belly laugh. "A wizard wants to visit me? What for? I'm not a wizard...or at least I don't think I am."

The suited man smiled. "You're not a wizard, Mr. Morton. I'm Wizard Joseph Hugeley from the Department of Mysteries in Prescott, MA, so I should now. There's something we need to talk to you about which you may find very interesting. Are you healthy enough to travel?"

The doctor spun in surprise. "You're taking him on a trip? He can't walk all that well, and I doubt he's in good enough position to Apparate."

"Don't worry. I've got a wheelchair and we'll be taking care of him."

The doctor shook her head. "I'm not sure if wizard support is covered by the policies. I think I'll have to send someone with him."

Hugeley looked at her sharply. "That is out of the question, I'm afraid. The information I need to discuss with Mr. Morton is top-secret level classified. In fact, he will have to be Obliviated after the meeting concludes."

Edward started at the wizard, confused. "Wizard Hugeley, I can keep a secret -- I was a soldier, after all. Besides, aren't you fellows out now?"

Hugeley nodded. "This information is classified even for most wizards. I'd say 99% of the wizards don't even know that this project exists. The Department of Mysteries is off limits to most people."

Edward's confusion deepened further. "Then what do you want me for? I've never been involved with wizard projects."

"Well, you are now. If you're up to it, I'll bring the wheelchair and we'll get going."

"Where are we going, Wizard Hugeley?"

"I can't tell you here, Mr. Morton. However, if it helps you feel any better most of your relatives are coming as well. Daniel, Rachel, and Barry have already reached your destination. Three of your grandchildren -- Noelle, Amanda, and Caitlin -- are also coming. There will also be second and third cousins you've probably never met. Trust me, Mr. Morton. You want to come. They're all waiting for you and Caitlin, since we're concerned about having either of you Apparate."

Edward stared at the wizard, hard. "What's wrong with having Caitlin Apparate? She's 26, and she's my eldest. She's a tough girl."

The wizard shrugged. "She's pregnant. Pregnant women shouldn't Apparate."

The doctor looked at Edward and then at the wizard. It was obvious that he was going to go no matter what. "All right, Wizard Hugeley. I'll go get the wheelchair. Make sure he comes back in one piece."

The wizard nodded. "You have my word on it, Doctor."

The wizard wheeled Edward to an unmarked car and helped him in. "We normally would just fly
you there, Mr. Morton. However, due to the high secrecy here we don't want too many people to find out that you've gone away with us. The doctors are already sworn to secrecy, and we can trust them."

They drove down I-495 for half an hour, got off at the exit for Brookhaven National Lab, and drove around the lab for a while. Eventually, they stopped in front of a large rug lying on the ground.

Edward whistled. "Is that a flying carpet?"

"It sure is -- thank you Guinevere. We've beefed it up so it can travel 60 mph. We'll be at the Ministry in a couple of hours."

The wizard lay Edward down on the carpet and then handed him a sealed piece of parchment with instructions not to open it until he was airborne. After spending a few minutes putting away the wheelchair, he moved to the front of the rug and put himself into position for takeoff.

Hugeley called back over his shoulder. "All right, Mr. Morton. Before we begin, I want to confirm your identity. You are indeed Edward Bartholemew Morton, age 83, of Riverhead?"

"Yes."

"What was your mother's name?"

"Sarah."

"And her maiden name?"

"Sykes."

"What were Sarah Sykes's grandfathers' names?"

"Hold on a second...my memory isn't as good as once was...Ebenezer McKenzie and Bartholemew Sykes."

Hugeley nodded and launched the carpet into the air. "You are indeed the person we're looking for. Go ahead and open the document now."

Fumbling with his arthritic fingers, it took him a while to open the document. There were lots of official looking seals on it and reports that anyone who wasn't supposed to read it would be hit with nasty curses. Fortunately, it seemed to like him. He read a little further down it and came across a dynamic photograph of an archway of some sort with a gauzy black curtain strung across it. Underneath it were the words "DEATHGATE PROJECT. TOP SECRET."

Edward hissed and turned to Hugeley. "What the hell is this? Deathgate Project? Are you going to kill me? Is this the way people die?"

Hugeley laughed and shook his head. "No, Mr. Morton. Keep on reading, and you may find several of your questions answered."

Skeptical, Edward read on. His eyes widened when he saw reports that the Deathgate allowed the people to talk to the dead. His jaw nearly fell to the floor when the report mentioned "Interview With, And Requests Of, Civil War Veteran Bartholemew Sykes."
He read the next few lines and began trembling in fear and anticipation. "Are you telling me that my great-grandfather wants to meet his descendants?"

"That's right, Mr. Morton. Virtually everyone is going to be there. The room is going to be pretty cramped, but we're sure we'll have room for the wheelchair and Wizard Durrant, the man who will be operating the flying carpet heading into Sheol. He can't go in, obviously, but he'll be able to tell the machine what to do. It's an unmanned probe, just like with NASA."

-------------------------------------
Death Chamber
Department of Mysteries
-------------------------------------

The Deathgate, with the iris still closed, had been mounted on the wall at least four feet up to make sure no one would accidentally walk into it. The flying carpet with the probe was lying on the floor next to it, near a large TV screen. The rest of the room was occupied by row after row of chairs.

Edward couldn't believe half of the stuff he had seen in these halls. He'd have loved to tell the world about this. Unfortunately, the wizards had confiscated all writing tools and electronic devices, knowing the Obliviation would take care of the rest. They REALLY didn't want word of what was in the Department of Mysteries leaking out. Considering what had happened with the Statute of Secrecy, that was probably a VERY good idea.

They wheeled him over to the front of the room as the other people began to file in. Apparently he had relatives he didn't know about -- MANY second cousins. There were at least six second cousins, fourteen people who were his children's third cousins, and twenty-seven college age students. There were even seven infants lying in their carrying cases.

All of these people were descendants of Bartholemew Sykes. Although most of them lived in the New York area, there were some from as far away as St. Louis and Miami. A few of them had moved out of the country to get married. His great grandfather would likely have been astonished to find that he had a couple of Chinese great-great-great-great-great-grandchildren (it WAS six greats, right?)

There were investment bankers, doctors, and teachers. There were also a few janitors, construction workers, and painters. There were also a lot of soldiers and ex-soldiers. Edward was astonished to find that no fewer than three of his second cousins had served in the Second World War. One of them had apparently been a fighter pilot, another an infantryman, and another a midshipman who'd barely managed to get out of Pearl Harbor alive.

Everyone was silent, including the babies, as the wizards explained what was going to happen. There were very few questions, and minutes later the door to the Deathgate opened and the flying carpet with the probe made its way through. All eyes turned to the television screen.

--------
Sheol
--------

Bartholemew Sykes was thunderstruck. He had been amazed to learn that the wizards had figured out how to transmit images in and out of Sheol. Now he would be able to see out of the Deathgate as easily as they would be able to see in.

The probe apparently had been equipped with a mirror which reflected images from inside the Ministry of Magic onto the flying carpet, which was made of a smooth white material. The images were upside down and/or reflected, but he could always float around to make sure they were in the
The ability to see out of the gate was nothing, however, compared to what the content of the first pictures which came through the gate. They showed a room with Hugeley, Durrant...and no fewer than 65 other people. They ranged from an white-haired man in a wheelchair to several tiny infants. Some of them didn't look American, but he figured that was his bad eyesight acting up again.

Were these all his descendants? They didn't even look like him for the most part. This was impossible! Then again, there were wizards involved here, so who knew...

Hugeley spoke first. "Mr. Sykes, here they are. These people are all your descendants, and they're very interested in hearing from you. There are people from four generations here, my friend. Those little bundles of joy are your great-great-great-great-great-grandchildren."

Sykes couldn't help but cry. "I...I can't believe it! Sixty-five! Thank Our Lord Jesus Christ! He has been so merciful!"

"Indeed, He has. On other extreme, I believe you'll find someone you recognize...or at least saw evidence of. You mentioned that your eldest granddaughter, Sarah Sykes, had gotten married a few years before you died?"

Sykes nodded. "I believe so. She was pregnant with her first child when I died. I had always hoped that I would live to see that great-grandchild, but that was not to be."

Hugeley chuckled and put his hand on the wheelchair. "Well, you can cross that off your list. Last time you saw this man, he was in Sarah's belly. He was born maybe four months after you died. Mr. Sykes, allow me to introduce Edward Bartholemew Morton, son of Sarah Sykes and Asa Morton. And unless I'm badly mistaken, he was given his middle name in your honor."

To be continued...

Update #375: A Horse is a Horse is a Horse, Off Course

Tuesday, October 1, 1996 / 18 Tishrei 5757 / Sukkot Day 4 / 4 Days To Shemini Atzeret
1400Z
Suffolk Downs Racetrack
Boston, MA
United States of America

NEXT UP: Nature Trail to Hell

Wizard Jeff Rinaldi looked over the racetrack. It was more or less empty, but that suited him just fine. The closer he got to the finish line, the more likely it was that this was going to work.

He had looked up the new rules carefully and was fairly certain this wasn't covered. They said that he was not allowed to bring Felix Felicis to casinos or any other places where gambling took place, and they said he wasn't allowed to use anything to change the odds at sporting events. The directive included a list of major sporting events and it was pretty comprehensive.

Well, almost comprehensive. For some reason, they hadn't included horse racing. Maybe they figured that it wasn't popular anymore among the Muggles -- it certainly was less popular than football and baseball, and it had certainly gone out of fashion with the wizards a long time ago. He
didn't care why it the wizards had not mentioned it. The important fact was that it wasn't there.

He looked at the his racing card for the first race of the day. Miss Ellie was the favorite, at 1:1 odds, and she was in position #1. Beauty Queen, horse #2, was at 12:1. Then came Ladybug (16:1), Pearl (7:1), Hula Skirt (18:1), and Merriweather (10:1). There were six horses, many of which would pay him handsomely.

This race was going to be easy. All he had to do was place bets on the four horses with the worst odds. Judging from his vantage point, he believed he had enough time to hex two horses while they were coming down the backstretch. The only problem he could think of was the fact that if two horses were neck and neck, he could miss and hit his own horse by mistake. There was only one way to find out, though.

He headed over to the betting kiosk and bet $10 on each horse other than the 7:1 and 1:1. Satisfied, he went back down to the his seat and watched as the race unfolded.

The favorite, not surprisingly, shot out to a large lead. The 16:1 was in second, seven or eight lengths back. Rinaldi hadn't thought he'd have to use the spell so early on in the race. However, he had no choice. Having the horse suddenly stop running two feet from the finish line would be much too suspicious.

Grateful that the Deceleratus hex didn't have a visible beam, he brought out his Fideliused wand and pointed it at the pack. He fired it off, hoping that he would hit the horse in the lead.

Nothing happened. The favorite maintained her eight length lead. Frantic, he tried again. Nothing. He was about to shoot a third time when he saw some commotion in the stands on the far side of the track. Apparently one of the vendors was having trouble walking -- no, he was just walking VERY slowly. It occurred to him that not only had he missed on the first spell, he'd hit the vendor. He had to be VERY careful.

The horses came around the final turn, and the favorite still had a large lead. He had to do something, however, and do it quickly. Hoping there was still enough time to slow Miss Ellie down, he fired the beam again. He figured the horses would be easier targets this time as they were closing in and running almost at him. They wouldn't be swerving left or right as often.

Bingo. The lead horse suddenly slowed down by maybe one mile per hour or so -- exactly what Deceleratus Minimus was supposed to do. The track announcer reported that Miss Ellie was losing steam and the 16:1 was starting to make up ground. The 8:1 was coming up alongside her, and it looked like it was going to be a three-horse finish. Rinaldi didn't care anymore, however. He had both the 8:1 and the 16:1. As long as one of them won, he'd come out ahead.

The 8:1 nipped the favorite at the last minute, causing a good half of the people in the stands to salute the victorious underdog. The man next to him swore bitterly that he had lost $250 on the favorite.

Rinaldi grinned. One race in, and he'd won $40. He figured he should probably not tamper with a few of the next ones as to avoid suspicion. Yes, he would lose most of the time. But a slow loss of $10 followed by a lucky win of $100 would make it seem much less suspicious.

He sat back down and waited for the next race to begin.

----------
1430Z
Hogsmeade
Daryna Vovchanckaya looked at the letter Halyna Zygonova had dropped off earlier today, during lunch. The Amelia Bell impostor had excused herself during lunch, wandered outside Hogwarts, hidden herself in some trees outside the Apparition boundary, put on her Invisibility Cloak, and Apparated home. Slowly, Vovchanckaya turned to Zygonov and saw that he was also trembling in excitement.

"Get ready, Mr. Zygonov. It's going to be tonight. We're going to have that wand in no time, and Rasputin is going to very happy with us."

Zygonov nodded. "Indeed. I'm still not entirely sure why he wants Dumbledore's wand, though. Maybe as proof that we've done the deed."

"Perhaps. We know Dumbledore is a powerful wizard, after all. He could cause complications when Rasputin takes over."

Zygonov looked out the window. "I hope Halyna's going to be all right. I hear she's pretty well liked there, and I can't imagine them suspecting her. Particularly if we shoot off the Dark Mark there at the end."

"I sure hope so. It's been a pleasure working with you two."

Zygonov had been spending most of his time hanging out around Muggles (invisible, of course -- he had the Invisibility Cloak most of the time) to gather information to relay to his wife about Muggle customs. Vovchanckaya had helped as well during the day but was forced to stop working in the evenings when she had to go back to Bell's apartment to prevent her roommates from noticing her absence. They had put a lot of work into this assassination plan, and it was finally time to carry it out.

Taking the Invisibility Cloak from Zygonov, Vovchanckaya headed back to Bell's apartment to leave a note that she would be back late. She had to stay under the cloak, of course, because people would have wondered what Bell was doing out of school during class. Pocketing the Invisibility Cloak -- she would be needing it for a few hours -- she returned to the Zygonovs' rented house to get their hands on the tool of the hour: a Muggle pistol. Rasputin had been adamant that a Muggle weapon be used to do the deed, and that the evidence be disposed of immediately as to not incriminate the new Muggle on the staff. Taking one last look around the house, she closed the door, never to return.

The plan was to have Zygonova tell Dumbledore that a student had told her that several Death Eater masks had been found in the Forbidden Forest. Although no one had actually seen the Voldemort supporters, Dumbledore couldn't risk the Death Eater movement starting up again under a new leader. This would likely force wizards to come out in force to confront the Death Eaters. Dumbledore would almost certainly join the hunting party, and if he brought anyone with him Zygonova would recommend that the group split up and try to find evidence of the group's whereabouts. He would likely tell Zygonova, as the Muggle, to stay inside...which she would do to maintain her alibi.

The wizards would leave the castle and head towards the Forbidden Forest. Vovchanckaya, hidden in the trees under the Invisibility Cloak, would wait until the group split up and then follow Dumbledore. Once he was alone, she'd shoot him.

There were several risks, but there wasn't much they could do about it. The biggest one was Dumbledore seeing them before he died. Once that happened, the game was up as he would just tell everyone when his portrait went up in the headmaster's office. The second was the possibility that
people would pair up to watch each other's backs. If that happened, Vovchanckaya would be forced to kill both Dumbledore and the witness and clean everything up before anyone got there. Once everything was cleaned up, she would escape via Portkey.

The third possibility, and most worrisome, involved Alastair Moody. It was almost certain that the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher would be in the posse. Moody was dangerous in that his magical eye could see through Invisibility Cloaks. If Moody caught a strange woman hiding in the trees before the hunt began they'd suspect her immediately. Vovchanckaya couldn't even use the Amelia Bell Polyjuice Potion as an option because Muggles weren't supposed to have access to Invisibility Cloaks.

There were all too many ways this could fail. Then again, failing Rasputin would likely be a hell of a lot worse.

Reciting a brief prayer for success, she put on the Invisibility Cloak, took the Portkey and the gun, and started towards Hogwarts. Thank God the Silencio spell worked much better than a Muggle silencer.

To be continued...
Update #376: Nature Trail to Hell

Tuesday Night, October 1, 1996 / 19 Tishrei 5757 / Sukkot Day 5 / 3 Days To Shemini Atzeret
1930Z

Headmaster's Tower
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
United Kingdom

NEXT UP: You Do Realize The Kids Will Root For The Snake If They Hate The Teachers

Albus Dumbledore looked at Harry Potter and shook his head. "I'm sorry, Harry, but I don't think I'll be able to intervene. Snape is entitled to restrict NEWT classes to O students only, and it's clear that you only got an E. And judging from the fact that you've already missed a month, it's the only thing I can say. I'm sorry, Harry, but my decision is final."

Harry was crestfallen. "Can't you talk to him? Make an exception for me?"

Dumbledore frowned. "I can't, Harry. If I make an exception for you, I have to make exceptions for everyone."

Harry felt awful. There went his dreams for becoming an Auror. He was about to leave the room when Dumbledore spoke once more. "However, if you wish, I will request that Slughorn teach you the required coursework. It will be quite grueling, I must warn you, and this would be in addition to your normal classes and Quidditch practice. If I were serious enough about wanting to become an Auror, I would quit Quidditch. It is up to you, Harry."

Harry didn't know what to do. He had to choose between his dream career and Quidditch. He wished that he could use magic to make this decision.

There was a knock on the door of the headmaster's office, startling Harry. Dumbledore nodded. "Ah, I see I have a guest. If you would excuse us, Harry, I have some business to attend to. Have a good evening."

Dumbledore watched conflicting emotions race across Harry's face as the door opened and the young man left the room. He was replaced by Amelia Bell, the Muggle Studies teacher.

He nodded to Professor Bell. "Good evening, Amelia. How can I help you?"

Bell looked nervous, more nervous than he had ever seen her. "I'm sorry for bothering you, Headmaster, but we may have an incident in progress in the Forbidden Forest. Draco Malfoy was just issued an invitation to join a newly-reformed band of Death Eaters organizing in your forest. I was the first teacher he encountered after hearing this information, and he told me straightaway. It's good that he's on our side now."

Dumbledore froze. Had his greatest nightmare come true? "Are you sure about this, Amelia?"
"Yes, Headmaster. He had been asked to recruit Crabbe and Goyle, but he's not going to do the Death Eaters the favor."

"Where is Draco?"

"In the Slytherin common room, I would suspect."

"Get him, Amelia."

Bell grimaced. "I can't get in. I can ask Snape, though. However, to be honest I highly recommend that you take out those Death Eaters now. For all we know, they're going to attack me since I'm a Muggle...and the Muggle Studies teacher. When they don't realize Draco is coming, they'll know they've been compromised."

Dumbledore swore silently to himself. Amelia had a point. "All right, Amelia. You stay put. Did Draco say where they were hiding?"

"Yes, Headmaster. They were going to be in the Forbidden Forest near where the dragons had been kept during the tournament."

Dumbledore nodded. At least they wouldn't need to risk Draco or any other students in this endeavour. Granted, there wasn't any proof, but it was better to be safe than sorry, especially when Death Eaters were involved. "All right. Keep this quiet as we don't want to scare anyone else. Tell Severus and Alastair to meet me at the front door in five minutes. Thank you for your advice, Amelia. You may have saved many lives with that."

Bell nodded. "I live to serve, Headmaster."

Dumbledore nodded and swept out of the room. Sending a message over the school mass communication system that there were some wild animals on the loose in the Forbidden Forest and that people should stay inside, he collected Moody and Snape and headed outside.

The three wizards held their wands at the ready as they marched out of the castle and started walking towards the Forbidden Forest. Looking behind them to make sure that none of the students were following, they headed out into the darkness.

------------------------

Daryna Vovchanckaya had just climbed down out of the tree when she saw Moody spin around. For a second, he stared right at her and she froze. She was about to surrender when Moody's eye moved on.

She breathed a sigh of relief as the three wizards continued deeper into the forest. She soon realized that she had escaped detection because unlike Vovchanckaya, whose eyes had already been dark adapted from waiting outside, the wizards' had not. They probably hadn't been able to see her in the dark.

Making sure the Invisibility Cloak was secure, she followed the wizards into the forest making sure that she hid behind the trees as much as possible. She listened as the searchers spoke quietly to each other.

Snape: "How could the Death Eaters come back without me knowing it?"

Moody: "It could be a brand new cell. You heard about what happened with Syrdan and the United
States. They probably have a lot of disgruntled wizard supremacists out there."

Dumbledore: "Why do you think they'd meet here, Severus?"

Snape: "The obvious reason is to attack either me or you. I'm a reformed Death Eater, as you know, and you would be a perfect target for a Voldemort revenge killing."

Moody: "I'm thinking Severus, Headmaster. Remember Draco was already ordered to kill him once."

Dumbledore: "All right, here's what we do. Alastair, you scout on ahead and see if you can find anything with your magical eye. Since we're the most likely targets, Severus and I will stick together and cover each other's backs."

Moody: "Will do, Headmaster."

Vovchanckaya watched as Moody moved off. The two remaining wizards stayed together, clearly covering each other. She bit her lip. She had been afraid of this. She would have to kill Dumbledore first and hope Snape didn't turn her into fertilizer for this tree. How she was supposed to get his wand was beyond her.

------------

Snape pointed into the distance. "Over there, in the trees. I think I see a human figure."

Dumbledore nodded. "It's probably a centaur, but in times like this it's right to be cautious. Go check it out, Severus. I'll watch your back."

Snape waved his hand in acknowledgement, pulled out his wand, and headed towards the shape. Dumbledore found it hard to believe that Moody had missed this fellow. Had he not been looking in the right direction? He had an odd suspicion that Moody's special eye had reported that it was a centaur immediately and he hadn't bothered to investigate. He couldn't call Snape back without alerting their quarry.

So far, Dumbledore hadn't seen anything out of the ordinary. Hoping that it would stay that way, he kept a close eye on Snape as the Potions master headed towards the figure. The figure moved, and it soon became obvious that the humanoid had four legs. It was a centaur and not a threat. He started motioning for Snape to come back.

Then something hit him from behind and he knew no more.

---------------

The magical silencer worked like a charm. The bullet hit home, and Dumbledore collapsed to the ground with a thud. She felt sorry for the famous wizard, but there wasn't any time to grieve at this point. She had her mission to focus on.

She started heading over to Dumbledore to retrieve his wand. However, it was obvious she wasn't going to make it. Snape had apparently seen Dumbledore fall and was running in her direction, shouting for Moody to join him. She did the only thing she could think of: drop the gun, reach for her wand, and whisper: "Accio Dumbledore's Wand!"

The wand flew into her hand as Snape shouted: "Alastair! Dumbledore's down, and someone just stole his wand! It flew over to that tree over there, and I see branches rustling! Get Dumbledore to Madam Pomfrey while I deal with the attacker and look around some more!"
Shit, she thought. What use was invisibility if her movements would be betrayed by the trees? She had no choice. Acting on instinct, she lifted her newly-acquired wand and pointed it at the furious Potions master. This man knew too much, she thought. He had to die, or at least be Imperiused to say he made a mistake. Rasputin's voice echoed in her head -- something about using the gun instead of the wand -- but she was out of options.

Hoping her aim was good, she whispered "Avada Kedavra!!" just as Snape shouted "Expelliarmus!". The two beams hit each other in midair. Some good that will would do, she thought. She just gave away her position to someone who wasn't dead...wait a minute...huh?

There had been a brilliant flash of light. She could have sworn that she saw the green Avada Kedavra beam plow through the Expelliarmus one and hit Snape. The Potion master fell lifeless to the ground as she heard hooves and feet running towards the area.

She stared at the new wand in confusion. What just happened? Those beams should have bounced off each other! She couldn't give it much thought, however, as people would be flooding out of that castle any minute now. Turning her attention back to Dumbledore, she looked around for her gun, which she had dropped. She was horrified to discover that she couldn't find it in the dark.

How was she going to finish off Dumbledore if she couldn't use magic against him? It occurred to her, however, that the man sure LOOKED dead, and if he wasn't dead he would be soon. Besides, she had his wand. As far as Rasputin was concerned, the mission had been a success since he had wanted the wand. Now it was time to frame the Death Eaters. She couldn't count on that bizarre incident with the Potions teacher happening again. She had to escape while she had the chance.

Still holding Dumbledore's wand -- for some reason, it seemed to like her better than her old one -- she pointed it into the sky and shouted "Morsmordre!". The Death Eaters would certainly want to celebrate the deaths of Dumbledore and Snape, wouldn't they?

A bright green beam shot into the sky and exploded in a burst of light. A huge glowing skull appeared in the sky, and a huge snake shot out of its mouth. The two symbols looked much more real than they had done even when Voldemort had cast the Dark Mark. It was almost as if Dumbledore's wand had been supercharged to cast more powerful spells.

The snake looked realistic...very realistic. In fact, it looked like it could actually have physical form! It couldn't. Then again, if Dumbledore's wand supercharged the spells beyond the level Voldemort had expected...

She stared at the wand. A supercharged wand. Maybe that's why Rasputin wanted it, and it certainly explained why her curse overwhelmed Snape's. Huh. This could come in handy, at least as a bargaining chip with Rasputin.

Regardless of how supercharged that wand was, she didn't want to face that big snake or the enraged Auror if she could help it. She had to escape before her luck ran out. Fumbling for the Portkey and hoping Moody didn't see her, she grabbed onto the Portkey and disappeared just as Moody reached Dumbledore.

-----------------------

Moody stared at the hideously realistic Dark Mark desecrating the night sky. This was not good. Not good at all. However, he couldn't worry about that right now. His first responsibility was to save Dumbledore, who was thankfully still alive. Wandless, but still alive. He knew Madam Pomfrey, and he was fairly certain that Dumbledore would live.
He sent a Patronus to Madam Pomfrey asking her to come out immediately. Standing over Dumbledore and telling him that he would be all right, he watched as the snake continued glowing in the sky. It obviously didn't want to go away.

Suddenly, the snake reared up and dove towards the castle. Its jaws opened wide, only to close on the top of the Astronomy tower. There was a horrible tearing sound, and much to Moody's horror the top of the tower came off.

Moody swore. The snake from this Dark Mark was REAL! It was attacking Hogwarts! He couldn't even imagine the Dark Mark doing that. He thought it was just a light show to terrorize people.

He could tell one thing for certain. Someone had murdered Snape, nearly killed Dumbledore, and cast such a powerful Dark Mark that the snake had come to life.

How the hell could you get a wand which could do something like that? The only thing that could do that would be the Elder Wand, which...was owned by Albus Dumbledore. Who was now Disarmed...and had his wand missing.

God help us, he thought. The Death Eaters have mastered, and obtained, the Elder Wand. What's more, they would get their hands on the Resurrection Stone if they went through Dumbledore's possessions. That left them...no!

Moody nearly collapsed on top of Dumbledore when he realized what the plan must be. They believed in the Deathly Hallows, like some people. They believed that the collection of all three Hallows would allow a wizard to be the master of Death. And if someone mastered Death, they could...quite possibly...bring back Voldemort. The big question was: where had Dumbledore kept the Resurrection Stone, and where was the Invisibility Cloak?

He shuddered and looked back down at Dumbledore's still form. Hogwarts was going to have a very bad evening.

To be continued...

------------
Update #377: You Do Realize The Kids Will Root For The Snake If They Hate The Teachers
------------
Tuesday Night, October 1, 1996 / 19 Tishrei 5757 / Sukkot Day 5 / 3 Days To Shemini Atzeret 1939Z
Gryffindor Common Room
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
United Kingdom
------------
NEXT UP: Harry Will Kill You If You Use the Resurrection Stone On Snape (.5)
------------
Harry Potter slammed the door to the Gryffindor common room and turned to Ron and Hermione. "It's no use, Ron. I asked Dumbledore, and he said that Snape had the right to teach his classes however he wanted. The only possibility he could think of would be for me to take extra Potions classes with Slughorn. He warned me, however, that it would be a lot of work and that I should probably give up Quidditch to find time for it."

Ron and Hermione stared at him in horror. "You can't give up Quidditch! You're the best Seeker Gryffindor has had in years!"
Harry shrugged. "I know, Ron. It's probably too late to train a new Seeker, which means Gryffindor is probably in trouble if I do decide to take Slughorn up on his offer."

Hermione thought for a moment. "Maybe not. You were able to handle Quidditch and the Occulumency lessons with Snape at the same time."

Harry paused for a moment. "You know, that's true. Then again the lessons with Snape were a disaster and didn't get very far. Besides, the NEWT-level Potions -- "

Harry was cut off by a blood-curdling howl. All three of them spun to see a fourth-year pointing out the window, towards the Forbidden Forest.

She screamed two more times before she was able to finally get out a coherent sentence. "The Dark Mark's been raised over the Forbidden Forest!"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione stared at each other and raced over to the window. Sure enough, there was the Dark Mark. It looked much more substantial than usual, and the snake looked almost alive.

Ron swore. "Bloody hell, it's got to be Draco or someone like that. I never trusted that snobby little git."

Hermione spoke in a quiet voice. "Dumbledore mentioned animals in the Forbidden Forest and told us to stay inside. I suspect that those animals had Death Eater masks on. I sure hope that Voldemort isn't going to come back."

Harry stared at her in horror. "He can't, can he? We destroyed all the Horcruxes, and his death curse went off!"

Hermione nodded. "That's what I'd have thought. However, Voldemort was an extremely powerful wizard. For all we know, he came back as a ghost and has re-inspired the Death Eaters here! What I'm worried about is...who got killed?"

Harry let out a long stream of expletives. "Just what we need, Hermione. Just what we need. And according to Moaning Myrtle, there's no way to get rid of a ghost. Hell, that basilisk couldn't kill Nearly Headless Nick in our second year."

Hermione started running towards the door as screams began echoing throughout the castle. "I'm of age now, and I'm going to check this out. You two stay back here."

Ron and Harry stared at each other, shook their heads, and ran after Hermione, who threw up her hands and waited for them. They reached the door just as a horrible crashing sound exploded from somewhere far above them. It was accompanied by many more screams, most of which were silenced almost immediately. Five seconds later, there was a huge crash as tons of masonry fell to the ground. Judging from the location of the noise, it sounded like half of the Astronomy tower had caved in.

Harry's heart skipped a beat. Ginny had Astronomy tonight, and everyone had planned to go out on the roof to do some observations to start up on OWL training. He sure hoped she was OK.

The corridors were mobbed with panicking students. Someone reported that the snake from the Dark Mark was actually alive and had eaten a large number of students off the top of the Astronomy tower.
Suddenly, Professor Flitwick's voice resonated throughout the building. "Attention, all students. Please go to your dormitories immediately, and do not leave them until one of us tells you to. Teachers other than Filch and Bell will head to the Astronomy tower immediately to salvage the situation. Professor Filch, keep the students in line and contact Aberforth in the Hog's Head. Professor Bell, head the nearest dormitory as soon as you can. Harry Potter, come to the Astronomy tower as soon as you can."

Hermione and Ron stared at him for a second. Eventually, Hermione hazarded a guess. "I think I know why they want you, Harry. You're a Parselmouth. If that snake is alive --"

Harry got it immediately. " -- I can tell it to stop. I don't know how well it will work since I'm not a Death Eater, but I can try. I'll see you later."

Hermione and Ron nodded, and Harry ran off in the general direction of the Astronomy tower. Judging from the wreckage outside, it sure looked like the top third of the tower had collapsed. He could see bodies lying around in the rubble. One of them, much to his amazement, was Professor Sinistra. He didn't see Ginny, but that didn't mean that one of those huge blocks of stone hadn't fallen on her.

Far above, he saw what looked to be the Dark Mark snake. It looked VERY much alive, and venom was dripping from its fangs. The blood drained from Harry's face as he ran. Had Voldemort discovered a way to return in a way more powerful than he been earlier?

Why hadn't Dumbledore issued the order? Had Dumbledore been the person who was killed? He couldn't imagine someone killing Dumbledore, especially with Voldemort dead. Then again, if Voldemort had a trick up his sleeve and knew something about ghostly powers Dumbledore hadn't expected...

The night sky was filled with multicolored beams as the teachers started attacking something far above. He heard the snake scream -- oddly, he couldn't understand it -- followed by a sizzling noise as it crashed into a sphere of protection the staff had just put up. Harry hoped that this would buy enough time for Dumbledore and the rest of the teachers to finish off the snake.

Alastair Moody's voice suddenly echoed throughout the building. "Madam Pomfrey, we need you in the Great Hall immediately. Professor Snape is dead, and Professor Dumbledore has been gravely injured. On second thought, head to his tower, pick up Fawkes, and bring the phoenix over here. Hurry, Poppy. The headmaster's life may depend on this."

Harry stopped in his tracks. Snape was dead? He couldn't have heard that right, but then it occurred to him that Snape's murder could have elicited the Dark Mark. He had to admit that he had mixed feelings about this. Granted, Snape had been a loyal member of the Order of the Phoenix and had risked his life for his double agent role. On the other hand, he had been...well, Snape. As far as Dumbledore being injured, Dumbledore couldn't die. He couldn't! However, the frantic call for Madam Pomfrey, accompanied by the request that they bring a source of phoenix tears...

It took him a good ten seconds for him to start moving again. He headed over to the Astronomy tower, hoping that he would be able to talk the snake out of continuing the fight. At one point, he was nearly run over by what appeared to be a panicking Professor Bell. He had no idea where she was going, but he hoped that the friendly Muggle Studies teacher would escape the Death Eaters' clutches.

--------------------------------------
Halyna Zygonova waited anxiously in Professor Bell's office. It was only a matter of time now, she thought. Dumbledore had already told everyone to stay inside because of a disturbance in the Forbidden Forest. It was obvious that he'd taken the bait. The question now became whether Vovchanckaya would be able to get over there, kill the headmaster, and take his wand.

She looked out the window, over the Forbidden Forest. For a long time, nothing happened. Suddenly, however, some lights began flashing among the trees. There was a brief pause which seemed to last forever.

Then there was a final flash, and a green bolt blasted its way into the sky. It exploded far above the Forest and revealed the classic image of a snake and a skull.

Zygonova punched the air in exultation. They'd pulled it off! Thank the Black God, they'd pulled it off!

Making sure her purse was on her, she raced through the corridors in the direction of the Room of Requirement. She had to act VERY quickly now and escape in the confusion before people figured out what was going on. Thank the Black God Umbridge had informed the rest of the staff about the location of this remarkable room before Scrimgeour had recalled the controversial Defense Against the Dark Arts professor the previous year.

Ignoring students' requests for her to head to the dormitories and save herself from the attacks of the Death Eaters, she hurried up to the seventh floor. She nearly crashed into Harry Potter rounding a corner, but he didn't seem to pay any attention. He just kept running towards the Astronomy tower in response to Flitwick's orders.

Moody reported that Snape was dead and Dumbledore was very badly injured. That came as a bit of a surprise. Why had Vovchanckaya not finished Dumbledore off, taking out Snape instead? Would Dumbledore want his wand back if he recovered? That worried her a little, and she hoped Vovchanckaya knew what she was doing. Rasputin would not be happy if, after all this, they didn't come away with Dumbledore's wand.

Thankful that she was in the body of a healthy twenty-something woman, she made it up the stairs to the seventh floor and stopped outside the Room of Requirement. She walked past the entrance three times.

"I need to a room which will include an exit to Hogsmeade...I need a room which will include an exit to Hogsmeade...I need a room which will include an exit to Hogsmeade."

She opened her eyes and saw the door materialize in the wall. Making sure there was no one in sight -- fat chance with everyone in the dorms -- she slammed open the door and headed into a small antechamber filled with maps of Hogsmeade and what appeared to be coupon books. At the far end of the corridor was a narrow passageway with a big EXIT sign hovering above it. Seemed pretty straightforward.

There was only one thing left to do. She reached into her purse and brought out the shrunken, sleeping form of Amelia Bell. Hoping her maltreatment over the past month hadn't hurt her, she placed the tiny woman on the floor, reversed the Shrinking Spell, and restored Amelia to her normal size. Taking a cue from Rasputin, who was a master of mental magic, Zygonova provided the young graduate student with a false memory that a wall had caved in on her, hit her on the head, and caused about one month's worth of amnesia. Zygonova smiled. Her original was going to cover her escape.
Bell stirred, and Zygonova brought out her wand. She couldn't have Bell leave the room until the latest batch of Polyjuice Potion had worn off and Zygonova had resumed her normal form. Casting a one-hour sleep spell on Bell, she raced down the corridor and headed for the exit.

The corridor ended in a small painting of a young girl. Underneath it was the name ARIANA DUMBLEDORE. She pushed on the painting, and it opened into what appeared to be the Hog's Head Tavern. The bar was fairly full at the moment, though the vast majority of the people were looking out the windows at the fight going on over Hogwarts. Zygonova watched as a veritable rainbow of beams hit the snake and it exploded in a flash of light.

She looked behind the bar, but the bartender wasn't there. Trying to stay calm, she headed for the exit. She had her hand on the door when one of the guests told her to stay inside.

"Professor Bell, this is not a good idea. I don't know how you got in here, but you shouldn't leave right now. There are Death Eaters in the area, and they tend to attack Muggles."

Zygonova tried to think up a response. "I doubt they'd attack a Hogwarts professor, sir. Besides, I need to check on my roommates. Hopefully they're still all right, and if all else failed they will be able to protect me. Hiding in plain sight isn't such a bad idea."

The bar customer shrugged. "I'm not so sure about that. However, if you think you know what you're doing. Good luck, and keep in mind that this usually does not happen at this school. It's actually a fairly safe place for Muggles. I'm sorry that you had to go through this."

Zygonova nodded and raced through the streets of Hogsmeade until she found herself in an empty alley. Making sure no one was around, she Apparated back to her husband's house, where her husband and Vovchanckaya were waiting for her.

Vovchanckaya smiled and showed her a brand new want. "This is Dumbledore's wand, Halyna. It's very powerful, it appears. No wonder he was such a good duelist. Well, if he's not dead he's working on it. Mission accomplished."

The three Rasputin follows shook each other's hands. All they had to do is figure out how to get out of Hogsmeade. And given the fear people had of Death Eaters, that wouldn't be hard to do.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #377.5: Harry Will Kill You If You Use the Resurrection Stone On Snape

-------------
Tuesday Night, October 1, 1996 / 19 Tishrei 5757 / Sukkot Day 5 / 3 Days To Shemini Atzeret 2038Z
Great Hall
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
United Kingdom

-------------
NEXT UP: No Snape and I Can Be an Auror? Woo-Hoo!

-------------
Madam Pomfrey finished her examination of Albus Dumbledore. Exhausted, she stood up and put her wand back in her pocket.

She turned and looked at Professor Flitwick. "He's going to live, Headmaster. It was touch and go, however. A bullet in the head is going to cause serious physical trauma no matter what, and our
magic isn't accustomed to this type of injury. Had it not been for Fawkes's tears and Alastair's prompt actions, we would have lost him as well. We'll have to take him to St. Francis's Hospital for a while - it's not as good as St. Mungo's, but it's the best we have left -- but he'll recover. Whether he should come back instead of retire, however, is a separate question."

Flitwick put his hands to his head. "A bullet? You mean...from a Muggle weapon?"

Moody nodded, put on a glove, and handed over something which Flitwick recognized as a Muggle weapon. "Indeed. This, ladies and gentlemen, is a Muggle pistol, the weapon used on Dumbledore. Bane the centaur, who had distracted Severus and is now horrified at what he accidentally caused, searched the scene of the crime after I brought Dumbledore back. He found this weapon lying in the trees near where Snape and Dumbledore had fallen."

Flitwick couldn't believe it. "A Death Eater using a Muggle weapon. That doesn't make any sense, Alastair."

Moody shook his head. "I'm afraid it does, Filius. You see, I suspect I know the Death Eaters' motivation. They're believers in the Deathly Hallows and think that if they get all three, they become the master of Death and will be able to bring back You-Know-Who."

The staff members talked nervously among themselves for a moment. Finally, Professor Grubbdly-Plank shook her head. "That's crazy, Alastair. For one thing, that story is a legend. For another, what do the Deathly Hallows have to do with Albus Dumbledore or Severus Snape?"

Perenille Flamel answered this. "It's not a legend, I'm afraid. I've been around for a long time, and I've picked up enough stories over the years to have reason to trust the story's veracity. The Deathly Hallows do in fact exist, and no one has ever managed to control all three at the same time."

"But what does this have to do with Dumbledore?"

Moody put his head in his hands. "Simple. Dumbledore made a mistake. When people asked him about how he planned to get rid of Voldemort, he mentioned that he had the Elder Wand. He used it as his everyday wand."

Mrs. Flamel stared at him. "You're thinking that the Death Eaters did this to get their hands on the Elder Wand?"

Moody nodded. "Indeed, Mrs. Flamel. It has all the hallmarks of an Elder Wand transfer killing. I was too far away to see what was going on clearly, but it makes a lot of sense. A Death Eater in an Invisibility Cloak -- possibly the Cloak Hallow itself for all I know -- follows us outside the castle. I don't know how I could have missed him with my special eye, but miss him I did. At any rate, he waited until all three of us were separated and then made his move. He knew that magical weapons were useless against the Elder Wand. So, he brings out the pistol, attacks Dumbledore, and takes the Elder Wand. Snape then runs in and attacks him with magic, at which point the shooter retaliates with an Avada Kedavra launched by the Elder Wand, which has now sworn allegiance to the shooter for incapacitating Dumbledore. Against the Elder Wand, even a wizard as well trained as Snape doesn't stand a chance."

Professor Vector gasped. "Dear God!"

"Indeed. By that point, however, Snape had alerted me. I saw Snape fall as Bane and I came running in. However, by the time I got there and had a clear shot through the trees, the attacker was gone. I
suspect he used a Portkey to get out. However, before he left he launched the Dark Mark with the Elder Wand. The enhanced version of the spell triggered by the Elder Wand brought the snake to life and gave us our next set of problems."

Vector whistled. "Did you get a look at him through the Invisibility Cloak?"

Moody shook his head. "I'm afraid not."

Mrs. Flamel thought for a moment, and then her eyes widened. "Dumbledore has the Resurrection Stone in his office, right? Is that still safe?"

Moody forced out a smile. "We're about to find out. I sent Harry Potter over to Dumbledore's Office to look for the Resurrection Stone. I figured we didn't need him as interpreter anymore after we finished off the snake. I sure hope it's still there, Mrs. Flamel. If it is, I want you to take it over to your husband and have him give it to Dagher or someone like that. We DO NOT WANT the Death Eaters in possession of all three Hallows. Just imagine Voldemort, Master of Death, with the Elder Wand."

Flitwick shivered. "That, Alastair, is something I don't want to do. How's Aberforth holding out?"

Moody shook his head. "He's completely off his rocker right now. I've heard rumors that he went back to the bar after he found out about Albus and drank himself into a stupor. He needs help, and I highly recommend sending him to St. Mungo as well."

"Where are Argus and Amelia?"

"Argus is busy checking the corridors to make sure all the students are safely in their dorms. As far as Amelia, I don't know. No one's seen her for a good half hour, ever since Harry ran into her racing over here. She seemed to be in a big hurry, he said."

Flitwick nodded. "She's probably in one of the dorms. I suppose Argus will find her in due course."

Madam Rosmerta, who had joined in the consultation, cut in. "She's safe, Alastair. One of the people in the Hog's Head saw her after Harry ran into her. They says she was heading home to her apartment, figuring her roommates would protect her."

Moody frowned. "Her roommates? How old are they, 25?"

"Something like that. What I'm wondering is how she got out of the castle."

Vector offered a possibility. "The Room of Requirement. I bet is supports Muggles as well as wizards. Muggles think as well, after all. If she needed a way out and didn't want to risk being caught as a Muggle in the castle while the snake was attacking, she could have tried that."

Moody nodded slowly. "That's possible. Very foolish of her, but I can see her making that mistake. All right, let's deal with the second problem. How are Aurora Sinistra and the Hufflepuff/Ravenclaw Astronomy students? Did they get off the tower in time?"

Madam Pomfrey shook her head. "Sinistra had a broken neck from te fall -- nothing I could have done. No fewer than seven fifth-year Ravenclaws are dead, along with five Hufflepuffs."

Moody swore. "God Almighty. That snake wiped out half of the Hufflepuff class of '99 and three
quarters of the Ravenclaws."

"I'm afraid so, Alastair. Three students are missing, and I have a terrible feeling that the snake ate them. The rest are badly injured and are going to be in the hospital wing for a long time. Some may even have to go to St. Mungo's with Dumbledore."

There was a long pause. Finally, Flitwick shook his head in dismay. "This is probably the biggest disaster in the history of Hogwarts, including the problems surrounding the Chamber of Secrets. Two professors dead, one incapacitated, fifteen students killed by a snake attack, and the Astronomy tower partially destroyed. Let's hope this was a one-time incident and that the Death Eaters won't come back. I don't want to have to think about closing Hogwarts or moving it somewhere else safe. And I don't even want to consider bringing back dementors."

None of the professors spoke for a long time. Finally, after about ten minutes, Harry Potter burst into the Great Hall. Panting, he held out a stone with an odd symbol on it. "Here it is, Professors. Is this the object you were looking for?"

Moody took it from him and looked it over. He handed it to Mrs. Flamel, who nodded. "Indeed, Mr. Potter. That is indeed what we want. Go back to your dorm now, Potter. It's time for the students to grieve."

Potter nodded and ran off. Moody was about to pocket it when something came to him. "I've got an idea. At the very least, it will tell us if this thing is the real thing and not a duplicate. And if this works, we might get some more testimony."

Vector stared at him. "What?"

In response, Moody lifted the Resurrection Stone and turned it over three times in his hand. There was a flash of light next to him, and when it cleared Professors Snape and Sinistra were standing before him.

The rest of the staff backed off in shock, and Moody had to explain. "No, they're still dead. However, we'll be able to talk to them for a little. We'll start with you, Severus. What the hell happened there?"

Snape scowled a bit, but he answered the question. "I saw Dumbledore go down and called to you. Then I saw motion in the trees but no people there, a sign that someone was hiding under an Invisibility Cloak. Thinking that was the shooter, I tried to Disarm him. Unfortunately, a green Avada Kedavra beam shot out from those branches, hit my spell, and ate it up. It hit me and blasted me into Sheol."

"Did you ever see the shooter, Severus?"

"No, Alastair."

Professor Grubbly-Plank frowned. "Wait a minute: wouldn't two spells cancel each other out? How could the attacker's spell have hit Snape if the two beams hit each other?"

"Simple, Wilhelmina. I have reason to believe that the attacker had taken the Elder Wand off of Dumbledore. Dumbledore's wand was missing when I got there, and I figured that he had taken it as he was now its new master."
Moody shook his head. "Why'd you use magic against him then?"

Snape shrugged. "I didn't have much of a choice, Alastair. Besides, I was hoping he was still holding the gun."

Moody winced and turned to Sinistra. "All right, what happened to you?"

Sinistra threw her hands up in the air. "It wasn't my fault. I was looking at the Andromeda Galaxy when that snake came out of nowhere and chewed up the top of my tower. The next thing I knew, I was falling very quickly. I hit the ground before I finished casting Arresto Momentum."

Flitwick winced. "Ouch."

Sinistra chuckled. "Believe me, I didn't feel a thing. It was instantaneous."

All eyes turned to Flitwick. Finally, Moody spoke. "All right, Headmaster, what do we do now?"

Flitwick thought for a moment. "I think it's time for some funerals, I'm afraid."

To be continued...

-------------

Update #378: No Snape and I Can Be an Auror? Woo-Hoo!
-------------

Wednesday, October 2, 1996 / 19 Tishrei 5757 / Sukkot Day 5 / 3 Days To Shemini Atzeret
1400Z
Great Hall
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
United Kingdom
-------------

NEXT UP: Welcome Back Dementor
-------------

Amelia Bell was extremely confused.

The last thing she remembered was starting her new job as the Muggle Studies teacher here at Hogwarts. She hadn't gotten very far, however, before that big pile of rocks had fallen on her head and forced her into the infirmary for a week. She had nearly died in the accident, and she had lost most of her memories from the school year as well as the ability to form new memories for two more weeks. However, eventually St. Francis's had cleared her and sent her back to Hogwarts.

The next thing she knew, she had woken up in an odd room somewhere in the middle of nowhere -- presumably the Hogwarts medical wing. No one had been there for some reason, which confused her in retrospect. Nevertheless, she had enough of her wits about her to realize that the big EXIT sign had told her where to go.

The corridor had ended in a tapestry of a young girl whose last name, oddly enough, had been Dumbledore. She had pushed it open and come out in the Hog's Head tavern, where Aberforth Dumbledore -- was this Ariana Aberforth's daughter? -- was behind the bar.

All similarities to a typical Hog's Head evening had ended there, however. The bar had been completely empty, and Aberforth's face appeared to have been ravaged by grief and horror. She hadn't needed magical abilities to realize that he was completely drunk.
Concerned about the Transfiguration professor's well-being, she had gone over to him to ask him what the problem was. He had looked at her for a moment and stared at her in shock for a second. Smiling weakly and slurring his speech, he had spoken.

"Amelia? My, you look very attractive. You seeing anyone? Say, didn't Madam Rosmerta tell us you left about --"

He had suddenly cut himself off. "Oh right. I'm drunk. This is probably a hallucination. All right, Aberforth, I think it's time to go sober yourself up."

He had pointed his wand at his head, mentioned something about Albus being hurt -- when had that happened? -- and slurred some magic words. A pink beam had lanced out from the wand, blinding her momentarily, and hit him in the head. His head had promptly swelled like a balloon as he said: "Oh, that didn't work..."

Not knowing what to do, she had turned around to head back to the corridor to let her back into the castle. Ariana Dumbledore's portrait wouldn't move, however, and she had been forced to start walking over to the castle. She hadn't gotten very far before large numbers of wizards had told her that it was dangerous to go there right now, especially for her.

What was going on? Confused, she had returned home to her roommates who had abruptly started hugging her and praising Merlin or someone like that that she was OK. She, of course, had no idea what they were talking about because of her memory issues. So, she asked them to bring her up to speed. Which they had done, and for a good five seconds Amelia felt very grateful that she had no memories of what had transpired.

Apparently a revived Death Eater cell had attacked Hogwarts, killed Professors Snape and Sinistra, and nearly killed the headmaster. A snake had attacked the top of the Astronomy tower, wrecking it and killing fifteen students. The school was in complete chaos, and the wizards were trying to figure out what exactly had happened.

There were rumors that the Minister of Magic, Nicholas Flamel, had come in to investigate. He had announced a major investigation into British Death Eater and wizard supremacist activity, and he had also supposedly taken an extremely powerful magical artifact from Hogwarts with the intention of delivering it to the Grand Mugwump himself for safekeeping. The Grand Mugwump was not available at the moment, however, as he was making sure that the Abrahamic pilgrims who had gone to Mecca were able to complete their pilgrimages in safety and dignity. Supposedly Dagher would be returning to Atlantis on Saturday evening, after the holiday known as Shemini Atzeret.

With Albus Dumbledore incapacitated (no wonder Aberforth had been drunk!) and Snape dead, Professor Flitwick had been appointed headmaster of Hogwarts and Alastair Moody had been made his deputy. Horace Slughorn had come out of retirement -- once again -- to serve as Potions master for the rest of the year, at which point he would call it quits for good. Hugh de Lourdes, Dr. Flamel's old apprentice, had been picked to teach Charms. Although Hugh was not a Charms specialist, his six centuries of experience had taught him a lot about the subject. Astronomy would be handled by two well-known Muggle astronomy figures: Sir Patrick Moore and -- Amelia couldn't have heard this right -- Stephen Hawking, who would receive magical treatment to improve his condition to the point where he would be able to walk and speak again provided that he received the treatment regularly.

All of this had happened yesterday evening. By the time she had gotten to work this morning, the wizards had finally started to get around to cleaning up the remains of the Astronomy tower and
identifying the bodies. Grief counselors from Hogsmeade had come in to help comfort the stricken
students, and even a few of the teachers couldn't believe what had just happened.

Moody had spoken with Flitwick and Minister Flamel. The discussion had been quite animated, but
eventually Flamel and Moody had convinced Flitwick to allow creatures known as dementors onto
the campus provided that these dementors had been taken directly from the Ministry headquarters
and not from Azkaban. Amelia had no idea what a dementor was, and she couldn't see anything
unusual in the area. She suspected that these dementors were creatures only wizards could see, as the
students were much more subdued. Oddly enough, she felt more depressed and hopeless than usual,
though she passed that off to shock from her memory loss and learning what had just happened to the
school.

The Forbidden Forest had been made off limits to everyone, including the teachers, as the dementors
began investigating it as a crime scene. Amelia had no intention of going to the Forbidden Forest.
For all she knew, it was filled with these monsters. It was probably called the Forbidden Forest for a
reason, after all.

The rumor mill was abuzz with theories as to who had done it. Three people got the lion's share of
the blame: fifth year students Draco Malfoy, Vincent Crabbe, and Gregory Goyle. Although all three
boys had sworn under Veritaserum that they hadn't known anything about this, people accused them
of having been taught tricks to reduce the effectiveness of Veritaserum.

The case against the boys was disturbingly strong. All three had been staunch wizard supremacists
whose fathers had been involved with the Death Eaters -- Draco's, in fact, had been Voldemort's
second in command over in Korea. Although all three of them had forsworn their Death Eater past
after Voldemort had died, many students -- including Ron Weasley, whose father Arthur was a
George Cross recipient who was building flying cars for Muggles -- wasn't convinced they'd actually
turned. Draco had been a double agent once, after all, and his actions had cost Hogwarts the life of
another professor, Minerva McGonagall. He could always go back.

All three boys had been in a perfect position to go after Dumbledore and/or Snape. They would have
seen the two professors a lot, and they would have known that Snape had betrayed the Death Eaters.
Snape loved Draco and had adopted him as his son. Dumbledore's great failing was that he thought
too much of his students, which would have played right into the suspects' hands. All three would
have been underage, so they could have thought that they would have not been sent to Azkaban.
They would have been the perfect sleeper agents inside Hogwarts.

She took her place with the rest of the teachers as Headmaster Flitwick stepped to the podium to give
the eulogies. Every single student was in his or her dress robes. Amelia, who didn't own any robes,
had found herself in a somber black dress appropriate for the occasion. The House tables had been
removed, leaving a disturbingly empty staff table at the front of the room.

In front of the staff table lay two coffins. Snape's was covered with the Slytherin flag, and Sinistra's
was covered by that of her own house. Next to Snape's coffin were several Muggle soldiers who had
arrived to give the former SAS associate a formal military honor guard for his funeral. Behind the
coffins, in three rows of five, lay the coffins of the fifteen students killed by the snake. Amelia had
trouble seeing them from time to time as the surviving Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws knelt next to
them to grieve and pay their respects.

Harry Potter looked at the coffins in front of the benches where he and his classmates had been
sitting. Had that attack occurred one hour later, Ginny would have been dead. Had that attack
occurred two hours later, Hermione would have been dead as the NEWT class would had begun.
He couldn't think whether he should consider this good luck or bad luck. Granted, the attack had come at the one time which had saved his two best female friends. On the other hand, any attack which kills seventeen people...
So Slughorn would let him take NEWT classes even with an E in Potions. Woo-hoo.

He listened attentively as Flitwick gave the eulogy. Harry was amazed at all the stuff Snape had done. He almost fell over -- both Ron and Hermione had to support him -- when Flitwick explained that Snape had defected to the light side because he had cared for Harry's mother. Harry wondered if he would have been able to Avada Kedavra himself if he found Snape had been his father.

The eulogy went on and on. Slowly, he began to realize that Snape hadn't been half as bad as Harry had thought. In fact, he had been one of the bravest men Harry had ever met. It would take Harry a long time to get over his distrust of the man, but it would probably happen at some point.

He had never known Sinistra all that well. All that he knew was that she spent most of her clear nights looking at stars and claimed to have seen over 100 Messier objects in one night. He couldn't imagine why she would like top look at messy objects, but he wasn't an astronomer.

Flitwick then proceeded to talk about the fallen students from Ravenclaw. He then yielded the podium to Pomona Sprout, who talked about the Hufflepuff students. He then announced that classes would be put on hold for a week so that the students could grieve and Professors Hawking and Moore would be able to make it over to Hogwarts.

The mourners then all filed outside to the cemetery near Hogwarts, where Sinistra and Snape were laid to rest. The school chaplain recited a few prayers and the SAS men fired a rifle volley in salute. The families of the fallen students were then allowed to take their loved ones' bodies home for a more personal burial.

Finally, it was over, and Amelia Bell had no idea what was going to happen next. All she knew was that there was going to be a BIG investigation. Both Flamel and Flitwick had been adamant about that.

To be continued...

----------
Update #379: Welcome Back Dementor
----------

Wednesday, October 2, 1996 / 20 Tishrei 5757 / Sukkot Day 6 / 2 Days To Shemini Atzeret
1800Z
Three Broomsticks
Hogsmeade
United Kingdom

NEXT UP: All Right, Which Ones Are the Wonder Twins?

----------

Madam Rosmerta glared at the dementor snooping around the room. "All right, Khamul. As you can see, there's nothing here. You're just scaring the customers. As the Muggle story goes, take eight of your buddies and go chase after that stupid ring."

The dementor, not surprisingly, ignored her. It looked under the tables, which had emptied very quickly as soon the patrons had felt the monsters gliding towards the bar.
Rosmerta put her hands on her hips. "Well, if you're going to deprive me of all my customers, would you at least be willing to buy something?"

To her amazement, the dementor turned to face her and glided up to the bar. It stopped and looked at her for a moment, and she breathed a sigh of relief. "All right. What will it be? I'm not sure -- ulp!"

The dementor put its hands around her throat midway through her sentence. Then, it spoke in a truly hideous voice.

"Do not interfere with our work, and do not restrict our movements. This is a criminal investigation, and any interference will result in incarceration in Azkaban or worse. Do you understand me, woman?"

Rosmerta's blood drained from her face. Nervously, she nodded. The dementor released her and continued to search the room.

She gritted her teeth and thought: welcome back, dementors. I hope you hate your stay enough that you decide to stay for a little less than a year this time.

She wondered if she should start serving some very low quality butterbeer. Maybe that would FORCE them out and bring back her regular customers.

Assuming her regular customers chose to keep living in Hogsmeade. People were leaving the city in droves, too terrified of the dementors and the Death Eaters to stay. Among these had been Gene and Eileen Sigmund. Gene's sister Dara had left a couple of hours after them.

------------

Hogwarts

- - - - - - -

Harry Potter led Ron and Hermione over to Professor Bell's office. With dementors running around who could quite possibly be working for the newly activated Death Eater cell, he needed that Marauder's Map back as soon as possible...at the very minimum, to identify the sleeper agents who had warned the invisible shooter that Dumbledore and Snape were coming out.

Hermione was fairly certain he wasn't going to get the map back. She figured there was maybe a 60% chance the staff had confiscated it and a 38% chance that the SAS hadn't finished working with it yet. Hoping for the best, he knocked on the Muggle Studies teacher's door.

Professor Bell responded immediately. "Hello? Who is it?"

Harry figured he'd speak for the group. "Professor Bell, it's Harry Potter. I was wondering if the SAS had finished working with my map yet."

"What map? And what's this thing with the SAS?"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked at each other. Had the teacher forgotten about the map completely? Had the SAS confiscated the map and sworn her to secrecy? This seemed very strange.

Cautiously, Harry replied: "The map you took from me which showed the location of everybody at Hogwarts. It's magical."

The door creaked open, and Professor Bell looked at them with a mixture of embarrassment and confusion on her face. "I don't remember taking a map from you, Mr. Potter. Then again, that injury
a month ago which robbed me of my memory and put me in St. Francis's for four weeks could have wiped out my memories. Can you describe the map for me?"

Harry's eyebrows shot up. Delicately, he said: "What do you mean, you were in St. Francis's for four weeks? You've been here the whole time, and I never saw you injured."

Bell frowned. "Are you ALSO saying my memory is faulty? Everyone's telling me that now. Why do I suspect George Weasley or someone like that hexed me as a practical joke? Granted, I kind of like his joke shop and think he's kind of cute, but I know to keep my distance."

Harry froze and turned to Ron, who was staring at Bell in absolute disbelief. It was obvious that Bell didn't realize George and Ron were related. Surely the red hair should have given THAT away, let alone the last name!

Hermione put her hands to her mouth, and when she spoke it was in a very low tone. "Professor Bell, this is very strange. You should see Madam Pomfrey -- as a Muggle, you might be susceptible to a lot of things we wizards take for granted. What was the last thing you remember before your injury."

Bell shrugged. "Meeting all of you in class for the first time. The injury occurred right after that."

Harry looked at Hermione and Ron in horror. Excusing themselves for a moment, he led his two friends away from the door and began speaking to them urgently. "This does not look good. I bet she was Imperiused or Polyjuiced by the sleeper agent -- remember she was the person who told Dumbledore about the Death Eaters to lure him outside. As a Muggle, she would have been caught completely unaware of such a curse, and since no one on the staff knew her beforehand they wouldn't recognize any change in behavior."

Hermione slowly nodded. "That makes a lot of sense, Harry. I sure hope you're wrong, though."

Harry nodded. "I hope I'm wrong, too. However, we all noticed that she became a little stricter after that first day. And she started focusing on Russian literature at that point as well. The syllabus we saw on Day 1 didn't have anything Russian in it."

Ron nodded. "That's a distinct possibility, Harry. The obvious question now is: who is the Russian student behind this? You'd have expected we'd have seen him on -- "

Harry swore and finished the sentence: " -- the Marauder's Map, which has conveniently gone missing! The sleeper agent must have realized that we'd be able to see him or her on the map and tricked me into giving it up, just like what Barty Crouch Jr. did when he impersonated Moody!"

Ron grunted. "Death Eaters all think alike, it seems. If that is the case, you can bet your bottom Galleon that we're not getting that map back, and in the miraculous case that we do get it back it will be after the mission is complete and the agent has left."

Hermione rounded on Harry. "Harry, think for a moment. Do you remember seeing any Russian names at all on the map before Bell, or whoever it was, took it from you?"

Harry nodded. "As a matter of fact, now that I think about it, I did. Something which started with a Z. I figured the person was a first year and didn't pay much attention."

Hermione shook her head feverishly. "Impossible. It can't be a first-year student."
"Why not, Hermione?"

"Because William told me he was the second to last person in line, and the girl after him had the last name Woods! There were no last names later in the alphabet than Woods, which means no Z's!"

The three were silent for a second. Finally, Harry shook his head. "You're thinking a Russian Death Eater cell? It's plausible, except for one thing. Why would they attack here instead of Durmstrang, which is closer and already had Karkaroff as a defector?"

Hermione hummed. "You know, you have a point. However, you can also say that Durmstrang would be the more obvious target in that case. If they did it here, they could frame people like Malfoy for it while their own cell remained safely anonymous."

Ron snorted. "Unless Draco's the one doing the Imperiusing."

Harry bit his lip. He couldn't imagine himself defending Draco, but he was. "I've been thinking things over, and I don't think Malfoy did it -- but we're meant to think that he did. Veritaserum doesn't lie, Ron. You heard how Barty Crouch Jr. sang after Snape dosed him with the stuff. If the Death Eaters knew how to mask the truth under Veritaserum, our fake Moody certainly didn't know about it. Malfoy professed his innocence under Veritaserum. He's not the sleeper."

"What about Crabbe and Goyle?"

"They also testified under Veritaserum. They're clean."

Ron winced. "There's another possibility. Could it be Britain for Humans or someone like that? We know they don't like us. That would explain the Muggle weapon."

Harry shook his head. "Unlikely. Why would Britain for Humans ally with a wizard to shoot off the Dark Mark? How would they even KNOW how to shoot off the Dark Mark?"

Ron thought some more. "Can we assume the sleeper is still around? If you haven't gotten the map back yet..."

Hermione nodded slowly. "Most likely. And I bet know why he's still here. He didn't kill his primary target."

All three of them looked at each other in disbelief. Finally, they said it together. "Dumbledore! He survived!"

Harry spun on his heel and began marching towards the headmaster's tower. "We've got to tell Flitwick...and someone at St. Francis's. Unless I miss my guess, someone's going to attack St. Francis's to finish off Dumbledore."

---------------------------

Italian Ministry of Magic

Don Amaranto was furious. Now GERARDO had disappeared? This made no sense! He got up and hurried over to his manager. It was time for him to go find Gerardo and rescue his friend from the Mob.

---------

Xylenda
Megan Baldwin had no trouble getting permission to return to England to check on Amelia. Her friend must have been terrified of the Death Eater attack, and rumors were coming out of memory loss. Had she been injured? Thankfully, there were more and more anthropologists coming over. The new sport of Hoops was starting to spread throughout the island, and people were trying to construct courts in Juneau.

To be continued...

--------
Update #380: All Right, Which Ones Are the Wonder Twins?
--------
Thursday, October 3, 1996 / 20 Tishrei 5757 / Sukkot Day 6 / 2 Days To Shemini Atzeret
Astraea Records and Studio
New York, New York
United States of America
--------
NEXT UP: Royal Treatment
--------
Stefani Germanotta was nervous. Everyone had told her that she knew how to sing, and she'd gotten a bit of a fan base in the New York subway system. But she had never actually tried making an album before -- especially with a full band and several backup singers whose only claim to fame was that they could also do funny things with their hairs well.

She looked at her father, who just smiled and led her into the big boss's office. Sitting behind a huge desk stacked with papers was a woman dressed in a fancy business suit. The sign on her desk read ERIN BOYD, AGENT. She seemed to be a little older than her father, which meant she was REALLY old. Not quite as old as those wizards, but old enough.

The woman smiled at her, came out from behind the desk, and bent down to shake her hand. Stefani was a bit embarrassed at this, but she smiled and managed to hide her blushing for the most part. The woman looked her over, smiled a little, and then turned to her father.

"So, Mr. Germanotta, this young lady is going to be our lead singer?"

Her father nodded. "Yes, Ms. Boyd. This is my daughter, Stefani. She has an outstanding voice, and she is already accustomed to singing before live audiences in the subways and parks."

"Does she also have this ability to alter her looks -- what do you call it, the Tonks Treatment?"

Her father beamed. "That she does, Ms. Boyd. Do you want her to demonstrate for you?"

The woman looked amused. "Sure. All right, Stefani, can make your hair look like a porcupine for me?"

Stefani smiled ear to ear and closed her eyes for a moment. Seconds later, her hair all started standing up on end, just like a porcupine's quills. Grinning, she said: "I'll wear a porcupine on my head on a whim! Want me to make it purple?"

Boyd, already impressed, couldn't help but nod. Stefani thought some more and eventually managed to get her hair to turn fluorescent purple. Her father applauded, and Boyd nearly fell over in her chair.
Boyd turned back to her father. "Son of a...gun, Mr. Germanotta. She's at least as good as the rest of them. The question now is whether she's got enough talent to be the lead singer. You can't have your shape-shifting Jackson Five without the child lead being able to blow the audience out of the water."

She turned back to Stefani. "Stefani, how about singing something for us?"

Oh no, she thought. I'm not good enough for this. Hoping the woman wouldn't see her shaking, she sang a few lines from a song she and her father had written about her odd ability to change her form.

I'm beautiful in my way  
'Cause God makes no mistakes  
I'm on the right track, baby  
I was born this way

Don't hide yourself in regret  
Just love yourself and you're set  
I'm on the right track, baby  
I was born this way

Hoping she hadn't made a fool out of herself, she turned to look back at the woman behind the desk. Her father seemed proud of her, but how would the agent react?

She froze when she saw that the agent was staring at her in disbelief. No one spoke for a good fifteen seconds, until finally, Boyd broke the silence. "Good God! You're AMAZING! I haven't heard anything this good in years. This may be our chance to get this label on the map. How old are you, Stefani?"

"Ten, ma'am."

"Do you want to try performing for large audiences with a bunch of other people who can change their hair color and facial features just like you do?"

Stefani stared at the woman. "Other people can change their facial features too? Cool! Does that mean they can sing as well? Maybe you have to be able to change your facial features in order to sing well. That would explain people like Boy George, Gene Simmons, and Michael Jackson."

Both adults fell over laughing at this. Eventually, her father managed to compose himself and shook his head. "The ability to change your hair like that has no bearing on a person's ability to sing. Some people can sing, some people can change their hair color, and some can do neither. You are the only person I know who can do both very well."

Boyd nodded. "He's right, Stefani. The other people who can change their hair color can sing a little, but you're MUCH better than they are. You'll get to do almost all the singing for this group, Stefani. You, as the child lead, will be the person everyone is focusing on, just like Michael Jackson in the Jackson Five."

Stefani thought about it for a moment, then shrugged. "I guess I can try. Who are these other people you're talking about?"

Her father smiled and put his hand on her shoulder. "The people playing the other instruments. You may be interested to know that the Ministry of Magic has found ten other American Muggles who have the ability to change their hair like you on a whim. Some of them were also intrigued by the
possibility of a shape-shifting band. Imagine a rock band where you're singing and everyone is changing their facial features as part of the show."

Stefani giggled. "That's really funny. Sounds cool though. How many people will I be performing for? A few dozen?"

Her father and her agent looked at each other for a second. Finally, Boyd answered. "Well, we'll start with a few dozen. If that works out, we'll go up to maybe 100 or so. If that works out as well, things really start to get interesting. You might get as popular as Michael Jackson or Madonna."

Stefani's jaw dropped. "Madonna? I can never be Madonna!"

"Don't count yourself out just yet, Stefani. You've got the best voice I've heard in years, and the idea of a band made entirely out of Metamorphmagi is going to really intrigue everyone here in New York. How much would you be willing to bet that Madonna felt the same jitters you feel now when she was first approached for a record label?"

Her father grunted and muttered something to the agent about Madonna not being ten years old. The agent said that she couldn't risk waiting until Stefani was eighteen or nineteen to sign her: she was just THAT GOOD. Someone was going to get her at a young age no matter what.

Her father looked at her sternly and then at the agent. "If Stefani does do any concerts anytime soon, either my wife or I must be with her at all times. Furthermore, she is not to do any concerts during the school year. You will restrict the shows to the summer and Christmas vacation. Is that clear?"

Boyd nodded. "It is clear, and we have already taken that into consideration. I'm thinking of having the first show be over Christmas break."

Stefani's father stared at the agent. "Christmas break? I'm not a professional songwriter! How are they going to rehearse? How are they going to even have time to write songs?"

"She'll have to do some weekends to help with the rehearsals. As far as songwriting goes, judging from the song she sang she's already got access to a good lyricist."

Her father chuckled. "That was something Stefani, my wife, and I wrote up on the spot, and I can tell you that Born This Way it took a good three hours to write. Trust me, that's not an option -- wait a minute..."

Boyd winked at him. "Either you or your wife is unemployed, right? How about becoming Stefani's guardian agent and songwriter? Once we sign you guys up, we can always subsidize your work."

Her father nodded. "I see you're thinking along the same lines I am. Well, now, that changes stuff. All right, given our economic straits, I'm game for anything at this point. Sign her up, with me as her guardian."

The agent nodded and brought out some reams of paper which her father started filling out. As he was doing so, he asked: "How many other Metamorphs are going to backing Stefani up?"

Boyd shrugged. "Three, two women and a man. They range from age 25 to age 51. If you wish, you and your wife can perform as well. Your presence on stage -- or maybe just offstage -- could help calm her nerves."
"Damn straight we're doing that, Ms. Boyd. Now, can we give Stefani a stage name? We've already got the name of the band, the Metamorphs. I don't want her going by her real name because she'll get mobbed at school once everyone finds out what she can do. I don't want her treated differently from the other students."

Boyd nodded. "That's not a bad idea. What were you thinking? Something which will emphasize the fact that she's very young and can spontaneously change her appearance?"

Stefani flared at her father. "I'm not a baby, Dad. I'm not going to go ga-ga-goo-goo on stage."

The two adults stared at her for a second. Finally, Boyd let it out. "Gaga."

Stefani looked at the agent in horror. She knew she wasn't supposed to get mad at the nice lady, but...She turned to her father, hoping that he would protest, and to his amazement he was actually nodding.

"Gaga actually makes sense, Ms. Boyd. It means 'strange', which certainly refers to her unusual abilities and the strange costume changes the band members will be...shifting into. It also refers to her youth as well. That's actually not a bad name, believe it or not. Gaga and the Metamorphs."

Stefani wrung her hands. "DAD! I'M NOT A BABY!"

Boyd looked at her and smiled. "OK, we'll make you sound more grown up. We'll do Lady Gaga. You can think of yourself as a princess for now, and when you grow up you really will be a lady!"

Stefani was suspicious -- was she supposed to dress like a princess? She didn't really like the second name all that much either. However, judging from the expressions on their faces, it was fairly obvious that they were going to foist that atrocity on her no matter what.

What kind of idiot would call herself Lady Gaga?

Her father grinned as he continued filling out the forms.

-------------------------------------
Britain for Humans Headquarters
-------------------------------------

Isabel Miller dropped the newspaper in disbelief. That was the last straw. The Aes Sedai oaths were no longer working, the Kol Nidre service had allowed wizards to renounce their oaths, and now Voldemort's men had attacked Hogwarts again? Although she admitted that some wizards were good, it was fairly obvious that they were going to foist that atrocity on her no matter what.

Britain for Humans had offered a truce in good faith. Unfortunately, it was obvious that the wizards either would not, or could not, hold to their side of the bargain. Well, to hell with them.

She started writing a letter to all major Britain for Humans cells. The truce was over, and she was accepting suggestions for new anti-wizard terrorist attacks.

----------------
Hogwarts
----------------

Hoping against hope, Harry Potter knocked on the door of Professor Slughorn's office. All of the teachers had come in to serve as grief counselors even though the school was still in session.

A voice called from the other side. "Who is it?"
"It's Harry Potter, sir. I was wondering if I could ask you for a favor?"

"Come on in, Mr. Potter. Come on in."

Cautiously optimistic, Harry pushed open the door and entered Slughorn's office. It looked a little like Snape's, albeit a little less messy. Drawing a deep breath, he asked: "Sir, I was wondering if you take people who took E in their Potions courses for NEWT level classes. I want to be an Auror, and I have good marks on the other Auror-related OWLs. I tried to convince Snape to let me in, but he wouldn't."

Slughorn nodded. "I heard about that, Mr. Potter. That's why Dumbledore recommended that I give you some extra training in lieu of Quidditch."

"I'm aware of that. At any rate, can I join your class now? I'll do extra homework to make up for that lost month."

Slughorn looked at him for a moment. Finally, he nodded. "It's fine with me, Mr. Potter. I'm sorry that your admission had to come under these circumstances, but there's nothing we can do about it."

The Potions master began rummaging through an old cabinet. "First things first -- we're going to need to get you a book. I take it you don't have a Grade 6 Potions book?"

"No, sir."

Slughorn nodded in satisfaction as he found what he wanted. "Good -- take this one. It's a bit ratsy, but it will do the job...and it's got some extra spells in it which will help you on your NEWTs."

Harry looked at the cover and read the note there. "'Property of the Half-Blood Prince'? Was this used by a nobleman, sir? Lady Laura perhaps?"

Slughorn laughed. "Not that type of prince, Mr. Potter. This was Severus Snape's book, whose mother's name was Eileen Prince. You know Patricia Prince, the new first-year in my House? She's Snape's cousin's daughter. At any rate, Snape was an excellent student, and you'll find some notes in there which will help bring you up to speed quickly. If I were you, I'd spend the next couple of days looking over chapters 1-4. I'll quiz you on it before class next week."

Harry shook Slughorn's hand. "Thank you for your help sir. I won't let you down."

Slughorn nodded. "Don't mention it. See you next week."

To be continued...
AiF: Good morning, fellow Muscovites. I am writing to you from a Wizarding sanctuary in St. Petersburg, a fantastic palace which has been hidden for centuries from prying Muggle eyes. This palace, which looks like a cross between the Disneyland castle and a medieval fortress, is the ancestral home of the Wizarding branch of the Romanov family.

As you are undoubtedly aware, the Romanov dynasty was believed to have been terminated when Tsar Nicholas II and his family were killed after the Soviet revolution. However, that was not the case. Although Muggle line was completely wiped out, Lenin's status as a Muggle ensured that the Wizarding line was going to survive.

With me is Tsar Alexei Romanov, the current Wizarding Tsar. He looks to be in his late thirties, about 190 cm in height. He's wearing a standard Wizarding robe with a special sash indicating his rank. He's accompanied by two children, Ivan and Svetlana.

Your Majesty, thank you for this interview.

Tsar Alexei: You're welcome.

AiF: Perhaps we should begin by explaining how you and your family are related to the Romanovs most Russians are familiar with.

TA: It's actually quite simple, sir. Nicholas II was my great-grandfather.

AiF: Your great-grandfather? Amazing! Your Majesty, how could that be possible? Was Nicholas a wizard as well?

TA: He wasn't. However, his daughter Valentina was. I know what you're thinking, sir. He didn't have a daughter named Valentina.

AiF: Well, Your Majesty, that did occur to me.

TA: Valentina was born in 1908. Nicholas, who knew about the wizards in our family, figured something strange was going on and asked the Russian Minister of Magic to check on her. Sure enough, she proved to be a witch. After brief discussion with the Minister, Nicholas decided to
Obliviate all knowledge of Valentina from the Muggles and had her sent off to Durmstrang to be trained as a witch at a very young age.

AiF: How could Nicholas do that? Surely Muggles must have seen the Tsarina pregnant!

TA: The Ministry of Magic can be quite thorough, especially back at the turn of the century when Muggle technology was not as powerful as it is today. From what I've been told, they got everyone. There wasn't any Internet in those days, after all. The only thing that survived was a legend of a missing daughter that got transformed over the decades into the story of Anastasia surviving the executions by the Soviets. The Minister of Magic, realizing that the remaining Romanovs had to be hidden, encouraged the propagation of this rumor.

AiF: What exactly happened to Anastasia, then, Your Majesty?

TA: She was killed with the rest of them. They just haven't found the body for some reason.

AiF: Amazing!

TA: Indeed, I would expect this to come as a surprise to you. At any rate, Valentina graduated Durmstrang class of '25. When it came time for her to marry, the Minister of Magic discussed with then-Wizarding Tsar Mikhail the possibility of Valentina marrying a foreigner to prevent the Wizarding line from inbreeding. Mikhail recommended that Valentina be set up with Frederick Spencer, from the British Wizarding line. They were married in 1928, and my mother Alexandra showed up in 1931 -- a beautiful name which would fit in both Russia and Britain.

AiF: Whatever happened to Mikhail?

TA: He turned over control of the Wizarding line to my grandmother in '25, when she turned seventeen and finished Durmstrang. It was a bit unorthodox, but he felt that she deserved the throne after what her family had gone through.

AiF: This is just mind-blowing. Your Majesty, I can barely take it all in!

TA: Just jot it down for now and make sure that recording device still works. Where was I? Ah, my mother. She went to Hogwarts, Hufflepuff class of '48. She corresponded a lot with Tsarina Valentina, of course. When the Cold War broke out, this mother-daughter pair proved invaluable in preventing the West and East from blowing each other up. When Atlantis got involved during the Cuban Missile Crisis, these two women were worth their weight in Galleons as diplomats. It's a pity you Muggles never knew about it until now.

AiF: Wow!

TA: I thought you might find that interesting, sir. Well, let's press on to the present day. You may be interested to know that my grandfather Frederick was in fact a distant relative of Princess Diana. I think it's third cousin twice removed or something like that.

AiF: Diana's part witch?

TA: Yes and no. She has Wizarding ancestors, but that doesn't mean the genes made it all the way to her. When it comes to King William, Charles was the one with the Wizarding genes. Diana is straight Muggle.
AiF: Fascinating!

TA: Indeed. Alexandra married Johann VI of the Hapsburg line in 1959 and had three children: me in 1960, Ingolf in 1966, and Laura in 1971. As the eldest, I was offered the Russian title upon my mother's death, which I accepted and took the surname Romanov. Ingolf started out as Hapsburg but married a high-ranking Romanov, Olga, in 1990. He took her name and converted his name to the more Russian Igor. Laura is currently the Wizarding Queen of England.

AiF: Incredible, Your Majesty!

TA: There's still one generation left. I married Maria Popova in 1983 and had Svetlana here in 1986. Igor, who spends a lot of time with me trying to cheat at Wizard Chess, married Katya Laronova in 1987. The little boy here is Igor's son Ivan. Laura is still unmarried, and many people are recommending that she marry King William in ten years or so to unify the British Muggle and Wizarding royal lines.

AiF: Goodness gracious! So all of the European Wizarding royal families are still highly related?

TA: We are, and to be honest it's probably not good for us. I've already decided that when Svetlana here gets the throne after me, she can marry a Muggle if she wants. That will, among other things, unify the two lines -- which, in my opinion, would be a good thing. I'm actually very much in favor of Svetlana winding up with King William, but we don't do arranged marriages as often anymore.

AiF: Can she marry a commoner, Your Majesty?

TA: I'd prefer not, and it's unorthodox with us, but I'll keep my options open. If all else fails, I can elevate the husband into the nobility to keep the line going. Being an emperor has its perks after all.

AiF: I'm sorry, Your Majesty, I'm going to need to take a break to digest all of this. I'll come back later.

TA: No problem. Take your time.

To be continued...

Update #381.5: Holes in the Alibi

Friday, October 4, 1996 / 21 Tishrei 5757 / Sukkot Day 7 / 1 Day To Shemini Atzeret
Headmaster's Office
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
United Kingdom

NEXT UP: Maybe I Can Subcontract This to the Merpeople

Headmaster Flitwick stared at Harry, Ron, and Hermione in horror. "Are you sure about this, Harry?"

Harry nodded. "Yes, sir. It all makes sense. Professor Bell has been kidnapped and Polyjuiced, just like Professor Moody was. Either that, or she's under the Imperius Charm cast by some Death Eater agent in the castle. It's the only thing which would explain her memory loss and her desire to get her hands on --". Abruptly, Harry stopped, and he stared at Ron.
Flitwick prompted him more. "Get her hands on what?"

No one spoke for a few seconds. Finally, Hermione glared at the two boys and answered. "The Marauder's Map, Professor. It's a magical tool which shows where everyone is at Hogwarts. Supposedly Sirius Black, James Potter, Professor Lupin, and Wormtail helped design it. It eventually wound up in the possession of Fred and George Weasley."

Flitwick looked angry and held out his hand. "Sounds like something they would have done. That's important information, Harry. However, you do realize that I'm going to have to confiscate that as joke products like that aren't allowed at school. Give it to me, now."

Harry shook his head. "I can't, Professor. Bell took it from me a couple of weeks ago and I haven't seen it since. The same thing happened with the fake Professor Moody two years ago, sir. Crouch Jr. realized what the Marauder's Map could do and grabbed it before we could use it to blow his cover. Rest assured, however, that you won't have to deal with it anymore."

Hermione went on from there. "Professor, do you know of any new students or staff members whose last names start with Z?"

Flitwick thought for a moment. "Not that I know of. There haven't been any students whose last names have started with Z for the past three years. Are you implying that you saw a stranger in Hogwarts with this map of yours before Professor Bell confiscated it?"

Harry nodded vigorously. "It's quite possible, sir. I remember a Russian-sounding name starting with Z. I figured it was a first year until Hermione reminded me that the first year class roster ended with Woods."

"What was this name?"

"I can't remember for certain, sir. All I recall is that it sounded Russian."

"Did you see this name many times, Harry? If so, where?"

Harry thought for a good thirty seconds. "I'm trying to remember the details, sir. I remember seeing the person in...Professor Bell's office! Bloody hell!"

Flitwick swore. "Merlin's beard! Why didn't you tell us this earlier?"

Harry wrung his hands. "I thought it was a first year who was serving detention with her!"

"Was Professor Bell in the room at the time?"

"No, Professor."

Flitwick grew more animated. "That implies Polyjuice Potion and not Imperius. Was this person ever in Professor Snape's office?"

"I don't remember, sir."

Flitwick began pacing around the room. "This is very troubling. Particularly since we tested all of the staff members for Polyjuice before the school year started. We didn't want another Barty Crouch Jr. among us."
Harry winced. "I'm sorry, Professor, but I think the agent figured you'd do that. I suspect that Bell was Polyjuiced a couple of days after class started, after any preliminary screening. I remember seeing a syllabus with lots of interesting books on it...which suddenly were replaced with Russian folk tales early in the semester. That sounds exactly like what a Russian agent would do if she were trying to pass herself off as a Muggle Studies professor."

Flitwick shook his head gravely. "A Death Eater passing herself off as a Muggle Studies professor. Who would have thought it? A Muggle can't pass herself off as a wizard, but a wizard can certainly pass herself off as a Muggle simply by refusing to use magic in the castle."

Flitwick stared out the window. "This makes all too much sense now. Megan Baldwin abruptly resigns, thinking her mother has died, and then finds out later that it had been a false alarm. That sounds a lot like someone trying to tamper with her memories in order to get her out of Hogwarts so that this new agent can take over Muggle Studies. School was about to start at the time, and Dumbledore was frantically trying to find another Muggle Studies professor."

Ron interrupted here. "If I were the Death Eater, I'd have tried to apply for the job at that point. Were there any other candidates other than Professor Bell?"

Flitwick gasped. "There was! A chap named Zygonov! He presented himself almost immediately and asked for the job!"

Hermione spun to face Harry. "Harry! Is that..."

Harry's eyes widened as the word brought back an image of the Marauder's Map. "That's it, Hermione. I remember the name now. Halyna Zygonova."

Flitwick reeled back and had to sit down. "Dear me. Zygonova. We've been fools all this time!"

Ron stared at the headmaster. "The names sound similar, but are you sure they're related?"

Hermione nodded. "Positive, Ron. The A at the end of the name is a suffix indicating that the person is a woman. Unless I'm very badly mistaken, this Halyna is Zygonov's wife or unmarried sister."

Flitwick nodded. "Indeed. Dumbledore mentioned that Zygonov was married. Everything is all too clear, now. Zygonov forces out Baldwin and tries to take the job so he can...go after Dumbledore". He doubted that these kids really needed to know about the Deathly Hallows and the Elder Wand. "He does this with very little warning before the school year starts, so the odds of finding another candidate are very low. However, Dumbledore lucks out and gets Amelia Bell. This leaves Zygonov with a problem: he needs Dumbledore killed but he has no access to Dumbledore."

Hermione finished the thought. "The Polyjuice Potion doesn't work across species, and people often find it difficult or uncomfortable to appear as the opposite gender. He decides that he didn't want to Polyjuice into Bell, so his wife does it. Halyna Zygonova waits until the school year starts and then replaces Bell. It all fits, Headmaster. Dear God, it all fits!"

Flitwick nodded sadly. "And unless I'm badly mistaken, that sudden gap in Bell's memory means that either Zygonova Obliviated herself so she can't incriminate herself...or she brought back Bell to unknowingly cover her escape, in which case she'd be...MERLIN'S BEARD! Aberforth!"

Harry didn't like the sound of that. "What? What does Professor Aberforth have to do with this?"
"Madam Rosmerta claimed she saw Professor Bell leaving the Hog's Head while we were fighting the snake. Now that we've studied the Room of Requirement, we believe that there may be a secret passage into the Hog's Head from one of the configurations the Room of Requirement can take. We were under the impression that Bell managed to escape through there. This all makes sense...except that about half an hour later a drunk Aberforth claims to have seen Bell suddenly appear in the Hog's Head...without walking in the door. Keep in mind that the guards around Hogwarts during the fighting were under strict orders to not allow Bell or any other Muggles back into the building while the fighting was going on. This means that Bell had no way to get into the castle, return to the Room of Requirement, and have Aberforth see her again."

Hermione and Harry looked at each other, and then Hermione spoke. "Two Bells. There's your proof. Dear God! What's more, it explains the insane interest Bell had in Dumbledore! I remember joking about it with Harry, claiming that the age difference was a bit large!"

Flitwick nodded. "Indeed. I hadn't paid much attention to Aberforth's story earlier because he had been drunk at the time! If you nearly lost YOUR brother, what would you do?"

The room was silent for a minute. Finally, Harry spoke up. "All right, Headmaster. Now that we know what happened, what's the next step?"

Flitwick thought for a moment. "First, we'll send people to St. Francis's to keep an eye on Dumbledore. You'd expected one of those two Death Eaters to go after him once they know he survived. Second, we're going to have to prevent everyone from leaving Hogsmeade until we've done a thorough investigation. From what I've been told, people are leaving town in a hurry, afraid of the dementors and the Death Eater attack."

Hermione whistled. "You're thinking the Zygonovs are going to try to escape in the confusion."

"That's correct. I suspect they're probably still here, so we have to work quickly. I'll have Mrs. Flamel talk to her husband."

Flitwick went on. "Third, I want Bell in here as soon as possible. She probably doesn't remember much, but I'll take what I can get. I'll also give her that Polyjuice detection potion -- with luck, the wrong one will still be here."

Hermione shook her head. "I doubt that Zygonova would still be here, sir. Bell's abrupt memory loss implies that the original professor was put back."

Flitwick shrugged. "That's most likely the case, Hermione. However, there's always a chance. There's also one last thing we need to discuss...something which you three might be able to help with."

Harry's ears perked up. "Really? What's that?"

Flitwick gritted his teeth and spoke in a low voice. "Someone must have convinced Baldwin to leave to make room for Zygonova. Someone with access to Baldwin."

Hermione saw where he was going. "You're thinking there's another Death Eater mole here, someone who's still hidden. And you're thinking students."

Flitwick nodded. "Indeed. Keep an eye on Draco Malfoy, Vincent Crabbe, and Gregory Goyle. And
keep in mind that they're all about to turn seventeen soon. If they want to do something...unpleasant, they'll want to do it before they turn seventeen."

Harry shook his head. "They didn't do it, Headmaster. We're sure of it."

"They didn't kill Dumbledore. The question is whether they were accomplices in helping the Death Eaters get rid of Professor Baldwin. Remember that Draco turned double agent once before. In the meantime, I want to get Baldwin here to see what she remembers. You three head off, and don't say a word about this. Thank you so much for this information."

Ron muttered to himself as the three headed towards the exit. "I'll never trust Malfoy. Never."

Suddenly, Hermione stopped and turned back to the headmaster. "Sir...what happens if Snape changed sides again and forced Baldwin out, and the Death Eater who attacked Dumbledore hadn't known that he was on their side again?"

Flitwick frowned. "That unfortunately, is another possibility. And we have no way to contact Snape anymore to confirm this. Let's hope that's not the case. Once we've figured out what happened with Draco and Professor Snape, we have to deal with the real question."

"Oh? What's that?"

"Somebody must have activated Draco, Snape, Zygonova, and so forth. Who's running the Death Eaters now? I can't imagine He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named returning, but I've been surprised before."

To be continued...

------------
Update #382: Maybe I Can Subcontract This to the Merpeople
------------
Friday, October 4, 1996 / 21 Tishrei 5757 / Sukkot Day 7 / 1 Day To Shemini Atzeret
City Hall
Boston, Massachusetts
United States of America
------------
NEXT UP: Melissa Loses 25 Pounds
------------
Mayor Tom Menino stared at the wizard in his office in disbelief. "Wizard Kershaw, I know magic can be powerful...but this is almost unheard of!"

Robert Kershaw shrugged. "I agree that the methods of construction aren't exactly what you would call commonplace. Nevertheless, Mr. Mayor, I'm fairly certain that we're going to be able to get all this done under $5 billion."

Menino grunted. "That's what Bechtel-Parsons said as well, and look what they did."

"I'm aware of that, Mr. Mayor. That's why we focus on the Big Dig itself first and throw in all of the other projects if time and money permit."

The mayor looked over the charts. "Can we go over the details again, please? I want to make sure you're saying what I think you're saying."
Kershaw smiled and flipped the flip chart back to the beginning. "We'll start with the Central Artery tunnel. The plan is to have the surveyors figure out where to put the tunnel. Once we've got that, I'll contact some of my friends in the Four Towns -- well, the Two Remaining Towns -- and have them send one of our rock worms over to Boston. This creature is about twenty feet long and has a six-foot wide body. Oh, and he eats rock."

Menino nearly choked on that. "You're going to have this...monster...CHEW its way underground and create the tunnels that way?"

"Yes, Mr. Mayor. That's how most of the I-Entry tunnel was created, after all. It will work. Furthermore, you'll get another aqueduct connecting to the Quabbin as a side effect. We'll place spells at either end to make sure no accidents happen again."

Menino chuckled. "I'll give you points for creativity. However, I don't see how that will work, sir. Won't the noise keep people up at night? Won't buildings shake like leaves as the monster plows its way through? I don't want half of downtown Boston collapse due to earthquakes or due to the fact that the tunnel has undermined buildings' foundations."

"That won't happen, sir. Before the creature chews out each section of rock, his wranglers will apply spells which will stabilize the ground above and below it -- a common practice when digging with this type of animal. The worm will therefore be able to create the tunnel safely and with minimal disruption. Once he reaches the other side, he will turn around and head back the way he came."

"What about the noise factor? Won't it make noise?"

"In theory, yes. In practice, we can always cast an area version of Silencio to make sure that most of the noise is dealt with."

"What about the exit ramps?"

"The worm backs up and chews out another tunnel. Big deal."

"Escape routes? Fire extinguishers? Electrical work?"

"The Muggles will have to handle that part, Mr. Mayor. We'll provide the animal and the tunnel, and if you wish we'll help speed up some of the Muggles' work. That should save you a lot of time and money."

Menino nodded as he examined the plans further. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but it's an interesting idea. I assume that this creature is...domesticated? It's not going to start eating cars and so forth."

Kershaw smiled. "Absolutely, Mr. Mayor. Jeff is very friendly."

"Jeff?"

"The rock worm. He really likes silicates."

Menino stared at the wizard. "These animals have NAMES?"

"Why not, Mr. Mayor? They've got completely different personalities. Norm goes for soil a lot, Jackie prefers sandstone, and so forth."
I sure hope they don't prefer people."

Kershaw laughed. "They don't like people much. Too mushy. They really like rock though."

Menino tried to ignore that last statement. "All right, how long do you think it's going to take? How expensive?"

"It's going to take maybe a few days to dig the tunnel and the off-ramps. The rest of it is up to you. We may be able to increase the efficiency of the Muggle construction, though. Taking into account the Muggle engineering issues, I figured we can get the whole thing done in maybe 6-9 months. Total cost should be about $2.5 billion, including $100 million to pay for the wranglers and the care and feeding of the rock worm. You'll get a couple of six-foot wide tunnels pretty cheaply this way, sir."

Something occurred to Menino. Delicately, he said: "Er...Wizard Kershaw, how is an 18-wheeler truck going to make it into a six-foot wide tunnel?"

Kershaw laughed. "We've taken that into account, sir. Before the tunnel begins, we're going to cast a spell which will shrink objects entering the tunnel. There's going to be a 20-foot wide region outside each end of the tunnel which will use Extendatent shrinking technology to shrink the vehicles to 1/10 their normal size. That should leave enough room for multiple lanes -- and possibly multiple levels, if necessary. You'll have one northbound tunnel and one southbound tunnel. If you want, we can separate the various levels with magic -- no bridges or supports necessary. The pavement will just hover in midair."

Menino stared out the window. "And fall down if the magic stops working? No thank you."

Kershaw shrugged. "As you wish, sir. It's just another option."

Menino nodded and flipped over to the next chart. "All right, that leaves 2.5 billion. Let me guess. You're going to use these critters to chew out the North-South Rail Link."

Kershaw nodded. "Precisely, Mr. Mayor. That's going to be relatively easy once the route is planned out. It may be kind of curvy, but it will work. $500 million."

Wondering if the wizard was mad, Menino flipped over the next chart. "I can already where you're going here with the Green Line extension. You want it the tunnel dug out underground with more worms."

"Exactly, Mr. Mayor. We provide the tunnel and help build the stops. You connect it to the surface. $500 million. Best of all, all of this worm work is going to provide enough loose rocks to cap the landfill on Spectacle Island, where $100 million more will turn it into a park."

"Loose rocks? What loose rocks?"

Kershaw shrugged. "Everybody poops, as the saying goes."

Menino was aghast. "You're going to make a park out of WORM SHIT?"

"Why not, Mr. Mayor? Jeff defecates rocks. They're good at covering up landfill, and we can always put plants and so forth on top of it."
Still dubious, he flipped over the last piece of paper -- the one which was the most amazing of all. It was entitled I-695 SKYWAY BELT: $1.4 BILLION.

Menino pointed at this chart. "This, my friend, is beyond belief. I don't even see how this is going to possibly work!"

Kershaw looked at him in surprise. "Why not? We've already got flying cars, and unless I very much miss my guess flying vehicles are going to become very popular. Those young carpet distributors are getting a lot of business now, after all. DeLorean has a flying car, and I have reason to believe that Ford is about to get into the game as well. We'll ignore the Bentley Pegasus for now as it's too pricey."

"This goes beyond flying cars, Wizard Kershaw. You're talking about a HIGHWAY FLOATING IN MIDAIR!"

"Why not, Mr. Mayor? It's going to be restricted to flying cars, of course, which the passengers use at their own risk. Since it's a brand new road, its construction won't impact existing traffic. All we need are the levitating signs, which are going to be easy. The cars just launch themselves into the air and follow the signs. At the very minimum, it will encourage the use of magical flying vehicles, which in itself is somewhat good for the environment."

"Not if planes hit them coming into Logan."

Kershaw shrugged. "That's why I put the highway only 150 feet above the ground. I don't expect the planes to hit the cars."

Menino looked at the page in amazement. "You've got it going through Brookline, Cambridge, Somerville --"

"Why not, Mr. Mayor? If you want, we can figure out how to levitate trains and have the T go through there as well."

Menino couldn't take his eyes off the page. "This looks like something out of Back to the Future II!"

Kershaw winced. "I'm sorry, sir, but I'm not familiar with that movie. Does it involve flying cars?"

It took Menino a great deal of effort, but he was eventually able to wrench his attention away from the flip chart and back to the wizard. "I must confess, Wizard Kershaw, that if this works you'll have the gratitude of every single Bostonian. However, I'm still somewhat skeptical that you can do what you claim. So, I was wondering if you could demonstrate this technology for me."

Kershaw nodded. "Fine with me. What do you want me to do?"

Menino grinned. If the wizard could pass this test -- particularly with the water issues -- the mayor would sign him up immediately. "I read somewhere that part of Dana was exposed when the reservoir flowed out through I-Entry."

Kershaw nodded. "That is correct."

"Is it inhabited?"
"No, Mr. Mayor. It has been left as a memorial to the attack."

"Good. I want you go over there and demonstrate all of these worm tunnels and so forth while simultaneously ensuring that the site is maintained as a dignified historical monument. In addition, I want you to provide examples of levitating signs and underwater work, taking care to consider safety implications. If you pull that off, you've got the job. Bechtel-Parsons is going to have a fit, but I'm sick and tired of their excuses."

"Certainly. Give me a month, and then come to Dana. I assure you that you will like the result."

Menino nodded and shook the wizard's hand. "Make it so. Good luck."

The wizard nodded and Apparated out of there, leaving Menino wondering whether he just imagined that whole conversation -- too surreal to be true. He had to dispel that notion immediately, however, as the flip chart with the Big Dig plans was still sitting in his office. No sane person would have even considered plans like that...

To be continued...

-------------
Update #383: Melissa Loses 25 Pounds
-------------
Saturday, October 5, 1996 / 22 Tishrei 5757 / Shemini Atzeret
Sanders Residence
Prescott, AZ
United States of America
-------------
NEXT UP: Duck Hunt With a Car
-------------
Isaac Sanders looked at his wife and at the wizard in surprise. "You're thinking of making a television show with us as the stars?"

Strong Bear nodded. "That's right, Mr. Sanders. Now that we've come out, a lot of people are curious about what our life is like and how Muggles are going to adapt to the presence of wizards. They know you from the Super Bowl Breach, and you've been interacting with us for a while. I figured you two were good people to focus on."

Sanders couldn't believe what he was hearing. Nevertheless, he couldn't deny the fact that there were several video cameras, both Muggle and Wizarding, pointing at his face. "We're not movie stars, Strong Bear. Hell, I can't even sing karaoke."

"That's the point of a reality show, Mr. Sanders. The goal is to show how real people live, and in this case it will include both the Muggles and the wizards."

Melissa looked at Strong Bear. "What prompted this all of a sudden?"

The wizard grimaced. "We've heard rumors that Britain for Humans has announced that it's planning terrorist attacks again against British wizards. Apparently that attack on the British magic school convinced Britain for Humans that we weren't doing enough to police ourselves. Particularly since it appears Voldemort's followers were behind the attack."

Sanders winced. "That doesn't sound good. I thought the Judgment Day activities got rid of all the Death Eaters."
"So did I, Mr. Sanders. However, apparently we missed a few. The point is, we don't want America for Humans -- or anyone else for that matter -- getting the same ideas. The purpose of this show is to show that wizards and Muggles are for the most part decent people who just want to live their lives. We believe that we'll be able to stop the various World for Humans terrorist organizations through education."

Melissa nodded. "That may work. I --"

She suddenly stopped and her eyes widened. Strong Bear looked at her quizzically. "You what, Mrs. Sanders?"

Her face paled, and she put her hands on her immense belly. Slowly, she turned to Sanders, jumped to his feet.

"Melissa, are you thinking what --"

She never gave him a chance to finish the sentence. "This is it, Izzy. My water just broke!"

Strong Bear glanced at one of the cameramen, who nodded and Apparated out of the room as Sanders reached for the phone. Strong Bear, however, waved him off. "Don't bother, Mr. Sanders. Remember how the wizards deliver children. Trust me, this is going to be much easier, if you're up to it."

Melissa thought for a moment, then nodded. "All right, I'm game. You haven't tried to kill us yet, and from what I've been told the Wizarding midwives are a hell of -- shit, I just had a contraction."

Strong Bear took one look at Sanders, who seemed to be paralyzed with shock and worry. Not surprising for a first time father, he thought. It looked like he, Strong Bear, would have to take over. Besides, Mr. Sanders wouldn't know what to do anyway to prepare for a Wizarding delivery.

He started ordering people around. "Mr. Sanders, get her over to the bedroom as soon as she can and put her on the bed. One of the cameramen has left to get the midwife. Mrs. Sanders, can you walk?"

Melissa nodded. "I think so. I've never been through this before, so --"

"Good. Go to the bedroom and lie down on the bed. Do you want the cameramen to film the delivery?"

Melissa shook her head vehemently. "Deliver a baby on live TV? Hell no!"

"All right. Cameramen, I want all of you to walk into the den where you can hear what's going on. The only people in the delivery room are going to be the Sanderses and the midwife."

Some of the paparazzi grumbled a little -- what a surprise -- but they agreed. They all crammed themselves into the den while Sanders and Strong Bear helped Melissa make it into the bedroom. Once she was safely on the bed, Strong Bear left the room, told Melissa to get undressed, and pulled the door shut.

He turned away from the door just in time to see the midwife and first cameraman Apparate into the living room. Briskly, he told the midwife to head into the bedroom and dragged the cameraman into the den with him.
The midwife glanced at him. "How far has she gone so far?"

"It's just started, White Star. Her water just broke, and she just had her first contraction. How much time should I tell everyone? Half an hour."

The midwife nodded. "I'm going to have to dilate her, so give it half an hour. If I were you, I'd spend the time getting a religious chaplain if they want it and/or figuring out where the nearest Muggle hospital is in case there are complications we can't handle. Which reminds me -- when's her due date?"

"I can't remember exactly. I think the baby's a little premature, though it's less than two weeks."

"Good, so nothing serious. I'll head in there and see what I can do to keep those cameramen from interfering."

Strong Bear nodded, wished the Sanderses and the midwife good luck, and Apparated back over to Fourth Mesa, where Two Bear was waiting for him.

Two Bear grinned. "Green River just told us. So Mrs. Sanders finally decided to have the baby, did she?"

"That's what it looks like. You've got all the little shirts, cribs, and so forth for the infant? I expect this little girl to get the benefits of both a Wizarding and Muggle upbringing."

Two Bear nodded, opened a closet, and brought out a large trunk. "They're all in here, Strong Bear. Along with the betting charts."

Strong Bear looked at him and grinned. "I forgot about those. What's the range?"

Two Bear chuckled. "We've got virtually all weights from four pounds to nine pounds covered. I think I'm trouble, though, as unless I'm mistaken the child is premature. There's no way she's coming out 7 pounds 10 ounces. Oh well, maybe I can win on the name."

Strong Bear snorted. "You seriously think they're going to name the baby Mary? No one names their kids Mary anymore."

Two Bear shrugged. "Last time I checked the Muggle popularity list, Mary was number one."

"That list is probably eighty years old, Two Bear."

"So? Maybe If I had some Felix Felicis..."

Strong Bear threw his hands up. "That won't help now as you've already placed your bet. At any rate, wait maybe an hour or so and then send someone over with all the goodies. I sure as hell hope the midwife isn't in on the weight pool."

"She isn't, Strong Bear. Don't worry. How did the Sanders take to the idea of a reality show?"

"Mrs. Sanders water broke before we could finish the discussion. However, I suspect that if they do go for the reality show, we've got a rather exciting first episode."
Melissa Sanders couldn't believe how easy it had been. There had been virtually no pain, and the whole thing had taken about forty minutes.

She and Izzy had one brief look at the baby before the midwife hovered over her for a few minutes checking her out. Finally, she nodded. "The child looks all right to me, Mr. and Mrs. Sanders. I've got her pegged at 5 pounds, 7 ounces. A little small, but then again she's a little premature."

The midwife had to scream to make herself heard over the sound of the crying newborn. Outside the bedroom, the paparazzi managed to stop complaining about their inability to see what was going on long enough to offer their congratulations. Melissa found it rather disturbing that they had realized that the child was a girl even before the parents did. She didn't want to know.

The midwife frowned. "My husband is going to be pissed, though: he put 50 Galleons on 8 pounds 12 ounces."

Melissa rolled her eyes. Men. Trying to take her mind off the subject, she asked the midwife what was going to happen next.

"Well, Mrs. Sanders, we're going to run a few more checks on her to see if there are any major congenital problems we need to fix. I don't see anything at this point, though. Did the Muggle doctors detect anything?"

"Not that I know of."

"Good. That probably means she's clean. No, Mr. Sanders, you can count her toes and marvel at how small they are after we put her on your wife's chest. I suspect she's hungry."

Melissa pulled down her blanket -- let's hope those nursing classes worked, she thought -- and exposed herself as the midwife placed the baby on her chest. The little girl, about the size of a pot roast, had been wrapped in a pink swaddling cloth with the traditional pictures of unicorns, flowers, and so forth on it. The only difference is that this unicorns actually pranced all over the clothes.

The midwife smiled at her. "Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Sanders. Have you decided on a name yet?"

Sanders nodded. "We have indeed. Hermione Fay Sanders."

The midwife's response was drowned out by a loud "I WON!" coming out of the den. Melissa watched as her husband went outside and tried to tell the cameramen to calm down. There was brief exchange in the den, punctuated by someone saying "Come on, ALL the new parents are naming their girls Hermione now!"

The midwife smiled and nodded. "He's right, you know. Hermione's been a very popular name ever since that eponymous British witch saved the world on Judgment Day."

Melissa chucked. "Really? What are all the boys being named now, Herman? Hermes?"

"Unfortunately, no. Most people outside of Greece don't actually realize that Hermione is just the feminine form of the name Hermes. They just think it sounds pretty. There are still very few Hermeses outside Greece, and there are almost no cases where they go for the Roman equivalent: Mercury, Mercurio, or Mercuria."
"What are the boys using then?"

"Well, various versions of Anastasios are becoming popular. Travis is on the upswing, as are Harry, Nicholas, and William. Heydar's gotten popular in Muslim countries."

Melissa nodded. "Remind us of that next time so that we don't wind up with fifteen Hermiones in the same class."

"Will do. Now, I'll leave the room so you and your husband can bond with your new daughter. Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Sanders."

And with that, she left the room and closed the door behind her.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #384: Duck Hunt With a Car
-------------
Monday, October 7, 1996
Ford Headquarters
Dearborn, Michigan
United States of America
-------------
NEXT UP: Next Time, Tell Your Ambassador Not To Kill Us
-------------
Fred Cortez yelped as the vice president of product development stormed into his office and threw a document onto his desk. "Freddy, I think we've got ourselves a problem here."

Cortez didn't like the sound of that. The economy appeared to have stabilized for the time being, but there still weren't all the many people buying expensive items like...say, cars. There had been rumors of more cutbacks, and he had been concerned that he would be the next person out the door.

Cautiously, he looked at the executive, who looked...worried. "Sir, what's the matter?"

The executive pointed at the document on Cortez's desk. "Read."

-------------
GM, WSC TEAM UP TO MAKE EXISTING CARS FLIGHT-WORTHY FOR $9,995
-------------
General Motors Corporation and Wizarding Services Corporation have the distinct pleasure to announce a breakthrough development in the automotive industry, one which could very well change the way people use their cars.

Eric Street, chairman of WSC, explains. "The idea is quite simple. The emergence of the Wizarding world has stimulated rapid development in the Muggle transportation, taking cars into the air for the first time. The Bentley Pegasus was the first car to fly, and it was followed soon thereafter by the DeLorean Aviator."

"Although the Aviator and the Pegasus are fine vehicles, they are luxury cars which the vast majority of Americans will be unable to afford, particularly in this economy. This begs the question: why bother buying a luxury car when all you want to have is a flying one. Furthermore, why bother with a new car at all if you've already got one and all you want to do is teach it how to fly?"

"My company, Wizarding Services Corporation, has joined forces with General Motors to develop
the Jetson Package. Jetson can be applied to any make or model of vehicle. For $9,995, it will convert said vehicle into one capable of flight. With Jetson, you will never have to worry about sitting in traffic jams again. Why spend all your time in traffic when you can just fly over it?

"In addition to the spells required to get the vehicle airborne, the Icarus Package will provide the car with extra safety features the unlikely event that the car experiences a problem in midair. The package also includes a three-day course in driving a flying vehicle.

"Many of you grew up watching a television show called the Jetsons, which took place in the distant future and featured flying cars. The future, however, is now here thanks to the help of magic. The flying car has arrived, and it is here to stay. With the Jetson package, you can become a Jetson yourself."

For more information, contact General Motors or Wizarding Services Corporation."

----------

cortez put the document down in horror. "son of a bitch. we've got a problem, all right. and i bet you can guess, what you want me to do. do something similar for a lower price, or grab some more wizards and have them start teleporting cars or having them get 100 miles per gallon."

the vice president nodded. "you read my mind, freddy. can you think of anything offhand?"

cortez frowned. "well, i've got a few questions. first, how on earth did gm gets their hands on a wizard? particularly since street's operation is based in texas?"

"wsc has people all over the us now, freddy, and there are rumors that they may be going international. my guess is that they just grabbed someone from the cwi."

"the cwi?"

"the chicago wizarding institute, the headquarters for our region."

cortez nodded. "i see. and unless i'm mistaken, these wsc people will be willing to work for us as well. particularly if we pay them more and have them produce mass-market flying cars which cost less than $20,000 -- that is, an existing car plus gm's package."

the vice president smiled. "i see we think alike here, freddy."

"indeed. however, i'm not yet convinced this will work. no one's buying cars at all right now, let alone expensive ones. these aren't going to be affordable for the vast majority of americans, particularly after the novelty of flying cars wears off."

the vice president thought for a moment. "you have a point. what do you think about waiting out the recession, working on projects to make a really cool magical car? once people start buying again, we launch."

cortez shook his head. "gm will monopolize the industry, and god knows what delorean, toyota, chrysler, and everyone else will do once they realize what gm is doing."

"you got another idea, freddy?"

cortez thought for a moment. slowly, he nodded. "assuming we get a wizard, we do two things.
First, the wizard will figure out how to make an existing car fly. Once we do that, we start selling our own conversion package...for $7,995."

The vice president's smile was vicious. "Price war with GM! I like it."

"I thought you would, sir. At the very least, it will likely get the Aviator in trouble. In the meantime, the wizard can figure out how to use magic as an alternate source of propulsion. Brooms and flying carpets work without engines, so why can't cars? Imagine, 100 miles per gallon or more and no greenhouse emissions."

The vice president's smile widened further. "Well done, Freddy. A few more ideas like this and you'll get yourself promoted."

Cortez chuckled. "I hope so. In all fairness, though, I doubt we'll be able to create a purely magical vehicle in time for the 1997 model year. 1998, however, is an entirely different story. We'll take all the funds from getting other people's cars airborne and pour it into the 1998 Lacewing project."

The vice president whistled. "Lacewing. Not a bad name for a flying car. I like it, actually. 1998 Lacewing."

Cortez. "Thank you, sir."

The vice president punched the air in exuberation. "I think we've got them, Freddy. I think we've got them!"

----------

Moscow

---

The Russian Minister of Magic stared at Flamel in horror. "You're telling us that we've got Russian Death Eaters running around in England?"

Flamel nodded. "I'm afraid so, Minister. Does the name Zygonov ring a bell?"

The Minister thought for a moment. "It's an old Wizarding family name. It's not as well-known as the Laronovs and the Popovs, but there are a few of them out there. Why do you ask?"

"We have reason to believe that two of the people involved in the attack had the last name Zygonov. There was a woman named Halyna Zygonova. Know her?"

The Minister shook his head. "I'm afraid not. Do you know her husband's name? Perhaps I know her husband."

"We don't know his name, sir. I apologize."

The Minister stood up. "Well, that's good enough to start with. Inform your men that we'll be helping you on this investigation. I don't want the Death Eaters back, and I know you don't either."

Flamel smiled. "Thank you, Minister. Hopefully, we'll track these people down before they strike again. We've posted guards around St. Francis's in case they try to finish off Dumbledore, but I don't want to take any chances."

The Minister agreed. "Neither do I, Dr. Flamel. Neither do I. How is Dumbledore?"
"He's going to survive, but there's going to be some permanent memory loss to say the least -- he got a bullet to the head. He's been unconscious most of the time to this point, but I spoke him once when he was up and he agreed to retire from Hogwarts. He also said that we need to get his wand back as soon as possible."

"Oh? Why?"

"It's the Elder Wand, Minister. We don't want that in the hands of the Death Eaters, even if they aren't going to be able to reunite all three Hallows."

The Russian responded with a large stream of expletives, and Flamel couldn't agree with him more.

To be continued...

-------------

Update #384.5
-------------

Monday, October 7, 1996
Hynhynn
Houyhnhnmland

-------------

In a reasonably well-preserved building of the recently ruined centaur capital, the leaders of each and every native faction have gathered to negotiate a lasting peace. Some of them, like the governors of the rebellious South, the battered and volcano-ridden West, and the loyalist North and East were traditional participants even if they had some personal changes, just like the president Neihym who stayed in office until a new election could be hold. Others, however, were completely new to politics: even when everyone not a citizen or a yahoo was excluded, the influence of the outsiders was felt by all, with members of the newly founded Catholic Church of Houyhnhnmland and the Communist Party of Houyhnhnmland participating.

Since the large battle wrecking the capital, large scale military operations were put to a stop. Well, not immediately, as all sort of wild gossips about unidentified -and when asked, presenting smartass answers emulating Ulysses- wizards and witches blasting each other to kingdom come all around the continent, with little regard of collateral damage. But just yesterday, one such witch came to President Neihym, presenting an apology for the inconvenience and a report that the escaped penal legion had no more members left unaccounted for... at least on centaur soil. Neihym could read people well enough that he didn't need to ask the (mer)witch about elsewhere, but that really was someone else's problem now. It wasn't like he had nothing else to worry about.

Such as Father Martinez's flock. So far, the priest proved to be a reasonable and benevolent force, actually preventing fanatics from committing anti-centaur crimes and welcoming the hooved race's members into his rapidly expanding church. As far as Neihym knew, the Catholic religion's holy scripts said nothing about centaurs, so the priest could have declared his race to be soulless abominations... from what he learned of Muggle history, it had been done over smaller differences. Yet, despite all this, the movement bode ill for the nation's independence: the Church's hierarchy was traditionally rigid, and when a newly converted territory was subjugated by an external religious authority, many times worldly influence came with it. The problem was further aggravated by the chaotic state of said hierarchy with half of it's members and most of it's higher echelons siding with the reformist movement led by the alleged ghost of the prophet Samuel. The 'faith' of the Five
Elements was losing followers at a steady rate, and it was only a matter of time until some higher ups in Laputa took notice.

And if it wasn't enough, the economy lay in ruins, and communist propaganda made the working class less cooperating than ever. He of course knew a lot about the ideology, and saw it working in Xylenda, but Neihym had plenty of time to read in his exile, and to think. He read about the democracy of the ancient Greeks, and how it failed the Romans. Xylenda was a communist nation, and it worked, but Houyhnhnmland's population was bigger by an order of magnitude, and divided. He personally thought it'd be best not to try and see if such a regime worked... sadly, others thought otherwise, even taking up arms to make their point. Having the Communist Party of Houyhnhnmland attend the negotiations was a small victory by itself, but it still didn't change the fact that at least two related paramilitary organizations, the People's Liberation Army of Houyhnhnmland (PLA-H) and the Houyhnhnmland Yahoo Liberation Front (HYLF) were still out there, conducting guerrilla warfare against everyone- including each other.

He would have none of this. Enough of his people have died already in pointless fights, no more should join their ranks. But he was running out of options...

To be continued...

-------------
Update #385: Next Time, Tell Your Ambassador Not To Kill Us
-------------
Tuesday, October 8, 1996
Ieti Embassy
London
United Kingdom
-------------
NEXT UP: Well, At Least They Aren't Tripods
-------------
Princess Diana couldn't tell whether Seeress Trelawney was right in this case. The former Hogwarts instructor had predicted that she would meet someone tall, dark, and handsome. The man standing before her was certainly dark, and he wasn't particularly unattractive for his age. However, there was tall. And then there was TALL.

She had stared at Hagrid in amazement when he had come in and announced that several members of a Wizarding alliance known as the Galiver Consortium had decided to introduce themselves to the Muggles on a limited basis. These countries would still be protected from Muggle visits without explicit permission from the ruler. However, the fact that they were coming out to begin with was a big step.

She had been even more amazed when had Hagrid told her and the rest of the Regency Committee why they had chosen Britain for their first contact: apparently the events Jonathan Swift recounted in Gulliver's Travels had actually taken place. Lemuel Gulliver, a Briton, had apparently been a friend of Swift's, and Gulliver had told Swift about these adventures firsthand. Although Gulliver's experiences had been sensationalized somewhat by the time they made it onto the printed page (and modified to satirize the British government to some extent), they were in fact a factual documentary.

The half-giant had warned the Regency Committee to be prepared for a request for compensation for
virgin soil diseases. The Consortium nations had apparently all banded together after Gulliver had visited their islands and brought virgin soil diseases to the local populations. Although the devastation had not been as bad as it had been in the New World thanks to the use of magic and the fact that many of the inhabitants were not Homo sapiens sapiens, about half the populace had perished within a few dozen years of exposure. Diana didn't know how exactly they would be able to pay for this disaster, since almost three hundred years had elapsed since Gulliver had set sail. She'd think of something, however. Maybe she'd give them Muggle technology.

Flanked by Flamel, Hagrid, and the rest of the Regency Committee, Diana looked around the room. She had to admit that she hadn't seen a more...unusual group of people in her entire life.

The man in front of her was a good meter and a half taller than Hagrid, tall enough that he had almost had to squat to make it into the room. Flamel introduced him as Prime Minister Tolivan of the Kingdom of Brobdingnag, the homeland of the giants and of the initial settlers of Ietalis.

Next to him was a woman maybe 30 centimeters in height with fluttering gossamer wings. Hovering in midair, this second visitor was roughly the size of Tolivan's middle finger. Flamel told the Regency Committee that this little woman was Queen Liseth of the Kingdom of Lilliput.

Diana's eyes widened, and she looked at the rest of the members of the Regency Committee. Brobdingnag they hadn't recognized at first. Lilliput, on the other hand, was well known from Swift's book.

The diminutive woman nodded. Speaking in what appeared to be an archaic form of English, she said: "Ah, ladies and gentlemen. I see you recognize the name of my country from Galiver's reports."

Diana looked at her. "Galiver?"

"Lamel Galiver, madame. The man who visited our islands and brought death and destruction to our people. The Galiver Consortium consists of people who were weakened by Galiver's diseases and banded together for protection."

Flamel turned to Diana and cut in. "Princess, all they know is that a Muggle whose name was bastardized over the years into Lamel Galiver arrived on their islands, left, and got everyone sick. They don't realize that Gulliver was an explorer who hadn't intended to get anyone killed--"

Tolivan looked Flamel and nodded. "So I've been told, Minister. Had we known that at the time, it would have made a big difference. Unfortunately, we can't change the past. To make a long story short, we figured that the Muggles had done something to us and decided to keep ourselves away from them. We had thought that our isolation in the Pacific would make it so we didn't need to bother with Protectors. Unfortunately, that was not the case. We hadn't expected you to reach us so quickly."

Prince Andrew frowned. "Protector?"

Flamel explained. "A device which makes the island invisible anyone other than wizards and inhabitants. They've been using that ever since and have been hidden from the rest of the world as a result...with one unfortunate exception."

Andrew saw it immediately. "Houyhnhnmland. Now that I think about, there were Houyhnhnms in that book."
The centaur representative nodded sadly. "I'm afraid so, Your Highness. I'm President Neihym of Houyhnhnmland. We hadn't intended to expose ourselves, but things happened. Our experience with the exposure -- not to mention the climate change problems -- has convinced the rest of the Galivers to tell everyone we're there but not to actually expose our territories. Admission for foreigners and Muggles will be by invitation only. Diplomats and heads of state, of course, will have free access."

Tolivan began introducing the rest of the people. "This over here is High Priest Utlar III of Laputa. Laputa is described as flying city in the book. However, it's actually an archipelago where the wizards spent a lot of time flying from one island to the other. I gather that Galiver saw all these brooms in the air and figured there was a city up there."

Andrew's eyebrows shot up. "You're the chaps who've rocked the world with your discovery of magical seawalls."

Utlar beamed with pride. "That is indeed the case, Your Highness. Let's hope that there will be many more cases where the magicians in the Consortium will be able to help Muggles."

"Amen to that, Your Excellency. The rest of the people here are the First Citizen of Xylenda --"

"Xylenda? The blokes up in the North Pacific? You're also part of this group? I don't remember you mentioning this Consortium earlier when you started talking to the Americans."

The First Citizen nodded. "Indeed, Your Highness, we are members of the Consortium. We couldn't divulge information about other Consortium members without permission -- after all, they hadn't come out yet. That will change now."

"How come Galiver didn't mention your people, First Citizen?"

The Xylendan chuckled. "Simple. He was here all right...but we Obliviated him before he got off the island. You'd be surprised how far that man got and how many countries never made it into the book."

"I see. What about places like Luggnagg and Balnibarbi?"

The First Citizen pointed at the bearded man next to him. "They're around, all right. Luggnagg is the empire of the werewolves, and the Secretary of State is right over here. Balnibarbi's another small state."

Andrew grunted. "You've got a COUNTRY full of those creatures which attacked those people on the boat and in the football stadium?"

"Yes, Your Highness. The place shuts down during full moon, and everyone is forced to stay indoors."

Diana watched as the rest of the ambassadors described their nations. She could have sworn Spedarno was a town in Italy, and Dalernus was probably some Greek general. Then again, what the hell did she know? She was a Muggle.

Once the final ambassador finished his description, the diplomats stepped aside as an old but powerful man Apparated into the room. He introduced himself as the Premier of the Galiver Consortium, the head of its Senate.
The Premier shook the hands of the British leaders and then brought out a piece of parchment with a map of the Pacific. "This, ladies and gentlemen, is the true map of the Pacific. Let it be known that you are now allowed to print it in any Muggle textbooks as you see fit."

Diana looked at it in awe. "No wonder the Pacific was so big and devoid of landmasses, Premier. They've been there all the time, only hidden."

"Exactly, Princess."

"Are there any other lands which aren't on this map, sir?"

The Premier shook his head. "I cannot confirm or deny that, Your Highness. I'm sorry."

Diana nodded. "I should have known. I apologize, sir."

"No offense taken. To be honest, you've been reacting to this better than we expected. It seems that this 'second contact', so to speak, is going to be much more successful than our first one. Unless I'm very badly mistaken, we won't get sick again if we contact you, right?"

Flamel nodded. "I believe so, Premier. Your people have acquired immunity to our diseases now."

"Good. It's time to open diplomatic relations once and for all and start exchanging ambassadors for cultural exchange purposes and so forth. Since we're already familiar with your nation, we'll go through you for the time being. If other nations want to contact us, tell us and we'll start talking to them as well."

Flamel nodded. "I agree -- this would be beneficial to all. The question is whom we're going to appoint as ambassadors to your nations. There aren't many giants, centaurs, and so forth in Britain."

The Premier shrugged. "There are enough, I assume. And you've certainly got more werewolves thanks to that disaster in the sports arena. For all we know, Harrison Cooper could become the ambassador to Luggnagg -- either him, or Severus Snape, the man who invented the Wolfsbane Potion."

Flamel looked at the floor. "Professor Snape was killed in the Death Eater attack, Premier. However, Harrison Cooper could be a possibility. I don't know how good he is at diplomacy, but at least you know who the man is."

"Good. Any ideas about the rest of us, especially the human nations?"

Flamel thought for a moment more. Suddenly, he smiled slyly. "Actually, we might. I'll have to check with the people involved and do some research in the Muggle genealogical libraries, but there may be a set of ambassadors who would make a lot of sense -- even though they likely don't know it."

"Really? Who were you thinking of."

Flamel smirked. "You're already familiar with Lemuel Gulliver, I take it."

"Yes. He has a bad reputation, but unless I'm badly mistaken he didn't mean any harm and the diseases would have stricken us as soon as anyone from Europe came here."
"Exactly, Premier. Well, it's about time that Gulliver came back and apologized for his actions."

Tolivan gaped at him. "Lemuel Gulliver is still alive? That's impossible!"

Flamel's grin widened. "Oh, no, Prime Minster. Gulliver himself isn't alive. However, his descendants probably are."

To be continued...
Update #386: Well, At Least They Aren't Tripods

Wednesday, October 9, 1996
Jacksonville, NC
United States of America

NEXT UP: Oops, I Did It Again

The phone rang in Linda Warren's house. Shoving all of the spacesuit-clad NASA scientists out of the way (and barely resisting the temptation to Shrink them), she picked it up.

"Hello?"

"Linda? This is Christine Woodard from NASA. We've got some exciting news here."

"Really? What's that?"

"The Portkey returned from Venus about two hours ago. Considering where it's been, it's not in bad shape. The outside looks like it's been partially melted and scratched up, but it looks like the seals are still intact. Thank God for your spells."

Linda smiled -- at least one of the missions had gone as planned. "Thank Him indeed. Are there rocks in there?"

"I would assume so, considering that the Portkey is a good 80 kg heavier than it was before."

"That's great! What type of rocks do you have in there? And were you able to get an air sample?"

"We haven't opened it up yet -- we're waiting for you at this point. When you're dealing with 90 atmospheres worth of pressure at high temperatures you really don't want to make any mistakes here. We're fairly certain that the trip through space gave the box a lot of time to cool off, but we're not taking any chances."

"Won't the drop in temperature reduce the pressure inside the box? You know, PV = nRT?"

"Quite possibly. However, a drop from 700 K to even 350 K -- the temperature at arrival -- is only going to get you down to 45 atmospheres or so, which is still nasty. Do you really want an exploding sulfuric acid bomb?"

Linda chuckled. "No, I don't really. Put it in the freezer or something like that and reduce the temperature and pressure further before you open it. Yes, some of the stuff in the atmosphere is going to condense, but that should only contaminate the top layers of the rocks and we'll be able to figure out what came from where pretty easily. Once the temperature has dropped a lot, we should be able to open it, sample the atmosphere, and take the rocks out."

There was a pause on the other end of the line, followed by: "I'm not sure how well that's going to
work, but cooling the box before extracting the atmosphere is probably a good thing to start with. How are you doing over there?"

Linda looked out the window and could see the glimpses of suited technicians and flickers of blue light from the police cars blocking off the streets. The entire driveway had been sealed off in a huge plastic bubble which had drawn several curious passersby before the police had shooed them away. Someone with a bullhorn told everyone to stay inside as she replied, "It's a zoo here, as you would expect. Although the scientists are convinced that nothing contagious is going to come back with the box, it's better to be safe than sorry --"

Woodard cut her off. "Is that a police siren I here? Good God -- you've got the police involved with this?"

"Yes, Christine. When you're dealing with possible extraterrestrial life arriving on Earth for the first time, you have to take lots of precautions. The cops have already had to throw out lots of reporters and neighbors. We DON'T want people walking away with any of these samples until they've gone through a full quarantine and inspection."

Woodard chuckled. "And I thought the samples from Venus were going to be problematic with the high temperatures. I should have known."

Linda's reply was cut off abruptly when a brilliant light suddenly emanated from the plastic bubble. It vanished less than a second later, and in its place was a large box containing the world's first rocks from the floor of Valles Marineris on Mars.

Scientists in HAZMAT gear inside the bubble began hovering over and inspecting the container as Linda found her voice once more. Telling Woodard that the Mars Portkey had arrived, she hung up and joined the flood of scientists heading into her den, which had been converted into an impromptu control room. Photographs had been removed from the walls and replaced with computer screens, and the sofa had turned into something out of a Muggle science fiction movie.

The man in charge of the arrival team nodded to her as she came in. "They're doing the preliminary tests right now, Ms. Warren. Temperature of the box exterior is about 262 K -- 12 Fahrenheit. It still appears to be intact, albeit scratched up a little."

"Are there rocks in there?"

"Yes, ma'am. Mass appears to have gone up by about 100 kg."

This announcement was followed by a loud cheer. One person promptly sent off an email message saying that the Mars rocks had come in.

"Is there any sign of life in the rocks?"

The scientist pointed at the screen. "They're drilling into it with a sterilized probe right now to sample the atmosphere and get a few pictures. Give us a few minutes."

The wait seemed endless. Finally, a grainy black and white photograph appeared on the television screen. It looked like a bunch of rocks to Linda. Then again, she wasn't an astronomer. She wouldn't have been able to tell apart the moon rocks, the Venus rocks, and these rocks.

Someone at a computer console suddenly turned to the mission director. "Sir, we've got atmosphere
in there. Primarily carbon dioxide, as expected. Air pressure 0.011 bar."

The mission director frowned. "That's pretty high. However, that's somewhat understandable given that this sample was taken from a deep valley. Any signs of oxygen, methane, or other biomarkers?"

The computer operator looked at his terminal for a few moments, and then shook his head. "No, sir. The air composition of the sample matches what would expect of a sample without life. Do you want us to extract the air now, sir?"

The mission director thought for a moment, then shook his head. "Take out 0.001 bar and 0.001 bar ONLY. If there ARE any lifeforms in there which need atmosphere to breathe, a drop of 9% shouldn't kill them. Did the technicians bring the cooling devices into the bubble in time?"

The computer operator nodded. "Yes, sir. They're in the process of cooling the sample back down to standard Mars temperatures right now. I don't see how any lifeforms could have survived all that time in space, but we can always hope."

Linda was amazed at the care the scientists were taking to not kill any organisms living in the rock -- if there were any. Looking around the room, she asked if the rocks seemed unusual at all.

The mission director shrugged. "We won't know until we dig into them. They look reddish, as we would expect from the surface of Mars. Judging from these preliminary observations, I would suspect that there are no living organisms there -- at least organisms that we would recognize as life. Whether there are fossils or not, however, is an open question. There's also the possibility of creatures living inside the rocks but that's less likely."

One of the other technicians whistled. Pointing at his own monitor, he said, "Well, this looks interesting. I think we've got small crystals in there. They're round. I don't know if they're hematite or not, but they're the right color."

Linda looked at him and frowned. "What is hematite?"

The mission director turned to her. "It's a compound which only forms in water. If these crystals are made of hematite, that's a strong clue that water carved Vallis Marineris."

She then asked the obvious question. "Could they be alive? Are they moving?"

The mission director looked at her in astonishment for a second, and then spun to the second technician. "That's a good point. Like I said, we have no idea what Martian life would look like, or even if it would produce methane or oxygen. Well, Bill? Is anything moving in there?"

The technician turned to the screen a little longer, then looked back. "No, sir. Nothing's moving."

"How big are these crystals?"

"About 200 microns across, sir."

"Do they look inorganic to you?"

"Yes, sir. However, like you said we don't know if Martian life even uses the same stuff we do on Earth. With your permission, I'll ask the technicians down there to grab a few of them for further study before they start unloading the rocks."
The mission director nodded. "Permission granted. Good thinking."

Linda watched as the technicians continued their preliminary investigation of the Mars rocks. Eventually, as the sun was setting, they made their way out of the bubble’s airlock and stood next to Linda as she brought out her wand.

She waved her wand and watched in satisfaction as the larger box placed around the Portkey sealed itself and the huge plastic bubble shrank and wrapped itself around the larger box to provide an additional layer of protection. Wondering what wonders were going to come out of this, she got into her suit, went over to the box, put her hand on the handle, and Apparated it over to NASA's Mars Quarantine Lab.

To be continued...

----------
Update #387: Oops, I Did It Again
----------
Thursday, October 10, 1996
Henriques Residence
Praia, Cape Verde
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 5/0.9%
----------
NEXT UP: The 1996 Nobel Prizes
----------
P. Raul Henriques had gotten much more popular over the past few months. After all, he had been to Nestor and had gotten to hang around with -- and in one case actually fool around with -- the most beautiful women on the planet. Granted, they weren't entirely Homo sapiens sapiens, but they were close enough for government work.

He'd submitted several photographs of the Nestorian reception party to the newspaper only to have them returned as several other men had apparently thought of the same idea and gotten their pictures in beforehand. Playboy had refused as well, arguing that although the women were certainly attractive enough to serve as models for the magazine, publishing the photographs in what was in effect a first contact situation could cause readers to assume all the inhabitants of Nestor were party-crazed sluts. They recommended that he try submitting again in a year or so. Fortunately, one of Praia's major fashion and nightlife magazines had agreed to publish some of the photographs. Henriques suspected that the veela would be influencing fashion choices throughout the country for the next few months.

He had to admit that the photographs didn't do the women justice, particularly Gabrielle, the one he'd dallied with. Even the few dynamic photographs of the women which had made it into the newspapers hadn't done the job. Although all of them had been absolutely gorgeous, he wasn't as overwhelmed by her presence as he had been in real life. Could there have been a spell involved which couldn't be translated through photography?

Nevertheless, the photographs had been good enough to have a lot of men come over to visit his house and/or interview him. Oddly enough, several of them had asked him for advice on picking up women. How was he supposed to respond to that? He hadn't done anything -- he'd just arrived on the island and...well, swooned. If anything, they'd picked him up. There had to be magic involved, but as a Muggle he hadn't been able to pinpoint it.

He turned back to the television set, where the broadcasters were still debating whether the apparition
in Jerusalem had been an angel (now it was 9:1 in favor of a wizard, though oddly enough Michal Oved, the Israeli Minister of Magic, didn't know anything about it). A couple of spacecraft had returned from Venus and Mars bearing rocks, and pictures of a desolate plain had been sent back from the surface of Venus. The Mars rocks were being treated with extreme care due to the possibility of organisms living in the rocks, though a preliminary investigation indicated that there rocks showed no signs of life. The Russian Minister of Magic had started an investigation into the attack on the school in England, and Anastasios Dialonis -- the Wizarding ambassador to the United Nations -- was supposedly about to make a major announcement.

It took the announcer a good ten minutes to get through the headlines and reach the weather and football scores he had been hoping to see. Hoping to see how his bets had come out, he paid close attention to the TV set.

Of course, that was when a loud noise suddenly distracted him, as if someone or someone was tapping on his window. Confused, he turned to the window and saw something which appeared to be...an owl...staring at him and hooting. In the owl's claws was something which appeared to be a piece of paper. It almost looked as if the owl was trying to get in, but that couldn't be possible.

He stared at the animal, and the owl hooted some more and began waving its leg. Wondering if the wizards had something to do with this, he picked up a book to use as a possible club, walked over to the window, and opened it.

Henriques found he had no reason to worry, however. The owl swooped into his house, dropped the piece of paper in his hand, and stood on the windowsill patiently, apparently waiting for something. Now that the document was in his hand, Henriques saw that the document looked more like a piece of parchment than a piece of paper. Wondering what this was, he unrolled it and began to read.

----------------
Dear Mr. Henriques,

This message is from Gabrielle, the woman you slept with during your visit to Nestor. I hope you are doing well and enjoyed your visit. The government appears to have liked the response to your visit and is thinking of planning another one. My personal guess is that President Markali wants some action, but she's never going to admit it.

I'm writing to inform you that there's been a bit of a...complication. Remember that when you met me I had drawn a little star on my head indicating that I wanted to fool around? It turned out that there was a very good reason I was in the mood for fun.

I'm pregnant.

My cycle had come early and I hadn't realized it.

You're going to be a father, and I'm researching lots of herbal remedies and spells for morning sickness. Trust me, Mr. Henriques. You don't want morning sickness.

We can already assume it's going to be a girl. The fact that we've gotten through a full month of the pregnancy means that it couldn't have been a boy as full veela lose boys in the first few weeks of pregnancy. Our gestation period is about 39 weeks, one week shorter than Homo sapiens sapiens. That should put the birth somewhere in early June 1997.

----------------
Henriques looked at message in disbelief. What the hell was he going to do now? He could barely support himself. Now he had a kid to deal with? He vaguely recalled the Nestorian women claiming
that they took care of kids born to Muggles, but shouldn't he at least do SOMETHING to help, especially, with the Statute of Secrecy down and Nestor open to visits?

The letter contined.

-------------

I know this comes as a surprise to you -- it certainly came as a surprise to me. I don't know if you have had any children before, but this is my first. I'm excited, needless to say. However, to be honest I have no idea what in the name of the Five Gods I'm supposed to do.

Some people have told me to get rid of the baby if I don't think I'm ready to be a good mother. I'd prefer not to do that, however. Remember that each city allows reproduction only for a month or so each year. If I turn down this opportunity, I'll have to wait another year.

At any rate, I'm thinking of keeping this unexpected surprise. However, it would be inappropriate to make this decision without you. Do you want me to keep the child? You will get visitation rights, of course, if I go along with this. I won't be able to come to you as I still can't leave the island. Veela usually give their children Muggle names, and I was thinking either Stephanie or Felice.

I've told the owl which delivered this message to stay around so he can relay your response back to me. Do you want me to go along with this? Veela often raise children communally, which provides more options. I can raise the child myself, give her up for adoption, raise her communally, or terminate the pregnancy. I would really prefer the first, but I need your input on this.

Rest assured, Mr. Henriques, that if we do allow this pregnancy to proceed, you will in fact have the most beautiful child in your neighborhood. We can guarantee that.

I hope to hear from you soon.

Sincerely, Gabrielle

-------------

Henriques stared at the owl in disbelief. Was he supposed to go over there and marry her? He was a Catholic, and he really didn't want to think about the possibility of an abortion. For all he knew, getting into a fight with her over this child could lead to a hardening of Muggle/veela relations! Come to think of it, how did this Five Gods thing mesh with his being a Catholic? Would the child be baptized? Could he even marry her if she wasn't a Catholic? Would she convert?

He was going to need to think about this, and at least talk to a few friends.

-------------

United Nations

-------------

Anastasios Dialonis stood at the podium with Heydar Dagher by his side. The announcement they had been working on for a couple of weeks had finally come.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the International Confederation of Warlocks has studied the issues facing the world today which have eluded Muggle solutions for decades, possibly centuries. Many of these issues can be mitigated somewhat with Wizarding help. However, most will need a combination of both magic and Muggle technology to resolve completely.

"With this in mind, Grand Mugwump Dagher and I have agreed upon the Millennium Problems, a list of tasks which Muggles and wizards all around the world should focus on together. We need to take advantage of the fall of the Statute of Secrecy to combine our forces to do things one of us could not have done on our own."
"The protocol for dealing with solutions to the Millennium Problems will be similar to that dealing with the British quest to determine longitude. Solutions to the Millennium Problems will be presented to a board consisting of both Muggles and wizards. If, after extensive testing and evaluation, the solution can be used safely to benefit the lives of people all over the world, the ICW will award the winner a grand prize of $2.5 billion for each problem."

Diononis had to stop for a moment as the audience audibly gasped. Two and a half billion dollars for a reward. That was HUGE.

He continued. "Here, ladies and gentlemen, are the list of problems. Note that the space program is not included in these goals as its has been covered by President Clinton's announcement.

"1. Provide all people all over the world with adequate, and safe, food and drinking water -- at least 1500 calories per day.

"2. Develop a new clean energy source which will be capable of powering 75% of all Muggle technology.

"3. Remove enough carbon dioxide from the atmosphere to revert its density to preindustrial levels.

"4. Develop a system which will protect entire nations from rising sea levels and other aspects of climate change. Note that Laputan Lowne Paolte has made extensive progress in this area.

"5. Develop faster than light communication and/or travel by circumventing the inability for any material object to travel faster than c.

"6. Remove 90% of species threatened by human extinction from the endangered species list.

"7. Extend the average human lifespan to at least 100 years but no more than 150.

"8. Develop a program which will ensure that, for a period of no less than 10 years, every nation on earth be at peace with every other nation.

"9. Develop a program which will ensure the integrity and morality of all officials in public office,

"10. Develop a program which will reduce the number of incidents of religious extremism and hatred in the world by at least 75%.

"11. Develop a program which will ensure that technology and magic only be used in a fair and wise manner, for good and not for evil,

"12. Colonize the seafloor, our last frontier, in an ecologically sound and safe manner.

"I know that these are extremely ambitious goals. However, we now have both magic and technology at our disposal. If there is any time we will be able to accomplish them, that time is now.

"Hurry, ladies and gentlemen. There is no time to waste."

To be continued...

---------
Update #388: The 1996 Nobel Prizes
Anastasios Dialonis had no idea who was supposed to bow to whom here. Usually, people in republics tended to treat him as a president and people in monarchies tended to treat him like a king. The president of the United States had shaken his hand, and the Countess of Hogsmeade had bowed to him. But what was he supposed to do with Carl XVI Gustaf of Sweden? Was the Swedish king supposed to bow to him, treat him as an equal, or what? Was Dialonis supposed to bow to Carl Gustaf?

It was very rare for Dialonis to meet with Muggle monarchs. Interaction with Muggle heads of state, of course, generally didn't occur unless Atlantis was at DEFCON 2 or higher. However, prior to the events of Judgment Day there had been only two times in the past 250 years when the world had hit DEFCON 2: the destruction of Hiroshima and the Cuban Missile Crisis. Dialonis was thinking of doing the same thing the Swedish king did. If Carl Gustaf bowed, he'd bow back. The whole royal ranking protocol would have to be expanded to cover wizards.

It's not like he couldn't be here. The Nobel Prizes were among the most prestigious Muggle honors in existence, and one of them honored the person who had done the most to ensure world peace over the past year. It was obvious who the winner was going to be, and everyone knew it. Several of the other nominees hadn't even shown up, and one of the two men nominated for resolving a crisis in East Timor had decided to go fishing. Stopping the fighting in East Timor had, of course, been a major accomplishment. However, the East Timor crisis hadn't involved the entire world...or nuclear weapons.

Picking up the Nobel Prize wasn't the only thing he was here for. Curious about the Swedish royal family, he had looked them up and found some wizards in their family tree. Sure enough, when Prince Daniel had sent a DNA sample over to Ziggurat Labs under a pseudonym to hide his identity, the results had come back with Z-only wizard. That had prompted virtually the entire royal family to submit their own DNA. The current king was a Z, as was Princess Madeleine.

Sweden didn't have a separate Wizarding monarchy: the head of the Wizarding state was the Minister of Magic, eighty-five year old Filip Hansson, who served in the same role in the country's government that Travis Radner had. However, the discovery that Madeleine was a Z-only witch had sent shock waves through royalty watchers. The fact that Madeleine was only eleven days older than Q-only King William had started many Swedes trying to convince Madeleine to marry William and produce Muggle-born wizards. Dialonis thought the odds of this happening were low -- he was currently smitten with Hermione Granger, and many of the British were trying to set him up with Laura Spencer.

Wearing full dress robes over a Muggle suit, he took his seat near the front of the room as Carl Gustaf opened the ceremony and introduced the man who would announce the winner of the prize in physics. In theory, all of the prizes were supposed to have been awarded on different days. However, the circumstances were a bit unusual this year in that one man would be announcing two prizes and he had trouble getting around. As a result, they had decided to give them all out on the same day to not stress him that much.
The first award would be given out by Stephen Hawking, a famous British physicist who had taken some time off from his position as one of Hogwarts's two Astronomy professors to make this announcement. Having been tipped off by Flamel, Dialonis knew what was going to happen here, and he looked around the room to see how the Muggles were going to react to this little practical joke.

Hawking came out on stage in a wheelchair, with his automated speech synthesizer attached nearby. His computerized voice welcomed the guests to the ceremony, gave his respects to Carl Gustaf and the royal family, and began announcing the name of the new laureate.

"The winner of the 1996 Nobel Prize in Physics goes to --"

That was as far as he got. The man who pushed the wheelchair looked surprised for a moment. Realizing that without the computer Hawking wouldn't be able to speak, he started looking around the room in consternation.

That was when Hawking shook his head and chuckled. Speaking in a raspy voice still showing signs of disuse, he said: "Good riddance. I never liked the bloody computer anyway."

The entire room gasped when they realized what they had just seen. They came to their feet in unison and nearly brought the roof down with thunderous applause. The man who had pushed the wheelchair, now smiling openly, reached offstage and brought out a cane. Placing it next to the wheelchair, he watched as the scientist turned his head and reached for the cane. Amazingly, the applause grew even more deafening.

Making sure that Hawking was up for the next part, the man pushing the wheelchair nodded and backed off. Dialonis watched as Hawking, with the aid of the cane, got out of his wheelchair and gingerly came to his feet.

The applause reached a crescendo loud enough to be heard in Helsinki. Hawking raised his free hand for silence, at which point everyone told him to drop the cane. Expecting this, Hawking shook his head. "I'm afraid not, ladies and gentlemen. I actually NEED the cane. Wizards aren't gods, after all. However, considering that I couldn't even move or talk earlier, I'll take life with a cane anytime."

Hawking scratched his head with his free hand. "Where was I? Ah, yes, the announcement. The Nobel Prize in Physics goes to Innes Taylor for linking magic to a hitherto unknown form of repulsive gravity."

The crowd cheered as Taylor came up and received the award. The Scotsman gave a brief little speech, but it was obvious that the man had been completely thrown off by Hawking's amazing recovery. He stammered here and there, and Hawking nodded in understanding. Eventually, he hobbled offstage for a moment, cane clicking on the floor, to give Taylor enough time to give his speech with dignity.

Hawking came back onstage and resumed his speech as Taylor returned to his seat. "Ladies and gentlemen, it is also my great pleasure to announce this year's winner for the Prize in Medicine. As you are probably aware, the emergence of magic has allowed the life sciences to do things which had never been done before, such as...say...cure my disease and rid me of that infernal voice box."

The crowd laughed as Hawking continued. "The ability to cure ALS, however, pales in comparison to the repercussions of this latest development. Ladies and gentlemen, the Nobel Prize in Medicine goes to Dr. Michael Parsons of Britain's Ziggurat Labs for the discovery of the Q and Z genes"
underlying magical ability."

The crowd cheered once more as the winner walked onstage to receive the award. The cheers changed to a brief laugh, however, when Parsons bowed to Princess Madeleine. Madeleine innocently joked with him whether he'd be passing on a date request from King William, catching both him and the rest of the royal family off guard.

Hawking made it offstage on his cane as the other awards were announced. The chemistry prize went to three men who had helped discover a certain type of molecule called a fullerene. Dialonis had no idea what that was, but then again he wasn't a chemist -- or even an alchemist. The prize in literature went to someone named Wislawa Szymborska he'd never heard of before. Ms. Syzmborska had barely beaten out Noha-Pishtin for his documentary on the first Judgment Day. The economics prize went to two more people he'd never heard of before, a Brit and an American.

One prize was left. The Nobel Peace Prize. The king returned to the microphone to report that José Ramos-Horta would be announcing the winner.

There was a brief moment of confusion, followed by major applause. It was fairly obvious what had happened. Ramos-Horta had been one of the major contributors to the peace treaty in East Timor and would have almost certainly won the award had there not been a Judgment Day. Since it was obvious who the winner would be, the real fight was for second place -- and the award would be the honor of announcing Dialonis.

Ramos-Horta called out Dialonis's name, and the former Grand Mugwump made his way to the stage. Looking out over the crowd, he saw EVERYONE was on their feet. A television screen mounted on the wall featured a view of a large crowd, all of whom were coming to their feet simultaneously. The screen shifted to a scene in Paris, where everyone was doing the same thing. All around the world, people were acknowledging the most important and long-reaching magical operation in the past 3600 years. Had it not been for Judgment Day, the world could have easily gone up in nuclear fire.

He remembered that last report before Time Zero. A 39.1% chance of the end of civilization. Thank God it had worked.

Accepting his award with a brief speech, he headed over to the royal box and saw that the king was bowing to him. Relieved that His Majesty had prevented the former Grand Mugwump from making a fool out of himself, Dialonis began to bow back. However, the king shook his head.

"You don't have to bow, Ambassador. Not today."

Dialonis frowned. "Why not, Your Majesty? You're the king, and we're supposed to bow to kings. At worst, you're at the same rank as I am, especially in your own land."


To be continued...

---------

Update #388.5

--------

Friday, October 11, 1996

Icicle Citadel
Mab's iceberg fortress was an interesting place, but not particularly helpful in keeping one's sanity. For Black God cultist Sevastyan Orlov, his captivity was certainly taxing for the mind. He was the only occupant of his cell, bathed in crystal-light all the time to take away his sense of time. By his estimates he'd been there for a month. His Veela captor has pretty much declared him to be her private property, and used him in ways that made him shiver in dread and horror when not in her glamorous presence. Being raised in a Tchernobog cultist, but otherwise traditionalist family, he didn't think highly of bondage, dominance and S&M... actually, screw that, what the damned bitch did to him and forced him to do unto himself was plain torture, survivable only with timely magical healing. Sevastyan's whole body was a patchwork of healed and not completely healed skin, scars from various cuts, amputations (limbs reattached/grown back), crushings, burning and much more left visible just to screw with his mind. Still, the perversions of the creature had saved him from worse fates- this way, the fairies, giants and merpeople left him mostly alone. He, like many of his brethren, was lectured by wizards on many magical creatures that may cross his path in service of the Black God, and always wondered why they feared fairies so much.

Now he knew. Fairies were apparently tiny, cute and harmless humanoids, but judging by the things they did to him, they had disturbingly alien minds and for some reason saw his presence as an unforgivable insult. His wizard instructors taught him these Fey had strong wandless magic, superhuman speed and agility, not to mention flight. Hearing things like "We spare you for now, human, but once she gets bored with you, your life is ours!" from them was a bad sign.

But Sevastyan wasn't going to wait for that day to come. When not in her presence, he already desired the Veela's death, but as soon as he saw her it went out of his head. Once the damned female was out of the picture, he'd still have to escape the castle alone and armed only with what he scavanged on his way out, most of his intel given by gloating prison guards. Small chance of success, certainty of death... a worthy challenge for a brother of the Black Fist, the vanguard of Tchernobog's Cult. And he had an idea that might just work...

--------

later

--------

The Veela opened the door and stepped in the cell, barbed whip in hand and a wide array of torture implements hanging from the belt of her barely concealing outfit. A chest levitated in behind her and was lowered gently to the ground by a fairy, who exchanged a knowing, smug smile with the woman and left the room, closing the door behind itself.

Turning her charms to maximum, the Veela spoke, "Come here and kiss my feet, you worthless worm!", then as nothing happened looked at the prisoner's bed if he was there. He was, sitting with his back turned to her and a rugged bedsheets covering most of his torso. Nothing seemed out of place: his clothes ruined and his body full of scars, the prisoner often tried to hide like this, and while she didn't remember tearing the bedsheets she couldn't rule out that she got carried away last time... But the stupid male ignored her call, and would pay for it. Swinging her whip with an audible
whoosh, she stepped closer, and striked at the bare back... then several things happened in quick succession:

One: the cultist dodged to the left and back, avoiding the whip but for a single barb slashing his right shoulder.

Two: he turned around, quick as lightning, exposing his self-made blindfold and plugged nose, and got a hold of her arm and shoulder.

Three: he pulled her closer, brutally headbutted her face and crushed her nose. That was when the Veela's wondering why the charm isn't working were briefly stopped by the pain.

Four: one hand sliding to her nape and another grabbing her jaw, the cultist then proceeded to twist the female's head sideways until her neck snapped with a sickening crunch. Disoriented by the broken nose, the Veela at the last moment tried to turn in harpy form, but only got half the way.

Five: the combatants fell to the floor, and the cultist bashed the half-transformed creature's head to the floor a few times, just to be sure.

It all happened in the span of a few seconds. When it was done, the only sound in the cell was Sevastyan's ragged breathing, and he quickly got that under control. Silently, he reached out to his victim's neck to look for a pulse. Finding short feathers but no sign of life, he removed his blindfold and shakily stood up. It was not his first kill, far from it - to become an initiated member of the Black Fist, he had to become a killer in battle and sacrifice - but this was his first nonhuman victim, and a very disturbing one at that. "May the Black God chew on your wretched soul forever" he muttered, then began looking for suitable weapons.

He took the Veela's belt with the various knives on it. Some of them were balanced enough for throwing, and all of them were steel- useful against the fairies out there. Then he opened the chest, compartment after compartment. He found a hammer and nails first, then a club eerily similar to a baseball bat, then to his surprise a Muggle chainsaw, and finally, a katana. Whistling in apprehension, he settled for that one. 
Next, he cut the bedsheets to rags and wrapped him inside those, creating a rudimentary clothing- it wouldn't do to wonder out of the temperature-charmed zone half naked.

-------------
later
-------------

The fairy opened the door and looked inside, expecting the usual sight of one satisfied Veela and one barely living human. Instead, it only saw the former, motionless on the floor. As it moved closer to her, a huge shadow sprang from behind the door, and before it could blink twice, pinned it to the ground with a steel dagger piercing it's wing. Feeling it's power flowing away, it opened it's mouth for a desperate wail, but found another dagger's point hovering a hair away from it's face, and the human looking down on it. "Speak only when I ask you and answer truthfully, and I may let you live. Tell me, how do I get out of here?"
The fairy didn't try to play hero. "Stairs on the right end of the corridor, two levels up, third room to the left, cabinet of sticks. Are emergency Portkeys, break them to activate." The human smirked. "Oh, smart little thing. And tell me, where will that take me?" Again, the fey was too afraid to lie. "Inscription on all sticks. Location name. Safe house." That would complicate things. Or not. "Tell me which unguarded safe house is furthest south in European Russia!" The fairy told him eagerly, and tried to add a pleading 'please don't kill me'... but unfortunately for it, members of the Black Fist were taught never to leave armed hostiles behind their back, and wandless magic certainly qualified as a weapon. Feeling a little regret, the Tchernobog cultist stepped out of his cell and began his way to freedom and Rasputin...

To be continued...

-------------
Update #389: Don't Breathe the Exhaust
-------------
Friday, October 11, 1996
Environmental Protection Agency
Washington, DC
United States of America
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 5/0.9%
-------------
NEXT UP: Hope He Doesn't Want It In Galleon Coins
-------------
Once again, Linda Warren was at the podium in Washington DC. This time, however, it was at the request of the Environmental Protection Agency, which had just figured out a more creative use for her interplanetary Portkeys.

NASA had its hands full with the various sample return missions at the moment. The usual Apollo-era circus had erupted as various universities, labs, and billionaires had fought to get their hands on the various moon rocks. To make matter worse, the Chinese and Russians had argued that they were entitled to a substantial portion of the rocks as well because they had been collected by astronauts from those nations.

The good news was that there were more than enough rocks to go around for each major university to get a few dozen grams. The bad news was that about 90% of the requests had been for rock -- and in most cases water -- samples from the lunar south pole. There had been only about 5600 grams of water in the container, and there was no way that each lab would be able to get a large enough sample to do much good with it. In fact, all the water had managed to do was turn the rocks into a half-dissolved muddy mess. NASA was still trying to figure out who was going to get what.

The fight over the moon rocks, however, was nothing compared to the fight over the Mars rocks. Organizers were clamoring for whole rocks even though (a) there weren't enough Mars rocks to go around, (b) NASA hadn't even finished investigating the rocks on their own yet, and (c) for the most part the requests had come from labs which did not have a suitable quarantine facility. Although it was now fairly obvious that the Mars rocks were indeed lifeless -- at least on the outside -- NASA didn't want to take any chances.

The strange balls Linda had seen when the Mars Portkey had first been opened had been made out of hematite, as had been originally thought. The scientists now knew beyond a reasonable doubt that water had flowed in this area.
The Venus rocks weren't selling as quickly for two reasons. First, there wasn't any chance of life on Venus given that 90 atmosphere pressure, sulfuric acid rain, and high temperatures. Second, the Portkey was en route back to Venus so it could do more exploration. Several of the labs, after having been told of the second Portkey's location, had decided to wait for samples from that area. Nevertheless, most of the Venus rocks had already found new homes.

Linda put Venus out of her mind as the director of the EPA motioned for her to begin her speech. "Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming today. My name is Linda Warren, and I'm in charge of the Portkey department for NASA. It is my pleasure to announce a new initiative which will help clean up our terribly polluted planet.

"As you know, we have been able to send Portkeys to various locations in the Solar System. We've sent unmanned Portkeys to Mars and Venus and used them to send men to the moon. This time, we're heading for a bigger, and hotter, target: the sun.

"The project is simple. The government will collect trash, recycle everything it can, and then send over everything which is considered dangerous. This includes radioactive materials, hazardous chemicals, biological samples, and so forth. These compounds will be placed inside a Portkey and sent off towards the sun, where they will be safely disposed of. Unlike the other Portkeys, these devices are intended to be used on one-way trips."

She smiled. "Yes, you heard that right. We have just solved the problem of radioactive waste once and for all. Now, it's going to take a lot of Portkeys in order to get rid of everything. However, keep in mind that anything can be turned into a Portkey. Given the right safety precautions, a wizard can eschew the box altogether and turn a spent uranium fuel rod into a Portkey directly. The only danger is the possibility that the radiation could damage the wands -- we're working on that for now.

"I'll now take some questions."

---------------
Catanzaro, Italy
---------------

Don Amaranto had been snooping around in 'Ndrangheta territory for several days. He hadn't seen any signs of the missing wizards or any of the 'Ndrangheta mobsters. They had to be around here somewhere, he had thought. He just had to keep on looking.

As it turned out, they had been right behind him. Invisible.

Something heavy had conked him on the head, and he had lost consciousness. Finally, after a long and unexpected nap, he woke up.

He found himself staring at Don Cristian and Don Gerardo. Breathing a sigh of relief, he asked them what was going on.

Don Gerardo looked guiltily at the floor. "I'm sorry, Amaranto. I have no choice. I really don't want to have to do this, but I'm under an Unbreakable Oath. I'm sorry."

Amaranto stared at him, perplexed. "What the hell is going on here? Where's my wand?"

A new voice answered the question. "All will be explained in due time, Don Amaranto. In the meantime, I recommend that you listen to me. I have an offer that you can't refuse. Gerardo, would do you do the honors?"
The intern's excited voice resonated in the small chamber. "Minister, I think we've got her."

The Minister breathed a sigh of relief and turned to him. "That's great news! You're sure it's the right person though?"

The intern nodded. "Indeed we are, sir. There are only three H. Zygonova's in the Slavic-speaking world, and considering that the other two are 6 and 9 I doubt it's one of them. She's 52 years old and based in Lviv. Married to E. Zygonov, age 54."

"Did she ever spend time in England?"

The intern shrugged. "I can't tell, Minister. The records don't show that."

The Minister frowned. "I was hoping we would luck out, but we didn't. Oh well. Tell the Aurors to start trying to track her down, starting at her home town. Once they find her, keep an eye on her...and make it discreet."

The intern nodded. "Yes, sir."

Mt. St. Helens Facility

Sorceress Rachel Martins turned to the head of Mt. St. Helens and grimaced. "I have no idea how that happened, Diana. I've never seen anything like this before."

The head of the Mt. St. Helens facility shook her head. "You've never heard of an Engorgio manifesting itself slowly, bit by bit, over a long period of time?"

"No, I haven't. And there's no mention of this happening in the books either."

"Could it be because it's radioactive?"

"No, Diana, I told you. We'd have known about that from the Engorgios filmed inside the British Ministry of Magic before the bombs went off. Those were uranium, after all."

"Could it be because this...promethium...is artificial? Supposedly it's hard to create and doesn't exist naturally."

"I don't know, Diana. However, I doubt it as plastic isn't exactly natural either and we've been able to enlarge that."

Diana shook "Maybe because it's radioactive AND artificial. Find out."

Tokyo

The cop couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Are you telling me that a sample of radioactive material DISAPPEARED from your lab?"

The woman on the other end of the line responded. "Yes, sir. We looked around for a couple of weeks and didn't get anywhere. We asked everyone. Trust me, we've done everything we could."
The cop made a note. "I'll pass it on. I sure hope it doesn't fall into the wrong hands. Can you imagine Aum's subway attack with a dirty bomb? Worse still, with a mini-nuke?"

To be continued....

-------------
Update #390: Hope He Doesn't Want It In Galleon Coins
-------------
Saturday, October 12, 1996
Paolte Residence
Fern Island
Laputa
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 5/0.9%
-------------
NEXT UP: Little Miss Big Mouth
-------------
Lowne Paolte looked at the document in disbelief. What in the name of all Five Gods was he going to do with 12 million Galleons?

The scene had been almost surreal. Shortly after Dialonis had mentioned the Millennium Problems, the High Priest had come over and told him that a representative of the Millennium Problem Board wanted to talk to him. The representative had congratulated him on his good work and announced that Paolte's invention was working wonders in keeping Venice dry. He had no idea where Venice was, but that was beside the point. As long as the spell was working, that was all that mattered.

The representative had decided that Paolte's work had achieved part of the goals needed for the Fourth Millennium Problem. Not all of them, of course. But a good part of it. As a result, the Board had decided to award him 8% of the 250,000,000 Galleon prize: 20,000,000. After taxes, that worked out to about 12,000,000 Galleons.

Considering that Paolte was 59 years old, the idea of spreading the payments out over 30 years wouldn't work all that well in case he passed on in between. He had to take it all immediately as a result. The president of the Bank of Laputa hadn't initially accepted the deposit, thinking that it had to be money laundering or a scam of some sort. Eventually, Utlar III himself had to tell bank officials that this was on the level.

There was no way Paolte could even imagine spending 50,000 Galleons in one year. No way. Was he seriously going to consider buying a house every single year? He doubted he'd ever spent more than 15,000 in a year in his entire life. And he'd done a lot of traveling around the Galiver Consortium.

He could spend some of it trying to pick up a new wife. However, he was concerned that people would start dating him for the money and not for his personality. He could buy a big new house, one that cost maybe 300,000 Galleons. That still wouldn't even make a dent in it.

He looked out over the ocean trying to figure out what to do. Finally, he hit upon a solution. He would keep 3 million for himself, give 2 million to his son, set aside 2 million to local philanthropical work, and place the remaining 5 million in a fund which could be used to help companies trying to solve the remaining Millennium Problems get off the ground. How could he keep all of the money when there were still more Millennium Problems to be dealt with? He wondered how many Muggle businesses would accept funds in Galleons, but he supposed that the Muggle world would get around to using Galleons at some point. There was even talk of making the Galleon the new gold
standard, though that wasn't getting anywhere at the moment.

Getting involved in the Millennium Problems was risky, to say the least. Many people would try and fail. However, if any of them succeeded he'd reap a huge return on his investment. Once all of them were solved (or at least most of them), he'd take 30% for himself (if he was still alive, otherwise give it to his son), give 20% to his son regardless of what happened, and dedicate the other 50% to more philanthropical work. The money would just compound over time, making the fund larger and larger. Unless he was very mistaken, this reward would help the world a great deal.

Enfield, MA

Persephone Ariadne chuckled as she turned to the merman. "I know, you can't sleep. However, it should be finished soon. You should have expected something like this would happen, especially in Massachusetts."

The merman wrung his hands. "All that banging and spellcasting up in North Dana! Don't they realize how far sounds travel in water?"

"Probably not. However, consider this. Kershaw is making a memorial to the attack. He's also demonstrating some magical construction techniques in an attempt to convince the mayor of Boston that he is qualified to work on the Big Dig."

"The Big Dig?"

"A construction project to move a Muggle highway underground in Boston and dig another tunnel underwater. It's been going on for a while."

The merman chuckled. "Underwater tunnels? Merlin's beard, I could have helped with that. How are the Muggles doing it without merpeople and worms?"

Ariadne laughed freely now. "Not very well, Jomat. Not very well at all."

Jomat grinned evilly as he left the room. "And I thought I had problems. Ha!"

Ariadne smiled and turned back to most recent report. The Syrdani refugees had looked around for a new house and had eventually settled in Brighton, where many twenty- and thirty-somethings lived. The adults couldn't speak English well yet, and likely never would without the aid of Language Lozenges. However, Petunia -- the little girl -- was starting to pick up English as a second language. Having not yet reached the age where language acquisition became much more difficult, she was slowly starting to find herself in a position where she could serve as a last-ditch interpreter for her parents. She had even learned enough to start sitting in on some third grade classes at the Boston public schools. All three Syrdani were much happier in their new world, and they had slowly started to come out of their shells. There was already talk of making Petunia Syrdan the American ambassador once she grew up -- provided that Syrdan didn't revert back to its old ways.

In other news, Schwinn had teamed up with a wizard to produce a flying bicycle, Guinevere's Flying Carpets had gotten five more distributors, the Muggle Apparition Network's business was booming, and a Portkey was en route to Mercury. Rumors had liked out about the Ford Lacewing, which had prompted Toyota and Chrysler to follow suit and introduce their own flying car projects. A witch had spoken with a fully-recovered (but still retired) Radner briefly about possible wizard interference at race tracks, and she had come back with a mandate to send wizards to Wonderland, Suffolk Downs, Rockingham Park, and other horse racing venues to make sure that didn't happen. There
were too many places for wizards to be there all the time. However, spot checks would likely be enough, particularly if a violation resulted in a stay in that Wizarding prison in the Aleutians.

The Death Eater attack at Hogwarts worried her greatly. She couldn't imagine how the Death Eater organization had survived the events of Judgment Day. From what Dialonis had told Radner, all of Voldemort's minions save maybe seven or so had been taken out by Atlantis. Could those seven have returned to England and attracted some pureblood wizards who hadn't initially been members of the Death Eaters? Fortunately, a Russian witch who had been seen in the area during the attack was now being tracked by the Russian Ministry of Magic. Hopefully, if everything went according to plan, she'd lead the Russians to the rest of the Death Eater cell.

An awful thought occurred to her as she turned back to the report on Syrdan. The Death Eaters were wizard supremacists to some extent. The Syrdani were as well. If the Death Eaters and Syrdani managed to join forces, that would be...disturbing. And there were undoubtedly many disgruntled wizard supremacists in Syrdan who had been angered by the sudden emancipation of their slaves.

The Syrdan report hinted at a society in turmoil. Not surprisingly, the freed yahoos had trouble thinking for themselves -- the classical slave mentality -- so people tended to take advantage of them. Some of them had wound up hiring themselves out to their former masters for pay, while others roamed the countryside unemployed and had to resort to begging or crime to make ends meet. The wizards, meanwhile, had found that maintaining the tractors had been harder than they had thought and tried to call back their former slaves to keep the machines running. The slaves, of course, hadn't known how to work them either, and the former masters took them to task as a result. There were still several battalions of American soldiers running around down there, but the collapse of the economy in the wake of Judgment Day those government couldn't risk paying for military operations like this for too long.

Not surprisingly, Nestor had immediately announced that it would take in any freed yahoo who wanted to start a new life. A good half of the men had taken Andrea Markali up on her offer, an event which left Syrdan with a dangerous gender imbalance. There were even unconfirmed rumors that polygamy had started up among the Syrdani Muggles.

The lottery for Muggles moving to Atlantis had been held on October 1st, on schedule, and the winners had been notified. The Muggles were in the process of making their way over and trying to accustom themselves to life on the island. A large number of Black God cultists had joined the lottery, which had been unusual...and worrisome. Fortunately, there had been so many candidates that none of them had actually made it in.

The fighting in Houyhnhnmmland was finally winding down, much to the relief of virtually every wizard in the world. With the Resurrection Stone safely in Atlantis, the Philosopher's Stone out of the picture, and the Houyhnhnmmland conflict over, Atlantis was at DEFCON 5 for the first time since winter. It looked as if the world had weathered the Super Bowl Breach and had adapted to the presence of wizards in the community. There were still some anomalies here and there -- wizards disappearing in southern Italy, unconfirmed rumors about the return of Grigori Rasputin, and a missing Elder Wand. However, none of them posed enough of a threat to civilization to convince Ndukaku that the odds of societal collapse exceeded 1%.

She just hoped things stayed like this.

To be continued...

--------
Update #390.5
Under the waves of a shoreless sea of crystal clear waters and rootless jungles of seaweed, lay a vast and unique city of the merpeople. Sargassus was one of the most ancient of their settlements, founded by refugees after the Hammer of Ra smashed Roqteratl into rubble and it's inhabitants into bloody pulp. Blaming the contact with the other races for the tragedy, these refugees chose the single place on the globe where no coastal civilisation was nearby yet enough food grew for a city: the Sargasso Sea. Using the apex of their engineering knowledge, they built a whole city upon floating platforms made of balloons of rot-gas and alloys forged in an enchanted deep sea vent 3 miles underwater. If destroyed-and-rebuilt Roqteratl was like medieval Venice, Sargassus was like pre-Columbian Tenochtitlán. How that forge got there was a mystery, as no human wizard dived that deep and no mention of merwizards could be found in the records, but it was all they needed to build the city where no city should have stood.

In the golden ages before that time of great sorrow, the merpeople of the trading cities sponsored great expeditions and mapped most of the planet's waters, albeit mostly focusing on the coasts and the life-bearing photic zone. They built trading outposts wherever a terrestrial settlement was nearby, and outlying settlements to support those with food hunted and gathered on those feeding grounds (OOC: I need an aquatic equivalent for the word). When the great flood swept away the coastal civilisations, these settlements were left to fend for themselves, and in a generation, a great federation was reduced into warring stone-age tribes. Defending the new city against their encroachments was easy, even as the building alloys proved to be lousy weapon materials. Maintaining the city's isolationist policy was not easy. For even as they lifted stone and metal from under 3 miles of darkness, Roqteratl was also rebuilt. The leader of the refugees proclaimed himself Eldest, kept and strenghtened his people's unity, and said that the Shining City's continued association with the surface world would bring it's doom again. As the years came and went, the two cities grew, but when after five centuries Sargassus's population capped at a meager 10 000 even as they harvested food from all over the Sargasso Sea and Roqteratl, population 30 000, steadily kept growing with a much smaller feeding ground and maintaining much higher standards of living, the Eldest of Sargassus let go of the title, bowed before the Eldest of Roqteratl, and humbly requested the establishment of trade relations, Portkey Network access, and a place in the Merpeople Assembly.

Sitting on his throne, thinking of those lost days of glory and stubbornness five thousand years ago, Elder Shaga of Sargassus looked at the guests. There were six of them, one who could have been a Sargassian, the rest all half-breeds of various bloodlines like some Roqteratl, but dressed in strange clothing with lots of harnesses and pockets. None of his people had ever heard of people like these, and when they appeared out of the blue in the outskirts of his city, asking for an audience, the guards were spooked, to say the least. They hovered around the visitors, spears pointed at them, waiting for the slightest cause to stab. Looking at each other, the six strangers bowed curtly, and one of them spoke: "We bring greetings and offerings of peace from the Wandering City of Trapananda. None of you could have heard of us before today, for our kind was hiding from the world for five thousand years. I am Jowon of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Tavãrqyen, and I have a proposal for you and your people."
Deciding that these fellows were OK for the moment, Shaga signed to the guards to lower their spears, and replied: "I am Shaga, son of Dolfius, Elder of this city. You've raised my curiosity, Jowon of House Tavanyyen, and I trust you'll answer my questions truthfully. But first, tell me of this proposal!"

"As you are no doubt aware, many changes have come to the world in the last few months. One of those offers a new chance for greatness to our people. You are a wise man, you surely know how about one in a hundred of your people has the ability to see things that others can't. If you have any doubt, I can assure you they see magical constructs and creatures, like the surfacer wizards see. Recently, the human Muggles have made a great discovery, that one in a hundred of their people has the power of wizards, without their magical sight. Our researches indicate that it's the same for our people."

The Elder was shocked. "You say we have 100 merwizards in this city, all untrained and unrecongnised? From what you say I gather that their powers would be less than those of full wizards, but does that also mean that one of that 100 would also have the magic sight? In other words, wouldn't there be full wizards among us?"

That was the hard part, Jowon knew. "You are right. However, perhaps you're familiar enough with the workings of the surface world to know that wizards always try to stay away from Muggles. Until recently, most people had no idea that wizards and witches even existed. For some families, that was easy, as they were all wizards, and they have lived in secrecy for hundreds of years. Others were born to non-wizards by chance, but they too went to study in their nation's magic school, embraced the wizard world and distanced themselves from their families. Roughly one in ten thousand Muggle children were like that, all joining the wizards and keeping their secrets. We merpeople are very much like that, but spread out and without large nations, we would not have enough wizards to keep the flow of knowledge uninterrupted. We will tell you our story now, Elder. Hear it, and judge it if you wish, but know that it's the past and we can only learn from it's mistakes, not change them."

"Five thousand years ago, falling stars crushed into the sea, killing most merpeople and surfacers. A great human wizard from Egypt saved some of these people by reaching into time itself in the first Judgement Day. Back then, merpeople had wizards among themselves, who had a council where all of them were represented. This council ruled that our kind's wizards had a new destiny, to preserve life even if a future Judgement Day fails. To do this, they had to keep and increase their power. Back then, they believed that mating with non-wizards would weaken their descendants, so they used the destruction to disappear from the world your ancestors knew."

Another merwizard continued: "These merwizards manipulated all records, Obliviated all memories, under and above water. Then they all went to a place we can't show you under pain of death, and built our city. They grew numerous and powerful, they used magic to change into human shape, and walked the dry lands among those to get their power. They watched the surfacers, traded with them, learned from them. They saw them harm Life, and interfered where they could, as long as it didn't jeopardize the mission. For they had to stay hidden, to keep their power, to be ready when it counts."

The one who looked just like the natives spoke next. "But every now and then, merwizards and
merwitches were born to parents of the Thousand Tribes*. Left alone, they would have grown up thinking themselves mad, and even if they realised their powers they'd have gone to great danger learning to control them all by themselves. So, until a month ago, every time such a child was born, the merwizards of Trapananda would know. And when the child was old enough to know language and basic skills, they came for him, and took him along with any memories the tribe had of his existence. The process was cruel and imperfect, for some had retained memories and led to doubt their own sanity, but at the time we thought it was the only way.
I was one such child myself, from this very place. And when I was taken, I was angry at them. But when I understood what's at stake, I accepted it had to be done. For I have learned who we are."

They all spoke at one now. "World's End draws near, and now my watch begins. It shall not end until my death. I shall lead none of the Thousand Tribes and win no glory in their eyes. I shall live and die at my post. I am the hand in the darkness. I am the watcher in the deep. I am the fire that burns against cold, the light that brings the dawn, the horn that wakes the sleepers, the shield that guards the realms of the living. I pledge my life and honor to Trapananda, for this day and all the days to come."

The familiar-looking one spoke again. "I am Urthes, son of Rhaga, of Sargassus, and I return to you at the turn of the tide to offer our help to the city of my birth. If you allow us, Elder Shaga, we would like to open a school here for the half-wizards among our people, from this city and possibly from beyond. We would also be happy to help your people with upgrading your food supply system and many more aspects of your life, to raise their standards of living to that of Roqteratl, and above. All we ask in return is peace in the school, and respecting our secrecy, for even as we come out of hiding to help our magicless kindred into a new age of prosperity, others would seek to control us and limit our powers out of blind hate and ignorance. I speak of course of the surfacers, and though we have no ill will towards them, we're very glad to see none of them are here, and we'd appreciate if it stayed so."

To be continued...
Petunia Syrdan -- nee Pi'unt sen-Altri -- was slowly getting accustomed to interacting with the other children at her school. She was still well behind her classmates when it came to mastery of the English language. However, the nice people who lived underneath the reservoir in central Massachusetts had given her Language Lozenges which helped do a lot of the translations for her. The Language Lozenges could teach her English as well as the instructors -- in some cases, the sound produced by the Lozenges seemed more accurate than the words spoken by the teachers!

She couldn't imagine the teachers not being able to speak English. However, it sure seemed. The Language Lozenges seemed to all be in agreement that the large vehicles the Muggles drove around in were known as "cars". The teachers, however, pronounced the word without the R: "cahs". The teacher was really stupid, she thought. However, her parents had told her not to correct the teacher as that would not be polite -- and for the most part the teachers knew more than she did.

She had been pretty aloof during her first days at the new school, and her parents eventually encouraged her to bring Tarla, her stuffed unicorn over to school to cheer her up. Tarla had proven extremely popular among the other girls as she was the only stuffed animal able to walk around on her own, which she found vey amusing. The other girls' toys were so stupid: their various dolls and stuffed animals just sat there and didn't do anything. She was now one. Within a week of her arrival, she had become one of the more popular students in the school and had visited the houses of Kayla, Brittany, Caitlin, and several other people.

Life was not perfect, however. For some reason, she remembered few details of her life prior to arriving in the Boston area, and when she had asked her parents they had stared sharply at each other and claimed that they didn't know how they'd gotten here either. That didn't make sense, of course. Her parents were supposed to know and be able to fix everything. She suspected that fairies and wizards had been involved -- they were running around all over the place here, and she found them scary for some reason. As she had left the room, she heard her mother mentioned something about childhood traumatic stress disorder and amnesia. She wasn't sure what those words meant, however.

For some reason, the thought of wizards filled her with dread and made her think about the odd tattoo on her forehead. She didn't understand why, however. Most of the wizards she had met in Boston had seemed friendly. Yet what made her not trust them?

There were no wizards around her now, however, just Muggle boys and girls like her. Everything was behaving as she would have expected, with nothing floating or flying around. The only magical
object she trusted was Tarla, who was busy passing notes under the desk to Brittany a few desks away.

The teacher glanced at the unicorn and frowned. "Petunia, can you put her away? This isn't the right time to be playing with her toys?"

Petunia shrugged. "I tried to put her away. She jumped back out again and told me she wanted to play."

"Can you put her in your desk at least?"

She looked at the desk. "She doesn't like the dark down there."

The teacher thought for a second, then suddenly smiled. "All right, you win. However, I've got to see this. Can I play with her for a second. I'll take very good care of her."

Petunia's eyes widened, and she grinned. "Sure! Hey, Tarla! Ms. Conners wants to say hi to you!"

The unicorn wagged her tail and bounded towards the teacher, babbling something excitedly in Syrdani. Grinning, she picked up the little animal, petted it a little, and showed it a toy. Tarla naturally started messing around with it, and initially didn't complain THAT much when the teacher put her and the toy in a desk drawer and closed it. That didn't last, however, as the stuffed animal suddenly started complaining she couldn't see. The teacher, of course, did not know Syrdani, so she wouldn't have known to let Tarla out anyway.

Petunia fumed at the teacher. She was such a jerk.

Ignoring the laughs among the children and the irritated noises coming from the desk, she walked over to a projection device and showed everyone a Wizarding map of the world. "All right, kids. Today we're going to have a geography lesson. This is the latest map of the world, complete with the known Wizarding lands. We've got students whose parents come from countries all over the world here, so let's go through the room and tell everyone where we're from. We'll all point out our home countries on the map and talk about our cultures. Some of us may seem different from each other, but when push comes to shove we're all people."

Petunia looked at the map. She knew a little about geography, but not much. She knew that the Atlantic Ocean had two countries in it, Syrdan and Nestor. There was a third Muggle nation in the North Atlantic called Iceland which probably had lots of ice on it. Oddly enough, the map had Iceland and Nestor marked out. Syrdan, however, was labeled as "Part of Nestor???"

Well, she thought. She'd get to teach the Muggles something! She could be the teacher for once, which could even give her the authority to go to the desk and release Tarla!

Something odd occurred to her -- something about her not being allowed to tell the Muggles about Syrdan unless her parents told her that it was OK. She thought about it for a moment and smiled. Telling her friends about Syrdan was all right here, she supposed. After all, everyone ELSE was telling her about THEIR backgrounds. She was nine years old. She was a big girl now, and she figured she was grown-up enough to make the right decision here.

The first person walked to the front of the room and pointed at the map. "Hi! I'm Quynh Tất Huyền, and my parents are Vietnamese. This is Vietnam over here. My mom came over here as a child when a big fight broke out in Vietnam and tried to run away. My uncle claims that he was involved in the
big fight and helped rescue my mom..."

Petunia watched as he described what life was like in Vietnam. The little boy was followed by Boston-raised Brittany, a Mexican boy named Francisco, and a Haitian kid with dark skin who came from a port of princes. The teacher put little flags in the map for each child, and the class applauded enthusiastically after each talk.

Finally, it was her turn. She walked to the front of the room and frowned as the teacher blocked her access to the crying Tarla. "I'm sorry, Petunia. You can play with her after school. Classes come first right now. However, look to the bright side. You can tell us all about yourself now."

Somewhat relieved, she walked over to the map. "Hi! I'm Petunia Syrdan, and I come from the State of Syrdan. For some reason, the nice people at the customs agency named me after my country."

She pointed at the map. "The map is all messed up. For some reason, they think Syrdan is part of Nestor. It's not. It's its own country."

The teacher whistled. "Wow! Are you actually from one of the Wizarding nations?"

Petunia nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

"But you're not a witch, are you?"

"No, ma'am. I'm not. On Syrdan, the wizards are bad people and they beat up on people who aren't wizards."

The teacher frowned. "That's awful! Why would they do that?"

Petunia shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe they should play games more and learn to like each other."

The teacher hesitated for a moment, then let it out. "Your last name matching the country, your unusual language...good grief, are you...refugees?"

Petunia blinked at her. "What's a refugee?"

"Someone who ran away from a country which they were afraid of."

Petunia suddenly had a vivid memory of her trying to float away on a makeshift raft with her parents. It must have been suppressed for some reason. The vision scared her, but she tried to be a big girl. "Maybe. I just had a vision of me, my mom, and my dad trying to leave the island on a little boat on June 20th. On June 20th, lots of crazy things happened and a lot of the people ran away."

The teacher jerked back and put her hands to her mouth. "Judgment Day, and the lower classes escaped in the confusion. My God."

The Mexican kid raised his hand, and the teacher called on him. "Is this Syrdan a city in Cuba? I heard lots of people from Cuba try to come to the US on rafts."

The teacher chuckled and pointed at the map. "No, Francisco. Syrdan is not part of Cuba. Cuba is here, and Syrdan is here."

"But my father said the important people in Cuba are bad people. They're colored red for some
reason, and my father says everyone colored red is bad."

The teacher laughed louder. "They're not bad, Francisco. The president just disagrees a little with the people in charge of Cuba. The vast majority of Cubans are nice people, just like the rest of us. I suppose these people from Syrdan are nice as well."

Petunia frowned. "Sort of. The Muggles are nice, but the wizards are scary. I vaguely remember them doing bad things to me, but I can't remember what exactly they did."

The teacher looked at the map for a long time. Finally, she pointed at the map and turned back to Petunia. "Is Syrdan associated with Nestor at all?"

Petunia shook her head. "No, ma'am. Syrdan has bad wizards who like to beat up on Muggles. Nestor has lots of pretty girls who can turn into scary birds. When I grow up I want to be a pretty girl and turn into a bird as well, but I don't want to be a scary one."

"Why is Syrdan not marked on the map as its own state then?"

Petunia grinned. "The wizards are probably stupid and forgot to tell the map people. We know they're stupid because they don't like us."

The teacher thought some more, then her eyes widened. "Wait a minute -- has Syrdan announced itself to the Muggles yet? If they're not out, that would explain why the map is wrong -- especially if the Muggles labeled it."

Petunia shrugged. "I don't know, ma'am."

The teacher continued her train of thought as she talked to herself. "If the wizards suppress the Muggles in Syrdan, of course they won't come out because they know the rest of the world would obliterate them once they found out about it! We're talking war crimes on a huge scale here, with the majority class being persecuted! Hell, it's like apartheid!"

Petunia didn't understand the big words very well. However, the teacher seemed shocked...and disturbed. She watched as the teacher jotted down some notes.

Gently, the teacher knelt down and looked at Petunia. "Did the wizards hurt you at all in Syrdan? Is that why you left?"

Petunia shook her head. "I'm sorry, ma'am. I can't remember many of the details."

"How did you get that mark on your head, Petunia?"

Petunia looked at the floor. "A wizard gave that to me. His name was Altri. He was very scary."

"He scarred your head? How awful!"

Another memory came back. "My mother said he owned me. He thought I was his property. This mark on my head is his sign."

The teacher jerked back several feet in shock. "Wait a minute...are you saying that the wizards ENSLAVED THE Muggles in Syrdan? And they branded you with their marks much like we do to cattle?"
"Enslaved?"

"Made them work hard for them for little or no pay."

Petunia winced. "I can't remember anything of that, Ms. Conners. I'm sorry."

There was silence in the classroom. Finally, Brittany raised her hand. "I don't know about you, but I think we should tell these wizards to stop beating up on Muggles. Either that, or tell our parents to tell God and the President to beat up on the wizards and have them not hurt the Muggles."

The teacher glared at Brittany. "Brittany, remember people like Radner and Hermione Granger. Not all wizards are bad."

"But these wizards seem bad. Maybe these Syrdan wizards are associated with the bad wizard who nearly blew the world up."

The teacher reeled. "A tie between Syrdan and Voldemort? God help us. If that's the case, I agree with you, Brittany. Something needs to be done, and we need to figure out how."

To be continued...

--------

Update #392: Got Crabbes?
--------

Tuesday, October 15, 1996
Slytherin Common Room
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
United Kingdom
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 4/1.0%
--------

NEXT UP: What Do You Mean, Shirley Jackson Organized This Lottery?
--------

Vincent Crabbe turned Gregory Goyle and nodded. "All right, Greg. I'll do it. I'm in."

Goyle nodded. "It's good to have a friend at a time like this, and now's the time to do it when the school's still going nuts over the attack. Do you want to see if Draco wants to get involved?"

Crabbe looked down the hall at Draco, and slowly shook his head. "I'm not sure if we can trust him anymore, Greg. He's spending too much time with Flitwick and so forth for our tastes. Whatever he saw in London must have really addled his brains. Add to that the fact that the Death Eaters killed his adopted father --"

Goyle snorted. "Good riddance. The man was a blood traitor in the end. And we even trusted him!"

Crabbe disagreed. "He's much more of a Death Eater than this Slughorn fellow is. Bloody hell, Slughorn brewed that Felix Felicis to help take out all the Dark Lord's men in...where is that country, Greg?"

"North Korea, Vince. However, let's stay on task here. If we do want to get in touch with this new Death Eater cell, how do we do it? Hogsmeade is crawling with dementors, and there Aurors everywhere. If we send any message out it's bound to be intercepted. I'd say that we wait and gauge Draco's interest. He's smarter than both of us put together. If Draco can lead our cell, we can actually
get somewhere here."

"He's not going to get involved, Greg. Bloody hell, I hope we don't have to kill him."

"I hope so as well. However, think positive. Maybe the attack will cause Draco to come to his
senses. In the meantime, we should try to do something which will convince this new cell to let us in
even though we're underage."

"That's not a bad idea, Greg. What exactly did you have in mind?"

Goyle grinned. "I happened to overhear the teachers saying that in order to get the Dark Lord back,
we need to get the Elder Wand, a Resurrection Stone, and an Invisibility Cloak. The purpose of the
attack was to gain our side the Elder Wand, and that appears to have succeeded. We can't do
anything about the Resurrection Stone right now as I'm not even sure what a Resurrection Stone is.
However, we both know someone with an Invisibility Cloak who lives in this castle. And unless I'm
very badly mistaken, Draco would give us award after award if we did anything to irritate that
Cloak's owner."

Crabbe's grin was vicious. "You want to steal the Cloak from Potter and possibly kill him?"

Goyle nodded. "I doubt we'll be able to kill him without getting into big trouble. However, if we just
happen to 'misplace' that Invisibility Cloak so that it winds up in the hands of our new Death Eater
friends, that could come in quite handy when it comes to our initiation. And who knows, an
accomplishment like that could change Draco's mind."

Madam Pomfrey nodded, and Harry drew a deep breath and walked into the hospital wing.
Although most of the people who had been injured in the attack on the Astronomy Tower had been
dismissed from the hospital, there were three people left. One of them was Cho Chang, the first girl
Harry had ever kissed.

Harry had to admit that he saw Cho more as a friend than a possible significant other now. After all,
he and Ginny were now a steady couple. Nevertheless, the first kiss was a major milestone in a boy's
life.

Cho had survived the fall from the Astronomy Tower but had landed in a way which had damaged
her spine and partially paralyzed her. Despite all of Madam Pomfrey's help, it was increasingly
obvious that she was going to have to learn how to walk all over again. She was spending most of
her time taking baby steps around the infirmary under the watchful eyes of the nurse. Sometimes she
took lessons with Professor Hawking, who was also trying to learn how to walk once more.

Cho smiled weakly. "Hi there, Harry. How are you doing?"

Harry forced a grin -- he didn't like seeing anyone like this. "All right. The school is slowly getting
back to normal, though the grief counselors are still going to be around for a while. I can't believe so
many people are dead. I mean, Hannah Abbott, Susan Bones, Padma Patil, Zacharias Smith...more
students and staff died in this one attack than on Judgment Day! How are your lessons coming?"

"All right. I made it halfway across the room today, though Wayne Hopkins gets today's
recuperation award as it looks like he's going to be able to see again. Professor Hawking seems to be
getting accustomed to his cane, though I have no idea how he's going to make it up all those stairs.
Which reminds me -- how is he as a teacher?"
Harry grinned. "I'm not taking Astronomy NEWTs, Cho. However, Hermione raves about him. I haven't seen her so crazy about a professor since Lockhart. She claims he's a very famous scientist in the Muggle world. I wouldn't know, however."

"Neither would I, Harry. Neither would I. What about Hugh de Lourdes? How's he doing?"

"Hugh seems to have taken some lessons from both Dr. and Mrs. Flamel. He's an excellent teacher, though he tends to switch to what sounds like Middle French when he's flustered. George Weasley is thinking of having Ron feed him a joke Language Lozenge which will purportedly convert Middle French into English but will actually convert it into Pig Latin or a series of expletives depending on the phase of the moon."

Cho chuckled. "Clever, but won't Ron get into trouble for that?"

"No. The Lozenge will immediately explain that it's George and not Ron who did it. Ron should be safe."

"I see. How's Dumbledore doing?"

"According to Flitwick, he's almost ready to leave the hospital. However, Dumbledore had a discussion with some of the doctors and they've recommended that he just retire. He lost many of his memories when that bullet hit him in the head, and he wouldn't be as good a lecturer/headmaster as he was before the incident. If he retires like this, we'll remember him as he was in his prime and not as a shadow of his former self."

"I see. Is he going to get a portrait in the headmaster's office once he officially retires? I've been told there's no portrait of him up there yet. We've got Umbridge, Snape, and McGonagall, but no Dumbledore."

"There's a good reason, Cho. He's still alive. The portraits only show up when the headmaster dies."

"Are Umbridge and McGonagall still screaming at each other in Flitwick's office?"

Harry nodded. "Judging from the magical ear protection Flitwick wears in his office, I believe so. McGonagall should have had more portraits made of her while she was in school -- as it is, she can't leave this one. Umbridge, of course, is stuck in her frame because all of her portraits were in the Ministry of Magic, which got blown up."

Cho grinned evilly. "It seems they'll have a long time to iron things out. I hope Flitwick gets work done at some point."

-------------------
National Mall
Washington, DC
-------------------

Miriam Coleman looked at the base of the Roqteratl obelisk, where the merpeople had conveniently provided a translation of all of the text on the obelisk. Her granddaughter's friend Brittany had told all of her friends that there was a Wizarding nation on the map which did bad things to Muggles. She had claimed it was in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, to the northwest of Nestor.

Skeptical about this claim, she figured she'd drive over to DC and take a look. The obelisk was pretty tall and covered with runes and unfamiliar pictures. The map did have an island in the middle of the Atlantic to the northwest of Nestor. It was labeled as "Frisland" on the map. That didn't mean much,
however, as the island known as Nestor had been labeled. "Wynera".

Very interesting. She continued making her way around the base of the statue and saw that someone had attached a second map -- this one made out of parchment -- to the bottom of the statue. The note next to the map claimed that this was a modern Wizarding map taken from a Xylend schoolbook. The countries' names weren't in straight English -- they were in an archaic dialect of some sort -- but they were close enough: NISTOR, LILLIPUT, BROBDINGNAG, YETALIS, FESTANDRI, XYLENDA.

She took a good look at the Atlantic Ocean on the second map. There appeared to be a mountain range right down the middle of the ocean, and the land marked as Frisland seemed to be situated right on top of it. It looked a lot like Iceland in that respect. Next to it was a small word with a question mark handwritten after it: SIRDAN(?).

She frowned. She had been told the country where the wizards beat up on the Muggles had been called Syrdan. There could be truth to this rumor after all! If that were the case, she'd better tell her congressman and the Secretary of Magic. She didn't want a country which suppressed Muggles so close to the East Coast.

Determined to do something to help, she compared the two maps a little further. Most of the other nations had already been identified. However, there were a few other locations on the Xylend map which she hadn't known about. Perhaps the most astonishing was something which appeared to be a small city called SALASIA(?) in the middle of Antarctica.

She didn't like the idea of an Antarctic nation at ALL. If you were a wizard who wanted to subjugate Muggles and felt like setting up a secret base somewhere, where would you go? Obviously, you'd want to go somewhere where people bereft of magic would fear to tread, right?

She picked up the phone and started calling her own friends. People needed to do something about these two new threats as soon as possible.

To be continued...

------------
Update #393: What Do You Mean, Shirley Jackson Organized This Lottery?
------------
Wednesday, October 16, 1996
Santorini
Aegean Sea
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 4/1.1%
------------
NEXT UP: March of the Penguins (.5)
------------
Mykhailo Alekseivich Kohut had not let the letter out of his sight ever since it came in the mail. He'd nearly shoved the owl back out the window before his wife cautioned him that it could actually be from Atlantis.

International Confederation of Warlocks
1 October 1996

Dear Mr. Kohut:

It is my great pleasure to inform you that you have won one of the opportunities to move to Atlantis.
Everything has been prepared for your arrival, and you can move in whenever you wish. Your new home on Atlantis will be determined by lot once you arrive and choose between two sets of homes: an all-Muggle section and a mixed Muggle/wizard section.

You will be allowed to transport as many personal items as you want. Thanks to the charms involved in devices like the Extendatent, a building which seems like a small apartment can be actually quite spacious. You will not have any trouble finding room for your belongings.

This invitation is valid for you, your spouse if you have one, and any children under the age of 17 living at your current address. Pets are permitted as long as they are registered with our staff.

Atlantis is currently on the surface and plans to stay above sea level for the foreseeable future. The climate is similar to that of Santorini and the other Aegean islands: hot and dry in the summer, mild in the winter. If you find this uncomfortable, do not worry as your home has magical climate control similar to Muggle air conditioning. In the unlikely event that Atlantis is forced to submerge, the city will be enclosed in a magical dome of air maintaining a constant 21 degrees Centigrade (70 degrees Fahrenheit).

You will still be allowed to maintain your Muggle citizenship while on Atlantis. The government has ruled Atlantis to be neutral ground when it comes to national territory, both Muggle and Wizarding. All you will need to obtain before traveling to Atlantis will be a valid passport.

If you choose to take advantage of this opportunity, send this owl back with an acceptance letter. Include a piece of personal information about a member of your party to be used for a security check. When you are ready to begin your move, please travel to Santorini, where we have set up a temporary embassy and customs house. Once we have verified your identity through magical means, each member of your party will be issued a resident card which will allow travel to and from the island and entrance into your new home.

I hope you join us on Atlantis. We are very interested in learning more about the Muggle world, and I assume that you are interested in learning more about us.

Once again, congratulations, and I hope to hear from you soon.

Best wishes,

Heydar Dagher
Grand Mugwump
International Confederation of Warlocks

Anastasios Dialonis
Grand Mugwump Emeritus
Wizarding Ambassador to the United Nations
-------
Kohut and his wife had celebrated with a tremendous glass of champagne and sent back the owl with the acceptance letter. There had to be magic involved here -- whoever had sent the letter must have cast a spell on it so it would come out in Ukrainian instead of whatever language the wizards spoke - - what was that, Latin?

They had eventually decided to use the Atlantis apartment as their winter home. The climate seemed much more palatable than northern Ukraine -- it didn't even snow down in Atlantis! They had spent a couple of weeks making sure their passports were up to date and packing up whatever they needed.
Finally, the day had come. The flight and boat cruise had taken longer than they had hoped, but they had made it over to Santorini. Kohut could see the fabled city off in the distance, and he could only wonder what awaited him there.

There were two other people in the waiting room, a man and a woman who appeared to be in their fifties. They smiled when they saw Kohut and congratulated him and his wife on their lottery win. Kohut was amazed to find that they spoke perfect Ukrainian, which was an even better boost! He hoped he would wind up living near these other Muggles at some point -- hopefully SOMEONE would figure out what the wizards were saying.

The man laughed and shook his head. "I'm sorry, Mr. Kohut, but we're not Muggles. We're actually wizards who are minding the store here and reporting back when people show up. That's why we know your language -- our magic does the translation for us. Now, if you will excuse us, we'll head back to Atlantis and make sure someone comes to pick you up."

Kohut nodded. "Go ahead, sir. I can't wait!"

The two people vanished, and Kohut turned to his wife. "These people seem very nice, and they've even gone out of their way to find a Ukrainian translator for us. This is going to be perfect."

His wife nodded and clapped her hands. "I can't wait until we see them cast spells in front of our faces! I know Apparition counts, but I'm hoping to see them pull a rabbit out of a hat or something like that."

They didn't have to wait long. Seconds later, he heard someone in a raspy voice whisper two words: "Avada Kedavra!"

The green beam hit him, and that was that. His wife fell less than a second later.

- - - - - - - - - - - -

Halyna Zygonova watched as the two Muggles slumped to the ground. They had to act fast before the REAL Atlantean welcoming committee showed up.

She watched as her husband plucked some hairs from each of the Muggles' heads, stripped the bodies, and Transfigured the corpses into a couple of small rocks, which he tossed out the open window into the street. He then dropped the woman's hair into a vial of Polyjuice Potion and gave it to her. Less than a minute later, they had taken the forms of the two Muggles.

Zygonov started rummaging through the dead Muggles' stuff. "All right, Halyna. Find their passports. Let's see what our names are going to be."

Zygonova nodded and leafed through the woman's purse. "Looks like I'm Lyudmila Kohutovna. You?"

"I'm Mykhailo Alekseivich Kohut...drat, this guy is supposed to be 39. How the hell am I going to pass for 39 once this Polyjuice wears off?"

Zygonova shrugged. "Hey, if I could pass for 36 I'd be more than happy. In all seriousness, you won't have to most of the time, Genya. I suspect we can get by with our normal looks as long as someone doesn't ask us for a passport."

Her husband frowned. "I hope so, Halyna. Let's hope this residency card doesn't have our faces on it
because it's going to have these two guys' faces."

They dragged all of the clothes and Muggles' equipment into a side chamber, where they changed
clothes. Zygonova winced when she realized that the dead woman had been maybe 180 cm tall and
she was only 160 cm. She whipped out her wand and tried to mess with the clothing so it at least fit.

Dressed as the Kohuts, the Zygonovs managed to make it out of the side chamber just in time to see
a wizard walk into the room. The wizard, a man in his thirties, waved to them. "You must be the
Kohut family. Welcome to Atlantis. I'm Wizard Redica, and I'll be helping you with your move.
First, a bit of security details. Can I see your passports please, along with one other form of
identification?"

Hoping this would work, Zygonova and her husband handed over the passports. Redica checked
them out and nodded. "They seem to be authentic to me, Mr. and Mrs. Kohut. There's one more
thing we need to check, however. There's something called the Polyjuice Potion which allows
people to infiltrate an organization by taking someone else's form. That's why I asked you for a
security question. With that in mind, what was the name of Iryna's first boyfriend?"

Zygonov swore to himself. He was hoping to not have to do this, but he had no choice. Turning to
Halyna, he asked: "All right, Lyudmyla. That's your sister. Let's get this over with."

To Zygonov's great relief, Redica fell for it. The Atlantean turned to look at Halyna, giving Zygonov
a chance to blast Redica with a Petrificus Totalus when he wasn't looking. Having learned some
mental magic from Rasputin, he planted a false memory in Redica's head which managed to convince
him that the "Kohuts" had successfully passed screening. This was immediately followed by an
Obliviation of the fact that Redica had been hexed in the first place.

Redica blinked in confusion for a moment, then shook his head and smiled. "Sorry about that, Mr.
and Mrs. Kohut. I got confused for a second there. At any rate, you seem to be who you claim to be.
Let me take your picture for the residency cards...just a second..."

Redica brought out a camera as Zygonov tried to figure out what he was going to do. Finally, it
occurred to him: take the residency card and forge the data. He could always buy a magical camera
on Atlantis somewhere, take pictures of their real faces, and attach them to the cards.

The two wizards smiled as Zygonov took their picture. "All right, then. Now, if you'll come with me,
I'll fly you over to Atlantis. I'll bet you never thought you'd be flying on a broom, right?"

Zygonov smiled. He made a mental note to start gambling with this guy.

Five hours later, they were in their new home in Atlantis. It had been very, very close. However,
they'd made it through the screening procedures and were in the process of doctoring their residency
cards to cover up the pictures of the Kohuts. The Black God was giving them luck, Zygonov mused.

Redica had thoughtfully provided them with a magical telephone which would allow them to contact
their friends on the mainland. Their phone number here at Atlantis was going to be 011-*-1-352.
How convenient, Zygonov thought. Now he didn't have bother with owls or other familiars.

Thankins Redica profusely -- he had been so helpful, albeit with a little help from his charges --
Zygonov called up Vovchanckaya. He spoke two words.

"We're in. Awaiting orders from Rasputin or the Black Fist."
Russian Ministry of Magic

The intern walked into the Minister's office and saluted. "Sir, we've put our agents into position in the Zygonovs' town. If they're there, we'll catch them. Some of them are near the house itself."

The Minister frowned. "You haven't seen them yet? Even though you've been watching their house?"

"Not sir, but we're working on it. They've got to be around there somewhere."

"Keep me posted if anything changes, Oleg."

"Yes, sir."

To be continued...

Update #393.5: March of the Penguins

Wednesday, October 16, 1996
Tsalal House
Shores of Lake Tsalax [OTL Lake Vostok]
Tsalax
Senate and People's Republic of Tsalasia
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 4/1.1%

NEXT UP: I Hope the QE2 Can Be an Icebreaker

Being Consul of Tsalasia had been hard enough on its own, Tsirul thought. The magic maintaining the temperature shield had broken again the other day, and the dome had cooled to the point where the surface of Lake Tsalax had nearly frozen. Fortunately, the threat of exiling the Atmospheric Stability Division to the surface had gotten the problem fixed pretty damn quickly. Yet that had been nothing compared to what Foreign Minister Tsorak had just dumped on her lap.

Tsirul resisted the urge to throw the Foreign Minister into the lake. "Are you sure about this, Foreign Minster?"

Tsorak sighed but nodded. "I'm afraid so, Consul. The reports coming out of the United States and Xylenda seem to be very consistent. It appears that some idiot in Xylenda gave the American Muggles a map of the world from a school textbook. We're on it, and people in the United States are asking questions. Their Senate has found out about this as well, and Ariadne was caught completely off guard. She have us a heads-up less than half an hour ago."

Tsirul growled. "Wonderful. File a formal protest against Xylenda and start Obliviating everyone."

Tsorak threw his hands up. "What good will that do, Consul? It's done, and I don't think we can stop this now. Besides, the Xylend have apologized profusely. That map is almost certainly on the Muggle computer network called the Internet now, which means everyone on the planet can see it. If we're not forced out now, we will be at some point. I recommend that we come out now, on our own terms, though --"

The Foreign Minister paused. It was obvious there was something else he wanted to say but was
reluctant to. Tsirul, however, needed to know everything. "All right, Tsorak. Spit it out. What else?"

Wincing slightly, he coughed delicately. "You know how our agents sometimes hang out on the surface for masquerading as penguins? Well, they've seen several indications that the Muggles have sent out an expeditionary force to visit us."


"They should be above us momentarily. They can't get through the ice cap, of course. However, it's obvious they're very curious. The party seems to be made up of large numbers of scientists from McMurdo, the South Pole Station, and a whole bunch of other research facilities on the surface. They're all meeting at Vostok Station and are going to head over here."

The Consul fumed. "Why couldn't this have happened in the winter when no one was there?"

Tsorak shrugged. "Bad luck, madame. What do you want to do? Should we go up and meet them?"

Tsirul thought for a moment. "What do you think the odds are that they're going to make it down here?"

"It may only be a matter of time, Consul. I can already tell you that the Americans are getting very curious and are pressing for first contact. Once they get a wizard involved, it's over. There are also rumors that people are thinking of coming over from places like South Africa and Australia."

The Consul spat in a most unladylike fashion. "More Brits. Just what we need. I figured we can't trust any of those people."

Tsorak thought for a moment and slowly nodded. "You may be right, Consul. However, to be honest Ariadne is doing us a favor here by warning us. She may come from a former British colony, but I suspect she's a decent person."

Tsirul was skeptical, but she could tell her options were limited. "Quite possibly. However, we're going to be very careful here. I'm guessing there are a lot of folk who aren't going to be happy about --"

Suddenly, she broke out laughing. "Syrdan. Muggles finding out about Syrdan. I suspect there's enough noise going on around Syrdan at this point that they'd have thought another Judgment Day just hit. From what I've been told, the limited exposure the Syrdani have already suffered nearly overthrew their society."

Tsorak grinned. "I wouldn't be surprised, Consul. At any rate, how do you want to handle this? Since this is an important diplomatic encounter, I recommend that we try to suppress our current opinions for the time being -- the last thing we need now is a war with the white folk. Besides, who knows? With so little contact between us and the outside world, it's quite possible that our theories are completely unfounded."

Tsirul shrugged. "Quite possibly. All right, here's what we'll do. I take it that they can't survive long out there?"

"No, Consul."

"I thought so. Here's what we'll do..."
Researcher Edwin Mueller looked around the windswept field of ice. "This is where you guys said the lake was?"

Igor Zhukov nodded. "That's it. The lake's there, all right. It's just that we've got this little ice cap in the way. If there is a country down there, you'd expect that they'd put it near the lake so they can get drinking water."

Mueller scoffed. "Drinking water? They can just lick the ice!"

"And have their tongues freeze off? Get real. If I were them, I'd -- what the hell is this?"

Mueller spun, and his eyes widened when he saw what appeared to be the ghost of a penguin -- well, a penguin which was shining with the a brilliant white light -- looking at him. It barked something at him in a language he didn't recognize.

Frowning, he turned to Zhukov. "That isn't Russian. Hell, I have no idea what it is? Any of the rest of you know?"

The rest of the scientists shrugged and shook their heads. Mueller was about to try sign language when there was a flash of light and two people wrapped in roughly 8 layers of parkas materialized next to him. Zhukov shook his head in disbelief as Mueller tried to be diplomatic.

"Hello, ma'am. Are you a Tsalasian? If we're trespassing on your land, I apologize, but we're just curious --"

The person grinned and spoke with a woman's voice. "I'm actually not Tsalasian, sir. I'm actually Katie Leonard, a special Muggle envoy from the Aboriginal Australian community. I'll help you talk to these guys. I'm accompanied by Wizard Poole here, who will serve as our guide and interpreter."

Zhukov frowned. "Special envoy? I can understand why we'd need an interpreter. What does this penguin speak, Linux?"

Leonard nodded grimly. "Yes, special envoy. This penguin here, according to Wizard Poole, is a messenger sent by Consul Tsuril of the Senate and People's Republic of Tsalasia. She is the head of Tsalasia."

Mueller grinned. "What is this? Did Rome move down here when we weren't looking?"

"Almost, sir. You see, this place is modeled after the Roman Republic. You're aware that the various Hidden Nations have rather...primitive forms of government. This is no exception."

Poole cut in. "Now, gentlemen, this is serious. Tsalasia has always had a bit of a...problem with the Western World. Suffice it to say they've been hurt by Westerners in the past and are a bit wary of them. This is why Katie and I, a Maori witch doctor, will handle first contact. You guys stay in the background for the time being -- we don't want any problems here."

Mueller nodded very sharply. He wasn't a diplomat, after all. He backed off, and most of the rest of the researchers followed him.

Poole and Leonard looked at each other. Finally, Leonard drew a deep breath and turned to face the penguin. "Good afternoon, Madame Consul. My name is Katherine Leonard, and I am a Muggle
from the aboriginal tribes of Australia."

Poole translated. The penguin waited for a few seconds, and then blurted out a response which Poole relayed back to the rest of the crowd.

"I am the Patronus of Consul Tsuril of Tsalasia, and I have been sent by my mistress to welcome you to our land. How did you find out about us, Ms. Leonard?"

"A map we retrieved from the nation of Xylenda. Rest assured, we mean you no harm."

The penguin grunted. "I figured as much, Ms. Leonard. The First Citizen is getting angry messages from virtually every single Hidden Nation. Have these Westerners harmed you at all?"

The researchers backed off a little further as both Poole and Leonard winced. Poole replied, "Actually, Madame Consul, these so-called Westerners are researchers. They have come to Antarctica to study this frozen continent. You will find them to have much more open minds than the people you fled from a while back. You have no reason to fear us anymore."

The penguin hesitated. "I hope that is the case. At any rate, let me describe my country. We have about 75,000 people, with about 30,000 wizards and 45,000 Muggles. We live underneath the icecap in a protective dome. The icecap is actually fake, and there is a passage through the ice which can be opened by a wizard to reach our community. Our capital is Tsalax, and it is located on the shores of Lake Tsalax, a large freshwater lake here under the ice."

Mueller couldn't help but cut in. "Madame Consul, we are aware of the lake. Our Muggle sensors detected it, but we have no way to explore it."

The penguin looked worried. "You discovered us through the ice cap?"

"No, Madame Consul. We discovered the water and that was it. We assumed there was no civilization down there. As it is, we have no desire to interfere with your way of life."

Leonard cut in. "Madame Consul, it is rather cold out here. May we visit your community, where it's presumably warmer? We are unarmed, and if you wish Wizard Poole will hand you his wand. All we are bringing with us are Muggle recording devices called cameras which will show our world your way of life and how you live. We will not record anybody without their permission."

The penguin shook its head. "I'm sorry, but we're not accustomed to having visitors down here."

"You're missing out on a lot, Consul. The world has changed since you left, and for the most part it's become much less barbaric. You have no reason to hide from us anymore. Furthermore, since the Statute of Secrecy has fallen, Muggles and wizards have become working together for mutual good."

The penguin thought for a long moment. Finally, it nodded. "All right, here's what we'll do. I will let Leonard, Poole, and three Muggle researchers with the video cameras into the city. The rest of you should stay at your base on the surface to keep warm. After you leave, our community will vote on whether we should let the rest of you in. If the vote comes out in your favor, we'll open up more."

Leonard smiled. "Thank you, Madame Consul."

She turned to the researchers. "Who here's got the cameras, and who wants to visit? I'd recommend one person from each nation."
There was a brief discussion, and Leonard eventually picked out Mueller, Zhukov, and someone from China. The Maori interpreter relayed this to the penguin, and the penguin nodded.

"This is acceptable. Wizard Poole, do you know how to get in?"

Poole nodded. "Yes, Madame Consul."

"Good. Take them over to the entrance, and Praetor Tsandor will meet them there."

Giddy with excitement, Mueller followed the wizard over to what appeared to be a crack in the ice as the other researchers glumly walked back to the Vostok research station. He soon found out, very quickly, that it was far more than a crack in the ice.

To be continued...

-------------
Update #394: I Hope the QE2 Can Be an Icebreaker
-------------
Wednesday, October 16, 1996
Tsalax
Tsalasia
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 4/1.1%
-------------
NEXT UP: Which One Is Undesirable #1?
-------------
Edwin Mueller looked around the park at the edge of the lake. "Praetor, this is amazing! How long did it take you to build this?"

Praetor Tsandor smiled. "It took a matter of months and that was it. Remember that we have magic at our disposal down here."

"Is this a natural lake, or did you construct it?"

"Believe it or not, it's natural. It empties into the Southern Ocean through a river on the other side of the city. Merpeople brave enough to swim through the cold waters down here can actually come and visit us through that channel."

Poole whistled. "Interesting. You've got a way for vessels from the outside to reach your nation?"

"In theory, yes. In practice, however, most of the river is under the ice so I don't see how well Muggle ships can make it over here. Maybe if they knew how to travel underwater."

Mueller cut back in. "Praetor, we do have underwater vessels. They're called submarines, and a couple of them are protecting Atlantis at all times now. You know, sir, a place like this could become a prime Muggle tourist destination if that channel is wide enough to admit submarines."

Tsandor grimaced momentarily, but his face soon cleared up. "Perhaps. However, keep in mind that we aren't accustomed to dealing with outsiders. Many of us will be scared, especially if the submarine comes from a Western nation."

The Chinese man looked over at the waterfront a few hundred feet away, where several of the locals were eyeing them warily. "That's another thing I don't get. Why exactly do you guys fear people
"Our country was founded by people fleeing anti-wizard colonial policies, Mr. Chang. This part of the world was relatively unknown to the Europeans, but not to the merpeople. They told us about this lake and helped us settle down here."

There was a distinct pause, and finally Leonard spoke. "Praetor, I come from Australia, a nation which was once part of the British colonial empire. I can tell you that times have changed. If you took a look at a modern world map, the empires have all disappeared and the colonies have gained independence for the most part. You have nothing to fear anymore. If anything, we Muggles will marvel at what you have done down here. You have managed to settle where people like us couldn't have dreamed."

Zhukov grinned. "If you want monetary compensation for what your oppressors did to you, you can always have them come down here in their submarines and pay to visit. This would also open up trade with the outside world. You'd never know when Muggle technology would come in handy."

A new voice cut in, and Mueller turned as the Foreign Minister headed in their direction. "That may not be a bad idea. However, we'll have to think about it -- we don't want to push things too fast down here."

Zhukov continued. "There's another alternative -- you can leave this underground city and return to the lands you came from as the colonial threat is gone. You probably wouldn't mind feeling the sun on your face without the ice in the way."

"Indeed, we wouldn't mind feeling the sun directly. Sometimes we take the form of penguins and go exploring on the peninsula, but that's as far as we can go. As far as the relocation goes, the simple fact is we've all grown up here. This is our home now, and none of the people who originally emigrated here are still alive."

Mueller nodded and looked back at the lake. "Are there any native lifeforms in the lake or in the area surrounding the city?"

The Praetor nodded. "Indeed, there are fish in the lake unique to this area. The area surrounding the lake, however, is artificial and does not have any native lifeforms. Are you thinking of examining these creatures?"

Mueller nodded vigorously. "Absolutely. We are scientists, and these animals have been isolated from the outside world for millions of years."

Tsorak bit his lip. "We'll see what we can do to set up a naturalist expedition. Keep in mind, however, that the endemic creatures are not very common anymore. When we brought our fish in to feed ourselves --"

The researchers swore in unison, and Mueller let it out. "Let me guess. Your fish ate everything in here because they had no predators and the fish here weren't expecting to become prey."

The Praetor blinked. "Why, that is exactly what happened. I'm impressed, sir -- you must be very smart. There are a few local species left in niches here and there, however. We've taken some care to make sure they don't die out as we've managed to extract some interesting spell components and herbal remedies from them."
Mueller breathed a sigh of relief. "That was a wise move, Praetor. I'd recommend putting some kind of barrier in the lake and confining your fish to one side of it, the one nearest the town. That way, you won't have to look as far for your food and the native species will be able to come back."

Praetor looked at the lake thoughtfully. "That might not be a bad idea. I'll bring it up at the next Senate meeting. That should be next Fire Day."

Zhukov frowned. "Fire Day?"

The Foreign Minister smiled. "We have an unusual calendar down here. With the seasons and constellations all in disarray because of our proximity to the pole and our belief in the Five Gods of Magic, we've developed a calendar which consists of 73 five-day weeks, where each of the days is named after a different god. Every four years there's a special holiday dedicated to all five gods which occurs at the end of the year."

Mueller did the math in his head and turned to the rest of the researchers. "Heh. 73*5 = 365. It sounds like they've developed something based on the Julian calendar with five day weeks. I wonder..."

He turned back to the Praetor. "Do you ever find the equinoxes and such getting out of whack with the beginning of the year?"

The Foreign Minister nodded. "It's gotten off by a few days. However, it's pretty close. You can do better?"

Everyone nodded in unison. "Indeed, Praetor, we can. Let us tell you about it."

The Foreign Minister listened attentively as the researchers explained the Gregorian calendar. Once the presentation was done, he nodded. "Very interesting. I'll bring this up with the Senate as well."

The Praetor then brought out a bottle of green liquid, which Mueller looked at warily. Pouring it into glasses, Tsandor gestured to the bottle. "Do you drink alcohol or wine in your culture? This is a bottle of fine wine from the land of Syrdan. Only highly-ranking Muggles are allowed to drink it."

Mueller looked at the rest of the Muggles, who were as baffled as he was. "Syrdan? Where is that? Is that somewhere else under the ice cap?"

"No, sir. It's in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, and I would expect that your world already knows about it by now since it is almost certainly going to be on the map which exposed us. You DID know about it, right?"

-------------
Hogsmeade
-------------
Professor Flitwick looked at Dumbledore. The man had survived, but he seemed to have lost a lot of his memories and his speech was somewhat slurred. Flitwick had handed over the former headmaster's Pensieve hoping that it would fill in some of the blanks.

Flitwick watched as Moody brought Dumbledore up to speed. "That's about it, Albus. You went down, and the Death Eater stole the Elder Wand and killed Severus when he came to investigate. He cast the Dark Mark with the Elder Wand, and the supercharged spell brought the snake to life. It attacked the people on the Astronomy Tower, killing Sinistra and many Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff NEWT students. Two famous Muggle scientists, Professors Moore and Hawking have taken over
Dumbledore nodded. "That's good news. However, I am a bit disturbed by the fact you believe the Death Eaters are after the Deathly Hallows so that they can bring back Voldemort. That would explain their attack upon me, of course. I take it Nicholas has given the Resurrection Stone to Atlantis?"

Moody nodded. "He has done so, Albus. I highly doubt the Death Eaters would be stupid enough to actually try to get into Atlantis. Particularly since an international manhunt is underway for the Zygonovs."

"That takes care of the second Hallow. However, there is something urgent I need to tell you. Would you agree that we need to keep the third Hallow out of the Death Eaters' hands as well? Especially if they don't realize the Resurrection Stone is out of play?"

Flitwick nodded. "I agree. You know where it is?"

"I believe I do. And trust me, Filius, you're not going to believe it."

Moody grunted. "Considering what's happened over the past nine months, I'll buy anything. All right, Albus. Where is it?"

Dumbledore told them, and there was a long pause. Finally, Moody burst out swearing.

"Is there anything that kid is NOT involved with?"

To be continued...

-------------
Update #394.5 Not What I Had In Mind
-------------

Wednesday, October 16, 1996
20 miles south of Belaya Gora
Abyysky District
Sakha Republic
Russian Federation

-------------

The muksun was a fine specimen of its kind, silvery, fusiform, half a meter long. Soon, it would travel upriver to find a suitable stream for spawning, but now it was lazily swimming through the clear, sunlit waters of the river, looking for smaller fish, insects or crabs. The prey never stood a chance. Faster than it could flinch it was impaled by a wicked, serrated knife, tightly fixed to a straight tree branch to create a makeshift spear, and hauled out of the water. Sevastyan Orlov neatly decapitated the trashing fish with another knife, uttered a praise to the Black God, and started gutting it. Looking up at the setting sun, he decided to call it a day and set up camp as soon as he found a good place.

He had been wandering in this wilderness since Friday. He salvaged what he could and dared from the empty safe house where the Portkey deposited him, but sometimes he felt he hadn't given himself enough time for that. Sure, it was only a matter of time until the enemy noticed his escape, and they
would send trackers after him... but even if it was only the middle of autumn according to the calendar, he felt the gathering cold already, and knew that winter is coming. He didn't recognise any prominent landmarks, but the stars, plants and climate told him he's somewhere in the Russian Far East. He found the river the day before yesterday, and followed it down ever since, knowing that following it would probably lead him to civilisation, but would certainly lead him north.

He had to find a settlement, and soon. The food he could take was good for a week, two if he are sparingly, and he could fish now that he found the river. But the trees have already shed their leaves and there were no berries left to gather. He salvaged a good tent, a warm bedroll, and a backpack, but he wasn't so lucky when it came to clothing or weapons. There were none of the latter, and judging by the safe house's wardrobe, none of Mab's minions were human males, a fact that limited his looted clothing to a gaudy and ill-fitting fur cloak and other items even more obviously belonging to females with twisted sense of taste. How in Tchernobog's name will he walk into a village dressed like that?

His musings were interrupted by the distant roar of an old engine. Straining his ears, he heard it approaching from the south, then he saw a faint, barely visible light filtering through the trees... then the roar stopped. By then, he identified it as an old pickup truck, one of the crude but durable designs from the late USSR, about a mile away. Not wanting to miss the opportunity, he grabbed his katana and started moving towards the source of light as fast and as silently as he could.

------------

Abram Yakov took another swing of his bottle of Vodka. He stopped to empty his bladder maybe ten minutes ago, but to his irritation he found himself unable to relieve himself, no thanks to old age. He came to these parts as a hunter and trapper, gathering furs in the summer, selling them and drinking booze in the winter. This year's catch was good enough for a happy winter in Yakutsk... a thought that should have made him relaxed enough. Well, perhaps with a little more alcohol... he put the bottle away and started whistling a tune, when he felt a slight prodding on his back and heard a cold voice say: "Don't move. Slowly, lift your hands up where I see them and turn around."

Obeying in silent terror, Abram turned and saw the wierdest man he'd ever seen, holding some japanese sword at his throat. He was dressed in a strange fashioned, gaudy fur cloak, obviously meant for ladies and quite expensive. Strangely, he couldn't identify the fur but saw that it was intact despite twigs stuck to it. Apart from that, the man wore rags feet to neck, he didn't even have a decent pair of shoes. His face and hands were full of scars, visible even in the faint light of the bike's headlights. The stranger spoke again, "Black light in the darkness..." as if he waited for him to finish it.

Seeing that the hunter won't know the reply phrase, the cultist said: "I need your boots, your clothes, and your pickup truck." Abram stared at him in wry amusement, then began to softly chuckle. "I guess you always wanted to say that line. I've seen that movie, son, I'm not gonna fall for that. But listen to me. We could work out a compromise. I need my boot and clothes, and my pickup above all that carries all my catch this year, but I think you're not specifically after those. What you need is a ride out of here and back to civilisation, and maybe someone who can help selling that cloak of you. You know, it looks quite expensive to me, I daresay it'd sell for more than what I made this summer."
So, how about I give you a ride to town, help you sell that stuff and buy decent clothing, and you forget that leaving me naked in the middle of nowhere part?"

Swiftly sidestepping and taking the man's gun from it's holster, Sevastyan replied: "Deal. Follow me to my camp, I've some stuff to pick up." To his surprise, the hunter just stood there when he started out. As the cultist raised his eyebrows questioningly, the hunter shrugged and said: "One more thing, man... could you please whistle something?"

To be continued...

-------------
Update #395: Which One Is Undesirable #1
-------------
Friday, October 18, 1996
Kohut/Zygonov Residence
Atlantis
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 4/1.2%
-------------
NEXT UP: Does My Hair Look Good On That WANTED Sign?
-------------
Heydar Dagher took the document from the Russian Minister of Magic. It showed a man and a woman in their fifties. The woman was had gray shoulder-length hair and the man had was bald with a salt-and-pepper beard. They should be easy enough to find...assuming they weren't using the Polyjuice Potion again.

He whistled. "So those are the Zygonovs. You think they've left Ukraine?"

The Russian nodded. "Yes, sir. We've staked out their house for a while, and we've seen no activity there."

"Could they be somewhere else in your area?"

"It's possible, sir. After all, Ukraine is a large nation, let alone Russia itself. There's a whole section of Siberia which isn't patrolled very often because people...well, generally don't go there. I'm organizing an expedition to start searching these remote areas. Keep in mind, however, that given the sheer size of the target area and the wizards' access to Polyjuice the odds of finding them are low."

"How about England? Could they have gone back to England again?"

"Perhaps. Flamel is looking for them over there as we speak. So far, nothing."

Dagher put the document with the Zygonovs' pictures on his desk. "Keep me posted, my friend. I'll start warning my men over here, and they'll start broadcasting the alert all around the globe. We'll catch them. Don't worry. Any news on Rasputin?"

"Nothing yet, sir. If he's out there, he's being very careful. He knows what happened to Voldemort. We're going to issue a bulletin for him as well. I know you can't get involved yet as it's not international, and let's hope it stays that way. How's the situation in Tsalasia? I've heard Tsirul just came out to a bunch of Aussies and Antarctic researchers."
"Indeed they have, Viktor. So far, they seem to be cautiously optimistic that contact will work, though there's a lot of distrust. Both sides have been learning from each other, and I've even been told that the Muggles have introduced them to the Gregorian calendar -- they've still been using a Julian one with five-day weeks."

The Russian smiled. "It's about time they did that. My parents told me about the confusion when they switched over in Russia, and I still can't figure out when my birthday is half the time. What's going on with Syrdan? I've heard rumors that the common Muggles in the United States have found out about Syrdan. We know President Clinton already knew about the Syrdani and kept them a state secret due to the fact that nation wasn't out. Has Syrdan come out?"

Dagher frowned. "No, and that's what worries me. Syrdan is in absolute chaos right now. The freed Muggles are begging and stealing for their food, half of the men have been lured to Nestor, and some of the opportunistic wizards are trying to take advantage of the situation by playing off the disgruntled Muggles. The tractors are breaking down every so often, and there aren't many people who know how to fix them. To top that off, there's still lingering resentment about the United States for forcing them to change their way of life. The wizards are frightened of further American interference, and the Muggles are finding it harder and harder to get by. The priests are not sure what to do with all the polygamy. It's an absolute mess. And yes, you are correct in that the Muggles in the United States are starting to find out. At the very least, the Tsalasian consul blurted it out thinking that Syrdan had already been exposed by the Xylend map which had exposed Tsalasia. Realistically, though, once that map came out it was only a matter of time. I doubt Tsirul's restraint would have bought Syrdan more than a couple of weeks. Remember Nestor has come out, and there are likely lots of ex-yahoos who want to rat on their former masters through Nestor."

"Do the Muggles realize the Syrdani used to enslave the Muggles?"

"Unfortunately, I think so. The stories coming out of Enfield are claiming that the nine-year-old girl who'd escaped on the oil tanker is learning English and is starting to talk. You forget how quickly young children can learn new languages. She's got the ability to speak but doesn't have the restraint or maturity yet to keep things to herself. That's a dangerous combination, especially now that she's spending a lot of time in a Muggle school without her parents to keep her in check."

The Russian grimaced. "I agree. And if the Syrdani find out that the general American populace knows about them and is almost certainly going to tell the rest of the world..."

Dagher gritted his teeth. "There's going to be hell to pay, Viktor. I have a very bad feeling about this. It could very well be that the State of Syrdan may not be long for this world. Remember what happened to Houyhnhnmland. There's only one thing we can hope for: the United States realizes that any attack on Syrdan will almost certainly justify Tsalasia's prejudices and give Syrdan a possible ally. We can only hope this conflict doesn't widen. Particularly since the US is a member of NATO."

The Russian's eyes widened. "God help us. America and Nestor vs. Syrdan and Tsalasia, with a possible escalation to get NATO involved. That we DEFINITELY do not want."

-------------
Chancellors' Executive Chamber
Syrdasch
Syrdan
-------------
Siatnan looked Vixar in horror. "What? Are you sure about this?"

Vixar nodded slowly. "There are multiple reports stating that we exist making out into the general
Muggle community. One of Altri's missing yahoos has started talking in the United States, and we can rest assured that there are yahoos talking to people in Nestor, which is already out. To make matters worse, Tsalasia exposed us during THEIR first contact, thinking that we were already out or about to come out."

The three chancellors looke at each other. Finally, Ortelu summarized the situation in one word. "Shit."

She continued. "It's a moot point right now. We're going to HAVE to come out, and do it fast. First impressions are very important, and as a result we need to broadcast our side of the story before that kid tells us what she believes to be the truth."

Siatnan shook her head. "But we've made some reforms already and given the yahoos more freedom."

"Yes, but remember that this little girl -- and very likely her parents -- don't know that. They're American Muggles now for all practical purposes. Besides, it's not like freeing the yahoos helped solve our problems. If anything, it made it worse. Those yahoos don't know how to think for themselves, they can't fix the tractors, and so forth. In effect, emancipation has just given our country a 53% unemployment rate and an insane gender imbalance."

"Is the United States going to attack us?"

"I sure hope not. We've certainly made changes, after all. Hopefully the US will help clean a lot of this stuff up. You have to understand that a similar situation happened in the United States back in the nineteenth century. One part of the country had slaves while the other didn't. This distinction was used as a casus belli for a civil war when many of the southern states broke off to form their own nation. The war lasted four years, and the northern side won. The nation was reunited, and slavery was abolished in the south -- and according to Ariadne the United States had the same problems we currently have for a while. It took a lot of hard work to clean that up, most of it was imposed by the winning side. Let's hope we have the time."

Vixar grunted. "Does this mean that the half of the United States will support us and half will support the yahoos?"

"Unlikely, Vixar. Remember they're all potential slaves from our perspective...and that the side which was against slavery won. Judging from Clinton's reaction, the nation may very well find itself compelled to squelch slavery wherever it goes. That would be bad. At any rate, here's what we'll do. We'll issue a report this afternoon and broadcast it to the US and other nations. We'll spin it in a way which focuses on our reforms. something along the lines of 'we have reformed our government to make it more democratic and believe we are ready to come out to the world. Further reforms will still be coming, and the country is in a state of flux. Advice would be appreciated, and people who wish to contact us should speak with their Minister of Magic'. What do you think?"

The other two chancellors looked at each other. Finally, both women nodded. "I don't like it much, but I agree with you. We have no choice, and we need to announce ourselves before any of the sen-Altri do it for us. Let's start talking with the speechwriters. We need to get this done today."

Vixar nodded. "Agreed. Besides, as long as the Protector is still up, they can't really do anything to us without our permission."

To be continued...
Update #396 through Update #400

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Mislagnissa

Update #396: Does My Hair Look Good On That WANTED Sign?

Friday, October 18, 1996
Kohut/Zygonov Residence
Atlantis
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 4/1.3%

NEXT UP: Don't Drool On the Camera Lens

Genya Zygonov was getting accustomed to life in Atlantis. As far as he could tell, everyone had seemed to have been convinced that they were in fact the Kohut family. They seemed to have escaped without any problems. However, as a precaution, they had disguised themselves in case people caught them without the Invisibility Cloak or the Polyjuice Potion. He had shaved off his beard and drunk an experimental potion which supposedly regrew some of his hair (it gave him some acne, but he figured he could live with that). His wife had dyed her hair brown -- which she had been thinking of doing for years -- and cut it almost short enough to look good on a man.

It was hard for him to spend most of his time indoors, and in the few times he went outside for him not to use magic. Halyna had done it for a long time, however, and she had come out fine. She had given him some pointers -- put your wand in your pants leg or somewhere like that where it wasn't as easy to reach -- and those seemed to be working. But for how long?

His musing was interrupted by an owl which flew in their window with a document in its talons. The bird was accompanied part of a large flock which seemed to delivering similar letters to all of the people in the area. Since he had chosen to live in a Muggle area, it was probably more instructions to get the Muggles accustomed to their new lives.

He unrolled the document and began to read it. His eyes widened as soon as he saw the two pictures at the top of the page.

-----

URGENT SECURITY ANNOUNCEMENT
International Terrorist on the Loose
250,000 Galleon Reward For Her Capture

The International Confederation of Warlocks, in conjunction with the British and Russian Ministers of Magic, has just issued a reward for information leading to the capture of a Ukrainian witch, Halyna Wasylyevna Zygonova. The British Ministry of Magic has evidence which ties Mrs. Zygonova to the recent Death Eater terror attack at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Like all of the servants of the late Voldemort, she is to be considered armed and dangerous. If you see her, do not try to apprehend her. Call the Aurors and they will deal with her.
As you can see from the photographs below, Mrs. Zygonova is in her early 50's. She is about 160 cm in height and has shoulder length gray hair. She also likely has a Death Eater tattoo, though it is not visible in this image. She likely belongs to a Death Eater cell in Eastern Europe, possibly in the Ukraine.

She may be seen in traveling with her husband, Yevheniy Romanovych Zygonov. He is bald and has a black and white beard. We have reason to believe that he is either a Death Eater or sympathetic with the Death Eaters' mission of subjugating the Muggles and ridding the world of wizards who are not pureblood. He is about 180 cm in height.

Both Zygonovs come from a small town near Lviv, Ukraine. They survived the events of Judgment Day by hiding underground, possibly with the assistance of the Polyjuice Potion. This draught allows the drinker to temporarily assume the form of another person, allowing escape without being detected.

Mrs. Zygonov was detected at Hogwarts by agent with a magical artifact which saw through Polyjuice Potions. The ICW has reason to believe that she infiltrated Hogwarts by posing as the Muggles Studies teacher and luring Headmaster Dumbledore and Severus Snape out into the Forbidden Forest where they are attacked by an unknown accomplice. The accomplice cast the Dark Mark into the sky with spell powerful enough to animate the snake and cause it to attack the castle, killing one more professor and fifteen students.

If you have any information on either of these people, or you want more details as to how to detect if someone has been Polyjuice, contact your local Wizarding official.

Thank you for your attention.

-----

Zygonov swore and raced downstairs, where he ran into his wife washing dishes. "Halyna, we've got a problem. We've got to get out of here."

Zygonova looked at him surprise. "A problem? What do you mean?"

In response, he just showed her the letter. She read it and began shaking. "Dear God, Genya. What do we do? We can't leave here! If we leave, Rasputin won't have us in place when the Black Fist needs us."

"I'm aware of that, Halyna. However, he also has to realize that if we're dead, we won't be able to help him either. How did they figure it out?"

She looked over the document once again. "It must have been Alastair Moody's eye or that Marauder's Map I confiscated from that student. Now that I think about it, it was probably the latter. I highly doubt Moody would have let me keep on teaching if he saw through my ruse. I suspect the kid saw me on the map, though I was a new student, and didn't pay much attention until the attack took place. Once the investigation began, he recalled seeing my name on the map and everything went from there. We did catch one break, however. They didn't catch Daryna."

Zygonov nodded. "No, they didn't. And that gives me an idea."
"Really? What?"

He brought out their fake ID cards. "We get two more people in here, a man and a woman, who continue playing the role of the Kohuts. We then shrink ourselves, hide under the Invisibility Cloak or Polyjuice Potion, and escape on the boat that brings the new wizards in. Maybe Daryna can play the woman's role. We stick their pictures over ours similar to the way we did it with the Kohuts. Suddenly, our fake ID's become theirs."

"But won't people wonder where we went?"

"Probably, Halyna. However, I suspect that if the new agents say they're friends of the Kohuts -- or better yet their Muggle-born Wizarding children and the Kohuts bought a house for them -- we may be able to get away with this."

----------------------------------
Revelation Party Headquarters
----------------------------------

Judith Rodgers looked at the America for Humans members and pointed at the map. "That, ladies and gentlemen, is Houyhnhnmmland. A place where wizards have been engaged in battle despite the Aes Sedai oaths. Combine that with the fact that it is possible to pre-emptively renounce oaths with religious formulas, and you can see how the wizards are unable to police themselves. To make matters worse, the Death Eaters have regrouped and are attacking children in England."

Her voice reached a crescendo. "Ladies and gentlemen, it is obvious that the wizards are not keeping up their end of the bargain when it came to the truce America for Humans had with them. As of this moment, the truce is null and void. As of now, it is once again open season on wizards. I will advocate increased pressure on wizards to behave while you guys start planning attacks. If the wizards don't shape up in a hurry, it's showtime.

"Britain for Humans has already said they plan to resume attacks. We don't want to let them have all the fun, do we now?"

--------

Nestor
--------

Gabrielle watched in disbelief as the cruise ship pulled up a few hundred feet away from Nestora. It was about the size of a small town! She shuddered to think how many people were on board.

A small boat lowered itself over the side, filled rapidly with people, and started heading over to the island. People with Muggle cameras were taking pictures and gawking at all of the women in the welcoming committee.

This wasn't mating season anywhere on the island. However, it didn't prevent people from wanting to visit. Judging from the people on the boat, it looked like a 70/30 split between men and women. Many of them were elderly. However, there was a large group of young men whose eyes were roughly the size of Acromantulas.

Curious what they wanted, she started heading over to check it out. She had barely taken ten steps before her stomach heaved again and she doubled over. Damn that morning sickness, she thought. Maybe it would be best for her to just stay here.

Henriques had written back and agreed that she should keep the baby. She hoped she wouldn't regret that about eight months from now.
Harry Potter glared at Flitwick in Moody. "First you people take my map and then you take my Cloak?"

Flitwick nodded. "We have reason to believe the Death Eaters are going after your Cloak. I can't say why, though. Suffice it to say that anyone with Dumbledore's wand and your Cloak is in a position to obtain great power."

"Really? Why? And why my Cloak in particular?"

Moody grunted at him. "I can't say, Mr. Potter. It's classified. Suffice it to say that your Cloak is unusual, and Dumbledore knew about it."

Harry frowned. "My Cloak is unusual? Aren't there others?"

"Yes, Mr. Potter. However, yours is unusually powerful and can do strange things when use in conjunction with Dumbledore's wand. Give it to me."

Harry winced. "Can I at least have my map back?"

Moody shook his head angrily. "We don't have the map, and even if we did have the map we'd confiscate it and not give it back. Now are you going to give me the Cloak or do you want me to give you a detention? This is for your own safety."

Resigned, Harry handed over his Invisibility Cloak. He was having a very bad day.

To be continued...

----------------

Update #397: Don't Drool On the Camera Lens

-----------

Saturday, October 19, 1996
Stonehenge
United Kingdom
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 4/1.3%

-----------

NEXT UP: Time to Invent a Spell to Correctly Spell "Tchernobog"

-----------

Fleur Delacour hadn't realized how much time it took to prepare a model for a photo shoot. She had been in the makeup room for a good thirty minutes already, and they were still trying to mess with her hair. The stage manager had already lain no fewer than five costumes on the back seat of the Pegasus, most of which were rather revealing.

Those were nothing, however, compared to the requests they had made to have her pose nude. Yes, she would have all private areas covered by monoliths and so forth, and in some cases she'd have her elbows in front of her chest. She had turned those down flat, of course. They had insisted, however, and she eventually agreed to do the nude poses (a) a few months after the first set had already been taken, (b) if the men of Britain agreed that she would make a good model, and (c) if no men were present at the nude shot.
The plan was to take advantage of the morning sunlight and take several shots of her lounging in the back seat of the car (her future father-in-law had leapt at the possibility of getting more Pegasus advertisement out of this). They'd then take her over to the monoliths and have a few more with her leaning against them, standing between them, and so forth. The hope was that she would be able to advertise herself as an attractive young woman who was both an accomplished witch and a model.

The choice of Stonehenge to serve as the photo shoot made sense in more ways than one. Not only was it traditionally associated with witches and witchcraft, but it supposedly had been built by people the Muggles weren't supposed to have known about. Giants had helped shape and carry over the tremendous rocks several thousand years ago in an attempt to help the ancient Britons create a simple observatory. The Muggle documents explained how hundreds of workers had been needed to carry each stone -- a fiction which Fleur was wondering if she should disillusion them of. Construction supposedly began in 2840 BC upon the site of an existing Muggle observatory which wasn't doing much good. There had been a brief pause of about 20 years immediately after the Hammer of Ra impact in 2807 BC. Other than that, construction had been more or less nonstop -- with lots of magical assistance -- for about fifty years. By the time the site was fully operational in 2760 BC, it had magical turrets made out of wood and extremely sophisticated technology for its time. It had been one of the wonders of the post-impact world.

Stonehenge didn't last long, however. In 2531 BC, a war broke out between rival tribes and one of them decided to use the site as a fortress to defend themselves against a more powerful enemy. Not surprisingly, the besiegers eventually made it in and more or less wrecked and looted the entire structure. All that was left behind were the huge stones which survived to this day. Everything else had been small enough to steal or burn. By the time people returned to the site a few hundred years later, its history as a magical observatory had been completely lost.

Fleur winced as she tried on the first swimsuit. How could something this...scandalous cost £199? What was that, 40 Galleons? There wasn't any material to buy! She found much to her amusement that it propped up certain parts of her body in a most...disturbing fashion. She made a mental note to not let them put her in such ridiculous costumes in further shoots -- at least until she got herself completely drunk.

Doing her best to paste a smile on her face, she stood between two of the pillars as the cameramen turned a Muggle air moving device called a fan on so her hair could be blown back. In one hand she had a flower, and in the other hand she had a wand. The photographers grinned and started taking pictures with both dynamic and ordinary Muggle cameras. She resisted the urge to strangle the photographers as they told her to look this way, turn that way, put her head on the rock, and so forth.

She breathed a sigh of relief as the photographers said she was done. Then they pointed at the next swimsuit, one which seemed even more revealing. Oh wonderful, she thought.

Britain for Humans Headquarters

Isabel Miller pointed at the Long Live King Harry sign over her head. "That's right, ladies and gentlemen. We are Britons, and we love the monarchy. However, the idea of having a potential wizard in charge of the country gives me a sense of dread. We know William is a good person. However, what are the wizards going to do to him? Are the wizards going to make it so that he is going to be unfit to rule? Will he get the same snobbish arrogance as the rest of the wizards and make Muggles like us second-class citizens?"

Judging from the reaction of the crowd, she wasn't alone in that assessment. She continue: "I believe that the country should do one of two things. First, we can have the Regency Committee continue to
serve as the de facto rulers even after William attains his majority. Second, we can pressure William to abdicate so that Prince Harry can take the throne. What do you think of that?"

There crowd murmured a little. It seemed like was a little more dissent here. Besides, it's not like the king had much real power anymore.

On the other hand, the king hadn't been a practicing wizard for...God knows how long, if ever.

---------------------------------------

Muslims for Humans Headquarters

---------------------------------------

The head of Muslims for Humans gestured towards the crowd. "This is a sign from Allah, fellow Muslims. Allah has hardened the wizards' hearts to the point where they refuse to hold by the Aes Sedai oaths. What's more, they attack children."

"Allah will not do everything for us, though. You know how He works. He guides us through His actions the world. Although I do not dare to presume to know how He thinks, His request here is plain to see."

"America for Humans is planning to restart its campaign against the servants of Satan. Britain for Humans will be doing so as well. Even our traditional enemy, the crusaders, have joined the party through Christians for Humans, officially known as the Celestine Church."

"Everyone is acting to overthrow the wizards and their demonic allies. If you need any more proof, just take a look at Houyhnhnmland, where horse-men have spent years subjugating our race! Look at Syrdan, where according to recent reports the wizards have historically treated mundane people like you and me as slaves! The wizards' behavior is an affront to Allah, and it is obvious what must be done."

"Allah has called you to action and demands that you rectify His world. What say you?"

The crowd cheered in unison, and Muslims for Humans was back in business.

-------

Tokyo

-------

The INTERPOL agent looked at the Japanese security officer and shrugged. "We've looked all over the place, sir, and contacted people from all around the world. There is no radioactive material missing other than promethium. However, all of the promethium appears to have disappeared. There is one anomaly, however."

The Japanese man frowned. "Oh? What's that?"

"A wizard in the United States used a spell to Geminio some more promethium for his lab. This Geminio worked, and he now has several kilograms worth of the material. The spell appears to have been cast about the time you -- and many other people around the globe -- saw your samples disappear from your lab."

"That's crazy. Are you implying that they stole our stuff? If so, why would they just take that and not other radioactive compounds?"

"We're not sure, sir. However, one of the wizards has an interesting theory which, if true, sheds some light on the way magic works...at least when it comes to Geminio and possibly Engorgio."
"Really? What's going on?"

The INTERPOL agent looked at his notes. "The theory is that Geminio works not by duplicating material but by summoning additional material of that type from locations all over the world. Enough material is summoned to make it look as if more of the substance had been created out of nothing. However, if one were to look very carefully you will notice that some of the substance has been taken from other places."

The security officer nodded slowly. "I think I see where you're going. The spell required five kilograms of promethium. This element does not occur naturally on Earth, so there wasn't much promethium anywhere nearby. Consequently, it took stuff from further away."

"Correct, but it goes further than that. According to latest estimates, there are fewer than 600 grams of the metal on the surface of the Earth. This forced the spell to look in outer space as well, which in turn caused it to retrieve material from so far away that the finite speed of light came into play."

"How?"

"The metal arrived in several bursts after the first 500 grams or so appeared. The next batch occurred three seconds later, which is roughly the amount of time required for light to travel to the moon and back. Atlantis suspects that this batch came from the moon. The next batches came from further away, far enough away that the light travel time was measured in minutes and possibly hours."

The security officer whistled. "I see. So the summoning spell worked after all, except that it was drawn out by the fact that nothing can travel faster than light."

"Exactly."

"What does it mean?"

"It means that physics has another conundrum to deal with...and, if we set up the experiment properly, we have discovered a way to get material objects to travel at or near the speed of light."

To be continued...

-------------

Update #397.5: Scary Big Tracker
-------------
Friday, October 11, 1996
Icicle Citadel
Arctic Ocean
-------------

"What do you mean, he escaped?" Sabine's shriek reverberated through the white halls of the iceberg fortress. The fairy winced and replied in a small voice: "Tun'tun and your Veela friend is dead, and the prisoner is not in the cell. Someone must have taken him away to dispose of him."

The witch was baffled. "Who on Earth would want to dispose of a prisoner? He was right where Mab wanted him, enabling her to cross-check any information gained from her new... outfit."

The fey shrugged. "Tun'tun was pretty high in the chain of command, he had many enemies and jealous ones. And you know how it goes... offing one's superior on the field of battle is called
treaon, doing the same in the Citadel is called a promotion. He must have been killed by one of our kind."

Forcing back an outburst, Sabine told the fairy in a dangerously calm voice: "I don't care about your hierarchy. The prisoner is missing, find him and bring him back alive, before I have to tell the Queen you screwed up. She won't be happy."
The fairy gulped. "He could be anywhere, Icicle Citadel is very big. Finding him will take time."
Losing the last of her patience, the witch shrieked: "THEN YOU BETTER START NOW!"

-------------
Saturday, October 12, 1996
Icicle Citadel
Arctic Ocean
-------------

The steady rumble of Lookhus's footsteps drowned out the more subtle noises of the corridor, but only when he chose to. This time, for example, he wore armored jackboots and walked with the stereotypical Giant gait... but when he donned his deerskin moccasins, he could be frighteningly silent, especially for a 20 foot tall brute. Well, at least in theory. The truth was, whenever it came to forests, being a Giant and being stealthy was invariably mutually exclusive- not that it stopped him from hunting with an oversized crossbow and a small pack of tamed Waheelas, but it wasn't the same as walking the woods like a shadow. Purposefully trampling to avoid the pestering of tiny ones, on the other hand, never got old.

Unfortunately for the oversized hunter, Ke'shaunn did not give up when his voice was drowned out by the thumping of giant feet. It all came to a startled halt, when the fairy simply flew up into the giant's ear, and whistled sharply.
"Ow! Wazzat for?" He was irritated, and knew from experience that his mistress didn't particularly care about each and every 'accidentally pulped' little winged minion... but the little one's recklessness awakened his curiosity.

"I need your help, O Great Hunter, Master of Direwolves" chimed the fairy. "I want a lost person found, discreetly- the Queen doesn't need to know he's not in his cell. Can your wonderful beasts track a day old trail?"
A cocky grin spread on the Giant's face. "Sounds like a challenge. Lead the way, Squishy!"

--------
30 minutes later
--------

The fairy and the Giant looked at each other in the dim light of the Emergency Portkey Room. Desperate, the small one cried: "Are you sure he didn't double back, or something?" The hunter shook his head and rumbled: "His path is clear from the cell all the way here. He knew his way, and came alone. He used a Portkey and is somewhere in north-east Asia. We must tell the Queen."

--------
Wednesday, October 16, 1996
20 miles south of Belaya Gora
Abyysky District
Sakha Republic
Russian Federation

The waheela sat on the muddy road, and let out a sad howl. The scent trail ended here, and the prey wasn't here. It knew its master will be disappointed and angry.

Up to this moment, Lookhus was full of hope. The escapee's campsite was really fresh, he could still feel the warmth of the campfire's ashes - a remarkable achievement, considering the man had a day's head start and he'd lost another two when a rain has washed away the trail. Now he heard the beast's report of failure, and felt a burning anger building up in him. Kicking out, he snapped a full-grown tree in half like a twig - the first to show his rage, but not the last. Behind the red haze, part of his mind noted that the local humans will recognize his handiwork for years to come, but there was nothing wrong with that - the yakuts were better off knowing their place, under the thumb of the Queen in the North... and those knew better than alerting their Ministry of Magic, as that was more distant and less threatening that the power of Mab.

--------------------
Friday, October 18, 1996
Yakutsk
Sakha Republic
Russian Federation
--------------------

Refreshed by a good night's sleep, a decent human breakfast, clad in decent human clothing and having a wallet full of decent human money, Sevastyan Orlov, Tchernobog cultist and operative of the Black Fist felt that life is good. He was standing before a nondescript house in a totally average part of the city, where one of his brethren he called on a phone directed him. The house was a gathering place for the cult, and a memorized Apparition place for some of their wizards. Soon, one will come for him and at last, he can report back to his superiors. No doubt, Rasputin would want to hear all about the self-proclaimed Queen in the North...

To be continued...

--------------------
Update #398: Time to Invent a Spell to Correctly Spell "Tchernobog"
--------------------
Saturday, October 19, 1996
Russian Ministry of Magic
St. Petersburg
Russia
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 4/1.5%
The Minister of Magic heard a whistle behind him. Turning, he saw Oleg the intern heading towards him with an excited expression on his face.

"Sir, I think we've found something interesting pertaining to the Zygonovs."

The Minister looked at him hopefully. "You've found them? Where are they?"

"We don't know, sir. However, we've discovered that they were spending a lot of time with a woman named Daryna Vovchanckaya. She's in her late twenties and is a known witch."

The Minister frowned. "Is Vovchanckaya also a Death Eater?"

"I'm not sure, sir. However, we did find one thing that they shared which was most intriguing. You see, all three of them are members of the cult of Tchernobog."

The Minister's eyebrows shot up. "They're Black Gold cultists?"

"It appears so, sir. The cult has many members in the former Soviet nations, after all. We've always passed them off as crackpots. The fact that they have wizards, however, is a little disturbing."

The Minister sighed. "The Zygonovs' religious beliefs aren't pertinent to the issue here. What would a bunch of Black God cultists have to do with a Death Eater attack in England?"

"Nothing that I can think of, sir, and that's the problem. Granted, the Black God cult has always prided itself on bringing back Tchernbog to bring about the end of the world. I wouldn't put terrorism by them."

The Minister dismissed that impatiently. "There's no way that is going to happen. Now that the Statute of Secrecy is gone, we can just start having the Muggles look for them. The Black God cult is leaderless and powerless, my friend."

"Were any of the Death Eaters also Black God cultists, sir?"

"Not that I know of, Oleg. However, it wouldn't be a bad idea for you to double-check that."

Oleg gulped. "It will be done, sir. In the meantime, I suggest that we start tracking this Vovchanckaya woman as well. Although it is unlikely that she was involved in the attack, it's possible she could lead us to the Zygonovs."

The Minister nodded. "Make it so, Oleg. In the meantime, I should probably report this to Atlantis. They'll put out a bulletin looking for Vovchanckaya as well. I'll recommend 30,000 Galleons as she's not a suspect at this time. She isn't at the same level as the Zygonovs."

"You're going all the way to Atlantis with this?"

The Minister grabbed a quill and a piece of parchment. "Absolutely. First, this woman may lead us to the Zygonovs. Second, an unusually large number of Muggle Black God cultists tried to get into the lottery for Atlantis. Judging from the list I have here, we lucked out and none of them were actually chosen. But it's an interesting development, particularly in light of this discovery."

-----------------------------------
Siatnan looked at the report in disbelief. "Are you sure this is right, Vixar?"

Vixar nodded. "It is, Siatnan. The Americans have found out that we exist and are not happy about it. It as we feared, ladies. We got the message out either too late or to the wrong people. A good 21% of the American people wants to see us destroyed at the moment, and I suspect that percentage is going to increase with time."

Ortelu gritted her teeth. "Shit. Has Bill Clinton said anything?"

Vixar began pacing around the room. "Clinton is in a difficult position. We have reason to believe that he wants us destroyed. However, his economy is in recession and he has already advocated a more isolationist policy. If he attacks us, he cheats on the isolationism. If he doesn't, he goes against the will of the people. The latter could be quite damaging to him, particularly since the United States chooses its next president in two weeks."

Siatnan growled. "Bad timing."

"Indeed, Siatnan. Had this been after the election, things could have been different."

Ortelu cut in. "But they already messed around with us! They forced us to emancipate the yahoos!"

Vixar looked out the window. "That was a black op, from what we've heard. It wasn't officially on the record, and the vast majority of Americans didn't know about it. They probably weren't using all of their military capacity. Also, keep in mind that Nestor was considering an alliance with the Americans as well. Our biggest threat there was Nestor, not the United States, because the United States officially didn't know we existed at the time."

Siatnan slammed her fist on the table. "But they do now."

"Indeed, they do now. This gives them more deadly and dangerous options."

Ortelu shook her head. "Has Clinton said anything yet? You still haven't answered that question."

"He has, in fact. He's said that the government has known about us for a while and sent agents in to help improve the lives of Muggles in our land. It's a clever compromise: he doesn't try to provoke us, he makes himself look good with the election coming up, and he doesn't start wasting money on another war after he's recommended isolationism. Assuming the Americans don't get too angry at us, we may be able to get away with this. This assumes, of course, that we don't start by picking a fight with them."


Vixar smiled and shook his head. "We're not going to attack them -- the United States is an extremely powerful nation, and as we saw last time they'll manhandle us. However, there are many hotheads here on the island who have been urging some of the committees I'm involved with to join with a group of wizards in Iraq who are also wizard supremacists. These Iraqi wizards have offered an alliance with us. They're willing to use Iraqi weapons and materiel, both Muggle and Wizarding, to defend us in case the Americans attack. They will also keep our lower classes in line. In return, we will let them into our government as observers and advisors. We also give them monetary aid and let them use our materiel if necessary."
Ortelu frowned. "Iraq? Why does that name sound familiar?"

"It's because that is Saddam Hussein's nation. President Hussein was one of the two Muggle leaders who had to turn the Judgment Day keys back on June 20th. He doesn't have a Judgment Day key anymore, of course. They now belong to the two modern superpowers: the United States and Russia, the most important member of the former Soviet Union."

Siatnan thought for a moment. "What do you think about this alliance?"

Vixar put his hands behind his back. "I'm personally in favor of it. We need some help at this point as it's almost certain the Americans are going to try to interfere again at SOME point. I don't like bringing in the Iraqis. However, we don't have much of a choice, I'm afraid. I was going to recommend a tentative alliance which will solidify itself if the Muggles do start attacking us."

"What happens if the Iraqis send Muggle soldiers over?"

Vixar grinned. "I highly doubt they will, Siatnan."

Ortelu shook her head. "These Iraqis are Muslims, are they not?"

"Yes, Ortelu."

"Could Muslims for Humans get involved? We don't want Muslims for Humans infiltrating Syrdan and agitating the lower classes against us."

Vixar drew a deep breath. "I sure hope not. However, you have to keep in mind that most Muslims are not like that. Like any religious movement, the majority of the people are peaceful and it is only the lunatic fringes that give them a bad reputation. Muslims for Humans is a distinct minority."

"Won't they see us as infidels?"

"Quite possibly. However, I doubt they'll jeopardize the alliance by trying to start a religious war with us. Besides, the vast majority of Muslims are not lunatics. It's quite possible we may agree to disagree."

The three discussed the Iraqi alliance a little more. Eventually, they gave it a tentative approval, at least for a few months until the crisis with the United States passed.

Finally, later that evening, the meeting adjourned. They left the room to issue their report to the rest of the cabinet.

Ortelu looked over her shoulder. "What was the name of the head Iraqi wizard again?"

Vixar began scanning his document. "I can't remember offhand. It's on this document, however. All I can remember is that I believe he's Indian and came to Iraq a few months ago. Let's hope he doesn't hit the United States with a pre-emptive attack and drag us into it."

To be continued...
Grigori Rasputin silently studied the Muggle kneeling before him. His record was remarkable: Sevastyan Igorovic Orlov, age 28, a devoted member of his cult like his father and father's father (etc, etc) before him. Showed a remarkable talent for violence in training, and was assigned to the Black Fist. Couple of successful missions, kill count of 3 Muggles and now a Veela and a Fairy. The man came back as the single survivor (what a sad loss, one of his finest lovers MIA like that, where will he find another girl like Suzy...no, Sybil, oh, scratch that, the world of the living is full of nubile wenches) of his team sent on a retrieval mission in the north, and his story was so improbable that even the members knowing him for decades as a completely (brutally) honest man wanted magical proof for it. Having been trained, however briefly, at Occlumency like every other soldier of the Black Fist, there was a shadow of a doubt even as he repeated his story under the effects of Veritaserum, and had an interview with one of the cult's Legilimens.

Wanting to hear the story personally, the Mad Monk granted an audience to his soldier, and now there he was, Occlumency barriers lowered, looking in Rasputin's searching gaze without flinching away. They were unmoving for a long time, as the wizard went through the memories. When he finished, he stayed silent and deep in thought for a while. Finally, he came to a decision.

"This Mab is no threat to us for now. She might be a powerful witch and probably very old, but her armies are weak. She commands only a few witches, some creatures with lesser magic, and an army of inferi in the worst case. Neither of these could stand the might of a modern army, as the battles of Judgement Day clearly showed it. Furthermore, it appears she's biding her time. I say, we proceed with our original plans. Let her act when she wants, we'll be ready for it."

He looked at the Muggle.
"As for you, I sense that some of your memories trouble you. I'll have a Pensieve brought, you'll put your worst memories there- I'd say those will become very effective for torturing enemies. Then, if you agree, I'll have those memories of you Obliviated. You'll only remember you were tortured and the Veela deserved her death, but the details will be mercifully absent. Do you like the idea, Orlov?"

The man bowed even deeper. "Yes, my lord. Thank you, my lord."

He rose to leave, but Rasputin wasn't done with him yet. "Oh, and another thing. The healers reported some of your scars were cursed, and beyond their talent to heal. They say those are inconvenient, considering that they make you very noticeable. However, I may have something at my disposal that they don't..." he showed the Elder Wand, "and I'm quite eager to test it's powers."

To be continued...

Update #399: Another Brick in the Wall
Wizard Amirmoez, formerly associated with Hamas and the Death Eaters, looked up at the newly rebuilt Western Wall. The plan to rebuild the wall had been announced during the Shemini Atzeret services at the Temple and had been intended to serve as a project which would bring people of all of the Abrahamic denominations (and then some) together.

Some people had immediately started running outside to start working on the project. Samuel, however, had requested that they wait until the holiday had ended since difficult manual labor should not be performed on a holiday (which also happened to be a Saturday to boot). This inevitably led to a big discussion over whether volunteer work for a spiritually uplifting experience was permissible on the holiday. Amirmoez had watched, partially amused, as the rabbis started arguing over fine points of the Five Books of Moses while a good 40% of the pilgrims ignored them and headed off to start work on the ruined wall.

Amirmoez had gone out of his way to help with the reconstruction process. After all, he had been inserted by Rodolphus Lestrange to infiltrate the Middle East, and he had been in one the discussions to demolish the wall. He hoped that Allah would accept this form of atonement. It turned out, however, that the help of a wizard would be much appreciated. The explosion which had flattened most of the wall had thrown rocks all over the place, and Amirmoez had to cast several spells to bring back all of the rocks. Meanwhile, the Muggles were poring over pre-attack photographs of the wall to make sure that all of the rocks were in the right place.

A good 15% of the rocks had been damaged beyond repair, and 5% more had suffered scorch marks in the explosion which would be inappropriate at a holy shrine. After meeting secretly with the Israeli Ministry of Magic and Prime Minister Netanyahu, Amirmoez agreed to replace them with rocks from a nearby quarry and make them so they looked like the stones they had replaced. This was kept absolutely secret, of course. Nevertheless, a good 80% of the rocks were recovered and put back in their original positions.

The Western Wall reconstruction project had turned the Israeli hotel industry on its ear as hundreds of thousands of pilgrims, sick and tired of living in their tents, had checked into hotels to make sure that they would be able to participate in this act of kindness. Prices skyrocketed, and people wound up staying in their tents a little longer or renting cars and driving in from places as far away as Haifa (despite warnings that there could be slightly above average radioactivity there from the Judgment Day dirty bomb). The scene looked like something out of the book of Exodus, except that the construction project was to honor God instead of to mock Him. Whenever possible, the builders used technology (and magic) known to the classical Israelite kingdom.

The paparazzi surrounded him as he and Michal Oved prepared to lift the last rock -- a good fifteen ton monster -- up to the top of the wall, finishing the construction. Waiting for the cameraman to give the signal, they picked up the huge brick and put it in place at the top of the wall. Construction workers swarmed around it with rocks and wooden beams to make sure it stayed in place. Once everything looked like it was all right, the workers nodded and left. The Western Wall was complete once more.
The Jews of Jerusalem started singing songs of praise and rushed over to the wall to pray and insert notes which, according to tradition, would be read by God Himself. Running pilgrims and Israelis nearly trampled each other en route to the wall, and eventually the wizards had to lift some of them into the air to get them to all access the Wall in a timely fashion. Ordinary tourists were respectfully told to depart to make room for the pilgrims.

The Kohen Gadol then announced that he was thinking of extending the Dome of the Rock to accommodate larger numbers of people. Plans were in the works to add additional wings and courtyards to the Temple which would wind their way down the Temple Mount and include the reconstructed Western Wall. Some of the conservative Muslims grumbled about this a little, but the Kohen Gadol placated them by saying that they could restrict themselves to the current site if they so wished.

Barely audible over the chanting pilgrims, Michal Oved nodded and looked at him. "You know, Amirmoez, I never thought I'd find myself doing this with you. Hell, I thought I'd have to Avada Kedavra you at some point. Come to think of it, I had a death warrant out for you shortly before Judgment Day."

Amirmoez laughed. "Don't worry about that, Minister. That Amirmoez is dead. You can tear that up now."

Michal nodded, reached out to shake his hand, but then drew it back when she remembered that religious Muslims generally did not shake the hands of people of the opposite gender. "Don't worry, I will. Which reminds me: do you want to work for us now?"

Amirmoez shrugged. "I don't see why not."

-------------

Syrilla
Syrdan
-------------

Emancipation wasn't as good as he thought it was, Ho'star sen-Irno thought to himself. He then kicked himself when he realized he'd added his master's name again. He needed to get accustomed to thinking of himself as a free man.

With freedom, of course, came a price. He had to think for himself, which proved difficult. All his instincts told him to ask other people for help, a habit which eventually began to irritate them. It would take him a long time for him to gain enough self-esteem to start making his own decisions.

He had wanted to spend some time starting his own farm and possibly buying his own tractor. Unfortunately, tractors were expensive, and land was even more expensive. The money he had received as part of the emancipation program had been barely enough for him to afford a small house on the relatively unpopulated eastern side of the island, far away form Syrdasch.

He knew how to grow things pretty well, so he decided to see if he could turn a five-acre plot of land into a one-man farm. He'd spent a lot of his startup fund to buy seeds and plant them -- with all the rain from the exposure of Houyhnhnmland, there would be lots of crops around. The problem was that crops wouldn't grow in a day without magic.

And the wizards were not helping him at all. With most of the American support force gone, the wizards were basically throwing rocks at him and bullying him. Slavery may have vanished, but discrimination persisted. A couple of friends of his were hexed for no other reason than being in the wrong place at the wrong time.
Most of his friends had gone to Nestor. By the time he had realized what was going on, the Nestorian ambassador had left and he was stuck over here. Granted, he would likely find himself very popular with the women. However, he doubted he could feed two on his lot.

He had paid a good 30 Galleons -- a lot of money -- to join a lottery to get some support from the United States and Atlantis. As it turned out, he won device which would magically irrigate his field. At least he wouldn't have to go water the plants all the time during droughts, he thought.

Wondering what food was available today, he headed into town where an Atlantis agent was giving out food and drink. It was a good two-hour walk each way, but he was accustomed to walking. As he got into town, a dingy old woman tapped him on the shoulder and told him that he dropped something. Wary that this was a robbery attempt, he held onto his possessions as he looked behind himself. Sure enough, there was a little card on the floor. Fairly certain that it wasn't his, he picked it up to tell the woman it wasn't his. However, by the time he had stood up, the woman was gone.

Curious, he looked at the card and his eyes widened.

--------

Attention, Freed Muggles of Syrdan!
Are you having trouble making ends meet?
Do you believe we should be getting more help from the wizards?
Are your representatives in Syrdasch being ignored by men and women now considered our equals?
   In short, has our New Order not improved your way of life or possibly even worsened it?

We of the Syrdan Muggle Resistance Movement are here to help.
Under our leader, Frederique Lornezi, we plan to do to Syrdan what our colleagues in Houyhnhmland did in the Pacific.
Miss Lornezi is a veela from Nestor who sympathizes with and supports our mission.
We plan to overthrow the tyrants and turn Syrdan into a state where the Muggles rule the wizards, not the other way around.

Are you interested? Intrigued? Willing to help?
If you are, meet us in front of the building across the street from the place your received this card at 2 AM tomorrow morning.

Make yourself heard, and turn Syrdan into the Muggle-friendly democracy you always wanted it to be!
Sincerely,
The Syrdan Muggle Resistance Movement

P.S. The woman who gave you this note was a veela in disguise.

P.P.S. Thanks to our Nestorian Wizarding friend, this message will self-destruct in ten seconds. I'd drop it if I were you.

Ho'istar dropped the message in a combination of shock and surprise. Ten seconds later, it vanished in a puff of smoke.

His mind raced. A Muggle resistance movement to turn the tables on the wizards for good? He needed to get involved with this. He didn't have a wife and children, and it was fairly obvious that as long as the wizards were on the island the Muggles would never get fair treatment.

He looked across the street, where an old office building had a big plaza in front of it. That must be the meeting site, he thought. He decided he'd check it out, provided that he would be able to get up at midnight and walk tow hours in the dark.

"Nah," he thought to himself. "I'll sleep on the ground tonight, maybe under a tree, maybe twenty minutes away from here. I don't like it, but I've done it before. I really don't want to miss this."

To be continued...

-------------

Update #400: J. K. Rowling GIVES UP ON the Harry Potter books! 

-------------

Monday, October 21, 1996
Great Hall
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
United Kingdom
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 4/1.5%

-------------

NEXT UP: It's the Stay-Puft Marshmallow Man

-------------

The huge double doors opened, and J. K. Rowling found herself in the Great Hall of Hogwarts. This time, however, she knew exactly how she had come to find herself in the castle and what this was all for. This was much better than last time, where she had awoken in an old closet near the Great Hall and had no idea how she had gotten there. Her confusion had lasted only a matter of moments, just long enough for her to leave the closet and see hundreds of people waiting to see which house King William had been sorted into.
That had been a month and a half ago. Once again, she was in the magical school to be present at a press conference. This time, however, she wasn't going to be a reporter. She was going to be the speaker, accompanied by two students and one of the vice presidents of Bloomsbury Publishing.

She watched as some of the staff and Muggle paparazzi began settling into their seats. The students for the most part were absent, Flitwick having refused to allow them to skip classes to attend the conference. However, not all of them were absent. She turned look at Harry and Hermione as they took their seats at the front of the room, next to the podium.

Rowling turned to Harry. "You're sure you're all right with this, Harry? I figure you wanted to be famous, but --" 

Harry shook his head. "People may know my name, but I'm not superhuman like the people in the stories. Hermione here, on the other hand, has developed a reputation which far exceeds anything I could have even dreamed of."

Rowling nodded. "I'm aware of that". Turning to Hermione, Rowling bowed slightly. "Countess, I --" 

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Don't call me Countess, Ms. Rowling. And don't bow. I still see myself as an ordinary human being, just like you. Call me Hermione. To be honest, I don't even think William is accustomed to being thought of as 'Your Majesty' or 'Mr. Windsor'. As far as my reputation goes, I just did what I thought I had to do. I had to save myself from that explosion, and while I was at it I figured I'd protect other people as well."

"So you've told me, Hermione. Still, you've become a heroine all over Britain. Are you aware that Hermione is fast becoming the most popular name for baby girls in English-speaking countries?"

Harry chuckled as Hermione's face turned white. "Actually, Ms. Rowling, I didn't. God, that's...embarrassing..."

Rowling was about to continue the conversation when someone tapped her on the shoulder. It was Headmaster Flitwick (how often did this school go through headmasters?)

The man nodded and gestured at the podium. "It's all yours, Ms. Rowling. The podium has been enchanted so that your voice can be heard all over the room. No microphones will be necessary."

Rowling thanked him and walked over to the podium with Harry and Hermione trailing behind her. The crowd fell silent as she began to speak.

"Ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon. My name is Jo Rowling, and I'm a columnist for the Daily Mail. I've been focusing on issues relating to the Wizarding world.

"As you know, the world has changed drastically since little Harry here flew his broom in front of that Blast Cola camera. I had always wanted to write a story about a magical school, yet I never imagined that such schools actually existed. People all over the world want to learn more about what life is like at these schools and do so without interfering with the education of the students.

"With this in mind, it is my pleasure to announce that Bloomsbury Publishing and I have just agreed on a deal for a seven-book series which will document the life of one of our nation's best-known and most-admired Wizarding students: Hermione Granger."
"These books will focus on her career at Hogwarts, one year at a time. The first book will start with her finding out that she was a witch and continue through the end of her first year, 1992. Each succeeding book will discuss her experiences during the years after that. There will be seven books, one for each year at Hogwarts.

"The first book, *Hermione Granger and the Philosopher's Stone*, will be available in hardcover in April 1997 and in paperback a few months thereafter. Much of the research for the book has already been done thanks to my interviews with Harry, who was originally going to be the focus of the series. However, now that Hermione has emerged on the world stage and that Harry and Hermione have shared many of their experiences, the two young wizards and I have agreed to switch the focus of the documentary over to Hermione.

*Hermione Granger and the Philosopher's Stone* will discuss Hermione's meeting Ron and Harry, nearly being killed by a troll in the girl's bathroom only to be saved at the last minute by Harry and Ron, and thwarting Lord Voldemort's servant Quirinius Quirrell as he pursued immortality through a Philosopher's Stone originally created by Nicholas Flamel, our current Minister of Magic. Each book will be geared towards an audience whose age matches that of Hermione's in the book. For instance, this first book will be geared towards children 11 or 12 years old.

"The titles of the first five books have already been determined, with each book coming out one year after the previous. They will be *Hermione Granger and the Philosopher's Stone*, *Hermione Granger and the Chamber of Secrets*, *Hermione Granger and the Time-Turner*, *Hermione Granger and the Bulgarian Seeker*, and *Hermione Granger and the Super Bowl Breach*. Since this is currently Hermione's sixth year, we have no idea what will happen in the last two books. However, given all of the aftershocks from the exposure of the Wizarding world, you can be assured that it will be exciting.

"Hermione will spend some time each weekend speaking with me and bringing me up to date on what has happened. Accuracy is going to be important here, as this series is designed to serve both as a historical documentary as well as a children's novel."

She reached into her pocket and brought out a piece of paper. "I would like to take the opportunity to read the first chapter of *Hermione Granger and the Philosopher's Stone*. Hopefully this will give you a taste of what is to come.

"Chapter 1: The Girl Who Lived Differently. Hermione Granger knew she was gifted..."

---------

Atlantis

------

Daryna Vovchanckaya, Polyjuiced as a dead Muggle and with a wand Fideliused to her, looked at the man next to him and then at the two Atlantean guards who had escorted them to the house. "This is it, gentlemen? This is Misha and Mila's house?"

The escorts nodded. "That's it. Do you need any more assistance?"

"No thank you, sir. You've been very kind, and I hope that this helps improve wizard/Muggle relations."

"Do you know how to get back?"

"Yes. My husband here has a good sense of direction."
"Excellent. My name is Dionysus and don't hesitate to ask if you have any other questions."

The two guards walked off. Making sure the way was clear, Vovchanckaya knocked on the door. Seconds later, she heard Halyna say: "Hello? Who is this?"

"Mila, it's Anya. I've come for a visit!"

She hadn't actually come for a visit as much as to stay. It was a code phrase indicating they were Rasputinites.

Halyna continued. "Wow! How'd you get over here?"

"Atlantis flew us over on their magic brooms!"

The door unlocked with a click as Halyna said, "Come on in. The water's fine."

Vovchanckaya and her accomplice stepped into the main room and shook the Zygonovs' hands. Zygonov looked at them, closed the windows, cast a spell to ensure privacy, and whistled. "We've got a problem. Daryna, you're going to have to go back. This is not going to work."

Vovchanckaya stared at him in alarm. "Oh? What happened?"

Zygonov put it bluntly. "Things are getting hot here. Atlantis has figured out that the Black God cult is involved. What's more, they've tied you to us. The WANTED poster isn't out yet, but you can rest assured that it will be shortly."

"Great. What are we going to do?"

Zygonov nodded at the man who had come with her. "Pyotr here should stay with you for the time being. Keep yourself Polyjuiced at all times, even inside the house. Do not, I repeat, do not do anything suspicious and stay away from the police. Give us the Polyjuice Potion you came with. We'll masquerade as the people you two masqueraded as in a few hours after we've discussed plans and leave. Once we get back to Ukraine, we'll ask Rasputin to send a woman over to take your place, preferably a new recruit or even a Black Fist Muggle since you know how to brew Polyjuice. Pyotr can serve as our mole here in the meantime. Hopefully we'll have you out of here in a few days, at most a week."

Pyotr gawked at him. "Damn, Genya. Are they actually onto us?"

"I sure hope not. If they kill off Rasputin and destroy his Horcrux before we can bring back Lord Koschei there will be hell to pay as Koschei and his Horcrux will be likely be assigned automatically to Boris Yeltsin, the closest thing that exists to the advisor to the Romanov tsar. Hand over the Polyjuice Potions...thanks. Pyotr, here's my fake ID. I go by Misha Kohut here, and your partner will go by Mila."

Pyotr nodded. "Misha and Mila. Got it."

Zygonov pointed. "The Kohut hairs and Polyjuice components are in a cabinet over here. There should be more than enough to get us through the next six months, at which point Koschei's takeover of Atlantis will likely be complete and we will no longer need to hide anymore."

Vovchanckaya nodded. "Sounds like everything's all set. We chat for a moment to fool anyone
who's watching and Polyjuice into the Kohuts. You Polyjuice into the people we came as and leave Atlantis. You send someone back Polyjuiced in my current form to pick me up. She arrives and turns into Mila Kohut while I resume my current form and leave."

Zygonov nodded. "That's correct. Any questions?"

The two visitors looked at each other and shook their heads.

"Good. Let's get down to business."

To be continued...

-------------

Update #400.5: Return to Syrdan I

-------------

Monday, October 21, 1996
Green Dragon Inn
Neutral District
Glubbdubdrib
Galiver Consortium

-------------

Most of Glubbdubdrib's landmass was partitioned between the member nations of the Galiver Consortium, belonging to their jurisdiction. However, the region where the Senate and assorted offices stood was declared a neutral zone, and over time became a multicultural gathering place... for the rich, naturally. Even though neither his birthplace Syrdan, nor his second homeland Roqteratl was a member of the Consortium, Samanar Naztheros was welcome here, as long as he had money. And that he had enough, and then some. Sitting in a comfy armchair in the VIP backroom of a high-class establishment, dressed in tailored robes of the latest fashion, sipping exotic and very expensive wine, the only clue implying he wasn't always a rich aristocrat was the company he had- old friends and partners of various races, some (like the pair of goblins wearing Muggle sunglasses even indoors) quite out of place no matter how much money they left at the tailor's.

His business enterprise was surpassing all expectations. His starting funds have produced profit, which he in turn invested again to upgrade his flying ship to the best of all the spellcraft of the Hidden Nations. Copycats were quick to follow, but being there first and having his Veela girlfriend with him at negotiations, he managed to obtain monopolies, concessions and other exclusive trade arrangements cementing his place among the most influential merchants operating between the Hidden Nations and the new Muggle/merpeople trading posts, all in a matter of weeks. They also had the foresight to found a corporation, Naztheros Shipping Company, and now he made an offer to other flying ship captains: join the company, pay a share of their profits, and benefit from those monopolies. So far, 17 other captains have taken up on the offer.

There was some confusion about the company's laws, namely, if they should stick with the archaic Guild design still dominant in the Hidden Nations, or to adopt some Muggle cleverness, like a franchise or a Public Limited Company. Lacking familiarity with the latter, they agreed to settle the argument later, and have individual contracts with Mr. Naztheros as his employees. He, in turn, allowed them quite a bit of freedom provided they followed some basic rules (no involvement in
wars, no smuggling, etc), and was willing to listen to their advice.

His musings were interrupted by someone knocking on the door. With permission granted to enter, a robed man came in. He was short, wiry, with tanned olive skin and curly black hair—even without family sigil, the wizard was obviously Syrdani. He bowed politely to another apparent Syrdani and announced himself: "Wizard Alar Faramos, at your service, my lord Naztheros, and at yours too, ladies and gentlebeings." As the tanned wizard didn't respond, and a pale, red-haired gentleman began to chuckle softly, Alar blushed in embarrassment—he should have gone for the hair, instead of assuming his compatriot will have the same complexion after spending two decades in an underwater city devoid of sunlight.

As the wizard quickly corrected his mistake, Sam went over what he knew about the man. The Faramos family has been serving his for countless generations first as overseers and retainers, but more often right hand men. When his father started openly advocating abolition, they stayed loyal to him, and were consequently punished when the Noble and Most Ancient House of Naztheros was stripped of all ranks and titles, of all lands and holdings, and exiled from Syrdan. Obviously, they survived and regained some of their former influence... "I presume you're here to join our brave and profitable enterprise, Wizard Faramos."

The man nodded in approval, but also pulled a large tome from under his robe. "Correct, but there's something else I must do first. I've spent two decades reclaiming what I could of your family's possessions, and recently, this item came to me. As the last scion of your House, this now belongs to you."

Sam recognised the book at first sight. It was the 4th volume of the Naztheros family grimoires, a priceless collection of magical lore accumulated over two millennia.

To be continued...
Update #401: It's the Stay-Puft Marshmallow Man

Tuesday, October 22, 297 AG [AD 1996]

Lilliput Lantern Newspaper

Lilliput

ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 4/1.5%

NEXT UP: Where's an Aging Potion When I Need One?

Galiver's Descendants Return -- In Peace

We have all heard the legends about the return of the Dread Lamel Galiver bringing about the end of the world. Teachers threatened to turn us over to Galiver if we misbehaved in class, parents begged us to reform our ways lest Galiver take us, and we have wished that our former spouses and supervisors be punished by Galiver time and time again. We've been taught from a young age that Galiver and the rest of the evil Muggles sought to conquer our land and weaken our people by infecting us with deadly diseases. We've learned that the Galiver Consortium was founded, and Protectors granted to all of its member states, to prevent further Muggle intrusion and to buy time to rebuild our society in case the Muggles came calling again.

Yesterday, the legends finally came true. Galiver returned...but with the olive branch of peace instead of the sword of war. For the first time in hundreds of years, Muggles have set foot upon Lilliput and South Lilliput and have promised us that there will be no more epidemics among our people.

At approximately 1:00 yesterday afternoon, a tremendous vessel carrying Muggles docked a few hundred feet away from the capital and a Muggle man was escorted ashore by our own diplomats. This man stood approximately 6 feet 3 inches tall, a good twelve times the size of the average Lilliputian. He towered over our buildings, and when he explored our neighborhoods -- walking around the perimeter to make sure he didn't damage any buildings or step on any people -- the ground shook with every footstep he made.

Many of you may have thought that the end of the world had come, and that the apocalypse heralded by Judgment Day was upon us. However, that is not the case. The man everyone in the city saw towering over the buildings was our new Muggle ambassador, the Honorable Jermaine Gulliver-Brooks.

If his last name sounds familiar, it should. Mr. Gulliver-Brooks is a distant descendant -- eleven generations, according to Muggle scholars -- of a British explorer named Lemuel Gulliver. About three hundred years ago, Lemuel Gulliver encountered our islands on a British mission of discovery. We will not bother you with this tale as you already know it. Needless to say, although the encounter with our ancestors went well at first, tragedy struck shortly thereafter and the explorer's name was changed over time into Lamel Galiver and considered synonymous with the Dark One.

Our wizards and politicians, including Her Majesty the Queen, have spoken with the Muggles to determine what happened. You may be amazed to learn that the assault of the tremendous,
carnivorous animals known as "rats" and "dogs" Gulliver unleashed upon our nations was, in fact, unintentional. Stated simply, Lemuel Gulliver and his crew were carrying large Muggle animals which saw most of our food sources as prey and would have likely eaten us had it not been for our wings. Gulliver may have been civilized enough to not try to intentionally hurt us, but when those animals got off the ship...that was a completely different story. There was no way for Captain Gulliver to have known as he would have very likely not been paying attention to his "small" animals at the time. After all, do you keep track of YOUR pets 24 hours a day?

Gulliver-Brooks was horrified when we told him the story of the attacks of 2-9 AG. Throwing diplomatic protocols out the window, he broke down in tears -- a sight which all of you could not have missed as he towered above most of the buildings. Although he knew very little about his explorer ancestor, he was fairly certain that Lemuel Gulliver -- the man we had thought of as evil incarnate -- would have reacted the same way. Although he speaks a different dialect of Galiver from the rest of us, that booming "The animals ate most of your food while virgin soil diseases got everyone else sick?" would have woken the dead. Our wizards were skeptical at first and subjected him to a Veritaserum test, whereupon they found that he had been telling the truth the entire time.

Our authorities then sent messages the British Minister of Magic, Nicholas Flamel, for confirmation. Not only did Minister Flamel confirm this, he explained that he remembered the incident very well. Recall that Minister Flamel is over six hundred years old, having lived this great age due to a now-destroyed Philosopher's Stone. The Ministry suspected a virgin soil pandemic or invasive species incident almost from the beginning, as similar conditions had killed most of the people in North America in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries AD. However, since the Statute of Secrecy was already in place, there was little the wizards could do to help without exposing themselves. Flamel recounts a near-schism in the British Wizarding world over assisting our people through those terrible early years.

After rancorous debate, the Ministry decided not to intervene. This was not out of malice, however, as the British wizards argued that our own wizards should be able to stop the animals. In our defense, our ancestors did actually manage to reduce the mortality rate from 90% -- as it had been in North America -- to between 30% and 40%. But even this rate -- one out of every three people -- dying on short notice is still a major disaster.

Note that the other Galiver nations' experiences with widespread disease also had a Muggle explanation. It was in fact a situation known as a "virgin soil pandemic" where diseases in one area suddenly find themselves transmitted to a second which is not prepared for them and as a result everyone gets sick. The Muggles had already adapted themselves to not have to worry about the diseases, so they didn't even know they had them. However, when Gulliver interacted with us, the diseases spread to our communities and appeared seemingly out of nowhere a few years later.

Although Mr. Gulliver-Brooks represents the United Kingdom -- Lemuel Gulliver's nation -- he says he is willing to serve as our representative to other nations as well in case our inhabitants are not comfortable interacting with Muggles yet. He will take on this new responsibility after 1 year of working with us and getting to know us.

Nothing can atone for the horrors Lemuel Gulliver unwittingly unleashed upon our people. However, the British have ensured that all of the members of the Galiver Consortium receive appropriate monetary and medical compensation for the attacks. The Muggle world is in an economic recession right now, yet no fewer than 15 major Muggle powers -- including both Judgment Key holders -- are contributing to a compensation fund. Our people will be trained in medical practices which can do wonders even from a magical standpoint.

Muggle medical practices will be analyzed by the government and by the Senate in Glubbdubdrib
and will be available to all citizens once they are deemed safe and effective. The monetary compensation will be more than enough to cover our debts and help improve the infrastructure all over the Galiver Consortium.

Many of you may wonder about whether the Galiver Consortium will continue to operate now that its original purpose -- the defense of the world from Galiver -- is now gone. Rest assured, it will. We have been working together for centuries now, and that is not going to change. The Galiver Senate has served a role similar to the Muggle entity known as the United Nations, defusing issues before they can escalate into a war.

For those of you in South Lilliput who missed seeing the ambassador, be advised that he will be visiting Blefuscu this afternoon and spending a few hours exploring South Lilliput. He may be tall and a Muggle, but do not hurt him. He is a diplomat, here to help us, and the Head Wizard himself is convinced that he means no harm. He intends to travel to Brobdingnag on Friday to provide second contact with the giants. His plan is to meet with all of the nations Gulliver discovered in the order they were seen. Nations which joined the Consortium later, such as Dalernus, will be visited at the end.

On behalf of the Lilliput Lantern, we would like to welcome Ambassador Gulliver-Brooks to our land. We both sincerely hope and pray that second contact will be much more peaceful and mutually beneficial than first contact. Judging from what we all heard yesterday from Mr. Gulliver-Brooks, this seems extremely likely.

After all, it's already been one day since he arrived upon our shores...and we have not seen one attack by one of his creatures.

To be continued...

__________________

Update #401.5 Return to Syrdan II
------------
Tuesday, October 22, 297 AG [AD 1996]
Green Dragon Inn
Neutral District
Glubbdubdrib
Galiver Consortium
------------

To understand Alar Faramos's gift, we have to take a look at magocracies. In mundane, modern societies the threat of Muggles, should the Statute of Secrecy fail, was serious enough to force the wizards to cooperate and share as much power with each other as they could. National or even international magic schools become the norm, and homeschooling is negligible. Schools teach spells for all aspects of life, and when the newly graduated student gets a job or some post-grad studies, his colleagues gladly share most of their knowledge with him. Of course, Noble and Most Ancient Houses, especially those who like the Malfoys live off their lands and holdings, tend to monopolize knowledge as long as they can get away with it, but that usually means secret dietary requirements of a new breed of magical sheep, as anything less situation-specific will very soon leak out to the general public, like Snape's Sectumsempra curse.

Magocracies are not like that. From their founding to the last years of the 20th century, none of the
Hidden Nations has been threatened by Muggles. If the race has dedicated spellcasters, they were treasured...or feared. Those lucky enough to be born a wizard or witch (or Cunning One, as the goblins call theirs) had nothing to fear... except the others of their kind. For without unifying external threats, the rivalry between them stayed much stronger than their fellow wizards living among Muggles ever experienced.

Knowledge was power. And power was shared only with family, friends and trusted allies. With Muggleborns popping up again and again, public schooling developed here too, but the education they offered was generally less than what Hogwarts and other such schools offered, and homeschooling was usually a de facto requirement of becoming a fully trained wizard.

Syrdan, in particular, had the tradition to help Muggleborns obtain their rightful place as wizards...assuming they lived long enough to prove themselves worthy. Their lives weren't without danger, not even their childhoods: many times did nubile slaves and their toddlers end up dead and their owner cursed when his wife discovered the signs of magic in their slave's offspring and the wizard couldn't deflect suspicion quick enough. Assuming that apathy from the mistress's part, or good lies (with enough Occlumency to beat Veritaserum) or even actual fidelity and innocence from the master's part enabled the young Muggleborn to reach sufficient age, (s)he was sent into a school where they taught the children some magic, but more importantly reading, writing, general tidbits of culture, and above all, the superiority of wizards. Those Muggleborns who sought to help their slave families were filtered out, and disappeared from the country while they were still manageably weak, one way or the other. Most Muggleborns eagerly offered their loyalty to pureblood families in exchange of jobs, arcane knowledge, and eventual marriage to surplus offsprings of the House... and completely turned their back to their yahoo parents. There was a saying in the plantations: "Ruthless, as an overseer who's momma has a forehead tattoo."

Anyway, all that knowledge that made the pureblood families so influential had to be recorded somewhere. Enter the grimoires, books containing all sort of useful informations and advices from crops to animal husbandry, from ancient genealogies to fertility potions, from powerful warding runes to horrible hexes deliberately invented to be hard to copy. These books were the prized treasure of wizard families, guarded, updated and looked after, cherished as the House's millennia-spanning repository of knowledge. To lose it was worse than death in the eyes of the Syrdani. So, when Melanar Naztheros publicly advocated abolition and actually set his slaves free two decades ago, the rulers of the island nation stripped him of all ranks and titles, of all lands and holdings, confiscated all his family grimoires, and forced his whole family into exile. Perhaps understandably, the man soon died- some say shame killed him, others suspect assassination, and his widow didn't linger for long after that. Young Samanar was home-schooled in Roqteratl as long as there was money for that, and ended up being a cunning businessman but only a mediocre wizard by the standards of his kind. Now, the book returned to him offered new ways to increase his power... and raised other questions.

Syrdan has changed a lot in the last few months. Slavery was abolished and the nation didn't just blink out of existence, that alone had probably elicited a chuckling 'told ya' from the late Melanar in Sheol, and a curious 'gotta see it for myself' from his son. With the reason of their disgrace re-evaluated, perhaps it was time to restore the ancient family's position in power. And if not, there were still other parts of the family library back there...

To be continued...
Update #402: Where's an Aging Potion When I Need One?
-------------
Wednesday, October 23, 1996
Hog's Head Tavern
Hogsmeade
United Kingdom
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 4/1.5%
-------------
-------------
Harry and Ron had been looking forward to this Hogsmeade trip for a while. Unfortunately, this trip had proven to be a bit of a letdown.

With all of the dementors and Aurors scouring the town for information on the Death Eater who had attacked Hogwarts and killed Professor Snape, the mood in the city was somber, to say the least. The dementors were making everyone depressed, and several of the shopkeepers were so down that they had simply closed their shops until the crisis had passed. There weren't many customers, and most of the people browsing in the stores hadn't been in the mood to buy anything useful.

There were still no new information about the attacker. The *Daily Prophet* had reported that Flamel could have sworn that all of the Death Eaters in Britain had been accounted for and that no new cells had started up since Judgment Day. Nature abhorred a vacuum, as Professor Hawking liked to say, so the rumor mill immediately began turning. The attack had purported been triggered by a revived Voldemort, a Snape who had turned back to the Death Eaters and been killed by the Aurors, Britain for Humans somehow having the nerve to hire a wizard, and so forth. None of these seemed to fit the circumstances, however.

Large sections of Hogsmeade were off limits as the dementors continued the investigation. The Forbidden Forest was also out of bounds, but this time for an entirely different reason. Supposedly a fight had broken out between the dementors investigating the forest and the centaurs there and several people had been killed on both sides. There were rumors that Aragog, Hagrid's half-tame Acromantula, had been killed by the Aurors as a creature that big would have been a threat to both Hogsmeade and Hogwarts. Aragog had gotten a few reprieves at first when his supposed executioners had collapsed in pain when they tried to kill him, thanks to the Aes Sedai oaths preventing use of magical against sentient beings. Eventually, though, they managed to find someone who was not sworn and dispatch him that way. Harry would have paid to see the expression on Hagrid's face if the former Care of Magical Creatures professor ever returned to school.

Students were not allowed to travel around Hogsmeade unless they were in groups of at least three or more (or there was a teacher in attendance). For the first time, underage wizards were allowed to defend themselves outside of school without having to worry about disciplinary hearings.

Harry and Ron had planned to explore the city a little with Hermione, but Aberforth Dumbledore had held Hermione behind as soon as the group emerged into the Hog's Head from the Room of Requirement. When Harry asked why Hermione couldn't attend, Aberforth claimed that Hermione had been inducted into the Order of the Phoenix now that she had turned seventeen. She would not be able to do much during the semester, of course. However, since the Order had now set up shop in Hogsmeade, she would at least be able to attend the meetings.
Harry had been a bit miffed at Aberforth's decision. For one thing, they had been forced to find a third person to go exploring with them, which inevitably meant both Ginny and Neville. However, Harry couldn't help but think that he had a right to be the member of the Order. So he wasn't seventeen yet. Big deal. He had EARNED it, for crying out loud. He had destroyed two Horcruxes, the locket and the cup. In fact, if the rumors were true about Tom Riddle's diary, he had actually finished off three! He was a trained Voldemort hunter, yet he was not officially a member of the Order? What the hell was going on here?

"Where's an Aging Potion when I need one?", he thought.

Harry and his friends noticed that many Muggle stores had opened up in Hogsmeade. Amazingly, they were actually doing a decent amount of business. The shopkeepers may have felt a little down because of the dementors. However, their saving grace was the fact that they couldn't actually SEE the dementors. The food service establishments were getting zero customers as the Wizarding food was much better than Muggle food. Electronic equipment was popular until the Muggles realized it wouldn't work well with wizards running around. Games like Scrabble and Monopoly had made inroads into British Wizarding society, and supposedly Hasbro was in the process of making a Wizarding version of Monopoly with Atlantis in the Boardwalk space.

After what seemed to have been an hour, Hermione raced down from the upper levels of the tavern followed by the rest of the members of the Order of the Phoenix. She gestured frantically for Ron and Harry to follow her. Aberforth glared at her sharply for a moment. She glared right back at him, at which point he threw his hands up in the air and nodded. Excited, the three students headed into an empty store for the debriefing.

Harry spoke first. "All right, Hermione. What can you tell us that we're not supposed to know?"

Hermione whistled. "A lot. They're still working with Atlantis to try to figure out who these Zygonovs are working for. They've discovered that a group of people associated with the Black God Tchernobog may be involved. We can't tell if their association with Tchernobog is coincidental, though. The investigation is continuing."

Harry frowned. "Tcherno WHAT?"

"Tchernobog. He's an evil Slavic god and he's got a bit of a cult following in eastern Europe. Think of him roughly on the same level as Satan."


"Amen, Ron. Does this cult have a branch in Britain?"

"Not that I know of, which is even more puzzling. However, Harry, I've come across some information which will affect you personally. For some reason, you could be a target for the Death Eaters."

Harry stared at her. "Bloody WHAT? Why aren't they telling me this?"

Hermione looked down the street to make sure no one was watching. "Are you familiar with the story of the Deathly Hallows?"

Ron nodded. Harry, however shook his head. "Never heard of it?"
Hermione explained. "It's a Wizarding tale which was believed to be a legend until Perenille Flamel claimed that it was true."

Ron's jaw dropped. "The Deathly Hallows really exist?"

"Yes, Ron. Now let me finish, this time with the legend turned into information which is more likely and more practical. Many years ago, someone -- in the story Death -- created three powerful magical items: the Elder Wand, the Resurrection Stone, and the Invisibility Cloak. The tale goes on to say that whoever collects all three of these artifacts can become the master of Death."

Harry's eyes widened. "Master of Death? You mean he can overrule Death and bring people back to life?"

Hermione nodded. "That's the theory. Dr. Flamel and the rest of the Ministry is convinced that the attack on Hogwarts was an attempt to take control of the Elder Wand, which happened to be in use by Dumbledore at the time. Once they have all three Hallows, they cast some powerful spell to revive Voldemort from the dead."

Harry swore. "Bloody hell. Just what we need."

Ron, however, was focused on something else. Turning to Hermione, he said: "DUMBLEDORE has the Elder Wand?"

Hermione shook her head. "Had, Ron. If the stories are correct, defeating the Elder Wand's owner in battle causes the Wand to change its allegiance to the person who won the duel. Considering that Dumbledore's wand is now gone, the Ministry is assuming that they've already gotten their first Hallow."

Ron and Harry looked at each other. "Bloody hell. That's bad."

Hermione continued. "That leaves two Hallows left. The Resurrection Stone was also in Dumbledore's possession -- in fact, Voldemort made a Horcrux out of it. We can rest assured that the Death Eaters are not going to get that because Flamel's wife had that shipped directly to Atlantis. If all else fails, Dagher can always order Linda Warren to send it off into space."

Both boys laughed at that. However, Harry's chuckling stopped abruptly. "Hermione, what happens if a Death Eater mole makes it into Atlantis?"

Hermione grinned. "Highly unlikely, Harry. They do background checks. Besides, like I said, they can always send the Resurrection Stone into the sun somewhere -- that should destroy it."

Her expression then turned serious. "Here is where Harry comes in. Although we know that the Death Eaters won't be able to reunite the Hallows, they don't. This means that they are naturally going to try to get their hands on everything...including the third Hallow, the Invisibility Cloak."

Ron snorted. "What does Harry have to do with..."

His voice drained away. Slowly, he looked at Harry, and then back at Hermione. "You have GOT to be kidding."

Hermione shook her head. "I'm afraid not. Dumbledore had Harry's cloak in his possession for a
while. He strongly believes that it is the third Hallow."

Harry nodded abruptly. "THAT Explains why Flitwick and Moody wanted my Cloak!"

"Exactly. They realize that the cloak's owner may be in danger and they want to take it onto themselves. They want to keep you safe, Harry. Do not ask for that cloak back, because you're not going to get it."

Harry grumbled. "Can I at least get the Marauder's Map back?"

"I'm afraid not, Harry. The Order doesn't have it. And even if it did, Flitwick is right. If you get that back, the school will confiscate it immediately. As it is, the map may already be in Death Eater hands."

Harry looked at his two friends "I see. So what are we going to do about this?"

------------------------

Crabbe and Goyle took advantage of the Hogsmeade trip to spend some time in the library. Crabbe admitted that he'd probably not spent this much time in the library during his previous five years combined.

He opened the book on potions and slammed his finger down on the page. "That's it, Greg. Polyjuice Potion. We take the forms of Ron and Harry, incapacitate them, enter the Gryffindor common room, and take the Cloak. If we're lucky, Harry will have it on him and we'll be able to nick it without having to risk using the potion."

Goyle looked at the potion description and frowned. "I'm not sure about this. Without Snape to help us this looks like it's going to be tricky."

Crabbe nodded. "Indeed, it will be tricky. However, we're almost seventeen. We can't rely on Draco anymore, and we're going to have to take risks to get this Death Eater cell to approve of us. Well, my friend? Are you in?"

Goyle looked at the potion, swallowed, and nodded. "You got it. I'm in. Let's get cracking."

To be continued.

__________________

Update #402.5 Noah Would Be Proud

Wednesday, October 23, 1996
Archon's Office
Sapphire Caverns
Trapananda

Avernus, of House Qelthas, the First of His Name, Archon of Trapananda, Protector of the Realm of the Living, titles, titles... was reading an after-action report from the Watch, detailing their failure to track any more of the escaped Death Eater supporters... just as usual. Pointing his wand at the scroll and uttering a charm in Old Mermish, he wrote his thoughts below the report. "Note to self: train
He had been crowned barely a week ago, with relatively little ceremony as the city-state was still recovering from the recent coup and brief civil war. Making him the Archon was a necessary compromise to prevent more infighting: House Qełthas was an Oldblood family, thus acceptable to the more traditionalist elements, but Avernus couldn't be linked to the atrocities of the last two regimes and he had personally helped in taking the last one down by destroying the Observer's focus point in the Nazca Desert. That didn't mean he liked his new position: he had the responsibility of leading the merwizards in an unprecedented time of trouble and change, and his power was significantly less than what his predecessors had. And he had so much to do...

Such as getting familiar with some classified projects. Formerly being a high-ranking member of the Watch, he already knew some of those, but there were surprises, and he suspected this time will be like those. He quickly summed up what he knew of this one: Merwitch Joronda of House Maerdlle. She was a head of her House, that had a private academy going since the city's foundation, healers mostly. He wondered what their secret would be.

There was a flashing light coming from a warning crystal, about the same as a human doorbell ringing. Outside the veil closing off his office, a bodyguard announced the visitor. Avernus pointed his wand at the veil and deactivated it, allowing her through. Measuring up the witch in one look, he said the traditional greetings and added: "Now, please keep this as brief and informal as you can while still telling me all you must, I'm a bit tired of this ceremonial crap."

The old female nodded in understanding, and began her story. "As you know, Archon, our city was founded to be the failsafe for the human Judgement Day protocol. But what you don't know is how exactly we'd do it. All we do is apparently this: gather all merpeople who can do magic, train them, and hope that when the might of Atlantis fails to save the world, somehow we will be strong enough to do it. But it's not true. Our real mission is not preventing the catastrophe: if Atlantis fails, it's already happened, and no amount of Time-turning can undo it. Our mission is to rebuild... and this is where Project Re-Genesis comes into play."

"For thousands of years we've been experimenting with restoring ecosystems after extinction events, and by now, I'm proud to report that we have made incredible progress. We have gathered samples from all sort of ecosystems, enough from each to make it complete, and have stored them in stasis." Avernus interrupted: "How can you know it'll work? There were no such extinction events since the fall of the Old Ones!"

A smug smile spread on the wrinkled face. "I know it works, because we tested it. Every few years, a new island is born when underwater volcanoes reach the surface. Those are devoid of life, even more harsh than what our predictions are, yet a reasonable number of our specimens survive, an average of 30% of introduced species are still there after 10 years."

"Is that safe? Wouldn't Muggles find those islands and wonder how life got there?" -"We had no such problems, Your Grace, we have always chosen species that weren't that much out of place, and a Muggle could have let them loose there: mice, rats, cats, dogs, goats, rabbits, that kind of things. We allowed a greater variety of plant and bird life, but as we know they accept those far easier, even
"If they are so strange— they just convince themselves those were blown there by the winds."

A thought came to the Archon. "What kind of cataclysm did you prepare for? Does it include a nuclear world war?" The witch sighed. "We had no way of safely testing nuclear sites, and the scenarios were a supervolcano eruption and a second Hammer of Ra impact, with terrestrial impact sites. Both would result in an ice age that we can weather out here, and a layer of ash not unlike that of volcanic islands. As for using it in irradiated environments, perhaps you could get someone in Atlantis to cooperate once you contact them."

"I'll do that. I expect a detailed, written report of Project Re-Genesis by the end of the week. Until then, I wish you the best luck and inspiration, Lady Maerdlle."

To be continued...

----------


----------

Thursday, October 24, 1996
Eastern Mediterranean Sea
200 Miles From Egypt
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 4/1.5%

----------

NEXT UP: Accio Nirvana!

----------

Joanna Gifford whistled and looked at the computer monitor. "There's definitely something down there, all right. It's long and almost perfectly straight. That can't be natural. Dr. Albaf, can you come and check this out?"

The Egyptian archeologist came over to the screen and checked out the results of a radar scan of the seafloor. The device had been configured -- thank you, Wizard Bařina -- to pick up any signs of wood or within the top 100 feet of the ocean floor. He nodded excitedly when he saw the huge red streak plastered across the screen.

"That's definitely worth a look, Dr. Gifford. How did you find out about this?"

The American smiled. "We've known about it for a long time. People have always joked they thought it was the keel of the Titanic, albeit in the wrong ocean. Which reminds me, however: are you sure that this is what we're looking for? There are lots of shipwrecks down here. Besides, I would suspect that the people would have reported this anomaly as a shipwreck had it truly been a shipwreck."

Albaf nodded. "I highly doubt it, Dr. Gifford, for one major reason. As far as we knew, there was no way this could realistically have been a shipwreck. It's far too large for the time period. You've seen a lot of ancient Egyptian vessels in the museums and so forth. If this is indeed a shipwreck, the ship
must have been at least the size of the *Titanic*. That's probably why they called it an anomaly and not a shipwreck."

Gifford turned to the man next to her. "How far down is she?"

The technician crunched the numbers. "The main anomaly is about 70 feet down or so. However, there appears to be a large field of debris around the target, including several wooden and primitive metal objects. Judging from what I'm seeing, it sure looks like a wreck to me. And a very old one, to boot. Had it not been for the size, we'd have identified her a long time ago."

Albaf and Gifford rounded on the technician in unison. "How old? Can you estimate a date given the depths of the sediment?"

The technician turned to look at one of his charts, and his eyes widened. "Son of a bitch. That depth corresponds to approximately 4850 +/- 100 years old. In other words, 2850 +/- 100 BC."

All three of them turned to face the bearded man in the back of the room. "Well, Wizard Bařina? You've been talking with Grand Mugwump Dagher and Ambassador Dialonis. What's the current estimate of the date of the Hammer of Ra impact?"

Gifford knew what the answer was immediately simply by watching the Czech wizard's reaction. Nevertheless, the mage answered the question in a hushed voice. "2750 +/- 75 BC. Intriguingly, there was a solar eclipse in May 2807 which could have been mentioned in some of the flood myths."

The four team members looked at each other. Finally, the technician voiced what they were all thinking. "Good Lord. The two error bars overlap, and that overlap includes that 2807 date. This has GOT to be it. I'd say we send down the submersible to check her out. We'll first examine the surface and see if there are any artifacts up there. If there are, we go full bore. Wizard Bařina, are you sure that you will not be able to make it so the submersible can transport itself into the sea bed?"

Bařina shook his head. "In theory, we can transport it into the seabed. However, we won't be able to see much with the sand around. Besides, trolling around for artifacts in the area could jeopardize the safety of the submersible as well as possibly contaminate the site. If this is indeed the wreck of Noha-Pishtin's lost ship, we have no right to damage her. We'll do drills for now, and if necessary Portkeys to retrieve samples."

Gifford turned to Albaf. As the Egyptian representative and the head of the expedition, it was up to him to make the final decision. After all, the expedition had unanimously considered the wreck to be Egyptian property.

Albaf drew a deep breath. "This is the best lead we've gotten so far, and it wouldn't hurt to take a better look. Send the sub down and have them investigate that big anomaly."

The technician shook his head. "We can't do that, Dr. Albaf. Remember that the main anomaly is underground. All we have access to are the fragments on the surface."

Albaf shrugged. "Very well then. Start with the surface and we'll go on from there."

The technician nodded, and Gifford picked up the phone to start talking with the team in charge of the submersible.

--------------
Six hours later, the team crowded around the computer monitor as the automated sub approached the seafloor. The little ship had a camera in front which was broadcasting a signal up to the surface. For the longest time, the display had just shown an empty water column interrupted here and there by odd-looking fish.

The technician called out the altitude from the radar sounder on board the ship. "20 feet...15 feet...10 feet..."

Albaf raised his hand as the seafloor slowly rose into view. "Stop at 5 feet -- we don't want the engines to start raising a sandstorm down there and making it so we can't see anything."

The technician nodded and the image froze with the camera hovering five feet above the bottom. A small, oddly shaped fish, surprised by the intruder, came over to take a closer look. Seeing that the camera was not edible, it swam away.

Albaf turned Gifford. "How far away are we from the nearest artifact?"

Gifford looked at her screen. "About 8 feet, bearing 175."

Albaf nodded and turned to the technician. "All right, David. Move it over so we're right above the artifact. We'll start numbering the artifacts as we see them. We'll call this one Artifact 1-1 and go from there: the first artifact from this dive site. Got that?"

Gifford nodded. "Yup. Artifact 1-1."

The team spent the next five minutes feverishly taking pictures of the artifact from all angles. The piece of wood seemed more or less featureless with the exception of a small hole in the center, where a black object maybe four inches across appeared to have penetrated it and gotten stuck in the wooden matrix.

Albaf looked at the screen momentarily and frowned. "Something doesn't seem right here. Where are all the parasites and stuff? Surely SOMETHING must have eaten through this object over all these years. I'm starting to wonder if this is a piece of a separate wreck. Do you have something which does carbon-14 dating in there?"

Gifford shook her head. "No, but we do have something like that in the lab. Thanks to the intervention our Czech friend here, we should get a result within half an hour."

Albaf bit his lip. He really didn't want to damage the sample, but he didn't have much of a choice here. "All right, then. Take tiny pieces of the edge of the artifact and see if we can get a piece of that black thing."

The technician frowned. "I think the black thing is just a rock. But there should be rocks --"
He cut himself off when he realized that there WEREN'T any rocks around. The wreck had landed in a sandy area, and the fact that the rock was there was also a bit surprising. Meanwhile, the wizard finished the technician's thought. "I don't think it's natural, David. It could be a decoration. It could be a magical stone of some sort, possibly used to prevent marine creatures from damaging the hull. For all we know, it could make the hull waterproof. I agree, Dr. Ablaf. We want to take samples of both if possible.

Gingerly working the submersible's robotic arms, Gifford took tiny samples of the two regions and stored them in the submersible's hull. She then moved out of the way so that the wizard could cast the Duplication Charm on the artifact so that the team could study it while leaving the site intact.

The submersible began making its way up to the surface as the artifact's duplicate appeared on the boat. Working quickly, the wizard cast a spell around the copy which would protect it from the air yet still allow the team to examine it. For the first time in millennia, the artifact could be seen under natural light, light whose colors had not been attenuated by water. The resulting observations brought virtually everyone into the little control room.

The piece of wood had portions of what appeared to be three hieroglyphs on it. They had been drawn on in red ink which had survived in the abyss after all these years. Cameras flashed everywhere as Albaf stared at the copy in amazement.

"Those are definitely hieroglyphs, and judging from the shapes of the characters old ones to boot. This is very, very promising. I'm going to want to see the carbon-dating results before we claim victory."

Gifford whispered the obvious question: "What do they say?"

Albaf shook his head. "I can't tell without more context -- they seem to be in the middle of a word somewhere. Suffice it to say that we know the wreck is Egyptian, and old Egyptian as well. I would give a good 50% chance at least that we have found the Iavet at last after three months of searching."

The team then looked at the copy of the rock, which appeared to have been burned somewhat on the outside. Turning to the wizard, he pointed at the rock. "What's the rock for? Is it used in spells at some point? It looks like it's been burned, and it's not charcoal. I haven't seen anything like this before."

The wizard shrugged. "Neither have I. However, we have a lot of time to look at it. Let's first see what the carbon dating and spectroscopy tests give us on the originals."

Five hours later, the results for the carbon dating test on the wood sample retrieved from the submersible had come back: 4793 +/- 85 years. The team burst out in cheers when they heard that. All they had to do now was tell the rest of the world.

Noah's Ark had finally been found. One of them, at least.

However, there was still one more surprise to come. Half an hour later, the results came back on the rock sample which had punctured the wood.

Albaf looked at the report in confusion. "Iridium? What on earth would wizards do with iridium? Pavel, is there anything about iridium which makes it special to wizards?"
The wizard shook his head. "Not that I know of, Dr. Albaf. Then again, I'm not exactly an authority on --"

Bařina's reply was cut off by an shocked scream from Gifford. Everyone turned to her and saw that her face was white with terror...and awe.

Albaf turned to her. "Dr. Giffords, what's wrong?"

Gifford could barely speak. "I think I know what that rock is. It just occurred to me."

"Really? Please, illuminate us."

She opened her mouth to continue the explanation when suddenly the computer technician got it as well, and turned to stare at the copy of the rock fragment still embedded in the artifact. He turned to Gifford, who nodded. "The iridium gives it away."

There was a delay of a few seconds, after which both people suddenly began to cry.

Albaf threw his hands up in the air. "What in Allah's name is going on here? What are you guys all worked up about? We've found the wreck! You should be happy!"

Gifford wiped her eyes. "We've found more than the wreck, Dr. Albaf. You see, iridium is a very rare element on Earth's surface as most of it is embedded deep in the core. What this usually means is that if a rock has a high concentration of iridium in it, it does not come from Earth. It has an extraterrestrial origin."

Albaf suddenly realized where she was going, and his face turned ashen. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

Gifford nodded. "Indeed. What we have here is a rock of extraterrestrial origin which has punctured a small hole in the deck of the Iavet. This could only mean one possible origin, sir."

There was another pregnant pause. Finally, Bařina whispered three words to himself.

"Mother of God."

Within seconds, virtually every single team member had his or her head bowed in respect for the dead. Sitting before them, embedded in the wood, was a copy of a piece of the object which had caused the largest natural disaster in the history of the human race, one which had caused the extinction of over half of the world's population.

To be continued...

__________________

Update #404: Accio Nirvana!

------------

Friday, October 25, 1996
Gryffindor Tower
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
United Kingdom
Hermione Granger had gotten hooked on the Buddhist meditation practices as soon as she had bought the book at a Muggle New Age bookstore which had opened up in Hogsmeade. Interest in Buddhism had skyrocketed as soon as Buddhist techniques had been incorporated into Samuelist teachings. There were a few books on Samuelism out as well, though Hermione suspected that Samuelism would start getting more publications once the Omega conference completed. Having been raised secular Anglican herself, she knew very little about Buddhism. She could see, however, that traditional Abrahamic beliefs could mesh pretty well with the teachings of the Buddha. After all, most of the meditation practices were nontheistic, so even more rigid Abrahamics could adopt them without denying belief in one god.

She was going to try to adopt a ten-minute meditation practice each day. Finding time for it was often hard, considering her work as a prefect and her interviews with the Muggles. However, she figured she'd be able to do it right after she woke up or something like that.

She opened the book and cast the spell which caused it to turn to the page where she had left off. It was entitled "Metta: Lovingkindness Meditation". Very interesting, she thought. Was this a meditation which made you a little friendlier? She figured it couldn't hurt.

The chapter explained how one started out in a lovingkindness practice by loving yourself, then trying to extend the circle to include relatives, then friends, and so forth. Eventually, the circle got large enough to encompass the whole world.

The Buddha understood that going from the ground level to loving the whole world couldn't be accomplished in one jump, so the worshiper had to go step by step. Hermione thought that might actually work -- she'd try it when she got a chance. Intriguingly, the text referred to a case in the Old Testament where the practitioner -- in this case the classical Kohen Gadol -- managed to relate to the community as a whole in a similar fashion on Yom Kippur. The Kohen Gadol would first atone for himself, then for his family/clan, and then eventually for the entire community. She wondered if the Kohen Gadol had managed to accomplish this feat over the past Yom Kippur.

Finishing her daily reading, she meditated for a few minutes, did some homework, and then looked over the latest excerpt from the proposed *Hermione Granger and the Philosopher's Stone*. It was discussing how her parents had thought that her unusual behavior had been due to hallucinations either their parts or hers -- the brain template necessary for a 150 IQ had to have a few drawbacks with it. Instances of this "problem" would recur with increasing regularity until her parents received the note from Hogwarts which explained what the underlying cause had really been.

She corrected some of Rowling's texts and then sent them back to her. She was about to get back to her reading when hjpotter@hogwarts.uk raced in with a computer printout in his hand. Professor Flitwick had proven to be as curious about the computer in the headmaster's office as Dumbledore had been, and he had put in a request for each House to have its own computer. In the meantime, Flitwick requested that all people who wished to get onto the Internet speak with Hermione, Professor Bell, or one of the two Astronomy professors if they wanted to get an account. Hermione was amused to discover that someone had put Duke Nukem 3D on Flitwick's computer -- and none of the staff members seemed to know who it was. It was probably George Weasley via Ron, she thought. There were also rumors that a television set with a Sega Genesis had materialized in the Hufflepuff common room.
Harry tried to shove the document in her face. "Hermione, take a look at this! You're not going to believe it!"

Hermione batted it away and tried to turn back to her book. "Not now, Harry. I'm --"

Harry spoke right over her: "going to be very happy when I tell you that SPIW's mission has just taken a tremendous step forward thanks to the United Nations!"

Hermione put the book down and gawked at him. "WHAT?"

Harry, grinning furiously, showed her the document once more. This time, she took it and started to read. Her eyebrows headed for the ceiling as soon as she read the first few sentences.

------------

United Nations Grants Human Rights To All Sentient Hominids

After extensive discussion with Ambassador Dialonis and members of the British organization known as the Society for Preservation of Intelligent Welfare, the United Nations has passed a resolution which will grant human rights to many hominids capable of speech. This resolution will go into effect on January 1st, 1997.

Ambassador Dialonis, a member of SPIW, explains. "We have known for many years that many species other than Homo sapiens are intelligent and capable of meaningful discourse with human beings. In the Wizarding community, we have two classes of sentient creatures, Beings and Beasts. With very few exceptions, Beings are capable of human, or near-human, intelligence and are far more civilized than their unusual exteriors would suggest. Most Beings are hominids, or at least part-human, and in some cases are able to even breed with humans. Some of them may have horns, fins, or tails. But you can look into their eyes and see someone on the same level as you are in virtually all aspects."

Beginning January 1st, all hominid creatures with Being status will receive the same rights in Muggle countries as humans. These include goblins, elves, giants, fairies, and veela. Werewolves are also included while they are in human form, as are centaurs and all humans of all races and creeds. Merpeople are protected by this new law as long as they are in forms capable of human speech. Finally, mixtures between these species, such as Ambassador Hagrid the half-giant and veela model Fleur Delacoeur, are also considered Beings.

The United Nations admits that the human race has had a dark history of discriminating against other members of their own species simply because they appear to be superficially different. Humanity has made great strides over the last few years to rectify this issue, but there is still more work to be done. The difficulty of stopping discrimination even in our own species makes preventing inter-Being discrimination extremely important. "We need to nip this in the bud", as Ambassador Dialonis says.

President Andrea Markali of the Republic of Nestor was one of the first to comment on this resolution. "We of the Veela Republic are glad to hear that the Muggles will be accepting us as equals. As you can tell, we look almost exactly like human beings and can be mistaken for human beings very easily. A quick poll of the people in this room indicated that 98% of them believed I was an ordinary human and were quite surprised to find that I actually was a veela."

This decree applies to Muggle nations represented in the United Nations as of January 1st. Wizarding nations, for the most part, already accept other hominid species as Beings and have done so for many years. There is one glaring exception, however: Houyhnhnhmland, where President Neihym has
Harry backed off. "I'm sorry, Hermione. I couldn't print out the rest of it because Flitwick imposed a limit of one printed page per person. There aren't that many pieces of Muggle paper out here yet, and the pieces of parchment we usually use are too large for the printers to take them. However, you can rest assured that you are mentioned near the end. I wouldn't be surprised if you're asked to make a statement."

Hermione looked at the document again and blinked. "Dialonis himself found out about SPIW? How did he do that?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't know. If I were to guess, I suspect it was either through something you said or through Hagrid. After all, Hagrid is a diplomat now."

Hermione's mind raced, and she frantically tried a meditation technique to calm her. It didn't work well, of course. Then again, she needed to start getting into a regular practice. Hopefully she'd be able to think of something intelligent to say before the Muggle paparazzi managed to force their way past the Fat Lady.

---------

Baghdad
Iraq

Saddam Hussein was ecstatic. No fewer than 35 wizards had agreed to come to Iraq and swear Unbreakable Oaths to serve him. Granted, they had requested that he accept the version of the Unbreakable Oath which wouldn't kill the oath taker if he or she accidentally made a mistake. He was a bit worried about that. However, he figured that it would be good enough. He didn't have THAT many wizards, after all, and he didn't want any of them dropping dead because of an accident.

The vast majority of them were Muslim or had agreed to convert to Islam. Most of them were Shiite to boot. This appeared to be a match made in heaven.

Now the question was...what was he going to do with them? Get back at the United States? Beat up on Iran? Grab some more oil? He needed to think carefully here.

----------

A few hundred miles away, one of the newly sworn Iraqi Death Eaters chuckled as he explained why he agreed to take the break-it-or-die version of the Oath. "It's simple, Mahmud. When I mean serve him, I meant that I would give him a drink at some point. That technically does count as serving, does it not?"

Mahmud chuckled. "Indeed, it does. The big question is whether it still counts as serving if it's been spiked with Veritaserum or hexed or something like that?"

The first Death Eater smiled. "Why, yes, I suspect that it does."

Mahmud nearly fell over laughing. Eventually, he composed himself and jotted down a note. "You know, that's a clever idea. I'll have all the other Death Eaters do just what you did -- swear on their lives to serve him. As long as you give him food at some sort, you've obeyed your oath. If you really
want to get creative, you can Transfigure him into a tennis ball and hit him with one of those Muggle rackets."

The first Death Eater shook his head in mock sadness. "I doubt he'd let me Transfigure him into a tennis ball. Too suspicious."

Mahmud shrugged. "Well, it was worth a try."

To be continued...

Update #404.5 People's Republic Of Tyranny
----------
Friday, October 25, 1996
Communist Party of Houynhnmland HQ
Hynhynn
Houynhnmland
----------

"...So this is how it works. Any questions?" Advisor Chantrea Samnang, Xylend witch hasn't even finished her sentence yet, and virtually all hands in the room were in the air.
"How do you think we could manage without that mobility?" asked Hohepa, a former yahoo from Chiron's Landing, and added: "I mean, we don't have as many wizards as you... at least not full wizards with Apparition Licenses."

The witch frowned and responded: "As I said, we haven't seen any working examples of this kind of government above the population of 100,000. Worse, we've seen it **not** working well at all through the eyes of those Inuits unfortunate enough to belong to the USSR. But then again, we haven't seen a combination of magic and advanced technology before since...well...ever! Next?"

Sitting in a back corner, some men of the Shining Path's original expedition force were whispering to each other angrily. "This is totally not what we signed up for!" said one Peruvian. "That weirdo system of that foreign witch isn't even decent communism, and she'd have us achieve it peacefully, without revolution! What a farce!"
Struggling to maintain his feigned expression of anger instead of smirking smugly, Comrade Vazquez (actually Zafareth Bluestar, undercover merwizard agent) responded: "Unfortunately, these ex-yahoos seem to give more trust to fellow Hidden Nations people than to us. And face it, they have better credentials than us when it comes to peaceful life... after what those wizards did to this city I'm not surprised they'd rather avoid war for a time."
"Still," the complainer insisted, "the boss will not take it well if we just give up. Or you say you're willing to tell him personally, Vazquez?"

----------
later
secret location
Republic of Peru
----------
"No, no, absolutely NO!" Comrade Feliciano, (actually Óscar Ramírez, current leader of the Communist Party of Peru - Shining Path) shouted in the wireless transmitter, his face beat red. "We will not heed that false communist's words! Our path, the only true path, is that of Revolution! Having it any other way is just a feeble excuse for cowardly inaction, which in turn directly helps the reactionary forces! ... Of course we won't stop our militant campaign, for a thousand times no! In fact, it's time to show the world that we really mean business! I know there are some of those halfwizards there, loyal to us... I think it's time we start using them to re-enact those bombings of Judgement Day! ... What do you mean Vazquez, it's Tabooed? ... I see. Well, then we'll just have to stick with more traditional methods, but I trust your ingenuity comrade, I know you'll find some way to incorporate magic in our new wave of terror attacks! I command you, Comrade Vazquez, to use everything at your disposal to show the might of the proletariat to all it's enemies! Use whatever tools you see fit! I'll be watching you."

Putting down the transmitter and looking around to see he's alone, 'Vazquez' pulled out his wand from it's Fideliused holster and muttered to the empty room: "I see fit to use this tool, you delusional criminal swine. Expecto Patronum!"

To be continued...

__________________

Update #405: Bye Bye Bardie

Saturday, October 26, 1996
Outside Shakespeare Residence
Stratford-upon-Avon
United Kingdom
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 4/1.6%

NEXT UP: The Omega Bible

Nicholas Flamel couldn't deny it anymore. He was aging, and he had completely forgotten how it had felt since he hadn't aged for...well, about six hundred years. One look in the mirror this morning had betrayed it. His hair had definitely thinned, and what was left was almost completely gone. His beard had gone from gray with white streaks to white with gray streaks. He was getting backaches more and more frequently, and although he was able to heal them with some spells he'd picked up in the 17th century he knew it wouldn't last forever. He figured he had ten years left, twenty tops.

He was having second thoughts about having destroyed the Stone four years ago. Why hadn't he just Fideliused the Stone to himself and let his wife and Hugh in on the secret? That way, the Stone would be effectively out of play for everyone other than the three of them. He grimaced: there wasn't much use worrying about it now.

The fact that his life was nearing an end had made it more important than ever that he start giving
lectures about his experiences and telling everyone what had REALLY happened, especially in the years before the Statute of Secrecy had come into place where the wizards actually witnessed things the Muggles would have known about.

He had spoken to his wife and Hugh about this, and both of them had agreed. Hugh would leave Hogwarts at the end of the school year and replace him as the Minister of Magic. Hugh didn't have any political experience that Flamel knew about. However, Flamel hadn't had any, either. Their main qualification was the simple fact that they had lots of experience in MANY fields...period. Six and a half centuries worth of experience at their fingertips thanks to their Pensieves. Once Flamel resigned from the Ministry, he and his wife would spend the rest of their days discussing their past experiences on the talk circuit. It would be like teaching the medieval literature class all over again...but without the homework.

Yes, they were planning to turn his diary into a movie, *The Life and Times of Dr. Nicholas Flamel*. The problem with movies, of course, was that in order to be viable for the mass market, they needed explosions and sex and so forth. He knew enough about the Muggle film industry to realize that more often than not the movie didn't match the book perfectly. Since the purpose of this project was to document reality, he could not afford any mistakes in the transmission to film. It could be boring from time to time. Well, the Muggles would have to live with it. Perhaps advertising it as the first 3D would help.

There were lots of things the Muggles knew little about: Professor Koschei's involvement with the Black Death, the Native American Wizarding shamans killing off the settlers of the Roanoke colony, the real reason Columbus's ships made it across the Atlantic, the terrible circumstances leading to the founding of the Galiver Consortium, and so forth. It was up to him to clear the air on these.

He decided that he would start by spilling the beans on Britain's most celebrated author. As a result, he had agreed to give his first lecture at Shakespeare's home in Stratford-upon-Avon.

Looking out over the crowd which had gathered in front of the building, he saw that there were at least a thousand people there and that he would have to enhance his voice to get them all hear him. Hoping that he wouldn't break the windows in the old building behind him, he cast the spell and began to speak.

"Ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon. My name is Dr. Nicholas Flamel Sedai, and I am currently serving as the British Minister of Magic. I admit that I am relatively new to this position, having been called upon to serve my country shortly after the events of Judgment Day. I promise you that will do everything I can maintain stable relations between the Muggle and Wizarding worlds.

"My trip to this famous house today, however, is not to support the Ministry. Rather, it is because it is the first stop on what will be a lifelong tour to explain, once and for all, some of the momentous events I have witnessed over my lifetime -- most of which have been recorded incorrectly in history books, both Muggle and Wizarding, as we know it.

"I believe that I am qualified to do this because, stated simply, I look quite good for my age. I appear to you to be a man of seventy-five or so. However, I am actually slightly older than that. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, the rumors are true. I was born on August 10, 1328. That is right, ladies and gentlemen. 1328. I studied alchemy from a young age and decided to attempt to construct a Philosopher's Stone after the Black Death ravaged most of Europe. Having seen several people die of bubonic plague, including my infant son Robert, I took it upon myself to ensure that something would always exist to cure virtually all ailments. Needless to say, the fact that I am still here proves that I succeeded after decades of work. However, that is a story for another time."
"I have come here to tell you the tale of the Wizarding scholar Sir Henry Wood. He was born in 1556 in a house four blocks from here, died in 1649, and was one of the most learned wizards of the era. He served as Minister of Magic from 1636 to 1647. He was fluent in English, Spanish, Gaelic, Danish, German, Greek, Latin, Hebrew, French, and quite possibly Italian as well. The man was a linguistic scholar of the highest degree and governed our wizards with great skill and dignity. He also was a very successful diplomat and mediator.

"Most of the information on Sir Wood vanished from the Muggle world shortly after the Statute of Secrecy was put in place. However, a few of his works survived, primarily dramatic. They included plays like *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and a large number of sonnets."

The crowd began muttering excitedly, and Flamel smiled. "If this reminds you of somebody, you're not imagining anything. In 1590, when Wood's first plays came out, he decided to publish them under a pseudonym because he was concerned that Muggles would not read plays written by a wizard. After much consideration, he decided to attribute these plays to a middling actor and playwright from these parts, a man by the name of William Shakespeare."

The crowd, naturally, began hollering. "Shakespeare himself, whom Wood knew from his home town, was not literate enough to produce any good plays. Besides, he didn't have the international experience and Wizarding knowledge to turn out masterpieces. Wood and Shakespeare agreed to split the profits from the plays, with Shakespeare getting 25% and Wood getting 75%. Shakespeare would take the credit in the Muggle world and Wood would take the credit in the Wizarding world. This helped Shakespeare's own plays gain in popularity and helped him make some money, enough at one point to start his own theater troupe. The Wizarding part of the funds, collected anonymously, went to various charitable agencies...including the research and development fund which eventually allowed me to finish off the Philosopher's Stone."

"When Shakespeare died in 1616, Sir Wood considered continuing to release his plays to the Muggles under a different name. He was in the middle of a work called *Double Falsehood* at the time -- I'm sure you recognize the title as that of one of Shakespeare's lost plays. However, it was increasingly obvious that he was having less and less time to work on his plays. His fame was starting to catch up with him, much as you see with the Muggle royal family today. He was also thinking of getting into politics as he had done a lot of research to create the plays he had already written -- and, as I said earlier, became Minister of Magic twenty years later. However, he did manage to write a few more plays, none of which were actually made available to Muggles."

The crowd immediately started hollering "WE WANT THE PLAYS! WE WANT THE PLAYS!". Flamel having expected this, smiled. "Don't worry, they're coming out. At any rate, all of his plays were designed to be performed using either wizards or Muggles as actors. Muggles could play many roles, such as Hamlet or Romeo. However, there are scenes where ghosts come into play, as you know. Hamlet's dead father is a good example. Furthermore, there are plays which refer to fairies, such as Titania and Oberon in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Wizards could appear as well, such as Prospero in *The Tempest* -- which reminds me, Caliban was supposed to have been cast as a troll. A Wizarding performance of these plays where the magicians and wizards were actually performing their assigned roles was a marvel for the guests, and I hope it will be possible for one of these to be performed again."

The crowd began cheering loudly and immediately start clamoring to have Flamel organize a performance. Flamel chuckled and nodded. "Ah, yes. I thought you would be asking about that. Well, you will not have long to wait. You see, Amelia Bell, the Hogwarts Muggle Studies teacher, recently reintroduced Sir Wood (under the Shakespeare pseudonym) to the Hogwarts curriculum to
get the wizards up to speed on Muggle culture. My wife, of course, found this rather amusing. He
pulled her aside and explained a few things to her. Needless to say, she was very surprised.
However, she eventually came to see the truth.

"Professor Bell immediately recommended that the school put on some of Shakespeare's plays in full
Wizarding form. After discussion with His Majesty and several of the staff members, the school has
decided to put on The Tempest and King of the Warlocks for a brief period of time near the end of the
first semester. First performance is going to be Tuesday, December 17th, in the Great Hall. Yes,
King of the Warlocks was one of Wood's last plays, published in 1631. The last I heard, Flitwick
would be playing Prospero, the Gray Lady would be playing Ariel, and Nearly Headless Nick will
be playing Rufus, Laurentio's servant in King of the Warlocks. Tickets will go on sale in a few days:
8 Galleons or £40 per person for each play. All proceeds will be donated to the Judgment Day
cleanup funds."

Flamel winked. "I highly recommend that you mark your calendars, ladies and gentlemen. Rest
assured, it will be a night to remember. After all, I saw several of those plays performed when Wood
was one of the new kids on the block. Besides, how many of you can claim to have seen an
authentic 'Shakespearean' play called King of the Warlocks?"

To be continued...
Update #406: The Omega Bible

September 28, 1996
Christians for Humans Headquarters
Lviv
Ukraine

ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 4/1.7%

NEXT UP: Of Course, The Dead Sea Is Probably More Salt Than Water

Viktor Pavlov shook his head as he handed the document to the man formerly known as Pope Urban IX. "Holiness, I'm sorry for bothering you, but I think you should see this."

Urban looked at the news report and his eyes widened. Slowly, methodically, he read its contents. Finally, he growled and threw report away. "Do they honestly expect us to abide by this? Who do they think they are, God?"

Pavlov chuckled sarcastically. "Probably. Judging from all of the grandees who are there, I bet they think they speak for Him."

"I doubt it, Viktor. This Samuel character -- assuming he is in fact Samuel to begin with, which I'm still not convinced of -- has got him under his spell. Not to mention that wizards are starting to join the conference."

Pavlov nodded. "Indeed. With all due respect, however, it's getting a bit late in the year for Omega to be open. If they want to continue the conference into the colder months of the year, someone is going to have to winterize those cabins in a hurry."

Urban crossed himself. "I'd rather bring over a sleeping bag and a space heater than subject myself to the Mark of the Beast like that. Those poor fools, Viktor. I hope God has mercy on their souls. And if His mercy comes to late, then it behooves us to break up that conference using any means necessary."

Pavlov blanched for a moment as the ramifications sank in. Slowly, he backed off a step. "Any means necessary? Sir, I doubt I'd go that far..."

Urban glared at him. "We are doing the work of God here, Viktor. He has given humanity knowledge for a reason. Had He not intended us to use it, He would not have allowed us to obtain it."

Pavlov glowered at him momentarily, then shook his head. "Whatever you say, Holiness. In the meantime, what do we do about this new Bible they're advertising."

Urban grinned. "We've already got a Bible, and it's the unalterable word of God. We don't need this newfangled thing they're toting around. If God wants us to change the text of His book, He'll
presumably come down and tell us.”

Pavlov hesitated for a moment. "Holiness, one could argue that the fact that the conference allowed to begin to start with could be a sign of God's approval. I personally don't like wizards all that much, but the fact that the vast majority of those theologians are Muggles and were brought together to begin with..."

Urban gritted his teeth. "Yes, and God said wizards were supposed to be destroyed. There may not be many wizards there, but when whoever is in charge is supposedly a wizard AND a ghost, that's a rather damning sign. Besides, you've heard rumors that one of them supposedly tried to play God over Sukkot."

Pavlov frowned. "That I have heard. However, in all fairness the jury is still out."

Urban looked at Pavlov as if the latter were stupid. "A wizard disappeared shortly before that manifestation took place. Coincidence? I think not". Cutting off Pavlov’s reply, he said. "Tell everyone to buy copies of those new books. Once everyone has a copy, cut out everything that's not in the real Bible and see if it's combustible."

Pavlov gaze was fixed on a point somewhere above Urban's head. "As you command, Holiness."

-------------

Hogsmeade
-------------

Richard Zabini, a former Slytherin whose son was still at school, frowned when he saw that the package was addressed to Dinky, his elf. Since when did elves actually get presents? Wary, he unwrapped the gift and realized what was for almost immediately.

The package contained a piece of parchment wrapped around what appeared to be a piece of underwear. The parchment read:

-----

Dear Friend: Thanks to the actions of the United Nations and the Society for the Preservation of Intelligent Welfare, you are no longer a servant. Go out into the world and make a new life for yourself if you so choose.

Sincerely,

S.P.I.W (formerly S.P.E.W)

The Society for the Preservation of Intelligent Welfare

Countess Hermione Granger, Founder
Ms. Henrietta Lansford, Chief Executive Officer
Mr. Leonard Culver, Chief Elf Rights Agent

-----

Furious, he tossed the package into the trash. The United Nations had no jurisdiction over him. Who was he to listen to those obnoxious Muggles?

At least two thirds of his friends had lost at least one elf servant over the past twenty-four hours. It appeared that someone in S.P.I.W. had managed to get list of everyone who had owned elves and had decided to give them a bit of a surprise. Well, he wasn't going to fall for that. Just wait until he
got in touch with the Death Eater cell which had attacked Hogwarts. Had Blaise been taking Astronomy at the time the snake had attacked the tower, things might have been a bit different. But Blaise was excited and ready to go. Supposedly he, Crabbe, and Goyle were already starting to set up another student group of Death Eaters right under poor Flitwick's nose.

He went back to his work when he heard someone rummaging in and around the trash can. He frowned when he saw pointed ears sticking up out of the trash can.

Grabbing his wand, he pointed it at those ears. "All right, Dinky! Get out of that trash can! Go back to work!"

Dinky didn't respond immediately. Instead, he rummaged a little more. Zabini shot a few hexes in his direction, but the stubborn elf didn't respond.

It appeared he had no choice: he had to maintain discipline. Preparing an *Avada Kedavra*, he threw everything he had at those ears. The ears promptly disappeared into the trash pin, and the green bolt hit the curtain and set it on fire.

Seconds later, Dinky came out with a smile on his face. In his hand he held the sock and the note.

Dinky beamed at Zabini. "Master has given Dinky underwear! Dinky is free!"

Zabini begged to differ. He roared, "No, I haven't! You weren't supposed to get that! I most certainly did not give that to you!"

Dinky looked at him slyly. "Master knows Dinky likes to rummage in trash. He intended to give the letter to Dinky by dropping it in the trash."

Zabini bit his lip. So, the elf was a bit of a lawyer, was he? Well, two could play at that game. Throwing a book at the elf, he bellowed: "That was NOT what I had in mind!"

Dinky didn't bite. "Master could have Vanished it. But no, Master threw it in a place where Dinky could find it."

Zabini was getting fed up. Hitting the elf with an *Immobilus*, he shouted: "Dinky, I'm warning you! I'll give you to the count of three to promise me you will go back to work. One, two..."

Dinky's ears drooped momentarily. Finally, he sighed. "Master is right, of course. Release me from the spell."

Breathing a sigh of relief, he released the elf from the spell. Winky, still moping, dropped the parchment in front of him and got ready to leave. However, as he was about to leave, the elf stopped and turned to look at the man who had owned him for nineteen years.

"Winky would like to say one thing, Master."

Zabini stared at him warily. Wand still pointed at the elf's chest, he said: "And that is?"

Winky smiled and extended his middle finger out towards Zabini. "Go kiss a dementor, Richard Zabini."

Furious, Zabini cast another *Avada Kedavra* at the elf...only to find the elf disappear before it hit him. The spell hit a wooden table and it, too, started to catch fire. Zabini barely had time to let loose with an expletive-laden "DINKY!" before the fire alarm spells started hooting throughout the building.
Michal Oved and Wizard Amirmoez blinked in the glare of the harsh sunlight. It was devilishly hot here, even by Middle Eastern standards. Then again, what would could someone possibly expect when you were in a desert area near the lowest point in the entire world.

Amirmoez raised his hand to silence the crowd and then nodded his head at a large glass door marked with "Experimental Spell Lab #3". Inside the laboratory, wizards were hard at work doing things the Muggles probably had no idea could even be done.

The former Hamas wizard began to speak. "Ladies and gentlemen, it is our great pleasure to introduce the Ein Gedi Experimental Desalination Plant. The sole mission of this facility is to combine Muggle and magical technology to develop a safe, economical, and practical method to turn salt water into water fresh enough to drink. Inshallah, the wizards and scientists in these laboratories will be able to provide drinking water for people all around the world. This project has been sponsored by the Israeli Ministry of Magic and is partially sponsored by the Lowne Paolte Fund for the Millennium Problems."

Michal Oved continued. "The Earth's surface is over two thirds water, yet very little of it is actually fresh. Even worse, most of the fresh water is stuck in the glaciers of Antarctica and Greenland, where the only people able to benefit from it are the Tsalal community buried deep under the Antarctic icecap. With large portions of the world lacking high-quality drinking water, magical desalination techniques should improve the livelihood of hundreds of millions, perhaps billions of people."

One of the reporters raised his hand. "Can the Philosopher's Stone be used to create potable water?"

Michal shook her head. "I don't think so, sir. However, it is a moot point as all surviving copies of the Philosopher's Stone have been either confiscated by American wizards or destroyed."

"Why did you set up the plant here? Shouldn't you have placed this facility on the Mediterranean?"

Amirmoez smiled. "There's a reason that this is called the Ein Gedi Experimental Desalination Plant. A second is also under construction outside what is left of Tel Aviv, right on the Mediterranean. Although that facility will be hard at work trying to purify water of lower salinity levels, the Tel Aviv facility -- formally known as Experimental Desalination Plant #2 -- will also be hard at work at trying to deal with radiation and other anthropogenic pollutants. This plant here, however, is the primary desalination one."

Michal Oved cut in. "The reason for placing a plant on the Dead Sea is obvious. If we developed a technique for desalination which would only work for the Mediterranean, it is a distinct possibility
that the high salinity of the Dead Sea would be too much for the technique to handle. This could still leave hundreds of thousands of Israelis, Palestinians, and Jordanians with nothing to drink. With the Dead Sea being the saltiest body of water in the world, we're assuming that if it works on the Dead Sea's water, it will work for everything."

"What happens if the tensions between the Israelis and Palestinians flare up again? I know things have simmered down a lot because of the destruction of Tel Aviv, but we all know there have been scattered attacks here and there."

Amirmoez shrugged. "Then the Palestinians and Jordanians get this plant and the Israelis get the Mediterranean one."

"Will you be able to extract minerals such as potash and bromine from the sea water as you purify it?"

Amirmoez nodded. "Yes, we will. Once we remove the impurities from the salt, we'll be able to do whatever the world wants with them. Personally, as a wizard, I could use some of the substances for spell components. I don't know what you Muggles are going to do with the stuff, but I take it potash and bromine are quite valuable where you come from."

"I vaguely recall a prophecy which envisions a time when the Dead Sea's salinity will drop to a level appropriate for an inland lake, or at least to the level of the Mediterranean. Will you be able to fulfill this prophecy?"

Michal Oved frowned. "A prophecy? I don't remember a prophecy about this."

The speaker laughed. "It's in the Bible, both the traditional and Omega versions. Ezekiel chapter 47."

The Israeli Minister laughed. "Oh -- THOSE prophecies. Well, I'm afraid Ezekiel will have to wait. Magically desalinating the entire sea with a wave of a wand is far beyond our capabilities. Furthermore, even if we did, evaporation of the water trapped in the Dead Sea will just raise the salinity again."

The crowd murmured a little as Amirmoez winked at his former adversary. "Don't give up hope, Minister. Yes, as far as we know of, it is beyond our capability right now. However, you forget the power of science. For all we know, a technological breakthrough will occur in the next 20 years which will allow Ezekiel's dream to come true."

Michal Oved laughed. "I admire your optimism, Wizard Amirmoez. However, in the light of recent events involving Samuel and Deborah, I would not be surprised if Ezekiel himself comes back first."

The crowd murmured more loudly. Finally, someone at the back of the room asked the obvious question. "Are you telling me that Ezekiel was a wizard?"

Oved shook her head. "I do not know of the magical statuses -- or even the actual existence -- of any biblical characters other than those of Samuel's era. It's quite possible that Ezekiel was a wizard, or at least saw something magical in that chariot prophecy of his. However, it's more than likely that we will never have proof either way. With issues like this, it is a matter of personal religious beliefs and faith. And that is all I am going to say on this subject."

---------------------
Seredina-Buda
Northern Ukraine
Yakiv Gavrilyuk shook his head. "I don't like this, Lilya. It doesn't make sense for them to be gone this long."

His wife laughed. "They're the Kohuts, Yakiv. They like to travel. I suppose that they've taken advantage of the trip to Atlantis to go explore the Greek islands and possibly the Mediterranean basin in general. The weather down there's certainly better than what we've got up here now."

Gavrilyuk grunted. "That's possible. However, it seems very much out of character for them to go completely incommunicado like that. Particularly without telling us."

"Could they not have phones in Atlantis?"

"Maybe. However, they've got to have SOME means of communicating with us. Whoever is running the show down there has to realize that the Muggles who won the lottery are going to want to keep in touch with the rest of the world."

Lilya frowned. "You know, Yakiv, you could be right. Even if they don't have phones, the wizards would have at least given them owls or Patronuses or something else. Furthermore, now that I think about it, I vaguely remember Mila telling me that they'd be going down there for a week and would tell us if things changed."

Gavrilyuk nodded abruptly. "That tears it. They've been gone for too long, and I can't imagine them not talking with us for a week. I'm starting to wonder if there was a catch to those wizards’ invitations that we don't know about."

Lilya snorted. "You're being paranoid, Yakiv. We've heard lots of stories about people visiting Atlantis and reporting back to their families. This is Atlantis, for God's sake. Atlantis's mission is to save the world, not wreck it."

Gavrilyuk swore and started heading towards the phone. "That makes this even more troubling. It seems that everyone else has reported back...but the Kohuts haven't. Let me make a few calls here."

The Gavrilyuks spent the next fifteen minutes calling people who were friends with both the Kohuts and themselves. They were horrified to hear that none of them had heard from Mila and Mihaylo either. Something very strange was going on, and neither of them liked it.

Deeply disturbed, Gavrilyuk reached for the general phone book and started leafing through the civil service pages at the beginning. Finding the appropriate phone number, he dialed it and was rewarded with an almost immediate answer.

The words began to tumble out of his mouth. "Good evening, sir. I regret to inform you that we have a bit of a problem. I'd like to file a missing persons report, and I'd like for a copy of it sent the Minister of Magic if possible."

To be continued...

__________________

Update #408: Hint: Try Talking To Keebler
--------------
Dinky the elf was slowly starting to realize that freedom wasn't all it was made out to be. He had been in a state of euphoria for about six hours or so, after which his stomach started grumbling. It had suddenly occurred to him that he had to find a place to eat on his own -- the first fly in the ointment. And even if he did find food, it would likely be cheap and probably of the same quality as the scraps the Zabinis had given him.

Figuring that SPIW would know something about how to get himself out of this predicament -- they had probably freed lots of elves over the past few days -- he brought out a small business card which had been hidden inside the piece of underwear now sitting, albeit loosely, around his waist. It had SPIW's address on it and a comment saying that any elf in need of advice should go there.

Hoping that the SPIW office was still open, he snapped his fingers and Apparated over to the movement's headquarters. He was pleased to notice that it was still open, and it had a huge banner reading WELCOME FREE ELVES waving above the main entrance. However, his joy was tempered somewhat by the fact that there was a very large line of elves snaking out the door.

Hoping that he wouldn't die of starvation before he got to the front of the line, he took his place at the back of the line. He figured that it would take several hours for him to make it to the front. To pass the time, he made conversation with the elf in front of him.

This elf was named Zippy and had been owned by the Nott family. Dinky listened in horror when she explained how she had been beaten and tortured by her masters. "Master was a Death Eater," she wailed. "He treated Zippy like vermin and had her do all the dirty work. Zippy had hoped that her lot in life would improve after Master was killed in Flying House. However, that was not to be. Zippy was sold to Master's son, currently at Hogwarts, and told to live with her new master's uncle. Zippy was very sad and wanted to take her own life at some point. Yet Zippy could not do that!"

Dinky stared at her. And he thought his life had been bad. All he could say was. "Dinky is sorry, Zippy. Dinky feels for you. Dink --"

That was as far as he got before Zippy flung her arms around him and started crying. The elf in front of her, an old man, spun and glared at her. "In the name of the Five Gods, Zippy, stop doing that. No one is going to hire you if you can't control your emotions. I know I wouldn't."

Dinky stared at the old man in disbelief. Had he actually heard an elf use the word "I", placing himself on the same level as the humans? That one word even managed to shock Zippy back into a semblance of sanity. Slowly, carefully, she turned around.

Dinky let it out first. "You actually used the word 'I'! You brave elf!"

The old man grunted. "Brave? That's nothing. I'm asserting my right to be my own person. I've been wanting to do that for a while."

Dinky looked at him in awe. Slowly, he pointed at himself. "What is your name, sir? Dinky wishes to greet you."
The old man's response surprised him. "My name is Daniel."

Dinky and Zippy's jaws dropped, and it was all Dinky to could to gasp: "Daniel? That is a human name!"

Daniel grinned. "Yes, and I chose it for myself. It means 'God is my judge', not a human. Of course, I didn't start out as Daniel. I started out as Skinny and was under the control of the Macnairs. When I received my underwear, I made a run for it before that executioner's widow could intervene. It took me about three hours to choose my name, and by the time I decided what I would call myself I had gotten a bit hungry. Worried I'd spend the rest of my life regretting that I'd given up free food, I went around looking for Dobby."

Dinky stared at him blankly. "Dobby? Who's Dobby?"

Daniel's smile broadened. "Dobby is the reason we're all here, Dinky. A little over three years ago, Harry Potter -- yes, the famous wizard -- tricked Lucius Malfoy into releasing him. Lucius wasn't happy about it, to say the least. It looks like SPIW has been reusing that trick with the rest of us to let us all go."

Zippy gawked at him. "Harry Potter supports SPIW? The wizard who destroyed several of the Dark Lord's Horcruxes is our ally?"

"He does indeed, Zippy. Harry is in fact friends with Hermione Granger, SPIW's founder. Hermione was first introduced to Dobby through Harry, and when Hermione realized how miserable Dobby's life was she vowed then and there to do something to help the elves. Thus was born SPEW, the Society for the Preservation of Elvish Welfare. We now know that organization as SPIW."

Dinky clapped his hands. "Dinky...er, I...see! How has Dobby been getting by since his freedom?"

"Well, he was destitute for a while, like the rest of us. Eventually, though, he wound up working at Hogwarts in the kitchen with the rest of the elves there. He can tell you more about it here, from what I've been told."

Zippy frowned. "Why would Dobby be here if he already has a job?"

Daniel smiled. "To encourage elves like us that there is daylight at the exit of the cavern. We can look at him and realize that our troubles will soon end. Officially, he's here to serve as a recruiter for the Hogwarts staff kitchens."

"Recruiter?"

"Someone who tries to connect employers with jobs. As a veteran kitchen elf, he wants some more help. Supposedly half the elves ran away when Igor Karkaroff took over the kitchen a while back."

Dinky scratched his head. "What would a human be doing in the kitchen?"

Daniel shrugged. "I don't know, Dinky. However, from what I've been told, he couldn't cook all that well."

Zippy was starting to brighten up. "There are people willing to give us jobs and food here at SPIW Headquarters?"
Daniel smiled. "It's not just jobs and food, Zippy. We're talking Galleons as well here. Imagine, you will be given Galleons so you can buy your own food whenever you wish."

Dinky couldn't believe what he was hearing. "I...will have my own MONEY? I won't have to rely on other people for handouts?"

"Yes, Dinky. You can have your choice of the best food you can afford. That is, of course, if you get one of the jobs. I'm hoping to try out for the Hogwarts kitchens myself, though we're going to have to have open minds here."

"Who's hiring here?"

"Well, we've got Hogwarts, the Ministry here in Hogsmeade, a few places in York, and that pet store which was more or less cleaned out during the fight between Sirius Black and Peter Pettigrew over Nagini. Looks like all the Muggles ran away and Roger wants new employees. There are also supposedly seasonal positions for people who are supposed to wrap presents for Christmas, also for Muggle owners."

Dinky frowned. "I can work for Muggles?"

"I don't see why not. If you like Muggles, go for it. You'll get a lot of attention, of course. Keep in mind, though, that it can be a double-edged sword. You may get discriminated against 'unofficially', possibly with taunts and teasing. On the other hand, people with an open mind will likely back you up."

Dinky nodded. "I'll keep that in mind, Daniel."

Zippy turned to him. "Do you know which job you have in mind? I'm thinking the kitchens myself."

Dinky shrugged. "Whatever will take and feed me. I'm not that picky."

Daniel glared at him. "That's the slave mentality talking, Dinky. You are your own master now. You have rights, and you can CHOOSE a job. You need to come to this from a position of confidence. Otherwise they won't take you."

Zippy chuckled. "Take a look at the line. Unless I'm mistaken, I doubt they'll take us anyway before this job fair closes down."

Daniel shrugged. "Hope for the best, young lady. There's nothing you can do about it, anyway."

The three elves resumed their wait, making their way closer and closer to the front of the line. Dinky was about to start eating dirt when someone came out with free food, which he gobbled up immediately. It was better than anything he'd tasted before. Once he got a job, he'd be able to get food like this all the time.

If he could only get to the front of the line...

To be continued...
Ed Burchett had heard from many people in the know that Halloween in Salem would be an absolute
madhouse. However, NOTHING had prepared him for this. Route 114 was backed up for miles,
and at the rate it was going it was going to tie up traffic on Route 128 as well. He could only pity
those people like himself who wanted to go to places like Marblehead and didn't want to touch
Salem with a ten-foot pole. Or broom, for that matter.

The exposure of the wizards -- along with Guinevere's involvement with an organization (now
defunct) known as the Salem Witches' Academy -- meant that the traditional Halloween festivities
would go from ridiculous to completely out of hand. To make matters worse, the Peabody Essex
Museum had somehow managed to get hold of a few brooms and other magical artifacts even though
Secretary Ariadne had endorsed Radner's decree that Muggles should not be using brooms without
appropriate training.

Ariadne had foreseen that something like this would happen and had repeated that most of the people
who had been killed in the 1692 crackdown had not in fact been witches. She explained that the
exhibits in Salem gave people a false impression of what magic was like and what it was like to be a
witch or wizard. Finally, she repeated that most of the people who had been executed had in fact
been from Danvers, not from Salem. The only reason that the incident had been known as the Salem
witch trials was because at the time Danvers had still been part of Salem. She had done everything
she could to keep people away from Salem. Some good that did, however.

Burchett turned on the radio to hear that the Quabbin was absolutely mobbed. With two of the towns
already destroyed, thousands of people had tried to visit at the same time. The head of the Quabbin
Academy of Sorcery -- which now included the women's school as well -- had eventually given up
trying to teach classes when people had started pestering him for tours. The security guards had tried
to keep boats off the surface of the reservoir and had eventually given up, letting them visit as long as
they did not release any flotsam and jetsam into the water (and used paddles instead of motors).

Meanwhile, there were rumors that Rebecca Nurse, the ghost of a witch who had been killed in
1692, had made her way off to Salem Willows Park to try to deflect some of the people away from
downtown and explain what had actually happened. All that managed to do, of course, was make
matters worse because the people who wanted to visit her still had to get to Salem. There were also
reports that some leftover activists from America for Humans was going to protest in Salem.
Anything involving America for Humans looked like it was a good recipe for disaster.

He looked at the cars around him and was horrified to see no fewer than three people dressed like
elves. For all he knew, they WERE elves who knew how to drive cars. Five people were dressed as
witches, and one was even dressed as a mermaid. A shadow passed over him, and he craned his
neck to catch a glimpse of a flying carpet. He made a mental note to buy a flying carpet as soon as he
got back. If he ever got back.
To add insult to injury, he saw someone walking around with a sign advertising the Muggle Apparition Network: "Why spend all the time in traffic if we can Apparate you to your destination". He was very tempted to park the car somewhere and ask the MAN representative to send him home. Tomorrow, after all of this hullaballoo died down, he'd go back and pick the car up.

He was tempted. Very tempted.

--------

London

Michael Heseltine's remarks were short and to the point. "Ladies and gentlemen, it has been an honor to serve as your acting Prime Minister. However, it would be inappropriate for me to stay on too long without taking the will of the public into account. As a result, it is my duty to inform you that my tenure as acting Prime Minister will be ending February 1st, when the Regency Committee and Parliament have promised to identify a permanent replacement. It may be me, it may be someone else. All we know is that the person chosen on February 1st will no longer be acting Prime Minister. He or she will be Prime Minister, full stop. No ifs, ands, or buts.

"Note that the government has agreed that Nicholas Flamel, the Minister of Magic, is not in the running for this position. Although Minister Flamel appears trustworthy, we cannot forget the last time a wizard tried to run for Prime Minister. Voldemort nearly took us over, and we will never let that happen again."

--------

Hogwarts

Flitwick looked at the other staff members. "You're sure about this?"

Moody nodded. "We are, Headmaster. We have to show the world that we are trustworthy and do so without relying on those ridiculous Aes Sedai vows. That's why there have to be tours of Hogwarts. We need to have the Muggles see for themselves that we're good people and that we're learning about Muggles from one of the Muggles themselves."

"But what about Britain for Humans? Britain for Humans has regrouped and is thinking of starting attacks again!"

Patrick Moore threw his hands up. "All the more so. If we don't let the Muggles in, they're going to find way to circumvent our defenses somehow or attack somewhere else in the Wizarding world. Remember what happened with Zygonov and the Death Eaters. By giving out tours, we're going to lure them over to us...and hit them with virtually every single security method we can think of. We're going to involve both Muggle and Wizarding security tactics here. To be honest, Headmaster, I don't see how ANYTHING is going to get past that."

Moody continued. "We're going to have to let Muggles in at some point. People are going to want to talk to the Muggle king from time to time, and J. K. Rowling will be stopping by to interview Miss Granger. If we DON'T let Muggles in, on the other hand, they're going to start wondering what's going on here and whether we're doing something to King William."

Flitwick groaned. "I don't like this. Where are you going to take the Muggles?"

"Well, we'll go into the Great Hall and maybe have them sit in on a few Muggle Studies lessons. We'll probably throw in Charms and History of Magic because no one would be stupid enough to actually go the wife or apprentice of the Minister of Magic himself. Quidditch matches should also be popular, as well as Hoops matches."
"Hoops?"

"A new game which was developed in Xylenda as a combination of Muggle basketball and Quidditch. It's played at the Quidditch pitch but there are bouncing balls and so forth. It's getting pretty popular among the students."

Moody continued. "At any rate, we're going to enhance the castle's defenses with a permanent charm to prevent Polyjuicing. All guests will be disarmed and relieved of all their possessions other than notebooks and cameras. They'll then have to go through Muggle airport-style security checkpoints. Trust me, nothing is going to get by."

Mrs. Flamel nodded. "Headmaster, I'm personally comfortable with this. We know this castle had good security even before the Muggles got involved. This will just augment that. Furthermore, it would be a great political and diplomatic risk if we DIDN'T take the risk."

Flitwick looked at her grimly. "Well, if all else fails we can always say the dementors are still there -- at least those of us who aren't Aes Sedai. The Muggles won't know any better. All right, people. I agree. Let's start the tours, and God help us all if this doesn't work out."

-----------------------------
Russian Ministry of Magic
-----------------------------
Tsar Alexei looked at the Muggle attache and then back at the photographs of the two Muggles. "You're saying the Kohuts are missing?"

The Muggle bowed and nodded. "Yes, Your Majesty. A missing persons report has just been called in from northern Ukraine. Mila and Mihaylo Kohut. The person who called it in, Yakiv Gavrilyuk, insisted that the Ministry of Magic find out about this as well."

Alexei nodded. "That is a wise move, sir. After all, the Kohuts were among the people who earned a trip to Atlantis through the Muggle lottery on October 1st."

The Muggle gaped at him. "The Kohuts are in Atlantis?"

"I suspect. I don't know why they haven't kept in touch, however. Rest assured that I will relay this information to the Grand Mugwump to see if we can get this ironed out."

The Muggle bowed once more. "Thank you very much, Your Majesty. The Gavrilyuks will be delighted to hear this."

"No problem sir. I'll keep you posted."

--------
Atlantis
--------
Dagher frowned. "What do you mean the Kohuts are missing? They're right here! I saw them a few days ago!"

Alexei grunted. "Well, they appear to like Atlantis so much that they've forgotten to tell everyone that they're still alive. We've got a couple of people in northern Ukraine frantic enough about their safety to file a missing persons report."

Dagher nearly fell over laughing. "Stupid Muggle tourists. I'll head over the first thing tomorrow
morning. Send me the missing persons report so I can shove it in their faces."

Alexei nodded. "Will do, sir. Over and out."

Three hours later, well after sundown, a package arrived express from St. Petersburg. Wondering how frantic these northern Ukrainers were, he dragged over a candle to look at the document. The first things he saw were the two pictures, one of a man and one of a woman.

He didn't recognize either of them.

He swore to himself. "What the HELL?"

To be continued...

__________________

Update #410: Uh, Where Are You Going To Put Them All?
------------
Friday, November 1, 1996
Shap Abbey
Cumbira
England
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 4/1.6%
------------
NEXT UP: The Rise of the Frankenwizard
------------
Nicholas Flamel looked around at what was left the complex. Four and a half centuries earlier, Shap Abbey had been inhabited by group of Premonstratensian monks which had turned it into a religious shrine. Everything had changed, however, when Henry VIII broke off from the Catholic Church and dissolved all the monasteries. Shap Abbey soon fell into ruin with the exception of one tall tower.

It would have likely taken the Muggles decades to reconstruct the complex. However, this time the Muggles would have some assistance. If everything went as planned, the archeological excavation of the site would be done by late spring 1997 and the new buildings would be ready for use in the winter of 1998/1999. The rest of the time would be spent interviewing prospective teachers.

Flamel's advisors had initially been in a bit of a bind when Flitwick told them about his plan. Although the Hogwarts headmaster's idea made sense, there was the small issue as to where all of the new students would go. Fortunately, Flamel knew just the places to put the new institutions. After all, he had been born into an era when monasteries had still dotted the English countryside. Most of them were in ruins, like this one. They would not be in ruins for long, however. By the end of the century, most of them would be back in business as centers for education.

Flamel chuckled as he imagined the stern monks' reaction to hearing that their churches and homes had been transformed into Wizarding schools. He had the distinct impression that they would be turning over in their graves for years to come.

Making sure his robe was on properly, he stepped to the podium outside the West Tower of Shap Abbey. Headmaster Flitwick stood at his side, as did a Catholic priest.

"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming. Headmaster Flitwick and I have journeyed to this
ruined monastery to announce a radical change in the way magical education will be handled in the United Kingdom.

"For over a thousand years, the pool of Wizarding candidates was small enough that the vast majority of the students were able to be taught at Hogwarts. The class sizes were, and still are, small enough so that each student can receive individual attention if need be. Furthermore, it is possible for Hogwarts graduates to pass down their secrets even after their deaths by communicating with the current students through the portraits on the walls and in the headmaster's office."

Flamel looked around the room. "Everything has changed now thanks to Ziggurat Labs's discovery. The era where only one in ten thousand people was eligible for Wizarding school is over. The era of 1% wizards -- those with the Q gene -- has begun."

Flitwick continued. "As most of you are aware, His Majesty King William is a Q-only wizard. He has been taking courses in spellcraft along side the rest of his first-year students. From what I have been told by the teachers, he is an excellent student. He tends to have trouble seeing some of the magical constructs he makes, but that is understandable given the lack of the Z complex. Although he probably will never be good enough to make the Ministry of Magic, I am fairly certain that he will be able to hold his own as a wizard, as a Muggle, and as a king.

"King William is taking a dual curriculum this semester, one which has traditionally been reserved for Wizarding royalty. He is working extremely hard and plans to take some extra classes during summer. He has become a very conscientious -- and popular -- student. I have reason to believe that several well-known young women may fancy him. Princess Madeleine of Sweden, if you're listening, I'd recommend that you redouble your efforts if you want to get your hands on him."

The crowd chuckled as he continued. "His Majesty's experience has shown us once and for all that Q-only wizards can learn spellcraft as well with few ill effects. As a result, it is my pleasure to announce that starting in the fall of 1999, the Ministry of Magic will start offering Wizarding education for anyone with a Q complex."

The crowd began murmuring excitedly. One person in the back suddenly started jumping up and down, and Flamel grinned. Unless he was badly mistaken, someone was about to sign up for the 1999 dual curriculum.

"Q-only wizards who grew up in the Wizarding community will be able to attend Hogwarts as usual. Q-only wizards who grew up in the Muggle community will take dual curriculum classes similar to His Majesty."

Flamel began speaking once again. "Many of you may be wondering why we have called a press conference here, at a ruined monastery, to make this announcement. The reason is quite simple. You've seen Hogwarts. Where are we going to put all of these extra Q-only students, which outnumber the traditional wizards almost 100 to 1?"

He stabbed his thumb behind him, indicating the abbey. "You're looking at it."

The crowd reacted about the way Flamel had expected: disbelief and skepticism. However, he had been prepared. Slowly but surely, he tapped his wand on the podium in front of him and revealed a three-dimensional image of a small castle about half the size of Hogwarts. The model was dominated by the huge West Tower sticking out from the west side.

The crowd gasped as Flamel continued. "Yes, ladies and gentlemen. With the help of both Muggles..."
and wizards, we are going to rebuild this and many of the other ruined monasteries. They will be reborn as centers of learning, this time for the Wizarding community. A full archeological dig will be performed on each site before construction commences, and any relics -- religious or secular -- will be placed in a museum on the premises of the school. The schools will be named after the monasteries, so the one over here will be called the Shap Academy of Witchcraft, Muggle Studies, and Wizardry."

"These new schools will open in the fall of 1999. Students will have three choices for housing: in the school itself in the rooms which used to be the monks' or nuns' barracks, in the town served by the original monastery, or in their parents' houses assuming that the parents provide transportation. Note that out of respect for the dead monastics, only students whose gender matches that of the original religious center will be able to sleep on campus. For instance, in this case, boys will be housed in the West Tower while the girls will be living in town. This will successfully segregate the sleeping arrangements while allowing for a co-ed school. The current plans are to introduce 10 schools in 1999, 20 in 2002, and 50 in 2006. These schools will be spread out all across the nation so that Muggles all of the country can train their children to become wizards."

Flitwick spoke once more. "Note that Hogwarts will start admitting Q-only students early, in the fall of 1997. The Q-only students will be sorted into the traditional four houses, plus the new Black House. However, due to space limitations that they will be given housing in Hogsmeade for the time being."

The headmaster smiled. "Well, that's about it for us. We'll now take questions."

----------

Atlantis

Daryna Vovchanckaya looked up from her reading when she heard the knock on the door. She frowned: what was going on here? She wasn't expecting guests.

Putting away the book on magic as it would blow her cover as Mila Kohut, she headed over to the door and looked through the peephole warily at the two men. "Hello?"

One of the men nodded. "Mrs. Kohut? We're here on a request from the Ministry of Magic. Do you remember Yakiv Gavrilyuk?"

Vovchanckaya froze. She had no idea who this Gavrilyuk was. However, the name sounded Ukrainian. She suspected that it was one of the Kohuts' friends. Hoping she didn't blow her cover, she called out, "Yes, sir. Is there something wrong? Did something happen to him?"

The other man's pocket suddenly started shaking, and his eyes widened. He turned to his colleague and nodded. The first man returned the favor and turned back to Vovchanckaya.

"Ma'am, Mr. Gavrilyuk is concerned you haven't written back or called him yet. He's been so nervous that he's put out a missing persons report on you. Is it all right if we come in?"

Vovchanckaya's mind raced. Hoping she didn't sound too nervous, she said: "Not unless you have some form of ID. With Death Eaters running around, you could be anyone."

The two men nodded and reached into their pockets. They both pulled out ID's which claimed that they were Muggle liaisons. Both "Kohuts" had been trained, as had all of the Muggles, to recognize them. They were genuine, as far as he could tell.
Still wary, she asked: "Can you remind me of his phone number? I haven't called him for a while."

The two men did so. Hoping that this wasn't a mistake, she told them to hold off for a second so she could try the phone. She picked up the handset and started pushing buttons at random. She had gotten maybe four digits in before the line conked out.

Shit, she thought. The wizards would probably would want proof that she'd called them. Yet with the phone malfunctioning like this -- how could it NOT malfunction with all the magic around -- this would be a problem.

She returned to the door to see the two men talking to each other. One of them heard her approach and said: "Ma'am, we apologize, but I think we just did something which knocked out your phone. Our spells are picking up a malfunction in there. May we come in so we can fix it?"

Trapped, she opened the door and the two men came in. She marched them over to the phone and pointed it out. They nodded, raised their wands, and pointed them at the phone. The first man nodded and began messing with the phone. The second, however, pulled out a piece of parchment and looked at it for a moment. Smiling in satisfaction, he put the parchment away and pointed his wand at her. He then spoke two words.

"Expelliarmus! Immobilus!"

Vovchanckaya's wand was safely in a drawer, so she didn't lose the wand. However, she still couldn't move. What the hell was going on here?

Abruptly, both men reached into their pockets once again and brought out two more badges. She blanched when they realized what they were: Auror badges.

The man with the parchment spoke, his wand still pointed at her face. Meanwhile, the man next to him cast *Revelio Hominem*.

"Daryna Vovchanckaya, you are under arrest, charged with conspiracy, murder, and terrorism at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in Hogsmeade, England. Now if you know what's good for you, help us find your so-called husband and come with us."

To be continued...
Update #411: The Rise of the Frankenwizard

Friday, November 1, 1996
2340Z
Ziggurat Labs
England
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 4/1.9%

Wynfor Grigor looked around the lab. The only people left in the building belonged to the janitorial staff, and he highly doubted that they had any idea about what actually was going on in the building -- let alone what Grigor was trying to accomplish.

Making sure that the view of the video camera was blocked by the secret cabinet containing his experiments, Grigor opened the door and took a look at the contents of the petri dish. There, sitting in a batch of chemicals, four small groups of stem cells were growing and thriving.

The cells had initially been taken from an ordinary cell line that Ziggurat Labs had been working with over the past few years. They had supposedly been extracted from umbilical cord blood after one of the secretaries had given birth. This woman, a pure Muggle, had figured that it couldn't hurt try donating some of her stem cells to science.

Ziggurat Labs tended to do a lot of work with genetic testing and occasionally genetic engineering. All of the equipment the company had purchased over the past few years had paid off in gold -- and a Nobel Prize -- once the wizards had been outed. Had Michael Parsons not convinced the president of the company to commit all of that cash to genetic testing equipment, someone else would have likely walked away with the secret of the Q and Z genes.

Grigor had managed to commandeer some of these stem cells for a little experiment of his own, one which no one else in the company knew about. One of the batches of cells in the cabinet was a control group, which were growing under circumstances familiar to anyone who worked with biological material. A second group consisted of cells which had been modified to have the Q gene. Having been on the team which had helped Parsons identify the Wizarding genes, he had an ample supply of the stuff. A third group contained cells which had been primed with the Z gene. As far as he could tell from his last observations, these three groups of cells seemed to be doing what they were supposed to.

This would have been a major breakthrough on its own. However, the key experiment lay in the fourth container, where the cells had been injected with both the Q and Z complexes. There had been some cell death in that group -- about 20% of the cells had disappeared somewhere between the 16 and 32 cell stage. Thankfully, there hadn't been any problems since.

That fourth group of cells were his ticket to glory. Once he was convinced that the QZ-enhanced cells were viable enough to be used in experiments, he planned to go into the black market and start
advertising a service which would allow volunteers to try to bear children guaranteed to be capable of magic. It didn't matter whether one of the parents, or both of them, had started out as Muggles. Grigor's job was to make sure that wizards could be born ex nihilo, out of a situation where neither parent had magical ability. Which, of course, covered about 96% of the world.

It had taken him many, many tries to reach this point. After all, genetic engineering wasn't easy. He had used various techniques to try to get the cells to accept these new DNA strains only to find most of them dying between the 2 and 4 cell stage. Eventually, he had stumbled across a gene splicing method which worked.

He amended that thought: worked at least for now. How many cells did he have there, a few hundred? There were many, many more than a few hundred cells in a living human being. For all he knew, all of these cell cultures would self-destruct in two or three days.

He started examining the four clusters of cells more closely. The control group seemed to be working more or less the way he had expected. The Z group still seemed to be going strong, though some of the cells around the periphery seemed to be a bit ragged. The Q group had, for some reason, split in two. He didn't know if it was from the presence of the Q gene or whether the blastocyst had naturally twinned. He would have to run this experiment again.

The QZ group seemed to be very unhappy. There weren't as many cells as he had expected, and a few of them seemed to be starved for nutrients. He wondered if activating the Q and the Z together had consumed so many of the nutrients on the petri dish that there wasn't enough food left to go around. If that was the case, this culture would die off in a few days. This theory assumed, of course, that the Q and the Z had already been activated. He had no idea if that was the case. There was evidence that the Q had done SOMETHING strange as it had twinned that culture. That wasn't conclusive, however. And it certainly wasn't enough to merit him another Nobel Prize.

It was increasingly obvious that this latest set of QZ cells was going to be another failure. However, he had definitely made progress -- the culture had lasted almost a week before collapsing. Would the cells last longer if he provided them with more food? He made a mental note to try to find a witch who had borne children and ask her whether she needed to eat more food than a Muggle during pregnancy.

Jotting down notes on his most recent observations, he turned to the next set of petri dishes which were trying to implant G1, S, B, T, and a whole host of other complexes into the base stem cell template. The G1 cluster seemed to have larger cells, which was consistent with gigantism. The B's looked normal for now, and the T's were half dead. There was still a lot of work to be done here as well.

He wondered how long it would take for him to be confident enough in his results to try to move on to animal and primate experiments. Checking for the Q was easy: give the chimp a wand, and if the chimp howled and dropped it immediately the animal didn't have Q active. For the Z, all he had to do is have a ghost volunteer come into the room with the chimp. If, as the theory claimed, the Z gene allowed you to see ghosts of species other than your own, a chimp which reacted to the ghost would mean that the Z was active. This assumed, of course, that the chimps weren't close enough to Homo sapiens for the animal to see the ghost anyway.

He figured he could make a killing creating wizards via genetic engineering. He'd have to do it in secret, of course, and possibly set up the lab in a remote location so no one would be able to find it. He expected a Q enhancement would go for £250,000, a Z enhancement for £100,000, and a QZ combo for £325,000. The other complexes would be cheaper: £10,000 for half-giant genes, £50,000
for the T gene, £25,000 for the siren gene S, £30,000 for Parseltongue ability, and so forth.

As he continued examining his cultures, Grigor wondered whether he should get a wizard in on the act. The wizard would likely know more about what all these genes did than he did. Grigor also suspected that he would likely be able to do something to these cultures which will make them more viable and cause them to develop more quickly.

It occurred to him that Harold-Green Pharmaceutical Corporation might be willing to help him. They had fallen upon hard times now that the wizards had run away with their Philosopher's Stone. Their stock had tanked, Daniel Green had been forced out, and Lou Harold had taken over as sole president. Grigor suspected that Harold would likely be shown the door pretty soon unless something drastic came along. Well, Grigor was working on something drastic. If they joined forces...things could be very, very, interesting. Particularly if Harold-Green had some Philosopher's Stone information left over which could possibly, just possibly, be reverse-engineered.

He finished his observations and turned off the light just as the clock struck midnight. He had been in there for less than an hour and a half. Before he left, he took a quick look at his "real" project: the lycanthropy vaccine. Things seemed to be working pretty well there, and Harold was pretty excited. Granted, a large infusion of cash from the emperor of Luggnagg hadn't hurt. At the rate things were going, clinical trials would likely begin before the end of the year.

If all else failed, he could give up on the genetic engineering and make his fortune off the lycanthropy vaccine. However, he did not intend to fail. Not by a long shot.

To be continued...

__________________

Update #411.5: All Your Base Are Belong To Us
------------
Friday, November 1, 1996
Ministry of Magic, Andes facility
Condór Picchu
Peru

Hidden in the mountains surrounding Macchu Picchu, was the secret ancient school and headquarters of the Inca Empire's wizards. They weathered the spanish conquest there, waiting under the leadership of the Wizarding Sapa Inca for a day to reclaim their land. That day never came, and the royal bloodline ended in the XVIII century, but over the decades as Muggle cultures mingled, so did wizarding ones. Today, the Minister of Magic, Eligio Porfirion, had Spanish and Inca ancestors in equal number. Traditionally, Peruvian wizards were considered isolationists, mingling with mundanes even less than the SOS allowed, even keeping heads of state off the loop if they deemed their regimes transient, and even after the Breach wizarding facilities remained classified with entrance limited to high ranking government officials. Harboring some resentment over the past inaction of their wizards, the people of Peru were nonetheless pleased when Judgement Day came and went without battles in the country.
That would change now. Earlier that week, President Fujimori was contacted by none other than Atlantis, and received from anonymous sources an incredibly detailed report on terrorist activity in the country. Alberto Fujimori had used successful counter-terrorist operations to forge political capital several times in the past, and saw great potential in this one— the neutralization of the entire Shining Path. He already struck several blows at the organization back in 1992, but even mostly crippled it survived... and he made many enemies when his military took the necessary steps to combat the terrorists, and collateral casualties appeared. But this wasn't going to be a problem now: along with several hundred pages of records, came maps and pictures enabling Apparition, and the sites were already checked by Disillusioned wizards and deemed real.

"The plan will work, Senor Presidente," the Minister of Magic assured Fujimori. They stood on a balcony. In a hallway below them, close to a hundred Aurors and more than a thousand spec ops commandos prepared for the mission.
"Of course it will," replied the President, "the Shining Path ends today."
An aide came, and reported that the troops are ready for action, and are waiting for the inevitable speech from Fujimori. They didn't have to wait long, just until the Minister of Magic casted Sonorus on him.

"My fellow citizens of Peru! You who have gathered here today are the best of two worlds, and we can proudly say that our cooperation has set an example for all humanity! Together, we will build a better world. But there are some individuals in this nation, certain irredeemable louts, who wouldn't let us prosper. Men who resort to intimidation, bombings and assassinations to force their twisted ways on normal people, and who don't hesitate to become drug lords to support their unholy war against our nation. I speak of course of the Shining Path, the very thugs you'll fight against today. When you see them, remember all the suffering they brought to our beloved Peru, and to make a better life to our children, don't let a single one escape! Let all know, that as long as I am your president, terrorism shall never be tolerated! Gentlemen... let's bring them Hell."

-----------
Shining Path HQ
Safe House, somewhere in an abandoned mine
-----------

Deep beneath the earth in a quite elaborate base, Óscar Ramirez nom de guerre Comrade Feliciano, leader of the Shining Path smiled. For the first time in five years, the organization managed to actually increase it's power. The revelation of magic brought unexpected developments: though Al-Quada had beaten them to the most destructive applications (nukes) and their actions resulted in the worldwide ban on the most obviously useful spells (Engorgio, Geminio), all was not lost. The alleged revolutionary force had always been eager to take what the black market offered... and since the Breach, all sort of magic-related stuff appeared there, up to and including mercenaries. Some of
those weren't particularly useful in Muggle hands. Yet others... other things showed serious potential. For example, a shady fellow traded an easy, mass-producible and very potent something for a kilogram of kokaine. Óscar couldn't wait to see his little deathbringers wrecking havoc among the revolution's enemies. For now he could only chuckle at the thought that if his acts were known, he'd have to add PETA to the long list of his enemies. His musings, however, were cut short by sounds of gunfire in the tunnels...

----------

Same facility, earlier
----------

With a crackling sound, muffled almost into nothingness by a spell, a Disillusioned Auror Apparated into a locked storage room, looked around to make sure no one is there, Disapparated, and returned seconds later with 2 commandos at his side. He repeated the process a dozen more times until the room was filled with soldiers and equipment, then opened the door with Alohomora. Silently, squads of commandos began spreading out through the base, and the wizard resumed the side-along Apparitions to bring further reinforcements.

The insurgents had no idea they were there until over a hundred special forces agents were in the middle of their base... and by the time one of them stumbled upon a squad, shouted an alert, reached for his sidearm, jumped behind a corner and managed to get a few shots out before going down in a hail of bullets... by then the soldiers were in position to cut off all escape attempts. But the rebels didn't surrender, and managed to put up a hell of a fight.

At last, the commandos managed to spot Óscar Ramirez, fleeing deeper into the base. Chasing him, a squad of soldiers came to a great hallway, with rows of tables on the sides packed full of strange boxes. They were small, about 20x10x10 centimeters, with small holes in them but a second layer blocking view, a small cage door in the front, a larger one on the top wired shut, and miniature levers on the side, and a post-it with numbers on each box.

Ribbit, ribbit, ribbit.

As they looked around in surprise, searching for the inexplicable mine-dwelling frog, Ramirez glanced out from behind the doorway on the opposite end with a hand mirror, and tossed a grenade in the hallway.

A BOOM was followed by splintering of furniture and screams of wounded men... then a rising, infernal HISSSSS joined the cacophony.

"Of the many fearsome beasts and monsters that roam our land, there is none more curious or more deadly than the Basilisk, known also as the King of Serpents. This snake, which may reach gigantic size, and live many hundreds of years, is born from a chicken's egg, hatched beneath a toad. Its methods of killing are most wondrous, for aside from its deadly and venomous fangs, the Basilisk has a murderous stare, and all who are fixed with the beam of its eye shall suffer instant death. Spiders flee before the Basilisk, for it is their mortal enemy, and the Basilisk flies only from the
"Crowing of the rooster, which is fatal to it." Hatching a Basilisk is easy- both toads and chicken eggs are commonly accessible. Dark wizards had been doing it for centuries... but they didn't exploit the easiness of the process to its full potential. In this hallway, there were hundreds of boxes, each with two compartments. One was just big enough to put in a toad and an egg, and so small that the toad had no choice but to sit on the egg. This compartment had an hatch on the top for putting in the toad and the egg, then it was sealed shut. Once the baby basilisk hatched, it ate the toad, then handlers periodically placed live mice in the other compartment, closed it, pulled a lever to open the door separating the compartments, let the snake feed for a few hours, then picked up the box, shook it down into the smaller compartment, and closed the door with the lever. They started a cluster of eggs each day, and by now many has hatched. The boxes were designed to let air and small objects like excrement pass, but absolutely no light... and though they were quite well-constructed, they were intentionally weak. The shockwave of the grenade knocked many tables open and flung boxes around. Many basilisks ended up dead or crippled... but many more ended up free, and enraged.

Newborn basilisks were around 10 centimetres long. Their poison was already full potent, but their lethal eyes were not- until their third moulting (by when their size tripled), even a direct stare 'only' caused petrification, and an indirect one led to fainting. Because of this, they started out hunting by scent and hearing, and with their eyes closed- they could not eat rock. However, it was still their favorite defensive mechanism against perceived attackers, in this case the big warmbloods making noise. Soon, wounded and healthy commandos alike thudded on the floor with cracks, their flesh turned to stone.

Hearing the lovely noises of panic and mayhem, Ramirez smirked... but his expression turned sour when he evaluated his situation. He was cornered: the corridor he stood in was ultimately a dead end, and the only way to escape was through enraged deadly snakes and equally pissed-off counter-revolutionaries. Well, at least he'd go out in battle like a hero, setting an example for the proletariat. Yes, he could do that.

As the shouting increased in the other entrance of the hallway, he tensed, and when he heard a soldier suggesting to throw grenades at the snakes till they were silenced, he sprang from behind the doorway, grenade armed and poised to throw, trajectory already calculated so it would fly through the hallway and land at the other door... but a little something dramatically altered his plans. Two little somethings, to be exact- two small pinpricks at his ankle, and an instant wave of dizziness sweeping through him. Refusing to believe what in his heart he knew, that he only has seconds to live, he looked down, desperately hoping for anything but a snake at his feet. Fate was cruel to him: his expression had managed to strike the perfect balance between complete despair and utter horror before the reptile's eyes found his... and he turned into stone like that...then the grenade exploded in his petrified hand.

------------------
Ministry of Magic, Andes facility
Condór Picchu
aftermath
------------------

"Look, is that really necessary?" asked the president, and not for the first time. The Minister of Magic sighed and facepalmed. "Senor Presidente. I already told you of the dangers of basilisk breeding. If you don't want those monsters released in your cities, that knowledge can't get out to Mug...mundanes. Anyone who has seen it has to be Obliviated, or killed, before he talks about it, or writes
about it. Don't let today's events fool you, President Fujimore, for our cleanup teams did a great job but if even a single mature basilisk would be released in a crowded city, today's few dozen casualties would be laughable low. Please, let us Obliviate your soldiers, and their captives now."

"Fine" shrugged the president, "take their memories, just take care not to mess up their heads." Then he pointed down at the petrified, mutilated body of Óscar Ramírez. "What of him? Any chance of reviving him so he can have a trial? Is he alive at all?"
The wizard shook his head. "He is alive, but he was bitten before petrification and badly damaged afterwards. Even if we found a healing spell to rebuild him and some Phoenix tears as antidote, chances are he'd be dead before the antidote took effect. Realistically, he's either kept as a statue locked in agony for all eternity, or he is given the petrification antidote and allowed to die. Normally, I'd say a Being deserves the latter, but I hear this man is responsible for thousands of deaths, and worse."
"Indeed" said Fujimori with a smirk. "So, I either set an example by granting him a mercy kill, or I set an example by letting all see how terrorists end up here? Decisions, decisions."
"I don't follow Muggle news too close, but didn't some terrorist named Che Guevara end up being famous and popular after he was displayed in such a manner?"
"...You have a point," the president admitted. "Give him the petrification antidote and get rid of the body discretely, then."

To be continued...

__________________

Update #412: Singing in the Rain
------------
Saturday, November 2, 1996
Atlantis
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 4/1.8%
------------
NEXT UP: Countess Love Triangle
------------
Daryna Vovchanckaya was not a happy witch. The undercover Aurors had frogmarched her and her "husband" out of the house and had escorted them into a pair of Apparition-proof cells with no view whatsoever of the outside. They had then told her to make herself comfortable and locked her in. Then the wait began. She to talk to and she thought that she was going to go out of her mind.

She wondered what had happened to her colleague. They had taken him from her shortly after locking her in the jail. She could have sworn that she had heard him screaming from time to time. She prayed briefly that that was not the case. Besides, most of these people had sworn at least Novice level Aes Sedai oaths. This meant that use of magic as a weapon was forbidden unless the oath taker was fighting a Dark wizard. She and her friend were certainly Dark wizards, at least from the misguided Atlantean view of the world. However, she couldn't imagine how they could be torturing him if he wasn't fighting them.

Then it occurred to her: they could be using Muggle tactics, tactics which were often far more barbaric than magical torture. Crucio was exceedingly painful, but it didn't cause any permanent harm. Muggle techniques, on the other hand...She shuddered. She didn't even want to think about
She wondered if Zygonov and Rasputin knew that they had been captured. If Atlantis played its cards right—which she had to admit was a strong possibility given Dagher and Dialonis's power—they'd just have her vanish without telling Rasputin where she went. There was also a distinct possibility that they could try to force her to betray all of her secrets using Veritaserum or some other method. She really hoped that was not the case as she was not allowed to betray Koschei without permission of Rasputin. An Unbreakable Vow had seen to that.

She had no idea how much time had gone by since her arrest. She had long since finished counting the number of bricks in the walls: 1457. The wizards shoved food through the wall at irregular hours, undoubtedly designed to make sure she didn't know what time of day it was. The food wasn't all that great, but it was a hell of a lot better than anything the Muggles would have been able to produce.

She had told everyone that she was willing to die for the cause. However, now that the moment was upon her, she couldn't do it. What use would she be, dead? As long as people lived, there was still hope. Granted, there wasn't much she could accomplish without her wand, and she highly doubted that they would agree to her request to get her wand back. She hoped that her colleague would be braver than she was. She was man, after all, and men were supposed to be brave and sweep women off their feet.

She broke off her reveries as she heard footsteps approach her cell and stop outside her door. A voice shattered the silence:

"Prisoner Vovchanckaya, we are about to come in. Keep your hands above your head and do not move. Otherwise, we will shoot you. Be advised that we are carrying a device which will allow people to see invisible objects as well as a Secrecy Sensor. We also have the executioner with us in case you make too much of a mess. Do you agree to this?"

She tried to keep her voice steady. "I don't see I have much of a choice. What would you do if I didn't feel like cooperating?"

"Then we will make your cell airtight and you will die a slow, painful death from asphyxiation. It is a terrible, gruesome fate. You do not want to face it, Prisoner Vovchanckaya."

She sighed and put her hands over her head. "All right. Come on in."

The door opened and no fewer than ten wizards marched in. They put her in handcuffs made of Devil's Snare—wonderful, she thought—and forced her out into the hall. She saw no sign of her colleague and couldn't decide whether they had killed him, turned him, or placed him in a separate facility.

They marched her into a dark room with what appeared to be several small leaks in the ceiling. They asked her if she wanted to get a little bath to get rid of the stench of her prisoner's uniform. Amazed at their merciful behavior, she nodded. They pushed her under the leak in the ceiling so that the water drops began falling at random intervals on her forehead. They were brutally cold, and she opened her mouth to ask them to raise the temperature. She didn't get far, however, before someone cast Immobilus on her. Suddenly she found herself motionless with water dripping on her forehead.

She suddenly realized what this was. She wasn't going to be given a bath. She was about to be subject to an interrogation method known as Chinese water torture. And those damned Aes Sedai called it "a bath" so they didn't have to see it as torture.
Hoping she wouldn't go insane, she gulped and stared as a man sat at a desk across from her. "Prisoner Vovchanckaya, how are you feeling?"

She fought to speak. "Cheated. I wanted a shower and I got this uncomfortable leak in my face."

He shrugged. "We're sorry about the discomfort. We'll try to get you out of there as soon as possible, provided that you answer some questions for us."

She looked at the floor, unable to move her head. "You're going to torture me, aren't you?"

"Not necessarily. You can end it much more quickly by telling us what we want to know. Be advised that your colleague is being interrogated as we speak, and that it is in both of your best interests for you to co-operate. I believe the Muggles call this the Prisoner's Dilemma. Do you accept these terms?"

"I don't see I have much of a choice, sir."

"Indeed, you do not, so make the best of a bad situation and be advised that there is a strong probability that your colleague may confess in order to reduce his sentence and foist all the blame on you."

Vovchanckaya blinked and winced as water got into her eyes. She could imagine the Black Fist Muggle telling everyone the witch did it and he was just a henchman. This was not good. Not good at all. Sighing, she told the interrogator to begin the interview.

The interrogator nodded and pulled out a piece of parchment. "All right, let's get started. Where were you on the night of October 1st?"

She looked at him with a straight face. "I was in my apartment with my colleague." The Secrecy Sensor didn't move -- after all, she did spend some time in the Zygonovs' apartment in Hogsmeade on the night of the attack.

The interrogator checked the Secrecy Sensor and nodded. "This was in Hogsmeade, right?"

"Correct."

"Did you ever spend any time in the vicinity of Hogwarts, Prisoner?"

She gulped. "I was definitely in the area of Hogwarts. Then again, Hogsmeade is near Hogwarts, so that doesn't really help much."

"I see. Were you INSIDE the Hogwarts castle at all on that night?"

"No."

She was relieved when she saw the Secrecy Sensor not moving. She had never actually entered the castle -- all she had done was enter the Forest and escape via Portkey after doing the deed. The interrogator looked at the man holding the Secrecy Sensor and frowned. Finally, the man with the Secrecy Sensor smiled.

"Actually, I have a question. Prisoner Vovchanckaya, were you by any chance in the Forbidden
She blanched, and then winced as she realized her facial expression had given everything away. Hoping against hope, she stammered, "Why would I have been in the Forbidden Forest?"

The interrogator glared at her. "Answer the question. Don't play with us."

All she could hope for was the Secrecy Sensor not working. "I don't recall entering the Forest, sir."

Not surprisingly, the Secrecy Sensor began shaking rapidly. The interrogator saw it and shook his head. "Don't lie to us, Prisoner Vovchanckaya, as it will just prolong the agony. So, you were in the Forest after all. Did you by any chance hide in the trees under an Invisibility Cloak at the time Professor Snape was killed?"

She looked at the Secrecy Sensor. She was toast, and they knew it. Finally, she gave up. "Yes, that was me. I had the Cloak and was hiding in the Forest. Let the other man go -- he didn't do anything."

"He didn't do anything on that mission, you mean. We can't rule out the possibility that he was involved with something else. At any rate, back to the Forest. Were you responsible for killing Professor Snape and using a Muggle weapon on Albus Dumbledore?"

She let out a soft whimper. "I had no choice! Snape was trying to kill me!"

"Probably because you had just shot Dumbledore and taken his wand. Am I right, Prisoner Vovchanckaya?"

The game was up. "Yes, sir. I had the gun."

The interrogator whistled. "Whew. Looks like we've got a live one here. Let's get some more details here. For one thing, do you still have the Elder Wand?"

She blinked. "The Elder Wand? Why would I have the Elder Wand? I took Dumbledore's wand, not the Elder Wand."

"You obviously knew Dumbledore had the Elder Wand, Prisoner Vovchanckaya. Otherwise, you wouldn't have wanted to take it."

She stared at the interrogator. "I...didn't know."

The Secrecy Sensor stopped moving -- she was telling the truth. She knew Dumbledore's wand had been supercharged, but the actual Elder Wand? Now she regretted giving it back to Rasputin!

The interrogator was silent for a couple of moments while he pondered this development. Suddenly, the man holding the Secrecy Sensor spoke up once more. "Actually, that makes sense. Someone told her to retrieve the wand for him without telling her it was the Elder Wand because he wanted the Elder Wand for himself. He didn't want Hit Woman here to be tempted to keep it."

The interrogator whistled. "Indeed, that makes a lot of sense. So, let's go down that line of thought. Who exactly are you working for? Lord Voldemort? The Italian Ministry of Magic? Grigori Rasputin?"

Her jaw dropped at the mention of Rasputin. She tried to clamp it shut again even though she
realized it was too late.

The interrogator smiled evilly. "Well, it looks like we've got a lead into Rasputin's camp here. A bunch of Black God activists uniting under the Mad Monk's banner. Am I correct?"

She breathed a sigh of relief: technically, according to one interpretation, the questioners were correct. "That is correct, sir."

"Rasputin is a Black God activist?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you give him the Elder Wand after the mission?"

She grumbled. "He demanded it of me. I told her that Dumbledore's wand seemed to like me and he responded by Disarming me and claiming the wand for himself. I'm stuck with my old one."

Mr. Secrecy Sensor growled: "Shit. Rasputin's the master of the Elder Wand now. We need to find him, and find him soon. All right, Prisoner Vovchanckaya. Where's Rasputin? I suspect a lot of Romanovs are going to want to hear this."

She had dreaded that question. "His safe house is under the Fidelius Charm, sir. I can't tell you as I'm not a Secret-Keeper. Besides, I've never actually been there. I've met him at designated meeting points and that's it."

"Where are these meeting points?"

"Well, we've got a place in Istanbul, a place in St. Petersburg, and a place in Constanta, Romania."

The interrogator's eyebrows shot up. "What the hell is in Constanta?"

"I don't know, sir. All I know is that we sometimes meet there."

"Give me addresses. Now."

Resigned, she turned over the addresses and the interrogator jotted them down. "Thank you for your cooperation, Prisoner Vovchanckaya. We'll be done soon and you'll be able to get out of that leak in the ceiling. Are you familiar with either of the Zygonovs?"

"Yes, sir. I know them both."

"Were they involved in the attack at all?"

Telling the truth was getting easier and easier. "Yes, sir. Zygonova was the woman who passed herself off Amelia Bell at Hogwarts. She was our mole into the school."

"Were you there most of the time as well?"

"I was called in to help with this mission once Zygonova realized that she would have to be in two places at the same time, serving as Zygonov's husband while keeping Bell's two roommates from noticing her absence. I lived in Bell's apartment with the roommates while Zygonova herself lived with her husband."
"Are the Zygonovs actually married?"

"Yes. Husband and wife team."

"What did you do while school was in session?"

"I spent some time exploring the Muggle world to get information for Zygonova to relay to the class in Muggle Studies. It was tough trying to find stuff for the course sometimes."

The interrogator made some more notes. "We appreciate your candor -- you'll probably get a reduced sentence out of this. One last thing. Is Rasputin a Death Eater? I find it hard to believe."

She couldn't help but grin as she answered the question. "No. Rasputin is not a Death Eater, and neither am I. I cast the Dark Mark to frame the Death Eaters. I learned the Dark Mark from a program about Judgment Day and Voldemort."

Both men's eyes shot to the Secrecy Sensor, which remained still. For the first time, their eyes widened in shock. Finally, Mr. Secrecy Sensor swore. "Son of a bitch. We've been chasing a false trail the whole time."

The interrogator pressured her further. "If Rasputin's not doing this to bring back Voldemort, what's his mission?"

She prayed this would be enough. "He is involved with a group which wants to make wizards rule Muggles. Wizard supremacists, you might say. The world is difficult and chaotic, and it is up to the wizards to take control of the Muggles when they misbehave."

The interrogator grunted. "That's our job. You don't need to cast your lot with Rasputin."

"You aren't effective enough. People ignore Atlantis all the time, and you don't really do much unless the world is about to blow up."

"I see. Is Rasputin the head of your cell?"

"Yes."

"Who's his boss? Who's the kingpin here?"

She chose her words to be carefully ambiguous. "I cannot say. I'm sorry."

The interrogator looked at the Secrecy Sensor, which was stationary. He frowned. "Well, we'll just have to capture Rasputin and deal with him -- looks like you're pretty low-level. What happened to the Kohuts?"

"The Zygonovs killed them and took their forms before they arrived on the island. They modified your Muggle ID cards so they had their pictures on them instead of the Kohuts'."

"Where are the bodies?"

"On Santorini, Zygonov claimed. Transfigured into rocks."
"Where are the Zygonovs now?"

"Don't know. Sorry."

Mr. Secrecy Sensor shook his head. "They could be anywhere by now. Were they ever here on Atlantis? They must have been if they went after the Kohuts."

"Yes, they were. They had originally been tasked with the mission of infiltrating Atlantis but were pulled out when Rasputin realized that you may be onto us. He replaced them with less...famous people. He was about to pull me out as well but didn't get to me in time."

"Was he the one who gave you the Polyjuice Potion?"

"Yes."

"Where have you been keeping the Polyjuice Potion?"

The dripping water was really starting to get uncomfortable, and there was nothing she could do to prevent it. Sighing, she said that it was in a cabinet at home. Hoping against hope, she then pleaded with the interrogators to let her go back to her cell. To her surprise, they agreed. "You've given us a lot of information to work with here. If anything else comes to mind, tell us. With luck, you'll be able to reduce your sentence further."

She nodded. Within an hour, she was back inside her cell hoping she hadn't revealed too much...and that Rasputin or Koschei wouldn't kill her for it.

To be continued...

__________________

Update #413: Countess Love Triangle

----------

Sunday, November 2, 1996
Gryffindor Tower
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 4/1.8%

----------

NEXT UP: Now Will Anyone Less Than 3000 Years Old Buy This?

----------

Harry Potter woke up and felt like a million Galleons. The sun was out, and the temperature was probably in the teens somewhere. He had more energy than he knew what to do with, and he felt like he could take on the world.

How could this be? He hadn't done anything unusual over the past few days. Yes, he'd won a Quidditch match, though his work as a sixth-year Seeker had been interfered with somewhat by the dementors hovering around the pitch. At least he hadn't fallen off his broom a few hundred feet up in the air like he had three years earlier when the monsters had been protecting the castle from Sirius Black!

School had slowly settled back into a routine after the Death Eater attack. Hermione spent most of her time meditating, trying to oversee SPIW, helping J. K. Rowling work on *Hermione Granger and*
the Philosopher's Stone, and reading in the library. Occasionally, she even had time for class. Harry wondered if she had stumbled across another Time-Turner and Flitwick was turning a blind eye. Ron had been fighting his way through Slughorn's Potions class, convinced that he would also become an Auror at some point.

Ron's ability as a Keeper had improved, and he had gotten a little more popular at school. He had managed to pick up a new nickname, "Count". Considering that he was going out with a girl who was a countess, that made a lot of sense. Granted, the skinny redhead had had to endure taunts from people like Crabbe and Goyle his supposedly not being able to count. He had managed to restrain himself to the point where he'd only gotten detention twice.

Ginny had been shaken badly by the attack on the Astronomy Tower. She had told Harry that had the attack occurred an hour later or so, she would have likely been killed or eaten by the snake. Harry didn't want to even think about that. She had become an integral part of his life now -- hell, he even lived at her house now when school wasn't in session -- and he couldn't imagine life without her. He was doing everything under the sun with her now, including several things both Ron and Hermione thought he'd get into big trouble if either her parents or the school staff found out. He felt so brave today that he decided to ask her for another anatomy lesson today.

King William, a.k.a. Mr. Windsor, had spent most of the time since the attack trying to turn on the charm for Hermione. It was obvious he had fallen for her -- what would you expect for a kid who had just turned fourteen? Although Hermione was a good three years older than him, she appeared to be at least somewhat considering the idea of dumping Ron for William and becoming a princess. Harry was still trying to figure out whether he should break this to Ron and then run for the hills. The king had proven to be a passable wizard thanks to the assistance of the Wizarding Queen and the Korean chap. He would likely never be able to do everything an ordinary wizard could. However, he wouldn't embarrass the profession.

Harry opened the window to take a look outside. He scanned the area around the castle and thought something seemed a bit strange. What was it? The sun was out, there were a few birds left in the trees, the Whomping Willow was beating up on a pigeon, happy thoughts were coursing through his mind...

Happy thoughts. Suddenly, it hit him.

The dementors were gone.

He ran around the floor throwing open windows to see if they were anywhere in sight. They weren't. The one-month siege of Hogwarts had finally come to an end.

The noise of him racing through the dormitory woke up most of the boys on his floor. Their irritation about being woken up early on a Sunday dissipated very quickly when they realized they were all in a better mood than they had been for over a month. Soon, everyone was cheering.

Ron hurried to get dressed. "Thank God they're gone! With them hovering around here, we couldn't do ANYTHING fun! Do you know what happened? Did they catch the guys who did it?"

Harry's reply was interrupted by a squawk as an owl suddenly flew into the dorm and dropped a rolled up parchment in Neville's hand. It looked to be a copy of the Quibbler. Considering that Neville and Luna were rumored to have hooked up, it made a lot of sense. Harry could just hope that Luna would be able to save Neville once Flitwick realized that an owl had flown directly into the dorm without first stopping in the Owlery.
Neville took one look at the headline and started waving the paper around. "It's a Quibbler extra! It's talking about the dementors!"

Everyone crowded around as he began to read.

------

DEMENTORS REMOVED FROM HOGWARTS, HOGSMEADE

Happy days have returned to the citizens of Hogsmeade and Hogwarts. For the first time in over a month, the residents of these locations will not have to deal with dementors in their midst.

Dr. Nicholas Flamel, our Minister of Magic, offered an explanation. "Late last night, word came in from Atlantis which shed some light on the actions of the Death Eaters in the area. After carefully considering this new information, the Ministry has concluded that Hogwarts and Hogsmeade are no longer under a magical terror threat from the Death Eaters. The Death Eaters were removed immediately during the night, a development which will please virtually everyone in the area."

The Minister, however, could not reveal everything. "Although many of you wish to know who exactly attacked Hogwarts, the Ministry cannot provide any additional information at this time. The investigation is still ongoing, although we now know for certain that Hogwarts will not be targeted again by You-Know-Who's organization. Ministries of Magic all over the world are going to be collaborating in track down the killers.

"As Minister of Magic, I regret having to withhold information like this. Unfortunately, we cannot reveal all of our information without possibly tipping off the killers to the fact that we are on their trail. The only person outside the upper levels of the Ministry to know the entire story will be Professor Flitwick, headmaster of Hogwarts; and Alastair Moody, the school's Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher."

Madam Rosmerta, a resident of Hogsmeade, was ecstatic about this development. "It's about time those black-caped monsters left Hogwarts. Everyone has been moping for the past four weeks, and no one has spent any time in the Three Broomsticks. I've had so few customers that I've often found myself closing the shop and sending everyone home. Now that the dementors are gone, the tavern should finds itself brimming with customers once more."

------

Ron began whooping it up. "Way to go, Flamel! He may not have specifically campaigned for Minister of Magic. However, I can't help but think that someone who's been around six hundred years has certainly got more experience and wisdom than any of the politicians like Fudge or Scrimgeour."
Neville chuckled as he rolled up the newspaper. "Amen to that, Ron. Amen to that."

Harry frowned. "They haven't caught the guy who did it, it sounds like. I'm not sure how safe we are, to be honest. I think we'd better reconvene the original Dumbledore's Army group from last year and see if there's anything we can do to help out."

Neville frowned. "I don't think so. I trust Flamel -- he knows what he's doing. Besides, how are we going to get out of school? We can't even leave the castle to visit Hogsmeade. How are we going to help here?"

Harry nodded somberly. "You're right, Neville. Maybe I can use my Cloak --"

Ron rolled his eyes. "You gave the Cloak to Moody, Harry. Besides, you by yourself can't do much."

Neville scratched his head. "Maybe we should talk to Hermione and use her new star power to help out? I --"

A first-year stuck his head in the door. "Hey, guys! Come on down! Professor Dumbledore wants to talk to us in the common room!"

"Which one?"

The first-year blinked sheepishly. "Oh, Aberforth. Albus is still retired, as far as I know."

Harry followed the rest of his friends down into the conference room just in time to see the students celebrating and Aberforth making his way out through the portrait hole. Hermione, clad in a very interesting looking nightgown which was making Ron's eyes as wide as saucers, headed over to explain.

"The Ministry is continuing the investigation into the attack on the Astronomy Tower. They're not certain which Death Eater did it, of course. However, what they are certain about is the fact that Hogsmeade is no longer going to be threatened. The dementors have left, guys. In case you're wondering why you feel so happy this morning, that's why. Oh, and they're all letting us going to Hogsmeade today to celebrate!"
Ron's eyes widened. "Yes! Unplanned field trip!"

Harry smiled. However, his face turned serious again. "Hermione, do you think I'll be able to get my Cloak back?"

Hermione frowned. "I doubt it, Harry. If the Death Eaters are still planning on taking the Cloak and Flamel is convinced that Hogwarts is safe, the obvious implication is that the Cloak has been moved out of the area. And even if it is in the area, there's no way you'll get it back as it will draw the attackers right back here."

Harry groaned. "Damn. Well, at least we got a Hogsmeade trip out of it. Let's find Ginny and get going."

----------------

Harry had been on many Hogsmeade trips before. This, however, was the best of them all. The place was mobbed as virtually everyone was out celebrating. He had kissed Ginny several times and gotten her some candy at one of the stores. Ginny had surprised him and bought him a set of British football cards at a Muggle store. Ron, of course, had no idea who any of the players were. Neither did Harry, though his excuse was a bit different.

Hermione had left a little early to hang out with Lavender Brown and a couple of other girls. Ron had ogled her for a minute and begged her to stay, but she argued that he would be able to put himself to better use serving as a chaperone for Harry and Ginny. Harry didn't like the idea of Ron serving as a chaperone, but Hermione did have a bit of a point.

Three hours later, Harry, Ron, and Ginny started making their way back towards Hogsmeade with the rest of the group. He wondered where Hermione, William, and Laura Spencer were. He figured they'd show up eventually, however. Hermione wasn't one to miss school. And if the monarch wound up missing -- either Muggle OR Wizarding -- there would be hell to pay and the government would find the person very quickly.

Ron looked down an alleyway and suddenly froze. His face went beet red as Harry crashed into him. Apologizing profusely, Harry asked Ron if something had happened. In response, Ron just pointed. Besides him, Ginny gasped and winced.

Harry followed Ron's outstretched finger to see William kissing Hermione. Next to them was Laura Spencer, who was frantically trying to separate the two of them.

Ron started marching towards them with fury in his face. "I'm going to kill both of them!"
Ron started marching towards them with fury in his face. "I'm going to kill both of them!"

"OK, I'll just kill HIM then!"

Harry shoved him up against the wall of the alley. "You can't kill William! As far as the Muggles know, he's the king. You're going to get the entire British Secret Service after you if you do that. Besides, you remember what you were like when YOU were fourteen?"

Ron wasn't listening, however. Harry and Ginny tried to catch up as she closed in on Hermione and William.

Laura Spencer jumped in between them. "Ron, this isn't what you think it is --"

"Out of my way!"

Ron tried to shove her out of way -- unsuccessfully -- as Hermione spun and stared at him. Realization suddenly dawned in Hermione's eyes. Slowly, she began to back off. "Oh my. Oh my."

Ron glared at William. "Well? What do you have to say for yourself? Hermione is MINE, William."

William shrugged. "I'm the king. In theory, I could always call for your head to be chopped off."

Everyone started screaming until Laura clapped her hands. "You can't do that, William! I know! Magna Carta and all that! I told you, you're acting like an idiot. Every single guy does when he's fourteen."

Ron, of course, then proceeded to play the idiot by starting to beat up on William. He actually managed to land a few punches before everyone else managed to separate them. Finally, sporting a bloody nose, he turned to glare at Hermione.

"Well? What exactly was that? Tutoring?"
Hermione flared at him. "I must admit, I was intrigued by the possibility of being queen for a while. However, you're right. He's way too young for me. Besides, I know a sure thing when I see one."

Ron blinked. "So you're not going out with him?"

"I had debated it for a while. However, I've decided against it. At least I had before you started beating up on the poor kid."

Ron's face reddened again, and Harry and Ginny pulled him back while Laura checked to see if William was injured. "I -- I was being stupid. I apologize."

Hermione wasn't convinced. "You'd better apologize. Otherwise, I may just change my mind. I don't go out with bullies."

Ginny and Harry promptly started pestering Ron to come to his senses. Finally, he did. Giving Hermione a kiss and ignoring William's glare, the sixth-years headed off back towards the castle with Ginny standing between William and Ron.

Suddenly, Hermione stopped. Saying she'd dropped something back in the alleyway, she headed back to Laura as the other students headed for the castle.

Laura shook her head when Hermione approached. "William does have a thing for you, Hermione. However, I agree that he's way too young. Besides, would the Muggles seriously like an active witch being the king's consort?"

Hermione grinned. "Maybe, maybe not. Tell William that we'll have to just stay friends for now because the age difference. I remember a bit about that time in my life myself, and I can understand where William is coming from."

Laura nodded. "I will. I hope he doesn't go to pieces over it, though."

"I hope he doesn't, either. After all, who knows? Ten years from now, when he's 24 and I'm 27, things could be different."
Laura stared at her. "You're still somewhat interested?"

"Quite possibly. However, that's just between the two of us for now. For the time being, I'm fine with Ron. In the future...we'll see. After all, how often does one marry your first boyfriend as a teenager?"

To be continued...

__________________

Update #414: Now Will Anyone Less Than 3000 Years Old Buy This?

-------------
Monday, November 3, 1996
Omega Institute
Rhinebeck, NY
United States of America
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/2.0%
-------------
NEXT UP: An American Does His Civic Obligation
-------------
Samuel didn't like the way things seemed to be going. His first reforms had gone over pretty well. However, his ordination of female clergy had gotten a few of the delegates upset enough to split off to the Sanctuary to hold their own High Holiday services.

Nevertheless, he had to try. He was convinced he had been sent back for a reason: to unify the Abrahamic faiths. He knew the road would be difficult and that there was a distinct chance that this would fail. These new, more serious reforms had to be made in order to mend the fences between the three sects. It could very well alienate a few members of the group, and if that were the case so be it. Sacrificing 5-10% of the group to improve the lives of 90% was, in his mind, a reasonable price to pay.

There would always be pangs of pain accompanying a birth. He knew that all too well seeing after hearing what his sister-in-law had to go through. Yet people had to have faith that things would work out in the end.

Drawing a deep breath, he came to the podium with the interpreter and looked over the crowd. The Jews and members of John Paul's sect didn't look all that happy. The Jews had complained that one of the reforms would likely endanger their sect's traditions due to the sect's small size. Samuel didn't like the idea of one of the sects' traditions disappearing completely, but he'd be willing to take that risk. The Catholics -- John Paul's sect -- had complained about the second reform, saying that it just wasn't done. Samuel had explained that the Jews and Protestants did it, and the Protestants also believed in Jesus.

As usual the various reporters were there. Most of them were starting wearing light jackets as the main hall had not yet been winterized. If the conference was going to continue much longer -- and Samuel was adamant that everyone stay put until a consensus was reached -- every building would
have to receive climate control. The rabbis didn't look happy, but they pasted smiles on their faces for the cameras.

He began to speak. "Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming. It is my pleasure to announce two new reforms which I would like to propagate through all of the Abrahamic sects.

"As you know, the goal we are all striving for is the unification of the Abrahamic faiths and an end to the struggles between the two large ones, the smaller Jewish faith, and the world. I believe that part of the problem revolves around the fact that the three sects have spent so much time isolated from each other that they have inaccurate views and opinions of the other two. This needs to be rectified in order for progress to continue.

"As a result, I encourage members of all the sects to date and marry people who did not belong to their original sect. Yes, some of you may consider this to be interfaith dating. However, it is not as we all belong to one faith, the faith of the God of Abraham. In mixed marriages like this, a child's sectarian affiliation will be that of the parents whose sect has fewer members. The tribal, secular affiliation will go by the other parent.

"I understand that relationships between members of different sects may be difficult for some people due to the different backgrounds of the two individuals. Relationships are difficult even without this handicap, and if a given couple finds the gap too hard to overcome they shouldn't force themselves. However, I want everyone to realize that simply ruling someone out for not belonging to the right sect is the wrong thing to do.

"I also encourage people in subsects to marry believers outside their subsect; for instance, Orthodox Jews marrying Reform Jews, Shiite Muslims marrying Sunni Muslims, and Greek Orthodox Christians marrying Catholics."

There was a collective gasp from the crowd, and people started peppering the interpreter with questions. Samuel raised his hand and the people slowly quieted down. He noticed that the rabbis' scowls had cleared up somewhat with his declaration that the child inherits the faith of the minority parent. However, they still most definitely weren't happy campers.

"In addition, it has come to my attention that the Catholic subsect is unusual in that it does not allow for married clergy. I have been informed of certain unscrupulous behavior among Catholic clergy when it comes to the youngest members of the congregation. Although I will not denigrate the sect's image by going into the nature of this behavior, I have reason to believe that this problem is due to the fact that the Catholics do not allow married clergy."

The crowd began to chatter excitedly once more. Samuel saw that most of the Catholics had a relieved look on their faith, happy that one of the darkest aspects of their history was hopefully about to be dealt with.

"As a result, it has been agreed that all of the sects are allowed to have married clergy of either gender. There is to be no discrimination by gender in institutes of religious instruction. Furthermore, any Abrahamic religious advisor who performs abominations such as those found among the Catholic clergy will be stripped of their posts and excommunicated."

The crowd began to throw questions at him once more. However, he wasn't done yet. "One more thing. I can understand how people who have already been raised in their sectarian traditions may find it difficult to change their views to match those I have promulgated here at Omega. As a result, I decree that people of this generation will be permitted to practice as they always have. However,
couples who marry after this conference concludes will have their children instructed both in their family's traditions and in the combined Abrahamic one. This will allow the current generation to keep their current beliefs while readying the world for the merged Abrahamic faith.

"There is a precedent for this decision. At one point in the history of the Jewish sect, the Jewish people were split between the teachings of the School of Hillel and the School of Shammai. Both of these men were well-respected religious teachers who lived about the same time. The religious authorities, however, grew concerned that the community would split into two rival religions, one which practiced Hillel's rites and one which practiced Shammai's. For the sake of unity, they had to request that one of these scholars -- in this case Shammai -- stop teaching his own practices and instead start teaching Hillel's. However, he and his students were allowed to keep on following their customs for the rest of their lives. It worked for Hillel and Shammai as the Jewish sect still exists. God willing, it will work for us as well."

Samuel fervently hoped this would work. Judging from the reaction of the delegates at the conference, he gave it maybe 2-to-1 odd in favor. Better than 50%, but far from a certainty. What he was concerned would likely happen was that the rest of the Abrahamics would just ignore this pronouncement. He hoped that he wouldn't have to communicate everyone else and create what was, in effect, yet ANOTHER sect.

He figured he'd end on a happy note. "In other news, it has come to my attention that the Students for Samuel movement has grown drastically over the past few months, especially here in the Northeast United States of America. I would like to invite the young adults in this movement -- those of age 35 and under -- to Omega for a young adult retreat the weekend of November 22nd through the 24th. You will likely have to sleep in tents on the grounds or inns in Rhinebeck itself, but you will be able to come onto the campus and speak with me and the rest of the staff here."

------------------------------
Harold Pharmaceutical Corporation
(Formerly Harold-Green Pharmaceutical Corporation)
------------------------------

Lou Harold looked at the balance sheet and frowned. It didn't look good, not good at all. Daniel's obsession with the Philosopher's Stone and Vitalix had nearly bankrupted the company by giving Harold-Green the worst of both worlds: a huge investment in a product only to have the damn wizards TAKE the Stone from him just after they'd announced that Vitalix would be made available to the public. The resulting public relations nightmare had forced him, against his better judgment, to feed Daniel to the wolves known as shareholders.

He'd be taking a big risk with this. Wynfor Grigor -- much to his surprise, the guy was Welsh and not Russian -- had an interesting idea. Ziggurat Labs probably wouldn't let him implement his genetic engineering plans. They were very likely skirting the edge of the law here, and Ziggurat didn't want to risk the profits and fame they'd already managed to accrue. Hell, the Q/Z stuff had just earned them the Nobel Prize!

Harold, on the other hand, needed to take a risk. The company was in deep trouble at this point, and they had to do something crazy to right the ship at this point. Perhaps he could convince Grigor to take maybe 60% of the profits from the genetics research in exchange for the patent in the future.

Hoping that this would work, he looked up the number in the email message and dialed it. A man with a distinctive Welsh accent picked up the phone.

"Hello?"
Harold's throat was dry. "Is this Wynfor Grigor of Ziggurat Labs?"

"It is he. Who is speaking, please?"

"My name is Lou Harold, and I'm the president of Harold Pharmaceutical Corporation?"

There was a pause on the other end of the line. "Is this the same as Harold-Green Phramaceutical Corporation?"

"It was Harold-Green until recently, when my co-founder Daniel Green was forced out because of an unsuccessful business venture."

"In other words, he took the fall for the wizards stealing your...equipment."

Harold bit his lip. "I see the word has spread. Wonderful."

"Green's miscalculation appaers to have become public knowledge, I'm afraid. Fortunately, I think I can help your company get back on its feet again. All we have to do is make a deal."

"Indeed, a deal may be mutually beneficial to both of us. I assume we'll be able to haggle over the specifics?"

"Of course, Mr. Harold."

"Good. We're in."

To be continued...

__________

Update #415: An American Does His Civic Obligation

----------
Tuesday, November 5, 1996
169 South Street
Waltham, MA
United States of America
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/2.0%

----------
NEXT UP: Santa Claus Is Coming...To Pay Me

----------
I looked at the email in amazement and had to reread it to make sure it was saying what I had thought it was saying. It was, however. Samuel had invited the entire New England branch of the Students for Samuel community over to Omega for the weekend before Thanksgiving.

I really wanted to go. Unfortunately, there were logistical issues to deal with. To start with, I would almost certainly have to take a vacation day to get down to Omega before sundown on Friday. I hadn't accrued many vacation days yet, having only gotten to Parametric less than a year earlier. New hires got two weeks of vacation per year and one week of sick leave, and the plan was to use most of the vacation on Jewish holidays. I supposed I could take a sick day, but I wasn't comfortable of using sick days for days when I wasn't sick. It just felt...wrong.
On the other, the holidays had all come out on weekends in the fall by sheer good luck. This gave me a little more flexibility in the vacation department. If there was a year I would able to make it over to Omega for a long weekend, it would be this one.

Money was also a problem. I was making a decent salary, even after the pay cuts. The problem was that although the Judgment Day recession had bottomed out, there didn't seem to be any obvious growth in the near future. I didn't like spending $100 to frame my newly completed jigsaw puzzles. How could I afford a hotel in Rhinebeck? Granted, I could always get a roommate -- but I did like my privacy.

Fortunately, there was an option in the money department: the tent. I was still going through my astronomy phase, spending many nights stargazing on a golf course in Stow. The equipment for stargazing sessions, in addition to that huge telescope I had gotten for graduation, included a decent tent (which I had no idea how to put together) and a sleeping bag which supposedly protected the wearer down to 20 below zero Fahrenheit. Did I have the guts to simply put the tent and sleeping bag in the back seat of the car (along with possibly the telescope -- what better way to lure cute girls over to you than going to a 20's and 30's event and letting them see the moon and planets?) and camp out in the open in late November? There wouldn't be any charge for camping, of course. But it would be very, very cold. Even worse, there probably wasn't a shower there outside the sauna.

I'd never been in a sauna before and was a bit nervous that I'd be broiled alive -- particularly a clothing optional one. Granted, the sauna had switched from its traditional co-ed clothing optional status(!) to single-sex. The danger was that it would get very popular for both the shower and the heat. Maybe I could try to get one of the wizards to Extendatent and winterize my tent for me.

There was also the simple fact that my mentor at Parametric was Orthodox. Most of the more conservative members of the Orthodox community didn't buy Samuel's reforms and had chosen to maintain their original customs. The loosening of the interfaith dating restrictions was almost guaranteed to cause someone to explode. I don't think my mentor would be particularly pleased by the fact that I was going to the Samuelist Shabbaton, as many of the Brandeis Students for Samuels were calling it. Although I was probably paranoid about this, I figured I'd get excommunicated by the religious community. For all I know, my Orthodox high school would revoke my diploma and shower me with guilt!

I would likely have to decide quickly -- with all of the students coming in from Boston and New York, the weekend would sell out soon. If enough people from the Brandeis and MIT chapters of Students for Samuel went, I'd go. Let's hope they made up their mind within the next few days.

Putting the Samuelist conference on the back burner for the time being, watched the news and got ready for another possibly overwhelming day at work. However, there was something I had to do before heading the one mile to Parametric.

I pulled out of the driveway and turned left instead of right, heading towards downtown Waltham and the synagogue once known as Temple Beth Bingo. This was probably the first time I'd ever been to the synagogue on a weekday morning, and it felt strange pulling into the parking lot. Then again, what I had come for was a ritual which had nothing to do with God.

The parking lot was crowded, of course, and I could see a short line snaking out the door. The latest polls across the nation had Clinton leading 45% to 42%. Most of the Massachusetts commentators -- not to mention the college students in the area -- saw this as promising and believed that Clinton was going to win re-election fairly easily. I didn't know how much my vote would matter -- this was Massachusetts, after all, which ALWAYS voted Democratic. Yet one didn't have to look far to find
countries where the common citizens didn't really have a say in who the president would be.

It took me maybe 15 minutes to make it up to the front of the line. When I did so, I found myself staring into the brown robes of a wizard.

Having learned very quickly during my tour of the annex of the Dutch Ministry of Magic in Curacao that wizards were decent people, I turned to the wizard and just had to ask.

"A wizard at a polling station? Talk about unusual! What exactly are you doing here?"

The wizard didn't bat an eye as he spoke. "Sir, I'm making sure that there aren't any irregularities in the voting. We're also keeping track of how many people have voted. Once the polls close, we're thinking of casting a spell which will point out who DIDN'T vote."

Some of the people waiting in line cheered at that. I couldn't help but laugh. "Ingenious, sir. That's one way to increase voter turnout, which would probably be good for the country as a whole. I don't know how well that will go over with the country, though. Someone's probably going to get irritated."

"It works pretty well with us, sir. We get 98% turnout for the elections in the American Wizarding community. We've always thought it was rather odd that less than half of the registered Muggle voters actually come to the polls to vote for the president. At any rate, back to the issue at hand here. What's your name and address?"

The wizard gave me a ballot and I headed over to one of the booths to cast my vote. I was amazed how many presidential candidates there actually were: I had only heard of Clinton, Dole, and Perot. Who were all these other guys? I filled in one of the little circles and dropped the ballot off in the box. I then headed off to work, thinking about what the wizard had told me.

Having wizards in the polling place made a lot of sense as they were good as impartial judges for the Muggle community. However, I couldn't help but think that having a corrupt wizard handling an election could be mildly problematic. What was there to prevent the wizard from magically tampering with the ballots? The ballots hadn't been designed to handle Wizarding interference. For all we knew, the wizard would tap the ballot box at the end of the day and make the ballots all support the Libertarian candidate! Furthermore, what was preventing the wizards from announcing not just who did (or didn't) vote -- but who everyone voted FOR as well? The information was almost certainly there!

I sure hoped this worked. It had the potential to be big news, for good or for ill.

---------

Albania

- - - - -

Halyna Zygonova grunted as she looked at the message from Rasputin. Things were definitely getting hotter and hotter. She could only hope that the movement would survive long enough to bring back Koschei.

---------

Dear Supporters. I regret to inform you that we will no longer be able to use the Constanta, Istanbul, and St. Petersburg safe houses for our meetings. This is because we have reason to believe that Daryna Vovchanckaya may have been captured by the Atlanteans. We haven't heard from either her or her Muggle assistant for several days now, which is completely out of character. This, combined
with the fact that the defensive arrangements around Hogwarts have changed, lead me to suspect that Vovchanckaya was betrayed and interrogated. This interrogation may have provided Atlantis with the location of our safe houses.

"I want you each to send a Patronus to the following coordinates, where I will cast a spell which will relay you the locations of our new safe houses. They're going to be in the same geographical area, but not in the same place. If you are a Muggle who cannot cast a Patronus, contact your wizard colleagues to send the Patronus for you and tell you the new location.

"One more thing. It is quite possible that Vovchanckaya and her Muggle may reappear in the near future. If they do so, assume they've been compromised and are being tracked by Atlantis. Don't tell them anything unless I specifically tell you to. If you have Secrecy Sensors, Sneakoscopes, and Invisibility Detectors on you, make sure to have them available while talking to them. Furthermore, we have to consider the possibility that Atlantis may take a piece from our own roll of parchment and try to Polyjuice into Vovchanckaya as to infiltrate US. Make sure to challenge her and her Muggle whenever you see them, and take everything they say with a grain of salt even if they do prove to be the real thing.

"That is all. May the Black God be with us.

"Sincerely, Grigori Rasputin."

Normally, I didn't watch the news in the evening. However, there were a few major exceptions, such as on the night after an election.

I turned the TV to Channel 4 and started watching as the electoral map soon started to fill in. I sure hoped that the wizard who had been manning the polling station hadn't in fact been manipulating the results. If he had been, the entire country -- no, the entire WORLD -- would be in trouble.

The first few states didn't show any irregularities. Massachusetts went Democratic by a wide margin, of course. Democratic states went Democratic, Republican states went Republican. Overall, the election results still seemed to be about 45% to 42%, just as they had been the day beforehand.

It took a good three hours or so for the pattern to become clear. I normally didn't stay up this late on a weeknight, but I figured I had to see history in action here. Clinton was building up a decent lead, as most of the pundits had expected. Nevertheless, it was likely a bit closer than it would have been had a couple of big cities not been nuked and the nation plunged into a recession.

Finally, California went for the Democrats and pushed Clinton over the top. I turned off the TV and went to bed. As I did so, it occurred to me: messing with the election results would be too obvious if I were a wizard. Messing with the voting in the Electoral College, however...

To be continued...
Update #416 through Update #420

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Mislagnissa

Update #416: Santa Claus Is Coming...To Pay Me

------------
Wednesday, November 6, 1996
Michael's Toy Emporium
Bath, England
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/2.1%
------------
NEXT UP: Recalculating! Turn Left In 500 Kilometers, Then Turn Right
------------
Dinky was wearing clothes -- a lot of them. All he could see were his hands and parts of his feet. Even more amazing, they actually felt a lot more comfortable than the rags he had grown up with!

His new costume was actually a uniform associated with his new employer, Michael's Toy Emporium. His visit to the SPIW jobs fair had paid off, and he was now working for a whopping 3 Galleons a day. That was a lot of money, he thought. A LOT of money. The only problem was that the job would only last until the end of the year, at which point he would likely have to look again.

His primary job was to wrap presents for customers, attach a photograph of himself and Santa Claus, and write the words "Courtesy of Santa Claus and Dinky the Elf" on the wrapping paper. Although wrapping presents got boring after a while, he found that talking with the store's staff as an equal for the most part was most refreshing. Michael -- the manager -- had to explain, however, that most of the people who worked at toy stores were children deep down inside and tended to have open minds. As a result, they were more likely to be accepting of elves than other humans. Business was slow right now, but Michael said that it would get more hectic as Christmas got closer.

Dinky was also responsible for interacting with young customers as he saw fit. He was supposed to let children sit next to him for a small fee (which he would get 50% of) and ask them what exactly they wanted Santa to give them for Christmas. The premise, of course, was that Dinky was in fact one of Santa's elves and consequently would be able to deliver the child's request directly to Santa. At the end of each day, he would enroll the children's requests in a raffle to determine who actually got the free gifts.

The only problem with the job lay in the fact that the children were...well, children, with all that entailed. A typical interview would go like this.

HIM: Good morning, little girl! What's your name? My name is Dinky.

CHILD: I'm Michaela! Are you really Santa's elf?

HIM: Such a pretty name! At any rate, I really am one of his elves. Look, I can do magic!

(Snap of fingers and Apparition a few feet away)

CHILD, excited: COOL!

HIM: So, Michaela, what do YOU want Santa to get you?
CHILD: A pony!

HIM, sheepishly: Well, I'll see what I can do about a pony. However, that's not going to be easy here. How about a few Barbie dolls, a dollhouse, or --

CHILD, louder: I WANT A PONY!

HIM, grasping at straws: Will a My Little Pony suffice?

CHILD, throwing a tantrum: I WANT A REAL PONY! MOMMY!

HIM: Er...

Although the arguing with the children wasn't easy, it was a hell of a lot better than working for the Zabinis. For one thing, he wasn't getting whipped and tortured. For another, he was getting paid.

He had found himself a place to live along with three other elves. Their house was in one of the low-rent districts in town, but the buildings were outright palaces compared to what he had been forced to deal with at the Zabinis' house. He had two other elves living with him in a room which had originally been intended for two people. Fortunately, since elves were smaller than humans and had magic at their disposal, the place didn't seem as cramped.

He had tried walking around Muggle Bath the first day after he had moved in and had found that it was a bit of a mistake as he had attracted lots of attention, both good and bad. On the good side, many people talked to him and tried to ask him if he needed help getting settled in. On the other hand, others had run screaming while a third group had treated him like a child or curiosity instead of a sentient being. He and his roommates quickly decided that they would limit their interaction with people outside their immediate jobs for the time being.

He had originally wanted to get himself a permanent job, not a temporary position which would expire at the end of the year. Unfortunately, the line had been long, and by the time he had made it to the front virtually all of the permanent positions had been filled. He still considered himself lucky, however, as many of the elves who had come in after him hadn't gotten anything at all.

Hopefully this temporary position would give him experience working for Muggles, experience which would go a long way into earning him a permanent position. For all he knew, Michael would take him on full-time if he did well during these next two months.

The bell on the door jingled, and Dinky turned to see a family of three enter the door: two parents and a child of about 8. The child, naturally, saw the him and screamed. Thinking quickly, he flicked his fingers and an illusory racing car appeared in his hand. That got the child's attention, and the screams suddenly turned into cheers as the child started running towards him.

Here we go again, Dinky thought.

---------------------------

Lega Veneta Headquarters
Padua, Italy

---

Don Gerardo, now helplessly trapped in the clutches of 'Ndrangheta, didn't like what he was being told to do. However, he didn't have much of a choice. He had tried rebelling once before, and one of his sisters had been shot dead as a result. The Godfather wasn't kidding when he said he played
tough.

Hoping not to make anything any worse, he turned to face the president of Lega Veneta, one of the major secessionist movements in Northern Italy. Originally based in Venice, this association was part of the Lega Nord, a group which advocated the independence of Northern Italy and creation of a new nation, Padania. Gerardo knew a lot about the Southern secessionist movements, of course, as most of the wizards down there were manipulating politics to pave the way for an 'Ndrangheta takeover of Southern Italy and its transformation into a nation which was ostensibly democratic but in fact ruled by the 'Ndrangheta mob.

Rome hadn't paid much attention to the increased saber-rattling down in the south. The Two Sicilies (he never figured out where the second one was, and he'd have known if a wizard-only island existed) secession movement had been making noise for a while and for the most part nothing had come of it. The reason for that was obvious: if the south seceded, Rome would just march in and take it over, likely with NATO support. In order to truly break off, the South needed power -- power which it now had in the form of the captive wizards like himself.

There were still several obstacles to an 'Ndrangheta takeover, however. First, the other crime syndicates had to be dealt with before they could try to fill the power vacuum. Second, Rome had to be given enough of a distraction to leave the south alone. Finally, the north had to start getting accustomed to living life without the south.

Gerardo, in his alias as Ministry of Magic member Don Elvio Paderna, had been tasked with helping set these in motion. The Godfather had thought of a rather elegant way to do this which, much to Gerardo's horror, might actually work.

He really didn't want to do this. Then again, did he want to lose his son too?

He drew a deep breath and turned to the president of Lega Veneta. "Sir, thank you for letting me speak with you. I am here to tell you of some disturbing information the Ministry has recently received in the southern part of the country."

The LV man chuckled. "Let me guess, Don Elvio. Vesuvius is about to erupt and you guys are going to fix it."

Gerardo's eyes widened -- he hadn't even thought of that. "Actually, no. This is a more subtle problem, I'm afraid. A problem which may work to our advantage."

The LV man raised his eyebrow at him. "Our advantage?"

Gerardo nodded. "I'm from Venice, and I wouldn't mind ridding ourselves of the south too at some point. However, don't tell anyone or I'll have to turn you into a toad or do something nasty like that."

The LV winced. "That, I don't want. However, I appreciate your support. What's going on?"

Gerardo licked his lips. "There have been mysterious disappearances going on in the Ministry of Magic of late. We have reason to believe that Cosa Nostra has been buying up wizards and plans to turn southern Italy into an autonomous Mafia state."

The LV man frowned. "You're sure that's accurate? I heard it was 'Ndrangheta."

Gerardo had expected this. "We did as well for a while. However, we now have reason to believe
that Cosa Nostra is behind it. They're hoping to take over and get everyone chasing 'Ndrangheta instead."

The LV man looked out the window thoughtfully. "Clever. They take over the south, frame 'Ndrangheta, and have Rome knock out their primary competitor in the attempt to regain control."

"Exactly. With this in mind, can you see how that is going to help us?"

"Indeed, I do. We start arguing that we don't want to have to deal with all those mobsters and secede on our own, creating Padania. We wash our hands of all that mess, leaving it all to Rome."

"Correct. We get the north, the mobsters get the south, and Rome winds up in the lurch somewhere."

The FV man frowned. "I don't want to burst your bubble, Don Elvio, but I don't see how this can work. There's no way Cosa Nostra can get ALL the wizards, and if all else fails Atlantis is bound to get involved."

Gerardo shook his head. "Atlantis can't get involved until at the very least DEFCON 2. And to be honest, if we get to DEFCON 2 we've got bigger problems than a bunch of nut jobs in the South. If I recall correctly, we only got to DEFCON 2 when that nuke went off in Afghanistan."

The LV man then stared at Gerardo -- hard. "All right, how about this? You're a member of the Ministry of Magic. You guys have to follow orders, right?"

"Yes."

"What are you going to do if the Minister of Magic orders you to go after us?"

Gerardo shrugged. "Go after you, of course. However, I highly doubt that they'll send the wizards after the north -- particularly if there are mobsters controlling the South. If anything, Rome will likely join Padania once the south breaks free."

The LV man grunted. "I don't want Rome in Padania."

"Having a Padania with Rome in it is going to be better than having no Padania at all, sir. Besides, controlling Rome could give your state extra authority."

"Fine. Now, let's bring up another question. You said you're a wizard, right? Well, prove it."

Gerardo shrugged, brought out his wand, and turned a coffee mug on his host's desk into a rat. The rat managed to run maybe five feet before Gerardo zapped it once again with a wand and turned it back into the mug.

The LV man clapped. "All right, you're a wizard all right. Now I want to know if you're telling the truth. This seems too good to be true."

Gerardo nodded and brought out a Silver Card indicating Aes Sedai status. He wasn't an Aes Sedai anymore, of course. However, the Godfather had thought of this contingency by managing to procure a Silver Card off a dead Aes Sedai wizard and changing the name on the front. Showing it to the secessionist, he said that he was an Aes Sedai and couldn't lie.

The secessionist looked at it and whistled. "You're telling the truth, my friend. This is interesting.
Very interesting. I'll tell you what -- you go back home and continue with your work. Meanwhile, we'll see what we can do to prepare for the secession of Padania as soon as the South breaks off."

"That will be fine, sir. Keep it quiet, however -- we don't want anyone find out. If they do, BOTH our lives will be on the line."

"Will do, my friend. Good luck."

"You too."

To be continued...

Update #417: Recalculating! Turn Left In 500 Kilometers, Then Turn Right

-------------

Wednesday, November 6, 1996
Central Prison
Atlantis
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/2.1%
-------------

NEXT UP: Let The Cost Overruns Begin
-------------

Daryna Vovchanckaya woke up with a startle as she heard steps approaching her cell. Worried that she was going to be interrogated again, she drew a deep breath and braced herself for the pain.

The door opened, revealing a surprise: Kristjana Þórdís Elísabetdottir, one of the people in charge of the Auror division. She was Icelandic, from what he had been told, and she spelled her middle name with some bizarre runic character instead of a TH or theta.

This didn't look good, she thought. If the chief Auror herself was coming in, something big had happened. Had she run out of luck? Was this woman about to hit her with an *Avada Kedavra*? She didn't think she deserved execution -- she'd told them a lot. If anything, she would have expected an early release!

The chief Auror had been accompanied by her two interrogators, both of whom seemed a bit...disturbed. She had a large bag in her hand, its flexible sides betraying the fact that it was very full. Vovchanckaya looked at the bag suspiciously, expecting something to be moving around in it. Death by snakebite would be quick and clean.

Elísabetdottir tossed the bag over to Vovchanckaya and began to speak. "I've got good news for you, Vovchanckaya. Word of your cooperation in our investigation has reached all the way up to the top. After a brief discussion, we've decided that you have earned an early release. As of now, you are free to go. Your possessions are in the bag."

Vovchanckaya's eyes widened. "You're letting me go?"

"Yup. These two men will administer an Unbreakable Vow to you which will ensure that you never
work for Rasputin again. Once that is done, they will Obliviate you so that you don't remember anything that happened here. You will then be escorted from the city back to Santorini, and you will be banned from visiting Atlantis ever again."

Vovchanckaya thought frantically for the moment. Had the Atlanteans learned from all of their mistakes with the Aes Sedai oaths? Hoping not to look too excited, she asked: "I don't like Aes Sedai oaths, Chief Auror. Make one false move and you're dead, even if that move is unintentional."

Elísabetdottir nodded. "I'm aware of that. That's why we've chosen to use the version of the Unbreakable Vow which will cause you to experience excruciating pain instead of die. From what I've been told, it's quite a good deterrent -- one or two violations is more than enough to train an average oathbreaker."

Well, well, thought Vovchanckaya. They haven't learned from their own mistakes. She was more than willing to take this kind of oath and either renounce it or experience a momentary pain to work for Rasputin once more. Most interesting. Rasputin would want to know about this...if she were given the opportunity to tell him.

She kept her face as neutral as she could. "That's a pleasant surprise, I must admit. I'll be more than willing to accept those terms."

Elísabetdottir grinned. "You'd better, because the alternative is staying here."

"What's going to happen to Zhukov?"

"He was released earlier today. If you wish, I can show you the document authorizing his release. I can vouch for its authenticity."

Vovchanckaya shook her head as she began rummaging through her stuff. As far as she could tell, most of her clothing was there. The Atlanteans had crammed lots of stuff into that Extendatent bag. She wondered how much of her stuff had been placed in Zhukov's bag.

She frowned, however, when she noticed that some of the stuff was missing. She mentioned this to the Chief Auror, who shrugged. "We couldn't fit it all in. Think of it as part of the fine associated with your crime. Besides, in all honesty you can't honestly NEED seven pairs of shoes."

One of the interrogators glowered at her. "Get real, Chief. You have at least ten."

The Chief Auror glared right back. "Actually, I don't. It's one pair of shoes which can change color."

------------------

Elísabetdottir watched as the interrogators escorted the two Black God terrorists away from Atlantis towards Santorini. Once they were out of view, she walked back into the Auror Office and headed over to the Muggle Technology Research Bureau, where two people were staring intently at a couple of computer screens.

She folded her arms over her chest. "Well? Did it work?"

The Muggle technician turned and gestured to the monitor. "The Global Positioning System tracker is working perfectly. I've got the woman's coordinates right here."

"Good work, Felix."
"Thank you, Chief. I must say, sticking a Muggle tracking device on her kind of makes sense. She'll probably think we're going to do something magical and look for spell residues or something like that. She'll probably never suspect a magic-hardened computer chip embedded in her earring."

Elísabetdottir smiled savagely. "That's the point, Felix. We're going to do what she doesn't expect us to do."

"Using Muggle technology certainly qualifies, Chief. They came to spy on us, and now we're going to use them to track down Rasputin and whomever Rasputin is working for."

"Correct. Do these chips broadcast video footage of where they are? What about sound recording?"

Felix raised his hands in resignation. "Some chips do that. These, however, don't. We didn't have much to work with, after all. Sorry."

"Don't worry about that -- this is still a very good development. Both of them are being tracked?"

"Yup. The man's chip is in his belt buckle. Hers is in her earring."

"How robust are these things?"

Felix smiled. "Fairly robust, I'd say. Besides, like I've told you, they're magic-hardened."

"Good. Keep an eye on where they're going and see if they lead us to any new safe houses. If the two of them separate and then suddenly start converging on the same place, let us know immediately."

"You got it, Chief. The big question is whether Rasputin will still accept them -- or whether they'll go off on their own thinking we're tracking them."

"They've been Obliviated, so they know nothing about their visit other than the fact that they really shouldn't come back here. As far as them stopping to work with Rasputin, I'm counting on them going back to work for him. I deliberately used the hurt-if-you-violate-it version of the Aes Sedai oaths on them, not the death version. Although most people won't even think of violating their oaths, these are Rasputin's people we're dealing with here. Many of them have been known to renounce this type of vow, enough to make many of us start wondering if the Aes Sedai program is still worth it anymore -- especially since Britain for Humans doesn't buy the vows as a deterrent anymore. We're betting that they're going to try to get out from under their vows and go back to work again. And once they do, we catch them."

 Montreal, Quebec

Guinever de Mornay and Jason Morgenstern waved to the crowd as they cut the ribbon on Guinevere's Flying Carpets's new office in Montreal. Kurchatova had wanted to come as well but she was too busy grading papers to make the trip up here.

The company was doing very well, holding its own against the Muggle Apparation Network and the flying cars. As of today, it had fourteen stores...and was now an international company.

Guinevere's Four Towns friends and Jason's MIT colleagues were already up to their ears in orders and the details of running a growing company. However, they were young and full of energy. There was no limit as to how far this could go.
Update #417.5

October 1996
Notes of a Japanese anthropologist in Roqteratl, excerpts

---

...average merpeople life expectancy is about 70 years in Roqteratl, while around 40 years in other colonies inhabited purely by merpeople, based on anecdotal evidence gathered from merchants. Speculated reasons of this difference are lack of advanced technological or magical medicine, and general lack of advanced technology: non-Roqteratl merpeople generally don't have access to useful heat sources, with the rumored rare exception of magical forges harnessing undersea volcanism...

...some Roqteratl residents fear their city will lose many of its traditional customers with the establishment of Muggle-Merpeople trading outposts. Others point out that the city-state is still unique in providing a remarkably neutral and discrete jurisdiction (comparison to old Swiss banking system- possible abuse by criminals?)...

...apparently, all merpeople society is based on tribes. Interestingly, Roqteratl citizens belong to Houses instead of tribes- according to local tradition, in the founder's dialect the plural to tribe meant war, and the plural to house meant city (comparison to Greenland's naming by vikings- PR trick?)...

...Roqteratl Houses usually pool their resources and specialize in a few areas of expertise each. Monopolies are respected and enforced to avoid conflict...

...anecdotally, there are a thousand tribes of merpeople in total. In truth, the number is approximately correct but not accurate, as they split and merge over time, especially the smaller nomadic communities. On average, a tribe has a few thousand members, putting global populations at around 3-5 million (confirmation needed)...

...Different subraces (Siren, Selkie, Merrow) are interfertile but hybridization seldom occurs outside Roqteratl, as tribes stick to their own territories and keep interactions on a low level. Merpeople eat a lot, especially in cold water (some quirky biology thing- they don't have enough fat to keep core temperature unless they speed up their metabolisms. Or if they spend their time as dolphins.), so conflicts sparked by contest of feeding grounds are commonplace...

...Tribes are led by Elders. They are elected for life (details of voting process needed). There was a
Update #418: Let The Cost Overruns Begin

Thursday, November 7, 1996
1600Z
Park Street/Downtown Crossing Connector Passageway
Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority Terminals
Boston, Massachusetts
United States of America

Atlantic Defcon Status: 3/2.1%

For the first time in a long time, Mayor Menino was wandering through his city and he wasn't the focus of attention. There was a good reason for that, however. The man next to him was a wizard, complete with a full-blown robe and a hat.

Wizard Kershaw had sent a word a couple of days ago that his memorial in Dana for the Quabbin attack had been completed. Menino had commissioned the project a while back when Kershaw had claimed that he'd be able to finish the Big Dig well under budget -- and throw in the North/South Rail Link, the Green Line Extension, and I-695 as well. Menino couldn't help but think that this would be a godsend...if this guy could actually do what he proposed and those massive worms pressed into service as tunnel-boring machines wouldn't eat any of his voters in the meantime.

Menino and the head of the Big Dig immediately sent back a message indicating that they were ready for the tour. Kershaw's response was to meet him at Park Street Station at 11:00 AM this morning.

Kershaw shook the two politicians' hands and began leading them down the corridor to the Orange Line. "Welcome, gentlemen. It took a lot of overtime to complete the project, but thanks to the expert workmanship of our Wizarding engineers it is done and looks just about the way I planned."

The Big Dig's chairman barked a question at him: "How did the budget work out?"

"About 10% over budget. However, compared to the Big Dig as implemented so far, that's nothing". Menino didn't like the sound of that. However, he would withhold judgment until he saw the results.

Ignoring the stunned looks from the passersby, he stopped outside one the doors on the right side of the corridor heading away from Park Street. "First things first, gentlemen. Let's head over to the Four Towns. This ordinary-looking utility door is actual dual-purpose, and it will transform itself into the new I-Entry when I tap it with my wand. We can use it to shorten our trip."

Menino's frown deepened. "You reconnected the city with the Four Towns despite the disaster triggered by the terror attack?"
Kershaw looked surprised. "I left a note on your desk: you must have overlooked it. Rest assured, Mr. Mayor, that it is going to empty out on dry land above sea level near the memorial site. There is no risk of a flood."

Menino's frown dissipated slightly. "That's good to hear, Wizard Kershaw. Lead on."

The wizard nodded, brought out his wand, and tapped the door with it. The door shimmered and suddenly vanished, revealing a long passageway with sunlight streaming through the far end. Not surprisingly, the spell didn't go unnoticed as many of the commuters froze when they saw the corridor materialize in the wall. It was obviously something new was afoot.

The wizard gestured to Menino and the Big Dig official. "Gentlemen, after you."

Hoping this wasn't a mistake, Menino walked through the door and began heading down the corridor. The Big Dig official appeared behind him, followed by no fewer than five civilians who had raced over to the door to see what was going on. Kershaw -- seemingly taken aback by all of the accidental tourists -- emerged a few seconds later and closed the door before anyone else could follow.

The corridor was bathed in soothing blue light. The civilians oohed and aahed as Menino stopped to read one of the inscriptions glowing in the wall in white letters.

Mai Anh Mạnh, Age 19  
Hải Phòng, Vietnam  
H-Entry, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Puzzled, he turned to Kershaw, who smiled and began addressing the assembled group. "This corridor connects Boston with the Four Towns. It has been enchanted with light in a color appropriate for an underwater setting in order to commemorate the fact that the corridor was flooded. The names of the people who were killed in the Cambridge flood have been etched into the wall and are glowing under an enchantment which will never go out. Their memories will be with us forever. Now, if you follow me a little more, we'll come out the other end. It will take a few minutes, and is handicapped-accessible. There aren't any stairs to interfere with our elder statesmen's mobility."

Kershaw led the group down the corridor and stopped midway through when the corridor suddenly widened and took the form of a long tube. "My friends, we are currently somewhere between Route 495 and Worcester. This section of the tunnel was dug out by the rock worms, worms which will help finish off the Big Dig, the North/South Rail Link, and the Green Line extension."

Menino nodded in appreciation and satisfaction as he examined the walls. As far as he could tell, the worm wranglers had done their job and constructed a fine tunnel. He had plenty of time to examine the walls as the wizard had to spend a few minutes explaining to the civilians that these worms were tame enough to be allowed in Boston. There were names on this wall as well. Curiously enough, they were all from the Four Towns. One name stood out in particular:
The Big Dig official tapped him on the shoulder. "Impressive work. Assuming these worms don't have us for lunch, he's gotten my vote. I take it the people on this side of the corridor are casualties from the two flooded towns?"

Kershaw overheard their comment and nodded. "That is indeed this case, sir. And no, the worms will not have you for lunch. They eat rocks, not people. Now, if you would come with us, I'll show you the memorial itself."

The expedition reached the far end of the corridor and stepped out into what appeared to be a domed enclosure. The top of the dome was lit by a faint blue light which allowed the sun to pass through. The dome featured benches, fountains, some flotsam and jetsam, and two large reflecting pools. It was held up by about seventy or so pillars. There appeared to be a piece of an airplane as well mounted in a fountain, an exhibit which looked completely out of place here. Still, the place looked beautiful -- a good sign for this possible Big Dig engineer.

Outside the dome was a large stack of what appeared to be carpets. Menino would have given 3:1 odds that those carpets were going to get off the ground, odds which jumped to 6:1 when he saw the Guinevere's Flying Carpets logo on a sign near the pile. He also gave himself 3:1 odds that he wouldn't set foot on one of those carpets if they paid him. Next to the pile of carpets was a standard Massachusetts state highway sign with a big "32B" on it. It had two arrows pointing straight up. Was that a misprint? It was also light blue instead of the standard white.

Kershaw continued the tour. "This is the main memorial for the attack. Each of the pillars supporting the dome represents 100 people killed here in the four towns. The two reflecting pools represent Dana and Greenwich. You can tell which one represents which because Greenwich has the airplane statue and Dana has the deep section in the middle representing the original I-Entry passageway. Remember that the airplane crashed into Greenwich and the bomb was dropped into Dana.

"The benches are designed for relaxation and contemplation. In the center of the park is a small structure which will provide more information about the attack. The building over there discusses the history of Wizarding Greenwich, and this one over here discusses the history of Wizarding Dana. In case you're wondering about a building discussing the history of the QAS, that's going to be built in Enfield at the school's new location. Recall that only the men's division was destroyed; the school has since reopened by expanding the women's division, which survived intact and is now housing both genders under the name Quabbin Academy of Sorcery."

Kershaw walked over to one of the reflecting pools. Menino followed him and saw to his amazement that each pool was surrounded by a trench maybe three feet wide with some kind of odd liquid in it. Puzzled, he turned to Kershaw. He was just about to ask a question when one of the civilians let out a squeal.

Everyone turned to look at her and saw her shaking in her shoes. "There are people in that water! Ack!"

Kershaw shook his head. "No, ma'am. What you are seeing are memories recalled by the people of Prescott and Enfield concerning the people who lived in Greenwich. That trench you put your hand
in is something called a Pensieve, albeit on a much larger scale. What better way to learn more about the people killed in the attack than by living through memories concerning them?"

Menino looked suspiciously at the trench. Finally, against his better judgment, he stuck his hand in and soon found himself watching two young lovers crossing a street in what had to have been Greenwich. He nearly fell over in shock when he realized that one of them had probably been killed in the attack and this was a recollection by the survivor.

Shaken but deeply moved, he stepped away from the trench to see everyone leaving the dome and congregating near the pile of carpets. He hurried over to find Kershaw pointing out the sign with the two arrows.

"This is the world's first Skyway sign. This means that to reach Route 32B, you go straight up. We couldn't use one arrow because as we all know that means 'ahead'. Signs which indicate that the traveler should go down will use two arrows pointing down."

He then pulled a large carpet out of the pile of carpets. It was actually a decent-sized Oriental rug, one which seemed to be large enough to fit everyone in the group.

No way, he thought. Absolutely no way.

Kershaw unrolled the rug and told everyone to get on. "If you will all follow me and get on the rug, I'll get us airborne so I can show you what a Skyway -- an airborne highway -- looks like to a commuter."

A few people stepped onto the carpet and sat down. Several, however, looked at it warily. Finally, one of them said: "What the hell: why not." and got on board. The rest of the people followed, leaving only Menino and one other person behind.

Shit, he thought. I'd better get on before these civilians think I'm chicken and won't vote for me. Muttering nervously to himself, he got on the carpet and sat down as Kershaw explained how to control the carpet. "Guinevere herself had originally wanted to do this, but she's busy working on setting up a new office in Canada. So, I had to take over."

Making sure everyone was seated, Kershaw stepped to the front of the carpet, sat down, and directed the carpet into the air. A few of the passengers twittered nervously for a while, but they eventually got accustomed to the ride. Menino found that if he sat in the middle of the carpet he wouldn't need to worry about looking over the edge.

About 150 feet up in the air he saw another blue sign hovering in midair. It read:

```
SOUTH <---- 32B ----> NORTH
Prescott.................New Salem
```

Kershaw pointed at it. "That's a standard Skyway sign. To go to Prescott, go south. To go to New Salem, go north. Let's start heading south."

The carpet began slowly moving southwards. As it did, little illusory white lines -- Menino could put his hands through them -- began making their way past them. Just like regular highway lane markers,
he thought. The ride was extremely smooth, and there was no wind to interfere with them. Kershaw explained that the shield preventing the people from falling off ensured that the wind didn't hit them. The view was amazing.

The waters of the reservoir slid beneath him, and Menino had to admit this looked like it was going to be a very good idea. Even more important, the civilians -- many of whom were likely people who were going to vote for him -- seemed to approve of it. If that was the case...

Kershaw looked over his shoulder at him. "Well, Mr. Menino? What do you think? Is it what you were looking for?"

Menino had to admit the truth. "I must say, Wizard Kershaw. I'm...speechless. The Big Dig is going to be like THIS?"

"I-695 will, sir, and it will only be for flying vehicles. The rest of it is going to be for cars, just as it had originally been planned. What will it be sir? Do I have the job? Magic makes it cheaper, I must confess, and much more of a highlight for the city of Boston."

Menino and the Big Dig engineer looked at each other. An unseen signal passed between them, and they both nodded. Turning to Kershaw, they spoke in unison. "Congratulations, Wizard Kershaw. You've got the job."

Everyone clapped, including the civilians, as Kershaw nodded and began focusing on steering the carpet. "Thank you, gentlemen. I will do what I can to justify your faith in me. Now, if you will look ahead, you'll see another sign which shows there's another exit in 1 mile and that Prescott is straight down. Let's descend to the surface of the reservoir, get away from the exit, and head over to the shore."

To be continued...

Update #419: Messing with Sasquatch
-------------
Thursday, November 7, 1996
2220Z
Above Great Bear Lake
Northwest Territories
Canada
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/2.2%
-------------
NEXT UP: Don't Worry, Kershaw, We ALWAYS Complain About The Big Dig
-------------
Canadian Park Service agent Ellen Colson lowered her binoculars and stabbed her finger out at the telltale mark in distance. "There's another one. That's definitely a fire of some sort. And even from out here I can tell that it's coming out of a building."

Amanda Lira squinted and shook her head. "I don't see anything. The trees are in the way."
"Don't focus on the trees. Take a look directly above the trees. There's a small tube of some sort with a thin gray plume coming out of it. That's got to be chimney. Someone has a fire lit."

Lira looked for a moment and then turned away. "I see what you're talking about. However, I can't believe that's a house. Come to think of it, how tall would a house have to be to poke the chimney that far above the trees? Five stories? Four?"

Colson ignored her and reached for the controls of the helicopter. "We're going over there. We have to check this out. There have been more and more sightings of these anomalies up here. No one I've spoken to can make head or tail out of them. It's about time we went over there and saw them for ourselves."

Lira winced. "You know, Ellen, if they ARE houses we're going to need to get warrants if we want to come in. For all we know, they're radicals of some sort who are going to be plaster us with shotgun shells as soon as we approach."

"That's why we're going to circle around the anomaly first. If it is a house, we'll watch what they do for a while. If they aren't threatening, we'll land a mile or so away in a clearing and go up and knock on the door. I'll head over there and keep in radio contact with you. If anything happens to me, get out of here."

"You'd better go armed, Ellen."

Ellen reached into a storage bin and pulled out a firearm. "I will, Amanda. Don't worry."

The chopper approached the anomaly, and soon became apparent that it was indeed a house in a clearing. The house had to be at least forty feet tall and a few thousand square feet in area. It was impressive, yet it betrayed signs of a hasty and recent construction. Who would build a monster like this as a temporary dwelling?

Lira took a deep breath. "They're going to hear us a mile away, Ellen. You can't use stealth with -- ah, look, what did I say?"

Colson's brow furrowed as a door opened and a bearded man walked outside with something in his hand. Amazingly, the man's proportions seemed to match those of the house: huge. Judging by the trees, he had to be at least ten feet tall.

"Could this man have been abandoned or exiled from the community up there? If so, we should at least ask if he needs help."

Lira hesitated. "He could also be a criminal of some sort who's ready to take us out as soon as we get too close."

The two Canadian agents watched as the man turned back towards the house and gestured at people inside. Seconds later, two more figures emerged: a ten-foot-tall woman and an ordinary human. Colson took a second look and her jaw dropped when she realized what the ordinary woman actually was: a six-foot-tall child with a three-foot diameter ball.
Lira whistled. "This must be a Ieti family. I don't know what they're doing down here, though. We know one thing for certain, though: if they've got a child with them, they're unlikely to be hostile."

"Indeed, Amanda. Let's go down and talk to them. However, we should just hover for a while to show that we have no malicious intentions and that we're just curious."

They had been hovering for about five minutes when the bearded man gestured with his hand and pointed something at his throat. He then spoke with a booming voice.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen. If we're trespassing on your territory, we apologize and we'll go somewhere else. I must say, however, that this looks like a good place to live because it isn't as crowded as Ietalis, has fresh water, and is going to be much warmer for Unlox here". He pointed at the child as he finished his statement.

Telling Lira to hold the helicopter steady and hoping that the sound would carry over the noise of the rotors, she grabbed a bullhorn and shouted back down at the man. "Good morning, sir. Do you three live here? What are you doing all the way down here? Do you need assistance?"

The half-giant cupped a hand over his ear and screamed at her to repeat the question. Colson did so, and the giant hesitated a minute. "Well, actually, help would be appreciated at this point -- being pioneers and migrating to places we've never been before can be difficult. Come on down here -- put that machine of yours on the lawn so we can get inside where it's warm."

Lira drew a deep breath as she began landing the helicopter. Colson asked her what was wrong -- the giants seemed pretty friendly. Her answer was quite succinct -- and surprising.

"He said migrating, Ellen. Not exploring, migrating. It sounds like the Ieti are planning on moving down here now that they're allowed to be seen on the mainland."

"What's wrong with that? If I were stuck living up on that windswept island, I'd think about it as well!"

The helicopter touched down and Lira rounded on Colson. "A couple of people migrating somewhere isn't a problem. A whole NATION trying to get up and head south is an entirely different matter. That's especially true in this case, where the northern parts of the Northwest Territories are sparsely populated."

Colson suddenly saw where she was going. "You're thinking they're going to try to occupy parts of the Northwest Territories and make them part of Ietalis?"

"That's what I'm wondering about. A few settlers here and there isn't a problem. However, if ten thousand people the size of these characters suddenly start taking all of our resources up here and start clamoring that they have a right to live here as well...well, that's how wars of conquest start up."

Colson didn't want to think about that. Hoping for the best, she said: "Amanda, you're being paranoid. It's not like they've seen thousands of these houses down here, only a few. Let's at least hear what these fellows have to say."

"Agreed."

The two women got out of the helicopter and trudged through the snow over to the front door. They
soon found themselves facing a handle about the size of their arm placed about a foot above their heads. Colson was concerned they wouldn't be able to yank the damn thing down -- if the handle WAS supposed to pull down. They didn't have to worry about it, however, as the door opened of its own accord and revealed the man looking down at them.

He was about their height...combined.

The man smiled at them. "Come on in, ladies. I'm sorry, I wasn't expecting guests, so I don't have any food prepared. If you wish, I'll send Aelfor over to Aulavik to see if they can send over some extra food. In the meantime, I hope you like caribou."

Lira, who was a vegetarian, winced at the mention of caribou. Colson, however, had paid attention to a different part of his introduction. Cautiously, she asked: "Aulavik? Where's that?"

The half-giant shrugged. "It's one of our new frontier towns, one island south of South Ietalis. It's got 3,000 people already and it's growing as we speak. The land is beautiful down there and it's got lots of musk oxen for hunting game. I've been told the meat is good."

The two women stared at each other, concern on both of their faces. The northern end of the island due south of Ietalis featured Aulavik National Park, well known for scenery and for a large population of musk oxen. Hoping it wasn't too late, Colson bit her lip.

"Sir, you shouldn't settle in the northern part of that island. It's a Canadian Muggle national park -- Aulavik National Park -- and should be protected."

The half-giant gaped. "So that's what the sign they saw was for. I'll tell them, but I doubt that they're going to move. Moving one family like ours is one thing. Moving 1,500 is something else. Maybe your culture and ours can turn what's left of the island into a new park."

"That would most appreciated. Also, please don't eat the animals -- they're endangered. It's kept as a nature preserve."

The half-giant frowned. "Oh dear...I don't think there's much we can do about that at this point unless you can find us another source of protein. I suppose we could go back to polar bears and so forth if all else fails. We apologize, and I'll make sure to tell the High Chief. We try to not go to places where you humans are living because we don't want to get into any trouble taking things which aren't ours."

Lira didn't like where this was going. Cautiously: "Are there a lot of pioneers like you who try to settle in new places?"

"Yes, ma'am. From what I've been told, there are about 15 or so families in this portion of the lake. I'd say the total population around the lake as a whole is about 100, and it's probably going to increase with time. Do you want us to leave the lake? I must say, ma'am, that it's a good place for us to live with the water, fish, game, and so forth. Which reminds me -- do you have any Muggle heating equipment we can use?"

Colson shook her head. "I'm sorry. We've got some Canadian money you can have, though. At any rate, what percentage of you are thinking of leaving Ietalis and coming down here?"

"I don't know, ma'am. My guess is a lot of us are. The High Chief thinks that maybe 50% of the people are going to bolt -- to honest, it's gotten a bit overcrowded up there. Most of them are going to
go south, I think. However, they're going to have it easy compared to us. We're the trailblazers and do the hard work. But hey, I bet they're going to let us name the settlement after Unlox here!"

Colson tried to keep her facial expression neutral. "Sir, you can't just send large numbers of people of an unusual ethnic group around Canada without at least alerting the government and asking for permission. What happens if your people and mine start arguing over who gets the fish in this lake?"

The half-giant rolled his eyes. "I told you, we don't go where you guys are. We live in the places you haven't settled, which from what I've seen so far is about 99% of the land here."

"The Inuit want to fish here too, sir. Won't they get to use it as well?"

"I don't see why not. However, in all honesty I don't see them here much. Why let all of those fish go to waste? We take these fish and the Inuits keep on using their own fish stocks."

Lira had to ask. "How much of the area around here have your people explored?"

The half-giant thought for a minute. "I don't know -- maybe 200 miles or so south of Ietalis? I hope you guys don't mind -- we try to keep away from your people, as I said. We're peaceful and don't want to fight anyone."

The conversation continued for a good fifteen minutes. Eventually, it got late and the two women excused themselves and trudged back to their helicopter for the trip back to the base.

Colson looked at Lira and then back at the house receding behind them. "They seem nice and were more than happy to talk to us. It's obvious that they're friendly, on the level, and don't mean anyone any harm. If anything, they're all gung-ho about exploring and breaking new ground to alleviate their overpopulation."

Lira nodded. "That's the way countries expand, Ellen. First a few pioneers and explorers map the area, and then the colonists come in en masse. The next thing you know, you have a new country trying to claim large swaths of land. This guy may be on the level. However, the time will come when Canada and Ietalis are going to start fighting over the fish in that lake. Mark my words, Ellen. Mark my words. And we really don't want to be fighting infantry battles with creatures eleven feet tall."

To be continued...

__________________

Update

#420: Don't Worry, Kershaw, We ALWAYS Complain About The Big Dig

----------

Friday, November 8, 1996

169 South Street

Waltham, MA

United States of America

ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/2.2%

----------

NEXT UP: How About Breaking Up Harry And Ginny While You're At It

----------

I didn't feel like going to work today. However, I didn't have much of a choice. Dejected, I headed
over to the TV set to watch the morning news. Granted, hearing lots of gloom and doom didn't help much. However, I needed to be informed.

I turned the TV on and saw that the anchorwoman was accompanied by a placard showing the Big Dig logo and a wizard's hat. I blinked in confusion. What was going on here? Had they actually asked WIZARDS to finish the Big Dig?

The anchorwoman cleared things up pretty quickly. "We begin today's report with an astonishing development in the never-ending saga that is the Big Dig. Mayor Menino, along with the governor, have reported that the state has relieved Bechtel-Parsons of its involvement in the Big Dig. Bechtel-Parsons was the construction firm responsible for most of the planning and budget overruns with the Big Dig to this point. This firm was responsible for the Ted Williams tunnel and had been hard at work in digging the Central Artery tunnel under the city of Boston.

"However, they will no longer be working on the Big Dig. As of today, the Big Dig will be supervised by Wizard Kershaw of Prescott, MA. Kershaw is a trained engineer and construction manager who plans to use magic to do what we Muggles could not and get it in under budget."

The scene changed to a press conference featuring the governor, Mayor Menino, and a wizard. The camera focused on Menino as he spoke. "Ladies and gentlemen, Wizard Kershaw has demonstrated that he is extremely competent when it comes to using magic as a construction aid. He has reason to believe that with magic at his beck and call, he will be able to complete the Big Dig within four years at a cost of under $6 billion. That's less than Bechtel-Parsons's most recent estimate. Furthermore, Kershaw's methods are so thrifty that they will allow us to complete three extra projects in addition to the Central Artery tunnel: the North/South Rail Link connecting North and South Station, the Green Line extension to Somerville (albeit underground), and the I-695 Inner Belt Skyway.

"Yes, ladies and gentlemen, you heard me right. Skyway. This highway will be designed for flying vehicles like brooms, carpets, cars, and so forth. In a scene right out of Back to the Future II, it will use hovering signs to guide people through Cambridge, Brookline, Brighton, Somerville, Charlestown, and the South End."

I watched in disbelief as the image shifted to show simulated lines of flying cars and brooms hovering over Brookline. This couldn't be happening, I thought. This was impossible? Then again, I had to admit that flying carpets were getting more and more common, especially in the Northeast. Hell, I was thinking of renting one myself for a few days to see what it was like!

Menino continued. "Wizard Kershaw has already demonstrated his technical prowess to the citizens of Massachusetts by using his abilities to design a memorial to the attack on the Four Towns and the Cambridge flood. It can be accessed through a new I-Entry-like corridor which can be reached, with Wizarding assistance, from the Winter Street concourse connecting Park Street and Downtown Crossing on the T. Don't worry, ladies and gentlemen. The exit of the corridor is above sea level so there can't be another flood."

The scene shifted once more to photographs of a domed structure supported by pillars with a bunch of benches and two reflecting pools in the ground. The anchorwoman explained that this was an example of what Wizard Kershaw could do with magic. There were even shots of a blue highway sign for Route 32B (wherever that was) which were supposedly prototypes for the I-695 skyway. They were followed by scenes taken from what appeared to be a flying carpet floating a few hundred feet over the Quabbin.

I couldn't believe this. This looked like it was out of a science fiction movie. What were they going
to think of next?

The anchorwoman came back on screen. "Channel 4 spent much of yesterday evening walking the streets of Boston asking them what they thought of this new development."

The image shifted once more to a reporter interviewing random Bostonians. The opinions were extremely varied:

"Of course a wizard will get the job -- he'll turn us all into frogs otherwise!"

"He's going to charge us $13 billion as well, I'd imagine."

"I think it's a clever idea, and it can't be worse than what we've done so far. I don't know if I can afford a flying car, though. Maybe a carpet."

"This has got to be a joke! Isn't it?"

"Can't the wizards invent transporter beams?"

"They're thinking of extending the Green Line when cars are always breaking down on the Red Line?"

"I know how they'll get it done by 2000! Finish it in 2017 and Obliviate everyone into thinking it was done on time!"

The anchorwoman came back on screen. "We at Channel 4 admit that it's a bit unorthodox. However, these people seem to know what they're doing, and I wish them luck in the months and years ahead."

The broadcast shifted to more mundane news, and it suddenly occurred to me that if I got laid off I might want to get involved with think tanks trying to adapt magic for Muggle use. In the meantime, I'd stick where I was at Parametric, continue work on HTML, and prepare for the Samuelist Shabbaton in a few weeks.

--------------------------------------
NASA Space Rock Quarantine Lab
--------------------------------------

Linda Warren's Caterwauling Charm went off, startling virtually everyone else in the room. She knew what it meant and immediately told everyone to don their bunny suits so they can check out the returned Portkey.

This Portkey had been sent to Mercury to bring back a rock sample. A quick analysis of the box indicated that it was about 80 pounds heavier than it had been when it had left.

Making sure that the entire room was filled with an argon atmosphere, the scientists opened the boxes and began removing the rocks. Most of them appeared to have been made of metal for some reason, possibly iron. Someone brought out a magnet and discovered that most of them were magnetic.

One of the scientists looked at Linda in surprise. "Well, well. I guess I was wrong. Maybe Mercury is the iron core of a planet which lost most of its volatiles and silicates because it was too close to the Sun."
Linda shrugged. "It's quite possible. Unfortunately, I have no way to tell whether this is true or not. I'm a witch, not a specialized astronomer."

The scientists looked at her pleadingly. "Can't you do something to discover this information?"

She shook her head. "Nope. I may be a witch, but there are things even I can't do. As a wise wizard once said: we're wizards, not gods."

One of the other scientists thought for a moment. Finally, he shrugged, picked up a rock, and put it in a Ziploc bag. He then handed the rock over to Linda.

"Hey, Linda! Keep this. You've deserved it after all this work you've done for us."

Linda looked at the rock skeptically. "I'm sorry, I don't think I should have it. There aren't that many of them --"

The scientist grunted and pointed at the box. "There are 81 pounds of those things. Trust me, we've got enough to go around for you to keep one as a souvenir. Who knows, if you sold it you'd probably get a lot of money for it. Make sure to keep it sealed, however. We don't want oxygen or even nitrogen for that matter to contaminate it."

Linda shrugged. "If you insist, I'll keep it. I suppose I could sell it if you needed money."

The scientist grinned. "If you want to make money selling rocks, try to see if you can grab more pieces of the Hammer of Ra impactor. That small piece of boat hull -- with the rock in it -- supposedly went for $375,000,000."

"I thought it would go to Atlantis as a reminder of what they had to do."

"Me too. However, Sotheby's had other ideas."

---------------------------
Slytherin Common Room
Hogwarts
---------------------------
"Hey, Little Snape! Come here for a second!"

Patricia Prince turned and saw the two sixth-years towering over her. Hoping they wouldn't take her to task for hanging out with King William again, she walked over to them warily. He tried to remember their names -- ah yes, Crabbe and Goyle. Both of them were bullies to be wary of.

Hoping this wasn't a mistake, she came over to them. "Yes?"

Crabbe tapped her on the shoulder. "I was wondering if you could help us with something. Let's head into this alcove."

Suspecting that they were going to beat her up, she followed them into the alcove. Once they were alone, they gave her a vial with a golden liquid in this.

"Be a good girl and drink this, Little Snape."

She put her hands behind her back. "Uh, I don't think I should. Slughorn probably won't like it if we pilfer his stuff."
Goyle grinned at her. "We'll beat you up if you don't."

Drat, she thought. Figuring she had no choice, she unstoppered the vial and drank the contents. She suddenly felt sick and collapsed to the floor, writhing in pain. She tried to scream but she couldn't get any sound out of her mouth. Finally, the pain subsided. Making a mental note to report this to Slughorn, she glared back up at the two bullies.

They were looking at each other and smiling in satisfaction. Glancing at her one more time, Crabbe whistled. "Merlin's beard, Greg. It works."

"Indeed, it does. We'll do the deed tomorrow."

"Agreed."

Patricia, wincing in remembered pain, was barely able to make it out. "What works?"

In response, Crabbe gave her a mirror. Hoping this wasn't another mistake, she held it up to her face. Pansy Parkinson's face stared back at her. She tried to scream once more and could barely utter a sound.

Goyle gave Crabbe a high five. "Way to go, Vince! We did it! We made Polyjuice Potion on our own!"

-----------------

Eastern Russia

---------------

Tsar Alexei looked in disbelief at the huge tracks in the forest. They were partially covered by snow, but enough of them were visible to tell where they had come from. The fact that the trees had been shattered all over the place helped as well.

He scratched his head, concerned. "Yup. They're giants all right."

The Muggle made off a sign to ward off evil. "God preserve us! Are they going to threaten us, Your Majesty?"

"I don't know, sir. However, I'd recommend that you stay away from this area for the time being."

"Are they good or bad, Your Majesty?"

"Giants, like any other sentient being, can be good or evil. However, the fact that they're running around out here in the open can't be good. For all we know, they could be more Death Eaters -- they supported Voldemort in the past. The fact that they're hiding out in the forest is also suspicious."

"Voldemort? Death Eaters?"

"Voldemort was the evil wizard whose death curse triggered Judgment Day. Death Eaters were Voldemort's supporters. We believed most of them were dead or in prison."

"Are they, Your Majesty?"

Alexei grunted. "I thought so. However, I could be mistaken. Then again, they could be signs
Rasputin is running around out here. The more that I think of it, this likely IS Rasputin. He's tried to frame the Death Eaters before."

"Rasputin? The Mad Monk?"

"Yup. He was a wizard and is making a mess again. Stay away from here while we check this out."

The Muggle nodded. "As you wish, Your Majesty."

Alexei nodded and turned to leave. However, the Muggle called after him. "Uh, Your Majesty?"

The tsar turned around. "Yes?"

"You're a wizard, right?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

"Can you cast a spell to keep my family warm for the upcoming winter? We don't have much money and firewood is expensive."

Alexei thought for a moment, then nodded. "I'll see what I can do, my friend."

To be continued...
Update #421: How About Breaking Up Harry And Ginny While You're At It

---------------
Saturday, November 9, 1996
Slytherin Common Room
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/2.2%
---------------

NEXT UP: Lowne Paolte Should Get Royalties Out Of This
---------------

Crabbe and Goyle looked at each other in concern. They'd miscalculated, it seems like. They only had enough Polyjuice Potion to give both of them half an hour worth of time in their alternate body. The other alternative would be for one of them to take the full hour and the other one to stay behind.

Crabbe thought for a moment and shook his head. "I'm not staying behind. I want to join the Death Eater cell, and if I chicken out they're not going to let me in."

Goyle nodded. "My reasoning exactly. I'd say we split the potion. It increases the risk, but a high-risk operation will very likely get us into good standing with the Death Cell. Particularly if we come away with the Cloak."

"Fine with me. However, I highly recommend that we don't drink the potion until we're just outside the Gryffindor common room. Which reminds me -- where exactly IS Gryffindor Tower?"

Crabbe rolled his eyes. "Even you can't be that thick, Greg. How many times have we been over there to pick on Potter, the Mudblood, and Weasley? Come on, I'll show you after we jump a couple of first-years and take their hairs. And make sure you bring the potion."

The two boys headed to the Great Hall see if there were any Gryffindors they could jump. There were a few people playing games in the common room, including several Gryffindors. Unfortunately, there were enough people in the room that they would likely blow their cover. So, they tried going somewhere else: a bathroom near the Great Hall.

Hiding in the toilet stalls, they watched as people came in and out of the bathroom. Eventually, their wait paid off as a Gryffindor third-year made his way in. After an interminable wait to make sure everyone else left the bathroom, Goyle hexed the third-year and shoved him into the toilet stall Goyle had been hiding in. He grabbed some of the third-year's hair and shoved it in his pocket. Crabbe gave him a thumbs up and waited for another Gryffindor to show up.

It didn't take long for Crabbe's future alter ego to appear in the form of Neville Longbottom. Unfortunately, the bathroom was filled with students at the time and there was no way for Crabbe to attack Longbottom out in the open. However, in a stroke of good luck, Longbottom chose the toilet stall Goyle had been hanging out in. Granted privacy at last, Crabbe pointed his wand at Longbottom and threw a hex at him.

Longbottom's surprise didn't last long, however, due to his training in Dumbledore's Army. He shouted "Protego!" and the spell bounced away and crashed into the pipes in the wall. Students
streamed out of the bathroom as Goyle and Longbottom fought in the stall and water sprayed into the room. Waiting until the students were gone, Crabbe raced out of his own stall and hexed Longbottom through a crack in the door.

Goyle breathed a sigh of relief. "Phew! Thanks, Vince. I thought we had a problem there. Come on, let's grab his hair and get out of here."

Crabbe yanked off some of Longbottom's hair. Then, just for fun, he hit the detestable Gryffindor with an Eat Slugs curse. Not waiting to see what happened to Longbottom, Crabbe followed Goyle out of the bathroom.

They made it over to Gryffindor Tower and searched for another bathroom near the entrance. Making sure no one else was around they inserted the hairs into the Polyjuice Potions and watched as they changed color, just as they had with Pansy Parkinson. There was a good two-minute argument over who would get to impersonate Longbottom, and the honor eventually went to Crabbe.

Crabbe looked nervously at his potion. "Judging from Little Snape's reaction, this is going to hurt."

Goyle nodded. "Probably. However, think of the honor we'll get once we finish this operation despite the pain."

Console, both boys consumed the Polyjuice Potion and transformed themselves into the two Gryffindors. They then hurried over to the portrait hole where the Fat Lady was waiting for them.

She stared down her nose at them. "Password?"

Crabbe looked at Goyle and then back at Fat Lady. "Um..."

The Fat Lady rolled her eyes and turned to Crabbe. "Mr. Longbottom, how many times are you going to forget the password? Fortunately, Kevin here will help you get in this time. You're lucky someone's here for you."

All eyes went to Goyle, whose borrowed face went white. "Er..."

The Fat Lady's painted jaw dropped. "Goodness gracious, Mr. Falwell. You've forgotten the password too? Well, I guess you're going to have to wait until someone else lets you in. Don't worry, they'll probably be around in ten or fifteen minutes. I'd recommend doing my homework if I were you."

Crabbe and Goyle stared at each other in horror. If it took fifteen minutes for them to even get into the Gryffindor common room, they'd be sorely pressed for time to rifle through Potter's belongings for the Cloak. This didn't look good.

Five minutes went by, and the two boys started to do homework. Ten. The Fat Lady commented that she was impressed the third-year Falwell was doing a sixth-year's course work. Finally, after about twelve minutes a first-year came over and opened the door for them.

Crabbe and Goyle raced into the Gryffindor common room and hurried up the stairs towards the sixth-year men's dormitory. Thankfully, each level of the tower was labeled with the class's year of graduation and gender. Three minutes later, they reached their goal: an ornate door labeled with "Men, class of '98". Fifteen minutes down, fifteen minutes to go. They had maybe eight to ten minutes to go through Potter's stuff and find the Cloak.
The two Slytherins found Potter's bed immediately thanks to the state-of-the-art broom he had as the Gryffindor Seeker. Goyle immediately started rummaging through Saint Potter's stuff, trying to find the Cloak. Crabbe, however, didn't move for a while. Goyle looked up at him in surprise and saw Crabbe staring at the broom.

Suddenly, Crabbe chuckled. "I think I know how to get Slytherin to win the House Cup this year. Watch this."

He brought out his wand, shot a hex at Potter's broom, and watched in satisfaction as the broom snapped in two and the bottom half fell out the window. Goyle, not amused, slammed him to the wall. "You idiot! We've only got eight or nine minutes left up here. Focus on what we've come for or the Death Eater cell won't take us."

Subdued, Crabbe joined Goyle in searching through Harry's stuff. They found a lot of love letters from Ginny Weasley, a lot of extra robes, a few Galleons here and there (which Goyle pocketed), objects which looked like they came out of the Weasleys' joke shop...but no Cloak.

Goyle looked at his watch frantically. "We've got one more minute before we have to turn back! Hurry, Vince! Hurry!"

Crabbe looked around the room. "I wonder if the Invisibility Cloak is in fact invisible and we have to feel for it. If that's the case, it's going to be hanging on the walls somewhere. You keep on looking around in there while I try the walls."

Goyle counted down the seconds while he tossed Potter's clothes all around the room and Crabbe did a number on the walls. Finally, though, they ran out of time.

"Bloody hell, Crabbe! We've got to go! We can't get caught here in our normal bodies or we're going to be expelled!"

Crabbe wailed, "But the Cloak --"

"-- will have to wait, Vince. Next time, we'll get the password beforehand using Crucio or Imperio and bring along extra Polyjuice. Come on! The clock is ticking, and you can console yourself by having wrecked Potter's broom!"

The two faux Gryffindors hurried back down the stairs and raced out of the portrait hole with maybe two minutes left to spare. They began racing towards the bathroom only to find Argus Filch running down the corridor in their direction. He gaped at Crabbe momentarily. "Longbottom! Flitwick reported you were sick in -- hey, where are you going? Come back here, Longbottom! And what are you doing running in the halls, Falwell? Come to think of it..."

Crabbe and Goyle didn't have time for chit-chat. They hurried down the hall towards the bathroom with Professor Filch hot on their heels shouting, "Get over here, you two, or you're going to face detention".

Goyle, panting, could barely speak. "We're going to have to lose Filch in the next minute or so or we're done for. We can't be trapped in the bathroom because he'll put two and two together when Longbottom and Falwell disappear and we happen to show up with no one entering the room in the meantime!"
Crabbe nodded. "Let's go. Run, and hope we can outrun Professor Filch!"

The two of them hurried down the corridor. They were slowly getting away from Filch, but they were just about out of time. Crabbe's limbs were starting to ache, a sign that he was about to change back.

They rounded a final corner and reached the Great Hall once again. Realizing that they had to do something drastic, Goyle hexed a Ravenclaw second-year who had been reading a book nearby. The second-year fell down in the corridor seconds before Filch entered the Great Hall. Filch, his eyes solidly on the two running Gryffindors, tripped over the second-year and went flying in a spray of robes. The last thing Crabbe saw as he left Hogwarts Castle was Mrs. Norris staring at him.

The pain was starting to become excruciating as Goyle, visibly wincing, pointed at a small grove of pine trees. They dove into the trees as they completed their change back into their normal forms.

Crabbe and Goyle looked at each other in horror. Not only had they not been able to retrieve the Cloak, they'd gotten Professor Filch suspicious. They had to confess that they'd be lucky not to be expelled -- particularly with their parents having been involved in the Death Eater movement.

To be continued...

__________________

Update #422: Lowne Paolte Should Get Royalties Out Of This

----------

Monday, November 11, 1996
Hogsmeade City Hall
Hogsmeade
United Kingdom
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/2.2%

----------

NEXT UP: I Went To This Exhibit IOTL

----------

Magical Administrator Keira McDonald looked over the assembled multitude. The HMRI didn't have a permanent address yet, let alone the magical and scientific equipment that it would need to accomplish its goals. However, they had more than enough money to play with, both in pounds sterling and Galleons, now that Lowne Paolte had agreed that the organization was a worthy candidate for Millennium Fund support.

The reclusive Laputan angel investor had been delighted when McDonald had told him about the British government's new think tank devoted solely to go after the Millennium Problems. He had been even more pleased to hear that both she and her Muggle counterpart, physicist Dr. Charles Hewitt, had followed Paolte's lead and agreed that 50% of the proceeds from Millennium Fund bonuses would be reinvested back in the HMRI to finance future projects. As each of the Millennium Problems succumbed to the work of the HMRI, the money would keep on flowing in and be concentrated further and further on the remaining projects.

She personally had no idea how they were going to pull it off. Then again, she wasn't exactly Stephen Hawking or Albus Dumbledore. She was just a businesswoman who knew only a little
about science. She might be able to help with basic magic here and there. However, the really
dvanced stuff required specialists. She only had to look at the desalination project in Israel to see
how specialized and difficult the work would be.

They weren't called Millennium Problems for nothing, after all. Those $2,500,000,000 bonuses
weren't going to be easy to get. People had always joked about solving world hunger as the classic
example of an intractable problem. In order to earn that $2,500,000,000, the HMRI would actually
have to DO it.

Minister Flamel, who had taken time out of his busy schedule to come to the dedication of the
HMRI, likened the HMRI's predicament to that of John Harrison and Nevil Maskelyne when the two
engineers had attempted to solve the longitude problem back in the early eighteenth century. The
citizens of the world would serve as the Board of Longitude's judgment panel and Lowne Paolte's
fund would serve as the Board of Longitude's financial arm.

The Minister had told her flat-out that most of the ideas the HMRI would produce would likely be
unworkable and/or crackpot. He explained that solutions in the quest for longitude had included,
among other things, a means of keeping track of time in London by injuring an animal, bringing it on
board the traveling vessel, and using "Powder of Sympathy" to cause the animal to bark at 12 noon
London time. Not that it would have worked as a Muggle-only solution, he added. The point was
that the HMRI would have to sift through a lot of ideas to find the ones which worked. Furthermore,
McDonald had to resist the temptation to give up. What would have happened to the Muggle world
had the Board of Longitude folded before John Harrison had presented his first sea clock? Sure, the
wizards had known how to do it since 1400 (which was news to her!), but this was well before the
Statute of Secrecy had fallen!

With Flamel on her left side and Hewitt on her right, Administrator McDonald began to speak.
"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming today. We have assembled here today to celebrate a
momentous occasion: the founding of the Hogsmede Millennium Research Institute, or HMRI. The
purpose of the HMRI is simple: devote all of its energy to the solution of the Millennium Problems
and to the transmission of any such solutions to the rest of the world. The HMRI has been funded by
a grant from the Lowne Paolte Millennium Fund, created by Laputan entrepreneur Lowne Paolte.
Mr. Paolte would have been here as well for this ceremony except that he is currently in Israel
speaking with the Ministry of Magic and the men and women in charge of the experimental
desalination plants there.

"The HMRI will be using a strategy similar to that of the Israelis. We will be combining magic and
science in an attempt to do what no sentient being on Earth has done before. To that end, we have
two presidents. My name is Keira Faith McDonald, and I'm a witch. I'm in charge of hiring and
looking out for everyone who can hold a wand. To my left is Dr. Nicholas Flamel, our ageless
Minister of Magic and a veritable storehouse of long-lost magical (and historical) knowledge as a
result of his...unusual longevity."

Most of the crowd giggled as McDonald continued. "To my right is Dr. Charles Bernard Hewitt. Dr.
Hewitt is a prize-winning biologist and general polymath who will be in charge of running the
Muggle scientific end of things. He knows a little about virtually every field of science known to
man, though the only field he can actually contribute personally to the research is biology.
Nevertheless, his wide repertoire will allow him to relate to scholars of all scientific and engineering
disciplines.

"We currently do not yet have a permanent headquarters for our laboratory. For the time being, we
have set up shop at the University of Liverpool, where Dr. Hewitt is a tenured professor. The
biologists will work in Liverpool's biology lab, the physicists in the physics lab, and so forth. Eventually all of the scientists will be moved under one roof so they can all work together in true interdisciplinary fashion."

Hewitt continued. "Unlike most government think tanks, all of our developments and work will be posted on the Internet for everyone to see and try to improve on. After all, the Millennium Problems are the world's problems, not just one company's. At least at the moment, we have no one to compete with, and ideally any competitors would join us and help our cause rather than strive to thwart us."

"This will likely be the first major research institution where scientists all over the world will be able to comment on and possibly make recommendations for future work. Why have only a few thousand people working on it when we can have six billion? You will be able to reach us at www.hogsmlnm.com."

Hewitt reached into his pocket and brought out a candy bar. Showing it to the crowd, he placed it in front of his Wizarding counterpart. McDonald unwrapped it and nearly had it in her mouth before she remembered what she was going to do with it. Laughing, she shook her head and put the candy bar back on the podium in front of her.

"Here's an example of what we can do. Remember that joke about solving world hunger? Here's a morsel of food. It's not exactly GOOD for you, but it could be an apple or anything else more nutritious. This one candy bar can't exactly feed an entire city, right? Well, not for long. With your permission, Minister Flamel?"

Flamel nodded. "Go ahead. I'm starting to think the restriction's a bit overkill anyway. Maybe we'll check to see what they're doing it to somehow -- there's another problem for you to consider."

The witch nodded and tapped the candy bar with her wand. "Engorgio! Geminio!"

Less than thirty seconds later, the front of the room was filled with jumbo-sized candy bars. It wasn't exactly enough to feed a city, but it would definitely provide Hogsmeade with enough dessert to last it a couple of months.

Assuming, that is, the citizens of Hogsmeade liked Kit Kats.

-------------------

Eastern Russia

- - - - - - - - - - -

Tsar Alexei Romanov frowned at the leader of the giants. "You're sure about this, Gurg Laxus? You didn't send any of your men over there over the past twelve months?"

The Gurg nodded. "I'm certain, Your Majesty. The few people we sent over there didn't travel in the direction those tracks had been pointing in. I'm sorry."

"Who did it then?"

"I don't know, Your Majesty. Did you try some of the other tribes in the area?"

Alexei nodded. "I have, and the mystery gets more and more profound. You're the last chance we've got."

The giant shrugged. "I'm sorry, Your Majesty, but it's not us. And if you've ruled out everyone else, then we could have a problem. Someone is doing something without telling their Gurg. That's very
bad form, to say the least."

"Borderline illegal, possibly?"

The Gurg’s face was grim. "Quite possibly. Are you thinking Death Eaters or something like that?"

Alexei's eyes widened. "I hadn't thought of them, but now that you mention it it's plausible. Either them, or the Rasputinites. We've still never figured out where that madman is. Could he be out here somewhere?"

"It's definitely possible, Your Majesty. There's a lot of room to hide out here, as you can see."

Alexei stared uncomfortably at the giant's feet. "I was afraid you'd say that, sir. I was afraid of that. Would you be willing to help me look for these guys?"

The giant nodded. "You have my word, Your Majesty."

"Good. Let's go."

To be continued...

Update #422.5 Naked First Impression
---------
Monday, November 11, 1996
Atlantis
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/2.2%
---------

Two merpeople and a wizard are talking in the Merpeople Liaison Office- until today, Grand Mugwump Dagher Sedai thought it'd only happen in jokes. The office was part of the Beast Division of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, and ever since merpeople rejected Being status and kept limiting contact with the wizards to 'come to us to trade and follow our rules while here', not a single one of them ever visited it. Today, it happened for the first time- and it was really wierd.

In the last two week, a mysterious group of wizards approached Atlantis through a series of contact persons. Proving to be very secretive, they eventually settled for communicating through Patronuses and Pensieve archives left behind in premediated locations. The strangers apparently wanted to establish, or re-establish contact between their very Hidden Nation and Atlantis, but first, they insisted on presenting some gifts. One was a breeding pair of live Tasmanian Tigers, a curiosity as though the animals were both completely mundane and thought to be completely extinct. Perhaps a hidden landmass near Australia would explain this... but not the other gift: lots and lots of carefully edited, but as the recent anti-terrorist raids proved, extremely accurate inside information on more than half of the criminal organizations on the American continents. In South and Central America, those covered virtually all significant organizations. In North America, it was less than that... and
somewhere along the line, just beyond Dagher's insight, was some important observation to make about it.

He was genuinely surprised when the two merpeople showed up on a flying rug, though. The strangers never mentioned their species, but he expected something more terrestrial and/or magical. Though these ones apparently didn't lack the latter: they both had holstered wands hanging from odd harnesses and belts that made up most of their clothing, covering some of their torsos and arms but nothing below- not that the tails were clothing-friendly anyway. They had Patronuses out, to do the speaking, he realised.

After some really cautious (but after the recent Tchernobogist infiltration, justified) inspection, they were escorted to the Merpeople Liaison Office by a trio of Aurors. The office, built with the amphibian race's special needs in mind, had a great pool to enable comfortable dialogue. Dagher pointed his wand at himself to cast Bubblehead Charm, but one of the guests shook her head and her Patronus said: "It won't be necessary". Puzzled, the head of Atlantis could only stare as the other merperson jumped into the water, brought out his wand, aimed (well aware of the Aurors tracking him with their own wands) it at the mermaid, and began some arcane incantations- while it was bearable for human ears, many of the sounds would have been impossible for human vocal cords.

As he finished, the mermaid began changing: greyish green skin became caramel, blue hair turned into black, great yellow eyes whitened and shrunk, a nose enlarged, gills closed up- then she crouched on her tail, and when she stood back up, she had legs instead. The Atlanteans stared at the improbable transformation, then blushed as one and turned away as they noticed that the witch's clothing did not change with her. Sniggering in a now human voice, she made a remark about them having been completely comfortable with her body in it's previous state, then pulled out a light robe from a small bag and put it on.

Introducing herself to the baffled humans as Willa Whitespear, ambassador of the merwizard hidden city Trapananda, she quickly got down to business. Mostly, she just informed Dagher of non-negotiable facts, but she did have some proposals, like a cooperation between the Auror organizations of the two entities and the sharing of Project Re-Genesis. Those were both promising, but the prize was high: Trapananda insisted on staying hidden, visitors were only allowed to leave if they took a harsh set of Unbreakable Oaths ensuring death before they could reveal the city's location in any way, no human visitors were allowed at all -"Sorry about that, ghosts present a serious security hazard that's unique to your race" explained Willa; the police cooperation's first task would be hunting down thousands of escaped Death Eater supporters, and although the merwizards blamed their previous regime for getting involved with the Houyhnhnmland conflict, it didn't change the fact that the majority of the wizards (and the most destructive ones at that) fighting there were in fact merwizards. Then there was the whole spy in human form problem, and their past treatment of nonmagical merpeople- they could insist those were reformed, but many of them were obviously still entangled in illicit activities. By the time the merwitch finished presenting this, Dagher was white as chalk, and dangerously silent. Then he exploded:

"YOU IDIOTS! Do you have ANY IDEA what you've done to the wizarding world? We were in the middle of getting Muggles to finally trust us, then you people waltz in, inform us that you've conspired for five thousand years behind our backs, and present us with demands! I wouldn't be surprised if all nations on this Earth would be checking each other for hidden merwizards once
someone invents the magic or technology to identify one! Your blatant disregard of Aes Sedai oaths and continued operation behind our back...

"Is nothing your lot hasn't done before, Mr. Dagher" quipped the merwitch. "Our existence, let alone our abilities will remain classified and only some high-ranking non-merpeople will be informed like you, so no Muggles will know more than they have to. As far as the world knows, the wizards fighting in the centaur civil war were of other Hidden Nations, which is mostly true. Our conspiracies only served to keep our power and preserve Life on this planet, and it'd be very, very amusing if a wizard accused us of operating behind 'normal' people's backs. Your Statute of Secrecy has done all these things and more, motivated only by self-preservation, and has fallen due to your own incompetence. As for your authority, human, remember which office we stand in- it might get some use in the future, but from now on, we'll only interact with the Roqteratl Merpeople Assembly as intermediary. Our goals are to preserve Life and now to uplift the merpeople species, and while your advice is appreciated, we will do it without any outsiders ordering us around, or trying to force those ridiculous Oaths - did anyone point out those were demanded by a known terrorist organization? - on us. I came here with offerings of peace and cooperation, asking in return nothing we don't already have, but if you don't want to share, we can keep going our separate ways. What will you do, Grand Mugwump?"

Dagher took some deep breaths to calm himself, before replying: "I... I have to think this over. Please give me some time alone." That being granted, he stormed out of the office, muttering to himself: "Allah forgive me, but I need a freaking drink!"

To be continued...

Update #423: I Went To This Exhibit IOTL

------------
Monday, November 11, 1996
Parametric Technology Corporation
150 Turner Street
Waltham, MA
United States of America
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/2.2%
------------
NEXT UP: W! O! R! M! Up!
------------
I was not a big fan of gambling. However, I had an uncanny ability to win lotteries. First there had been the trip to a classmate's house in Martha's Vineyard which had been auctioned off in elementary school. Then there had been the Celtics game in high school when I had sat in the area reserved for the Bruins penalty box when the Garden had been configured for hockey. Now I had earned a ticket to the opening night of the "World of Harry Potter" exhibit at the Boston Museum of Science. Granted, the premiere was on a weeknight and I normally didn't go out much on weeknights. However, magic was just...cool. Hopefully the exhibit would explain some of the stuff I had seen
during my visit to the annex of the Dutch Ministry of Magic in Curacao.

Making sure that the invitation was in my pocket, I hustled out of the building and hurried over to my car as quickly as I could. The event started at 7:00, and I had been forced to leave work a little early (thankfully, my manager hadn't had a problem with it). It took a good forty-five minutes to get down to Cambridge thanks to the miserable traffic on the Turnpike and Memorial Drive. However, I eventually reached the Science Museum and pulled into the parking garage.

The news had reported that the people were still picketing out in front of the Aquarium, claiming that the dolphins in the dolphin show were being poorly treated and deserved human rights. This was quite surprising, as several people from the Four Towns had come down to visit the Aquarium and assured the Aquarium's staff that the dolphins were in fact dolphins, not merpeople. However, the protesters had immediately countered by saying that dolphins had a civilization of their own thanks to the Grassy Key interview and should be included in the human rights discussion even though they weren't hominids. I wasn't sure how exactly our land-based species would be able to effectively extend human rights to an ocean-based species, but who knows?

I had been going to the Science Museum ever since it had been half its current size. In the old days, the Omni Theater hadn't existed and the third floor of the main exhibit hall hadn't even been built. The only problem I had now as the fact that I had to pay for admission -- my family had free membership until I got to MIT, and admission was free with a valid MIT school ID.

I gave my ticket to the front desk and was directed over to an elevator which I had never seen before. Intrigued by this discovery, I pressed the button for the third floor and watched as the doors opened into what appeared to be a conference room filled with round tables, wine, and hors d'oeuvres which didn't exactly fit well with the nutrition exhibit. There wasn't much I could eat, but I made do.

The room was fairly crowded, and I found myself overwhelmed from time to time. Most of the crowds were centered on the three wizards who had been brought over from the Four Towns to address the crowd. I tried to work my way into one of these groups but didn't get very far.

A few pieces of garlic bread later, the host told us to all take our seats and introduced the wizards who would be giving today's talk. I didn't recognize any of their names, and they explained that they were low-level administrators in the Four Towns. They then went through a little introduction to the Wizarding world and explained what magic could and could not be used for. I had already learned a lot about this, however, during the visit in Curacao.

The talk went on for maybe half an hour, after which the host requested that we go downstairs and check out the new exhibit. Everyone trooped over to the exit, allowing me a chance to talk with one of the wizards.

I still wasn't sure how to address a wizard, but I had to ask. "Sir, is there any work underway in the United States figuring out how magic works from a scientific point of view?"

The wizard nodded. "As a matter of fact, there is. Like I said in the talk, there has traditionally been a strong link between the Department of Magic and MIT -- a link which as you know nearly flooded Cambridge when the Four Towns were attacked. At any rate, MIT has started an investigation into the properties of magic. For instance, they have reason to believe that magic is powered by antigravity."

I blinked. "ANTIGRAVITY? There's no such thing as antigravity! I went to MIT myself and I was majoring in physics for a while."
"Join the club, sir. That took me by surprise as well. Nevertheless, this research seems to be credible. I suspect that the physics department there is going to really be breaking new ground here. I take it you're a recent graduate?"

"Yes, 1994."

"Perhaps you know several of our MIT liaisons: Jason Morgenstern, Jelena Kurchatova --"

I chuckled. "I knew Kurchatova from Russian House as an acquaintance, but I had no idea she was a witch. That caught me a bit off guard, to be honest."

"Of course she wouldn't tell you -- the Statute of Secrecy prohibited it. My guess is you'll see many more people coming out now. Who'd have thought the Pope was a wizard?"

Suddenly, something occurred to me. If I did get laid off from Parametric due to the recession, could I get a job working for whatever think tank was trying to analyze magic? If it was at MIT, perhaps I'd be able to call in some connections.

On a whim, I asked the wizard if the MIT research lab was hiring. The wizard nodded. "Indeed, they are. What's your major in?"

"Mathematics and computer science with a minor in earth, atmospheric, and planetary sciences. I have a master's in computer science and left midway through a Ph.D in computer science when I got sick of the field."

The wizard frowned. "I don't think they have a place for you -- they're focusing more on cutting edge physics right now. Keep looking, however. Perhaps they may find something based on astronomy. Maybe you could help with the astronomical Portkey program. Do you know how to design spaceships?"

I shook my head -- this didn't look like it was going to work out. "That's course 16, Aero-Astro. Sorry."

The wizard shrugged. We talked a little more about my trip to Wizarding Annex in Curacao, and the wizard was amused when I mentioned that a blue light surrounded us on Judgment Day. "It's a good thing that light was blue and not red. Had those balls been red at ground level, you wouldn't be here talking to me."

Eventually, we made it over to the exhibit and my eyes widened. The exhibit featured wands, dynamic cameras, Quidditch equipment, robes, potions, and so forth. We couldn't touch most of the equipment, unfortunately. However, looking at them was more than enough. It was a good thing that I had manage to secure tickets to the premiere -- it would have been MOBBED on a typical Sunday.

Since this was the Museum of Science, they had a lot of exhibits on the scientific investigation of magic. The company responsible for the Q and Z genetic discoveries was offering a deal on genetic testing for $100 -- too much for me. There was an exhibit on the Hammer of Ra impact crater as well in the Indian Ocean and a detailed discussion as to how the Noah story had actually taken place. A booth was offering small dynamic photographs for $250 each, still too much for my taste.

There were several skeletons on display near the far end of the room. They looked more or less human. The things which threw me were the labels over the skeletons: ELF, GOBLIN, TROLL.
There were also skeletons and photos of creatures which I'd never heard of before: PIXIE, DOXY, BOWTRUCKLE. I had no idea what species those were -- or even if they fit in the Linnaean classification. Hanging from the ceiling was the skeleton of a dragon.

The far end of the room had what appeared to be an elf sitting in a chair. I blinked -- an honest-to-God elf. He didn't look like anything out of Dungeons and Dragons or Santa Claus. The elf explained that he wanted to learn more about Muggles and had volunteered for this mission. He explained that until recently, elves were subjugated by wizards. They had just been emancipated by the federal government and the UN.

I was surprised the guests weren't trying to touch him or shake his hand. It turned out, however, that there was a defensive shield around the elf making sure he didn't get harmed. The elf explained that he had been granted a charm which would ensure that he receive some breathing space for the next two hours.

There was a small gift shop near the elf. They were selling, among the traditional stuffed animals, wizard hats, and so forth, small samples of potions which would regrow hair and heal injuries. The samples provided wouldn't do much, however, and as it was the price tag was well out of my range.

I would have wanted to stay to talk to the elf a little. However, it was getting late and I had to go back to work tomorrow. Besides, I had seen elves in Curacao. Taking one last look around the room -- a look which took longer than I had hoped -- I headed out of the exhibit and went back to Waltham.

********
Hogwarts

It was late at night, yet Professor Flitwick had still been adamant that Crabbe and Goyle head to his office. When they arrived, they found the headmaster with an angry look on his face.

Flitwick explained. "All right, Messieurs Crabbe and Goyle. I may not be Merlin, but given all of the witnesses to your...operations, it is fairly obvious what happened. You've returned to the Death Eaters and tried to steal Mr. Potter's Cloak so you could bring back He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. You knowingly hexed two Gryffindors, made Polyjuice Potion even though it is well above your grade level, and broke into Gryffindor Tower where you rifled through Mr. Potter's belongings and broke his broom. You were discovered in your alternate forms by Filch who immediately gave chase knowing that the original two Gryffindors had already been discovered by the staff. Is that correct?"

Crabbe and Goyle looked at each other and gulped. Finally, Goyle's eyes fell to the floor. "I'm afraid so. I apologize, Headmaster. We won't do it again."

Flitwick nodded. "Indeed, you will not. Give me your wands."

Crabbe looked at him. "Huh?"

"Give me your wands, or I will take them by force."

Reluctantly, the two Slytherins handed over their wands. Flitwick made a motion as to break them for a second, then changed his mind. Instead, he hid them in a closet behind Snape's portrait.

"You are hereby suspended from Hogwarts, effective immediately. This suspension will last throughout the rest of the year. You will spend the rest of the week apologizing to your classmates and cleaning out your rooms."
Crabbe blinked at him. "Sir, I don't have any parents left because of the attack --"

Flitwick spoke right over him. "You will be staying at Wool's Orphanage starting this coming Friday night. While you are there, you will be expected to perform community service for the Muggles. We need to wean you of your Death Eater superiority."

"No!"

Flitwick ignored him. "If your behavior improves over the next nine months, you will be able to resume your studies at Hogwarts next year, returning as sixth-year students. If not, you'll just have to wait longer. And if you tarry too long once you turn seventeen, you're going to Azkaban."

Crabbe shouted, "Now just a minute --"

Flitwick pointed his wand at them. "This meeting is adjourned. Now get out of this office unless you want to lose your manhood."

To be continued...

[Writing directly from the Admiral's Club at Miami International Airport, with the name Kathia Ernst coming from the first name of the lady who issued my airline ticket and the last name of the copilot of the plane that flew me down from Boston!]

Update #424: W! O! R! M! Up!

-------------
Tuesday, November 12, 1996
Charles Street Station, Red Line
Blue Line Extension Project / Rock Worm Boston Test
Boston, MA
United States of America
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/2.2%

-------------
NEXT UP: Hermione Gets a Job Offer

-------------
Kathia Ernst was getting a bit nervous, and for good reason. Jeff was being temperamental again.

Normally, when someone threw a temper tantrum you told them to shut up and behave themselves. Unfortunately, even worm wranglers like her hadn't perfected a method for trying to convince those 20-foot long rock worms to do what they were supposed to do. Usually, all the wranglers had to do was spray the rock wall which was supposed to be eaten with a substance which the worms would find tasty. The worm would do the rest.

On the other hand, it wasn't often that one of the rock worms was told to travel this far away from his home in the bowels of the Berkshires. Jeff hadn't mated for a few months as well, and she had promised him that she would find a mate for him after he did this job. Granted, she had no idea whether Jeff actually understood what she was saying. Probably not, she thought.
It was currently about 2 AM, and a few dozen feet above Ernst the city of Boston slept. Three hours earlier, Ernst had begun luring Jeff towards Boston with the thread of a delicious appetizer of landfill. There hadn't been any incidents that she knew about. The only sign of Jeff's passing had been a few seismometers registering a 1.3-magnitude earthquake a few miles south of the Weston geophysical monitoring station. This job was going to be one of the most difficult ones she had ever attempted for two reasons, neither of which involved Jeff being moody.

First, the soil between the Bowdoin and Charles Street stations was riddled with electrical cables, wires, pipes, and many other artifacts of human habitation. Ernst had done what she could to magically move these obstacles out of the way of the proposed worm tunnel and enhance the ground above the tunnel with magical supports so the pipes and/or dirt wouldn't fall back in. However, there would inevitably be mistakes here and there. Someone would probably lose power or have his or her sewer back up. Hopefully Ernst would find all of these anomalies and rectify them before the affected households woke up.

Second, the proposed route ran right underneath Massachusetts General Hospital. She would have to be extra careful in making sure the land above the tunnel didn't shake at all. She'd heard horror stories about people with broken necks and spines exacerbating their injuries when people moved them around, even minimally.

Third, the tunnel had to be done before the subway opened in the morning. Jeff tended to get nervous around people, and Ernst didn't like the idea of him breaking down one of the remote walls of Bowdoin or Charles Street only to find a few dozen people staring at him and running.

Fourth, the water table was pretty high in this area -- hell, the river was only a few dozen feet away. She didn't want the tunnel flooding, and to make matters worse Jeff REALLY did not like water. The poor thing had flailed a little the first time the water hit him, and that flailing had supposedly smashed a hole in the floor of the Charles Street Jail. Thankfully, she'd been able to fix it and calm down a few maintenance workers before things truly got out of hand. Thankfully, she'd told him to go up a little at the beginning of the tunnel to get him above the water level.

Finally, this was just a TEST RUN for the main tunnel: the Central Artery tunnel and the Green Line Extension tunnel. Those tunnels were going to be done under skyscrapers and very densely populated areas in Somerville. This particular mission would be a piece of cake compared to those, and a lot was riding on its success -- including, of course, about 67,000 Blue Line riders a day.

She'd never used rock worms in an urban environment like this before. Supposedly Menino or one of the other politicians had thrown a fit when he had found out about the animals and had screamed at Ariadne to get some more information about the worms. Ariadne eventually wound up contacting the National Zoo's magical creature wing, hoping to speak with one of the supervisors. The supervisor, of course, was a bit of a newbie and hadn't done much good. Finally, the wizards had wound up going out of their way to link Menino up with Rubeus Hagrid himself up in Ietalis.

Hagrid's response had been quite reassuring. "They're perfectly harmless, sir. They shouldn't cause you any problems. As a matter of fact, those little furry faces can be adorable when they're young! I had a larva eating pebbles out of my hand once!"

Ernst knew enough about Hagrid to realize that he would almost certainly say the same thing about hippogriffs, thestrals, and possibly even dragons. Come to think of it, he'd have probably said it about Voldemort had He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named sported antennas and fur. Fortunately, whoever the politician had been had fallen for it.
She directed the worm to tunnel underneath Charles Street Station and then told him to wait a minute as she brought out her wand to dig a hole the size of an elevator in the floor above. She cast the spell, and the roof caved in. Jeff backed up in excitement as he started chewing on the debris. She had a brief glimpse of the rock worm eating a fallen Red Line route display. As she watched, the words ALEWIFE and DAVIS turned into IFE and S.

Jeff had managed to consume most of the Red Line stops north of Kendall when Ernst saw movement overhead. She glanced up as someone shone a flashlight into the hole and shouted: "What the hell is going on here?"

A homeless man, she thought. She tried to explain that there was a construction project underway and apologized for the inconvenience. That, of course, was when the squatter shone the light on Jeff. The reaction was more or less predictable. "God Almighty, it's Jabba the Hutt!"

Jeff reared up in surprise, knocking another hole in the floor and forcing Ernst to make a mental note to tell Kershaw that Jeff had volunteered to provide room for an escalator as well. Both rock worm and squatter backed off, and the squatter's eyes narrowed as he looked at the huge six-pack of beer in the corner.

The hobo looked back at Jeff and shook his head. "Naaah. All right, Lou, time to get sober for a change."

Reassured that the man would pass off the worm sighting as a hallucination, she conjured some gratings to cover the holes in the ceiling and transfigured some pieces of the fallen Red Line sign into a picket fence. Surrounding the two holes with the fence, she ordered Jeff back into motion again and directed him at Bowdoin.

It took a good three hours for Jeff to chew all the way through to Bowdoin. Just to be safe, however, the city had closed down Bowdoin for "renovations" for the next four days. Kershaw had suspected that it would take several days for the worm to finish the job.

Eventually, Ernst halted Jeff a few feet away from the entrance to the part of Bowdoin Station where the Blue Line trains turned around. Casting Revelio Hominem to see if no one was there (thankfully, there wasn't anyone around), she told Jeff to complete the connection between the two stations. The rock worm did so and promptly took a bite out of the wall, knocking out one of the traffic lights in the tunnel. Swearing quietly to herself, she told Jeff to exit the tunnel, turn around in the Bowdoin turnaround, and start heading back in the direction they'd come in. Once he had done so, she waved her want and blocked off the hole with another makeshift fence. One tunnel done, one tunnel to go.

The journey back was relatively straightforward. All Ernst had to do was make sure Jeff stayed in the tunnel and didn't try taking bites out of walls he wasn't supposed to. About fifteen minutes later, Ernst rode the worm out of the tunnel, past Charles Station, and back to the edge of the river.

She petted Jeff on the snout. "Well done, Jeff. Well done."

Jeff, of course, ignored her.

This was the southbound tunnel. Tomorrow, Jeff would dig out the northbound tunnel. The day after that, people who had obtained permission to use the Geminio spell would start copying rails and ties repeatedly to create the track to extend the Blue Line.

Five hours later, she tuned on the news station to see what the damage had been. Only 1,000 people
had lost power and there had been a few dozen reports of people waking up in the middle of the night claiming the ground was shaking.

All in all, not a bad night given the circumstances. Hopefully tomorrow would be as successful as today.

To be continued...

Update #425: Hermione Gets a Job Offer
------------
Wednesday, November 13, 1996
Gryffindor Common Room
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
United Kingdom
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/2.2%
------------
NEXT UP: Probably a .5
------------
Hermione Granger still didn't know what to do about Ron and William. Ron was a sure thing: she knew that. However, she had always been a sucker for celebrities. She had gone crazy over Gilderoy Lockhart before he had come out as a charlatan, and to make matters worse she had been born into a family which admired the royals. It had never even occurred to her that she would be elevated to a countess, let alone be in a position to pick up the King of England!

One thing she did know for certain was that she couldn't risk pursuing William while Ron was still around. The odds that she would wind up with William to begin with were extremely remote thanks to the interference of Princess Madeleine of Sweden. She realized the only thing that she could do would be to stay with Ron for the time being and only consider William as a serious prospect (a) many years later, and (b) if she and Ron broke up.

Hermione's influence had begun to change the character of Hogwarts to some extent. It was a given that she would be Head Girl next year and the only question was who her male counterpart would be. Harry was a possibility for his work destroying Voldemort's Horcruxes. She could imagine William getting the nod as well -- for all she knew, active royalty automatically became Head Boy or Head Girl. J. K. Rowling, still working on Hermione Granger and the Philosopher's Stone, had been so bombarded by students trying to get her to interview them that she had begun taking notes on the other students and handing them off to another writer so they could be included in a compendium which would tell the Muggle world what life at a Wizarding school was like. Her adoption of meditation practices had triggered a flurry of copycat activity among the Ravenclaws and Gryffindor girls, and she had eventually managed to convince the Room of Requirement to transform itself into a meditation hall for her and her fellow meditators.

There had been an interesting quirk in the Room of Requirement which the group had to work around. Several of the students had asked Hermione to make sure that the Room of Requirement came equipped with a few statues of the Buddha. As it turned out, this proved to be impossible as a communal room was not allowed to single out any religious faith for a large group. Eventually, Hermione convinced the room to leave the Buddha statues out but replace them with various other
contemplative features like mandalas.

The school elves were now salaried employees and had started to produce much better food in response. Flitwick hadn't liked the idea of paying the Hogwarts elves for their services in the kitchen. However, he didn't have much of a choice. Word of the elves at Hogwarts had leaked out, and it hadn't taken much for SPIW to start badgering Flitwick to emancipate, or at least pay, the elves. Eventually, he agreed to a 2% increase in school tuition to help support the elves.

Interviews with a few of the elves may have exposed another problem. It appeared that a large percentage of the elves, perhaps even the majority, did not want to be freed and saw freedom as a punishment -- much to the surprise of the rest of the world. Apparently Dobby had been the exception rather than the rule, which meant that SPIW quite possibly would run into trouble for trying to impose a human value on members of another species. The psychologists and cultural studies groups were going to have to work overtime on this. Granted, it was possible that the elves feared freedom because they were not accustomed to thinking for, or providing for, themselves -- the classic slave mentality. However, she had to admit that she had only been twelve or thirteen at the time she had founded SPEW. With all that book knowledge, she hadn't done enough research on elves to prepare for this, having based everything on a sample of one. She hoped things would come out all right here.

Hermione didn't know whether she should be happy or upset about Crabbe and Goyle's suspension. Granted, the two knuckleheads had been looking of trouble for a while, and she felt somewhat relieved that they had gotten their just desserts. However, the entire reason the two thugs had gotten into trouble in the first place was because they still thought that the Death Eaters were still interested in the Deathly Hallows. Moody had informed the rest of the Order of the Phoenix as soon as Atlantis had briefed him on the Black God cultists' role in the attack. There was no Death Eater cell threatening Hogwarts, which meant that Crabbe and Goyle had thrown their careers down the drain for nothing.

Harry had been furious when he had discovered his broken broom. With only a couple of days to go before the next Quidditch match against Hufflepuff, Aberforth Dumbledore had been forced to petition Flitwick to allow Harry to use one of the school's old brooms for the match. This put him at a distinct disadvantage against the Hufflepuff Seeker. In one sense, Harry only had himself to blame for starting an arms race in broom technology at the school. Nevertheless, he was not happy when he reported that using the broom had felt as if he had been flying through molasses. The Hufflepuff Seeker had caught the Snitch relatively early on, and Gryffindor had gone down to defeat 210-40. Ron had had a tough day and had let in six goals.

The Slytherins, of course, had been overjoyed. Their enjoyment was terminated abruptly, however, when Professor Slughorn -- their housemaster -- announced that he was going to use his own money to replace Harry's broom in time for the match after Hufflepuff's. Slughorn believed that it was somewhat his fault that his charges had misbehaved, and he believed that it was incumbent on him to atone for Crabbe and Goyle's misbehavior.

Construction of Black Tower was still going on. Hermione had no idea how Flamel would be able to spare the construction of the tower after having promised Britain a whole slew of new schools for budding Q-only wizards. George Weasley had already started issuing odds on whether or not Black Tower would be completed in time: these were currently 4:3 against.

There was also the issue of the Black House ghost. The most obvious candidate for the position had been Sirius himself, and no one had seen any sign of him since his funeral. Granted, the school had plenty of time when it came finding a house ghost. However, she couldn't think of anyone who
would fit the job. She thought back to Nearly Headless Nick's Deathday Party and realized that none of the guests had been Muggleborn or obvious friends of Muggleborn. No help there.

Stephen Hawking had proven to be an excellent Astronomy professor. She enjoyed her NEWT Astronomy lessons and tried to discuss cosmology with him from time to time. All that had managed to do, however, was bring up a troubling decision: get a Ph.D. somewhere or become a full-term witch? Did she dare try to do BOTH? William was having enough trouble with his own dual curriculum, and she thought back to her third year when she overbooked classes and nearly killed herself from stress messing with that Time-Turner.

She caught some motion out of the corner of her eye and watched as the portrait hole slid aside and admitted Professor Flitwick, Aberforth Dumbledore, and a wizard she had never met before. She put down her book as they came over to her.

Flitwick smiled at her. "Good evening, Miss Granger. I hope I'm not disturbing you?"

Hermione shook his head. "No, sir. I'm just studying. How can I help you?"

Flitwick simply pointed at the wizards he didn't recognize. "This man here is Edgar Bosworth, and he works for the Hogsmeade Millennium Research Institute. Are you familiar with this institute, Miss Granger?"

Hermione nodded. "I believe so, sir. That's the think tank Dr. Flamel organized to go after the Millennium Problems, right?"

Bosworth nodded briskly. "You are indeed up to date, Miss Granger. Then again, I'm not surprised. I've heard a lot of amazing things about you. Is it true that you actually managed to use a Time-Turner responsibly and only ran into trouble when Albus told you to go back and rescue Sirius Black?"

Hermione winced. "I used it to attend more classes than students usually do, if that's what you mean."

"Incredible. At any rate, here is why I am here. I'd like to offer you employment after you graduate."

Hermione blinked. "What do you mean, sir?"

Bosworth explained. "I was wondering if you would be willing to work for the HMRI after you graduate Hogwarts. It is well-known that you are one of the best-known and best-educated students of your generation, Miss Granger. The HMRI needs people like you. Imagine spending all your time doing research and learning...and being paid for it."

Hermione grinned. "I wouldn't mind that, to be honest. Besides, money can't hurt."

"Indeed, it can't. Your starting salary would be 30,000 pounds or 6,000 Galleons -- your choice."

Hermione gaped at him. "Thirty thousand pounds? For a girl just out of school?"

"That's right, Miss Granger. I know, it's a very good deal. However, people like you don't come along frequency. Lots of people are going to want to get their hands on you once you graduate. I figured a high salary will make our offer a little sweeter."
Hermione thought for a minute. If she was this popular and people were going to have a bidding war for her...

She nodded. "It's very tempting. However, I'm still considering dental school for a Muggle career, at least on the side. People can make a lot of money as a dentist."

Bosworth nodded. "And how are you going to pay your way through dental school?"

Hermione looked at him quizzically. If she played this right, she could do this Millennium Problem research full-time for a while and use the money to finance dental school and any additional Wizarding stuff she'd get involved with. Finally, she smiled. "You have a point, sir. I'll think about it, though I confess it sounds very attractive. I'll get back to you when I graduate. In the meantime, keep me posted as to what you guys are doing."

Bosworth shook her hand. "I will, Miss Granger. I hope you will join us, as it will be a pleasure working with you."

To be continued...

Update #425.5 Survivormerman
--------
Wednesday, November 13, 1996
rainforest near Macchu Picchu
Peru
--------

Rasegar's stomach rumbled loudly, and the tourist turned, staring into empty air with a puzzled expression. The Muggle's expression grew alarmed as his mind started to process the barely visible sight before him: after months of tear and wear, the escaped Death Eater supporter merwizard's invisibility cloak was distorting light much more visibly than before, and took up an opaque shade - still offering superior camouflage, but "invisible" no longer, only "chameleon". Swearing, the merwizard sleep-hexed the human and was looting his backpack before he even hit the ground.

Food. This simple issue was crippling the renegade army, even as it successfully evaded pursuit from Trapananda, Atlantis and every local authority. Merwizards were trained to be infiltrators, fliers and battlemagi in their human form, but the training did not include jungle survival, for obvious reasons - an operative could just Apparate back to base to feed, if he didn't find a convenient, safe human meal. For the 3 thousand escaped convicts, there was no such base in the world, and with their cloaks failing, they had to stay in tree cover to avoid airborne patrols. One frequently forgotten fact about rainforests is the surprisingly low quantity of obviously edible stuff. Sure, being expert fliers equipped with brooms they could hunt tree-dwelling critters and birds, but those didn't have much meat either. Further complicating matters, while their bodies were apparently human with a few magical differences, their merpeople instincts carried over - including an increased appetite.

Magic didn't offer much to help. Geminio and Engorgio were out of the question - unlike Houyhnhnmland's (at that time) nonexistent authorities, the Peruvians were more than capable of
sending Aurors at a moment’s notice. Aside of those two spells, there weren’t any easy ways to produce food: sure, it was possible to transfigure it, but no sane person would do that—those spells were weak transfigurations, meaning that one Finite Incantatem would revert the food to its original state, and when it happened after ingestion, the results weren’t pretty. Wizards and witches throughout history had rather starved to death than risk it, and these merwizards weren’t going to try it either.

As an end result, they were spread out over a large area, hunting whatever they thought edible, stealing from tourists and locals, and when even that wasn’t enough... well, they could always comfort themselves that it’s not cannibalism when the Being roasted over the fire is not of your species.

Wolfing down a handful of sandwiches mid-flight, Rasegar approached the designated meeting zone of his part of the army. Today was an important day: some of them were sent to scout for suitable allies and hiding places around the world, and a party sent to Syrdan was scheduled to return in hours. Long before that, the place was secured: hundreds of cloaked merwizards waited hiding in the treetops, watching everything near the designated forest clearing. Muggle-repelling charms, Portkey barriers and anti-Apparition Jinxes were all set up, and just in case they failed, the majority of the army was hiding miles away, in a suitable place for either rescue or flight if it turned out to be an ambush.

A few minutes before noon, Revelio Hominem picked up a dozen incoming fliers from the north-east. As they landed at the edges of the clearing, they decloaked. Ten were the delegation sent to Syrdan—no questions of their identity, as (human) Polyjuice wasn’t working for merpeople, and all adult Trapanandans had some nasty mental blocks in place to deal with interrogation and brainwashing. The other two were humans, but with the same olive skin as most of the merwizards; one in robes with Syrdani House insignia, the other in plain black robes and a turban. They were introduced as Wizard Azhir, and some Arabic Death Eater whose name they could not pronounce (Rasegar instantly dubbed him Achmed).

And so, the negotiations started, gaining an army of Death Eaters for Syrdan, and a base of operations for said army...

To be continued...
Lucy Velasquez woke up with a start as someone shoved a beaker in her face filled with a black liquid. "We couldn't get many of them, Lucy. However, here's one which didn't seem as popular at the time."

She turned to the speaker and saw that it was Bieito Anxo Rocha, her thesis advisor. The man seemed excited and was looking at the beaker longingly.

She pointed at the beaker. "What do you have here?"

Rocha grinned. "The Draught of Living Death. Puts the drinker into a deep coma which in the old days could be mistaken for death. Do you think you can work with it or do you want me to go back and find something else?"

Velasquez thought for a moment. "I guess I can start with this. If I want to write something about the active ingredients in magical potions, I'll have to go through a lot of them anyway to get a good sample. Have you tried any of it?"

Rocha looked at her as if she had three heads. "Oh no, Lucy. I want to be alive at the end of the day. That's what lab rats are for."

"Is there an antidote?"

"There is, but it's kind of strange. You have to take the comatose person out into a field under the full moon and cast three spells on him in quick succession."

Velasquez's expression soured. "Great. That's going to complicate things. How am I supposed to test this out if I can't get a wizard to reverse the coma?"

"Beats me. However, it's your thesis. You could win a prize if you figure out how to do this."

"Will this antidote work for any type of coma, or only those which have been magically induced?"

Rocha's eyes widened. "Now that's an interesting question which could pay major dividends in the medical industry. In all fairness, though, I don't know. I don't think the wizards have ever tried it on comas caused by other sources. Keep in mind, though, that there could be cases where lifting the
coma could be dangerous to the subject's health. After all, the body sometimes goes into a coma so that it can focus all its attention on a disease or other condition."

Valesquez nodded. "I agree. We'll hold off trying to apply this to natural comas until we know more about it. Thanks for your help, Professor. I'll get right to work on it. Are there any more potions coming in?"

Rocha nodded. "We're trying to get Polyjuice Potion but there's a limited amount of it to go around. I've got some Shrinking Potion in the pipeline as well as Wit-Sharpening Potion. I'm trying to get as many different types of potions as I can to get a good sampling."

"That's good enough for me, Professor. I'll tell you if I find anything."

Rocha smiled. "All right. Good luck, Lucy."

With that, the professor left the room and Lucy began a cursory examination of the potion. The first thing she did was appropriate a lab rat from the cages, fill a feeding tube with water, and use an eye dropper to mix ten drops of Draught of Living Death into the water. Thankfully, the potion was soluble and disappeared into the water.

She then hurried over to the rat's cage, replaced the animal's feeding tube, and watched to see what the effects would be.

The rat came over to look at the tube. It looked at it momentarily and then turned away, as if it didn't like the smell of what was in the tube. Eventually, though, it got thirsty and took a few sips of the water. Velasquez estimated that the animal had gotten maybe ten mouthfuls of the stuff.

The rat cleaned itself and began burrowing around in the cage. Within a few seconds, however, the animal decided to stop messing with its bedding and curled up in a ball. The next thing she knew, it was asleep.

Very interesting, she thought. Those few drops were enough to put the animal to sleep, even diluted as they had been. She tried to rouse the animal for a few minutes, but it wouldn't wake up. Eventually, she prodded it and it glared at him with an expression that needed no translation: "Can't you see I'm trying to sleep? Let me go to bed!"

The rat slept for about 30 minutes and eventually woke back up. It walked around stiffly for a while but eventually resumed normal functioning.

She smiled and jotted down some notes in her log book. Whatever the rat had drunk had knocked it out like a rock. She could believe that at higher concentrations it could induce a coma. This potion seemed to be behaving as advertised.

Excited, she checked how much potion was in the beaker and then weighed the beaker with and without its contents. She crunched the numbers and discovered that the potion's density was surprisingly low: 0.955 g/cc, a little less than the density of water. Intrigued, she looked at a document the professor had handed her with the beaker which explained how to make the potion.

Most of the ingredients appeared to be biological in nature, so they would have densities of that of water or higher. The extra ingredients appeared to be metal filings, whose density was also greater than water. She frowned: how can one mix a bunch of things with density 1.000 g/cc or greater and wind up with something which was less dense? Particularly if, as the potion's recipe indicated, mass
wasn't being released through steam or anything like that? Where was all the extra mass going?

She could only think of two explanations. First, dragon blood wasn't water-based and had a density much less than 1 g/cc. That seemed a bit odd, though, assuming that dragons were natural lifeforms which had evolved on Earth. Second, something in there was magical enough to cause the antigravity effect to come into play, reducing the weight (and therefore the measured density) of the resulting potion to the point where it was 0.955 g/cc.

She didn't know what the answer was, but she was going to find out.

----------------

White House

Bill Clinton stared at the Attorney General in amazement. "The Supreme Court has ruled that the Constitution doesn't allow the citizens to perform direct election of cabinet members like the head of the Bureau of Indian Affairs?"

The Attorney General nodded. "That's correct, sir. The Native Americans up in Alaska aren't going to be happy about it, but the vote was 6-3 against. They're going to be even more upset when they find out that the wizards are going to be able to keep their traditions going and elect Ariadne's successor by direct vote."

Bill Clinton saw it immediately. "The Baseball League Protocol. When you're in Wizarding territory, Wizarding laws apply. When you're in Muggle territory, Muggle laws apply."

"Exactly, sir. Fortunately, several of the justices figured out away for you to nominate the Secretary of Magic just like any other cabinet-level position. The wizards simply vote on the representative using direct ballot, tell you the result, and you simply nominate that person. That way, you won't be setting a precedent for Muggles elevating people to the cabinet without your approval."

Clinton nodded. "It's a bit of a legal fiction, but it does seem to work around the problem."

"Correct, sir. The big question now is how to deal with the pissed off Native Americans and dear old John McCain."

Clinton looked out the door of the Oval Office and saw Ariadne waiting in the wings. He had to finish this interview quickly. "Talk to the head of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and see if you can get him to buy this. If all else fails, say that direct election for wizards makes a lot of sense because there aren't that many wizards to go around in the United States. I'll deal with McCain."

The Attorney General nodded. "I will, sir."

"Good. Dismissed."

The Attorney General left the room as the Secretary of Magic walked in and saluted. "You wished to see me, Mr. President?"

Clinton nodded. "Yes, Secretary Ariadne. I was wondering if you could give me some advice about a matter of state."

Ariadne frowned. "A matter of state? I'm not the Secretary of State, sir."

"When you're dealing with Syrdan, I think you're a better person to talk to."
Ariadne's frown deepened. "I've got a bad feeling about what you're going to be asking me, but go ahead, sir."

Clinton explained. "As you are aware, word of Syrdan's atrocities against the Muggles has managed to leak out among the American population. From what I've been told, it started when that nine-year-old girl started blurting things out she wasn't supposed to in school."

Ariadne bit her lip. "Your information is correct, sir. Believe me, kids that young shouldn't be given state secrets like that."

"Amen to that. However, what's done is done. Syrdan has come out and tried to downplay their history of Muggle suppression. However, those three refugees have been rather vocal in their attacks on Syrdan and are starting to get most of the American people to pressure their politicians to do something about that eyesore off Mexico."

Ariadne lowered her eyes. "You're thinking of invading Syrdan out in the open now that that particular state is no longer Hidden."

Clinton nodded. "Exactly. Can it be done?"

Ariadne thought for a minute. "We could probably do it if we overwhelm them with Muggle firepower and/or try to get a yahoo rebellion going like Two Exceeds Four did in Houyhnhnmland. Be advised, though, that I would highly discourage such an attack. You've seen what one powerful wizard can do. Can you imagine what a whole nation of them would do if we actually invaded them?"

Clinton's expression soured. "I see your point, Secretary Ariadne. We could do it, but it would be VERY expensive. And given the economic crisis a drawn-out war is the last thing we need."

"Exactly. And it would set a dangerous precedent, particularly with the entire raison d'etre for the Galiver Consortium being Muggle attacks on wizards. Merlin's beard, the entire reason Tsalasia exists is because a bunch of wizards tried to run away from European colonists. Finally, you also have to understand that they have made several reforms on our behalf, even though those reforms have somewhat destabilized the government."

Clinton looked out the window. "All right, an invasion is out of the question. However, I wonder if we can get some of our allies to help us pressure Syrdan further. If the magocracy falls and/or Syrdan makes further reforms, we'll say we were involved."

Ariadne's didn't like the idea, but she nodded. "That may work, sir. It's dangerous, but it may work."

"Good. Get me Andrea Markali."

-----------------------------
Israeli Ministry of Magic
-----------------------------
Michal Oved looked at Dialonis in amazement. "You want me to do WHAT?"

Dialonis repeated his request. "I want you to start bringing some Ethiopian giants into the Israeli Ministry of Magic. We want everyone in the Middle East to be accustomed to seeing giants and respect their culture and power."
Oved grimaced. "Sir, we've got enough problems here in Israel. There's still tension even though there haven't been major attacks against Israelis and/or Palestinians of late. The further we get away from Judgment Day, the more likely the fighting is going to start up again."

"We're aware of that, Minister. If everything goes as planned, the giants will help keep the Israelis and Palestinians in line and browbeat both sides into stopping their endless feud. You've got to admit, sixteen-foot-tall people with immense muscles can be quite intimidating."

Oved threw her hands up. "What will you get by having a bunch of giants running around here?"

Dialonis grinned. "The Palestinians want a state which respects them and they're leery of having it be Israel. We're aware of that and figure that recreating the State of Nephilu in the Gaza Strip will accomplish three goals: give the remaining exiled Nephilim their homeland back, intimidate the Israelis and Palestinians into burying the hatchet, and provide the Palestinians with a state which accepts them."

Oved stared at him in surprise. "The Nephilim still exist after all these years?"

Dialonis nodded. "Yes. They live in a remote corner of Ethiolpia, far away from all the Muggles. Their language -- known as Agheer (1) -- is most unusual, a combination of Giantish, Semitic, and Ethiopian."

Oved shuddered. "If this works it would be a godsend. However, I can see a million ways where this can go wrong."

"One step at a time, Minister. One step at a time."

To be continued...

(1) For the Robert Jordan fans who see the POD as triggering an early transition to the Age of Legends (Second Age), there's a reason this word sounds a lot like Ogier...

"The strong martial tradition of the Ogier has faded over the years. During the Age of Legends and the War of the Shadow, they were known to be fierce warriors (and also appear to have acted as a police force), with Lews Therin Telamon elected as their head."

__________________

Update #427: Bottle It And Call It Aquafina

-----------

Thursday, November 14, 1996
Israeli Ministry of Magic
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/2.2%
-----------

NEXT UP: We Were Not Alone

----------

Michal Oved didn't like this idea about reconstructing Nephilu in the Middle East. Although a powerful giant state could serve as a good deterrent for violence in the area, she was concerned that would just be adding another variable into the fighting. She figured it was only a matter of time until both Jews and Muslims started trying to flee from the giants and/or attack them with slingshots. She also didn't want to think about the possibility that the giants would convert to Islam and be convinced
to beat up on Israel.

She had sent a Patronus to discuss the matter with Prince Begnu, the leader of the Nephilu refugees in Ethiopia. Not surprisingly, Begnu had been a bit ambivalent. Granted, they didn't exactly like hanging out in the desert and would have preferred to move to a better location now that the Statute of Secrecy had been discontinued. On the other hand, the Nephilim were accustomed to where they were and preferred the devil they knew to the devil they didn't. To make matters worse, Begnu's sister-in-law was supposedly 51 weeks pregnant and could pop at any moment. She was in no condition to travel. Finally, Begnu argued that most of the Nephilim weren't accustomed to interacting with "little people" and could get the whole tribe (and possibly the entire race) into trouble.

Oved was surprised to see that millennia in the desert had changed the giants. The Nephilim had darker skin than any other giant tribe she knew of, dark enough to rival most of the Africans. They had shrunk somewhat as well, with an average height of 13 feet for men and 12 for women. Granted, that was still over twice the height of an average human being. However, that reduction was still likely enough to get them into the lower castes in places like Brobdingnag. They'd also likely be too tall to be welcomed in Ietalis. This was going to be a problem.

Eventually, Begnu said he'd ask for volunteers to come over to the Gaza Strip to set up shop there. He figured he'd start with the twentysomethings who didn't have families and had been most vocal about leaving in the first place. Oved had no idea how those giants were going to get over to Gaza, particularly with the Suez Canal in the way. Begnu assured her that the Nephilu wizards would get them over there.

There weren't many wizards in the clan, maybe seven or eight, which made the Nephilim's use as a police deterrent tricky. Begnu came up with a clever solution, however: give all of the mundane migrants fake wands and have one of the true wizards start casting some spells. This would leave the Gazan people with the impression that everyone there was in fact a wizard and the Gazans didn't want to cross them. He'd also tell everyone in the tribe to go for genetic testing (which Oved was curious about as well, considering the genetic isolation) and for all Q-only Nephilim to get basic training in wand use.

Oved looked at her watch and realized it was time for her latest press conference. She bid the giant goodbye and had just left the room when there was a snapping sound followed by a huge crash. She spun to find a thirteen-foot tall dark-skinned man kneeling among rubble from a broken ceiling rubbing his head. He muttered something in what must have been Agheer. Oved didn't know Agheer (having spoken with Begnu in archaic Hebrew Samuel would have likely been familiar with), but the meaning was obvious: "Oh, my head! I should have known the ceiling was too low! Sorry about the mess!"

Throwing her hands up in disbelief, she told one of her colleagues to look after (and discreetly send back) the wounded Nephil while she Apparated over to the desalination facility in Ein Gedi. Not surprisingly, most of the scientists were already waiting for her.

One of the scientists breathed a sigh of relief and turned to her. "What happened, Minister? I thought you were supposed to be here ten minutes ago."

She rolled her eyes in easperation. "We had a bit of a problem at the Ministry. I had to talk to a giant, who promptly had one of his friends Apparate in and bashed his head on the ceiling. Of course, half the roof caved in."
The scientist winced. "Ouch. However, I must confess I've never seen a giant before. I'd like to meet him. Are they really twenty meters tall?"

Oved shook her head. "Try four meters. Short by fantasy standards but still quite large by human standards. How have things been going with you?"

The scientist smiled. "The tests look good, and the rats are all surviving. I think it's time to go to the next step."

Oved nodded. "Good. If these giants are going to be hanging around as much as I think they are, I want everything stabilized as much as possible before they wreck the place."

Ignoring the astonished look of the scientists, she walked up to the podium and began to speak. "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I apologize for the delay, but I had something to attend to at the Ministry of Magic. Ladies and gentlemen, I have good news to report from the Experimental Desalination plants. The rat trials appear to have been successful and the time has come to go to the next step: human trials."

"I would like to ask for town councils to volunteer their towns for an experimental trial using the desalinated water. Within a week of volunteering, wizards at the Ministry of Magic and scientists at the Experimental Desalination plants will start piping either ordinary tap water or desalinated Dead Sea water into these towns' faucets. The inhabitants of these towns will not know which they are getting, the placebo or the desalinated water. This water supply will be provided for one month while doctors monitor the health of the residents. If, as we hope, the towns with the desalinated Dead Sea water fare as well as those with the placebo, we will start discussing nationwide distribution with Israeli, Palestinian, and Jordanian authorities."

"We will need at least 10 towns with at least 100,000 people combined to get a good sample. Each of these towns must have medical records for their citizens dating back at least three years. The reason is obvious: if 500 people get sick during the trial, we need to know that the problem is due to the desalinated water and not due to pre-existing medical conditions."

"The water is going to be filtered and fluoridated so that everyone can drink it. The filtration is such that microscopic creatures which some people consider non-Kosher or non-Halal will be kept out, allowing religious people of both faiths to drink it."

"It is imperative that the people in these towns drink from this water supply and NOT from bottled water or cisterns. We don't want the people from the bottled water industry interfering with this experiment. In the unlikely event that people do get sick during the trials, the Ministry of Magic and the Department of Health will be providing medical care free of charge."

Oved looked around the room. "Ladies and gentlemen, I believe that this is going to be a momentous occasion. I fully expect this experiment to succeed and that this work will allow us to cash in on some of the Millennium Problem money. I've tried some of the desalinated water myself and it tasted fine to me -- and as you can tell, I'm still standing. This will work, people. I'm sure of it."

"I'll now take some questions from the audience."

-----------------------------------
Mars Rock Quarantine Facility
NASA
-----------------------------------

Jason Albright thought these Mars rocks were very interesting. So far, he hadn't seen any sign of life.
However, there was plenty of evidence that they had once been immersed in water. Several of the rocks had rounded edges which were indicative of being tossed around by waves. They looked like they could have just been picked off the beach.

He reached for the next slide and inserted it under the microscope. Turning on the light at the base of the scope, he tried to maneuver his face over to the eyepiece. It wasn't that easy, particularly since he had a bunny suit in the way.

He noticed something odd about this rock immediately. Down at the lower left hand side there was an odd elliptical impression. It was maybe a few hundred microns across. It was about the right size for a primitive bacterium, he thought. He didn't see any cilia or anything like that, but there was no way to tell that Martian evolution would follow the same path as Earth's. For all he knew, Martian bacteria transported itself on little wheels.

This could be big, he thought. Jotting down the time and observation reports in the log book, he turned to the man next to him. "Hey, Jack, come over here. I was wondering if you could tell me what this is."

Puzzled, Jack came over and took a look into the scope. "That oval down there?"

"Yeah. What do you think it is?"

Jack scratched his head. "Not sure."

"Could it be a bacterium? It's about the right size."

Jack rolled his eyes. "Jason, we haven't found any life in these rocks yet. I doubt you're going to see something that obvious. Have you seen any other anomalies like this?"

"No, this is the first one."

Jack scratched his head. "That makes it less likely that it's a bacterium. You'd probably have a colony of these things had that been the case."

"Perhaps these guys didn't form colonies."

"Possibly, and I freely admit that it does look a little strange. However, there's a much more likely explanation. Have you seen any of those hematite blueberries in your rock?"

Jason saw where he was going. "Ah. You're thinking one of the blueberries had been sitting here and fell out when the Portkey picked it up."

"That's what I'm thinking. Does the ring have any signs of iron in it?"

"I don't know. This thing doesn't have a spectrograph on it."

Jack nodded grimly. "Find a spectrograph. You're probably going to find iron embedded in these rocks. That's a blueberry indentation, I'm suspecting. Keep the rock around, however. That's something that's worth a second look, especially if there's no iron in the area."

Jason sighed. He had hoped that he'd discovered evidence of life, but he had to admit that his interpretation was a bit of a stretch. "Damn, Jack. You're very good at ruining my hopes for a Nobel
The two technicians continue processing rocks for the next fifteen minutes. The next slices Jason looked at seemed more ordinary: no signs of bacteria whatsoever. He started wondering what he was going to do for dinner.

Suddenly, Jack gasped. "What the HELL? Jason, take a look at THIS!"

Jason grinned. "Let me guess. Another possible bacterium like the one I saw? Still sure that it's abiotic?"

Jack's face was flushed with excitement. "This isn't a bacterium. I've got three tubular anomalies about 9 to 11 millimeters across."

Jason blinked. "You mean microns, right? Millimeters are a bit...well, big."

Jack shook his head violently. "No! I mean millimeters! Two of them are overlapping. And I see evidence of segmented body structure!"

Jason dropped everything and turned to look at his colleague. He hurried over to Jack's microscope and looked into the eyepieces. There was nothing there. Irritated, he rolled his eyes and turned to Jack. "That's very funny, Jack. I --"

His jaw suddenly dropped when he saw what Jack was holding in his suited hand. It was the rock sample, about ten centimeters across. There were three strange wormlike forms embedded in the center. It almost looked as if one of them was eating the tail of its neighbor.

Jason finally realized what had happened. "Jack? That's got to be an Earth rock. Animals that big wouldn't show up in these Mars ones. Someone's playing a joke on you. And it's not me."

Jack shook his head furiously and shoved a bag in Jason's face. "It's a Mars rock! Here's the bag, right here!"

Jason looked at the bag. It was indeed a bag from the Mars Portkey. And Jack looked far too excited and startled to not think this was the real deal. The rock certainly looked like the rest of the Mars rocks they'd been messing with, complete with the rust-colored patina.

Jason whistled. "They look organic, all right. The question now is whether they're actually alive -- or were alive at least."

Jack's words tumbled out rapidly. "Curly's eating Larry's tail here while Moe's watching. That's what it looks like to me. This is life, Jason. It's got to be."

"Perhaps. However, remember that debate over ALH 84001 [1]. I'd recommend getting a second opinion before we start telling everyone we've found life on Mars. However, if these are believed to be biological, I get the first discovery because I got the bacterium first."

Jack nodded. "I agree. I'm going to tell my boss and have him get in touch with one of the fossil gurus from the Smithsonian. We want to do everything by the book here. We'll start by showing him the Three Stooges over here and ask him if they're fossils. We of course won't tell him that this rock is from Mars. If they're fossils and he can't identify them...well, that should nail it down, would it not?" [2]
Jason nodded. "Quite possibly. Then we can start on the champagne. However, can I make a suggestion?"

"What?"

"Wait until tomorrow. Maybe we'll think of an abiotic explanation after we've left for the day. Besides, I doubt the fossil gurus are still at work this late."

Jack looked at the rock wistfully, but put it back in the bag. "Agreed. We'll wait. Besides, who knows? Maybe the head's the other end and Larry's eating Curly's tail. And maybe your thing isn't a bacterium so I get the first discovery."

To be continued...


2. I didn't realize it at the time I wrote it, but this is exactly how ALH 84001 was probed for possible Martian life:

"The initial analysis of ALH 84001 was unusual in that an undergraduate student, Anne Taunton of the University of Arkansas, performed much of the SEM work used to correlate the suspected nanobacterial fossils with known terrestrial nanobacterial fossils. NASA's David McKay hired Anne Taunton for a 10-week student internship to perform the SEM analysis, but did not inform her about the nature of what she was investigating.[19] This technique is known as a single blind. Taunton reported the morphology of the biomorphs in ALH 84001 to be very similar to terrestrial samples without knowing that she was describing a Martian meteorite."

Update #428: We Were Not Alone

Friday, November 15, 1996

Paleontology Department

George Washington University

Washington, DC

ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/2.2%

NEXT UP: Don't Throw That Out Or You'll Go To The Jail...Literally

The phone rang on Robin Rivera's office shortly after she got in. The caller ID indicated that the call was from someone named GUNNERSON, JOHN. She had no idea who that person was. Hopefully she would be able to hang up on him before he had a chance to start selling her something.

"Hello?"

"Is this Professor Rivera of the George Washington University's paleontology department?"

Rivera was surprised: whoever it was had done a bit of research on her. Cautiously, she replied: "Yes, this is she. Who's calling?"
"My name is Jack Gunnerson. I work for the Museum of Natural History and have come across something which I believe is a fossil. However, I can't place it. Is there any way you can stop by and identify it for us?"

Rivera looked at her schedule and figured she would be able to give these people some time. "I'll see what I can do. When will you be able to bring it over?"

The man's response surprised her. "You're going to have to come here, I'm afraid. There's a safety issue involved as we believe there's something in the rock which may be radioactive. We can't let it leave this building, I'm afraid. You're going to have to come over and put on some special suits."

Rivera blinked. "This sounds a bit fishy. Would you be able to take a photograph of the specimen and send it over?"

"Of course, Professor. I'll send it over right now. What's your fax number?"

Five minutes later, the fax in Rivera's office beeped and a picture of a small rock slid out of the bowels of the machine. It appeared to be a sliver of rock maybe four inches across. Situated in the center of the rock were what appeared to be three fossilized wormlike creatures about a centimeter across.

She called Gunnerson back. "Mr. Gunnerson, this is Professor Rivera. I've received your fax. I take it you're referring to the three worms on top of the rock?"

"That's it, Professor. First thing first. What is the probability that these objects are fossils?"

Rivera told Gunnerson to hold on a moment as she brought the fax paper over to a microscope. She turned the dial to 200x and began examining the three worms.

They were fossils, all right. She could see three little pits which could have been eyes or sensory organs on top of the worms' heads. Amusingly, one of them appeared to have been chewing on another one's tail. The bodies were segmented, sort of like modern worms, and she could see what appeared to be an odd cellular structure in the segments. However, she didn't know of modern worms this size with three eyes. Come to think of it, she didn't know of ANYTHING this size with three eyes.

Why would something have evolved three eyes? Maybe this creature lived in an area where it could have been damaged easily. Having an extra eye would come in handy if one of them were lost as losing one eye could still provide the animal with stereoscopic vision.

She completed her preliminary examination and picked up the phone once more. "Mr. Gunnerson, this is a most intriguing specimen. All three are fossils all right. They're all the same species, one that's got three eyes and likes to cannibalize its neighbors."

Gunnerson sounded excited. "Those little pits are eyes?"

"They're sensory organs of some sort. I'm calling them eyes for the time being. They're pretty big for an animal that size -- whatever it was didn't have much sunlight around to work with. Probably submerged, I suspect."

Another voice chimed in. "Professor Rivera, this is Jason Albright from the Museum. You're 100% certain this rock has a fossil?"
Rivera rolled her eyes. "It looks like a fossil worm to me. I don't see how you can doubt that."

People started chattering excitedly on the far end. What was so important about this animal? Was it a new species that had gotten everyone all riled up? Perhaps that would explain why she didn't recognize it.

Albright continued. "Can you identify the species, Professor?"

Rivera hesitated. "I'm afraid not. To be honest, I've never seen anything like this before. Those three eyes really throw me for a loop. They actually look kind of creepy."

"Is it a new species?"

"Possibly. However, I'll have to double-check with some of my associates who focus on prehistoric worms. Which level did you find this at?"

Gunnerson came back in. "Level, Professor?"

"Rock level, Mr. Gunnerson. Cambrian, Proterozoic, and so forth. If I were to guess, it's part of the Cambrian explosion and belongs to a new genus, something with three eyes."

There was a pause on the other end of the line as the people tried to think of a response. Something seemed very odd here. Could they have been stupid enough not to jot down which level this specimen had come from. Finally, Gunnerson came back with an embarrassed cough. "We can't tell which level, unfortunately. All we can tell is that it is very old."

Rivera swore silently to herself. However, it fit with the Cambrian explosion. "All right, we'll assume it's Cambrian or something a little earlier than that. Give me five hours or so and we'll see if we can get someone here to identify these little critters."

-------------------

Five hours later, Rivera had Gunnerson back on the phone. "Mr. Gunnerson, this is an extraordinary find. We believe that this may be a new species as no one here can identify it. We'll do some more checking, though. Have you been able to carbon-date the rock?"

There was a loud cheer on the other end of the line. Yup, she thought. New species. Inevitably, the fight would begin over what to name it.

Gunnerson hesitated before explaining. "What do you think the odds are that this is a new species?"

"I'd say at least 80%. Those three eyes and chitinous body are a dead giveaway, not to mention the fact that they cannibalize each other. Now, answer the question. Have you been able to carbon-date the rock at least?"

There was another pause at the other end of the line. Finally, Gunnerson came back. "We have. About 2.7 billion years."

Rivera blinked. "2.7 billion? That's impossible. That's way too old. Nothing this complex can be 2.7 billion years old. Is it possible that the creatures just happened to die on a rock which was older than it was?"

"No, Professor. The layers above and below it are 2.7 billion years old."
Very interesting, she thought. No wonder they couldn't figure out which layer it was on -- there was nothing going that far back. If this wasn't a hoax, this would be a major discovery. She drew a deep breath and continued. "This is most extraordinary. Where did you find this?"

There was yet another pause, this one a long one. Twenty seconds. Thirty seconds. She heard people talking together quietly in the background. She snorted: did they think she was going to publish the paper on the discovery of this new animal?

Finally, Gunnerson spoke once more. "Professor Rivera, what I am about to tell you cannot leave this room until the official press conference has been concluded. Do I have your word that you will not reveal any of this information without our permission?"

So they were covering their tracks after all, she thought. Aloud: "You do."

What Gunnerson said next nearly caused her to drop the phone in shock. "Professor Rivera, we don't work for the Museum of Natural History. We actually work for NASA. Specifically, the Mars Rock Quarantine Lab. A while back, we sent a Portkey to Mars and had it return a sample from the bottom of Vallis Marineris. This rock came from that sample."

It took her a good twenty seconds to compose herself. "Are you telling me, sir, that this rock is...MARTIAN?"

"Yes, Professor. What you are looking at it is the first conclusive form of life away from Earth. I'm sorry I couldn't tell you earlier because I needed for you to judge the sample without knowing what it was."

Rivera whistled. "Amazing! Did the sample pick up any living organisms?"

"No. Only these three fossil worms, plus possibly a bacterium a few hundred microns across. We can't identify it, either. However, the odds of that sample coming from abiotic processes are much higher than those associated with this specimen."

"Do you know of any signs that life still exists on Mars?"

"No. However, Mars is a big planet. For all we know, there's still life underground somewhere."

"Could it have come from Earth -- no, it couldn't have come from Earth. Otherwise, we'd have 2.7 billion year old worms in our own fossil record. However, it's possible that we have a panspermia situation where life first originated on Mars and then made its way over to Earth. Be that as it may, this is a major discovery. Can we send some people over there to look at it? I figure a lot of people are going to drop everything for this."

"Absolutely, Professor. Keep in mind, however, you will be in a sealed quarantine lab and will be wearing bunny suits. Although we're 99.99% certain that there are no living organisms in the sample, we're not going to take any chances here."

"Agreed. We'll be right over. In the meantime, I'll start sending copies of this image throughout the school and triple-check that no one is able to identify this animal."

--------------------------------
Goddard Space Flight Center
- - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -
The email had come through at 2:18 PM. Within five minutes, people were running everywhere.

The phones were off the hook as people began calling their relatives and telling them that the Mars rocks may have included fossils. A good 25% of the employees had almost immediately gotten into their cars and started heading over to the building which housed the Mars Rock Quarantine Lab. It was obvious they wanted to see this rock for themselves. The Air and Space Museum immediately tried to get its hands on the rock, followed within minutes by the Natural History Museum. NASA, of course, was not going to let the rock out of its sights until it finished doing its research and concluded, without a shadow of a doubt, that this was indeed a form of Martian life. Current odds had it 2:1 in favor of Martian life.

The press conference had begun at 3:30. Jack claimed that the investigations were still underway and that several paleontologists were examining the evidence to verify that it was in fact not contamination from Earth. Multiple reports were coming out of rock ages between 2.5 and 2.9 billion years. *National Geographic* was trying to call in but couldn't get through, as were *Nature* and *Scientific American*.

Linda Warren had been peppered with more questions and requests to send a few people and/or Portkeys to Mars. Warren explained that a manned mission would be too dangerous at this point. However, Portkeys were another matter. Within a matter of hours, no fewer than 15 boxes were headed back towards Vallis Marineris.

The taxonomists had no idea what to call the species. Did the Linnaean system even apply to creatures which Linnaeus couldn't have even encountered? The scientists eventually decided upon a preliminary name of *Vermis xenomartius*, or alien Martian worm. Word of the discovery inevitably leaked onto the Internet even though the analysis was still ongoing.

Meanwhile, back at Yale University, Jason Albright realized that everyone was so busy with the stupid worms that they would likely not be able to take a look at his possible bacterium for a long time. Hopefully he'd at least get to name it *Xenomartius albrightii*.

To be continued...

__________________

Update #429: Don't Throw That Out Or You'll Go To The Jail...Literally

-------------
Friday, November 15, 1996
Riverside Station, D Line
Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority
Newton, MA
United States of America
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/2.3%
-------------
NEXT UP: Waiting for the Fuhrer
-------------
Teresa Levesque pulled into the parking lot of the Riverside T stop. She had gotten stuck behind an accident on Route 128 just outside the exit which would take her to Riverside. As a result, it was 8:35 and she still had to get to Downtown Crossing by 9:00.

She knew how long it would take to get to Park Street and then walk from there to Downtown
Crossing down the corridor which, according to rumor, was now sporting a brand-new connection to the Department of Magic in the Four (er, Two) Towns. There was no way she was going to make it. Even worse, there was no train currently at the station.

She left a message with the boss saying that she'd be late and there wasn't anything she could do about it. Of course, the boss wasn't there, and God knows if she would get there in time to reschedule the meeting. She could only hope and pray.

Trying to distract herself from the impending disaster, she parked the car and walked over to check on something which appeared to have materialized at the train station overnight. It appeared to be a large area covered with mattresses, taking up a good 5 parking spaces. Placed next to the pile of mattresses was a rack full of what appeared to be junk: an old shoe, a wristwatch, a broken stick, and so forth. It looked as if someone had decided to have garage sale (or mattress sale) in the Riverside parking lot. Why they'd have it here, she didn't know. Perhaps the vendor figured he'd be able to get all the commuters as they came in and left.

She saw something was up as soon as she approached the pile of mattresses. None of the mattresses seemed to have FOR SALE signs, and all of the pieces of junk appeared to have little signs on top of them. As she drew closer, she noticed that all of the signs had locations written on them: CLEVELAND CIRCLE, PARK STREET, BOSTON COLLEGE, WONDERLAND, and so forth. Most of them appeared to be subway stations which would have been a long trip away from her current location.

What the hell was going on here? Curious, she walked over to the end of the junk rack where a large white sign explained what was going on. The sign appeared to be tacked onto an old-fashioned MBTA fare box.

Riverside Portkey Authority Station: Pilot Program
Attention MBTA Customers:
The Department of Magic is experimenting with a new local-area transportation system called a Portkey Network. It consists of small objects which have been enchanted to transport anybody who holds them from one location to another. Once travel is complete, the user lets go of the object, which will then return to its place of origin.

You can see the rack of objects in front of you to your right. The destination associated with each object is written on the signs above them. These destinations are fixed by the Department of Magic and cannot be changed.

To travel using a Portkey, place the standard MBTA fare in the box below. That will activate the system, at which point a warning buzzer will sound. Once you hear the buzzer, step up to the list of objects and grasp the object associated with your destination. You will be lifted off your feet and carried through the air at a high rate of speed. Once you reach your destination, your motion will stop and you will fall onto a large pile of cushions similar to the one you see here. This will reduce a trip of thirty minutes or more into one of one minute or less.

Rules for using Portkeys:

1. The system supports one person, and only one person, per transit.

2. Pregnant women should not use Portkeys.
Teresa looked at the display in amazement. She wasn't entirely thrilled about being flung around by magical powers at a high rate of speed. However, this could very well be the only way to get her to her meeting on time.

She walked over to the fare box was about to drop in a token when a siren suddenly howled in the direction of the mattresses. She whirled just in time to see a man in a business suit appear in midair and fall maybe three feet into the mattresses. Teresa caught a brief glimpse of a brick in his hands as he got up. Seconds later, he released the brick, which vanished without a trace.

She helped him up. "Good Lord! Are you OK? Did you just travel by Portkey?"

The suited man nodded. "Yup. It's actually kind of exhilarating, sort of like riding on a roller coaster. Granted, the route I was on nearly had me crash into the Prudential, which caught me a bit by surprise. However, I got here. It really saves time, if you can handle it."

Teresa looked back at the train tracks, where a train was just starting to pull in. "I don't think I have much of a choice. Wish me luck."

The man wished her luck and began walking to his car as she dropped in her token and waited for the stack of junk to start buzzing. She made her way across the stack until she saw the sign marked PARK STREET. Drawing a deep breath, she closed her hand around the saltshaker lying under the sign.

She let out an involuntary scream as something lifted her off her feet and started flinging her through the air at a high rate of speed. Trees, houses, and subway tracks zoomed underneath her. She felt thankful that her hands were frozen in shock: otherwise, it was quite possible she would have dropped the saltshaker.

The Prudential Tower suddenly loomed up in front of her and began growing at an alarming rate of speed. Making sure she maintained control of the saltshaker, she lifted her hands in front of her head and awaited the inevitable crash. Nothing happened, however, as the device made its way around the
building and eventually down the entrance to Park Street.

She had a brief glimpse of a passengers unaware of her presence before she found herself rematerializing in midair above a pile of mattresses. She landed with a thud, badly mussing her coiffed hair. Wiping the wrinkles out of her business suit, she dropped the saltshaker (which vanished) and looked around to get her bearings.

She was in the corridor between Park Street and Downtown Crossing. The junk display and mattresses had been placed directly across from an unmarked door. She would have given 10:1 odds that this door was the connection to the Department of Magic. Unfortunately, she was not a witch, so she had no way to check.

She looked at her wristwatch and found that it was 8:39. Good God, she thought. I might actually make it!

Taking care not to knock people over, she hurried down the corridor and into the Downtown Crossing station. Up into the street she went, and she found herself in the office at 8:54. She rushed into the bathroom and spent a good three minutes trying to straight out the wrinkles in her skirt and fix her hair. Finally, she hurried into the meeting room with two minutes to spare.

The boss stood to greet her. "Good to see you, Teresa. I thought you'd be late. How'd you get here so fast?"

She grinned. "Magic, obviously."

-------------------------------------
Britain for Humans Headquarters

-------------------------------------

Isabel Miller looked around at all of the material her operatives had assembled in the workroom: tacks, fertilizer, saltpeter, and so forth. Each of them on its own was more or less innocuous. However, put them together in the right way and you could create for yourself a very effective improvised explosive device.

She whistled and turned to her colleague. "Well, Sam? You've got everything?"

Sam nodded. "Yup, Isabel. It's going to take two or three days to put this all together. However, the explosives experts know what to do. We'll have it assembled by the 18th and be ready to detonate it on the 19th."

"How big a blast are you going to get?"

"I don't know for certain, Isabel. However, from what people have been telling me it's approaching the size of a car bomb."

Miller nodded approvingly. "That's impressive. We'll be telling everyone we'll be back in style, it seems like. Hopefully this action will deter people from interacting with wizards and/or keep the wizards out of our hair for good."

"I hope so too, Isabel. To be honest, I don't really like killing civilians like this. However, like you said earlier, it had to be done."

"I agree, Sam. I agree."

Sam nodded and began to leave the room. However, at the door, he turned around.

"Uh...Isabel, I've got to know. What's the target going to be?"
Isabel told him. Sam thought for a moment and said: "Well, fair enough. It should cause enough havoc for us to get Phase II of the operation underway."

To be continued...

__________________

Update #430: Waiting for the Fuhrer
-------------
Sunday, November 17, 1996
Chancellors' Office
Syrdasch
Syrdan
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/3.1%
-------------
NEXT UP: When I Said I Wanted To Be With God, I Didn't Mean It THAT Way
-------------
Chancellor Siatnan looked at her two colleagues. "I'm a bit leery about talking to this guy. Yes, I know he's a wizard. However, I've heard some strange things about him."

Vixar frowned. "Like what?"

"Well, there are rumors circulating that his group was involved with the attack on the school in England. I don't like associating with terrorists all that much. I'm concerned that they'll turn on us."

Ortelu snorted. "Zygonov is one man, Siatnan. We've got the power of a nation-state at our beck and call. I'm not concerned about him. Let's see what he has to say."

"A nation-state which is in absolute chaos thanks to the escape of Altri's three yahoos! The police are barely able to keep everything under control, and there are rumors that a Muggle resistance movement is developing out in the boonies! We don't have time for any more complications when these newly-entitled yahoos think they own the place!"

Vixar stood. "I'm in charge right now, and I've already told him we'd give him an audience. If anything, we'll be able to find more about this organization he's involved with and whether they will be of use to us."

Siatnan stammered: "But..."

"We agreed, Siatnan. And if you want to have the final word, wait a few more months until you become Supreme Chancellor. Until then, I'm in charge."

Glowering at Vixar angrily, Siatnan returned to her seat as Vixar turned to one of his servants. "All right, Jongi sen-Vixar. Send the man in."

The yahoo nodded and left the room. A couple of minutes later, he returned with a bearded, Slavic-looking man who appeared to be in his late forties or early fifties. He placed a large briefcase on the floor next to him as the herald announced the visitor.

"Chancellors, allow me to introduce Wizard Zygonov of the Order of the Great Bear."
Zygonov bowed respectfully to the Executive Committee and spoke in Latin. "Thank you for granting me an audience, Your Excellencies. I have come before you with a proposition which I believe you will find most interesting."

Vixar, as the Supreme Chancellor, spoke. "Good afternoon, Wizard Zygonov. I'm Supreme Chancellor Vixar, and these are my colleagues Siatnan and Ortelu. I take it that my yahoos made you comfortable? Did you have trouble with the guards and the security protocols?"

Zygonov shook his head. "No, Supreme Chancellor. Your hospitality has been exemplary. The only thing I find surprising is the fact that I was expecting a few more yahoos to be serving the three of you."

Vixar shot a warning glance at Siatnan as he replied. "We've sent the yahoos away for the time being -- even chattel need a break from time to time. You can't work an animal twenty-four hours a day without it breaking down, after all."

Zygonov nodded. "I can't agree with you more. At any rate, I have come because I have been instructed to offer you and your allies membership in the Order of the Great Bear."

Ortelu looked at him in confusion. "And what, Wizard Zygonov, is the Order of the Great Bear?"

Zygonov explained. "It is a group of wizards who believe that people who should cast spells should be placed ahead of, and if necessary rule, the Muggles for their own good. As you undoubtedly know, Chancellors, the world is too chaotic for the masses to rule it effectively. Power needs to be concentrated in the hands of a few, and if that is the case those few must have unusual abilities far and beyond those of ordinary human beings."

Vixar whistled in surprise. "Such a situation does in fact appeal to us very much. Are you aware that originally Syrdan was founded on just such principles, where the wizards took oaths taking the Muggles under their wings in return for obedience?"

Zygonov nodded. "I am, Supreme Chancellor. That is why I thought that you and some of your allies would be interested in joining the Order."

Siatnan looked Zygonov warily. "I still want to hear more about this Order. Where is it based? How many people does it have? Is it powerful enough to warrant the attention of an entire nation, or are you coming to us hoping that we will support you and give you military help?"

Zygonov smiled. "Both. Right now the Order consists of a few thousand wizards and a few thousand Muggles working for the wizards. It is headed a Russian leader who is operating out of a Fidelius safe house."

Ortelu grinned slightly. "Let me guess. You're working for Rasputin. I've heard rumors he's been running around."

Zygonov blinked. "As a matter of fact, I am. He is currently our leader."

"Currently?"

"Currently, Chancellor Ortelu. Hopefully, he will relinquish control within the next couple of months to the man who, we hope, will be powerful and wise enough to supplant Atlantis as an effective ruler of the world. Atlantis may be a well-run organization, but it only can come into play when it reaches
Vixar laughed. "And who is going to be supplanting Rasputin to take over the world? Us? You? If it's us, you aren't in much of a position to bargain."

Zygonov shook his head. "No, Supreme Chancellor. The man who will succeed Rasputin has been in limbo for centuries. The last time he was active, he brought all of Europe to its knees yet was incapacitated before he could finish the job. Had he been active a few more years, he would have very likely managed to serve as philosopher king for the world."

Siatnan blinked. "Centuries? How can he still be alive? Has he been using the Philosopher's Stone? Are you referring to Nicholas Flamel, the British Minister of Magic?"

Now Zygonov looked surprised. "As a matter of fact, I am not. The person I am referring to is well-known in legends. I have been authorized to reveal his identity to you provided that it not leave this room. I would recommend that your yahoos leave for the time being."

Ortelu stared at him, hard. "So you've come to assassinate us."

Zygonov reached into the briefcase and brought out one of the two objects inside it. "No, Chancellors. Here is my wand, and I am freely laying it on the ground. If you wish, you may handcuff me so I cannot do anything to you."

Ortelu suddenly gasped and pointed at the wand. "The wand! I recognize it! That -- but it can't be --"

Zygonov nodded. "Yes, Chancellor. This is the Elder Wand, soon to be in the hands of the legendary wizard I spoke of earlier."

Siatnan abruptly brought up her wand, pointed it at Zygonov, and shouted "Expelliarmus". Nothing happened, of course, as Zygonov had already dropped the wand. Zygonov, however, laughed. "I am not the wand's master, Chancellor Siatnan. You can disarm me but it will have no effect. It currently answers to someone else."

"Who?"

"I may not say."

Vixar rounded on him. "How did your Order come to be in possession of the Elder Wand?"

Zygonov shrugged. "We earned it by going to Hogwarts and disarming its previous owner, Albus Dumbledore. Its owner reports that it is indeed a most puissant artifact."

Siatnan stared longingly at the wand and sent the yahoo out of the room. "All right, Zygonov. Talk. I want to learn more about this group of yours?"

Zygonov waited until the yahoo had left and cast a spell to prevent eavesdropping. That done, he turned back to the chancellors. "The wizard I am referring to is Lord Boris Maximovich Koschei."

Vixar gasped. "Koschei the Deathless?"

"The same, Supreme Chancellor."
"He was a terrorist! Why should we support you? What do we get out of it?"

Zygonov shook his head. "Lord Koschei is misunderstood. He unleashed the Black Death on the world to demonstrate his power to the rest of the Muggles. He had planned to use his power to reverse the disease, thereby demonstrating that he was fit to rule the Muggles by performing what appeared to them to be a great miracle, but the plague got out of control and he was banished before he could do so. He was simply trying to convince the Muggles to accept his rule."

Siatnan was very skeptical. "Prove it. And prove that if he lets a plague loose again, nothing will happen to us or any of his allies."

Zygonov nodded and retrieved the second object from the suitcase. It was a large, transparent container filled to the brim with a glowing white liquid. He placed it in front of the chancellors and gestured. "Ladies and gentleman, the Elixir of Life."

Vixar's jaw dropped. "The Elixir of Life? That's impossible! All of the rogue Philosopher's Stones were destroyed!"

"No, Chancellor. The Order has one. If you wish, call the yahoo in and I will demonstrate it for you."

All three chancellors came to their feet as Vixar drew his ceremonial sword. He brought the yahoo in and then calmly ran him through before he could make a sound. The man fell in a pool of blood to the floor.

Zygonov burst into action immediately. He decanted some of the Elixir into the injured man's mouth. Slowly but surely, the wounds closed and the scars disappeared. Within a minute, the man who had suffered the sword thrust had returned to perfect health. The yahoo was about to scream at his master for attacking him when Ortelu's Obliviation spell hit him in the head. He wouldn't be screaming about any attacks after that.

Siatnan whistled as Vixar sent the yahoo away. "Merlin's beard, it IS the Elixir of Life! Your Order has a Philosopher's Stone!"

Zygonov nodded. "Indeed, Chancellor. What's more, we also have the Elder Wand. This puts the Order in a position to supplant Atlantis as the de facto rulers of the Wizarding, and eventually Muggle, world."

Siatnan found herself leaning towards him. "I demand that we keep the Elder Wand and the Philosopher's Stone."

Zygonov shook his head. "I'm afraid I can't give you the Stone because I don't have it -- you can search me yourself. And as for the Wand, since I am not its master it is not mine to give. However, I can make you a deal. If you help us bring back Koschei, you and your allies will be able to have as much Elixir of Life as you wish. You could become immortal if you wish. In addition, Rasputin and Koschei will do their best to defend you and the rest of your alliance from the Muggles. Particularly the Americans, whom I have been told are rather angry with your treatment of the yahoos."

Siatnan grimaced. "We protect them. We deserve their service."

Ortelu nodded. "The Americans don't understand. Then again, for the most part they are Muggles themselves. Besides, they can't even get to us for the most part unless they go through Nestor or
Zygonov continued. "Finally, once the Great Bear takes over the world, you and your allies will be placed in positions of power. With luck, the Great Bear will eliminate Nestor and you will be in control of the Atlantic once and for all. You will never have to worry about those pesky veela ever again."

Vixar looked at his two colleagues. It was obvious that the promise of immortality was quite enticing. He had one question, however.

He leaned towards his guest. "Does your patron seriously think that he can tell us, a sovereign state, what to do?"

Zygonov shook his head magnanimously. "Of course not. Once the Great Bear takes over, he will personally control most of Eurasia. You will be left in charge of Syrdan and Nestor, just as you have before. Here, you will have complete control. You will be doing Koschei a service by eliminating any Muggles who are a threat to our rule. The point is, when Koschei takes over you will still be in the position you are today as Chancellors, in absolute power over Syrdan -- and if things go as planned, Nestor as well."

Vixar glanced at his two colleagues, who were deep in thought. This was an extremely tempting offer. By simply helping these people bring back Koschei, Syrdan would be fulfilling its dream of having a world where the wizards ruled the Muggles. Syrdan would also receive the Elixir of Life and possibly get control of Nestor to boot. Furthermore, Koschei -- who had been an extremely powerful wizard, he remembered, even more so than Voldemort -- would help deal with the Americans and Syrdan's own Muggles.

There had to be a catch, somehow. There had to be. Well, there was one way to make sure Koschei behaved. He turned back to Zygonov. "I personally like the plan, with two conditions. First, Zygonov here takes an Unbreakable Vow to tell the truth and says that everything he has said so far is the truth. I don't want to drag our nation into something we can't get out of. Second, none of this leaves this room -- or the three of us -- without unanimous approval from the Chancellors."

Zygonov nodded. "Certainly. I'll be willing to swear an Unbreakable Oath, provided that part of the contract involves some of your wizards engaging in battle with the Muggles and that decrepit Atlantis who are trying to prevent us from bringing back Koschei."

Minutes later, the Unbreakable Oath was in place and Zygonov showed that he was indeed telling the truth. Very interesting, Vixar thought. This sounds like something to think about. If all else failed, he could always order Zygonov killed and blame it on an accident. He'd then just alert Atlantis that someone was trying to bring Koschei back -- Atlantis would jump on the Great Bear people immediately.

Vixar made his decision. "All right. Let's write up the document solidifying the alliance."

Zygonov bowed. "You won't regret this. Do you have any allies we should know about?"

"Certainly. The remaining Death Eaters are certainly going to jump at the opportunity to get the Elixir of Life and suppress the Muggles and Muggle-born. Tsalasia is going to be more than happy to avenge itself on the Western colonial powers. I highly doubt that you'll find a problem there."

Zygonov smiled one last time and poured some of the Elixir of Life into four crystal goblets. "That is
good news, Chancellors. Let us all drink now to the future of the Order of the Great Bear, Boris Koschei, and world where the Muggles are in their place."

He distributed the goblets and raised his own. "To the Great Bear, Koschei, and the wizard-dominated world!"

The chancellors raised theirs as well. "To the Great Bear, Koschei, and the wizard-dominated world!"

Vixar smiled and downed the Elixir of Life. Seconds later, he felt better than he had in his entire life.

The world didn't stand a chance against this.

To be continued....

____________________

Update #430.5 Arrangements
----------
Sunday, November 17, 1996
Chancellors' Office
Syrdasch
Syrdan
----------

After Zygonov was escorted out, Supreme Cancellor Vixar asked his colleagues for other issues. Siatnan pulled out a scroll of parchment from her robe, and levitated it in front of her. "Wizard Zygonov's audience- check. Next item... whoa, boy, look at that. Wizard Naztheros's request for a traveler's permission for reclaiming former family possessions and a future audience to negotiate some trade agreement."

Ortelu sneered. "Naztheros? What's the traitor's spawn planning to do here? His family was banished for a very good reason..."

"Which is now no longer relevant." Interrupted Vixar. "Their party wanted to abolish the yahoos, now it happened and look how it turned out. If the man had any political supporters, they are certainly gone by now. Siatnan, how about the reports of our agents?"

After a couple of yahoos brought in the relevant documents from the archives, the Cancellor quickly read through the parts marked as important. "The boy has never had any political ambitions, apparently, "she summarised, " though he shares his father's ideas of Muggle rights. There are a few years of dusty nonsense, he lived in poverty in Roqteratl- took no Oaths-, then of course here is the ascension of his shipping company... and his relationship with a Veela witch."

"Peaceful, wealthy, and unable to raise political support," summarised Vixar. "I've rarely heard such a fine definition of 'harmless'. I say we let him in, but have some of our trusted agents accompany him everywhere... if he asks, it's a security detail for his sake. It would even be true, some people might want to avenge slights on him, even despite his personal innocence. What's next?"
"An audience with Merwizard Rasegar. He's the leader of a large group of refugees. Azhir and our ... arab guests... have vouched for them. Shall I let him in?" "Yes" replied the Supreme Cancellor, "but he better not be as arrogant as the Trapanandan ambassador was, or I'll kick his scaly butt out of here so hard, even the air will hurt."

----------

Rasegar was not arrogant, and his butt wasn't scaly either. He appeared to be a normal human wizard, in fact he could have passed for a Syrdani, unlike the exotic clothing of last week's Trapanandan ambassador - much of his equipment was damaged in the rainforest and was replaced by Syrdani clothing, and he started out in 'generic human wizard mercenary' outfit anyway. He bowed to each Cancellors, and introduced himself.

"I am Rasegar, leader of a group of merwizard refugees three thousand strong, and I thank you for your hospitality in their name."

"You are welcome here, as are all wizards if they are untouched by corruption," replied Vixar. "I've heard you wish to reach an agreement beyond the current state of being our honored guests?"

The merwizard nodded. "Indeed. While we're glad that you offered us a refuge, we feel that we need more than that. Condemned falsely and without proof as we were, we have no trust left in Trapananda... but we have nowhere else to go now. Many of us have family left there, and they won't be allowed to join us if we have nothing to call our own... so, I have a proposition. We enter your service as vassals providing a standing army, in exchange of citizen status and all the protection from foreign persecution it includes."

"Let us think it over" answered the Supreme Cancellor. After some whispered discuccion, he asked a few questions.

-Q: "Tell us about that unjust persecution. The Trapanandan ambassador warned me about Death Eaters, I assume he meant you. How would his actions contradict the laws of Atlantis?"
-A: "Firstly, we had no chance of actually committing anything recognised as a crime by Atlantis. We were arrested because some of us thouthgt inappropriate things near a legilimens, or just being friends of people who did so. Our interrogations were also non-conclusive by your standard, but here I can only blame the ancients: our Oaths and occlumency sometimes make veritaserum and legilimency unreliable when dealing with us... interrogating a merwizard is a delicate art, and they didn't bother. Now, I could tell about the prison, but I think even stasis with our minds left active is preferable to the hypocritical Atlantean practice of setting Dementors on prisoners. After that, we were recruited into a penal legion, sent to Houyhhnmlnland, and committed some atrocities, but it was actually an improvement over what the centaurs would have done on their own, and we only obeyed the orders of assigned political officers anyway. Satisfied, or you need more details?"

"Whoa, and people say our legal system is screwed up," remarked Ortelu.

"So, suppose we keep turning the Trapanandans down about handing you over," mused Vixar. "You'll need lands, and we don't have enough yahoos for 3000 people..."

"We don't need yahoos, we've been doing just fine without any Muggle servants in the past. As for lands, we're currently working on reverting ourselves into our true, amphibious forms. The spell is in Mermish, and nonverbal casting has so far been unsuccessful, but I'm confident we're approaching a
breakthrough... and once it happens, we can go live in the Protectored waters near the coasts, and build an underwater city... and some underground bases across the island, while we're at it. If you plan on fighting Muggles, you will sorely need those, and we have some useful tunnelling spells."

"One last question, Wizard Rasegar. How much of an army are you willing to provide?"
"One thousand on brooms, one thousand underwater. The rest of our population will work on civilian tasks, but they can act as a reserve force if it comes to that. Is that good enough for you?"

The Syrdanis were surprised. "Two thirds of your population as a standing army? We're content, but can you uphold it?" Rasegar didn't see anything strange in it.
"You saved our lives and offered us a chance to make something of it. We owe your people a life debt."

To be continued...
Update #431 through Update #435

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Mislagnissa

Update #431: When I Said I Wanted To Be With God, I Didn’t Mean It THAT Way

---------------
Sunday, November 17, 1996
Red Hook, NY
United States of America
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/3.4%
---------------
NEXT UP: St. Malachy Vindicated
---------------
Kohen Gadol Suleiman I was happy that he had been offered this opportunity to give the sermon at one of the churches here in Red Hook. It was becoming increasingly obvious that the Samuelist movement was running into more and more trouble and many of the attendees were starting to leave increasingly disgruntled with what was going on. Samuel had explained that there would be many reforms designed to unite the three faiths. What hadn't counted on was the possibility that not everyone would agree to those reforms.

Regardless of what had happened, the Samuelists had been a blessing from Allah when it came to Suleiman. He had become a much better-known and influential religious figure and many of the Muslims (and Jews) were starting to listen to his teachings. For a moderate Muslim who defied the Western heresy that all Muslims were terrorists, that was a great accomplishment. Even if the Samuelist movement collapsed and he went back to being the al-Aqsa Mosque's imam once again, people would remember that truly devout Muslims would not condone terrorism.

The Samuelist movement had likely been instrumental in allowing Abrahamic clergy to start giving sermons (and in some cases even practice) at houses of worship which did not belong to the speaker's denomination. He doubted he'd have been able to get this gig here at St. John's otherwise. He hoped that this practice would persist after the Samuelist conference ended.

He drove his rented car up over to the front door of St. John's and saw the minister walking out to greet him. He waved his hand in response and extended it to shake the pastor's hand.

Then something hit him in the back of the head and he knew no more.

-----------------------------
A couple of blocks away in an old barn, the Muslims for Humans sharpshooter watched in satisfaction as the bullet hit the traitorous imam in the back of the head. Blood sprayed everywhere, and the rector cried out in horror as the body fell to the ground.

Serves you right, the shooter thought. Once you started letting people of other faiths into the mosque you'd broken your contract with Allah. You make friends with Zionists and crusaders even though you're not supposed to. Oh, and to top it all off, you actually let yourself be swayed by a wizard who could very well be an evil spirit in human form.

The next thing the shooter had to do was make his escape. He had taped a note to the gun in which Muslims for Humans claimed responsibility for the attack. It went on to explain that Muslims for Humans had begun targeting wizards and friends of wizards in various nations around the world.
Being men of God, these attacks were necessary to rid the world of these evil sorcerers. Mankind's duty should have been obvious: even the Old Testament, used by the Zionists and revered by the crusaders, warned that witches should not be kept alive. Sure, some people interpreted it differently. But Muslims for Humans knew the truth.

To stop the attacks, the wizards either had to stop practicing, go back to the plane of existence they had come from, or adopt the six Aes Sedai oaths in the form originally intended by Jordan: namely, that the wizards were physically incapable of violating them. Once the wizards did their part, then Muslims for Humans would believe that the wizards were bargaining in good faith.

He had done what he could to silence the rifle shot. However, silencers didn't work as well as they did in the movies, and the gun had made an awful racket when it had gone off. Fortunately, with most of the people in the church, there weren't many potential witnesses available, at least at the moment.

Making sure that he touched the gun with his gloves the whole time, he hid the murder weapon in a big bale of hay and nonchalantly made his way over to his car. He turned the key in the ignition and hightailed it out of town before anyone could figure out what was going on. Five miles out of town, just as people had begun streaming out of the church to figure out who did it, he heard the welcoming sounds of a truck engine. He parked the car, got into the truck, and hid in the back as the truck made its way out of town. He found himself being squeezed between more bales of hay -- uncomfortable as hell, but invisible unless people inspected the cargo very carefully.

Half an hour later, he was back in his safe house. Mission accomplished.

------
Atlantis
------

Dagher stared at his underling in amazement. "What did you say?"

The underling’s face was pale. "There have been no fewer than 9 attacks on wizards and their allies all over the world -- all in the past five. All of them appear to have been at the hands of Muslims for Humans. To make matter worse, reports are starting to come in that they’ve assassinated the Kohen Gadol as well."

Dagher kicked at the wall. "Shit. As a Muslim, this makes me VERY angry. It's not going to be hard to convince myself that my life is in danger so I can use magic as an offensive weapon."

"Same here. What are we going to do about it?"

"First, what are their demands?"

The underling glanced at his sheet just as someone else ran down the corridor and shouted: "We've got two dead in Indonesia too now! Make that 12 total!"

The underling found the relevant section and looked back up at Dagher. "We either have to stop practicing, go back 'where we came from' under the Statute of Secrecy, or adopt all six Aes Sedai oaths in the form originally intended by Robert Jordan."

Dagher gulped. "The version where the oath physically prevents the oath taker from violating it?"

"That's it, sir."
Dagher winced. "That's impossible. It can't be done, short of some very intricate Legilimency which itself may violate the Oaths. And let me guess: Muslims for Humans doesn't realize that."

"No, sir, I don't think they do."

"Damn! How are the other World for Humans groups reacting?"

"America for Humans is more or less out of business thanks to the crackdown after the Four Towns were attacked. All that's left for the most part is an anti-wizard political party called the Revelation Party which is on the lunatic fringe. We don't need to worry about them. There's been no reaction from the Celestines --"

Dagher cut in. "Call them Christians for Humans. Celestine would never have done this, and Christians for Humans is a more accurate description now."

" -- Christians for Humans and Britain for Humans yet. However, I'm very concerned that these attacks are going to give them ideas."

"So am I, Alexander. So am I. I want all of the Aurors in my office in five minutes, and get Nicholas Flamel over here if you can. Now go!"

Syrdan Muggle Resistance Movement Headquarters

The five Nestorian agents, in their full veela glory, lifted their hands to the crowd. Their new army looked like it was going to work out pretty well.

One of them finally spoke. "Ladies and gentlemen of the Syrdan Muggle Resistance Movement, the time will soon be upon us when you will be able to take over the Syrdani government once and for all and transform it into a democracy, a system of government where each person has one vote. No more of this insanity where a minority with some unusual abilities rules the majority!"

The Muggles clapped as the speaker continued. "Rest assured, ladies and gentlemen, that when it comes time for your revolt, the Republic of Nestor will be backing you all the way. In a few more weeks we will be smuggling some magical weapons over to you, weapons which their makers would love to see used against the Syrdani elite. We'll also bring over three stakes which I'd like to see reserved for the bodies of the members of the Executive Council."

The Muggles applauded again as the veela pointed at one of the other members of her party, one who seemed to be an ordinary human woman. "This woman here is a Muggle who arrived on Nestor via a cruise ship. It just so happens that she specializes in removing tattoos. Who wants their brands off their heads?"

The Muggles all started charging the tattoo artist, and the veela had to wave her hands around momentarily to get them to back off. "Hold on a second! You can't all go there at once! You need to make appointments! I know, there are a lot of you and only one of her. Unfortunately, that's going to be better than nothing."

The crowd grumbled a little the veela reached into her pocket and pulled out a wand. "Ladies and gentlemen, you've seen these before. This is obviously a wand, right? Well, you may be interested to know that I can hold it. And I'm not a wizard. But holding a wand will sure make people think I'm a wizard."
The Muggles gasped in unison as the veela continued. "How can that be? Simple. It's a fake wand, a branch Transfigured to look like a wand. I can't actually do magic with it. However, a Syrdani wizard who sees you without your tattoo and carrying this will probably not even realize that you're in fact Muggles."

The Muggles roared as the veela concluded her speech. "Wait for the sign, my friends. When it comes, strike hard and strike fast. Within a few months, Syrdan will be yours."

The veela stepped down from the podium as the Muggles started streaming towards the tattoo artist. Nodding to her colleagues, she stepped aside and dispatched a Patronus over to President Markali.

Markali responded immediately. "Yes, Veronique?"

"Well, it looks like it's going well so far. That tattoo artist sent by Bill Clinton has become more popular than we are for the time being, and we're full veela here."

"Good. I want all of you guys out of there so that she can work on the yahoos without being distracted. In the meanwhile, I'll report to President Clinton while you guys start making more of those fake wands."

Veronique nodded. "Very good. You're sure we're going to get American support if this comes to a head?"

"Almost positive. It won't be overt support, however. It's going to be more under the table. Clinton wants this to be a black op lest the United States antagonize Tsalasia immediately...and Syrdan prematurely."

"That's good enough for me. Veronique out."

To be continued...

__________________

Update #432: St. Malachy Vindicated
--------
Sunday, November 17, 1996
Omega Institute
Rhinebeck, NY
United States of America
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/3.4%
--------
NEXT UP: Britain for Humans Goes to Hogwarts
--------
The shouting began shortly after one o'clock, and Pope John Paul II put down his book. Everyone seemed extremely alarmed, and people were asking each other what on earth was going on -- and whether they would be safe here at Omega.

The Pope frowned. Unsafe at Omega? There hadn't been any serious problems here. Granted, the conference was slowly beginning to unravel as more and more people deserted. However, there had been no threats directed at Omega that he had known about.
He heard footsteps stop outside his door and someone started banging on it. "Holiness! Are you inside? Are you OK?"

John Paul frowned. "I am, son. What exactly is going on here? Why is everyone so excited? Are you in need of counsel?"

The response shocked him. "We all are, Holiness. The Kohen Gadol has been assassinated!"

The Pope's eyes widened, and he yanked open the door to reveal someone with a white face. "Good God! Where? When? Tell me more! Is he still alive? If so, I may be able to heal him with magic again."

The visitor shook his head. "He's dead, Holiness. Judging from the witnesses, he was shot in the back of the head outside the door of St. John's Church in Red Hook."

"The place where he was to give the sermon?"

"Correct, Holiness. The pastor and rector saw everything, and they brought the entire congregation here for counsel."

"Who did it?"

The visitor shrugged. "We don't know yet. However, several church members recalled hearing a sharp crack a couple of blocks away from the church. That must have been the gunshot. Apparently there was supposedly an old farm in the vicinity which could have been used as a staging area."

The Pope slumped. "Sniper."

"Exactly, and from long range. Whoever did this must have been a professional."

John Paul crossed himself and recited a short prayer for Suleiman's soul. When he was finished, he began thinking aloud. "A professional sniper? That's got to mean either a fundamentalist Abrahamic sect which predated the Super Bowl, Muslims for Humans, or Christians for Humans. Christians for Humans have always been badgering us from the beginning. Muslims for Humans tried to kill him earlier, and fundamentalist Abrahamics would attack him because of his Samuelist ties -- Mother of God! Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

Judging from the visitor's expression, he was. "If they took him out because he was a Samuelist it was a warning for us. The next time, he may target Omega itself. Someone really doesn't like what we're doing."

John Paul slammed his mouth shut when Samuel's interpreter barged into the room and began speaking. "We're sorry for bothering you, but there's been a terrible tragedy. The Kohen Gadol has been assassinated, and Samuel wants to talk to everyone as soon as possible."

The Pope nodded. "Lead the way, my friend. May God have mercy upon Suleiman's soul, and may he find comfort in paradise. From what I know of his works, he certainly deserves paradise."

As the interpreter led John Paul through the compound, the Pope could see police cars pulling into the lot and setting up barricades near the main entrance. They were beefing up security big time, he thought. However, there was so much empty space out here. What was preventing people from coming in through the forest and breaking in near the dorms on the hill? Come to think of it, how
could he be sure that one of the clergy already at Omega wasn't in fact an enemy plant? Someone had to have told him that Suleiman had been going to Red Hook! Granted, the church in Red Hook would have likely announced Suleiman's impending visit in the newspaper. However, how many people read the newspaper here?

The interpreter escorted them into Deborah's room, where the two ghosts were talking in rapid-fire ancient Semitic. They looked up when he entered.

Samuel spoke. "John Paul, I assume you have heard the news. The Kohen Gadol has been killed by an unknown assailant. Spread the word that I am declaring a minor fast day the rest of the day. People are to not eat or drink between now and sundown unless their health prevents it. A special mourning service will held one hour from now in the main hall."

John Paul nodded. "I understand, Holy One."

"Good. In the meantime, I anoint you the new Kohen Gadol."

The Pope blinked. "Me? But I'm already Pope. How can I be both Pope and Kohen Gadol? Who's going to lead the Church, particularly at a time like this?"

Samuel was blunt. "As far as I am concerned, the title of Pope is obsolete as it refers to one and only one Abrahamic sect. You will serve as both Pope and Kohen Gadol for the rest of your life. When you die, the office of the Pope will become obsolete and disappear. Your successor will be called the Kohen Gadol."

John Paul bit his lip. "Can't you make Celestine Kohen Gadol? Come to think of it, what about someone Muslim like Ibrahim? The Kohen Gadol is going to be operating out of the al-Aqsa Mosque, after all."

Samuel looked irritated. "I needed to find someone venerated by the entire world. Islam does not have a singular spiritual leader, nor does Judaism. You are the closest to a true Kohen Gadol that we have."

"How am I supposed to pass on the position to someone else? Recall that I am under a vow of celibacy."

"So? Appoint someone worthy of the title. I'd recommend Celestine if he outlives you."

"Fine, but what about the fact that the Kohen Gadol's temple is now an Islamic house of worship? It deserves a Muslim cleric. Having me isn't appropriate."

"The Temple is being renovated to honor all three faiths. You don't need to worry about that. Besides, I believe that it's time we had four major temples to reflect the worldwide spread of believe in our abstract god: the traditional one in Jerusalem, the shrine at Mecca, St. Peter's Basilica, and here."

The Pope/Kohen Gadol nearly fell over in shock. "Here? This gathering isn't nearly on the same level as the other three shrines."

Samuel shook his head and put on a faint smile. "It may not be as ostentatious as the other three shrines. However, you see pilgrims visiting here from all over the country. In fact, a large group of young adults is going to coming here next week. Trust me, within a few decades this camp is going
to be an important spiritual center -- especially since word of our movement is spreading. We may not be able to unify the three Abrahamic faiths completely at the rate things are going, but we've at least gotten people to start rethinking the sects' differences.

The Pope's visitor glanced out the window and saw the rest of the conference members converging on the main hall. Slowly, still in disbelief, he shook his head. "I can't believe we're talking the end of the Papacy here. It's like St. Malachy --"

Suddenly, the visitor's jaw dropped. "Good God! St. Malachy's Prophecy of the Popes! It's just been fulfilled!"

Samuel looked at the man. "Who, Cardinal, is St. Malachy? Is it the prophet mentioned near the end of the Old Testament?"

John Paul laughed for a moment, but then his brow furrowed in thought as well. "This is someone else named after the Old Testament prophet. He issued a prophecy discussing the end of the papacy. He predicted that there would be a finite number of popes and that each pope's reign would be characterized by a certain saying in his poem.

"This prophecy was most famous for its prediction of the end of the papacy. Most people figured that this would be the end of the world, or at least of Christendom -- my sect. Most people have assumed it has been a forgery, though people have admitted that there have been many cases where the actual lives of the popes in question seemed to go along with the text of St. Malachy's poem.

"As it turns out, I am represented by the third-to-last saying in the poem: De Labore Solis. This matches me as I was born during a solar eclipse. The second-to-last saying, Gloria Olivae, matches Celestine pretty well in the sense that he tried to return to the fold -- as the saying goes, presenting an olive branch -- after he founded the movement which would eventually be corrupted into Christians for Humans."

John Paul smiled. "Here is where things get interesting. The prophecy goes on to say that the last pope, Petrus Romanus, will be leading the Christians through a period of tribulation and instability. 'And when these things are finished, the city of seven hills will be destroyed, and the terrible judge will judge his people. The End.'"

The cardinal gasped. "Wow. Christ Lord, WOW!"

John Paul nodded and continued. "Urban IX was born as a Romani man whose name was equivalent to Peter. That threw everyone off at first because everyone predicted that the last pope would take the title Peter II. No one had thought that it would refer to the fact that the person was a Romani named Peter."

Samuel nodded. "Prophecy works like that sometimes. Continue."

"At any rate, Urban IX initiates a period of tribulation by antagonizing wizards and forming what is now known as Christians for Humans. While he was serving as antipope, Voldemort starts wreaking havoc on the world. A city known as Seven Hills was destroyed in a test of al-Qaeda's city-destroying bomb. Soon after that, Judgment Day occurred and a great judge -- in this case Dialonis, not God -- judged the world."

Samuel whistled. "Impressive. And 'The End'?"
John Paul smiled. "Simple. The end of the papacy after Judgment Day. You've just declared it yourself. Contrary to most interpretations, it didn't mean the end of the world. It just meant that the office of the Pope, in effect, would go on under a different title. It's a hope for the future, Holy One. The world may not yet be doomed, no matter how bad things may seem at the moment."

Samuel looked out at the crowd gathering in the main hall. "Sounds like a fulfilled prophecy to me. Congratulations on your good work. Now, if you would come with me and my interpreter, we have a memorial service to perform."

-------------

Gaza Strip

-------------

Mudar Qanaan stared at his juice cup again. There were definitely ripples on the surface. The ground was shaking. Was it an earthquake? Hoping his wife didn't notice, he looked outside to see if any of the trees were shaking.

The trees were quietly waving back and forth in the wind. He didn't see anything unusual at first. However, he saw something fall off the porch of a house nearby a fraction of a second before he felt another tremor under his feet.

Qanaan looked up to the sky. Allah, if it is my time to die, I place my soul in Your care.

He looked back down to see someone standing in the trees. At least he thought it was a person. The man had dark skin, a leather tunic, and a thick black beard. When he walked, the ground shook.

Qanaan looked back into the house at his cup. Had someone given him alcohol by mistake? He didn't think he had any in the house -- after all, a pious Muslim wasn't supposed to drink alcohol. But what else could this be? Certainly Allah couldn't have answered his prayer and sent him an angel for protection!

The huge man looked at him and waved a hand the size of Qanaan's torso at him. He then spoke in some kind of bizarre dialect Qanaan had never heard before. Pointing at himself, he uttered the odd word "Nephil". He then looked expectantly at Qanaan.

Qanaan stared at the giant's feet, up to his head, and then down to his feet again. Finally, he pointed at himself. "I'm Qanaan". Then he raised his hands. "I'm sorry, sir. I don't know what you're saying. Are you an angel? No offense, but I don't think I've ever met someone as tall as you are before."

The giant apparently seemed to understand what he was saying. He laughed, waved his hand disarmingly, and then tiptoed over to near Qanaan's house (barely drowning out a shriek from Qanaan's wife) to deliver five goats to their doorstep. A veritable banquet.

Qanaan looked at his terrified wife and then at the giant. Licking his lips, he said: "Uh...thanks."

The giant chuckled and then marched off down the street as more people stuck their heads out of houses and stared in disbelief. About a kilometer or so away, the giant looked around a plot of land near the beach and nodded. He then brought out a wand and began casting spells to construct a house. A very large house, at the rate things were going.

Qanaan's neighbor yelled over at him. "Hey, Mudar! Who, or what, is that guy? He looks like he's at least four meters tall! Oh, can I have some of those goats? I doubt you can eat all of them!"

Qanaan shrugged and watched the huge man work. "Go ahead, Qadin, take a goat. It's always nice
to help a neighbor. I never did pay you back for that job you did earlier. And speaking of neighbor, I'm getting the impression that's precisely what that big man there is going to be."

Qadin stared at the giant. "That guy's going to be our neighbor? Well, I hope he's friendly. I don't want him to step on us by accident!"

To be continued...

Update #433: Britain for Humans Goes to Hogwarts

Tuesday, November 19, 1996
Platform 9 3/4
King's Cross Station
London
United Kingdom
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/3.5%

Henry Knight looked at the wall between platforms 9 and 10 in disbelief. He was supposed to walk right into that wall without bashing his head? Gingerly, making sure that the ticket to Platform 9 3/4 was in his pocket, he reached out to touch the brick facade. His hand passed right through it.

He didn't know whether he should be happy or scared. However, he didn't have much time to think about. Making sure that his gloves were on securely and that the semiautomatic weapon was hidden discretely under his newly-purchased wizard's robes, he carried the heavy suitcase down to train station.

Platform 9 3/4 had carried many suitcases before thanks to the perennial commute between London and Hogwarts/Hogsmeade. However, this was no ordinary suitcase. Instead of containing books, spell components, and clothes, the suitcase contained Britain for Humans's pride and joy: a powerful bomb which could be detonated by remote control. If everything went as planned, the device would go off in the middle of Hogsmeade and hurt enough wizards to make sure they went back where they came from.

As he boarded the train, he couldn't help but be a little disturbed by the wizards' unusual clothing choices. Purple robes with a yellow hat? Who on earth had designed that? Anyone who wore such garish colors couldn't be in their right mind. The fact that the person in question had a lizard on her shoulder didn't help, either.

The ticket agent looked at his ticket and told him to get on the train. It took him a while to find any empty compartment, but he eventually did. Hoping that he wouldn't have to share it with anyone, he placed the suitcase with the bomb so that it blocked the entrance. The nonverbal cue worked wonders, and the train pulled out of the station on time with him alone in the compartment.

Now that he was committed, he reached into the pocket opposite the one with the gun and pulled out the detonator. It a switch and a red button on it. Flicking the switch to the up position would arm the bomb, at which point pressing the button would detonate it. The two mechanisms had initially been labeled, but the Britain for Humans staff had conveniently blotted out the labels so that the wizards
wouldn't suspect anything. Making sure that the bomb was still disarmed, he put it back in his pocket.

It was going to be a long ride, he thought. He sure hoped he wouldn't have to go to the bathroom. He didn't want anyone to start walking into his compartment and stick their magical little noses into his suitcase.

----------------------

Hogsmeade City Hall

Ginny Weasley was bored. Prompted partially by her paranoid mother, she had continued taking defense lessons even though Voldemort and the Death Eaters had been destroyed. She had learned a lot of new skills, including karate (she was a green belt now) and taekwondo. She was also slowly becoming adept at using a gun. The problem with these lessons, however, was that the teacher kept on repeating stuff she already knew, either from her experience with Dumbledore's Army or from her Defense Against the Dark Arts lessons with Moody or (during her second year) Lupin.

She looked out the window at the Three Broomsticks, where she looked in the door and saw people drinking and having fun. She couldn't wait until this lesson was over. She was barely able to resist the temptation to shove aside the teacher and tell him that she would take over the class.

Unfortunately, that was not going to happen. Her father had already gotten into trouble with the Ministry, and she had heard what had happened when Harry Potter had tried to use magic outside of school. Granted, Harry had been exonerated due to the fact that the magic use had been in self-defense. However, she imagined her mother would have a heart attack if Ginny put herself in a position where she could get hurt.

So, she did what she could to pay attention. Next to her, Luna Lovegood was playing with her earrings and looked even more bored than Ginny was. For the first time in a long time, Ginny envied Luna's ability to live in some fantasy world which bore no resemblance to any reality Ginny knew about. Perhaps there were six Crumple-Horned Snorkacks walking around and no one realized it.

------------------------------

Headmaster's Tower, Hogwarts

Headmaster Flitwick looked up as Alastair Moody walked into his office. "Well, Headmaster, the defenses are up. If it had been hard earlier to for someone to attack this place before with malicious intent, that moving Caterwauling Charm will make it doubly impossible. Then again, I doubt Muslims for Humans can even get in here."

Flitwick frowned. "Tell that to the dead wizards, Alastair. There have been several security breaches of this school of late: the Chamber of Secrets incident, the Sirius Black incident, your own Polyjuicing, the attack on the Astronomy tower, and so forth. I've heard rumors that people are thinking of taking their students out of the school and sending them somewhere else. If we want to stay in business, we need to protect our students better."

Moody stared at him. "You've got be kidding. Things have gotten that bad?"

"They have, Alastair. And if Flamel thinks there's a danger, we're going to listen to him. He's been around for over six hundred years and is far wiser than any of us."

------------------------

Gryffindor Common Room

Harry's face was flushed. "Bloody hell, Hermione! Can't you and Ron snog somewhere else?"
Hermione shrugged. "People do it all the time, Harry. Besides, it's not like anyone here is going to complain."

Harry rolled his eyes. "And how would you react if William walked in through that door. Or anyone else, for that matter?"

Ron glared at him. "We'll stop. Besides, you do this with Ginny all the time in even MORE public venues."

Harry's flush deepened. "I do NOT!"

Ron thought for a moment, then looked embarrassed. "Actually, I take that back. That's Neville and Luna. Sorry about that. How's your new broom working out? I never thought something useful would come out of a Slytherin headmaster."

Harry smiled. "Next Quidditch match, Slytherin is toast. I'm surprised he didn't wait until after our upcoming match with Slytherin to give me the broom."

Hogsmeade Station

Knight's heart began racing as soon as the train pulled into Hogsmeade Station. However, he kept himself on task. Double-checking once more that everything was in order, he picked up the suitcase and headed towards the exit. If everything went according to plan, some tour agents would meet him at the gate and take any luggage over to the target: an inn known as the Three Broomsticks.

The two tour guides greeted him as soon as he exited the station. One of them shook his hand vigorously. "Good afternoon, Mr. Wilkins, and welcome to Hogsmeade. I'm Wizard Hallick, and she's Sorceress Sloane. How was the train ride in?"

Knight smiled. "Quite comfortable, thank you."

"I see you've even gone out of your way to dress like one of us -- it will make the staff react to you much more naturally. Did you have any problems getting through to Platform 9 3/4?"

"Not at all, believe it or not. I was a bit leery of that brick wall at first, but I stuck my hand in and it went right through."

"Did you try any of the food on the train? I've been told they take pounds now."

Knight doubted he'd have been able to keep anything down given his state of anxiety. "No, I didn't. I'll make sure to do so on the way back."

Hallick laughed. "You should -- those Chocolate Frogs are to die for!"

Knight nearly threw up on the spot. "Chocolate FROGS? Like real frogs?"

"No, Mr. Wilkins. They aren't real frogs -- they're pieces of chocolate which look like frogs and have been animated so they jump around and stuff. At any rate, back to your visit. I see you have a heavy suitcase there. If you want, Sorceress Sloane will take it to your hotel for you and check you in."

Knight breathed two sighs of relief: the woman would plant the bomb and he wouldn't have to lug
the damn thing around anymore. He could only hope that whatever she did to transport the bomb wouldn't mess with the electronics. Had the team put in enough argon to neutralize the magic in the area?

Aloud, he replied: "That would most gentlemanly of you -- thank you."

Sloane smiled. "It's no problem at all -- I can just enchant the suitcase and it will follow me to the inn. Which inn are you staying at?"

"The Three Broomsticks, ma'am."

Hallick whistled. "That's a very good choice. Madam Rosmerta takes very good care of the place, and it's very popular. All right, Sophie, take it away."

Sloane nodded, excused herself, and cast a spell on the suitcase. Knight watched with amusement as it followed her away from the station like a puppy dog on a leash.

Hallick watched his reaction. "Looks like she's got a pet suitcase right now. I've been told you Muggles find this entertaining."

Knight couldn't help but smile. "It is a bit...different. However, I am a bit grateful, it's quite heavy. Maybe 30 kilos."

"I should say so. Now, let me tell you more about what you're going to be seeing today. Is this your first trip to Hogwarts?"

"Yes, Wizard Wilkins."

"All right, so we'll start with the basics. Hogwarts was founded over 1000 years ago..."

Knight paid only half attention to the wizard's soliloquy. Making sure to nod at appropriate times, he brought the detonator an inch out of his pocket and armed the device. A little red light lit up underneath the detonation button. So far, so good.

The brochure had said that the inn was maybe a 10-minute walk from the station. When he judged that the bomb was in place, he brought the detonator out of his pocket. Thanks to his gloves, he wouldn't be getting any fingerprints on it.

Hallick stopped and looked curiously at the device. "Huh! I've never seen one of those before. What is it?"

Knight pointed at the detonator. "It's a Muggle communications device -- they come in pairs. My wife has its twin. The switch to the left turns it on, and the little red light there indicates that is in fact on."

Hallick looked even more interested. "Amazing! Muggle technology! Can I hold it?"

Knight chuckled and held out the detonator. Go ahead, Hallick. Get your fingerprints on it. "Sure. I doubt you've seen anything like this before. Talk about a cultural exchange!"

Hallick fiddled with the switch for a few minutes and marveled as the little light turned on and off. Finally, he decided to keep the light on ("I don't want you to miss a call, Mr. Wilkins.").
He hesitated a moment. Finally, he pointed at the big red button. "What does this button do?"

Wilkins shrugged openly, but his eyes were locked on Hallick's. "It initiates a call, Wizard Hallick. A wonder of modern technology. Come to think of it, I think I should make a call right now."

Hallick started jumping and down like a schoolboy. "I want to push the button, Mr. Wilkins! I want to push the button! I can say I used Muggle technology! My wife will be so jealous."

Knight smiled as he reached into his pocket. "Be my guest, Wizard Hallick."

Grinning, the wizard slammed his hand down on the button.

To be continued...

Update #433.3: Dark Side of the Luna
---------
Tuesday, November 19, 1996
Three Broomsticks
Hogsmeade
United Kingdom
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/3.5%
---------
NEXT UP: You Should Have Just Had the Ghosts Freak Him Out (.6)
---------
Madam Rosmerta frowned. "What do you mean, he's got a reservation? I just looked at the calendar, and I don't have anyone named Wilkins listed. Do you know which room he's supposed to be in?"

Sloane scratched her head and looked at the suitcase. "He didn't say. He just said that he was staying here and told me to take his luggage over."

"Pretty peculiar, if you'd ask me. However, what I suspect happened is that Miranda probably just forgot to write it down."

"The new trainee?"

"Yeah. She's going to --"

The world exploded.
-------------
Hogsmeade Town Hall
-------------
Ginny's envy of Luna had grown by leaps and bounds. The damn girl had actually fallen during the lecture, and the teacher hadn't even noticed. She made a mental note to brew a Drowsiness Potion and keep a vial of it in her pocket before she left.

The teacher was trying to explain how to conjure a Patronus when there was a huge flash of light across the street in the Three Broomsticks. Using instincts developed over months of Quidditch practice, she ducked underneath the window.
Less than a fraction of a second later, the wall slammed inward and a huge brick missile hit her in the left leg. She screamed in pain and watched as her leg suddenly bent at an impossible angle. Her screams grew even louder as she saw a foot-long shard of glass from the window slice across the top of Luna's sleeping face, striking both eyes and cutting a deep gouge in the top of her nose. Luna woke up with a start and started screaming she couldn't see.

Within seconds, the entire room was filled with smoke and crying people. She could barely see halfway across the room, and she saw immediately that virtually everyone had sustained some kind of injury from flying debris.

The smoke suddenly began to clear. Surprised, Ginny looked back towards the wall and saw that the wall had been completely blown in and she was a foot away from a two story drop. The Three Broomsticks was a complete ruin, and parts of it were on fire. As she watched, the third floor collapsed onto the second and the entire building toppled to the ground.

Suddenly, someone shouted over the din. "Get away from the window! Those of you who can Apparate, get out of here! Those who can't, head for the staircase! Remember your training drills, students! Remember your training drills!"

Ginny's eyes widened, only to become irritated by the dust. Finally, someone had had the presence of mind to give orders. Now that she had something to do, she immediately focused on those orders.

Telling Luna to stay calm and try to crawl away from her voice in case she couldn't see, she started on trying to improvise something to mend her leg. However, she wasn't Madam Pomfrey. She had been trained to deal with small injuries, but not something this big. Besides, her first priority would be to get out of the building.

She felt a little woozy and hoped that she wasn't falling into shock. Figuring that it permissible to use magic outside of school in this situation, she brought out her wand and pointed it at herself. She was barely able to make out the incantation through the pain in her leg and the shouts that Luna couldn't find her wand.

"Wingardium Leviosa! Protego!"

Slowly but certainly, with her useless leg dangling under her, she floated out of the building and towards the smoldering ruins of the Three Broomsticks. Directing her flight with her wand, she tried to get out of there as fast as possible. However, she still couldn't see very well through the smoke.

A roar less than a block away betrayed the collapse of another building, and less than a second later some roof shingles bounced off her protective bubble. She was finding it harder and harder to breathe, and she was concerned she was inhaling too much smoke for her own good. The problem was that she couldn't both control her flight and clean the air inside the Protego bubble at the same time. After all, she only had one wand.

She was getting dizzy as she floated over to a rooftop a block or so away. The air was clearer here, and she could see people running all over the street. Some were running away from the explosion covered with blood. Others were running towards it to see what was going on. Strangers were helping each other. She could have sworn that she had seen Crabbe actually helping out a Muggle, but that must have been a hallucination.

She landed on the rooftop and nearly blacked out with the pain and dizziness. As her last conscious...
act, she removed the Protego bubble to dilute the smoke and eliminated what the rest with a spell. She had managed to escape. However, she felt a bit guilty for ducking -- had she not ducked, Luna would likely still be able to see and not be trying to escape a building on the verge of collapse without the gift of sight.

She couldn't believe it. Muslims for Humans had made it to Hogsmeade. How many more wizards would die at the hands of terrorists?

Then the blackness took her.

---------------------------------
Headmaster's Tower
---------------------------------

Alastair Moody had just returned to his office when a flash of light caught his eye. Turning to one of the windows, he saw a huge cloud of smoke rising up from downtown Hogsmeade. That did not look good. Something had blown up, and it had been VERY large.

He swore. Of course Muslims for Humans wouldn't attack Hogwarts. They'd attack Hogsmeade, which wasn't nearly as well defended -- and which didn't pose the risk of killing large numbers of innocent children!

Wand in hand, he tried to Apparate over to help out but of course couldn't, prompting him to unleash a long series of expletives about the inability to Apparate out of Hogwarts. It looked like he was going to have to walk or fly.

---------------------------------
Gryffindor Common Room
---------------------------------

The first sign that something strange had happened had been the departure of every single character in the paintings in the Common Room. Harry and Ron looked at each other in confusion. What the hell was going on?

The two boys and Hermione made their way out through the portrait hole to see what was going on. Or at least tried to -- the portrait hole had sealed itself off.

Hermione swore. "Come on, Fat Lady! Let us out!"

The Fat Lady spoke in a tone Harry had never heard before. "You are not going anywhere, young lady. Headmaster Flitwick has sealed off all the entrances to the common rooms so they are entrance only. Something has happened and everyone is being sent back to the dorms."

Ron started pulling his hair out in frustration. "WHAT HAPPENED?"

The Fat Lady sounded angry. "I don't know! I haven't been able to leave this painting to see what's going on -- oh, Sir Cadogan! Maybe you can explain!"

The knight dutifully complied. "Fair lass, there has been tragedy in Hogsmeade. A large explosion appears to have taken place in the general vicinity of the Three Broomsticks and the Town Hall. Now, I must away to defend Hogwarts from these foul miscreants."

The three students stared at each other. "Explosion? What explosion?"

The Fat Lady snorted. "I don't know, and Sir Cadogan's gone. Now stay put!"
Ron spun on Hermione. "Is this Rasputin, the Death Eaters, or one of the World for Humans groups?"

Hermione put her hands on her head. "I don't know! I need to --"

Flitwick's voice suddenly boomed into the room. "Attention, please. Attention, please. This is Headmaster Flitwick. There has been an explosion in Hogsmeade, an extremely large one. We believe it was caused by a potions experiment gone wrong. Go back to your rooms and stay there until you hear otherwise."

Ron sniffed. "POTIONS EXPERIMENT? Why do I doubt that?"

Hermione shook his head. "I doubt it as well. Flitwick is probably trying to not scare the students. I'm torn between Britain for Humans, Muslims for Humans, and Rasputin. It could be any of them. Though come to think of it, Rasputin would be less likely since his agents were only after the Elder Wand."

Harry nodded. "That means it's probably Britain for Humans. It's not the type of attack Muslims for Humans have been doing and --"

Suddenly, Ron spoke right over him. "Ginny and Luna! They were in the defense class at the Town Hall! Oh NO! GINNY!"

Harry's heart suddenly leapt to his throat, and he nearly fainted. He was about to say something when someone told everyone to look out one of the windows. They did so and saw a huge pillar of smoke rising into the sky above Hogsmeade with flames flickering at its base.

He stared at Ron, who gulped. This was not good. Not good at all.

Between Hogsmeade Station and Hogwarts

Wizard Hallick pushed the button a few times with a wide grin on his face. "All right, I think it's ready to talk now. Look, the red light is flashing now. It must -- OH MY GOD!"

Knight watched as Hallick's jaw dropped in amazement and the detonator fell from his hands. Seconds later, the sound of the explosion barreled past Knight and his unsuspecting accomplice.

Knight smiled to himself -- Phase I was done. Now things got tricky.

Taking advantage of the wizard's distraction -- and making sure the gloves were on tight -- he punched Hallick in the side of the head with all his might. The man's eyes rolled up and he fell to the ground next to the detonator. Hoping no one had seen him, he reached for Hallick's wand. As he suspected, the gloves prevented him from receiving an electric shock. His hands did tingle a little, though.

He looked briefly back at the Three Broomsticks and saw the smoke rising into the sky. The bomb appeared to have been as powerful as the explosive experts had predicted. Score one for Britain for Humans. He couldn't see much of the area near ground zero, but from what he could see most of the buildings had been badly damaged.

Now, it was time for Phase II. If everything went as planned, Hallick's fingerprints on the detonator (and being in the proximity of the detonator itself) would be enough to trick the Aurors into thinking
that Hallick had been a Muggle in disguise. The fact that he had no wand would add to that impression.

And the fact that Knight DID have a wand would make him less of a suspect.

Grinning, he turned his sights towards Hogwarts and saw, much to his delight, that many residents of Hogsmeade were heading towards the school in droves. Apparently the school had extra protection which the city hadn't bothered with.

This would be quite useful, he thought. Making sure his robes wouldn't expose the gun and keeping the wand in his gloved hand, he made his way into the mob streaming towards Hogwarts. The question now was: how many teachers could he kill so that the students could be redeemed with a Muggle education? The students were off limits, but the teachers...watch out.

To be continued...

__________________

Update #433.6: You Should Have Just Had the Ghosts Freak Him Out

Tuesday, November 19, 1996
Near Hogwarts
United Kingdom
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/3.5%

Henry Knight was starting to get out of breath -- he hadn't had this much exercise for a while. However, he was almost there. The gates of Hogwarts stood open before him. He watched in amusement as a man with what looked like an obvious artificial eye and a bum leg made his way out of the castle and jumped onto a broom. Looked like the wizards weren't as powerful as they thought they were if they couldn't fix a busted eye!

Knight had a brief moment of concern when he saw there were security guards in front of Hogwarts. However, they were just waving everybody through and telling them to wait in the Great Hall. One of the Aurors disappeared as he passed them, presumably heading towards either the bomb site or the wizard who had been stuck with the detonator.

Two of the people racing for the castle abruptly slammed into what appeared to have been an invisible wall. An Auror swore something about the Muggle defenses still being up, conjured a white pig out of nowhere, and sent the pig off to the castle. Fortunately, the barrier didn't seem to affect Knight, presumably due either to his stolen wand or to his Muggle tour ticket.

There was a bit of a traffic jam as all of the refugees tried to make their way through the door at the same time. Eventually, though, he made it and found himself in a huge entry hall lined with floating candles.

Floating candles, Knight thought. Heh. Welcome to Disneyland.

He had taken about three steps when a loud scream burst out from over his head. Knight ignored it and tried to make his way out of the mob. To his surprise, the mob melted away from him -- all
except for one person, who tried to jump him. Both men went to the floor, and Knight suddenly
found a wand pointing at his face. He kicked out desperately and the wand skittered off into the
distance before the wizard could cast the spell. The wizard raced for the wand as Knight reached into
his pocket and brought out the gun. He squeezed the trigger, and the wizard went down.

How had the wizard figured out he was the culprit? It suddenly occurred to him that the siren
appeared to be following him around as he ran through the castle. To make matter worse, several of
the portraits on the walls were shouting that he had brought a Muggle weapon into the castle. That
wouldn't do, he thought. Those Van Goghs needed to be taught a lesson.

Hoping this wasn't a mistake, he turned the gun on a painting and pulled the trigger. The man in the
foreground dove out of the way as the bullet tore a hole in the fabric. The painting then started
screaming at him that he should watch where he pointed his weapon.

Shit, he thought. It looks like I've triggered some kind of alarm. He doubted it was Muggles in the
castle. Perhaps it was the weapon? If so, he'd have to fall back on Plan B.

Making sure no one else was around -- he'd somehow managed to make his way into an empty
corridor -- he dropped the gun on the ground and continued running. The siren continued to follow
him around, now accompanied by the words "Muggle in building with weapon! Muggle in building
with weapon!". Knight abruptly ran back and picked up the weapon. The good news was that he
could keep his weapon. The bad news was that he was toast at the rate things were going. It looked
like he had to get out of the castle before the staff cornered him. Phase II was dead on arrival.

He turned around and started running back towards the entrance. However, he had trouble making it
back to the door because of the stream of humanity flooding into Hogwarts. Eventually, he reached
the door only to find that he couldn't get out.

Wonderful, he thought. I'm stuck in here. He would have been surprised to know that the entrance to
the castle had been made entrance-only by the same spell that Flitwick had used to keep Hermione,
Ron, and Harry in the Gryffindor common room. Normally, the front door would have prevented
both inbound and outbound traffic. However, Flitwick could not prevent inbound traffic with all of
the refugees coming in.

Hoping he wouldn't get jumped again, he raced into one of the side corridors to see if he could find a
place to make his stand. If he was going to go out, he was going to go out with a blaze of glory. That
thought inspired him, and at the entrance to the corridor he turned back to the Great Hall and let
loose with the submachine gun. People started running, and a few more wizards went down.

That was when someone pointed at wand at him and shouted "Expelliarmus". Not wanting to figure
out what that spell did, he threw himself out of the way of something which looked like a laser beam
-- wonderful, wizards with lasers -- and started running down the new corridor.

He turned a corner and jumped into an alcove just his weapon was thrown from his hand. Footsteps
approached him, and when he judged the moment was right he leaped out and tackled the wizard.
The wand pointed at him once again, and he responded by thrusting his wand at the wizard's right
eye. The wizard instinctively tried to protect his face, which allowed Knight to kick him in the balls.
Seconds later, the wizard was writhing on the ground. This gave Knight time to retrieve his weapon
and put a shot through the man's head.

He continued down the corridor and suddenly found himself face to face with a large group of
students about half his height. Most of them were scared and talking about Death Eaters. They were
too busy running down the hall to pay any attention to him. That was good, because he didn't want to have to shoot kids.

He finally found himself a good place to make his last stand: behind two suits of armor in a corner. He figured the armor was probably good against magical weapons, and he'd be able to stick the muzzle of the gun out of chinks in the armor. He settled himself into position and waited for the wizards to come to him.

That was when the armor came to life and clubbed him on the head with the butt of a mace.

His last thought was: that's not fair! Then he lost consciousness.

-----------------------

Three Broomsticks

Moody landed his broom near what was left of the Three Broomsticks. The venerable inn had been completely destroyed, and what was left was still on fire. Half of the Town Hall had collapsed, and the street in between was littered with rubble. The building on the other side of the Three Broomsticks had been also leveled, as had part of the building across the street. He could see windows broken for a good block and a half.

There were bodies everywhere. He saw eight people lying motionless on the ground, though he could not tell if they were alive or dead. They consisted of seven wizards and one Muggle, judging by the dress. There were undoubtedly many, many more in the rubble of the collapsed buildings.

He was furious. Muslims for Humans (or equivalent) had attacked Hogsmeade while he was there. They would not do so again.

Shouting at everyone to stay calm, he cast *Revelio Hominem* to help with the rescue effort. Most people appeared to have been focusing on the Three Broomsticks. However, he knew for a fact that there were likely victims in the Town Hall as well. After all, he'd helped organize the wizard self-defense class that had been meeting there. He had to admit that had it not been for his position as the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, he'd have likely been teaching that class and trapped in the rubble himself.

Gathering people around him, he told people to start removing rocks to get at the victims. They began doing so, both by hand and by magic. He helped out himself, and he began Vanishing several of the rocks nearest him.

Suddenly, locks of long blonde hair was visible underneath a rock he had just Vanished. According to the Revelio Hominem, this victim was alive but in very bad shape. This girl needed immediate medical attention.

Moody gasped when he saw that it was Luna Lovegood. Her head was covered with blood, and a hideous slash had cut through her nose and both of her eyes. She was crying that she couldn't see. Moody winced at the sight -- it was unlikely that Luna would be able to see again unless she got an artificial eye like his own.

One of his students had been grievously injured on his watch as Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. That was intolerable, and he didn't want to be the person to break the news to Neville Longbottom. Redoubling his efforts, he wondered if Ginny Weasley and Christopher Wright had made it out all right.

-----------------------
Hospital Wing, Hogwarts

Madam Pomfrey shrieked when the first person was brought into her room. "Another bullet hole! Like Dumbledore! We should not have gotten involved with the Muggles, in my opinion!"

Flitwick sighed. "There isn't much we can do about that now. Can you heal her?"

Pomfrey washed her hands. "I'll try, but dealing with Muggle weapons is always tricky. Particularly high velocity projectile weapons like these. So much internal damage!"

"That's all I can ask for, Poppy. I must warn you, however, that there are going to be more coming in."

The blood drained from Pomfrey's face. "I'm going to need backup here -- hell, even Muggle doctors would help. These are all Hogwarts victims?"

"Yes."

"How many?"

"Judging from the carnage in the Great Hall, eighteen. Four dead and twelve injured in the Great Hall. There are also a couple of gunshot victims in the corridors, both of whom are still alive."

Pomfrey wrung her hands. "Sixteen! God help us! Did they at least catch the killer? I've noticed the Caterwauling Charm has stopped."

Flitwick nodded. "The killer is in custody, having been clubbed into insensibility by one of our suits of armor. The Aurors will be interviewing him after he wakes up."

"Were any of the students killed?"

"We don't know if any of them were hurt in the explosion in Hogsmeade. However, none of the people hurt here were students. The killer appears to have made it a point to not harm the students, only the adults."

Pomfrey drew a deep breath. "At least we can thank God for little things."

Gryffindor Common Room

The room went silent as Aberforth Dumbledore made his way through the portrait hole. Harry and Ron looked at each other in trepidation. Would this be the moment if they found out if Ginny had lived or died?

Aberforth began to speak. "Ladies and gentlemen, let me update you on what has just happened. It appears that a man named Henry Knight caused an explosion in Hogsmeade which destroyed the Three Broomsticks and most of the adjacent buildings. This includes the Hogsmeade Town Hall, where Ginny Weasley, Luna Lovegood, and Christopher Wright were taking the Wizarding self-defense classes which evolved out of the Hogwarts chapter of Dumbledore's Army.

"Mr. Knight is now in custody. Judging his possessions, we believe that he is a Muggle associated with the Britain for Humans anti-wizard group. We have been a victim of a terrorist attack against wizards, ladies and gentlemen. Needless to say, we will not be swayed. We will learn more after we
interrogate him.

"There are four dead here in Hogwarts, and at least eleven dead in downtown Hogsmeade. The body count is likely going to rise as victims are found. There are a good fifty to sixty injured. We're in the process of finding the survivors right now. In the process, however, we are coming across body after body."

Aberforth was silent for a moment. Harry had a bad feeling he knew what was coming next. "Mr. Wright appears to have been killed in the explosion. His head appears to have been caved in by a brick."

The students shuddered at that. Harry's tension ratched up yet another level.

"Miss Lovegood is very gravely injured. Madam Pomfrey plans to do triage work on her soon as possible, but there are many other people needing medical attention so Miss Lovegood may have to wait a while. She suffered a serious cut on her face, and there is a strong probability, according to Moody, that she will never be able to see again."

Neville screamed: "NOOOO!!!!!"

People tried to console him the best as they could. However, Neville couldn't help but sob. He started screaming that he was going to spend the rest of his life sending poisoned plants to the home addresses of every single Britain for Humans member he could get his hands on. Harry wanted to do something to help, but he didn't know what to do. It suddenly dawned on him that Aberforth had fallen silent once more -- was Harry about to find himself in the same situation Neville was?

Aberforth spoke once more. "Miss Weasley is missing. We've excavated maybe 80% of the rubble, but we still haven't found any sign of her. Our prayers go out to Harry, Ron, and the rest of the Weasleys. We will keep you updated as the situation develops."

Harry promptly lost it. He began crying, and Ron soon followed. Hermione tried to do what she could to console both of them as well as Neville, but there was only a limited amount of consolation one person could provide.

-----------------------------------------

Rooftop Near the Three Broomsticks

Ginny Weasley woke up and nearly doubled over with pain. Judging from the position of the sun in the sky, she'd been out at least two hours. She coughed, and smoke sprayed out of her lungs.

She was confused for a moment, and then it came back to her. The explosion in the Three Broomsticks and fire. A shard of glass slicing through Luna's face, followed by Luna's piteous screams. Ginny's delirious escape.

She looked at her leg and saw that it was completely mangled beyond repair. She certainly wouldn't be able to walk, and she wouldn't be surprised if Madam Pomfrey said it would have to be amputated.

She had to get medical attention somehow. She had left her broom in the Town Hall, where it had presumably been destroyed or at least covered in rubble. She didn't want to black out trying to fly herself over to Hogwarts because the spell would likely break down and she'd plummet to the ground.
However, there was one thing she could do. Thank God she still had her wand.

Reaching into her pocket, she pulled out her wand and launched a huge spray of red sparks into the sky. She was far enough away from ground zero for them to be at least somewhat visible. She followed the sparks by her Patronus, a horse. Hopefully that would convince Moody and the rest of the Hogwarts staff that it was her. She realized that she was in a pretty good position: she would be easier to get to (being on a rooftop far from the explosion) than most of the victims. Hopefully help would come quickly.

She lost consciousness again.

To be continued...

__________________

Update #434: I Sure Hope She Doesn't Have To Go Through Airport Security

--------------

Tuesday, November 19, 1996
Hogsmeade
United Kingdom
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/3.5%

--------------

NEXT UP: Urban Blight

--------------

"Miss Weasley! Is that you up there?"

It sounded like Alastair Moody's voice. The shout woke up Ginny from her second unplanned nap of the after. Irritated that the pain from her mangled leg hadn't diminished, her eyes shot open and she shot more sparks into the air.

"I see the sparks, Miss Weasley. Can you come down? It's all safe now?"

Ginny didn't dare crawl too close to the edge or fly down lest it make her leg worse. So, she found herself being forced to amplify her voice with the Amplification Spell. "It's me, Professor. I'm very badly injured. I think my leg is broken, possibly irreparably. Can you please fetch Madam Pomfrey for me and send her up here?"

"I can't, Miss Weasley. That maniac killed 26 people and injured 60, with three of them still missing. Well, make that injured 61 now that you're still alive."

"Who was it? What did he want?"

"We believe he was a Britain for Humans operative and that it was a deliberate attack on wizards."

"Did he get away?"

"No. He came to Hogwarts after setting off the Muggle explosive device and killed a few more people here before the castle's defenses caught him. We're in the process of interrogating him now."

Ginny gulped. "A Muggle got into Hogwarts? How was that possible?"
"We suspect he managed to sign up for the tour and was able to get in through the tour ticket. Whoever organized this was a bloody genius. He even tried to frame a wizard for the blast."

She didn't want to ask the next question, but she had to. "Were any students killed? I know Luna was very badly injured -- her eyes! My God, her eyes!"

"Christopher Wright was killed in the blast, but none of the other students or staff were hurt. The people killed in the building itself were refugees from Hogsmeade who sought shelter in the Great Hall after the initial blast. Now, if you don't mind, let's focus on getting you out of there. I take it you can't walk."

"No, Professor. I can barely crawl, and it hurts...oh God, it hurts!"

"All right, don't move. We're going to have to get you down from there by Apparition and send you directly to Madam Pomfrey. The hospital here is already overflowing, I'm afraid."

Ginny had been afraid of that. "But we can't Apparate into Hogwarts."

"If you wait five minutes or so, I'll come back with Madam Pomfrey and Headmaster Flitwick. You may or may not be aware that one of the privileges of being headmaster is the ability to Apparate in and out of the school. Is there enough room for two more people up on your roof?"

"Yes."

"Good. Stay where you are, and don't move. Flitwick will be with you shortly, and Madam Pomfrey will be tagging along by Side-Along Apparition. They'll take you back to the medical wing as soon as possible."

"How is Luna."

"Very bad. She's got internal injuries in addition to the damaged eyes, and she's been sent to Hogsmeade as she's beyond Madam Pomfrey's help. Odds are she won't be able to see again unaided with either eye. However, I know all too well that that is not the end of the story. I should know better, remember? Take a look at my face. That's what's Luna Lovegood will likely face if she survives. The prognosis was that she'd be in the hospital for three weeks to a month. Now, lie down and stay still. Help is on the way."

---------

Kilsyth
---------

Courtney Cooper could barely stay awake, yet she couldn't stop looking at the little person on her chest. It had been a lot of work, and she had spent the last half hour screaming at Harrison. However, it had all been worth it in the end. Paula Denise Cooper had come out at a little under four kilos. And to the best of her knowledge, she looked perfectly human. No hair in unusual places. The acid test, of course, would occur in less than a week when the moon turned full once again and her husband was transported to Hogsmeade to turn into a wolf.

The wizards had told her that her daughter would not become a werewolf because Courtney herself had not been a werewolf at any point during the pregnancy. The only situations which tended to lead to a higher-than-normal chance of lycanthropy occurred when the mother suffered the bite before she conceived the victim. In cases like that, the odds of having the fetus infected with the condition jumped from 1 in several million to 1 in 8.
Harrison had told her that Lauren Mistry and her husband had spoken with the wizards for a long time about whether Lauren should keep the baby. Eventually, they agreed to continue the pregnancy and limit themselves to the one child. Even though there was almost a 90% chance that the fetus would be all right, they didn't want to roll the dice too much. When asked whether fetuses transformed when the mother transformed, Harrison replied that no one really knew -- and that no one really wanted to find out.

She turned on the television to find that the news bulletin had switched from the coverage of the terrorist attack in Hogsmeade to, of all things, outer space coverage. Apparently Linda Warren, the Wizarding rocket scientist, had dispatched two Portkeys the outer solar system: one to Europa and one to Titan. Warren had told the reporters not to hold their breaths waiting for a sample, however: the Europa one would be due back in late 1998 and the Titan one was supposed to get back in early 2001. That was a long time, but a hell of a lot shorter than a round trip using an ordinary rocket. Meanwhile, Mars rocks had been mysteriously disappearing all over NASA. Fortunately, the now-famous Worm Rock was still in the Quarantine Lab -- under HEAVY guard -- and destined for the Smithsonian after the analysis was complete. She hoped it stayed that way: there were rumors that the Worm Rock would likely surpass the Doomsday Rock and fetch more than $375 million in an auction.

There was a knock on the door, and Harrison made his way into the room. He kissed his new daughter on the forehead -- somehow, the little girl managed to stay asleep -- and turned worried eyes to Courtney. "Courtney, I'm starting to feel a little sick again. As you know, full moon is coming up next Monday, which means I'm going to grow four legs and a tail."

"I'm aware of that, Harrison. The wizards seem to be taking good care of you, from what you've been telling me."

Harrison smiled bitterly, then nodded at the baby. "They have, Courtney. However, how are we going to tell HER? WHAT are we going to tell her? Do we tell her that we have adopted a stray dog who visits once a month and that I tend to go on business trips?"

Courtney shrugged. "That will do for now. Hopefully, by the time she's matured enough to understand the truth, the Wolfsbane Vaccine will be in production and you won't have to worry about transforming anymore."

The TV had switched back to coverage of the attack while they had been talking. "...dead and 63 injured, according to the latest reports. In addition, we have reason to believe that Britain for Humans, not Muslims for Humans, was behind the attack. Minister of Magic Nicholas Flamel has promised that he will act swiftly and bring Britain for Humans to justice. Isabel Miller, the head of Britain for Humans, is nowhere to be found. Looks like she has fled the coop."

Harrison frowned. "I sure hope that we didn't bring Paula into this world only to see it go to hell."

Courtney looked down at the baby. "I hope so either. If not...well, we'll do what we can to see our way through."

---------------------------
Hogwarts Medical Wing
---------------------------
"All right, Miss Weasley. Wake up!"

Ginny Weasley opened her eyes and saw Madam Pomfrey staring at her. For a few seconds, she couldn't remember what had happened. Eventually, she did, and she took stock of herself. The pain
had lessened greatly, and amazingly her leg felt completely pain-free. She tried to sit up but found that her limbs had been placed in restraints.

"Don't sit up, Miss Weasley. You need to get accustomed to your new leg."

Ginny blinked. "What did you say?"

"Your new leg. Sense anything strange about your leg?"

Frowning, she focused on her injured leg. It felt -- cold and stiff, for some reason. There was something strange about it which she couldn't put her finger on. Had they given her an artificial leg, similar that used by Moody? If so, how was she able to feel anything there? Could it have been a phantom pain, where the limb had already been cut off and replaced?

Something still didn't make sense, however. She replied, "It feels a bit cold and stiff, Doctor."

"Can you bend your knee?"

She tried and found that she could. "Yes, Doctor."

"Good -- the leg seems to be working fine for you. There are always cases where amputees' bodies have trouble using their new legs. Fortunately, you don't seem to be one of them."

Ginny tried to digest what she was hearing. "What did you do? Did you regrow my leg or make me one made out of wood like Professor Moody has?"

"Neither. Would you like to see it? I'll hold a mirror up so you can see it. I must warn you, however, that you'll be in for a bit of a shock."

Ginny braced herself. "I'll find out eventually, Doctor. Let's get it over with."

Madam Pomfrey folded back the blanket covering Ginny's feet and brought over a mirror. "Ginny Weasley, meet your new leg."

Ginny looked into the mirror and her jaw dropped in disbelief. They had indeed amputated her leg...and replaced her with one which appeared to be made entirely out of silver! It functioned more or less like an ordinary leg, yet it looked...well, like she was half...wobot, whatever the type of being was that Harry and Hermione had told her about!

She found her voice once more. "This is -- impossible! How did you do it?"

"It's a relatively new spell, Miss Weasley, developed in the closing days of the Wizarding War -- well, the First Wizarding War if you consider the Second Wizarding War to be the runup to Judgment Day. However, unless I'm mistaken, you've actually seen it done before. Are you familiar with Peter Pettigrew, Lord Voldemort's old disciple?"

"Yes. What about him?"

"Ever wonder where his silver hand came from? Well, now you know."

To be continued...
Update #434: Urban Blight

Wednesday, November 20, 1996

Omega Institute
Rhinebeck, NY
United States of America

ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/3.5%

NEXUP: Fahrenheit 4:51

The man once known as Celestine VI didn't like where the world was going. If there was a time for God to make Himself manifest on Earth, it would be now.

There had been a five month period of relative calm in the immediate aftermath of Judgment Day. However, the terrorist attacks were starting up once again. This undoubtedly would get the wizards upset, and they would start fighting back, oaths or no oaths. Once the wizards started fighting back, the terrorists would argue that magic needed to be suppressed and they would just redouble their efforts. A vicious cycle would start, and for all Celestine knew the nukes -- or magical equivalent -- would fly once again.

First Voldemort's supporters reorganize and attack Hogwarts, a major magical school in the United Kingdom -- and Voldemort's alma mater. The headmaster is injured and forced to retire for health reasons, two professors are slain (including Flying House hero Severus Snape), and many students die when a newly-summoned snake attacks one of the school's towers. Had Judgment Day all been for nought? Celestine had thought that one of the major foci of the Judgment Day activities had been to completely obliterate the Death Eaters and make sure they lost any access to Muggle terrorist organizations and nuclear weapons.

Next, Muslims for Humans -- whom the wizards had foolishly ignored during Judgment Day -- start attacking wizards and their allies all over the Muslim world. In doing so, they assassinate Kohen Gadol Suleiman I, a close friend of his and major contributor to the Samuelist cause. Celestine thought bitterly that the Prophet Mohammed would likely have been more supportive of Suleiman's belief system than the one espoused by Suleiman's hit man. Why did God allow a believer in a heretical form of Islam to murder someone who exemplified what the faith could do? Many people here at Omega wanted to know this, and unless something truly remarkable happened -- like that incident during Sukkot -- it was unlikely that God would provide any concrete explanation.

As if that hadn't been bad enough, Suleiman's body had barely been laid to rest before Britain for Humans had resumed the fight, detonating a homemade bomb in an inn in Hogsmeade, a major Wizarding town in England near Hogwarts, and sending a gunman into a Hogwarts already reeling from the Death Eater attack. Although this attacker had intentionally not targeted children, the casualty total was catastrophic. At latest count, there were 26 dead and 63 injured. Most of these people were residents of Hogsmeade and had been caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. At least God had the wisdom of making sure that the gunman was caught.

And in what seemed to be an almost tailor-made sign of the End Times, many members of the tribe of giants known as the Nephilim were starting to settle in the Gaza Strip, their former home. Although the Nephilim had proven to be extremely civilized people, this migration was supposedly making many Israeli authorities nervous. For all Celestine knew, the Nephilim would convert to
fundamentalist Islam and restart the fight between the Palestinians and Israel which had been shocked into a stalemate by the Tel Aviv nuke.

Why was this all happening? Was God angry with them that they weren't making any progress in reunifying the three faiths? Was God angry with Samuel for trying to reunify the three faiths to begin with? Where was Atlantis in all this? Surely Atlantis should be taking the lead in dealing with international threats like this, especially that of Muslims for Humans.

Yet Atlantis wasn't doing anything. The United Nations had supposedly beseeched Dialonis to start doing something about Muslim for Humans. However, the famous wizard disappointed everyone by saying that by law their hands were tied unless two different authorities lifted the city-state's alert level to DEFCON 2. It was currently at DEFCON 3, which meant that the Atlanteans could start making plans in case things got worse but they couldn't actually implement anything.

This made Atlantis relatively impotent, Celestine thought. If the wizards are to be our allies, they should be proactively taking charge at a time like this. They should use their great powers for worldwide good, not waiting until it was the end of the world to pull out their wands.

The former antipope, of course, had no idea that this was very close to the position advocated by Boris Koschei.

Hoping for spiritual guidance, he sat down on the floor to meditate. Meditation had taken off among the Abrahamic clergy, and the Dalai Lama and several other Buddhist monks had organized a whole group of walking and sitting meditation classes. The labyrinth on the hill between the main hall and the cafeteria had actually needed to be cleaned up a little as the pathway between those sacred stones had gotten quite trampled. Supposedly the practice had taken off elsewhere as well: many of the Students for Samuel who were coming this weekend were meditators, and apparently even Hermione Granger had a private practice.

He didn't get very far in his sitting before someone knocked on his door. Concerned it was another disaster in the making, he terminated the sitting early to answer it. "Yes?"

"Your Eminence, you have a telephone call. You can take it in the corridor with the restrooms outside the cafe, near the old bookstore."

Celestine frowned. "A phone call, for me?"

"Yes, Eminence."

"Who is it?"

"A man by the name of Leonid Pavlov, Eminence."

Celestine recognized the name. Pavlov was one of the clergymen who had first joined what had then been called the Celestine Church to protest Samuel's interference. That, of course, had been before Celestine had seen the light and atoned for his mistake.

The former antipope could think of two things. Either Pavlov was issuing a warning about an upcoming Christians for Humans terror attack against -- of course -- the Four Towns, Durmstrang, or Beauxbatons -- or he wanted to switch sides and ally himself with Celestine once more. The more Celestine thought about it, the more he concluded that Pavlov wasn't the type of person who would stoop to violence once that hypocrite Urban IX took over the movement.
Cautiously optimistic, he told his visitor that he would take the call. The visitor thanked him and escorted him to the main hall where one of the phones was off the hook. Celestine put it up to his ear as his visitor stood outside the corridor to give him some privacy.

"This is Celestine. Father Pavlov?"

"Yes, it is I, Eminence. How have you been?"

"As well as one could, I suppose, given these terrible events over the past week. I mean, two terrorist attacks in a span of three days. This can't be good."

Pavlov's voice sounded haunted. "What have we done to offend God so much?"

"I don't know, son. All I can recommend is praying for guidance. At any rate, how can I help you?"

"Very simple. I want to tell you about what's happening in the Christians for Humans camp. I have decided that I can no longer in good conscience serve this community with that maniac Urban at the head. I may not be a big fan of wizards, let alone Samuel, but I am a Christian and Christians don't do the type of things Urban has in mind. I'd like to join you in Omega, but I think there's something I need to do first."

Celestine was confused. "If you don't like what you're doing there, get out of there. You're not the Savior. You don't have to suffer to help us."

"I'm afraid I do, Eminence. You see, Urban has plans to do things which I believe are a little...rash."

Celestine bit his lip. "And these are?"

Pavlov hesitated on the other end of the line. Finally, he spoke in a whisper. "I have reason to believe that they are planning a terrorist attack against Omega."

Celestine uttered a word which normally was not associated with a high-ranking Church official. "What in the name of God are they doing now?"

"They're still in the planning stages at this point. I must say, Urban is very angry that you branded him a terrorist. He thinks he's doing the right thing by attacking wizards."

"That makes him a terrorist. John Paul specifically said that the witchcraft prohibition is against harmful magic and only harmful magic. You are in the right here."

"I agree, Eminence, and that's why I'm calling you. I want to give you a heads up about this. Whatever it is, it's probably going to be in the next three weeks or so."

Celestine raced into the cafe and asked one of the workers at the snack stand for a piece a paper. Thus equipped, her returned to the phone. "Tell me everything you know, son. We've got wizards here now, so maybe they'll be able to defend themselves. And then get over here as soon as you can."

Pavlov sounded regretful. "I can't come over, Eminence, until the attack is complete. They think that I'm supportive for the time being, and I don't want to blow my cover. Also, you're going to need a man inside Christians for Humans to spy on what they're doing."
"That's dangerous."

"Yes, and the Savior overturning the moneychangers' tables in the Temple was dangerous too. Yet He did it."

Celestine nodded. "Point taken. Will you be able to stop the attack?"

"I don't think so, Eminence, without revealing myself or without Urban completely changing his mind. He's completely deranged, Eminence. I've often wondered whether I should try an exorcism on him."

Celestine laughed briefly but got back down to business. "All right, you can't stop the attack. However, you'll be able to tell us which form it will take and when it will come so we will be able to defend ourselves."

Pavlov sounded much more relieved now. "Yes, Eminence. That, I can do."

"Good. Keep us updated every few days until then. And keep it discreet -- we don't want Christians for Humans figuring out that you're a double agent."

"I will. I assume that John Paul will welcome me back in the Church, Eminence?"

"It will be as if you had never left, Father Pavlov. God always forgives, so how can we be any different?"

"Thank you, Eminence."

"You're welcome, Leonid. Now -- oh, before I forget, maybe you could do something for me which will help with the surprise Urban is going to get when their attack completely disintegrates. Are you highly ranked in the Christians for Humans power structure?"

"Very much so, Eminence. I'm part of the Inner Council."

"Good. Get the names and addresses of all the high-ranking members of the Christians for Humans movement. Ideally, get the information for all the members, period. When they attack -- and fail miserably -- we do what the Americans did with America for Humans. We will coordinate with the Romanovs (and if possible Atlantis) to round them up all at once. After this attack, Christians for Humans will be no more."

Celestine could hear the excitement in Pavlov's voice. "I like this, Eminence. I really do. God knows Urban deserves it."

"Indeed. Urban will be our Pitmoss, Father Pavlov. Think of this as your penance for your time serving Urban."

Celestine could hear the thankfulness in Pavlov's voice. "Thank you very much, Eminence. I mean it from the bottom of my heart."

"You're welcome, son. Anything else I can do for you?"

Pavlov spoke one last time. "Actually, there is. Would you be willing to take a confession over the
phone? I know we don't have the traditional booth, but since I can't see you and you're one of my spiritual mentors..."

To be continued...
Update #436: Fahrenheit 4:51

Wednesday, November 20, 1996
Omega Institute
Rhinebeck, NY
United States of America
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/3.5%

Celestine hung up the phone and began hurrying over to Samuel's building. At least he thought of at as Samuel's building -- it was the dorm where his interpreter lived. Samuel himself, of course, didn't need to sleep because he had fall asleep three thousand years earlier.

He didn't know whether Samuel would be relieved or upset by this new development. Granted, Samuel would likely approve of Pavlov's actions -- at least those which the priest hadn't brought up during the confession session. However, the fact that at least one group of fundamentalists had targeted Omega would likely not sit well with him. Regardless of his opinion, this would have to be taken to the top.

It appeared he would have to wait, however. Samuel and his interpreter were apparently talking with John Paul, who seemed to have stumbled across a problem of his own.

The pontiff looked dejected as he explained the situation to Samuel, "Yes, Holy One. They're burning copies of your new Bible."

Samuel looked horrified, much more than Celestine would have expected. Suddenly, however, Celestine understood why. In an era before the printing press, books hadn't been so easy to come by.

The prophet grunted something, and the interpreter translated. "Who's doing it?"

"The Westboro Baptist Church, Holy One."

Samuel thought for a second. "That group sounds familiar. Aren't they --"

"Yes, Holy One. They're Phelps's old congregation. They're now operating out of a house somewhere in rural Kansas and have a new preacher who wasn't involved with America for Humans. So far, they haven't done anything particularly rash."

Samuel frowned. "Are you telling me America for Humans is coming back? I thought the attack on the Wizarding towns in the state of Massachusetts triggered a major crackdown on the group."

"America for Humans itself seems to be transforming itself into the Revelation Party, a political party. The group seems to have changed its modus operandi from terror attacks to political pressure. That's good, as it will make them easier to ignore. However, you have to understand that Phelps's
hateful congregation existed long before the Statute of Secrecy fell and America for Humans was founded. This is just a fundamentalist sect doing what it does best -- irritate people."

Samuel winced. "I see. Have we excommunicated that congregation yet?"

"I think so, Holy One. We can always do that again."

"Good. Reissue the edict of excommunication and make a statement that anyone who gives money to an organization such as this will be placed under the ban as well. Tell Celestine and the rest of the sects' leaders to do the same."

"What happens if people donate money to the Church for humanitarian purposes? A Christian house of worship provides both humanitarian and religious support."

Samuel thought for a moment, then nodded. "That will be all right, provided that the donor stipulate that they not be used for hateful purposes."

The pontiff nodded. "Makes sense to me. Listen, I should probably get going because Celestine seems to be waiting to talk to you. One last question, then. What do you think of me elevating Ibrahim to Deputy Kohen Gadol? He's going to take the name Ibrahim I upon elevation. Recall that he was already associated with the al-Aqsa Mosque before you arrived and turned it into the Third Temple."

"Works with me. He is from the Muslim sect, right? People with Semitic names tend to be Muslim or Jewish, and there are far more Muslims than Jews."

"Yes, Holy One."

"I thought so. Having a Muslim running the Temple makes a lot of sense given its history. Well done, John Paul. You are going to make an excellent Kohen Gadol."

John Paul nodded and excused himself. Celestine was about to begin speaking when Deborah suddenly appeared in the room and started chattering in rapid-fire ancient Semitic with Samuel.

The interpreter listened, bit his lip, and turned to Celestine. "Great. Five more people just left the conference. They claim it's because it's getting too cold. However, I have a strange feeling that they'd have stayed a little longer had there been fewer reforms. One man and four women, with the women claiming that the more conservative delegates are trying to undermine the powers of the new female priesthood. Rabbi Sara Hurwitz tried to convince them to stay but it didn't work."

Celestine shrugged. "It's a big change. When the Jews first ordained female clergy in the liberal movements, the women still suffered discrimination. As it is, a good 30% of the Orthodox Jews here don't buy her ordination -- as do about 85% of the Orthodox Jews outside this campus. Give it time, however: it will work. Who ordained Rabbi Hurwitz, Samuel or Deborah?"

"Deborah did. You can assume that if the candidate is wearing a skirt, hijab, or burqa odds are 10 to 1 that she elevated her."

Eventually, Samuel finished speaking with Deborah, who vanished into thin air as usual. The prophet then turned to Celestine. "Good afternoon, Celestine. How can I help you?"

"Holy One, I have good news and bad news. The bad news is that my rebellious offspring known as
Christians for Humans plans to attack this conference. The good news is that one of the members of that group's Inner Council has become disillusioned enough with Urban to betray Christians for Humans to us. He's going to be reporting on all of their plans while gathering up as much information on the members as possible. When the day of the attack comes, we'll be prepared to defend ourselves and we'll run Christians for Humans into the ground using the same techniques the United States did against America for Humans."

Samuel nodded. "That's good, and bad, to hear. What type of attack do they have planned?"

"Not sure yet. All we know is that it will be in about three weeks. Given our experience handling the High Holiday pilgrimages, we should be able to get everyone out of here pretty quickly."

"Indeed. Cotso Rica sounds like it should be very nice this time of year, especially for you mortals who have to deal with the cold and are accustomed to climate-controlled buildings."

Celestine couldn't help but laugh. "You mean Costa Rica, the site of the Omega Institute's winter retreat center? Yes indeed, Holy One. Costa Rica will work pretty well."

---------------------

Walsh Household
Blindburn, UK

"FREEZE!"

Riley Walsh nearly dropped his bottle of Blast Cola in shock. What the hell was going on here? He spun and found himself facing three men with wands pointed at his head. There were also a couple of cops with them.

Shit, he thought. He hoped this wasn't what he thought it was.

"Mr. Walsh, we're from the Ministry of Magic and we'd like to talk to you about Britain for Humans. You name was mentioned by an operative named Henry Knight, and we've been hoping to get hold of you for a while. You can start by telling us where exactly Isabel Miller is and handing over any computers in your possession."

Walsh was barely able to speak. "I don't know where she is! I'm just a mid-level operative, and I wasn't involved in the attack!"

"Well see about that. Ever heard of Veritaserum before?"

To be continued...

--------------

Update #437: That's Some Isolationist Policy

--------------

Thursday, November 21, 1996
Syrdan Council Chamber
Syrdasch
Syrdan

ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/3.7%

--------------
Vixar stared at the report in horror and turned to his advisor. "Please tell me that this is a joke. If it's not, we're in bigger trouble than we had thought."

The advisor shook his head. "I'm afraid not, Chancellor. If you wish, we can send for the head of the Intelligence Service. He'll confirm everything that's in here."

Frantically trying to figure out what to do, Vixar turned to the other two chancellors. "Ladies, it appears we have a problem. A very large problem."

Ortelu winced. "Like we didn't have problems already. All right, Vixar, what's the bad news?"

Vixar drew a deep breath. "Our spies in Nestor have informed the Intelligence Service that there have been several secret meetings between representatives of the United States of America and high-ranking Nestorian officials. In addition, Nestora has expanded its military training drills to include women between 30 and 35."

Siatnan slammed her fist on the desk. "Shit! It sounds like the two of them have formed an alliance and want to finish what they started here."

Vixar's advisor cut in. "That's a distinct possibility, Chancellor Siatnan. Particularly since the American public has been pressuring President Clinton of the United States to do something about our treatment of the yahoos."

"But we've already made some reforms! Don't those count?"

The advisor shrugged. "Not enough, apparently. Yes, we've made some reforms, and those quite possibly may have been enough to appease Clinton had they been done in a vacuum. However, we have reason to believe that ordinary American citizens didn't know about the government's earlier campaign against us. They know now, however, thanks to that overly talkative nine-year-old girl. The first impression that the Americans are getting is an account from one of Altri's former slaves. And we all know that Altri was a bit...overzealous."

Ortelu whistled. "We've got to do something, and do it fast. At the very least, I'd recommend increasing our own readiness. Mobilize some of our own soldiers and give them experience in real life situations by having them try to subdue the Syrdani Muggle Resistance Movement. In the meantime, send an emissary to Nestor --"

She suddenly cut off when she realized the flaw in her plan. "Merlin's beard, we can't send an emissary to Nestor. We got this through the Intelligence Service! If we react too quickly, they'll know we've got a spy in their government!"

Vixar nodded. "That's a logical conclusion. However, there's a way around that: tell them that we're mobilizing people to deal with the SMRM and that it has nothing to do with Nestor. If we're lucky, they won't realize that we're in on their little scheme and will stop hassling us."

The advisor cut in. "Chancellors, my personal opinion is that we need to squelch the Resistance Movement as soon as possible once we take action against Nestor. Markali might try to distract us by encouraging the SMRM to take up arms against us. Come to think of it, they could ARM the SMRM and make things worse."
Vixar nodded. "Looks like we've got a plan: send troops to get some experience handling the SMRM and tell Nestor that it's an internal issue. That will deal with the short-term issues. Now the question comes: what do we do about the United States. We've got to convince the United States that we aren't going to attack them."

The advisor glanced at him. "Are you three thinking of attacking the US?"

Siatnan snorted. "Hell no, at least not openly. They're a major Muggle superpower, and we've got problems of our own right now. If we deploy troops against the United States we'll be seen as the aggressor, and if that weren't enough Nestor and the SMRM would undermine us from within."

Vixar scratched his beard. "Then what do we do? Obliviate the President into thinking we're his ally? Assassinate him?"

Siatnan thought for a moment. "You know, an operation against Clinton might not be a bad idea. He's a Muggle leading a Muggle nation, which likely means his Secret Service isn't accustomed to magical threats yet."

Ortelu shook her head. "He's got a Minister of Magic."

"A relatively new one, Ortelu. Recall that Radner retired recently."

Vixar suddenly smiled. "I've got an idea. How about getting the United States to fight Nestor after convincing Clinton that we've started treating the yahoos better? If we're lucky, we'll be able to get the president to side with us against Nestor?"

Siatnan looked at him warily. "And how do you propose to do that?"

Vixar grinned. "Simple. We've still got some captured veela in our prison system right?"

The advisor nodded. "Yes...I don't see where you're going with this, Supreme Chancellor."

Vixar turned to the advisor. "Simple. One of your people must be good with Memory Charms, right? Specifically, modification of memories?"

"Yes...but how..."

"Good. And we can assume that these captured veela agents are trained professionals?"

"Yes..."

Siatnan grunted. "All right, Vixar. Enlighten us. What's your plan?"

"Simple. We place a Memory Charm on one of the captured veela and convince her that Markali had ordered her to assassinate the president of the United States."

The advisor stared at him as Ortelu shook her head. "Too dangerous. What if she gets caught?"

Vixar smiled. "If she gets caught, she confesses. However, remember that she'll have the Memory Charm on her. This Charm will convince her that she's been a Nestorian agent all along and that she had been given an order directly from Markali to kill Clinton."
Ortelu got it. "I see where you're going. If she gets caught, the American people blame Nestor instead of us because she thinks she's a Nestorian agent. The fact that she's a veela will just serve as proof. And once that happens, we offer an olive branch to the United States and ask to assist them in dealing with Nestor. We will do so out of gratitude for their assistance in giving us Muggle technology."

Siatnan grimaced. "It's very risky. What happens if the Memory Charm doesn't work? Besides, why would Markali suddenly want Clinton dead after allying with him against us?"

Vixar shrugged. "I haven't thought it all the way through yet, to be honest. However, it is something we may want to consider if the situation really gets bad."

-------------

Gaza Strip

Gaza Strip

Nagi Suhail Ali smiled as he'd managed to break into the house and come away with a few necklaces and a lot of cash. The place had been protected by a burglar alarm, but he'd been able to disarm it before he broke in. He'd lost his job in the chaos immediately following Judgment Day and the destruction of Tel Aviv. Now he'd be able to put food on the table.

He hurried into his backyard and got to work burying the loot. He had gotten midway through the operation when he felt as if someone was watching him. Gun in hand, he looked around to see if anyone was in the area. He didn't see anyone, however. He caught movement out of the corner of his eye and breathed a sigh of relief when he realized that it must have been a tree: it was far too big to be a person.

Trying to figure out what to buy, he got back to burying his ill-gotten goods. He didn't get far, however, before a voice boomed out behind him.

"Good evening, sir. I'm Abliath from the Nephil Protection Authority. I'm kind of curious why you're burying all of that information instead of putting it back in the house where it came from."

Swearing, he turned to look at the source of the sound. It had been the tree. He had a horrible suspicion as he looked up and up...and saw what appeared to be a face on top of the tree.

One of the Nephilim was, in fact, in his backyard.

Horrified, he pulled out his gun and took a shot, only to find the bullet bouncing off what appeared to be a steel vest. Son of a bitch, he thought. Not only were they four meters tall, but they were wearing reinforced armor!

The giant swore, and a huge fist closed around Ali, who screamed as he was lifted off the ground. He couldn't move either hand as they had been pressed into his sides. There was nothing that he could do other than hope the giant didn't drop him.

The giant lifted him a good ten feet in the air and glared at him. "All right, sir. That's not a very nice thing to do. In fact, I'm pretty mad at you about that. So, I'll give you a choice. Either you put back all of those stolen goods or I'm going to crush you to death right here in my fist and then hang your mangled body from that tree. Which do you prefer?"

Ali was barely able to speak. "I had no choice! I have no money!"

"Then look for a job, at least a temporary one. If you have a family, have one of your family
members get a job."

"My wife has to deal with the kids right now! She can't work!"

The giant squeezed a little harder. "Then take anything you can get, even if you wouldn't normally take it. However, I don't have time for this right now. I don't really respect people who refuse to work for their rewards. So, what's your response? I'll give you to the count of three: one, two..."

Less than an hour later, the necklaces and the cash were back where they had come from and Ali was busy trying to rewrite his resume.

To be continued...

__________________

Update #438: Samuelist Shabbaton
----------
Friday, November 22, 1996
Somewhere
I-90
Massachusetts
United States of America
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/3.7%
----------
NEXT UP: For Whom Isabel Tolls
----------
It had been about ninety minutes since I had left Waltham and turned onto the Massachusetts Turnpike headed west. Route 128 went past without any real fanfare -- I was very familiar with that area. The magnitude of this trip, however, didn't sink in until I went past Framingham. Beyond Framingham lay Route 495, Worcester, Springfield...and the great unknown.

I liked to travel, and occasionally went on day trips (or night trips to go stargazing). However, I had to admit that I knew very little of the world beyond 495. The only time I had ever gone out this far was to go to summer camp in Palmer, which was somewhere beyond 495 far over the horizon. Well, Route 495 had been under 20 miles from Boston. And judging from the map there had a long, long way to go.

In the uncharted wilderness beyond 495 were highways I'd never heard of before: 290, 395, I-84, and I-91. I watched as the mile markers slowly counted down, heading to zero at the border with New York. Amazingly, the Turnpike didn't actually go through Worcester, the second or third largest city in New England. One would have expected a major highway to go through such a major city. Then again, I knew very little about Worcester.

Towns without meaning whizzed by me as I headed west. Brimfield? Uxbridge? I remember seeing them on atlases, but they had could have been on Mars as far as I knew. Chicopee? Sounded like what a young bird did after it drank too much.

The trip went on and on, and the numbers on the mile markers continued to decrease. I had budgeted five hours for this trip, and it looked like I was going to make it in plenty of time. I had to get in before sundown, after all.
I discovered the Black Hole about fifty miles before the border with New York. The Black Hole consisted of a thirty-mile stretch of highway with absolutely no exits or turnoffs other than rest areas. This had to be the end of civilization, I thought. In the greater Boston area, exits further than maybe two miles apart were few and far between. Thirty miles? That was half the distance between Boston and Providence! I went through a series of little-known towns as I made my way through the Black Hole: Otis, Russell, Becket. There were virtually no buildings in sight in the Black Hole, and it made me wonder how on earth people even got to those towns. How many people even lived out here? I had always thought Springfield had been on the western edge of the state -- but it had proven to be a good fifty miles or more away from New York.

The lack of exits and unending stretch of road unnerved me to some extent, and I was relieved when I reached the next exit fewer than 20 miles from New York. At this point, however, I realized that for the first time in my life I was literally driving off the face of the earth as far as I was concerned. I liked atlases, and I enjoyed leafing through my family's book of Massachusetts town maps. Since that book only contained Massachusetts towns, I had no idea whatsoever what awaited me on the far side of that border. All I knew is that Yankees and Mets fans existed out there. I at least recognized that Brimfield and Otis were towns from the atlas. Beyond that...nothing.

The mile markers reached mile zero, yet the Turnpike did not end. Now called I-90, it continued onwards into New York, which proved to look a lot like western Massachusetts. Towns with bizarre names like Canaan and Austerlitz littered the landscape as exits with numbers like B3 began branching off the highway.

I eventually found the Taconic State Parkway (whatever that was) and turned onto it, heading south. There would be about forty miles more on this highway, one which never even touched Massachusetts. I was truly out on my own as I watched another long series of meaningless town names go by. There was a brief moment of shock when I discovered that New York also had a Chatham. Depending on the traffic going over the Sagamore and Bourne bridges, this Chatham could very well be a faster commute than the real Chatham on Cape Cod.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity -- and in one very real sense was as I had never driven this far before in one sitting -- I found the exit leading to Omega and started wending my way through the back roads of some extremely small towns which had honest to goodness FARMS on them. I had never been on a farm before short of the Drumlin Farm childhood field trip. There were no cities of any size anywhere in the area.

Or were there? As I drove closer and closer to Rhinebeck, I began seeing evidence that there were more people living in the area than I would have expected from the map. Traffic began to increase, and many of the general stores were advertising sales on Omega paraphernalia and Buddhist/New Age books. Many of the towns' small inns were filled to capacity, presumably by people who had made the pilgrimage to the Omega campus and had decided to stay there permanently -- or at least for long periods of time.

I soon found myself part of a long parade of cars all following the same route towards the Omega campus. Most of them had people in their twenties and early thirties, about my age. Some may have been undergrads. There were a few cute girls, which gave me hope that I might actually find someone there.

The train of vehicles slowed and stopped...in the middle of nowhere. A traffic jam out here? The reason for the delay soon became evident: there was a security checkpoint with barricades and so forth. Considering what had happened at the British Wizarding school and with the Muslim wizards all over the world, they weren't taking any chances here.
Finally, I pulled into the parking lot at Omega -- a large open area which must have once been a field where the grass now being routinely mowed by tires. I brought out my suitcase and tent and made my way over to the registration building. I gave the receptionist my name and they said they had my reservation.

Then came a surprise: "We've got a room for you. You'll be staying in Nirvana 1. Here it is on the map."

I blinked. "A room? Cool! However, I has the impression there weren't many rooms available here and that they were reserved for the elderly."

"That was the case a few weeks ago. However, a lot of people have been leaving the conference of late, either because of the colder weather or because Samuel's reforms don't sit well with them."

This was going to be interesting, I thought. "Is Samuel here? I'll actually get to talk to the a person from the Bible?"

"He's here all right, all 5' 3" or whatever of him. He doesn't know English, of course, so you'll be speaking with him through an interpreter. You're going to find that he's not exactly what you would have expected given a strict reading of the Bible. For one thing, he doesn't have a huge shaggy beard and long hair. He looks sort of like a monk turned professor. Deborah is here as well, and she's DEFINITELY under five feet. Came in wearing a full burqa but now we can see her face more. She seems to think she's a cross between Hillary Clinton and Gloria Steinem, something else the Bible didn't capture. Here's your information packet and your free Samuelist Bible."

I looked at the book in amazement. "They've printed their new version of the Bible now?"

"Yup. It includes stuff from all three major Abrahamic faiths, plus some Buddhist and Hindu tales as well. And of course it's got the actual events which took place during Samuel's era: David inventing the catapult, Samson being about as strong as a modern weightlifter, Jephthah having soldier's guilt and shell shock, and so forth. Enjoy!"

I intrigued, I headed over to the dorm and dropped off my stuff. It was actually quite small, smaller even than the dorm at MIT. It just had a nightstand, a bed (no linen -- eek!), a lamp, and a space heater. Looked like I'd be living like a monk while I was here. Putting the sleeping bag on the bed, I left the dorm and began walking around the area -- there were about 45 minutes before the festivities began. It was cloudy out -- in fact, the weather forecast had a chance of rain -- so it wasn't worth taking the telescope out of the trunk. That would stay in the car.

The first thing I saw was a majestic arch labeled SANCTUARY. How convenient: I must be near the main spiritual center. The arch led to a steep staircase which led up a hill and ended at something which would not have looked out of place in a depiction of Shangri-La. It appeared to be a large Buddhist temple, koi ponds and everything. Very peaceful. There was a large pile of shoes outside the front door. I took my shoes off and entered.

The place proved to be a large meditation hall with at least 20 people already there sitting quietly. More cute girls, I thought. This looked pretty good, and it was a form of self-improvement which didn't leave a bad taste in my mouth. I made a mental note to sit for a few minutes before I went to bed.

There was an interesting-looking bookstore (closed for the Sabbath), a maze-like structure of some
sort made out of rocks and very trampled wood chips, and a large building which appeared to be a library dedicated to Ram Dass. There were a few lumps covered with sheets which turned out to be statues of the Buddha. Considering Samuel's iconoclastic stance, hiding the statues sort of made sense. There was also a sauna which I wouldn't touch with a ten-foot pole: first, it was clothing optional; and second, I didn't want to fry my rear end off.

It was getting dark as everyone made their way over to the main hall for the reception. I got there early as usual so I could get a seat near the back. None of the Brandeis or MIT people were there yet, though I was far from the only person in the room.

There were two lecterns at the front of the room. Behind one of them was a ghostly woman who had to have been even shorter than the 4'10" Felicia. She was wearing what appeared to be traditional Muslim or Bedouin garb and was talking to a living woman in what appeared to be a bizarre dialect of Hebrew where I recognized maybe one out of every eight words.

Interesting, I thought. Deborah, I presume?

I would have minded talking to her. However, it was obvious she was going to be in high demand. No fewer than seven guests were converging on her, and the living woman -- presumably the interpreter -- told everyone to back off for the time being and set up appointments to talk with her in the book over there. This prompted a good half of the people to race for the book. However, I wouldn't be able to make an appointment until tomorrow night because I couldn't write anything down because of the Sabbath. Stupid rule, I thought.

More people made their way into the room and began blocking my view of the platform. With about two minutes to go before the presentation, a second ghost appeared on the stage and everyone promptly started rattling questions at him. I couldn't help but chuckle. Samuel did in fact look like a little professor: short beard, white hair -- hell, white everything -- and mustache. He barked something at Deborah's interpreter, who told us all to make appointments with him as well. Less than a minute later, a third ghost appeared whom I recognized as Tiqwael.

Finally, the reception began with every seat filled. Samuel -- well, the interpreter -- welcomed us all and told us that we were the future of the Samuelist movement and the vanguard of a new era where the three Abrahamic faiths would be able to live together in harmony.

Interesting, I thought. It sounds like he's given up trying to unify the faiths and has fallen back on trying to get Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to live in the same world without killing each other. It was a bit of a disappointment, but in reality there wasn't really much he could do to reverse two millennia of religious evolution.

Samuel went on to explain that the traditional Friday night Qabbalat Shabbat service would be replaced by a meditation session where a Buddhist monk would give the audience advice on calming the mind and achieving a state of rest and peace. That fit pretty well with the spirit of the Sabbath, I thought. I had come to the right place.

The meditation would last about twenty minutes, after which a member of each faith would give a short sermon. Once the sermons were over, everyone was going to troop over to the cafeteria for an organic vegetarian dinner.

I blinked. Vegetarian dinner? I hated vegetables! It occurred to me that unless I was badly mistaken, there wouldn't be much I could eat here. I hoped they had bread at least! It also occurred to me that Buddhist ascetic practices often included skipping meals after noon. Maybe I'd start adopting those
the hard way...

To be continued...

__________________

Update #439: For Whom Isabel Tolls
------------
Saturday, November 23, 1996
Ease Gill Cave
United Kingdom
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/3.6%
------------
NEXT UP: The Fall of Britain for Humans
------------

Isabel Miller didn't like the way things were going. As it was, she was very lucky to have skipped town when she did. Supposedly the government had visited her flat within five hours of the attack, confiscating a lot of material. Fortunately, the computer files detailing the locations and identities of all Britain for Humans operatives were in the her hotel here in Northern Ireland, where she had booked a room under an assumed name. The data on the files were encrypted, of course. No one would be able to access them without her secret key -- even if they were able to log into the computer to begin with.

The afternoon news broadcast had reported that Henry Knight had eventually cooperated with the authorities and turned over valuable information in exchange for not being subjected to the Dementor's Kiss, a particularly cruel Wizarding punishment. As a result, his sentence had been commuted to life in prison without parole. The wizards and cops were starting to use that information to make their way up the Britain for Humans command structure, taking people one at a time and getting closer and closer to Isabel herself. As of 1:00 PM, a good half dozen people in Henry Knight's chain of command had already been taken into custody.

The vice president in charge of Henry Knight's cell would have likely been able to pinpoint her relatively quickly. However, he had actually done something quite helpful from her perspective: poison himself rather than face either the Dementor's Kiss or life in prison. Judging from what had happened with America for Humans after the Quabbin attack, it was only a matter of time until everyone was rounded up.

For the time being, Isabel Miller was still free, as were about 95% of the Britain for Humans operatives. She had considered sending out a message to tell them to get the hell out of Britain, but she decided against it because she figured it had too high a probability of being intercepted. She could only hope that her people would stay in their safe houses and ride out the storm.

Having wizards in England was bad in itself. Having wizards spending most of their time and energy actively trying to track you down using magical means made things even worse. She began to wonder if the Dursleys -- the founders of Britain for Humans -- had gotten off easy.

She was armed, of course, with a revolver hidden in her coat. The gun dated back from the time her ex-husband had been stalking her and she needed some kind of means to defend himself from his advances. Thankfully, she hadn't been forced to use it, and it had sat in a locked safe in her flat for the past six years. It suddenly occurred to her that they would likely realize she had a license for a gun and would naturally concluded that she had it on her person when they ransacked her house and
found the gun missing. Sure, the gun would have been in the safe, but since when were mechanical locks safe from the prying eyes of wizards?

This late in the season, there weren't that many people out here, and she had the caves more or less to herself. She had managed to make her way into the cave system through one of the lesser-known entrances where no one had been able to see her go in. She was lucky to have taken an interest in spelunking before getting involved with Britain for Humans! The geology around here was fascinating, with lots of underground rivers.

She wondered whether she would be able to resurrect Britain for Humans from a cave such as this. It was an interesting idea, but it would require that she go back aboveground from time to time to recruit once more. Also, any location which was accessible to anyone but an experienced caver -- that is, requiring extensive rope work and possibly an underwater swim -- would be too vulnerable for her own good. Then again, did she want to spend the rest of her life hiding from the world in total darkness?

She was pondering her future when she heard the flapping of wings far above. A bat, she thought. The caves were filled with bats. She needed to calm down a little -- otherwise, she would go absolutely insane. Maybe people would forget about her in a few weeks and be content with the rest of Britain for Humans...if they managed to round up the rest of the group.

There was a very un-batlike hoot, and suddenly a piece of parchment fell into her hands. She shrieked and pulled out her gun, trying to figure out where the parchment had come from. The silence was complete, however, other than the soft flapping of the bat's wings in the distance.

She didn't like the sound of this, and cursed herself for not shooting that animal. That had to have been an owl, and owls tended to deliver messages for the wizards. If the owls knew where she was, the wizards couldn't be far behind. And she wouldn't be able to get out from where she was all that easily.

Hoping against hope that she was just being paranoid, she looked at the document. It was addressed to "Miss Isabel Miller, Ease Gill Cave". Stamped on the upper left hand corner of the envelope was the seal of the Ministry of Magic.

Shit, she thought. Opening up the letter, she began to read.

--------

Dear Ms. Miller. You have evaded us for a long time, but now the game has come to an end. You have ten minutes from the receipt of this letter to come out of that cave and surrender. If you do not do so, we will cast a spell which will block all of the known entrances to Ease Gill and come in after you. You will not escape, and you will likely be subject to the Dementor's Kiss if you resist. If you do in fact manage to defeat our men, we will leave the entranced blocked and you will never see daylight again. You will run out of food very quickly down there.

Do yourself a favor and surrender quietly. If you do so, you have our word as honorable men that you will not be subjected to the Dementor's Kiss. Instead, you will be placed in the Wizarding prison of Azkaban for crimes against the Wizarding world. Yes, life in a Wizarding prison is difficult, but it is better than losing your soul.

Your obedient servant,

Dr. Nicholas J. Flamel Sedai
Isabel crumpled up the letter and looked around frantically for a place to make her last stand. Finally, she found one: a small grotto which could only be accessed through a crawlway. Making sure that her flashlight was working, she made her way through the crawlway -- it was about 5 meters long -- and brought out her gun. Then, with a bit of trepidation, she turned off the flashlight and was surrounded by complete darkness. She was disoriented for a second and had to feel for the walls of the cave to orient herself.

Ten minutes later, a series of staccato bursts erupted from the cave she had just left and light blazed through the crawlway as wizards began looking for her. She didn't dare look through the passage to see if any of them were looking in her direction. She ducked out of the way as a flashlight beam made its way down the crawlway.

The wizard whistled. "Hey, George! I think we've got a passageway down here! You may want to check down here as well."

There was a pause, followed by: "It looks pretty narrow, Dave. I'll take it. You head for that other entrance."

"Fine with me, George."

A pearly white light illuminated appeared in the crawlway and began bobbing around as she heard someone crawling in her direction. She was trapped, and she knew it. Hoping that she would be able to find another way out of here -- long odds, but it was better than nothing -- she aimed her gun down the corridor and squeezed the trigger.

She got lucky -- the wizard had been too careful making sure he wouldn't get stuck in the corridor to look ahead. The bullet hit him in the head, and he collapsed noiselessly to the ground. As she had hoped, the body blocked the entrance to the cave so that no one could come in afterwards.

She turned on her flashlight and looked further down the passage as shouts erupted from the main chamber. She soon discovered, much to her chagrin, that there was no way out of this side chamber other than the way she had come in.

The wizards murmured something in the main cavern and smiled in satisfaction. "George! You OK? All right, Miller, you bitch. You're going to pay for that. Mike, is it a dead end?"
Another voice. "Yup, it is."

"Good, she's trapped. Cover me -- I'll withdraw George's body and we'll do what must be done."

Isabel began to panic as a commotion broke out near the front of the cave. Eventually, the light streaming down the corridor began gyrating once again as the dead wizard's body was pulled out of the cave.

She tried turning off the flashlight only to see it fly out of her hands, leaving her in darkness again. One of the wizards outside chuckled: "Hey, it worked! All right, Dave. Do your thing."

The other wizard nodded. "OK, Accio Hotel Key! Reducto!"

Her hotel key disappeared in a blaze of blue light as half of the crawling caved in. She was now both in complete darkness and unable to escape from her little antechamber. Suddenly, she knew exactly what the wizards' intent was, and she screamed. "NO!"

The wizard's response was chilling. "It seems you like caving, Miss Miller. You must be quite experienced to have gotten down here. Hopefully your experience will help you get out of this."

"I can't get out, sir! You blocked off the entrance!"

She could imagine the wizard shrugging. "Sorry about that. Next time, we'll be a little more careful."

There was a pause. "My, it looks like you stayed at the Royal Hotel. Good to know -- we'll tell them to not expect you tonight."

"NO!"

There was another pause, followed by: "Merlin's beard, you are in a bit of a predicament, aren't you? Tell you what. We'll send a bunch of our people in there, arrest you, and let you out of that cave. You're not getting out without magical help, Miss Miller. Considering that the alternative is slow
death by asphyxiation, I highly recommend that you surrender."

It was over, Isabel thought. She reached for the cyanide tablet...and found that she couldn't do it. Telling the wizards that she had given up, she sat back and waited.

---------------
Royal Hotel
---------------
The proprietor stared at Dave. "What? You're telling me that Mary Robbins was in fact Isabel Miller, the maniac behind Britain for Humans?"

Dave nodded and held out a sheet of paper. "Yes, ma'am. Can you take us to her room please? We've got a warrant."

The proprietor looked at the warrant and nodded. "By all means. You're lucky she isn't here right now -- now is a good time to search her place. I wonder where she is."

Dave sighed. "We found her in the Ease Gill cave complex and took her into custody. She's probably going to Azkaban, unless someone wants to impose the death penalty or Dementor's Kiss."

"Fine with me. She certainly deserves execution for what she did. At any rate, here's her room. Tell me if we can be of any help."

Dave thanked the proprietor and cast *Revelio Hominem*. The spell claimed the room was empty, so he simply unlocked and opened the door.

The room was more or less empty. It looked like Miller had brought only a few pairs of clothes...and a computer.

Dave looked at the computer in satisfaction. "Well, well. Look at what we have here! Who here knows how to break simple Muggle passwords using magic? We do!"

Mike shook his head. "That may be the case, but we're not going to be able to read anything off that computer unless we get it in an Ar-38 atmosphere. We don't want the spell to wreck the contents of those disks."

"Don't worry, Mike. I'm sure the Ministry will help us on this. Now the fun begins, my friend. Britain for Humans, you are toast."
Moody's harsh voice drowned out the voice of Ron's queen in Wizard Chess. "Potter, Weasley, come with me."

Harry glanced up and look at the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. "Sir? Is there a problem?"

"Something has come up. Do you know where Mr. Longbottom is?"

Harry shrugged. "I haven't seen him, sir. What's going on?"

Moody sounded irritated. "In case you've forgotten, Mr. Weasley, your sister was injured in a terrorist attack sponsored by Britain for Humans. You've been given permission to join the Aurors and several important Hogsmeade personnel in a punitive expedition to destroy Britain for Humans once and for all. Both Mr. Weasley and Mrs. Longbottom have given their consent as your guardians."

Harry and Ron started at each other in excitement. However, Harry thought of a problem. "Sir, we're both willing to help round up Britain for Humans members, and we're well versed in defending ourselves thanks to our work in Dumbledore's Army. However, we're not seventeen yet, so we're not allowed to use magic outside of school. Come to think of it, sir, we're not even able to Apparate yet."

Moody didn't even break his stride. "You two and Mr. Longbottom have been given special dispensation from Headmaster Flitwick to join the expedition because, unless I'm very badly mistaken, you want to revenge on the people who killed Mr. Wright and injured Miss Weasley and Miss Lovegood. The headmaster believed that the desire for vengeance would be festering in your system and you needed and opportunity to let it out."

Ron smiled. "Bloody hell, was he right. Harry, this is so exciting!"

Moody wasn't amused. "Exciting is not the word I would choose: DANGEROUS is better. You will likely have to put much of the material you have learned your Defense Against the Dark Arts and Dumbledore's Army classes into practice. Each of you will be accompanied by an Auror or a member of the Ministry of Magic. What you are given orders, you will obey them without question. You will not do ANYTHING unless it is sanctioned by the officer in charge. Do you agree to these terms?"

Both boys nodded. "Yes, sir."
"Good."

The three wended their way into the Great Hall and began heading for the main entrance. It was damp and dreary outside, and Harry wondered if he'd get a chance to get a coat. Not likely, at the rate Moody was walking. He would have to be content with warming himself up through his desire for revenge.

Moody, Ron, and Harry made their way down the hill to Hagrid’s house. The house itself was locked -- Hagrid had moved to Ietalis -- but they found a large number of people milling around outside. Harry recognized some of them from Hogsmeade. Many of them had bruises here and there, and Harry surmised that they had been members of the Hogsmeade self-defense class who had been injured in the attack. It occurred to Harry that they were meeting out here for two reasons: first, to get themselves closer to the point where they could Apparate out of Hogwarts; and second, to not tempt a lot of the other students into joining their expedition.

Harry saw Hermione in the group and wondered how she was involved. Moody, however, had anticipated his question. "Miss Granger is seventeen now, gentlemen. She chose to come on her own accord, and she has been advised that books are often a poor replacement for actual combat practice. We need look no further than to the late Dolores Umbridge for proof."

More and more people converged on the building, and by the time Moody had told everyone to start heading over to Hogsmeade the group had reached about 50 people, including Neville Longbottom. True to form, Ginny herself had shown up -- presumably informed by Hermione or Neville. Showing everyone her silver leg, she told everyone she was ready for combat. Moody's response was to send her right back to Madam Pomfrey and deduct ten points from Gryffindor.

The group met in the Hog's Head tavern (why hadn't Moody used the secret corridor in the Room of Requirement to get there?), where a bouncer was checking names against a list and letting in only people involved with the mission. The place was absolutely packed -- Harry was barely able to breathe as there were at least 200 people in the room.

Moody amplified his voice with Sonorus and began to speak. "All right, here is the plan. We have just received a complete list of members of Britain for Humans. Most of them are British, as one would expect. However, there are several America for Humans refugees in the group as well. This list was retrieved from Isabel Miller's computer after several wizard magically managed to break through a simple Muggle password.

"Britain for Humans currently has about 9,100 members and has a hierarchical structure. It's a classic pyramid scheme, with Isabel Miller on top and five levels underneath her. The vast majority of people -- about 8,000 -- are on the lowest level and don't know the identity of the other people in their cells. Because of this, they will be more or less isolated -- waiting for orders which will never come -- if we arrested everyone on the level above them. The level above them has 800 members, and they're going to be handled by the American and British Ministries of Magic.

"The level above them has 200 people and the level above those has about 80. We're not worried about the 200 level because if we knock out the people above them and below them they'll be isolated as well. Once every other level has been dealt with, we can finish off the rest of the group at our leisure. Once the 1,000 and 80 levels have been eliminated, The Ministries of Magic will deal with the 8,000 leaves and the rest of us will handle the rest of the tree."

Moody paused for a drink of water, then continued. "Our mission today is to deal with the 80 level. There are 240 people in this room, which means three wizards per target. Each strike team will..."
consist of two assistants and an Auror, and the teams will travel to the target by Side-Along Apparition. There, they will arrest the target and if necessary Obliviate him to make sure he does not inform any of his colleagues. It is 9:05 PM right now, according to my watch. All teams will leave at 9:30 on the dot, taking off at the same time to catch everyone by surprise.

"Agents under seventeen and volunteers with limited combat training will follow all orders given by the Auror in charge of the group without question. Is that understood?"

There was a general murmur of assent. Harry wondered if he and Ron were going to be working together. They knew each other pretty well, after all. On the other hand, both of them were underage...

Moody looked around the room, saw everyone was in agreement, and then tacked a long piece of parchment to the wall. "Good. Here are the assignments. Good luck."

Everyone crowded around the parchment. Harry found, much to his regret (but not to his surprise), that he and his friends had been broken up. He had been linked up with an SAS man named Banks and Nymphadora Tonks. He didn't recognize their quarry either, but he saw that the man wouldn't be hard to find:

Finlay Thompson  
88 Chapel Lane  
ASCOT  
SL5 0ZX

The room erupted into conversation as team members introduced themselves to each other. Banks nearly fell over when Tonks transformed her face into that of a pig. Shaking his head, the SAS man said: "You do realize, Miss Tonks, that I'm going to pay a lot more attention to my dog from now on in. How do I know he's not a wizard in disguise?"

Tonks chuckled. "Metamorphmagi and Animagi -- the only kinds of wizards who can do that -- are relatively rare. Besides, I know you're dog isn't a wizard. Most wizards of both classes are registered, and we'd have known if dear old Robert Banks was filling himself up with Puppy Chow."

The three of them discussed their plans. Finally, Moody called everyone back to order at about 9:28. "Two minutes to go, ladies and gentlemen. Get your wands at the ready, and be prepared for all eventualities. Wizards, cast your Protego spells. Aurors, prepare for Side-Along Apparition. People under seventeen, keep your emotions in check and don't mess us up. And don't let go of your Auror until you get to your destination."

The clocked ticked down to 9:29:30, and Moody said: "Thirty seconds left. Everyone grab onto your Auror and brace yourself. For those of you who have never Apparated before, it can be a bit disconcerting. Steel yourself for this, however. All ready? Good. Three, two, one...GO!"

With an expression of extreme concentration on her face, Tonks bent into what appeared to be an alternate dimension. Strange sensations flickered over Harry's body as the three of them traveled through the ether. Finally, floor materialized underneath them. Harry's wand popped into his hand as he began to look around his new surroundings.

He was in an empty living room which looked remarkably like the Dursleys' old house: a television set, a faded sofa, a curio cabinet, and so forth. As he thought about it, however, he realized that the
Dursleys didn't have furniture like this at all. He was just getting into the habit of expecting to see magical items in ordinary houses and thinking any major room which didn't have at least SOMETHING unusual in it was like the Dursleys.

The room was empty, and Harry began wondering if Mr. Thompson wasn't there. He was disillusioned of that almost immediately, however, when he heard a woman shout: "What the hell was that? Finlay, are you down there? Did you drop something?"

Tonks swore quietly to spoke in a whisper. "Merlin's beard, we've got multiple people in this house. Immobilize them one at a time but do not hurt them. Banks, do you have a card saying you're a cop or something like that?"

The SAS man nodded, and Tonks smiled. "Good. Take the first Muggle you see and show him the card. Hopefully he or she will become very cooperative. We'll Obliviate the person so he or she can't expose you after that."

Banks nodded. "I appreciate that -- thank you. How many people are in the house?"

"Probably two -- this subject's in his 60's and probably has an empty nest. I'll cast *Revelio Hominem* once we've dealt with Mr. Thompson."

Thirty seconds later, a woman in her late fifties popped into the room and swore. "Who the bloody hell are you, and how did you get in here?"

Banks showed him his card. "British Secret Services, and we've come to take Mr. Finlay Thompson into custody as member of Britain for Humans, the terrorist group which attacked Hogsmeade."

The woman stared at him in horror. "My husband is a member of Britain for Humans?"

Tonks nodded. "I'm afraid so, Mrs. Thompson. I'm an Auror, the equivalent of a Wizarding cop. The boy is a student at Hogwarts. Can you tell me where he is? Please do so, as I don't want to charge you with interfering with a criminal investigation. After today, Britain for Humans will be permanently out of business."

Harry drew a deep breath: what was going to happen next. He soon realized, however, that the woman was getting angry...and not at him. "So that's what he was doing all those nights when he was supposedly out at the pub! I can't believe it! Do you have proof of this?"

Tonks nodded and brought out a warrant. "We do, but not on us. We have a warrant as well, as you can see. Please cooperate, Mrs. Thompson. Where is your husband?"

Mrs. Thompson's response was cut off by the sound of someone walking down the stairs. "Emily? What's going on? Who are you talking to?"

Emily Thompson had a look of satisfaction on her face. "Just talking to myself, Finlay. Come here for a second, I've got to show you something."

Harry knew what to do. Just as the man's paunch made its way around the corner, he hit Mr. Thompson with an *Expelliarmus* just as Tonks blasted him with an *Immobilus*. The Britain for Humans agent yelped as he tripped and fell onto the couch. "What the hell?"

Then he saw that there were two wands and a gun pointed at him. His jaw dropped and he shook his head. "Oh, shit. This can't be good. Emily, what --"

Tonks did the honors. "Mr. Finlay Thompson, my name is Nymphadora Tonks, and I'm an Auror for
the Ministry of Magic. You are under arrest as a suspected member of Britain for Humans."

The suspect hesitated for a moment, then went beet red. "You must be out of your mind! That's impossible!"

Tonks smiled. "Perhaps. On the other hand, do Liam Bevan, Alexandra Johnston, and Louise Read ring a bell?"

Thompson hesitated and licked his lips -- only to realize that almost certainly gave him away. Resigned, his shoulders slumped. "This is not happening. Emily, make them go away. I need to make a phone call."

Banks shook his head. "I don't think so, Mr. Thompson. And I don't think your wife will help you much either, as apparently she didn't know about your extracurricular activities either."

Thompson looked at his three opponents -- make that four -- and it finally occurred to him that the game was up. "All right, Auror Tonks. You win. I'm part of the group. Please accept my surrender. However, be advised I'm not going to be able to tell you where everyone else is. I barely know the rest of the people under Ms. Read."

Banks smiled. "Not to worry, Mr. Thompson. We've got Isabel Miller's master list. We'll find them."

Thompson swore. "Go to hell, you demons."

Tonks didn't budge. "After you, Mr. Thompson. Now hold still while we put on these handcuffs and we read you your rights."

To be continued...
Update #441: Wait Until the Armenians Find Out
---------
Monday, November 25, 1996
Stein Residence
Los Angeles, California
United States of America
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/3.5%
---------
NEXT UP: One of These Popes Is Not Like the Others
---------
Seventy-five-year-old Abraham Stein looked at the news bulletin in amazement. He couldn't tell whether he should be overjoyed...or deeply, deeply disturbed.

-----

South African Ministry of Magic Acts To Halt Genocide in Burundi

ASSOCIATED PRESS -- In a development hailed as a breakthrough in the long struggle between the Hutu and Tutsi peoples in Rwanda and Botswana, the United Nations have called upon the South African Ministry of Magic to stop recent genocidal activity against the Tutsi population.

Michael Roark, the South African Minister of Magic, explains. "It was fairly obvious that the United States would not be able to trust any Hutu or Tutsi people when it came to stopping these horrific crimes against humanity. A third party was needed to oversee the operation, and that is where we came in."

The South African wizards' response was quite simple. Taking advantage of the fact that neither Rwanda nor Burundi has a functioning Ministry of Magic, they cast a spell which would ensure that any unnatural Hutu deaths would be reported to the nearest Hutu wizard and vice versa within a matter of seconds. As a result, criminals who committed crimes against humanity soon found themselves dealing with very angry wizards with wands in their hands.

"The solution isn't perfect", Roark says. "It still allows for the possibility that wizards can continue the fighting against each other. However, the fact remains that for the vast majority of people, the genocide can no longer continue unless the attackers figure out ways to defend themselves against magic. This action will save the lives of hundreds of thousands of people."

This solution went into effect November 1st, and since then the number of incidents of ethnic
cleansing in the two nations has dropped by 70%. Many people in the area are overjoyed that the wizards are finally halting this terrible struggle. A 37-year old man named Nduwimana explains: "Every few days or so a warlord would lead his posse down the street and start shooting people at random. I lost my nine-year-old son that way, and although I wanted to avenge myself on the Hutus I realized that two wrongs did not make a right and that any revenge I took would just exacerbate the problem. Thanks to the actions of the South African wizards, we can start to come out again knowing that if the warlords try to do anything, they will be caught immediately."

Many other nations are watching this development with interest in case they have to deal with fighting ethnic groups themselves. Although the events of Judgment Day have caused the Israelis and the Palestinians to bury the hatchet for the time being, there are many organizations who are warning that a long period of complacency might restart the fighting there again. Although it appears that the Israeli Ministry of Magic in has brought in members of a giant tribe known as the Nephilim to [cont. page 2]

-----

Although Stein felt happy that a crime against humanity had been thwarted, it made him wonder why the Atlantis -- or at least the local Ministries of Magic in Europe -- had not taken more action against genocides of the past.

Particularly his own. He rolled up his sleeve and looked at the number tattooed on his arm: 567178. He'd gotten that number in Dachau back in 1943. If the South Africans were able to stop, or at least reduce the effect of, genocidal tendencies in Rwanda and Burundi, what would a more organized Ministry of Magic like that of Germany have been able to do? Would the Ministry have been able to save his mother, father, and brother from the gas chambers?

Stein knew enough about the wizards to realize that the Statute of Secrecy would have been in effect in those days. However, he couldn't help but think that there must have been a way to save the inmates of the various concentration camps without violating the Statute of Secrecy. What about rescuing the inmates and then Obliviating them, replacing their memories of the wizards with memories of Allied soldiers or humanitarian Germans like Oskar Schindler? How about preventing future deportations by causing magical fire to rage through Auschwitz shortly after it was constructed, burning it to the ground and blaming it on a lightning strike? There had to have been SOMETHING the wizards could have done to preserve their precious Statute -- yet they had refused to act.

Could it have been because the wizards in the German Ministry of Magic had also been Nazis? He had to admit that could have been a possibility, in which case he had to place the blame partially in Atlantis's lap as well for not overriding the genocidal tendencies of the Nazi wizards.

Atlantis must have known what was going on at the time. There were rumors of a wizard named Gellert "Grendel" Wald who had fought for the Germans during the Second World War. Atlantis must have known that the atrocities inherent in an international conflict could only be remedied by a
major international effort. And who would be responsible for a major international effort when it came to magic? Atlantis.

Stein paced around his room angrily. He knew enough about Atlantis to know that they wouldn't intervene unless civilization as a whole was endangered. That was all well and good. However, who was supposed to watch out for endangered ethnic groups which did not have a Ministry of Magic to protect them? Atlantis had to wean itself off that laissez-faire attitude when it came to supervising the world. What use was it otherwise?

Stein had to do something. But what?

---------------------
Carillo Household
---------------------
Steve Carillo looked at the reporter in amazement. "We're up to 2,700 people now?"

The reporter nodded. "Yes, Mr. Carillo. Your lawsuit about being Obliviated and demanding compensation appears to have touched a lot of nerves around here. We're at 2,700 now and it's likely to grow even further."

"Amazing! And to think the trial isn't for a few more months. This is probably going to be the talk of the town."

"Quite possibly. Remind me of your story again?"

Carillo complied. "I'd always thought I'd been abducted by aliens and they'd performed experiments on me. However, it's fairly obvious now that it wasn't aliens. It was wizards who made me think that I was abducted by aliens. I'm half expecting that I'm going grow a third leg or something like that as soon as a wizard casts a spell in my vicinity."

The reporter frowned. "Why would a wizard do that?"

Carillo shrugged. "Beats me. I don't pretend to know how those wizards think. Do you understand them?"

"No, sir, I don't. At any rate, let's get on with the interview. Would you be interested in knowing that Oprah Winfrey wants to put you on her show?"
Carillo's jaw dropped. "I'm going to be on Oprah?"

"Yes, Mr. Carillo. What do you say about that?"

Carillo hesitated. "I'm personally not a big fan of Oprah. However, I can't help but admit that my sister is. When are they thinking of putting me on?"

The reporter gave him a card. "Early next year, or so I've been told. If you're interested, call this number here and we'll get the ball rolling. You may have 2,700 people involved now. After a gig on Oprah, however, you can easily get 10,000."

Carillo grinned. "I'm going to be famous in more ways than one? Sister Claire, eat your heart out!"

To be continued...

__________________

Update #442: One of These Popes Is Not Like the Others

---------------

Monday, November 25, 1996
2nd Floor
Ram Dass Library
Omega Institute
Rhinebeck, NY
United States of America
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/3.5%
---------------

NEXT UP: Damsels Without Dirigibles
---------------

Pope (or was it Kohen Gadol?) John Paul II looked over the note he had retrieved from the Ministry of Magic. He had expected that there would be a lot of people in attendance at this talk, and he hadn't been disappointed. Virtually every single Christian clergyman was in the room, as were a large number of the non-Christians. Samuel and Deborah were absent, however, as even ghosts couldn't be in two places at the same time.

The title of the talk was rather innocuous: "A Brief History of the Life of Pope John XX On the Occasion of John XX's Feast Day". At first glance, it looked like many other of the talks given by religious scholars during the conference. However, one thing stood out about this particular talk.

There had never been a Pope John XX. There had been a John XIX and a John XXI, but there had never been a John XX. The official explanation was because of a bookkeeping error in the early Church records, and most of the world had been satisfied with that. However, the wizards knew the truth. The wizards knew all about the person known as John XX, who, after all, had been one of
their own.

Waiting a few minutes after the scheduled start time for stragglers to make their way into the room, he brought out his notebook and began to speak.

"Ladies and gentlemen, clergy and laity, thank you for coming to my talk. Today I will be discussing the career of a little-known pope, John XX. This unique individual was a major religious figure of the thirteenth century and oversaw the Holy See between the years 1269 and 1271. This pope succeeded Clement IV and preceded Gregory X."

There was an astonished gasp from the crowd, which John Paul had expected. Inevitably, someone at the back of the room raised his hand. The pontiff nodded at him and smiled. "I have a funny feeling I know what you're going to ask, but go ahead."

The listener chuckled. "Thank you, Holiness. Although I can't be entirely certain, I could have sworn that there was no pope between Clement IV and Gregory X, only a three-year sede vacante. Furthermore, I could have also sworn that there WAS no John XX."

John Paul nodded. "Excellent question, Cardinal. Indeed, if you look at most of the religious textbooks we were taught from, you would have been correct. Clement IV died in 1268 and was succeeded by Gregory X in 1271. However, you have to consider the possibility that John XX was stricken from the history books for some odd reason. That is why John XX remains anonymous...and why the next John didn't take the name John XX."

The cardinal shook his head. "How can an entire papal reign be stripped from the records? You can't just lose a pope, even someone who reigned for only three years. We have records from men who had much shorter reigns, even in the Middle Ages."

John Paul smiled. "Simple. Everyone was instructed to forget about John."

"Why? What did he do? Was he an apostate, antipope, or something like that? Did he father children out of wedlock?"

John Paul shrugged. "Nope, and even if John had done so that would not have been enough to get the pope kicked out of the list. We've got the Borgias in the list and they weren't exactly people Christ would have been proud of."

"Then what happened? And where'd you get this information from?"

John Paul winked at him. "The wizards, of course. Recall that I am a wizard, and the wizards did not remove John XX from the papal registry."

Murmurs went through the audience as the pontiff's interrogator thought for a moment. Finally, it occurred to him. "Are you telling me...that John XX was a wizard?"

The Pope's smile broadened. "Of course not. John XX was not a wizard."

"Then what was he?"

"A witch, Cardinal. She was a witch. All that's left of her reign is the legend of Pope Joan."

The audience erupted in amazement, as John Paul knew they would have. Some of the more
conservative members looked a bit upset, but they respected John Paul too much to leave. Several of the liberals cheered, as did all of the women and most of the wizards. A witch as a Pope! Who'd have even thought of this? John Paul waited for the din to subside and began his story.

"The woman we now know as Pope John XX was born in Ferrara, Italy, in early 1218 to the then-powerful Amarlina Wizarding family. Both of her parents were wizards, and they found that she was a brilliant student as soon as she entered school. She was tested for Wizarding ability and admitted to the Wizarding school at Beauxbatons, where she graduated a year early, in 1234, and earned the position of Head Girl. The documents I received from Beauxbatons indicate that people revered the teenage Maria Amarlina in the same way they revere Hermione Granger today. There was one major difference, however: the Statute of Secrecy was not yet in force, so she was allowed to cast spells in the presence of Muggles in certain situations.

"Everyone expected her to be Ferrara's representative in her kingdom's Ministry of Magic when she got older. It was not surprising, therefore, that she got an internship in the Wizarding government of Ferrara almost immediately after she graduated. She didn't do anything big, but it was enough for her to put her foot in the door. When she turned seventeen and came of age, her position became permanent and she began making her way up the corporate ladder, so to speak.

"In 1237, while working at her position in Ferrara, she met a wealthy Muggle named Vittorio Gandolfo in the Muggle Liaison Office. The two of them hit it off almost immediately, and in early 1238 the Gandolfos and the Amarlinas agreed to the proposed marriage. Amarlina and Gandolfo were married in late 1238, and their son Antonio was born in January 1240. Our future pope seemed well on her way to becoming a powerful member of Wizarding Italy.

"However, life took an unexpected turn for her. Her husband proved to be extremely religious, and she agreed to increase her level of observance somewhat so that little Antonio could be given a decent Catholic upbringing. Unfortunately, Vittorio's piety caused him to make a terrible mistake: signing up for the crusade of 1241. Hoping to come back with some plunder for his growing family, he went off to the Holy Land. He came back in a body bag, a Saracen arrow through his throat."

John Paul took a sip of water and continued. "Our Maria was devastated by this turn of events, and she sought solace by spending time visiting a convent in Ferrara. She eventually got to know many of the nuns and found that life in a nunnery seemed to fit her scholarly personality. As a result, in 1246 Maria Amarlina made arrangements to have her son home-schooled by wizards so she could join as a full-time sister. Once that was done, she left her career in the Ministry behind her and became a nun, Sister Mary Joanna.

"Sister Mary Joanna enjoyed life as a nun and used her magic a great deal to help the women get by and improve the lives of the people in and around the nunnery. The Mother Superior picked her out for special services almost immediately, and by the time she was 45 she had been elevated to Mother Superior. By the time Mary Joanna had taken the corner office, so to speak, the convent had become renowned through the world for its mixture of Muggle and Wizarding artifacts, as well as for its comfortable lifestyle made possible by the presence of a witch in the house.

"Mary Joanna -- who soon started going simply by Joanna because a good 50% of the sisters were Mary Something -- promptly began doing things which attracted the attention of Ministries of Magic and clergy all over the world. She was using spells to feed the hungry, clothe the sick, and so forth. She encouraged study, both magical and mundane, and the convent's library became one of the wonders of Ferrara. Imagine a cross between Hermione Granger and Mother Teresa and you probably won't be far off. Meanwhile, she received word that her son Antonio had graduated Durmstrang after having served a prefect. Antonio proved to be as capable a wizard -- and as
religious -- as she and her late husband had been, a combination which would get both him and Joanna into trouble later.

"By 1267, Joanna had cemented her reputation as a powerful witch, well-respected abbess, great scholar, and gifted diplomat. She had made connections all over Europe -- among the wizards, the Muggles, and the clergy. At a time when Italy was becoming increasingly divided, Joanna was one of the few people everyone could agree upon."

The crowd started murmuring again. It was fairly obvious what was going to happen next.

The pontiff continued. "Now we get to history as you know it. In September 1268, Pope Clement IV died and the Conclave deadlocked over whom to name as his successor. The deadlock continued for a couple of months, and people started to get fed up. Finally, in early 1269, one of the Muggles in the Conclave joked that they should make Joanna the pope. This, of course, got the Wizarding Cardinals talking. They brought out some old texts, yet it took them a good thirty minutes to convince the rest of the Conclave that, in theory, a female wizard was preferable to a male Muggle. Suddenly, people began thinking that a puppet Joanna under a fake name might be a good consensus candidate.

"People agreed that Joanna had the personality suited to be a good pope. However a good 75% of the members of the Conclave refused to go along with a woman as Pope. They eventually agreed to consider Joanna if and only if they couldn't find anyone else they could agree on. Which, of course, proved to be the case.

"Finally, in March 1279, the Conclave caved in and elected Joanna Pope. Joanna was absolutely astounded by this decision, and claimed that she was better suited for a life at the nunnery. However, she eventually agreed to take the title as long as the Conclave continued searching for another option.

"She took a leave of absence from the nunnery for 'private meditation', donned a monk's robes, and came to Rome as "Brother Marius". The cardinals immediately escorted her to St. Peter's Basilica, where she was declared Pope John XX. Her magical roots and gender were known only to the cardinals, the wizards, and the nuns at her convent. When she spoke in public, she took advantage of the fact that a healthy lifestyle as a witch made her about as tall as most men. She also had a deep voice, so she could pass as a man very easily."

"She took office on March 22, 1279 and didn't have any major problems for the first two years. The baggy ceremonial robes hid her figure, and the fact that she was 51 at her coronation made it so that she was too old for her to exhibit...other issues pertaining to her gender. Her career proved to be well...mundane. She was a good pope, but so were many of her colleagues. There weren't any disasters during her reign, nor were there many earth-shattering triumphs. She was probably like many of the other popes in the Middle Ages, people whom we have long forgotten."

The pontiff grimaced. "Everything changed, however, in 1270, when her son Antonio's religious fervor got the best of him. Determined to avenge his father's death at the hands of the Saracens, Antonio enlisted in what we now know as the Eighth Crusade. For the longest time, he hid his magical abilities because he was scared of how the more conservative pilgrims would react. Nevertheless, in early 1271 the pilgrims were ambushed by a Saracen patrol and would have likely been annihilated had Antonio not used magic to defend them. The Saracens fled, of course -- as did a good half of the pilgrims, thinking that Satan had infiltrated the crusader forces. Antonio, finding himself confronted with a horde of angry crusaders, explained that he was a wizard and that his father John XX would explain everything. This raised eyebrows all over the world -- was John XX actually a supporter of wizards even though the Bible said magic was forbidden? And what was this about a supposedly celibate man having children?"
"Needless to say, the Church started an investigation. The cardinals tried to cover everything up as much as they could, but inevitably word leaked out that John XX was actually the former witch Mother Joanna. Not surprisingly, Christendom had collective apoplexy when they realized that they had elected a female pope. Kings all over Europe began demanding that Joanna resign and submit herself for punishment. She refused, claiming that wizards were preferable to Muggles when it came to dealing with spiritual dangers like the Devil. She explained the hierarchy as we know it: wizard, witch, Muggle man, Muggle woman. Since there were no wizards nominated in the Conclave, the papacy went to her. They promptly asked her which of her predecessors had been wizards. She didn't say, simply because it was extremely bad form to expose people as wizards without permission. Unfortunately, this refusal weakened her case and the protests against her continued.

"She was able to fend off her adversaries for a while. However, in May 1271 the reduced crusader army suffered a serious defeat in battle which proved to be a mixed blessing for Joanna: her son had survived and had been made an important commander, but her flock started screaming that the Saracen victory was a sign from God that the woman had to be taken off the throne of St. Peter. Eventually, even the cardinals started pressuring her, and in June 1271 she agreed to resign and return to the convent. She would continue serving as Mother Superior until her death on this date in 1316."

John looked around the room and saw that everyone was still looking at him with rapt attention. 
"Meanwhile, the papal conclave which had been convened in 1268 continued its deliberations, this time with much greater fervor now that their interim Pope had been deposed. Finally, in November 1271, they agreed to elect Gregory X Pope.

"Gregory, who had studied a lot about the Wizarding world, explained that there had been four Wizarding popes before 'John' and that he did not know who they were. He confirmed Joanna's interpretation of the Conclave hierarchy but recommended that future conclaves not elect witches as Popes for the sake of unity within Christendom. Technically, the law permitted witches as Popes. However, in practice they were just too controversial.

"The deposition of Joanna triggered a troubling backlash against wizards and nuns. Eventually, the wizards realized that only way to stop the fighting and maintain a unified front against the Saracens would be to Obliviate everyone into thinking Joanna had never been pope and that she had spent 1269-1271 safely ensconced in her nunnery. The wizards set to work doing this as Atlantis went to DEFCON 3. By the time 1285 had rolled around, virtually no one outside the Wizarding world had any proof that Joanna had ever been pope. After some discussion with the wizards and papal scribes, people began publicizing the theory that there had been a sede vacante throughout Joanna's reign in that an 'inappropriate' person had been pope. And if you take a look at the textbooks, that's exactly what you'll read today."

John Paul drew a deep breath as he finally finished his speech. "When the next pope named John came around, people told him that he could take the name John XX if he so chose. He refused, however, as he didn't want to be associated with a name which -- for some reason -- had cursed connotations. So, he became John XXI, and history as we know it continues from there.

"Well, that's all I have. If you have any questions, don't hesitate to ask."

A forest of hands appeared on the floor. John Paul winced: this was going to take a while...

To be continued...
Morni put down his butterbeer as he looked at the newspaper thoughtfully. The article discussed several recent rulings by the Muggle sports organization known as the International Olympic Committee. This committee was responsible for putting on an international sporting event every four years (or was it two? The wizard who had written the article hadn't been sure) in which athletes all around the world set aside their differences for a couple of weeks and engaged in some friendly competition. Morni was fully in support of such an organization: perhaps it would do for the vast majority of uneducated Muggles what the Quidditch World Cup did for decent wizards. Maybe it would distract the United States enough to ensure that the Muggle superpower wouldn't attack Syrdan.

At any rate, the IOC had just reported that it had discovered "anomalies" during the 1996 edition of the Olympic Games. Specifically, it had ruled that the French fourth-place finish in one of the relay races had been a result of "magical foul play which was not appropriate for games in an international competition". In other words, someone had hexed the French runner just to make sure that the French didn't win. Morni chuckled when he read that: apparently the free Muggles were as prone to cheating as the wizards were.

The IOC had decided that since the wizard who had been responsible for the attack had been a citizen of the nation which had placed third, the cheater's nation would surrender its bronze medal to the French. The cheater had protested vigorously, of course, but to no avail. The IOC warned people that magic would be considered the equivalent of a performance-enhancing drug in future Olympics and that athletes and fans would not be allowed to use magic to influence the outcomes of the races.

In other news, the IOC also reported that Quidditch would be added to the Winter Olympic program starting in 2002, when the Quidditch World Cup would become part of the Olympic Games. Matches would be limited to two hours in duration, and they would be held outdoors in the hemisphere opposite that of the primary Winter Olympics venue. Many of the wizards had recommended that matches be held during the Summer Games, but the IOC had rejected that because it would throw the traditional four-year cycle of the Quidditch World Cup out of whack.

In a decision which had shocked sports fans all over the, Atlantis had recommended that the 2004 Olympic Games be awarded to the capital of Xylenda, the Hidden Nation which had taken the lead in voluntarily announcing itself to the world. Athletes, guests, and reporters would be issued visas to visit Xylenda, and the Xylend had agreed to deactivate their Protector no later than 2001. The Xylend boasted that it would improve tourism and prove that the Xylend were welcoming towards the Muggles of the world.

Great, thought Morni. Now all of our yahoos are going to start claiming that they've got Olympic tickets and will want to "visit" Xylenda. It was becoming increasingly obvious that the recent
reforms handed down by the Executive Committee hadn't been enough to appease the yahoos. If anything, they had whetted the yahoos' appetite and left them clamoring for more. Supposedly the southwest part of the country was now infested with Syrdani Muggle Resistance Movement cells, and there had been sporadic outbursts of fighting there. Morni wondered how much more the Executive Committee could give up before the wizards lost control of the Muggles completely.

He turned back to his butterbeer and had the drink halfway to his mouth when suddenly everyone in the bar started chattering and whistling excitedly. Curious, he looked towards the entrance and found himself staring into the eyes of the most attractive woman he had ever seen.

He spilled his drink on the floor as he ogled her. He was totally smitten with her, and he apparently forgot for a few moments that he was married. Fortunately, his wife wasn't here right now, so he got away with it. Judging from the high-pitched swear and punch he heard a few booths away, one of the other guests hadn't been as lucky.

He watched as the woman sashayed into the tavern and asked for a butterbeer. Smiling, she turned and addressed the crowd. She seemed pleased to have gotten their undivided attention.

"Good evening, gentlemen. I'm sorry if I'm bothering you, but my name is Arot sen-Selur and I was wondering if there are any rooms here at the inn. My sorority sisters and I are looking for a place to hold a regional convention, and we were told this place was good."

All eyes moved to the proprietor, who had his back to the woman. As he started turning around, he said: "I'm sorry, ma'am, but we don't --"

Then he caught sight of the woman. His jaw dropped as he took in the wonderful sight. Eventually, he managed to continue: "I'll see what we can do, ma'am. Most of our rooms are booked, but if you ladies are willing to sleep two or three to a room we may be able to house you. How many people will be in your party, ma'am."

In response, the woman whistled, and ten more women as hot as she was appeared in the doorway. Jerking her head back at the newcomers, the first woman nodded. "We'll start with fifty, sir."

The proprietor looked at her warily as Morni tried to convince some of his body parts to pretend the women weren't there. "Fifty? We can't fit fifty more people here. However, if you wish, I'll start calling around to see if anyone else has any openings for the people we can't host."

The woman nodded. "Please do. We really like this part of the country."

Morni watched as the proprietor sent owls out to several of the other inns in the area. Minutes later, the owls returned to report that a large group of women had filled up their rooms as well. One of them went so far as to report that large numbers of attractive women had booked rooms in their establishments as well.

Morni blinked. How big was this sorority? And why were they spending time here if there weren't any major universities in this area?

Suddenly, one of the men near the front of the room raised his hand. "Hey, cuddles! You can stay with me! I've got a guest bedroom!" His response was echoed by several people, the vast majority of whom did not have wives sitting next to them.

The eleven women looked around the room and giggled girlishly. "Wow, wow! How are we
supposed to repay you for your hospitality? We really appreciate this!

The Tipsy Troll's patrons spent the next five minutes trying to explain it to them...at length.

Louise Lemarni watched as six of her sisters took over the Tipsy Troll and five others went off with several of the men who had been drinking in the tavern at the time. This was going to be a very good beachhead for Nestor, she thought. This was one inn she had under her control. So far so good.

She turned around to see an entire barnyard's worth of animals heading in her direction. They all had notes in their clause, paws, and hands. They were from several of the other commanders in the expeditionary force. Jessica's division had taken over Synoda, Michelle was now running Syblen, and Julie was occupying Syzarti even as she wrote the letter. An area a good twenty miles across was now completely enthralled by the young veela.

Louise sent a message back to home base. "All right, Olivia. Send the rest of them over. We've got the area secured."

Twenty minutes later, Morni had left the bar depressed that he hadn't gotten one of the eleven women. Hanging his head, he made his way over to the seacoast to ponder the waves for a moment.

Movement caught his eyes, and he looked up into the air where a large flock of birds was flying in his direction. They seemed to be huge birds, however. They were traveling in formation, almost like a bunch of soldiers marching towards a target. And the lock was HUGE -- at least a thousand, possibly more.

Suddenly, a thought hit him and his face blanched. He watched as the birds flew over his head and started landing in various positions on the ground. One of them landed near him, blurred for a moment, and suddenly transformed itself into another attractive young woman. And at that moment, he suddenly realized what he was seeing.

He thought back to the woman's name at the bar. Arot sen-Selur. Or, if you wrote it backwards, Nestora Rules.

He brought his wand out and pointed it at the woman. "Merlin's beard! You're veela! This is a Nestorian invasion!"

The woman shrugged and Disarmed him. "I wouldn't spread that around if I were you. You could get yourself killed. If I were you, I'd ask for Obliviation or cooperate with us."

Morni looked around frantically for his wand, only to find it in the woman's hand. Hoping he sounded threatening, he said: "I am no traitor, veela. I know what you animals are trying to do. What's more, I know you won't kill me as you don't kill civilians unless there's no alternative. You're going to let me go right now."

The veela grunted and pointed her wand at him. "I'd say exposing our forces is a major risk, sir. How have you been keeping up with your religious duties? I hope the Five Gods accept your soul."

Morni cringed. "No! Please, don't!"

The veela looked at him again. Finally, after what seemed an eternity, she put her wand away and picked up something which appeared to be a metal tube with a handle. She must be using it as a wand holder, he thought.
She sighed. "I suppose you're right. You haven't done anything to me, and you're a civilian so I suppose I can't kill you or use magic, harpy form, or fireballs against you without authorization."

Morni breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm glad we agree --"

That's as far as he got before the veela's arm lashed out and hit him on the head with the butt of an American-made gun. The Syrdani man crumpled to the ground, and the veela checked for a minute to make sure he wasn't seriously injured. Confirming that he was only knocked out, she Obliviated him and moved on to rejoin her forces.

The Nestorian attack on Syrdan had begun.

To be continued...

__________________

Update

#444: Only Ted Williams Can Hit 400
------------
Wednesday, November 27, 1996
Transfiguration Professor's Office
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
United Kingdom
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/3.7%
------------
NEXT UP: Those Penguins Make the One In Batman Look Good
------------
Hugh de Lourdes had been afraid of this. When Armando Dippet's widow had called him and asked to speak with him, he suspected he knew what it would be about.

He had always thought that his master's old policy of giving about two dozen people the Elixir of Life had been a mistake. Granted, Dr. Flamel had abandoned that practice back in the early 1970's when the first war against the Death Eaters had broken out, and by the time the original Philosopher's Stone had been destroyed in 1992 only the two Flamels and Hugh had still been using it. Flamel giving it to his wife made a lot of sense, and it was only fair that Hugh -- who as Flamel's old apprentice had did most of the work, similar to a graduate student today -- would get unlimited use of the stuff.

Not many people had realized that Armando Dippet had been born in 1637 and that his wife Sofia had been born in 1640. Granted, everyone had assumed that Dumbledore's predecessor at Hogwarts had been old, maybe in his 80's or so. After all, Professor Dippet had had the appearance of a man in his 80's. They would have gone nuts, however, had they realized how old he actually was. And it would have only been a matter of time until a lot of people started looking suspiciously at Nicholas Flamel.

Of the 25 people who had been given access to the Elixir of Life, Hugh suspected that 13 or 14 were still alive twenty years after their supply of Elixir had been cut off. Hugh certainly knew about himself, Dr. Flamel, and Mrs. Flamel. Sofia Dippet was clearly still alive, so that made four. Who else was still out there, miffed that Flamel had seen fit to restrict who got the Elixir?

Hoping that this interview wouldn't be a disaster, he told Mrs. Dippet to come into his office.
Professor Dippet's widow proved to be a white-haired woman who had appeared to be in her late 90's and likely didn't have much longer to go. She walked with a cane and her face was a mass of wrinkles. At her side was the Dippets' 320-year-old son, whom Armando had apparently been feeding the Elixir even though Flamel had cautioned him not to do that. Ernesto Dippet looked to be in his sixties or so and could still walk unaided.

Hugh had to bend down to address the frail old woman. "Good afternoon, Mrs. Dippet. How are you?"

Sofia shrugged, and when she spoke her voice was hoarse. "I'm definitely getting old, Hugh. I don't know how much longer I have left. Losing my husband back in 1992 didn't help to say the least."

"That's understandable, Mrs. Dippet. If you wish, I can recommend some counselors for people who have recently lost their loved ones."

Sofia spat a Spanish expletive at him. "I highly doubt that counselors will know what to do when the client is trying to deal with the end of a 323-year-long marriage. And who are you to judge? You never married and don't know what it's like."

Hugh forced himself to remain calm. "On the contrary. My master and his wife have been together for almost twice that --"

Sofia cut him off. "And it's your master's fault that I'm in this predicament right now. His decision to stop giving out the Elixir of Life as freely cost me my health and eventually cost my husband his life. And now to add insult to injury, Albus Dumbledore instructed him to destroy the Stone just before Armando died!"

Hugh sat down and put his head in his hands. Finally, he looked back up at his two visitors. "I believe Dr. Flamel explained his reasoning. The powerful dark wizard Voldmeort had just returned, a man well versed in the Dark Arts and probably the greatest threat to mankind since Boris Koschei. He had already tried to steal the Philosopher's Stone, going so far as to possess a Hogwarts professor to try to get at it. My master trusts Dumbledore's judgment. You should as well."

Ernesto spoke in his deep voice. "Easy for you to say -- you didn't lose your father because of that decision. Or your master, for that matter."

Hugh sighed. "Voldemort was responsible for a Judgment Day. That alone should tell you how serious this was. Can you imagine what would have happened had that man actually gained access to immortality? Although Mrs. Flamel and I originally balked at the idea of him destroying the Stone, Dumbledore appeared to have been spot on. Destroying the Stone was the right decision, even though it was distasteful at the time."

Mrs. Dippet looked at Hugh slyly. "I see. And now that Voldemort is dead, what is preventing you from recreating the Stone?"

Hugh hesitated for a moment -- she hadn't been the first person to make that suggestion. Nevertheless, he had seen enough to answer the question. "Your request would have been reasonable had it not been for one thing."

"Oh? And what's that?"

"The fall of the Statute of Secrecy shortly before Voldemort's death. The danger now is not
Voldemort getting the Stone. It's the possibility of the Muggles getting the Stone. Can you imagine what would happen to civilization if someone publicized the means to achieve eternal youth and health?"

Sofia glared at him. "And how would the Muggles get the Stone?"

Hugh suppressed the urge to scream. "Apparently you haven't kept up with the news. Shortly after the Super Bowl Breach, the Muggles found out about the Stone and broke into my master's house to steal his diary, which contained complete instructions for building the Stone. A Muggle pharmaceutical company then hired an alchemist to create a Stone and start selling the Elixir of Life."

Sofia stared at her son and then at Hugh. "Really? Which company is this? I should get in touch with them."

Hugh bit his lip. "Don't bother, Mrs. Dippet. When my master found out about Harold-Green's Elixir program, he went up in flames. That, incidentally, was part of the reason Dumbledore had Dr. Flamel succeed him as Minister of Magic shortly after Judgment Day. Flamel worked together with the American authorities to confiscate the Stones as Harold-Green created them. The crisis ended with one Stone in the hands of the Pentagon, one in the hands of the American Department of Magic, and all copies of my master's diary destroyed so that Harold-Green can't make any new copies from scratch."

Sofia threw up her hands. "Sounds rather hypocritical of him to try to keep the Stone from the Muggles considering that one of the Stones wound up in the hands of the Muggle defense forces."

"I agree, Flamel didn't like that all that much. However, without an alchemist -- and without the instructions -- they're not going to be able to do much."

Sofia stared at him, hard. "And what happens if they find an alchemist capable of reverse-engineering the Elixir? Then the Elixir will leak out into the Muggle world again even though your master supposedly doesn't want that."

Hugh was finding it harder and harder to suppress his frustration. "They're not going to be able to do it without at least SOME magical support. Besides, you have to understand that unless I'm very badly mistaken, the Stone in the Pentagon has top-secret classification. No one is going to get access to it. At the very least, it's at a security level equivalent to that of the Deathgates and so forth in the Department of Mysteries. Trust me, Mrs. Dippet. Nothing is going to come of this. The Muggles are not getting access to that Stone."

Sofia muttered to herself a little as Ernesto looked at him thoughtfully. "Hugh, there could be another option. You said that you were Dr. Flamel's apprentice, right? You helped him with the Stone?"

Hugh nodded. "That's right."

"You did most of the work developing the Stone, similar to a modern graduate student? And you got access to the Elixir as a result?"

"Yes."

Ernesto grinned. "Good. Where are your notes from your apprenticeship days? The notes whose results you dictated to Flamel back in the 1300's?"
Hugh swore -- he was afraid someone would figure out he still had them. "Under lock, key, and several powerful enchantments. Yes, I've got another copy of the instructions. And they're not coming out unless someone gives me a very good reason. And I mean a VERY good reason."

Ernesto pointed to his mother. "How about saving her life? Like she said, she doesn't have much longer at the rate things are going."

Hugh fumed. "Much as I feel for you, I cannot let one person's feelings dictate how I will handle what could very well be one of the most dangerous inventions in the history of the human race."

Sofia hissed at him. "Your master killed my husband, Hugh. I demand compensation."

"He did not kill your husband, Mrs. Dippet! He realized that the human race is not yet deserving of immortality!"

"Oh really? Who are you to say that immortality is immoral while you yourself were on the Stone? And how can you say that Dr. Flamel did not kill my husband? By destroying that Stone, he sentenced my husband, me, and my son to death. An undeserving death, I might add, considering my husband's contribution to the Spanish and British educational institutions!"

"You two should be happy you're still alive! Had Dr. Flamel not respected your work, he would not have given you the Elixir and you would have passed on in the eighteenth century! As it is, even I will pass on in maybe forty or fifty years."

Sofia laughed evilly. "Why do I doubt that? When you're my age --"

"I'm already older than you are!"

"-- physically, I mean -- that Stone is going to come out again. You're going to regret not having been on the Stone the whole time. You're probably going to Fidelius the Stone to yourself so no one else can use it and then live on forever, afraid of death."

Hugh blinked. Fidelius the Stone to himself once Flamel and his wife pass on and not tell anyone? He hadn't thought of that.

Ernesto turned to his mother. "Mother, do you think we should talk to the Pentagon and offer them our services in reconstructing the Elixir?"

Hugh started to lose his temper. "It's not going to work. You're not alchemists, you likely won't get through the security checkpoints, and they can probably get alchemists from somewhere else."

Sofia Dippet unleashed a long string of Spanish expletives. "This was a waste of time, Ernesto. Here, help me up so I can get on with what's left of my life. However little that may be."

Hugh waved Ernesto aside and helped Mrs. Dippet up -- he was the host, after all, and proprieties needed to be observed. Gently, he said, "I'm sorry, Mrs. Dippet, but I have no choice. I'm sentencing myself, as well as everyone else I know, to death. But when the alternative is possibly the collapse of civilization...Mrs. Dippet, you are currently the fourth-oldest person in the world. You must have gained a lot of wisdom over the years. If you think this over, you'll have to understand that this MUST be done."

The Dippets said nothing as Ernesto helped his mother to the door. As they were about to leave, Mrs.
Dippet turned back to Hugh.

"Methuselah lived for 969 years, and I am barely a third of the way through that. Rest assured, Hugh, the Stone will rise again. Given Harold-Green's work and the alchemists out there, it is only a matter of time. And when it does reappear, whoever brings it out will earn the complete support of myself and quite possibly the Spanish Ministry of Magic. Until then, adios."

And with that, she put on her wimple and made her way out of the office, leaving behind a very troubled (and thoughtful), Hugh de Lourdes.

To be continued...

Update #445: Those Penguins Make the One In Batman Look Good

Wednesday, November 27, 1996
Executive Council Chamber
Syrdasch
Syrdan
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/3.9%

NEXT UP: I Didn't Know They Had Mermaid Veela!

Supreme Chancellor Vixar couldn't believe what he was hearing. "What? Are you sure about this?"

The Defense Minister nodded. "Yes, sir. There are reports of thousands of veela arriving on the southeast coast. A good thirty miles of coastline have already been...enthralled, for the lack of a better word."

Ortelu groaned. "That's not good. What have you been doing about it so far?"

The Defense Minister sat down and put his head in his hands. "This is going to be tricky, Chancellors. This is effectively a two-front war at this point because we've got to deal with the yahoo resistance movement as well. The SMRM is starting to make inroads in the southwestern parts of the island, and the rebellion has just gotten worse since Nestor invaded. I have a strong suspicion that the Nestorians are backing SMRM and are taking advantage of the yahoo rebellion to invade."

Siatnan growled at him: "Answer the question, Defense Minister. What are we doing to fix this problem?"

The Defense Minister sighed. "We've segregated our forces by gender and sent all of the women over to deal with the veela. The women naturally won't be susceptible to the veela's charm, and if we're lucky we'll be able to infiltrate their ranks. The men will stay behind dealing with SMRM."

Vixar shrugged. "I suppose that's the best we can do, Defense Minister. Do you think it will be enough?"

"I'm not sure, sir, for three reasons. First, Markali has thrown a platoon of witches into the invading forces, so our forces will have magic to deal with as well as veela. For another...we have reason to believe there will be male Nestorians in the invading army as well."
All three chancellors gasped. "MEN? That's impossible!"

The Defense Minister shook his head sadly. "Unfortunately, it is in fact possible. Although we all know it's impossible to have a pure male veela, you can have half-veela men with a veela mother and a human father. These men won't be able to turn into harpies or shoot fireballs at us. However, they still have the ability to charm people of the opposing gender."

Siatnan got it immediately. "Shit! They knew we'd send women, so they send men out in the vanguard of the army to turn all of our units into quivering masses of drooling meat. The regular units then come up behind us and smash us."

"Exactly, ma'am. If I were Markali, I'd send the men in stark naked so they'll be able to impress us the most."

Ortelu shook her head. "I don't see how they can do that, Defense Minister. Won't the Nestorian men distract their own troops and vice versa?"

"I'm afraid not, ma'am. We have picked up intelligence that the Nestorian units are wearing blindfolds which will protect them against their colleagues' charms. We'll be affected, and they will not."

Siatnan grated: "Can we use the Accio spell to steal their blindfolds and have them flirt with each other while we mop them up? We've almost certainly got more wizards than they do."

The Defense Minister's eyes widened. "That may not be a bad idea, ma'am. I'll see that the order gets passed down the chain of command. However, back to the subject at hand -- our third complication."

"Oh? And what's that?"

The Defense Minister paused for a moment, then groaned. "We have reason to believe that several of these women have been armed with Muggle projectile weapons in addition to their wands."

Siatnan swore. "The United States is getting involved."

The Defense Minister nodded. "That's a distinct possibility, ma'am. Needless to say, that if the Muggle world gets involved this could escalate very rapidly. Atlantis claims that we've been hovering at DEFCON 3 for a while now. If this becomes a major Muggle/Wizarding war with the Judgment Day deterrent out of use until June 2001..."

Vixar cut in. "The American president can't be stupid enough to escalate this particularly after the reforms we've already introduced."

"Clinton may have no choice -- the ordinary citizens of the United States have been turned against us, albeit in error, by Altri's refugees. If he's a good leader, he'll have to obey the requests of his people."

Siatnan threw her hands up. "Defense Minister, do you have any GOOD news at least?"

The Defense Minister's mood brightened somewhat. "The initial Nestorian advance has been blunted, and for the time being we've been holding our own. We'll need more assistance to push them back into the sea again."
Siatnan turned to face Vixar. "I think it's time to call upon Tsalasia and the Order of the Great Bear. Thank the Five Gods for that alliance."

Vixar winced. "Tsalasia, fine. However, I'm still somewhat reluctant to bring Zygonov and his movement into it. After all, he's associated with Koschei. I know, Zygonov promised us that we'd take over Nestor. However, right now we're on the defensive. I don't think we're in a position to benefit from Zygonov's help yet. We need more men...well, women."

"What about the merpeople?"

The Defense Minister scratched his chin. "You know, that might not be a bad idea. Nestor is an island, which means the merpeople can get at it from all sides underwater. Imagine an amphibious assault on the entire coast. I like it, to be honest. As long as civilians are off limits, I'd be up for that."

Siatnan grunted. "Civilians are off limits."

"Yes, ma'am. The Nestorian forces have been decent enough to not attack any of our civilians, so we will do the same. The only way the civilians will get in the way here would possibly be in the form of charmed collaborators, in which case they are not to be harmed because it was not their fault."

Ortelu looked out the window, thought for a moment, then turned slowly back to the Defense Minister. "We have reason to believe that we may be able to launch a mission to assassinate President Clinton and have the veela blamed for it. What's your opinion of that?"

The Defense Minister shook his head vehemently. "Absolutely not. They will almost certainly retaliate in kind and knock out one, or possibly all three, of you. And remember the law -- once one of you dies, the other two have to resign and elections for three new chancellors have to be held within two months. Trust me, Chancellors, we don't want to have a vacancy at the top during a war."

Siatnan looked at him like he was stupid. "They're Americans. They can't GET to us with the Protector up."

The Defense Minister glared at her. "So they tell the veela to do it for them. Big deal. Trust me, we're not taking the risk. And speaking of the Protector, if I were you I'd start deploying forces to guard the Protector. If the United States wants to invade us directly, they'd have the veela come over and do to us what Two Exceeds Four did to Houyhnhnm."

All eyes turned to Vixar. As the Supreme Chancellor, he had the final say.

Vixar drew a deep breath. "May the Five Gods help us all. All right, here's what we will do. We'll call over the Tsalal ambassador and formally request military support from those trained penguins down there. Once we're done with her, get in touch with the merpeople and see what they can do to harass Nestor. Instruct them to use female troops only. Hopefully this will force them to pull some soldiers out of here to deal with the defense of their home island. Defense Minister, warn our troops there may be men in the invading army which could distract our women, and while you're there start thinking of ways to mass-produce those blindfolds. Finally, start telling everyone that Tsalal help may be on the way. That will improve our morale and make Clinton start thinking twice about getting involved here."

----------

Atlantis

-------
Dagher swore when he saw the report. "This is NOT good. We DO NOT want that mess in the Atlantic escalating further."

Ndukaku raised his hands in resignation. "Unfortunately, there isn't much we can do about that right now. We're still at DEFCON 3, after all."

"What's the current number?"

Ndukaku bit his lip. "3.9%. It's gone up 0.2% in the past few hours. In case you're wondering, that's over a 5% increase."

"Keep an eye on that number, Head Astrologer. I'm going to start making plans, and when that thing hits 5.0 we're going to DEFCON 2 and we're going to nail those troublemakers. I -- NOW WHAT?"

Ndukaku spun and saw that an urgent memo had hit the Grand Mugwump in the head and was trying to peck a hole in his forehead like a little bird. Muttering to himself, the Grand Mugwump unfolded the paper and looked at it. His eyes widened even further.

He swore and handed the document to Ndukaku. "Give this to Dialonis. I can't deal with it right now."

Ndukaku read the memo and whistled. "A Holocaust survivor is suing us for not saving the Jews, gypsies, and other ethnic groups from the Nazis and Obliviating the Holocaust victims to cover up the Statute of Secrecy?"

"That's what it says. Get Dialonis -- if he likes interacting with Muggles, now's the perfect opportunity. Do it. NOW!"

To be continued...

__________________

Update #445.5: Mordor calls for aid
------------

Wednesday, November 27, 1996
Executive Council Chamber
Syrdasch
Syrdan

The chamber's engraved marble gates swung open as Rasezar, newly minted Lord of Theramas - formerly a sleepy fishing town in north-east Syrdan, current site of some impressive amphibious construction projects -, liege lord of the Trapanandan political refugees (also known as traitorous Death Eater scum) recently rechristened Theramians, and bannerman of the Wizard's Republic of Syrdan, marched in, and bowed deeply and ceremoniously before the three Cancellors. "You called for me, my lord and ladies".

"You may rise, merwizard. You were summoned here for an urgent reason" began Vixar, "One that you may not be aware of yet. Forces of Nestor have invaded our southeast coast." The amphibious
spellcaster immediately responded: "Our wands are yours to command, my lord. Where shall we attack?"

Pleased by the vassal's eagerness, Vixar smirked. "Don't be so hasty, good Rasezar. First of all, we'd like to ask you for advice- read the reports, share your insight if you have any." Reading through the parchments, the ex-Trapanandan's head was filled with ideas. Finally, as he put it down, he exhaled deeply and presented his analysis of the situation.

"Your southern provinces are in serious trouble, that much is obvious. I suggest a total evacuation in the affected areas and a few dozen miles wide buffer zone, as much as you can spare without your wartime economy collapsing. Then, my men and any Syrdani willing and capable to do some serious collateral damage will swoop in from the air, unleashing area effect curses to kill everything on the ground from beyond Charm range. In my experience, airborne Veela tend to come in their harpy form, instead of on brooms. That way they can use their fireballs and nonverbal wand magic if they have it, and have more firepower than a human - or merpeople - caster could lay down... however, for all their destructive potential, they are just birds, with meager active gravity or inertia manipulation powers. In other words, they'd be outmanouvréd and massacred in a dogfight by even a smaller group of wizards on brooms."

"Interesting" mused Siatnan. "Do you have any personal experience fighting these beasts, or is this just book knowledge?" Rasezar then proceeded to tell her about the skirmishes in and over Houyhnhnmland he and his army fought in, against Veela fliers among others. "Granted, they were not military-trained Nestorians as far as I know, but their limitations appeared to be anatomical in nature, and thus, still valid", he concluded.

"Now wait just a minute," snapped the lady cancellor, "you propose we use the same spells you unleashed on Hynhynm? Thousands died there in less than a minute, and several times as many in the following days till the last fire was put out, the last poison gas cloud was dispelled, the last movement-seeking animated metal tentacle monster was exhausted..."

"...That's hardly the complete list of it, Cancellor. But as I said, it'd only be deployed after an evacuation- we'd only destroy the Veela and those already enthralled by them, along with some architecture. Consider this, my lady Siatnan: would you rather have something go up in flame, or left at the mercy of Nestor?"

"Well, call it plan C, as in, Completely Out of Other Options" said Vixar. "I'd rather avoid destroying our land to save it, not to mention the political ramifications of some influential outsiders becoming collateral damage if they wander by... how did we deal with the Veela last time we went to war? There is surprisingly little accurate data on that..."

"Invisible witch Imperiuses the Veela and orders it to order it's thralls to kill all Veela in the vicinity" replied the so far silent Ortelu. "Results are a load of dead Veela, and even more emotionally scarred wizards, many of whom have taken their lives with their own hands. And now, the witches aren't a safe way any longer, if they truly send their men too. We go with those plans, we're screwed either way... perhaps we should try to negotiate a peace..."
"Merlin's withered unmentionables, Ortelu, cease your defetist gibbering!" Shouted Vixar. "We have not considered an obvious option yet: let's use the merpeople spells... but not on our land. It is the Veela who attacked us- why not bring the war over to their island? Let's call back that Minister, tell him to organize hit-and-run airborn raiding parties to plunder Nestor, let's..."

He was briefly interrupted by a Patronus materializing before Rasezar and passing over a quick message, but seeing how the merwizard's face brightened up, he wasn't angry... just curious. "What news, merwizard?"

Rasezar, with a smile showing a bit too many teeth by human standards, let out a chuckle that sent shivers up the human's spine. "My subordinates just contacted me... after only a few casualties, they managed to revert one of us into our true form. Cancellors, I suggest we send some amphibious surprise along with those airborn raiding parties...

Vixar, too, let loose an evil laugh. "Yes, that's how I like it! Now, listen to me, I have this idea..."

To be continued...
Update #446 through Update #450

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Misagnissa

Update #446: I Didn't Know They Had Mermaid Veela!

Thursday, November 28, 1996
Costa Serena Cruise Ship
Between Cape Verde and Nestor
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/4.5%

NEXT UP: It's Better Than Animated Turkey Bowl XII

Plinio Raul Henriques couldn't believe that he was getting another chance to go through the Protector and visit Nestor again. Winning the lottery for a night of...adult revelry had been one thing. This time, however, things would be different.

The woman he had dallied with in Nestor had reported that she had gotten pregnant unexpectedly. After a brief discussion, the couple had agreed to keep the baby and raise the child as a Nestorian half-veela (or full veela in case it was a girl). As was usually the case, the father would get full visitation rights now that the Statute of Secrecy had come down. The only thing that Henriques had requested would be for the child to be baptized as well as be raised to honor the Five Gods.

He wasn't the only person on the ship, of course. Nestor had held another lottery about a month earlier, this time for a different town about to enter mating season. The winners had been announced last week, and a brand new group of horny twenty-somethings were now en route to the island. Henriques tried to explain to them what exactly would be awaiting them, but all that managed to do was get them even more excited.

Henriques would have submitted his name once again only to find that people who had won the lottery were not eligible to participate for the next three years. He soon realized, however, that he didn't want more accidents to occur and find that he had fathered a whole town in a few years.

Gabrielle had told him that she would be showing him around her town and trying to point out places which would be important in the raising of their child (the local Five Gods church, the school, recreational activities, communal child care facilities, and so forth). He would be one of the first Muggles to actually see this part of the island. She recommended that she bring Muggle recording devices in case he wanted to document any of this information.

The cruise ship was opulent, of course. In fact, it was even more opulent than he remembered. He had a strong suspicion that the Nestorian public relations committee had decked it out with magical spells to make it look fancier and -- at the very least -- get it through the Protector more efficiently. How else could there be smokeless candles hanging from the ceiling in the hallways without anything obviously holding them up?

The public address system announced that they were about one day from Nestor. There was no way for Henriques to tell, of course, as there weren't any land masses anywhere in sight. As far as he knew, Nestor was right over the horizon...if he would be able to see it at all outside the Protector.
Henriques spun and saw someone pointing frantically at the water. Merpeople? Had someone mentioned merpeople? He hadn't seen any merpeople near Nestor last time! He hurried back over to the railing and found himself in the middle of a large group of camera-toting, pointing passengers. He looked in the direction they were pointing and saw an amazing sight: no fewer than fifteen humanoid figures swimming alongside them. He brought out his camera and took a few shots. He didn't know how they were doing it, but the merpeople were probably doing a good thirty knots to keep up with the ship!

Henriques was a little worried. He didn't know if merpeople shared the same facial expressions as ordinary humans like himself. If they did, he would have thought that they look very serious and were planning to board the ship. That made no sense, however. There hadn't been a merman boarding party last time he had gone to Nestor.

He looked beyond the merpeople, back towards the horizon, and saw much to his surprise that the waves weren't going by that quickly anymore. Was it his imagination, or was the ship slowing down? Maybe they were going to be boarding the ship after all. It would certainly explain why the merpeople had been able to keep up with the vessel.

Ignoring the comments of the other passengers claiming that the merpeople were "veela pets", he hurried over to the bow of the ship to see if there was an obstacle in their path. As it turned out, there was a good reason the ship was slowing down. A good hundred merpeople were spread out in front of them, several of whom were riding some kind of strange aquatic animal. There were dolphins in the area as well who were staring at the vessel with little beady eyes. People here were screaming and waving at the merpeople, but they either didn't listen or ignored them.

Three of them were holding up a scroll with a huge sign on it. It was in Latin, and Henriques had to go back to his Catholic school days to try to translate the words. He didn't get all of them, but he got enough of them to figure out the gist of what they were saying.

**ATTENTION, MUGGLE VESSEL. WE ARE FROM THE NAUTICAL DIVISION OF THE NESTORIAN CUSTOMS DEPARTMENT. STOP AND PREPARE TO BE BOARDED. PLEASE DECLARE ANY MUGGLE TECHNOLOGY AND WEAPONS.**

Henriques's frown deepened. This didn't make sense. He'd been to Nestor before and the customs check had been done by veela on the island itself. Why would they be doing it out here with such urgency — and use merpeople instead of veela? Was someone smuggling weapons into Nestor on cruise ships? That was the only thing that it could be, he concluded. The only way for Muggle weapons to make it to Nestor would be to get Muggles over there, and the Muggles couldn't get through the Protector without using cruise ships.

The cruise ship slowed ponderously to a halt. By the time it had stopped, a good 20% of the passengers (and some of the crew) were on deck taking photographs of the merpeople and asking them to pose for the passengers. The merpeople, however, weren't cooperating. They were all business and didn't look like they knew how to smile.

The public address system came on as some of the merpeople disappeared below the railing where Henriques couldn't see them. "Attention, please. This is the captain speaking. We have just been contacted by the Nestorian customs agency. They will be doing a brief inspection here at sea to make..."
sure that we are not bringing in any Muggle weapons or other objects which do not belong in Nestorian territory. Please return to your staterooms and bring out all of your suitcases. Hopefully, we will be on our way within a couple of hours.

"They will be going room to room checking on each person's belongings. Note that they have difficulty speaking outside of the water, so you will have to communicate with them using the written word and sign language. They seem to be most familiar with Latin, though they seem to know bits and pieces of English.

"While they are on board, treat them like guests and the important public officials that they are. Yes, most of us haven't seen them before -- I certainly haven't, as this seems to be a new process -- but keep in mind that they would likely be offended if we started treating them as tourists attractions. That is all, ladies and gentlemen. I will report when we're about to get going again."

The guests made their way back towards their staterooms in a somewhat orderly mob, and it took Henriques a good five minutes to get back to his room. He looked at his roommate, who was already pulling his bags out of the closet near the entrance.

The roommate looked at him in excitement. "Wow! Merpeople! Did you know they existed -- Plinio, what's wrong?"

Henriques's face was grim. "I've been to Nestor before, and this didn't happen last time. Something fishy is going on here -- no pun intended. I went to Catholic school, and from what I saw on the sign at the front of the ship they're going to be checking for Muggle technology and possibly weapons."

The roommate frowned. "They're confiscating Muggle technology? Why would they do that?"

"I'm not sure. Keep your eyes open. Something really doesn't smell right here."

It took a good two hours for the customs agent to reach their stateroom. Finally, Henriques heard a knock on the door and saw a piece of parchment slid underneath it. Henriques picked it up and saw that it was written in both Latin and (bad) English.

THIS IS AGENT RASEZAR OF THE NESTORIAN CUSTOMS AGENCY. PLEASE LET US IN SO WE CAN INSPECT YOUR BELONGINGS. WE APOLOGIZE FOR THE INCONVENIENCE.

Henriques opened the door and moved out of the way as two people entered the room followed by one in with a few medals on his chest. Very interesting, Henriques thought. We got some bigwig here.

Rasezar and his buddies made their way into the room and started looking through the suitcases. Eventually, one of them let out a hideous noise and brought out Henriques's Swiss Army knife.

Rasezar's eyes narrowed and he started writing frantically on a sheet of paper: WHOSE BAG IS THIS?

Henriques raised his hand, and the two merman flunkies began pointing tridents at him. Oh, wonderful, he thought.

Rasezar continued. I'M AFRAID WE WILL HAVE TO CONFISCATE THIS UNTIL YOU LEAVE. ARE YOU GOING TO BE RETURNING ON THIS SHIP AS WELL?
Henriques shook his head.

YOU WILL BE ON NESTOR FOR A WHILE?

Henriques nodded.

HOW LONG WILL YOU BE HERE?

Henriques grabbed a notepad and wrote down: "A week or so."

Rasezar's eyes narrowed further. THAT IS A LONG TIME. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF YOUR VISIT?

"I came over earlier as a breeding lottery winner. The woman's name was Gabrielle, and apparently she didn't realize that it was the wrong time of the month for her to be having unprotected sex. I'm going over there now so we can discuss how exactly we're going to be raising the child."

The other two merpeople laughed at this, and even the stern Rasezar chuckled. NOW THIS MAKES SENSE. I DOUBT YOU'LL BE THE LAST MAN TO FIND HIMSELF IN THIS PREDICAMENT. I HOPE YOU DON'T MIND HAVING ABOUT 15 STEPCHILDREN, SIR.

Henriques blushed as Rasezar showed him the Swiss Army knife and gave him a piece of official-looking parchment. TAKE THIS DOCUMENT. WHEN YOU LEAVE, GIVE IT TO THE CUSTOMS AGENT AND YOU CAN GET YOUR WEAPON BACK. BE ADVISED THAT NESTOR HAS RECENTLY INITIATED AN AGGRESSIVE WAR WITH THE PEACEFUL STATE OF SYRDAN. IF YOU SEE SOLDIERS AROUND, STAY OUT OF THEIR WAY.

Henriques gulped. War? What war?

The merman flunkies made their way out of the room. Bowing politely to Henriques and his roommate, Rasezar left the room and shut the door behind him.

There was a brief moment of silence. Finally, the roommate turned to him. "You knocked up a veela here when you visited last time?"

Henriques sat down, embarrassed. "Yes. Neither of us expected it, and I get visitation rights once the child is born."

The roommate started chattering excitedly. "All right, what was it like? Huh? Tell me!"

Henriques looked thoughtfully at the door to the stateroom. "Something does not seem right here. He mentioned a war between Nestor and Syrdan, wherever that is. There was no such war going on during my last visit. And I can already tell you that when I went through customs last time in Nestor, it was done on the island itself...and they didn't take the Swiss Army knife."

"Maybe it's this war the merman was talking about."

"Possibly. Perhaps they're concerned that people from this Syrdan will get their hands on the weapons -- if this Syrdan really exists. Whatever it is, be careful. I've got a bad feeling about this."
Markali looked at her Customs Minister in astonishment. "What do you mean, the Serena got boarded by customs agents a day away from here?"

The Customs Minister nodded. "The captain just sent back one of the emergency albatrosses with a message. Apparently they've been boarded by a large group of merpeople and searched for weapons."

Markali fumed. "That can't be right. We do our customs search here on the island! Did you change the policies without telling me?"

"No, ma'am. If someone searched the boat, it was not us. And rest assured, to the best of my knowledge we don't employ merpeople."

"What's your interpretation this, Customs Minister?"

The Customs Minister hesitated a bit before speaking. "I don't know if it's just me, but it sounds a lot like Syrdan is trying to put up a blockade and is using merpeople to enforce it."

"Blockade? How can they put up a blockade if we can just fly over the merpeople's heads?"

"They must have discovered the American weapons on our soldiers and planned a counterattack. They're probably trying to get their hands on Muggle weapons, either to deprive us from them and/or even the score. Since we still have the Protector up, there are only two ways for Muggle weapons to get over here. First, have the American government smuggle us some through Ariadne, which is the way we got our first shipment. Second, have Muggle civilians bring them over on cruise ships, as they've done the five times since."

Markali swore. "The Syrdani have allied with the merpeople and are trying to use the American Muggle weapons against us. What did Roqteratl's ambassador say about this?"

The Customs Minister groaned. "She was outraged, and admitted under Veritaserum that she knows nothing about this."

Markali swore more vehemently. "Oh wonderful. A bunch of merpeople have gone rogue and sided with Syrdan. And unless I'm badly mistaken, Tsalasia as well."

The Customs Minister winced. "The penguins are involved too?"

"It looks like it. My guess, however, is that the Tsalal's dispute is more with the United States than with us. The Tsalal ambassador has told us that the penguin troops are under orders not to attack Nestorian forces unless it's in self defense."

The Customs Minister wilted. "Good lord. Three against two, and our ally can't help very well with the Protector in the way."

"Exactly. This leaves us with two choices: drop the Protector or ask the United States to start sending more and more materiel over. We can't drop the Protector on a moment's notice because it will cause serious climatic problems. From what I've been told, deactivating the Protector properly will cause the island to reappear in a span of 18 to 24 months."

The Customs Minister nodded. "I've heard that too."
Markali continued. "This means our only option is to increase American involvement in this war. I'm going to tell Clinton that we're going to need many more supplies and we can't rely on cruise ships to get them through."

The Customs Minister whistled. "This could escalate the war. If Clinton starts sending more materiel over, this run-of-the-cauldron fight with Syrdan could drag in Tsalasia and turn into a world war because of all of these alliances. Roqteratl could have a civil war, for all we know. Ma'am, with all do respect, I don't think we should get the US involved. From what I've read about Muggle history, this reminds me a lot of the way the Europe was set up in 1914. And our attack on southeastern Syrdan could have been the equivalent of Archduke Franz Ferdinand's assassination."

Markali shook her head. "It can't be all that bad. However, in this case we have no choice. If Syrdan has gotten its hands on Muggle weapons which were meant to come to us, we'll need more Muggle weapons to counter that. We need the US, I'm afraid. Right now, it's effectively three on one and the other guys are working of setting up a blockade. We have no choice."

"Tell the US to get out of there and hope that Tsalasia will go away. Once the US leaves it becomes a Wizarding-only war."

"All right, that leaves us two on one with the bad guys having Muggle weapons and a possible blockade while we don't."

The Customs Minister was about to respond when someone rushed in with a report. "Ma'am! We've got reports all around the island of increased merperson activity! There have been hundreds of sightings of merpeople!"

Markali spun. "What? What's going on? Are they doing anything to us?"

"No, ma'am. They're just watching for now. However, they've got some strange spider-like machines in the area with them."

Markali looked at the Customs Minister helplessly before responding. "Take the next two groups of soldiers destined for Syrdan and deploy them around the island to face off against the merpeople. They are only to attack in self-defense. Do you hear me? Self-defense only."

The visitor nodded and ran off. Markali muttered to herself: "How many troops do these rogue merpeople have?"

The Customs Minister sighed. "I don't know, ma'am."

"We need the US all the more so now. I'm going to talk to him and start making formal requests for assistance. Yes, it may expand the war, but we have no choice. In the meantime, I think it's time for us to reinstitute the draft."

The Customs Minister shook her head. "I don't like it, ma'am."

"I don't like it either, Customs Minister."

To be continued...
Finally, a day off. With all of the days I'd have to use for the Jewish holidays and an occasional forced workday on Sunday, it was good to have a vacation at last. Besides, even if I had gone in, there wouldn't have been anyone there to tell me what to do so I would have been bored to tears.

I had been forwarded an interesting email from my mother, who has always had a notorious tendency to forward corny jokes which were the most part not particularly funny. This message, however, actually had some substance to it.

On this Thanksgiving Day, consider the following if you find it difficult to find things to be thankful for. Remember that on June 20th, the world as you knew it came very close to ending in radioactive fire. The fact that you are alive today is, in one sense, a combination of the power of the wizards and the simple fact that you were not in the wrong place at the wrong time. Had those bombs gone off in your home town instead of New York, Ogdensburg, or Miami, you would not be here to receive this message. Regardless of where you live or where you came from, you have something to thankful for, and you would be well served to remember this.

Whoever had initiated this email thread did in fact have a point, especially for people in Boston. Had Kurchatova (I still couldn't believe that she was a witch after all these years) and her magical friends not summoned a rainstorm to beat down that cloud of nuclear fallout heading northeast from the ruins of New York, Boston could have very well suffered some serious casualties from the radiation.

As a matter of fact, Thomas Menino had organized a small ceremony downtown to remind Bostonians how close the city had come to suffering radiation poisoning. Supposedly he had managed to convince Kurchatova herself to give a little speech explaining what she and her colleagues had done. Considering that she was already a national hero and a well-known witch, it was almost certain that the speech would draw huge crowds.

No one could have predicted at the beginning of the year that wizards would appear among us. Once that had happened, however, there were plenty of ways which our lives could have been ruined yet we somehow managed to outlast them all. As the Passover prayer Dayeinu goes, many things had gone right, and dodging a large number of those bullets only to be struck by one later on would have been more than enough to be satisfied with.

Had the wizards been prevented from taking over the world, yet the Quabbin had still been contaminated, that would have been enough for us.

Had God/fate restored the water of the Quabbin but not prevented catastrophe in Cambridge, that would have been enough for us.

Had God/fate prevented catastrophe in Cambridge but allowed Voldemort to take over the world, that would have been enough for us.
Had God/fate prevented Voldemort from taking over the world but allowed Boston to be hit with radioactive fallout, that would have been enough for us.

Had God/fate prevented Boston from being hit with radioactive fallout yet caused me to lose my new job as a software engineer at Parametric, that would have been enough for us.

The list went on and on. I personally had suffered several hardships, to be certain: a forced evacuation to Curacao, a water shortage, a pay cut, a threat to my job, and so forth. Yet I was still alive, and I had to admit that was the most important thing of all.

Some things didn't change, however. As usual, our family had been invited to the Babchucks' house for Thanksgiving dinner, and my mother was screaming at me that I shouldn't come in blue jeans. There was a bit of a problem in that this conflicted with another tradition on Thanksgiving Day which started before the trip to the Babchucks: watching the various Thanksgiving day football games. The current game had the Chiefs playing the Lions, and the later game had the Redskins playing the Cowboys. I never really understood why the Lions and Cowboys always had to play on Thanksgiving. Had it ever occurred to someone to have the Lions and Cowboys play EACH OTHER on Thanksgiving?

What inevitably tended to happen is that the Babchucks' two sons and I would inevitably spend most of the time in the TV room while most of the people of my parents' generation made small talk in the living room. As an introvert, I couldn't handle having too many people around, and in some cases the presence of the people in the living room proved to be distracting. I would probably have to go out into the living room from time to time to talk a little to the other guests and to grab hot dogs before my father ate them all.

Making sure that I looked somewhat presentable, I hopped into the car and made my way over to the Babchucks with about nine minutes left in the second quarter. As I turned the television off, the announcer noticed that there would be a special event occurring during the halftime show of the first game. It probably had something to do with betting, as the announcer was constantly mentioning a Quad Pot. I was a bit surprised that they'd be having live gambling during Thanksgiving, but what would I know about this?

By the time I had made it over to the Babchucks it was just about halftime. After making the cursory small talk with the hosts and a few of the other guests (of whom I only knew about a third), I made my way into the television room where the other people were watching the game.

I got into the room just as the first half had come to a close. Wondering what form of gambling was going to take place, I glanced at the television set and saw something remarkable: a large forest of brooms making their way out into the field. Underneath the goalposts at opposite ends of the field were two huge pots filled with an amber liquid.

I frowned and turned to the two boys. "What's this? Some kind of Wizarding ceremony?"

The elder boy watched the TV intently. "I think it's a Wizarding sport. They're going to be demonstratin a Wizarding sport during halftime?"

"They're going to be betting on this sport? Four pots? Sounds a bit odd for daytime TV, doesn't it?"

The boy shook his head. "There's no gambling involved. The sport is called Quodpot, Q-U-O-D-P-O-T. It's the most popular Wizarding sport in the United States."
I gaped at him. "The wizards have invented their own sports? They don't play baseball and stuff like the rest of us?"

"I doubt it. Who'd have taught them if they don't interact with Muggles? Or at least didn't before the Statute of Secrecy fell?"

Now I was intrigued. I watched as a man in a fancy robe made his way out to midfield. He was accompanied by a man in a plain white robe. The man in the plain robe pointed his wand at the man with fancy robe, and the man in the fancy robe began to speak. The man's voice carried without the need for a microphone.

"Ladies and gentlemen, happy Thanksgiving to you. My name is Travis Radner, and I am the former Secretary of Magic here in the United States. I am now retired and occasionally serve as a consultant for the Department of Magic. With me here is Lucas McGee, the head of the American Quodpot League.

"It is our pleasure to host a Quodpot match here between the Mt. St. Helens Eruption and the Big Thicket Swamp Rats. These are two of the teams of the American Quodpot League, or AQL. This league has ten members and is dedicated to the playing Quodpot with integrity and passion. This matchup pits the 9-12 Eruption against the 11-10 Swamp Rats, with the Swamp Rats serving as the home team in this exhibition."

Radner reached into a box and withdrew a large red ball. "The rules of Quodpot are straightforward. Think of a combination of Musical Chairs and basketball. Teams of eleven players on each side spend time flying around the stadium trying to drop this ball (called a Quod) into the opponent's goal -- those cauldrons near the goal lines. This is similar to ball games you have seen before. However, there is a catch. At random times during the game, the ball will vanish. Any player in possession of the ball at the time it vanishes will be eliminated. That player must leave the field while the remaining players make their way back to their starting positions and wait for the ball to reappear.

"Note that this match will be played with a few variations. First, in traditional Quodpot the ball explodes instead of vanishes. We are currently experimenting with a vanishing ball which is safer for both the fans and the players. Second, the game ends in most cases when all players on one of the two sides have been eliminated, at which point the team with the most goals wins. Due to the fact that there is a time constraint here, however, the game will end after 15 minutes regardless of how many players are still on the field for both teams."

My eyebrows shot up as I looked at the two boys. "Cool game. Have you ever seen anything like this before?"

Both boys shook their heads. One of them said that it reminded him a bit of dodgeball: whoever gets hit with the ball at the end is out. But dodgeball on brooms? Forget it.

We watched the TV as Radner introduced the two teams. He then yielded the stage to McGee, who told the two captains to shake hands and moved out of the way to start the play by play.

"And they're off. Flynn has the Quod for the Swamp Rats. He passes it to Michaels, who passes it back to Flynn. Douglas gets in the way, but Flynn swerves around him. He's heading for the goal -- and the ball vanishes! Too bad, Swamp Rats. Flynn is out."

I watched as a furious Flynn made his way off the field to his bench. Meanwhile, at other side, an
volcanic eruption blasted its way into the sky ("that's not a real eruption, people! It's the Eruption's way of celebrating something good happening to their team!")

The two sides made their way back to the center of the stadium and play resumed. This time, the Eruption player threw the Quod out of bounds ("that's a foul, ladies and gentlemen: grounds for a turnover"). The Eruption regained control of the ball and hurried towards the goal. Even an opposing power play couldn't prevent Jones from making his way around the goalie, and the Swamp Rat midfielder swooped in and dropped the ball in the goal. A huge shower of sparks burst out of the bowl as McGee screamed: "Jones scores! 1-0 Swamp Rats! 13:25 left in the game."

The game looked pretty interesting, I thought. I had a strange feeling that people would start playing this in various high schools and colleges over the next few years. People would run with the ball instead of fly with it, of course, and the disappearing ball could be replaced with something which buzzed every minute or so on the average. It was certainly fast-paced. As far as I could tell, there weren't any timeouts other than when the ball disappeared and players were eliminated.

Finally, after fifteen minutes, McGee called it a game. The final score was 4-3 Swamp Rats, and three players had been eliminated from both sides. The cauldrons and Quodpot players were ushered off the field, giving some high school bands a chance to perform. Finally, the field was cleared once again and the third quarter began.

The elder Babchuck chuckled. "Newton South is going to have 5x5 versions of this game in the basketball court within a few weeks. Mark my words. Hell, I wouldn't be surprised if they take an 11x11 version onto the football field."

I nodded. "Neither would I. I highly doubt my high school will get as far as football, however. After all, we don't even have an ORDINARY football team!"

----------

Atlantis

----------

Sorcerer Pereira pulled over Ndukaku. "All right, I've done the calculations. We're stable at 4.5%. That's high DEFCON 3. Although most of the potential problems are still centered in and around the Black Sea, we're getting pretty concerned about what's happening in the Atlantic. If the United States's Muggle forces get dragged into this fight between those two hotheads, this will escalate in a hurry and the whole world could go up in flames. We DO NOT want the Muggles and wizards getting into a fight. And this time we don't have Judgment Day to fall back on."

Ndukaku looked at Pereira's report and nodded. "Believe me, Pereira. I know. I don't like it either."

Pereira hesitated. "Head Astrologer, I think there's something you may need to know. It's kind of a crazy idea, but I think it will solve a lot of our problems. And it would explain why the Apocalypsometer isn't even higher -- the prophecies have taken this into account."

Ndukaku turned to him. "And that is?"

Pereira's voice came out in a whisper. "There are a lot of people here in Atlantis which wouldn't mind if the Statute of Secrecy can be resealed and the damage caused by the Super Bowl Breach somewhat undone. I know it's difficult and it would likely need full Atlantis cooperation. If we get to DEFCON 1 -- or worse yet, break the 30% barrier once more -- we may want to consider that as an option."

Ndukaku didn't say anything for a long moment. Finally, the Head Astrologer's shoulders slumped as
he said quietly: "You're not the first to think that. Unfortunately, I don't think there's any way to get the genie back in the bottle here. This isn't the 14th century anymore. Word travels fast nowadays, and as you saw from the Super Bowl Breach even wizards can't plug everything that quickly anymore."

"Surely there must be SOMETHING you and Dagher can do!"

Ndukaku shook his head. "I'm afraid it's impossible, at least according to current technology. Researching that will likely take years, and if that fight between Syrdan and Nestor escalates it will do so in much less than a year. However, I don't want to give up completely. We can have Dialonis or someone add it to the Millennium Problems list as a last resort in case everything goes haywire and we don't have Judgment Day to fall back on."

Pereira nodded. "Thank you, Head Astrologer. Let's hope we don't have to use it."

"Agreed, Sorcerer Pereira. Now how about recomputing that percentage again? With our luck, it will hit 5.0 next time you try it and I'll have to barge over to Dagher's office so we can declare DEFCON 2 and activate the Atlantis rings."

To be continued...

__________________

Update #448: Uh, Jo, I Think Hermione Missed the Climax

Friday, November 28, 1996
Gryffindor Common Room
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
United Kingdom
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/4.5%

NEXT UP: It's the Isaac Sanders Show!

I really need to get one of these Quick-Quotes Quills, thought J. K. Rowling. Realizing that Hermione would be giving many interviews over the next few years (including a few with Rowling), Professor Dumbledore (which one was that again?) had convinced Headmaster Flitwick to get Hermione a magical device which would record anything spoken in its presence. It was an automatic dictating machine, so to speak, which transmitted spoken words directly to paper. Hermione had been forced to tinker with it at the beginning as it had come with a tendency to try to embellish the stories and make them far more interesting than they were. Whereas those would work for sensational movie reviews and so forth, that wouldn't do for a factual documentary.

From a Muggle perspective, virtually everything Hermione had discussed up to this point sounded like it would have come out of a fantasy television show or movie. The Philosopher's Stone, the existence of which had been leaked out into the world as Rowling knew it. People flying on brooms. Bizarre creatures and sporting events. Moving staircases. Talking paintings. Devices which warned people if they had forgotten something. A secret platform between platforms 9 and 10 of King's Cross Station. And this had all been during Hermione's first year! What would the next six years be like?

She had been looking forward to this day for a while. Her interviews had reached the point where
Hermione had become convinced that Severus Snape had planned to steal the Philosopher's Stone for Voldemort. In retrospect, that assumption had proven to be inaccurate as Snape had been a double agent for Dumbledore. To Snape's credit, the late Potions master had been able to fool virtually everyone -- including, most impressively, Voldemort himself. By the time Voldemort had found out, Snape had taken out most of his British minions in Operation Flying House.

After a brief hesitation, Hermione had decided to move today's interview into the Gryffindor common room. The Fat Lady had nearly suffered a heart attack when she realized that Muggles were about to enter the sacred chamber. It had taken a lot of fast talking for Hermione to let Rowing come in with her.

Hermione hadn't been kidding when she had said that the common room looked like it had been taken out of a four-star hotel. The nights were getting cold, and a fireplace was burning merrily in the hearth. The place was tastefully decorated and littered with comfortable chairs. There were several students reading books and doing homework in the area, but they knew well enough not to interview with these interviews.

Rowling brought out the Quick-Quotes Quill and began to ask questions. "All right, Hermione. You had reason to believe that Professor Snape was going to break into the third-floor corridor, get past the three-headed dog, and beat Professor Quirrell to the Philosopher's Stone. What happened next?"

Hermione began to recount the tale. "The first thing we had to do was make our way out of this tower and reach the room with Fluffy without being seen by any of the teachers or talkative students -- remember that corridor was off limits. There was a brief moment at the beginning when we ran into Neville Longbottom. He tried to stop us, claiming that we'd already cost Gryffindor a lot of points. We wound up being forced to hex him to make sure he stayed out of the way."

Rowling blinked. "You cast a spell on one of your own friends?"

Hermione nodded. "We had no choice. If Voldemort had come back with the Philosopher's Stone thousands of people would have been endangered. We realized we'd have to sacrifice Neville to save the world from Voldemort. At any rate, we neutralized Neville's threat, put on the Invisibility Cloak - -"

J. K. Rowling nodded. "Harry's cloak, the one which Moody confiscated as a powerful magical artifact?"

"That's it. Since we were all young, all three of us fit under the cloak. We made our way over to the room with Fluffy to find the door already ajar -- obviously, Snape had gotten in before us. We made the dog fall asleep with some music and then headed down through the trap door."

Rowling leaned forward, intend on the story. "And you ran into Snape?"

"All in good time, Ms. Rowling. We landed in a patch of Devil's Snare, a plant which tries to immobilize people which fall into it. We had some trouble there for a while, but I eventually remembered that this plant fears fire. We used a fire to get past it and encountered a room with thousands of flying keys."

"Flying keys?"

"Yes. The task here, apparently, was to identify which key would open the door to the next chamber. Harry flew around for a while, looking for a key which had already been manhandled by Snape."
Thanks to his strong Quidditch skills, he managed to track it down. We passed through that door and encountered a room with a life-sized chess set. Here, we had to take the place of three of the pieces and win the game. Only by winning the game would we be able to proceed.

Rowling chuckled. "You're good at chess, Hermione?"

Hermione scowled. "I'm not that great. However, Ron is very good. Which was good, because we wouldn't have made it through were it not for him. Ron, however, found that he would have to sacrifice himself in order for us to win the game. He did so, and one of the enemy pieces hit him hard on the head and knocked him out."

"The PIECE hit him?"

"It's wizard's chess, where the pieces are animated. We didn't want to leave Ron behind, but we had no choice. We decided that we'd continue on, get the Stone, and then get Ron to the infirmary when we were done."

"You were prepared to sacrifice another friend for the cause?"

"Like I said we had no choice. The next obstacle was a troll similar to the one which attacked me in the bathroom, but the intruder had already knocked it unconscious. After that was a logic puzzle involving potions. And this is where Harry and I separated. You see, there was just enough of the correct potion to send one person on towards the Stone. After a brief discussion with Harry, we agreed that he would continue on while I went back to deal with Ron."

"One eleven-year old boy against Professor Snape and/or possibly Voldemort?"

Hermione laughed. "It does sound a bit stupid in retrospect. However, we were kids. We didn't know better. At any rate, I headed back to the flying key room, took one of the brooms Harry had used to fly around chasing the keys, and continued on to pick up Ron. This proved problematic, however. Ron was still out cold, and I was concerned that I wouldn't be able to fly the broom while simultaneously making sure the unconscious Ron wouldn't fall off. And there was no way I was going to try using the Levitation spell to have him hanging in midair behind me, banging his head on walls and the Devil's Snare on the way out.

"Leaving Ron behind on the chessboard, I flew out of the trap door and managed to clear the room a second before all three of Fluffy's heads would have converged on my throat. The next step was to find a teacher and/or make my way to the Owlery to contact Dumbledore. As it so happened, I stumbled into Filch wandering the corridors. There was a brief moment of fear when he expelled me for flying around the corridors at night and, as far as he knew, injuring Ron. He said he'd contact McGonagall. Fine, I said -- we'll get this all sorted out.

"McGonagall rescinded the suspension but still docked Gryffindor thirty points for our going out of bounds. I explained what had happened and described the evidence that someone had gotten past Fluffy. McGonagall was horrified, to say the least. She sent Filch to find Quirrell and then sent a spell which I now recognize as a Patronus somewhere to contact Dumbledore. We then returned to the third floor corridor to check on Ron, who was still out. McGonagall cast some basic healing spells on him and then whisked him off to Madam Pomfrey using a spell I didn't recognize. She then told me to go to bed and not to move for the rest of the night.

"As I turned to leave, I could have sworn I had heard Quirrell screaming that he couldn't touch something. I must have imagined it, I thought. McGonagall then said that she would stand guard in
this room to make sure the intruder didn't have any accomplices coming in. It was at that point that Dumbledore came in. He looked furious and talked with McGonagall a little. He then barged in towards the room with the troll, intent on capturing the intruder or at least helping Quirrell. That was the last I saw, however. The rest, as you probably know, is history. We had no way to know that Quirrell had been the person after the Stone to begin with."

---------
Nestor
- - - - -

Gabrielle had enjoyed showing the Muggle around Nestor. What she had enjoyed even more had been the fact that the symptoms of morning sickness had started to abate. One would have expected that a country full of women and wizards would have figured out a spell to deal with morning sickness!

The Muggle had been distracted by a few of her neighbors, of course, and she had to keep a tight leash on him to make sure he didn't stray TOO much. She found his story about the customs raid on the boat disturbing, and she confirmed his suspicion that something was most certainly not on the level. She then told him about the Syrdan/Nestor war, at which point both of them realized it was probably an Syrdani attempt at a naval blockade.

This was disturbing, she thought. Syrdan had reacted fairly quickly and not only imposed a naval blockade but had also gotten some renegade merpeople to join their side. There were merpeople surrounding the island now, and the Coast Guard was watching them warily. So far, nothing had happened. However, how long would that be the case.

She was still musing this when she heard a knock on her door. Puzzled, she went over to open it and saw three women in military robes. She froze -- was this what she thought it was?

The woman in the front spoke. "Are you Gabrielle Jumarra?"

Gabrielle licked her lips. "Yes. How can I help --"

The woman talked over her. "We are here to inform you that your number has come up in the Nestorian military draft. You will be joining Louisa Longa's division supporting the Coast Guard. As of this moment, you are a member of the Coast Guard. You have ten minutes to gather your belongings and come with us."

She had been afraid of this. Hoping against hope, she pointed at her belly. "I'm pregnant, ma'am. I'm not sure if this is a good idea."

"If you're pregnant, you will serve in the medical wing or somewhere else which will not harm the baby. It is possible to serve the country without holding a Muggle weapon or a wand, after all. Think of it this way, Gabrielle. The alternative would be arrest for desertion, and I doubt you'd want that."

Shit, she thought. Telling the women she'd go with them quietly, she started packing some of her most valuable possessions. The thing which had been most troubling of all had not been the fact that she was now part of the Coast Guard. It was the fact that they hadn't mentioned how long her term would be.

To be continued...
Update #448.5: Mer, I am disappoint

Friday, November 28, 1996
Merpeople Assembly
Roqteratl

The great Council chamber was getting overcrowded, as leaders of most of the Thousand Tribes showed up to swear under Oaths their innocence in the current Nestor incident under the watchful gaze of outsider observers, including a nervous Veela. The more well-informed of them also kept shooting accusing looks towards Avernus, Archon of Trapananda, who was presently hovering beside the Eldest, engaged in a private conversation.

"I must say, I'm glad for your silencing spell" said Roqteratl's head of state in an almost-shouting voice, earning a question in an equally loud tone from his fellow ruler: "Let me guess, Markali sent a Howler your way too. Now, you said you have a question?"

"Indeed" said the Eldest. "While the merpeople seen in Nestor looked like normal tribesfolk, I can't help but feel there is more than meets the eye. I've already heard almost all relevant Atlantic tribal leader swear they aren't behind it. By relevant, I mean ethnicity, as far as the Veela managed to identify it, and access to any drider walkers..."

"Wait..." interrupted the merwizard monarch. "You say, the rumors are true, anyone waltzing into this city could buy one of those constructs? Man, it's insanely careless, any mage worth his galleon could take a working civilian mecha and enchant it full of shields and cursed weapons..."

"We did not expect you to come in the picture" the Eldest confessed with a sigh. "The machines are only good for merpeople pilots, and until you entered the picture we had neither wizards nor idiots who dared to call our wrath - delivered by professionally equipped battle driders - down on themselves by retrofitting our peaceful tools for war. But of course your babysnatching lot had to get involved and screw up a working system... nevermind, just tell me you can do something if they do turn out to be your renegades."

"No promises here" regretfully replied Avernus, "since Syrdan took them in, we can't just go and arrest them again. Legal formalities and all that. Add the fact that Nestor did indeed smuggle weapons in from the USA, to support an agressive war... that's exactly the situation we all want to distance ourselves from. So no, as long as they don't do something globally threatening, we don't do anything to the renegades."

"And here I am, shocked to hear this from the man who just last week pointed out to me how impotent Atlantis is because of their "only dealing with global threats" policy. You hear, young man? Shocked!"
The albatross had been half-cooked by the flames that ended it's life, and half-rotten after a few days in the water, but somehow no sea creature touched it. The merwizards noticed it exactly for this reason- it was unnatural, and clearly the result of some warding magic, and thus warranting further attention. They soon found the letter fastened to the bird's legs, and now it was in the hands of Rasezar, who managed to restore it to vaguely legible condition by some clever spells.

"Dear Myrtille,

I'm glad to inform you that Mother finally saw the light, and now she approves of your boyfriend. She kind of fell to the other extreme actually, now she keeps asking when the wedding will be, and keeps going on about how you're supposed to hold on to your luck, once you managed to wrap a pureblood wizard, and one of the wealthiest men in the Hidden Nations at that, around your fingers despite your pitiful magical powers. I hope you don't mind, personally I think it's still better than her past ramblings about how you stain the Trepanier name by associating with a Syrdani.

Speaking about Syrdan, please don't go near that place, I've heard from reliable sources that a real nasty and real unexpected stormy season is about to start there any minute now. It'd be awful if you or any of your friends got into trouble there.

Your loving sister,

Veronique"

Rasezar chuckled. No doubt, the shady talk about a stormy season was a code for the Veela invasion of Syrdan. Well, judging by the messenger albatross's most likely Veela-induced fiery death, this could mean the addressed one could actually be in Syrdan, recieving some extremely unpleasant and ironic experience if his gut feeling was right.

To be continued...

Update #449: It's the Isaac Sanders Show!

Saturday, November 30, 1996
Stern Residence
Scottsdale, AZ
United States of America
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/4.5%
David Stern sat down in front of the TV and wondered what was going to happen to dear old Izzy this time. He'd thought that Izzy had gone in over his head once he had gotten involved with the wizards to begin with. But this was different -- he was going to be one of the stars of a real-life documentary, a so-called "reality show" about a Muggle living among, and interacting with, wizards.

 Granted, Izzy had already learned a lot about wizards prior to the filming of the first show. As a result, he wouldn't be as clueless as some of the NBC producers had hoped he would have been. However, that role could easily be filled by Izzy's wife, Melissa. She didn't know as much about the wizards as Izzy did, just the little she picked up teaching Muggle Studies at Fourth Mesa. Not that she was teaching right now, of course -- she was on maternity leave, and she would be on maternity leave for a good month more.

 Sanders had told him that he didn't really like it all that much to have all of those Muggle video cameras in his face -- especially since they need to provide two or three times the normal number due to the tendency of Muggle video equipment to malfunction in a magical environment. He and his wife did want privacy, especially with a two-month old baby in the house. Unfortunately, that wasn't going to happen. Little Hermione Sanders was already one of the stars of the show, and photographs of her with magical toys were already making the rounds on various NBC commercials.

 So far, the Isaac Sanders show had been quite popular. It had gotten so popular, in fact, that people had begun clamoring for a scenario where a wizard moved to a Muggle-only area and began interacting with the Muggles. With all of the video equipment already in Fourth Mesa, various Fourth Mesa personnel would likely be good candidates. The Navajo (a.k.a. Dine) Nation, which surrounded Fourth Mesa, was in favor of having a Fourth Mesa employee be the star because it would show the world what being a Native American was truly like. Unfortunately, there hadn't been many wizards brave enough to try living in a Muggle area yet. So, the second show would have to wait.

 Stern was more or less accustomed to life working for Mt. St. Helens now. Granted, he had lost 10 Galleons betting on the Eruption during the Thanksgiving Day Quodpot game (for God's sake, they should have kept the exploding ball in there!). However, for the most part the people were quite supportive of him and his Muggle friends. Not quite supportive enough to start living somewhere like Seattle, but still much better than he had anticipated. There were some Wizarding supremacists hiding in Mt. St. Helens, but they were few and far between.

 Stern had taken Sanders's plans for a Muggle Studies class and tweaked them a little. He'd had a whole unit on Muggle technology: computers, cars, airplanes, etc. There were a couple of days on fashion (people had come in the next day in tuxedoes...pink ones), one on medicine, one on careers, and one on games and hobbies. He discussed what he knew of the (hopefully defunct) America for Humans anti-Wizarding group and its political arm, the Revelation Party. All in all, he thought he had done pretty well -- enough to possibly get called back next year.

 At the stroke of 6:00, the screen switched to an overhead shot of the Fourth Mesa region and had special effects cause a mountain filled with magical buildings to appear out of nowhere. The theme song played as the camera made its way through Fourth Mesa hallways filled with owls, floating candles, and so forth, into a fireplace. There was a flash of green light meant to indicate Floo travel, and when it disappeared it showed Sanders, his wife, and the baby living in their Muggle home in Prescott. All three people were identified by name as the camera Floo'ed its way back to Fourth Mesa and began identifying other people the Sandersons tended to interact with: Strong Bear, Two
Bear, Willis, and some others. Finally, it panned out one last time show the name of the program in a magically fanciful font: "The Isaac Sanders Show."

The camera focused on Melissa and the baby making their way out of the fireplace. The title card appeared: "One-Month Checkup". Although Sanders hadn't been able to say exactly what had been filmed, he had told Stern that Melissa had taken Hermione in to one of the Healers in Fourth Mesa for a standard one-month checkup given to all babies in a Wizarding environment. Supposedly they cast spells on the child and used them to determine how healthy the child was. The child was also given charms which would help strengthen the child's ability to ward off diseases. Stern figured that these were the equivalent of childhood vaccines. He had no idea if wizards needed to get booster charms as adults, however. Fortunately, he figured that he was about to find out.

The narrator explained what was going on as the camera followed Melissa through the labyrinthine corridors of Fourth Mesa. "Today is an important day for little Hermione Sanders: her one month checkup. It is standard practice in the Wizarding world for all children to be given simple medical checkups one month after they are born. Melissa is somewhat nervous, however."

The narrator's voice was replaced by a Melissa voice-over. "I have no idea what they're going to do. Sure, they say it's safe. However, is Hermione going to get all the vaccines and so forth she'll need? What happens if the wizards don't know about mumps and their checkup doesn't include the equivalent of a mumps vaccine?"

The narrator's voice came back. "To the best of our knowledge, diseases are less common in Wizarding children than they are in Muggle children. In fact, studies show that children die before age 2 a good 20% less often in the Wizarding world than in the Muggle world. We don't know if the wizards include a mumps vaccine, but we should know shortly."

Melissa brought the baby into an office with lots of potions lining the walls. Several of them were releasing green smoke into the air, and the camera caught a shot of Melissa looking at the smoke in alarm. There was a brief moment of silence, during which the narrator added: "Secondhand smoke issues?"

Melissa put down the baby as the Healer walked into the room. "Good evening, Melissa. How is Little Feather?"

("Little Feather, in case you forgot, is Hermione's Dine name. Many of the shamans here use the Dine names as their primary name. People like Strong Bear have English names -- for instance, Strong Bear is Alexander Parkman -- but they don't use them often.")

Melissa looked at the baby. "That charm you cast on her the other day is starting to have an effect. Her sleep cycle now matches ours: she goes to bed at 7 PM and wakes up in the morning, like we do. Granted, there are times that she wakes up screaming in the middle of the night and I have to get up and feed her. I don't suppose there's a milk substitute that you can magically whip up?"

The Healer winced. "There is, but it's not as good as the original. We don't recommend it unless the mother can't produce milk."

Melissa grunted. "Oh well. So what are you going to do?"

"We may have to adapt the procedures somewhat since she's a Muggle -- we'll see. However, here's what's going to happen. We're going to cast some spells on her and see how she reacts to them. They may surprise her a little, but they won't hurt her. They're going to test her reflexes and so forth. Next
we're going to cast a spell on her which will check for common childhood conditions such as jaundice. Finally, we're going to give her a charm which will help strengthen her immune system to the point where it will be able to fight off old diseases such as rubella, mumps, measles, and so forth."

Melissa nodded. "That's the equivalent of our vaccines, right?"

"Correct, with the advantage that you don't have to get a booster shot with it. The Wizarding treatment is also painless. I've been told that Muggle children cry a lot when they receive vaccines. Is that true?"

Melissa nodded and looked around the room again ("Let's hope the secondhand smoke doesn't kill her first") before continuing. "How long is this going to take?"

The Healer shrugged. "Maybe half an hour. You can stay with the child the whole time if you wish."

Melissa smiled. "Good -- I don't want her out of my sight. One question, however. Is it wise to have those potions spewing smoke into the room? I know as a Muggle that cigarette smoke can be harmful to your health."

The Healer laughed. "Don't worry, those are harmless. Those potions are in fact herbal aromatherapy tinctures. They won't harm you, me, or the child. Now, let's get started. Undress the baby while I start casting some spells."

------------------------

Kamchatka Peninsula

Igor Romanov frowned as the reports came in from the people scouring the area. Sure, there had been giant tracks around here. However, there wasn't any evidence that Black God cultists or Death Eaters had been in the area. The only name that the investigators had turned up was Mab, a half-crazy witch who had supposedly been possessing people since Shakespeare's time.

He looked at his aide. "Could this Mab be involved with the Death Eaters or Rasputin?"

The aide shrugged. "I have no idea, Your Highness. From what I've heard, she's a bit too unstable to be a reliable ally. She seems to change her mind every few days, almost as if she has a split personality."

"Split personality?"

"Correct, Your Highness. To make a long story short, she's nuts. She's not a threat, as far as I can tell."

Igor drummed his fingers on his chair. "Maybe the Death Eaters or Rasputin will ally with her and she'll do something which will expose herself -- and them. Do you think that's a possibility?"

The aide thought for a moment. "It's plausible. However, I would suspect that as soon as her psychological problems start manifesting themselves our quarry will drop her like a stolen wand."

Igor looked out the window of his winterized magical tent. It may have been freezing outside, but here it was actually balmy. "How is the unified Korean Ministry of Magic doing? They're searching as well, I've been told."
The aide smiled. "For a Ministry which was hit with a nuclear weapon and is in the process of reuniting with North Korea, they're doing a pretty good job. Unfortunately, they've come up empty as well."

Ignor nodded sharply and made up his mind. "Keep on looking. The fact that we've got these Mab references here could mean that she tried to link up with these guys and blew their cover. If your find anything, report it immediately."

The aide saluted. "As you command, Your Highness."

To be continued...

Update #450: Nothing Useful Up Here

Sunday, December 1, 1996
Kaktovik
Arctic National Wildlife Refuge
Alaska
United States of America
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/4.6%

NEXT UP: Theological Implications of an Afterlife

Chief Litu of Ietalis had never thought that he'd have ranged this far away to establish a new colony. Then again, he'd never thought that his people would have the opportunity to visit an area outside of that island of theirs. Fortunately, now that the Statute of Secrecy had fallen and that the Muggles were aware of the half-giant population, the Ieti were able to travel a little more freely.

The original island had been quite overcrowded at the time the Statute of Secrecy had fallen. Inevitably, people had figured that this would be a good chance for the half-giants to establish small towns and hamlets further south, where the weather was warmer. A large community had been established around the shores of Great Bear Lake, making sure that they didn't encroach on lands visibly occupied by Muggles. However, several of the leaders in the Senate had figured that they should take the opportunity to explore a little more and settle more unoccupied territories.

The exodus from Ietalis had been slow at first. However, it had begun to accelerate as the temperature dropped and daylight became harder and harder to come by. Eventually, the sea surface froze over and people were making their way south by crossing the icepack as well as traveling through the forest.

Litu, with his wand at the ready, had led his band of 100 hardy colonists on a trip to settle the coastal range to the west of Great Bear Lake. Explorers had mentioned a large area chock-full of wildlife, most of which seemed edible. Unlike most of the places they had settled so far, this location was technically part of the American state of Alaska. This meant that they would have to petition the American government if they had to deal with any Muggles in the area they planned to live in.

Rubeus Hagrid, the British ambassador to Ietalis, didn't think that the Americans would have a problem with people settling in remote corners of Alaska. He was the local expert on America, as he had spent some time serving as a zookeeper in the capital. "The Americans are fairly reasonable
people, Chief. Perfectly friendly. I'm sure they'll be fine with it. Besides, as far as I know the entire area is just covered with trees and no one lives there."

As it turned out, there were a few people up here. Shortly after reaching the coastline they had stumbled onto an Inuit community known as Kaktovik. The locals had been astonished to see the train of tall men making their way towards the shore. They had been even more surprised when they realized how tall the people actually were. Litu had discovered that some of them had thought that they were gods of some sort (huh?) while others thought that they were people known as Big Feet.

Thankfully, these people spoke English and Inuit, so Litu didn't have trouble talking to them. He explained that he and his band were trying to find a place to settle down as it was a bit too cold for them up north. The natives' response, however, took Litu by surprise. Apparently this was a protected area and the United States frowned on new settlements up here. So, the natives came up with an interesting proposal: live with them as residents of Kaktovik.

"There's a lot of open space up here -- you can build your homes just outside ours. Big guys like you should be good for dealing with threats like polar bears and so forth. Have you ever hunted whales, seals, and walruses before?"

Litu nodded. "We're originally from an island further north. We have to eat a lot, and whales are part of that."

The mayor grinned. "You'll be able to help us a lot then. Are you guys good with harpoons?"

"Some of us are, Mr. Mayor. However, I'm a wizard and I find it much safer to cast spells at them. We may be big, but whales are a hell of a lot bigger."

Litu talked with the mayor for about half an hour and then turned to the rest of his men, who had been waiting a few houses or so away as to not frighten the locals. "All right, guys. Here's the story. Believe it or not, the area around here is a protected reserve and the United States doesn't like people settling up here a lot. However, this community had been grandfathered in. As a result, they have offered to let us live with them."

One of the colonists frowned. "Are you sure that's a good idea? I thought we were supposed to keep away from Muggles. Something about us competing for resources, that type of stuff. And we don't want any international incidents with Canada or the United States so soon after we came out."

Litu grinned. "We'll be helping them gain many more resources. The polar bears see ordinary humans as easy targets, but they'll find us much harder to deal with. Our arrival will likely provide them with a lot of meat, and the fact that I'm a wizard will make things much easier for the locals. Besides, providing for 250 ordinary humans isn't going to tax us much considering that we eat a hell of a lot more than a typical human does."

A second colonist scratched his head. "What are they doing up here to begin with? Without magic, they must get awfully cold."

"There used be a military facility here back in the 1950's. That's all that left of it -- it's now defunct."

The first Ieti gawked at Litu. "Someone was going to INVADE here from the Muggle world? Who were the expecting, angry whales?"

Litu grunted. "Nuclear weapons. Decades ago, Russia and the United States were enemies and
people were concerned that they would shoot nuclear weapons -- the ones from Judgment Day -- at each other. This facility was to look for missiles headed towards the United States."

The second Ieti scratched his beard. "If the military facility is gone, what are they doing here?"

Litu shrugged. "Once they settled and built houses, they probably didn't want to leave. Which leads me to my next question: do we stay or go? If we stay, we'll have to send back a message saying that this city will have to be under joint Ieti/American jurisdiction. On the other hand, we'll get a chance to interact with Muggles. Let's vote, and when you vote think carefully about how your family would react to living in this area."

The colonists debated it for a little while and eventually decided to go somewhere else. They didn't want to get into a fight with the Muggles, and several of the people who would be joining them -- if everything went as they hoped, a few thousand -- might not be as eager to deal with Muggles as the first colonists were. Finally, they didn't want to be seen as invaders taking over an American city and making it part of Ietalis. The mayor was a bit disappointed, but he understood the half-giants' concern and recommended some other places further east, near the border between the US and Canada.

A few days later, well out of the Muggles' foraging range, they decided that they had discovered a good place to settle. There was a lot of food around and the area was beautiful. They were also right on the water, so they would have an ample supply of fish if they managed to smash their way through the ice on top. Litu nodded, brought out his wand, and began magically unpacking all their equipment.

Most of the people got to work starting to erect buildings, pitch tents, and plant the Ieti flag in the permafrost. However, a few people decided to look around the area to see if there was anything else of note other than trees. As it turned out, there was.

Litu looked in amazement at the sample one of the explorers had brought back. "What is that black goo? Where'd you find it?"

The explorer grinned. "I found it coming out of the ground in a forest somewhere, in the shadow of some trees. Believe it or not, there are areas up here where the trees are so thick there isn't much snow on the ground. At any rate, this goo is a good supply of energy, and it can be used in torches."

Litu nodded. "Interesting discovery. I wonder if the Muggles could use it. I know it may come in handy for us, but we have to remember that if the Muggles need a resource, they should get first dibs on it. We're on their territory, after all."

The explorer frowned. "I don't think we need to worry about it, Chief. There are no Muggles up here using it."

"What about the people in that village we saw? Could they be using it? We don't want to steal their stuff."

"I'd argue that it's a bit unlikely. We didn't see any evidence of downed trees or trails in the area. Unless those Muggles flew here, they've likely never seen it before."

Litu made up his mind. "All right, Martu, here's what we'll do. Tell me where you found that stuff. We'll wait a week, and if no one from the Muggle village comes to claim it it's ours. We'll then start trading it with the Muggles. Fair enough?"
Martu nodded. "Works for me, Chief. I'll see if I can go back and get more of it."

"Good idea. Oh -- one more thing. Which side of the border is it on? Do we need to talk with the Canadians or the Americans?"

Martu shrugged. "Beats me -- I didn't see any signs saying WELCOME TO CANADA. If I had to guess, I'd say the United States. I doubt it will matter, though. What are they going to do, invade us because we stole their black goo?"

Litu smiled. "Yeah, right. Here, let me see that. I wonder if it would make a good spell component."

To be continued...

-----------------------
P.S. This was an unexpected twist from my vantage point. It came across because the original plan for #450 proved to be ASB when I thought about it:

450 -- Sun 12/1 DEFCON 3/4.5: The Wolfsbane vaccine will be tested on a condemned criminal, who allows himself to be bitten during the next full moon.

Even with magic, there is no way that vaccine could have gotten to the point where it was ready for human trials...

__________________
Update #451: Theological Implications of an Afterlife
[I hope I don't offend people with this!]

-------------
Monday, December 2, 1996
Omega Institute
Rhinebeck, NY
United States of America
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/4.6%

-------------
NEXT UP: No Love Boat

-------------

John Paul II didn't know which of the latest developments was more disturbing. All he could say was
that things would have been much different had Development #1 taken place before Judgment Day.

Confronted with incontrovertible evidence that large numbers of giants were congregating in and
around the city of Gath in the Gaza Strip, the Israeli government had finally asked the fledgling
community to explain its actions. The giants' response had taken the world by storm: they planned to
re-establish the ancient Free City of Nephilu back on land which the giant took to be their native soil.
Although it was true that the Middle East had always been discussing two-state solutions, having a
second state run by giants hadn't exactly been what the peace brokers had had in mind.

Large areas of Gath had been built up seemingly overnight. Most of them were flying an unusual
flag that no one had seen before: a white fist on a green background holding a sword and an olive
branch. Samuel's jaw had dropped when someone had pointed it out. He said that it was the flag the
Nephilu had used in biblical times, and it hadn't been seen in this part of the world in millennia.

The Nephilim insisted that there would be freedom of religion in the city and that Muggles would be
welcome to live in it. There would also be swift justice in case any fighting broke out, a claim that
the giants had already shown to be plausible. The Palestinians had cheered the giants' declaration and
said that they had enough problem dealing with the Palestinians. The Israelis, however, had
complained that they had got involved in the region as well.

The Nephilu ambassador had apparently been expecting this comment. Grinning fiercely, he had
explained that the Nephilu had the right to settle in the area under the Israelis' own Right of Return.
He argued, quite reasonably in Samuel's opinion, that the community in Ethiopia was in fact a group
exiled from Israel by David and his descendants in the tenth and ninth centuries BC. If the Israelis
were allowed to return to their ancestral homeland, why weren't the Nephilim? The Israelis had been
catched completely off guard by this claim and didn't seem to buy it all that much. However, the
thought of thirteen-foot-tall walking mountains stepping on their houses caused them to protest less
strongly than they otherwise would have.

Supposedly the declaration had even caught several members of the Israeli Ministry of Magic off
guard. Apparently the Nephilim had originally been brought in to serve as peacekeepers in the Gaza
Strip. Had they been planning on recreating a small independent city-state in Gaza the whole time? If
so, had they realized how that could influence Middle Eastern politics?

The pope didn't have time to think about this, however, because of other issues which had come to his attention. There were rumors that the entire Omega community was going to leave the Rhinebeck campus and head off to Costa Rica. The reason was twofold: first, Christians for Humans was planning to attack the campus and the conference attendees didn't want to be there when that happened; and second, the fact that it was getting VERY cold up here. Everyone would have to pack up and make their way down there over the next few weeks.

Samuel had finally admitted that he would not be able to unify the Abrahamic faiths. However, at least he could suggest a philosophy that Abrahamics could follow, a way of life which would make sure that all three faiths were able to live side by side and at least tolerate each other. That plan still seemed to be holding, however -- thank God.

John Paul also had to make up his mind as to whom to make the next Kohen Gadol. He had tried to convince Samuel that having a Christian leader ministering in a revered mosque made no sense, but Samuel had been adamant. Oh well, he thought. We all have our crosses to bear. He was currently leaning towards Ibrahim, the late Suleiman's deputy in Jerusalem. He was a Muslim who was quite familiar with the area and was quite accepting of other people's faiths.

Then, of course, there was the latest issue. One of his priests -- a man who wasn't a Samuelist -- had sent him a note asking him to rule on the theological implications of the existence of ghosts. How did the realm Samuel knew as Sheol relate to hell, heaven, and purgatory? In order to answer this question, he'd need to talk to Samuel and learn more about this mysterious location.

He knocked on the door of the building assigned to Samuel's interpreter. The man told him to come in and take his shoes off. The pontiff did so, explaining what exactly he wanted from Samuel. The interpreter's eyes were a bit wide and was about to speak when prophet suddenly appeared in the tent. John Paul flinched a little -- he would never get accustomed to that.

Samuel nodded to John Paul. "You wished to see me, John Paul?"

"Yes, Holy One. I need to advise the Christian sect on how Sheol maps to the domains of heaven, hell, and purgatory. You're familiar with those terms, right?"

"Yes. I'm not sure how accurate they are, but I can see how someone could have thought that."

"I agree. First, tell me more about Sheol, and I apologize if I've asked this before. Do people of all faiths all go to Sheol?"

"Yes. I've run into a few Moabite prophets down there."

"Interesting. Are there criteria which a person has to follow in order to make it to Sheol?"

"No. Everyone goes there after death."

"So you don't have to be religious at all. You can be a sinner in your own personal faith and still make it there."

"Yes."

"Can anyone return from Sheol?"
"Only wizards can, and even so with difficulty. When they do so, they come back as ghosts."

John Paul jotted down notes on a piece of paper as he continued. "Now the hard questions. Are there angels in Sheol?"

Samuel thought for a moment. Then, he frowned. "Yes and no. There aren't any creatures with wings which look like your sect's angels. However, you have to realize that everyone in Sheol takes the form of a glowing, floating spirit -- like the way you see me. They're just naked souls without bodies. It is quite possible that someone found out about the description of a ghost, was partially Obliviated, and came up with the idea of an angel."

"What about the theory that you meet God in Sheol?"

Samuel shook his head. "Faith in the existence of a personal God is orthogonal to Sheol. Ghosts keep whatever religious views they had in life, which means that there are lots of theists in Sheol. Many people thank their deities for being granted an afterlife at all."

"How many of these theists meet God in there?"

"It depends on what concept of God you're thinking about. If you expect Someone to solve all of your problems, you're not going to find Him. However, I have reason to believe that the sight of spirits floating through the air could easily cause people to believe that they've found God as well as angels."

"Are there atheists in Sheol?"

"Yes."

"Do you meet your loved ones in Sheol when you pass over?"

"Yes and no. In theory, given enough time, you can find anyone. However, Sheol is a very big place -- as far as we can tell, boundless. The odds that you will actually find where one of your colleagues has been flying around are relatively remote."

"Do you find existence in Sheol to be better, worse, or the same as real life?"

Samuel thought for a moment. "You can't compare them, really. You don't have any responsibilities anymore, so that's a bit of an advantage. However, Sheol itself is pretty dull, especially for beings who can't come back. All in all, I'd say it's about even. Some people may find it better than life, in which case they'll call it heaven. Others may find it unbearable, in which case they call it hell. It's all in the spirit's point of view."

"Can people die again, so to speak, and be removed from Sheol?"

"Unclear, John Paul. People disappear from time to time, but it's possible that they have either left the immediate area or have returned to the world as ghosts."

"How about nonhumans? Do nonhumans appear in Sheol?"

"Yes. All sentient beings of all species appear in Sheol. And that's from a lot of experience."
"What species have you seen?"

"Various forms of humanoids, of course. I occasionally see dolphins or extremely hairy humanoids...you call them gorillas and chimpanzees."

"Is there a common language everyone can speak down there?"

"No, there are still language barriers. However, it's possible to learn new languages given centuries of practice."

John Paul drew a deep breath. "Have you seen the Savior in Sheol?"

"The prophet Joshua of Nazareth, you mean?"

"Yes."

He shrugged. "I don't know what he looks like. However, given that he was martyred two thousand years ago I'm assuming he's dead. If so, yes, he is in Sheol. Where, I don't know."

The talk continued, and a picture slowly began to emerge. Sheol seemed much more like the Greek version of Hades, an alternate world where everyone went. Perhaps the story of St. Peter at the Pearly Gates was allegorical, talking about a believer's own personal view of heaven -- or possibly influenced by the stories where Odysseus meets Teiresias and the gatekeeper in Hades. The pontiff could understand how this domain have easily been seen to be filled with angels, God, and so forth. And whether or not people found Sheol as heaven or hell depended on their view of the world.

In fact, it would make sense that wealthy people would find Sheol as hell and the religious ascetics would see it as heaven. Wealthy people would be stripped of all of their physical pleasures in Sheol, so they wouldn't like it. Ascetics would be more spiritual and knowledgeable and wouldn't be tied to material goods. So, they'd handle the transition better.

There was lot of stuff to think about here.

To be continued...

__________________

Update #452: No Love Boat
-------------
Tuesday, December 3, 1996
Silver Explorer Antarctic Cruise Ship
Near Tselna
Tsalasia
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/4.6%
-------------
NEXT UP: Finally, A Ruby Slipper That Can Take You To Kansas
-------------
Michael Barham had been looking forward to this Antarctic trip for a while. He'd been captivated by pictures of glaciers, penguins, and crystal-clear water. Some of his friends had joked that he'd run into icebergs, but he countered by saying that this ship's name wasn't *Titanic*. 
He had balked a bit at the price -- a good $8000. He hadn't realized how hard it was to get from Ushuaia in Chile across the Southern Ocean. Although the two continents looked close on a map, in real life it was much further than it seemed. There would be several days of cruising simply to get to the Antarctic Peninsula...and those days had increased the price of the ticket greatly.

He'd bitten the bullet, however, and booked a room. It had been worth it, however -- especially when word leaked out that the ship would be one of the first to be visiting the new Tsalal community of Tselna, sitting on the Antarctic Peninsula.

Barham had never met a wizard before, and he wanted to learn more. Unfortunately, the cruise line didn't really have much information on Tselna and the Tsalal community in general. Supposedly Tselna had a few thousand people and was rapidly becoming a base from which to explore the Antarctic Peninsula. A few of the Tsalal actually spoke English, which would help as well.

There hadn't been much trade yet between the Tsalal and Muggle communities. So far, the wizards had been trying to pick up computers and other pieces of Muggle technology. The Muggles, in return were getting lots of equipment magically hardened against the cold. The fact that people had been living down there under the icecap for all those years had been absolutely mind-blowing.

He watched from the railing -- wearing a parka, of course -- as the ship closed in on the new Tsalal city. There were a few fanciful buildings there, but all in all it looked just liked a typical small village anywhere in the world. A few people were flying by on brooms, but from what the brochure had told him there brooms weren't popular down here because the wind chill from the flight would make a bad situation a lot worse. Apparition -- magical teleportation -- was much more popular.

There wasn't a pier for the ship to pull up to -- the locals hadn't gotten to that point yet. Consequently, the passengers would have to disembark in groups of five or so and go ashore in the Zodiacs. Several popping sounds resonated throughout the ship as the wizards beamed aboard to process customs and so forth.

Everyone lined up near the Zodiac bay to get off the ship. Barham saw several people in white robes scouring the ship. What were they checking for, illegal drugs? The brochure hadn't mentioned anything about a full inspection of cruise ships. He debated asking one of the wizards what was going on, but they seemed very intent on what they were doing. So, he decided to not get between them and their prey.

The people stood in line for a long time...a very long time. Clearly, something unusual was going on. What was it? Were they checking for biological contamination? If so, they weren't doing a good job of it because the first person in line hadn't been processed yet. He glanced at the bridge, wondering if they were doing something up there. Finally, the boat's messaging system squawked as the bridge deigned to explain what was going on.

"Ladies and gentlemen, your attention please. This is the captain speaking. I have just spoken with Captain Tseno of the Tsalal Coast Guard. Due to circumstances beyond our control, Tsalasia has closed all of its borders to American citizens. No one with an American passport will be able to set foot in the city. In lieu of a trip to Tselna, American citizens will be given a trip in the Zodiac to the island across the straits from Tselna."

Barham stared at his passport and muttered: "What the hell?". He wasn't the only one.

The bridge continued. "I can't get into details, unfortunately. Suffice it to say that a recent incident has made the Tsalal government a bit leery of Americans. I don't know what we could have done to
get these guys angry at us, but what's done is done. In all fairness, Tseno reports that the citizens of Tselna are as shocked and taken by surprise as we are."

Barham scratched his head. Had the Americans planned to occupy Tsalasia? That made no sense as they couldn't live there without extensive resupplying. Then what had gotten everyone riled up? The only country the Americans had a beef with in the magical world -- at least as far as he knew -- was Syrdan, and to be fair the Syrdani deserved it for what they did to their Muggles. Did the Tsalal also enslave their Muggles?

No, he realized. If the Tsalal enslaved their Muggles, they wouldn't want the non-American passengers to see it, either. So, they wouldn't have let potential witnesses off the ship. And he doubted that they'd singled out American Muggles because they were better at fighting wizards than those of other countries.

The United States must have done something to antagonize Tsalasia, he realized. But what? Were Syrdan and Tsalasia allies, and Tsalasia threatening to go to war with the United States if Clinton took action against the Syrdani slave drivers? That's just what we need, Barham thought bitterly. Another war with wizards.

A second, heavily accented male voice boomed over the intercom. "This is Captain Tseno. On behalf of the community of Tselna, I sincerely apologize for the inconvenience. The people of Tselna are actually clamoring for the government in Tsalax to revoke the ban on Americans in Tsalasia's main trading post. Hopefully, Tsalax and Washington will be able to resolve this issue quickly and peacefully so people will be able to visit Tselna without any fear of repercussion."

Shit, Barham thought. Tseno had said "peacefully". The odds of the US getting into a war with Tsalasia seemed to be increasing by the moment.

The Tsalal continued. "As a gesture of goodwill and respect for the Muggle world, several of the stores in Tselna have donated items to be given to the American tourists. There are 15 items available, and they will be given out at random. I don't know about where you guys come from, but here in Tsalasia foreign civilians are off limits to government military decrees and activity. By the time you return to your cabins after this speech, the winners will have the prizes sitting in their rooms. All I can recommend is pray to whatever god or gods you believe in that this crisis will end without serious consequences."

There was a brief pause, after which Tseno concluded his statement. "I'll now turn this message back over to the captain of this vessel. Once again, welcome to Tsalasia and I hope that next time I speak with you, everyone will be able to visit our fine land."

Swearing bitterly to himself, he made his way out of the line and back to his room. He swore once again when he saw that someone had placed a stuffed penguin in his bed.

Barham grunted -- just what he needed, a practical joke. Furious, he picked up the penguin and prepared to throw it into the closet.

That's when the penguin spoke up in the same dialect Tseno had used. "Hello there! I'm Tsallie, and I come from Tsuknu's Toy Store in downtown Tselna. What's your name?"

Barham dropped the penguin in surprise, then watched in amazement as it made its way over to the couch -- waddling like a real penguin. "All right, I get the point. You want me to sleep on the couch. I still think there's room for both of us, though. Hey, I'm nice and cuddly! Kids love me! And if you
don't have kids...well, I bet girls will all fall over you when you carry a cute gal like me around! Hey, if you want I can even lay an egg. It won't be a real egg though."

Barham's mind raced. He couldn't really use the silly thing, especially if it spent the entire trip chattering like this. However, this would likely be a valuable souvenir in Kentucky. That was especially the case if the embargo against the United States continued for a while. Maybe he could auction it off somewhere...

For some reason, a practical joke on his Linux engineering friend came to mind...

To be continued...

__________________

Update #452.5: Best of Wishes

Tuesday, December 3, 1996
Beelzebub Castle
10 miles from Frankfurt
Germany

Fire under the glass cauldron in the dungeon was already burning.
An old man in a dark-blue tiara walked closer to it.

He looked at the piece of paper in his hand. "Yes, this spell will definately please Mr. Maggot."

That piece of paper was actually the Right part of the Demonic Scroll, a powerful and ancient artifact used to create the Wunschpunsch potion.
It was a very dark and forbidden type of magic, something the man liked very much.

His name was Beelzebub Preposteror and he was a dark sorcerer. Not a very skilled one, but a sorcerer nonetheless.
However, unlike regular wizards, he wasn't born with his abilities, he acquired them from someone through a very painful and disgusting ritual.
Maledictus Maggot was the name of that being. He was a humanoid bug-like creature, dressed in very expensive muggle business suit.
He was supposedly working for an organization called Hellish Wishes Inc.

Beelzebub met Mr. Maggot a long time ago and made a deal with him.
In exchange for his soul, Beelzebub would get magical powers and the ability to see magical creatures.
There was a catch of course. The newly-made sorcerer was forced to use his spells only for evil or personal gain, never for good.

Preposteror didn't care about that, as he wasn't all that good to begin with.
He later learned, that his aunt Tyrannia Vampirella, had the Left Part of the Demonic Scroll and that she also made a deal with Maledictus.
He remembered laughing when he discovered that. "Well this explains the longevity of that old hag!"

But now, he wasn't laughing. He was scared.
Two days ago, Mr. Maggot visited Beelzebub and told him that since the Statue of Secrecy is over,
he has spread his work to muggles AND increase the number and size of his evil spells to city-levels. The old man then asked what will be the consequences if he doesn't deliver. Maledictus simply smiled and said: "Oh, nothing big. I'll just eat your soul if you don't create a spell evil and powerful enough to destroy an entire city. You have 5 days."
He then teleported away in a flash of yellow smoke.

Immediately after that, Beelzebub contacted his accursed aunt. Both of them hated each other, but maybe, just maybe, she would be able to help him. When she arrived, Preposteror noticed that she hasn't slept well in a few days. He then understood that Mr. Maggot visited her as well.

Now, they were standing on the opposite sides of the glass cauldron in Beelzebub's dungeon. A green liquid was boiling in it. It smelled horribly.

"Alright. Do you have the Right Part?" Asked Tyrannia.

He nodded and waved the piece of paper before her face. "I do, but do you have the Left Part?" She replied with the same thing.

"Good, now let's begin. We don't have much time."

Vampirella looked at him with hateful eyes. She despised him and yet they were forced to work together.

"TIME FOR A LITTLE MEGA MAGIC!" They both screamed as hard as they could and the pieces of the Demonic Scroll started glowing a little with green light. They then took turns telling the incantation.

Tyrannia began and her part of the scroll flew up in the air. "By the power, hail and hearty..."
Beelzebub continued and the Right Part started flying as well. "...of an earthquake on a roll..."
"...to be party, part and party..." Both parts slammed into each other and started merging.
"...of the one and only scroll." The scroll was complete and powerful light was emanating from it.

Then, both of them started screaming the rest of the spell.

"FORMULA OF THE DEEPEST NIGHT, IF ITS YOU, THEN SHOW YOUR MIGHT! JOIN WHAT ONCE WAS WITH A SUnder, TO THE SOUND OF FLAMES AND THUNDER! READY?! SET! WUNSCHPUNSCH!"

The liquid exploded with green lightning bolts, smoke and the sound of a thousand tortured souls. Seconds later, all of that was sucked Left back into the cauldron. However, the spell wasn't complete yet, now they had to state their wish.

Beelzebub screamed. "Oh potent bowl of our incredible potion, hear our wish and grant us a devotion!"

"Remove all colors and all their hues,
from green to reds and yellows and blues!
Oh great spell, remove all colors from sight,
"and turn everything black and white!"

Tyrannia yelled. "Now we'll say it in reverse, to make our curse, a whole lot worse!"

"White and black everything turn and,
sight from colors all remove, spell great oh!
Blues and yellows and reds to green from,
hues their all and colors all remove!"

A giant black and white lightning bolt flew out of the cauldron and after minutes of flying, touched the city of Frankfurt.
Moments later, everything in the city lost its colors. People, animals, buildings, everything.
Mass panic ensued while Beelzebub and Tyrannia laughed.

To be continued.... (maybe, if you'll like it)

__________________

Update #453: Finally, A Ruby Slipper That Can Take You To Kansas
--------------
Tuesday, December 3, 1996
Metropolitan Transportation Authority
New York, NY
United States of America

ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/4.6%
--------------
NEXT UP: You've Got Audrey, But We've Got Audrey II
--------------

Cathy Seay had suddenly become a very busy witch. Originally the deputy chairman of the Americn Portkey Bureau, she had been catapulted into the corner office when her predecessor had found himself in Greenwich during the attack on the Four Towns. It had taken her a while to get up to speed on the job, one which was getting more and more complicated (and exciting) every moment.

First there had been the requests to put up the Portkey barrier shortly before Judgment Day, something her predecessor hadn't done in five years. Businessmen complained, of course, that none of their shipments were going through but she had convinced them that safety was paramount, particularly after the bombs went off. Then there had been the requests by Linda Warren to send Portkeys into space. The Russians had initially complained when that sneaker had materialized aboard Mir. Then there was the acquisition of the Apollo 11 command module and its rechristening as Selene. The people who had been maintaining the capsule had gone bonkers, and she'd had to done some fancy talking to placate them.

As if that hadn't been enough, she was being bombarded with requests to send people into the outer solar system (a bad idea, as the best speed Portkeys seemed to be capable of was about 1 AU every 10 days). Granted, travel with a Portkey was much faster than travel with normal rockets. However, a one-way trip to Pluto was still going to take a year at least. Didn't people realize how BIG the solar system was? And interstellar exploration? Forget it. It would take millennia unless wizards developed FTL travel, and she knew that was impossible.

Her most recent project, one which had been a major boon for commuters, had managed to raise the
ire of everyone from McDonnell-Douglas to Guinevere's Flying Carpets. This, of course, had been the Boston Portkey Authority. Now in its third week, this pilot program had revolutionized travel in the Boston area. It had been expanded to include the MBTA commuter rail system as well, which had managed to include a route to Providence and irritate Amtrak. There were lawsuits all over the place saying it was too dangerous, and she had countered with an emphasis that this was a pilot program and people were using it at their own risk.

The success of the Boston Portkey Authority had not gone unnoticed in the other New England towns. Providence had set up its own Portkey Authority in lieu of a modern subway. Springfield, Worcester, Hartford, and Nashua had followed suit. All of these Portkeys charged MBTA-level fares to start with, though many customers suspected that they were going to raise prices once these organizations realized that they had no competition.

Setting up the Portkey Authority for these towns was going to be far easier than the community Seay was currently talking with: New York. New York had more people than the other cities put together...doubled, at least. As a result, there were many more locations which needed Portkeys associated with them. The Long Island Railroad would have to be included in this as well, which meant that even more Portkeys would be necessary. Finally, there were cases where a Portkey couldn't travel from Point A to Point B because there was a large area full of radioactive contamination between them. People would have to go around those areas lest they start growing a third ear.

On the other hand, it was fairly obvious that SOMETHING had to be done to improve the transportation system in New York. A good portion of the subway service had been disrupted when the bomb had gone off on Judgment Day. Many of the MTA tunnels had flooded, and a large number of cars had been destroyed. Traffic had been an absolute disaster since that day, with everyone relying either on walking or on taxicabs. There had been too many taxis in New York even before the bomb had gone off. Now, however, things were insane. People joked that one could walk on top of the taxicabs and get to his destination faster than they would have in the cars.

Guinevere's Flying Carpets and MAN had gotten several customers here. However, a lot of people were still nervous about flying on rugs with big pictures of Winnie the Pooh on them. There had even been a few arrests where commuters going by on flying carpets had managed to stop en route, look into the apartments on the 34th floor, and see people undressing. Clearly, something else needed to be done.

Seay explained her plan to the MTA authorities. "Here's what we're going to do. We'll have a network of 512 stations, each with up to 16 bidirectional Portkeys. I take it you have enough junk to supply eight thousand Portkeys?"

The MTA chairman chuckled. "This is New York, Sorceress Seay. There's trash all over the place -- unless Astronaut Lady does something about that and Portkeys it into space."

Seay blinked -- she hadn't thought about that. "You know, that might not be a bad idea. I'll get back to you on that. At any rate, here's the plan. The transit map will be divided into eight sectors, one on Long Island, one for the suburbs north of the Bronx, one on the Jersey side, and one for each borough. Each of these sectors will consist of eight subsectors consisting of eight destinations each. Got it so far?"

"Yup. Eight cubed is 512."

"Good. The passenger goes to one of these 512 stations and will see a group of nine portkeys. Seven
of them go to the other locations in that station's subsector and they will be used for local travel. One of them will go to a station which represents the subsector as a whole and is intended to be used as a launchpad for longer journeys. These subsector-level stations will have sixteen Portkeys: eight to the destinations in the subsector, seven to the subsector-level stations of the other seven subsectors, and one to the station representing the sector as a whole.

"This last Portkey will take the customer to a sector-level station which will have fifteen Portkeys: one to each of the eight subsector-level stations and one to each of the seven other sector-level stations representing the other seven sectors. The net result will be a three-level tree which will get from anywhere to anywhere else in five jumps."

The MTA man nodded. "I see. Station A1A to subsector A1 to sector A to sector B to subsector B3 to station B3H. Sounds...intriguing."

"It should be, sir. It's the future of transportation in the area, especially with the subway overwhelmed as it is. I'd recommend a rack of maybe 5 or 10 pieces of junk per leg to make sure there isn't a wait. We're up to 80,000 Portkeys now, but like you said this is New York."

The MTA man, however, still had a few questions. "Will these people actually be flying through the air? Will people on the ground see them?"

"Not easily, but it's possible. Why do you ask?"

"Won't people driving around be a bit distracted if people are zooming over their heads at a high rate of speed?"

Seay had anticipated that. "At first, perhaps. However, if they've got their eyes on the road, they won't see the Portkey passengers. Besides, after a while they'll get accustomed to it."

"I see. What about buildings? Will people on these things crash into buildings?"

"No. Portkeys automatically maneuver their way around buildings. The passengers will approach the building and go around it."

Another MTA representative spoke up. "Won't these flying people be able to look into apartments as well like the ones on the flying carpets?"

"Not really. They'll be going too fast to see much."

"What about airplanes? I see LGA and JFK are both on the list as possible destinations. Do you really want people flying around only to be run over by 747's on final approach?"

Seay pointed out one of the features on the proposed Portkey map. "Nope. The subsectors with the two airports are such so that the other seven substations do not cross the airspace near the airport -- if the airport Portkey comes in on the west side, all other seven stations in that subsector will be to the airport's west. No one will be flying over the airport. That brings up another thing -- there may be cases where subsector to subsector and sector to sector travel may require more than one jump. In cases where direct access won't work, such as line of sight routes which would cross air lanes or Wall Bay, passengers will have to get off at an intermediary stop and pick up another Portkey to complete their journey."

"How long will it take to make a trip like this?"
"I normally assume 60 seconds per leg maximum, most of which is going to be pulling yourself off the pile of cushions and trying to find the piece of junk representing the next leg. This would mean at most a 6-8 minute trip anywhere in the city. Local trips will be 30-60 seconds."

A third MTA person raised her hand. "Will disabled people be able to travel this way? There's going to be a lot of walking involved along with falling into piles of cushions."

Seay shook her head. "I'm afraid not. The best way to transport someone with disabilities would be to use a flying carpet. Guinevere rents them out for about $40/month for simple one-man carpets."

"What happens if three people arrive at the same station at the same time? Will they fall on top of each other? People tend to be much harder and pillows in my experience. I hate to think what would happen half an hour before a Rangers game is about to start."

Seay hesitated for a moment -- she was a bit worried about this herself. There had been a couple of incidents where people had injured themselves in Boston in this fashion, and that had been with many fewer stations and many, many fewer people.

She drew a deep breath. "We're trying to figure out how to handle that, and a committee is looking into it. They've promised to have a solution by the end of the year. Once that's taken care of, we'll start installing the Portkeys in early February or March, provided that."

One of the MTA people looked mopey. "Can't you do it any faster? You were able to set something up for Boston pretty quickly."

"Yes, but that was for a much smaller-scale operation which was piggybacked on the existing MBTA system. Here, we're effectively replacing a lot of the subway system here and ramping it up to cover not only a city over ten times the size of Boston but two airports and Long Island as well. Trust me when I tell you that this is much more complicated. However, rest assured that once it's done, you'll have the most advanced transportation system in the world...at least for now."

Another MTA employee cut in. "Sounds cool. Here's another idea. How hard would it be to take all of these cities with Portkey Authorities and connect THEM with Portkeys? With one additional level of complexity, you can get from Boston to New York in sixty seconds."

Seay smiled. "We're actually thinking about that. However, we want to get this off the ground first. One thing I can tell you is that it's going to take more than sixty seconds to get from Boston to New York. We're talking maybe 20 minutes or so. As it is, getting from Boston to Providence takes 5 minutes."

"That's twice as fast as an airplane!"

"Correct. The trick here is what we're going to charge for such a service. Realistically, Portkeys require minimal maintenance -- maybe a few thousand dollars a year to replace a broken or missing Portkey. What's more, the maintenance costs don't depend on the distance traveled. In theory, we can just charge maybe $5 each way to go from Boston to New York in 20 minutes and still make money."

The MTA board began talking excitedly among themselves. Finally, the chairman pulled rank. "Yeah, and it's going to put companies like American Eagle, Greyhound, and Amtrak out of business. In this economy, that's no a good idea."
Seay nodded. "There is that, of course, plus the fact that it's difficult for disabled people to travel by Portkey. In addition, can you imagine grasping a Portkey without letting go for 20 minutes? That's one of the reasons we're not sure what to do about long-distance service at this point. However, rest assured that it's on the drawing board provided that all of these pilot programs work out all right."

To be continued...

Update #453.5: Behind enemy lines

Tuesday, December 3, 1996
Sargazos
Southern Syrdan

Few things are worse in war than getting trapped behind enemy lines. Unfortunately, when a group was composed of individuals from both warring entities, it was pretty much the default state of existence.

That was why Samanar Naztheros, one of the top 100 wealthiest Being in the Hidden Nations - which says a lot, considering how over-represented royels and other noble families with a tendency of hoarding treasures over centuries were in those countries - was currently cowering in the burnt-out ruins of a cottage, wondering how it all went wrong.

It all started nicely, arriving to Syrdan with his girlfriend and house-elf. Sure, Myrtille got a few stares, but as she was A, a known Veela, B, way too young to have been a combatant in the last war, and C, well-known for being his girlfriend, none of the customary accusations of being a spy/seducer, or any desire for revenge were voiced by the wizards and witches they met. Their Auror escorts, "assigned for their own protection" were outright amiable... a stark contrast with how he and his family were forced to leave the country last time.

Well, that time was about two decades ago, and boy, did Syrdan change. The end of the Statute of Secrecy brought along great changes. It started subtly, but with the Muggles getting involved, the traditional structure of Syrdani society soon began to crumble. Spellcasters were no longer the unquestionable authority they used to be, and as the yahoos were granted more and more rights, they became increasingly divided... some of both groups even reached the point when they resorted to open violence. It got to the point, month ago, where wizards now noticeably avoided stepping close to yahoos- fear from unexpected knifings became second nature to them. Rumors said that the Americans even supplied the yahoos with gunpowder weapons, probably smuggling it along the shipments of mechanized farming and industrial equipment.

Well, at least those were conveniently converted to work on magic, preserving the local environment, and by now enough wizards got a hang of mechanics, and enough Muggles learned rudimentary magic theory to ensure the machines were maintained well. More, they recently succeeded in
building machinery on their own, combining magic and mechanics quite adeptly - well, not on Roqteratl drider walker levels, but they were getting close. On the other hand, the sight of imported and custom-made machinery along with pack mules inevitably reminded Samanar of a certain desert planet's mismatched technology seen in a very popular Muggle movie.

However, it was all blown to hell when Nestor invaded. They were in the northern part of the country tracking down one of the family grimoire's volumes when they learned of it... in the form of a Veela air raid. Apparently, a sizeable army of the feathered ones attempted to take out an installation in a local fishing village, recently given to some refugees. The invaders were met with fierce resistance and routed in a destructive dogfight by wizards on brooms, but not before unleashing a veritable rain of fire. As their shelter caved in on them, Floppy the house-elf used her magic to fling them away into relative safety, but she was trapped under falling debris. He managed to excavate her in time, but they also had to deal with their escorts... as those turned on Myrtille. Disabling 3 Aurors was really taking a lot of luck, including some late fireballs, but in the end they got out in walking condition, only to learn that the elf had an internal skull fracture, a condition usually lethal in a few days.

Fortunately, he found a reference to a possible cure in one of the recovered grimoires. Unfortunately, the volume referenced was in the South, what now became a war zone. To complicate things, Portkey Barriers and Anti-Apparition Jinxes were powered up all through the nation, restricting teleportation to manned checkpoints... if their "escorts" were any indication, they wanted to avoid those. The elf was conscious but unwell, and required all her will to stay awake, so that approach was out of the question. In the end, they sneaked into the burning village and "borrowed" the first boat they could in the chaos, hastily enchanted it and took off, barely above tree level. They did reach the South, but now they had another problem- the desired location was in Veela-infested territory, and seeing how her fellow Nestorians had let his girlfriend walk into a soon-to-be war zone with no warning, Samanar had problems trusting them any more than his own countrymen...

----------
Syrdach
Syrdan
----------

Rasezar was in the throne room again, reporting to the cancellors about how they stopped the Veela incursion in the North at least, when the messenger arrived, handing a report to Vixar, who read it and tore it in anger.

"Well, merwizard, it seems your kind is more persistent than we were led to believe. Do you know of any reason why there are merwizards and Roqteratl military walkers appearing at our coasts, other than that they are pissed over our blockade?"

The renegade shook his head. "No... but they are bluffing. The blockade itself is left alone, and they didn't assist the Veela raid on our base. They are scared of the political implications."

Vixar frowned. "Explain."
"Say, what happens if the Eldest and the Archon send their armies of walkers and battlemages against us, numbering in the tens of thousands? Only a fool would meet them in open battle."
"They'd wipe us out in sieges too," snapped Ortelu.
"Probably, if we are on our own. But we have Tsalasia, and why is that?"
"...America" replied Siatnan. "As long as they are siding with Nestor, anyone siding with Nestor would be branded as traitors to all the wizarding world, assisting Muggles in a war of conquest against Wizardkind. It would escalate to the point where the Galiver Consortium might get involved, quickly leading to a world war while Atlantis is still recovering from the last Judgement Day."

"Reassuring" said Vixar, "But I'd like some contingency plans for a case when Nestor sees the Americans are more trouble than they are worth, and they choose to just sic the merpeople on us."
"I've been thinking about it for some time..." mused Rasezar. "Here is what we will do..."

Greater Council Chamber
Roqteratl

Avernus's ears were still ringing after yet another Howler from Merkali. This time, the insufferable hag was complaining that her strike force was decimated. "I don't understand her" he complained to the Eldest. "I did warn her that these are trained battlemagi and powerful dark wizards... what did they expect, a sensual back massage?"

Despite the severity of the situation, the old Roqteratli chuckled. "She might just be scared that her girls and lads didn't manage to charm the enemy into harmlessness. Speaking of which, how is it even possible?"

The Archon sighed. "Two reasons. One, our fighters are taught to take out hostile Veela from outside of Charm range. Two, these are dark wizards... some of the evil rituals they perform on themselves leaves them with decreased fertility and diminished sexual drive..."

"Less for the Veela to work with?" guessed the Eldest. The Trapanandan ruler nodded and asked: "So, what's next? Our soldiers did scare the Syrdani, but not enough to withdraw the blockade. They effectively called our bluff... so, they don't believe we would truly invade. What might go in their heads, I wonder..."

"Simple. They know our power, they know that if we send our armies of walkers and battlemages against them, numbering in the tens of thousands, they have no chance to win. Only a fool would meet them in open battle. It would be four nations against one... but then there is Tsalasia. We would forfeit their friendship if we were to side with the Muggles in the invasion of a wizard nation. So, as long as America is involved..."

"We wait." They said in unison.
To be continued...

--------
Notes:

-House-elves are valuable enough to warrant some research into their healthcare over the centuries the wizards had them, so a 'Big Damn Book of everything a family's members ever thought important knowledge' has good chance of containing relevant data.

-Nestor was given every information about Syrdan's rogue merwizard population, and they tried eliminating them the same way Israel bombed Iraq's nuclear facilities way back. Unfortunately, they had bitten more than they could chew, that with the residents being half on alert and airborne, half underwater.

-I presume the general tendency that wizard couples where someone dabbles in the Dark Arts tend to have less children is not just a coincidence. Voldemort has become pronouncedly asexual, not just monstrous (and powerful) - I presume he’d have been entirely immune to Veela charm. I'm going with the implication that there are less powerful and more common forbidden spells, other than Horcruxes, used by Death Eaters and other dark wizards with similar side effects. AFAIK Movie canon had some l33t Dark-only spells, such as unpowered flight in the bridge destruction scene.

__________________
Update #454: You've Got Audrey, But We've Got Audrey II

-------------
Wednesday, December 4, 1996
Chiang's Exotic Herbs
Chinatown
San Francisco, CA
United States of America
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/4.6%
-------------
NEXT UP: The Man Who Could Have Saved Millions
-------------
Guo Chiang signed for the Fedex delivery as the courier shook his head in disbelief. "I must say, sir, I've never heard of any of these things before. And I've delivered a lot of strange things to shops like this in Chinatown."

Chiang looked at the set of boxes and bowed. "It's understandable, sir. To be honest, I'm not entirely sure what I'm getting either. All I can tell you is that it will be unique."

The Fedex man frowned. "Where did you import this stuff from? Those symbols on the package sure don't look like Chinese to me. They're foreign, obviously. Come to think of it, why isn't there a customs slip associated with the delivery?"
Chiang laughed. "They're from an internal supplier. We don't need to worry about customs declarations, at least for now. For all I know, though, the Food and Drug Administration may start cracking down on us more."

"What do these plants do? And how can you have no idea what you're getting? Certainly you placed the order, as I see it's supposed to be delivered to you."

Chiang finished signing the forms and handed them back to the deliveryman. "I placed the order, all right. I told them to give me stuff that was...unique. I need to sell something that neither the Whole Foods down the street nor the other Chinese stores sells. Otherwise, I'll go out of business."

The Fedex man sounded dubious. "All right, I'll play along. Where did you get this from? Something really doesn't sound right here. I want to know the truth, sir. What's going on here?"

Chiang groaned. "I got it from the Mt. St. Helens Facility. It's Wizarding stuff. You've got to admit, no one else will have it."

The Fedex man looked at the boxes and shuddered. "*Gremlins.*"

Chiang blinked. "Excuse me?"

"The movie. Remember at the beginning when the guy gets that cute little animal from the store. Everything is wonderful until it gets wet, reproduces, and the little children start feeding after midnight. Next we know, there are monsters running all over the place and there goes the neighborhood."

Chiang laughed as the Fedex man turned to leave. "These are plants, for God's sake. They just sit there. They're not going to walk around and try to strangle people."

The Fedex man threw one last comment over his shoulder. "How do you know, sir? Maybe magical plants walk."

Chiang frowned as the man drove away. He hadn't thought of that -- would these plants actually try to convince their owners to water them? Come to think of it, wasn't there a movie when a plant needed to be fed blood to survive? He looked at some of the boxes with trepidation. Mt. St. Helens wouldn't have sent him dangerous plants now...would they?

Watering can at the ready (did these even take water?), he opened the first box and found a large, well-sealed container holding an odd green, slimy substance. This plant looked like it was some kind of cross between green moss and a worm of some sort. He breathed a sigh of relief when he realized that, at least for the time being, this plant wasn't moving around.

A long piece of parchment had been packed with the specimen. Hoping that these were instructions as to what the plant did and how to care for it, he unrolled it and began to read.

-------------

GILLYWEED  
*Inspiratus Submarinus*

Gillyweed is a magical plant found in carefully protected areas in the Mediterranean and Black Seas. It has a tubular form and is often compared to green rat tails. It features kelp-like leaves.
approximately 6-10 centimeters in diameter and prefers relatively sandy soil. Although the leaves themselves are edible and somewhat tasty, the tubular roots are what makes gillyweed a well-known and revered magical herb.

Gillyweed is best known for giving people the ability to breathe underwater for a limited time. One four-ounce serving of gillyweed allows for 60 minutes of underwater operation in a typical lake or ocean environment. Up to three ounces of gillyweed can be consumed at any one time. Eating more than sixteen servings of gillyweed in a span of 24 hours or less can result in breathing difficulties and possible pulmonary damage.

Gillyweed is a powerful herb. However, this power can be dangerous if misused. It does its job by closing off the eater's lungs about ten seconds after ingestion and opening two sets of gills on each side of the body. Once the gills fully develop -- five more seconds -- the eater will be able to breathe underwater like a merperson or fish.

The consumer's hands and feet will experience temporary webbing while the gillyweed is in effect. This will allow him or her to swim more easily.

--------

Chiang looked at the herb thoughtfully. Something which allows the user to breathe underwater without scuba equipment? This sounds like it would be a real boon for places in the Caribbean which feature coral reefs. All the person has to do is eat some of this stuff and leave the scuba tanks at home.

The only problem he could think of would be that this ability sounded awfully dangerous. If anything went wrong, the person could easily drown. On the other hand, if there was something else in these boxes which helped mitigate the risk...

He turned back to the information pamphlet.

--------

At the end of the allotted period, the eater's gills will close up and the lungs will reinflate. It is imperative that the eater be near the surface at the time this occurs. Otherwise, he or she could drown. Green Thumb Growers recommends that the wizard cast *Ascendio* as soon as he feels the gills begin to close. There will be a brief tingle in the gills about five seconds before they do so, which should be enough time for the eater to bring out a wand.

--------

Uh oh, thought Chiang. Don't tell me this stuff is only safe to use if the consumer can cast spells. Maybe this hadn't been a good idea after all.

--------

**WARNINGS**

1. Gillyweed will not work in water with high salinity.

2. Like any set of gills, the organs produced by gillyweed will simply siphon oxygen from the water. If gillyweed is used to explore a region with a low oxygen content, the user can still asphyxiate.

3. Gillyweed does nothing to handle pressure-related issues such as "the bends" and eardrum pain. As a result, Green Thumb Growers recommend that people dive no deeper than 15 meters.
4. Do not dive in water colder than 15 Celsius.

5. Gillyweed does not protect against grindylows, which can be common in kelp forests and ponds.

-----------

Wonderful, Chiang thought. You can get a disease as well -- or was that some kind of poisonous fish which the Muggles were blissfully ignorant of? He was starting to have several doubts about this now.

There were a few more warnings, most of which made sense (don't dive alone, for instance). The last warning was followed by care instructions, which he discovered he would be able to follow by simply placing the sample in the koi pond in the back of the store and making sure the fish didn't get at it. Although he figured he wouldn't be stupid enough to try to sell that stuff himself, he could always serve as a supplier to the Caribbean.

Putting away the gillyweed, he turne to the next box. This one contained a small bush with the root system still intact. It was clear it was supposed to be planted outside somewhere. It, too, had instructions associated with it.

-----------

**DITTANY MAGUS**

*Magus Dictamnus*

Dittany magus is magical herb which grows in small bushes about 20 to 30 centimeters across. It grows best in areas which do not exceed 30 Celsius for long periods of time. Don't try growing it near the poles, however, as frost will kill it. Keep it in direct sunlight as much as possible.

Dittany magus is best known for its use in essence of dittany, a powerful healing salve. When placed on wounds, essence of dittany will cause the wound to heal within minutes, leaving barely a scar.

-----------

Chiang blinked. Now THIS was something he could sell, particularly to people who didn't balk at trying unusual medicinal herbs!

-----------

Although this herb is well-regarded for its magical potency, and has been used by wizards for hundreds of years in the Aegean, one must keep in mind that it will only heal the wound. If the wound triggers an infection before it can be healed, the patient will still have to treat the infection. It should go without saying that it cannot heal fatal wounds or chronic medical conditions.

To prepare essence of dittany, wait until the spring and pick the blue berries which develop on the leaves. Crush the berries, squeeze the sap into a pot, and add the leaves. Pour the contents into a pot and bring it to a boil. Add some cinnamon into the boiling pot and stir three times clockwise and five times counterclockwise. Once you've done that, wait for it to cool. The resulting potion can begin healing wounds as soon as it comes to room temperature. It will remain potent for five years, after which it should be discarded and rebrewed.

-----------

Chiang gave a whoop of join and began looking around for his cinnamon sticks. There they were, sitting in a corner. He was all set to go -- except for one small problem: the specimen in the box
didn't have any berries on it.

Chiang scratched his head and read on, finding that dittany magus produced berries in April. Wonderful, he thought. He needed to keep this plant alive long enough to get it to produce the berries. He couldn't put it outside because he didn't want animals (or other Chinese apothecaries) to get their hands on it.

Something told him that he was going to have to keep this plant in his own house. He made a mental note to throw out the cat if it ate too much of the stuff...

To be continued...

__________________

Update #455: The Man Who Could Have Saved Millions
-------------
Wednesday, December 4, 1996
United Nations Building
Geneva
Switzerland
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/4.5%
-------------
NEXT UP: See It Fly
-------------

Anastasios Dialonis looked at the American representative in horror. "So it is true then, sir. The Americans have sued Atlantis for not preventing the genocide of the Jews in the Second World War."

The American nodded. "Not only that, but it's become a class-action lawsuit. Thousands of people whose families have been victims of genocide have joined it. There are Armenians involved, for instance, as well as members of the other ethnic groups Germany targeted during the war. What's more, from what I've been told Urban IX himself has joined the suit."

Dialonis looked at him warily. "The head of Christians for Humans? What does he have to do with this?"

"He's a gypsy, remember, and he supposedly lost an uncle in the war. Besides, we know him well enough to figure he would jump at anything to make life hard for the wizards."

"I see. The story is a bit complicated. However, to begin with you have to understand that the Statute of Secrecy made it quite difficult for us to intervene."

The American looked down at his notes. "I agree. However, it was not impossible. You have Obliviators, after all. All you had to do is do something magical to rescue the people in the concentration camps and cover them up. Am I correct?"

Dialonis fidgeted a little. "Technically, yes. However, there are two major obstacles to that. First, an operation like this would require thousands of Obliviators. It would have to go through both the inmates and camp guards and convince them that the Allies had liquidated the camp. That excuse, however, wouldn't go over very well unless the Allies were approaching the camp, in which case they would have likely liberated it anyway within a few days. All the Germans would have to do would find out that someone is convincing the guards to let the inmates go. If I were Hitler, I would
have been very suspicious. I would have likely court-martialed the guards and replaced them with ones who were more loyal to the Nazi movement."

"Did you consider the possibility that the camp guards would have had a change of heart and let them go of their own volition?"

Dialonis nodded. "It wouldn't work. Although many of the guards were probably uncomfortable with what they were doing, Hitler and the Nazis ruled partially on fear. These soldiers would have followed orders even if they didn't like them -- after all, that's the soldier's credo. One slip and they could have found themselves going into the gas chambers instead of maintaining them."

"How about sabotaging the Zyklon-B and replacing it with sleeping gas?"

"Still won't work. All the Germans would have to do is check if the supposedly dead prisoners still had a pulse. That ruse wouldn't have lasted very long. Incidentally, this goes to show that we at least discussed the possibility -- many of the arguments that you've raised are valid and were brought up during the war. However, the lack of Obliviators partially doomed them from the get-go."

"Did you serve in the war, Ambassador?"

A haunted expression appeared on Dialonis's face. "No, sir. However, I was alive at the time and remember the atrocities from the German occupation very well. I wanted to help but my parents advised me not to get involved as the Germans tended to butcher hundreds of civilians for every Nazi attacked. Look up massacres like the Holocaust of Kedros. I don't want to talk about it -- it brings up very bad memories. Besides, it doesn't involve the Stein lawsuit."

The American could tell immediately that Dialonis was uncomfortable here, so he got back on task. "You said there were two major obstacles to freeing the inmates from the camps. The first was the fact that you would have had to Obliviate all of the inmates and guards. What was the other one?"

Dialonis hesitated for a moment. Eventually, though, he let it out. "Gellert Grindelwald."

The American scratched his head. "Who?"

Dialonis began pacing back and forth behind the podium. "Gellert Grindelwald was a German Dark wizard born in early 1880's in what was then known as Danzig. He was a colleague (and at one point a friend) of Albus Dumbledore, the former Grand Mugwump and British Minister of Magic. He studied for a while at Durmstrang but was eventually expelled because he was caught studying the Dark Arts too much for his own good. He eventually went back home and continued studying the Dark Arts on his own.

"He served on the Western Front during the First World War, where he learned very quickly (a) that a discreet *Impervius* spell would protect him from mustard gas and bullets, and (b) he would need a large number of mechanical or undead soldiers if he wanted to take over the world. Given all of the casualties on the Western Front, that was a logical conclusion. And he couldn't use living people because they tended to think for themselves and get killed.

"So, he decided that he would create an army of Inferi, undead creatures, when it came to conquering the world. A believer in the Deathly Hallows, he understood that an artifact called the Resurrection Stone could be used to create Inferi. So, he went out of his way to steal the Stone. While he was at it, he stunned a wizard named Gregorovich and got his hands on the Elder Wand as well."
The Russian ambassador cut in. "Elder Wand? You mean the thing the Death Eaters stole from Hogwarts a while back?"

"Yes. This wand is extremely powerful and is well nigh invincible in a magical duel. Supposedly it is even strong enough to overwhelm Atlantis bubbles, though I'm not exactly hoping for confirmation."

The American grunted. "A wand which can beat Atlantis. Wonderful."

Dialonis tried to reassure him. "Don't worry, sir. There's only one Elder Wand."

"And it's in the hands of the Death Eaters. I'd say that's something to worry about."

Dialonis shrugged. "The Death Eaters are in disarray, as far as we can tell. One man with a powerful wand isn't going to do much, and we're going to do what we can to get it back. At any rate, back to the story. Grindelwald was similar to Voldemort -- and Syrdan for that matter -- in that he believed that the wizards should rule the Muggles. His belief in the Wizarding race's supremacy over the others led him into the study of Social Darwinism. This, in turn, led him to study the writings of a fellow Western Front veteran by the name of Adolf Hitler."


Dialonis waved his hands noncommittally. "Yes and no. The Nazis were German and Aryan supremacists, whereas Grindelwald was a Wizarding supremacist who happened to be German. The important thing, however, was that when Hitler came to power in 1933 and briefed on the magical world around him as one would have expected for a new head of state, Grindelwald introduced himself and explained that he was a wizard who was in favor of having the superior races rule the inferior races. Hitler was a bit wary at first, but a few 'magic tricks' by Grindelwald convinced the Fuhrer that Grindelwald knew what he was doing. So, they agreed to a tentative alliance which would be worth its weight in gold in 1940, when discreet magical support helped the Germans plow through Western Europe and conquer everything but Britain."

The British ambassador whistled. "Are you telling me that Grindelwald used magic against us during the war?"

Dialonis shook his head. "Almost. Grindelwald had considered it. However, he was wary of getting involved with England because that would drag in Albus Dumbledore, an extremely powerful wizard Grindelwald was reluctant to antagonize and/or fight. Besides, he didn't want Hitler getting TOO powerful as at some point Grindelwald would have to overthrow HIM as the head of the Reich."

"I'm surprised the German Ministry of Magic, groups like the Luftwaffe, and various generals accepted Grindelwald's support."

Dialonis chuckled. "They did...for a while. Most of the German Ministry members were strong patriots, which meant that they tended towards the Nazi ideology (although to their credit they refused to do anything to support the death camps). However, eventually the German Ministry realized who they were dealing with. Once that happened, things fell apart swiftly. Having just signed off on what we know as Operation Sealion, a combined magical-amphibious attack on the British Isles, they warned the Fuhrer that Grindelwald was an evil wizard who wanted to take over the world. Hitler immediately requested that the Ministry of Magic get rid of Grindelwald. The German wizards began doing so and dropped all support for the German military (much to Hitler's
chagrin, but the wizards convinced them at Grindelwald was too dangerous to allow free). This meant that Operation Sealion was going to have problems as there was no way that the invasion would work without magical support. To make matters worse, one of the German army generals who hadn't realized that there was going to be magical support supposedly reported to Hitler that many of his men were concerned that Sealion would be a disaster. Realizing that without the wizards the invasion was hopeless, Hitler called off the attack. This, ladies and gentlemen, is why the Nazis never invaded England and why the D-Day invasion worked.

"Now, back to the subject at hand. Grindelwald decided to entertain himself by taking advantage of the chaos in Europe to do the type of things Voldemort tended to do: attack Muggles and blame the Russians/Jews/Germans/Japanese/etc., terrorize wizards, and so forth. Atlantis couldn't do anything at the time as it was at DEFCON 3 during most of the Second World War, getting to DEFCON 2 only after the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima. However, it recommended that the free world send any free wizards to fight and capture Grindelwald."

Dialonis summed it up. "That, my friends, took up most of the our resources. That is why we didn't have anyone left to free the death camps. Atlantis couldn't intervene, and the wizards who could intervene were dealing with Grindelwald. Atlantis probably WOULD have intervened, but by law it couldn't unless it was at DEFCON 2 or higher, at which point the war in Europe was over."

There was a long pause. Finally, the American whistled. "This could very well be a case where ignorance was bliss. Is it just me, or should we say that the existence of Grindelwald should be considered a state secret and not leave this room?"

Everyone nodded, and the American turned back to Dialonis. "Whatever happened to Grindelwald?"

"Dumbledore fought him in a classic duel and eventually defeated him. He was sentenced to life imprisonment and placed in a jail he himself created. As far as I know, he's still there, thinking about his actions at the age of 113."

There were murmurs in the crowd. "He's still alive?"

"Yes. Recall that wizards tend to live longer than Muggles. However, you can rest assured that he isn't breaking out of there. Grindelwald himself saw to that when he made the prison."

The German ambassador's eyes narrowed. "I'm surprised you didn't execute him. He would almost certainly have stood trial at Nuremberg for war crimes."

Dialonis paused for a moment, then shrugged. "Being trapped with powerful magical guardians in your home for five decades is a fate worse than death, from what I've been told. Trust me, sir. He deserves this form of imprisonment. Execution would be a blessing in a case like this."

To be continued...
Update #456: See It Fly

Thursday, December 5, 1996
10-250 Lecture Hall
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Cambridge, MA
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/4.5%

---

Jelena Kurchatova tapped her wand on the blackboard and the wand motions underlying the Transfiguration spell appeared on the blackboard. She was grateful that she didn't have to write that out all by herself anymore.

She pointed at the board. "Take a look at this sequence of wand movements. Do you see anything familiar about them?"

One of the students in the front of the room raised his hand, and Kurchatova called on him. "It's the same swish and flick that was used with the Sleep spell."

"Correct. Why would that be?"

Another student answered that. "Probably because the swish and flick is necessary to concentrate magical energy. Have any experiments been done to determine at one point the energy flows into the wand?"

Kurchatova smiled. "Two points for East Campus. You're right on, my friend. Several scientists have done experiments with gravimeters now that we know that magic is powered by a form of repulsive gravity. A good 85% of the gravitational effects seem to occur during the initial swish and flick. Clearly, this motion was designed to strengthen the effects of the spell about to be cast."

"But how does that motion do that? Does the energy flow down into the wand when the wand is pointed up? If so why doesn't that happen more often?"

Kurchatova shrugged. "To be honest, we don't know. No one has ever tried done a scientific investigation of magic before. If you choose to go Course 19 you could get a chance to do your own magic lab and find out. All right, we now know what the first half of the spell does. Now comes part two. This spell whose wand motion has been written on the blackboard transfigures the target into what?"

A girl in the back of the room raised her hand. "A cat. I think it's going transfigure it into a cat."

Kurchatova was expecting this. "What makes you say that?"
"Because it seems to trace out the shape of a cat's head. I suspect that you have to wave the wand in a way which traces out the form the object is supposed to take."

Kurchatova smiled. "A reasonable conclusion. However, that is in fact not the case. The second half of the spell is a motion which indicates this is a Transfiguration spell. This particular spell actually can be used to change it into a dog, fish, mouse, Athena workstation...anything. All of them use the same wand motion."

"But how can that be?"

"Simple. At the time you finish the wand motion, you're supposed to think about what you want to transform the target into. Envision it in your mind’s eye, and that's how you do it."

She erased the lesson from the blackboard. "This goes to show two things. First, the swish and flick is used in virtually all spells to gather magical energy. Second, you can have a lot of false cognates when it comes to reverse-engineering a spell from its wand motion. All of you were convinced that it transfigured the target into a cat. However, that was not the case. Magical incantations aren't always what they seem."

One of the girls was watching the lesson with rapt attention. Kurchatova understood why, of course. In a class with 500 people, the odds favored about five or so being Q-only wizards. Sure enough, four of them had managed to grasp the wand without being harmed. Tentatively, the Q-only witch raised her hand. "Professor, can I try?"

Kurchatova looked at her warily. "Transfiguration is a pretty complicated spell, and it's easy to mess up."

The girl lifted her pencil and showed it to the crowd. "I think I know how it works. I'm going to try to run this pencil into a crayon. That's a small enough change that it could work even for me."

Kurchatova explained that traditionally students weren't supposed to use magic outside school for a reason. However, she didn't get far before her voice was drowned out by her students' chanting: "GO! GO! GO!"

It was obvious that they would keep on nagging her until she gave in. Eventually, she threw up her hands and handed over the wand. "All right, Jill. One try. And I want you facing away from the rest of us in case you blow up half the blackboard."

The girl stared hard at the pencil and then pointed the wand at it. Taking a deep breath, she shouted: "Burnt Sienna, here I come!"

There was a flash of light, and the pencil disappeared. In its place was what appeared to be a wooden stick. It wasn't a crayon, and it certainly wasn't a pencil anymore. But she had done something, at least. Excited, she showed the stick around the room. "Look what I did! It's not a crayon, but it's not a pencil anymore! How about that?"

The people whooped it up for a few minutes as Kurchatova put her head in her hands. Kurchatova took her wand back and said: "All right, Jill. That's enough for now. If you want to practice Transfiguration, do it somewhere where you can actually concentrate."

Jill's eyes brightened. "Does Next House get a few points for this?"
Kurchatova shook her head. "Casting the spell is not part of the official course curriculum, so no. However, I must say that you got further than I thought you would."

She turned back to the class. "All right, then. Where were we?"

She continued the lecture as people all around Jill started congratulating her. Jill's elation, however, diminished greatly when she realized that she was missing something. Sheepishly, she turned to the boy next to her.

"I'll go out with you if you give me something to write with."

Kurchatova rolled her eyes, conjured up a pencil, and threw it over to Jill. Jill caught it one-handed and started taking notes, much to the chagrin of no fewer than three boys who were waving pencils in her face.

She looked up at the back of them, where a good 2/3 of her sorority sisters were taking the class. She may have graduated, but she still spent a lot of time on campus with the rest of the girls. On a whim, all of them were wearing their SIF shirts. Although the official call letters of the sorority weren't actually SIF -- after all, there was no F in Greek -- the SIF had started out as a joke when Kurchatova had taken each freshman pledge candidate out on her broom for a ride. One of the girls had shouted down to the rest of group: "See? It flies". That had just opened the floodgates for more SIF acronyms: See It Fly, See I Fly, Shit I Fell, and so forth. Many of the pledges were pressuring Kurchatova and the rest of the founders into changing the sorority to be one based on fans of magic. However, the founders weren't going for that. The sorority had been founded to fill a niche at MIT which had not been covered by current Greek system, and it was important for the women in that niche to have a place to belong to.

The illusory cuckoo clock hanging over the blackboard started chirping, indicating that the class was at an end. Dismissing the cuckoo clock, she announced the latest -- and final -- problem set topics for the semester. Waiting to make sure everyone (or at least most of the people) in the room had gotten the information, she grabbed her broom and made her way out of the room.

She had gotten midway through her own grad student work when Jill made her way into the room. "All right, Professor. I really want to learn how to cast spells. You will be able to help me, right?"

Kurchatova shook her head. "Jill, listen to me. I'm extremely busy. I'm teaching a class and am taking my own grad student classes at the same time. I have to take care of the students here in Russian House, where I'm their 'Aunt Jelena'. I'm still on the board of Guinevere's Flying Carpets, though Jason and Guinevere have more or less taken over while I'm in school. I barely have time as is."

"Can't you get a Time-Turner?"

"There are restrictions on Time-Turner use, which means there is no way I'll be able to get my hands on one. Besides, I don't want to cause any time paradoxes and get myself killed. Time-Turners are dangerous and should only be used by trained professionals, like those in Atlantis."

Jill pouted for a moment before something occurred to her. "Maybe I can take classes in Enfield with the Quabbin Academy of Sorcery."

Kurchatova blinked, then stared at her thoughtfully. "You know, that might not be a bad idea. Do all four of you want to learn how to cast spells?"
Jill nodded. "Yes. We all do. And we know how to get there -- just head down to Park Street on the T and head down that new I-Entry corridor. Once we're there, take the flying carpet down 32B to Enfield. There's got to be something there which will allow us to get through the water to the city."

Kurchatova frowned. "There are several options. I'd recommend the Muggle Apparition Network -- supposedly they're going to have a man near the Quabbin attack memorial as well. Talk to them and have them send you over there on my authority. The headmistress of the QAS will almost certainly listen to you. Tell him that King William has been able to become a wizard and that you want to follow in his footsteps."

Jill let out a girlish laugh. "You really think they'll take us?"

"Absolutely. For one thing, Hogwarts has already set a precedent. For another, there are going to be a lot of openings over the next few years due to the deaths of students in Greenwich and Dana. Believe me, Jill. You'll get in."

To be continued...

Update

Update #457: World War Won't

Thursday, December 5, 1996
Oval Office
White House
Washington, DC
United States of America

ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/3.6%

NEXT UP: Charlie's Even More On the MTA

Bill Clinton looked at Secretary Ariadne and swore. "Are you sure about this, Ariadne?"

Ariadne nodded. "I'm afraid so. Tsalasia has closed its borders to Americans because of the way we're interfering with Syrdan. The Tsalal ambassador is hoping that we'll be able to resolve this diplomatically."

"We haven't done anything to Tsalasia! If anything, the Antarctic scientists have enjoyed talking with the Tsalal! Are Syrdan and Tsalasia allies? I can't see them as being allies as the Tsalal seem to respect Muggles."

Ariadne explained. "Remember Tsalasia's history. This particular nation was founded by wizards who were fleeing Western imperialism and colonialism. They wanted to keep their way of life and were concerned that their culture, along with that of the native population, would be subsumed in the name of progress."

Clinton's eyes widened. "They think that we're trying to take over Syrdan, make it an American colony, and impose American values?"
Ariadne nodded. "That's correct, Mr. President."

Clinton grimaced. "We all know that Syrdan has some quirks which most of the world isn't particularly keen on. From what I've been told, they're a bit of a pariah state themselves for that reason. However, much as I would like to reform them, I'm not planning on taking them over. We've already got enough problems here with the recession and so forth! Haven't you told the Tsalal that?"

Ariadne looked at him helplessly. "I have, Mr. President. And the Tsalal don't believe us. They've already pointed out that someone -- presumably a Western nation -- has forced the Tsalal to make some pro-Muggle reforms. And it wasn't Nestor, their traditional rival. The Tsalal probably don't know we reformed Tsalal. However, I wouldn't be surprised if Syrdan tells them at some point. From the vantage point of the Tsalal, it's classic American imperialism."

Clinton groaned. "You're thinking Tsalasia is going to ally with Syrdan and escalate the war if we actively get involved?"

Ariadne nodded slowly. "That's a distinct possibility, Mr. President. As long as it's just Syrdan and Nestor duking it out, nothing really is going to happen. Those two countries have been fighting for God knows how long, and this spat isn't particularly unusual. What is unusual, however, is the fact that there's a chance of escalation thanks to American intervention. And this is what I've come to talk to you about."

Clinton looked at her intently. "I'm listening."

Ariadne drew a deep breath. "Mr. President, I think we're going to have to get out of this somehow. I know we promised help to Nestor. However, if we get involved there is a strong possibility that a local war could go worldwide. This could be a Wizarding World War III if we continue to actively pressure Syrdan."

Clinton blinked. "WHAT?"

Ariadne looked at the president gravely. "Simple. We attack Syrdan. Tsalasia gets involved and goes after us, and the merpeople harassing Nestor start attacking our coastlines as well. You've seen what wizards can do -- magical terror attacks when we're out of position can wreak havoc on Muggles who aren't expecting them. A NATO country is attacked, so Europe starts going nuts. Think of Desert Storm but worse...and with wizards."

Clinton whistled. "Damn."

Ariadne continued. "The merpeople decide to play U-boat and start attacking Muggle shipping in the Atlantic. At the very least, they try to blockade us like they did Nestor. Oil prices hit $8.00 a gallon and the economy crumbles further. Europe gets dragged in, especially if European ships are targeted and they lose one of their major trading partners. NATO mobilizes. Syrdan, the merpeople surrounding Nestor, and Tsalasia then try to ally with the Galiver Consortium, arguing that Muggles are overstepping their boundaries again and attacking wizards. The Pacific goes up. Hawaii falls, and for all we know Japan and Taiwan do as well. Just go on from there...and consider the fact that wizards are very good at Apparating. Oh, and did I forget to mention we can't use the Judgment Day protocol again until June 2001?"

Clinton gritted his teeth. "Double damn."
Ariadne leaned towards the president. "This reminds me a lot of 1914 with a lot of alliances and global economics hooking everyone together. The initial attack by Nestor on Syrdan could have very well been the equivalent of the assassination of Franz Ferdinand. You know what happened next, sir. There is only one way to prevent a major international conflict. This has to stay a wizard-only struggle. The American armed forces can't get involved."

Clinton stared out the window, his brow creased with thought. "We have to do something, however. Nestor has asked for our help, and the United States doesn't renege on promises."

"I'm aware of that, Mr. President. We'll help, but we're going to do so in a way which is not military."

Clinton looked at her, intrigued. "Oh? What are you thinking?"

Ariadne smiled. "I have reason to believe that the merpeople blockading Nestor aren't working for the Archon."

"The Archon? Who's that?"

"The Archon is the king of the merpeople. But think about it for a second, sir. We've got a trade blockade of a possible American ally at the same time the Kodiak station is having brisk trade between the merpeople and the Americans. Something seems out of place here. What's even more interesting is that the merpeople's ambassador has told us several times that the Archon didn't order the attack on Nestor. I'm a good judge of faces -- at least with humans -- and I'm convinced that he's telling the truth. It makes sense. There are almost certainly a few wizard supremacists -- or at least human Muggle haters -- in the merpeople's community. They decide to ally with Syrdan since they both don't like human Muggles. Syrdan of course thinks they speak for the Archon and accept their help.

Clinton thought for a moment. "You're thinking we should issue a formal request to the Archon to have him pull his wayward countrymen out of Nestor -- by force? And we'll then leave the scene, having fulfilled our promise to Nestor?"

Ariadne nodded. "That's exactly my thought, sir. Here's what I envision happening. We tell the merpeople to clean up their act. They get embarrassed a little, but they soon realize that we're right. The Archon's forces take out the rogue merpeople as we leave the scene. Once we stop acting like an imperial power, Tsalasia backs down. This leaves only two combatants left: Syrdan and Nestor. Just like we've always had."

Clinton thought about this some more. Slowly, he nodded. "It makes sense. However, Nestor isn't going to be happy about this. I doubt they would have attacked Syrdan on their own."

"Don't be so sure about that, Mr. President. Nestor has always welcomed outsiders and the few Muggles it has been able to get its hands on -- after all, in a land with a good 2:1 ratio of women to men, where are babies supposed to come form? These two countries have been going after it for many years now. Come to think of it, I have reason to believe that several of the disappearances in the Bermuda Triangle were actually either Syrdani slave captures or Muggle ships caught up in the battle between the two states."

"Yes, and with our luck Nestor will decide to punish us for not helping them."

"I doubt it, sir. Why would Nestor open a two-front war? Antagonizing us won't do anything about
the fight with Syrdan."

"Nestor started it, Secretary Ariadne. Markali has her troops on foreign soil. Nestor can always pull back out."

Ariadne groaned. "Sir, we've thought about this a lot. This is the best solution by far. We're more than willing to risk of Nestor's displeasure if this action is going to stop a potential world war. You know enough about human history to realize that Muggles, wizards, and wars don't mix. Hell, the last time magical weapons were loosed on the Muggle world, we had a Judgment Day. And that was one wizard. ONE WIZARD!"

Clinton thought a little more. "Have you spoken with Radner about this?"

Ariadne nodded. "We haven't spoken with him much since he's technically in retirement from major political duties. However, we talked to him a couple of days ago and he fully agrees with this plan."

Clinton stood as he made up his mind. "All right -- let's do it. Send a message to the Roqteratl ambassador and have him meet the two of us here in three hours. See if you can get a promise out of Roqteratl to have the Archon's regular forces blockade Syrdan as long as the merpeople are blockading Nestor."

Ariadne nodded. "We'll do what we can, sir. Thank you for your support."

To be continued...

__________________

Update #458: Charlie's Even More On the MTA
------------
Friday, December 6, 1996
Charles Street Station Blue Line Tunnel
Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority
Boston, MA
United States of America
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/3.6%
------------
NEXT UP: How About Giving Them Time-Turners, Take II
------------
Michael Hobbs looked over the beginnings of the new terminal and nodded. The rock worm had, much to the MBTA's surprise, done an admirable job. The tunnel was more or less waterproof and seemed to be sturdy enough to support the weight of Cambridge Street above it. The wizards had managed to pack down the dirt on the walls, ceiling, and floor of the tunnel so it wouldn't be filled with dust when the first trains went through. As far as he could tell, construction was proceeding only a day or so behind schedule. However, it was still early in the project and he had a strong suspicion that the State of Massachusetts was going to throw a big monkey wrench into the proceedings.

The wizards had taken Jeff -- the rock worm -- over to South Station to start working on the North-South Rail Link tunnel. Jeff did an admirable job, as usual. However, there had been a couple of
minor snags which had made the news. First, a large sinkhole had opened up in Chinatown when the unstable landfill which made up much of Boston had caved in and swallowed a good portion of Curve Street. The wizards supervising the construction had plugged the hole pretty quickly. Unfortunately, one of the brownstones had partially collapsed and the residents had spent a good half hour screaming at the wizards in Chinese. The wizards had been forced to spend a good ten thousand dollars fixing the building and another two hours helping the residents put their belongings back in place.

That Chinatown incident, however, had been nothing compared to the disaster earlier today in the financial district, when Jeff managed to eat up a large electrical transformer buried underground. Not only had power been shorted out for a good three hours this morning, but the electric shock had spooked Jeff to the point where he'd backed out of his tunnel...and right into the Sotuh Station railroad platform, in plain sight of the Muggles waiting for the commuter rail and Amtrak. There had been a brief riot as the train passengers had run in fear of the humungous creature, and no fewer than two cars had been derailed in the animal's panic. Although the wizards had managed to fix everything by the evening rush hour, commuter rail service had been delayed and people were screaming that using monsters to complete the Big Dig hadn't been what they had been expecting.

The wizards explained that the monsters occasionally did get out of control for a few minutes here and there and that these particular creatures had been behaving about as well as could be expected in such an environment. They insisted that everything would be all right and that the wizards would repair any damage to Boston's infrastructure during the construction. The wizards' opponents, on the other hand, argued that it was only a matter of time until one of those animals crushed or ate somebody -- and as everyone knew by now, even wizards could not reverse death.

What a mess, though Hobbs. However, the simple fact been that the introduction of the worms to dig some of the smaller tunnels had been a pilot program for the most part. There had been no major incidents working on the Blue Line extension and only two working on the North-South Rail Link. Whether the program would be extended to cover the main I-93 tunnel would depend on the results of these trials.

The wizards had told Menino that they intended to continue the trials, and they had convinced Menino and the MBTA that it was safe. Unfortunately, Menino was being deluged with requests to get rid of the rock worms and have humans dig the tunnels. Once the tunnels were dug, then the wizards could do whatever they wanted. The concerned citizens also demanded that no monsters be used at any other point in the project.

Wizard Kershaw had explained that it would be possible to send Jeff back to the Four Towns and continue the construction using ordinary wizards. However, he warned the city that the cost would increase by about $2 billion and that construction would take an additional 12 months. It would be up to the citizens of Boston to decide between the cost increase and the worms. In either case, however, it would be cheaper than going with Bechtel-Parsons.

Hobbs hoped they stayed with the worms and finished the project on schedule for a change. The worms hadn't done anything to him, after all, and he found the idea of the tunnels being dug out by animals somewhat amusing. However, he suspected that the referendum on March 1st would determine that the worms had to go. After all, Boston was accustomed to cost increases and delays with the Big Dig. How would this be any different?

-------------
Park Street Station
-
Jill led the other three Q-only wizards from 19.00 off the shuttle bus which had replaced the Red
Line and made their way over to the entrance to Park Street. She and the three guys had been waiting at Kendall for a long time, ringing those musical sculptures in the station, when the public address system reported that there had been an incident at South Station and the Red Line was going to be replaced with shuttle buses for the next three hours. There were rumors running around that one of the rock worms had run amok and had managed to make its way into South Station, terrorizing a few passengers and causing damage before being subdued.

She didn't know how to react to that. Had it not been a case where people had been frightened and possibly injured, it would have sounded like a headline from a bad movie ("HUGE WORM FROM DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS ATTACKS PEOPLE IN TRAIN STATION!"). She had a strong suspicion that Wizard Kershaw's plan for the Big Dig would have to be redeveloped or scrapped completely. She chuckled. The Big Dig, she thought. What a disaster. Anyone who majored in courses 1 or 11 -- civil engineering or urban studies -- would probably make it big in Boston.

There were several streetlights out in the area for some reason, presumably damage from the worms. Fortunately, the entrance to Park Street was still illuminated. With Kurchatova's wand in hand, she led them down into the terminal and stopped outside the door to I-Entry in the Winter Street concourse.

Professor Kurchatova had mixed feelings about letting the four trainees borrow the wand. On one hand, holding the wand would prove once and for all that these four candidates were in fact Q-only wizards. On the other hand, the young professor -- who had supposedly just graduated last year -- had been concerned that one of the Gang of Four would try to do something with the wand without her supervision. All four had promised to behave, but Jill herself had to confess that one of the boys seemed a bit...eager.

The door to I-Entry was closed. However, Kurchatova had told Jill what to do: step up and tap the wand on the door. The door disappeared, and the four candidates made their way into the corridor. All four of them marveled at the worm-hewn walls and the glowing names which had been permanently etched into them. Alex, the sophomore, gasped when he saw the name of one of his friends who had been killed in H-Entry. It had taken the group a good two or three minutes to console him.

The corridor eventually opened out into a large park with a couple of reflecting pools. This must be the Quabbin memorial, she thought. If that was the case -- yes, there were the flying carpets, just outside the dome. And next to them was a man with a Muggle Apparition Network uniform. The MAN employee looked up for a moment, saw that Jill was holding a wand, and turned back to his book.

She led the group over to the MAN employee, who put down his book with a sigh of relief. "May I help you?"

Jill nodded. "Quite possibly. The four of us are Q-only wizards. Professor Jelena Kurchatova has recommended that we go to the Four Towns to see if anyone would be willing to train us over IAP. Hopefully this will set a precedent for training American Q-only wizards, much like they do in England."

The MAN agent blinked. "IAP?"

"MIT intersession, taking up most of January. Ideally, we'd like to learn as much as we can within two weeks of immersive study. That way, we'll be able to spend at least some time at home."
The agent frowned. "I'll be able to take you there, of course. However, you must understand that training to become a wizard takes years. You'll barely be able to cast simple spells with two weeks of training."

Jill drew a deep breath and brought out her half-Transfigured pencil. "I've already partially Transfigured a pencil into a crayon. Professor Kurchatova drew the wand motion on the blackboard and I tried to follow it."

The agent stared at the pencil with a dubious expression on his face. "All right, I'll send you over there. However, don't expect much. You won't be able to get into the QAS until next fall at the earliest, and even if you do so you'll have to take classes both at MIT and the QAS. I don't know much about MIT, but from what I've been told it is at least as difficult a school as the QAS. At best, you'll be able to get a personal tutor -- come to think of it, why can't you have Kurchatova teach you?"

"Kurchatova's extremely busy with her own work as a teacher. She is also a graduate student there as well as a dorm housemaster. She recommended some of Guinevere's friends as possible tutors."

The MAN agent looked even more dubious. "Guinevere's friends are as young as she is. I doubt they're experienced enough to be tutors."

"They help teach 19.00 from time to time!"

"Yes, and that's a basic magic course for Muggles. They're talking about the magical world, not actually trying to teach magic. Although I suppose they'll take you after 19.00 ends, be advised you won't learn much."

Jill grunted. "It's more than we know right now."

The MAN agent scratched his head. "True, so I guess it can't hurt. All right, you four. $10 each and I'll send transport you one at a time to the QAS."

The headmistress of the QAS looked at the four MIT students thoughtfully. "Kurchatova's right, of course. You probably should be tutored. Otherwise, your magic might get out of control and harm people."

Jill stared at her. "Harm people?"

"Have strange things tended to happen to you and you don't know why they do so? Do you ever feel like when you get into trouble you always manage to get through despite the obstacles?"

Jill nodded slowly. "Yes. However, I figured it's because we're bright and clever."

"Sometimes it is. Sometimes, however, it's because of magic. Magic will always resonate within you, even if you don't have a wand. Remember that several spells, such as Apparition, don't require wand use -- in fact, many cultures don't even use wands. Next time you find something unusual happening, pay close attention to it. It could be a magical instinct or talent manifesting itself."

"I see. So will one of your staff members be able to tutor us during the winter? We don't have much money, but we may be able to help by providing you with Muggle technology for your school."
The headmistress seemed amused. "Muggle technology? What would we do with it when we have magic?"

All four MIT students chuckled. "You'd be surprised, Headmistress. Computers are very powerful nowadays."

The headmistress paused a little, then shrugged. "Well, I suppose I should keep an open mind. All right, if you teach someone here how to use a computer and bring a computer with you, we'll give you lessons over the second and third weeks of January. I see you already have wands, so you're already ahead of the game."

Alex coughed discreetly. "Actually, we don't. This is Kurchatova's wand. We borrowed it to get in the door."

"I see. Well, in that case you're going to have to buy wands when you first begin lessons -- we're not giving you any wands before then, and you are not to experiment with Kurchatova's. Be advised that they can run hundreds of dollars, though from what I've been told of college tuition that's just a drop in the bucket. Is that so?"

All four students nodded sharply. They'd be paying off student loans for a long time...unless being a wizard made them more marketable.

"Good. I'll make the necessary arrangements here. Meet me outside the door to I-Entry the Sunday of the second week of January at 9:00. If, after two weeks, you wish to continue, we'll talk about renewing your lessons in the summer and expanding the program to cover more Q-only wizards. To be honest, I'm not sure where we're going to PUT all of you -- we don't have run-down monasteries like they do in England -- but we'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

To be continued...

__________________

Update #459: How About Giving Them Time-Turners, Take II

Friday, December 6, 1996
Ford Headquarters
Dearborn, MI
United States of America

ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/3.6%

NEXT UP: This Has Got To Be Cheating, But I Don't See How

It still sure looks a hell of a lot like a Ford Taurus, thought Jared Kincaid. He knew, however, that it in effect WAS a Ford Taurus with a few minor modifications. The biggest of these, of course, had been the flying enchantment.

The cars were coming off the assembly line faster than the wizards could enchant them and make enough cosmetic changes to make it look like a magical car. As a result, most of them were sold as is, with the Taurus chassis and name. At present, only one of every 10 or so would actually get the
flight modifications and be sold under the Lacewing brand. However, that would likely change as housewitches, CWI employees, and unemployed spellcasters started working to enchant the cars for money.

The engineers at Ford hadn't had to do much work to figure out how to adapt a car for flight -- all they had done was read up on the Bentley Pegasus and imitate what they did. Turning the steering wheel into an aircraft style control stick had been relatively simple, as had been adding parachutes to the roof. The wizards had told Ford that the parachutes weren't necessary as the flying enchantment was pretty stable. However, the president of Ford had insisted. Otherwise, the government would have probably intervened and prevented the company from selling the Lacewings.

The president of Ford had reported that approximately one out of every 2000 cars on the road today now had flight capability. The most common flying car in the United States was, of course, the DeLorean Aviator. There were a few Pegasi running around but not many due to the vehicle's high cost. Lotus was supposedly working on a flying car as well, but they were way behind Ford at the moment. And if everything went as planned, they'd be behind for a long, long time.

The president of Ford looked at Kincaid and frowned. "I thought Wizard Dresden would be here at the announcement. He did most of the planning, didn't he?"

Kincaid nodded. "He did. However, he's a pretty busy man. We recently had a string of serial curses in the Chicago area and Dresden was pretty busy dealing with that. He's all been busy trying to tell Jim Butcher what he can and cannot announce to the Muggles. He told me to convey his regrets, however. I'll be his representative."

The president of Ford jerked his head at the car, which was at the center of a brightly lit room with the Lacewing logo hovering overhead. Reporters and photographers were taking their first looks at a vehicle which would likely revolutionize the American automotive industry. "Do you know how to fly this thing?"

"Yes. In fact, I did a few test flights myself. The tricky part was learning to DRIVE it -- I haven't driven cars much. It took me a while to get accustomed to the pedals and so forth."

"Hmm...well, maybe at the demo I'll drive it around and you fly it around. We'll stop for a moment so we can change seats before we go airborne. Got it?"

Kincaid nodded. "Got it."

"Good. Let's get on with the announcement."

"Sounds good to me."

The two men made their way to the podium and told the photographers hovering around the car to take their seats. Once everybody had been settled, the company president began to speak.

"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming this afternoon. I am the president of Ford, and with me is a representative of the Chicago Wizarding Institute, Wizard Jared Kincaid. It is our pleasure to introduce to you the future of the American mass-produced automobile: the 1997 Ford Lacewing. It has got all of the standard features one would have expected from a Ford product: a chassis based on the Taurus, responsive handling, airbags, and so forth. However, it has one feature which is virtually unique among cars today. Wizard Dresden, if you would do the honors?"
Kincaid nodded and got into the car. He turned the key in the ignition and honked the horn at the crowd. Then, he grinned and pulled back on the steering wheel. The crowd gasped as the car rose into the air, and he made a couple of victory laps around the room. He then headed over to the middle of the room, the car hovering a few feet over the guests' heads.

The Ford representative continued to speak. "In case you haven't noticed, it can fly. No, it doesn't look like a fancy British model or like a science fiction time machine. However, it doesn't cost a fortune either. Unlike other flying vehicles you may be acquainted with, the Lacewing's MSRP starts at $18,995. That's right, ladies and gentlemen. You can get your own flying vehicle for under $20,000. Granted, it's a little more expensive than a typical Ford vehicle. However, imagine the respect and prestige you will earn when you're the only person on your block able to fly out of traffic jams and get to your destination in less than half the time you would have otherwise. And it is MUCH less expensive than the competitors, where you are likely paying for the fact that their cars look like time machines.

"There are already over a thousand Lacewings ready to be driven, or flown, off dealership floors. More of them are coming off the assembly line every day, being produced in the factories which have spent decades perfecting the Taurus. We at Ford believe that this vehicle will change the way people use their cars. The first skyway, Massachusetts State Route 32B, has already been created and has been a hit with wizards and people who own flying carpets. There are going to be more of those in the future, express lanes dedicated for flying vehicles. Right now 1 out of every 2000 cars on the road flies. We believe that by the time the new century come around, 2001, that ratio will be up to 1 in 30 or higher. By 2005, 1 in 10. By 2015, 1 in 4."

The crowd chattered excitedly as the Ford man continued. "In addition to this new product, we at Ford would like to announce our new Wheels to Wings conversion program which will take an existing vehicle and make it flight-worthy. The program will include two months of training and full flight enchantments. It will cost $4995 to convert a Ford vehicle, $6995 to convert a vehicle made by other American companies, and $9995 to convert a foreign vehicle."

Kincaid chuckled to himself. Considering that the actual cost to convert an existing car was maybe $750 (the parachute, the wizard-aided steering modifications, and a few enchantments), Ford was going to make a killing with this. And if someone else tried to undercut Ford on the price, the conversion package could drop even further.

The president of Ford smiled. "I vaguely recall a movie where a teenager and a scientist built a time machine that looked suspiciously like one of our competitors and traveled to the year 2015. When they arrived in 2015, they found themselves flying in the middle of a busy skyway with a large number of flying vehicles. Ladies and gentlemen, thanks to the fall of the Statute of Secrecy, that fantastic future is about to become a reality. And Ford, as usual, is going to be a key player in making that dream come true.

"I'll now answer some questions from the audience."

--------------------------------------------

Lou Harold Pharmaceutical Corporation
--------------------------------------------

Lou Harold looked at his aide in confusion. "What? How can that be? That's impossible! No one knows that we've been working on trying to recreate the Philosopher's Stone. Granted, we haven't gotten very far, but still --"

The aide nodded. "I'm aware of that, sir. However, he knew about it. And he mentioned something on the phone about giving us possible magical assistance and significant financial compensation."
Harold gaped. "You've gotten in touch with a wizard? And he's going to be able to help us out?"

"I believe so, sir. His name is Ernesto Dippet. Judging from what he's told me, I am fairly certain that he knows a lot about the Philosopher's Stone even though he's not an alchemist."

Harold grunted. "If he's not an alchemist, what good is he going to do? I doubt that every single wizard studies alchemy, and we need an alchemy to make the Stone."

The aide grinned. "I'm not so sure about that. Like I said, I'm fairly certain that this man knows a lot about the Stone."

Harold raised and eyebrow at his aide. "And how would you know that?"

The aide laughed. "Simple, sir. He's 331 years old."

Harold gaped at him. "You mean to tell me Flamel supplied him with the Elixir of Life? Or does he have a Stone himself?"

"The former, sir. Nevertheless, I highly recommend that we listen to this guy."

"I agree. Well done, my friend. Where does he live?"

"Spain, sir."

"Get him over here, pronto."

"Yes, sir."

---------

Nestor

Gabrielle didn't understand what had happened. One moment, the island of Nestor had been ringed with merpeople threatening the Nestorians with exotic weapons. The next moment, they had all been gone.

All she had heard were some hideous screeching sounds. It was obvious someone in that group was upset. The head merman had hollered out something which must have been an order, and the rest of the group had packed up and left.

Where had they gone? Gabrielle didn't know. Hopefully they wouldn't just reappear on the far side of the island.

She knew one thing for certain. If the soldiers had left for good and the merperson invasion was over, she would go back to civilian life. She really looked forward to taking care of this child. Hopefully, Senhor Henriques would be able to help out as well. The only fly in the ointment, of course, was the fact that the war with Syrdan was still going on. From what she'd been told, the invasion had bogged down and they were running out of Muggle weapons. She really hoped that she wouldn't be sent to Nestor as part of the medical wing...

To be continued...
Draco Malfoy took a look at the jet engine closely. Very closely. It seemed to do what he wanted to do.

Professor Bell had brought the device in to show the class what really kept Muggle planes in the air. The model she had brought in was a much smaller version than those actually used on aircraft, and the maximum speed it could accelerate a broom to was something like 200 kph. It also came with a remote control, having been part of a high school science project or something like that. It would be perfect for a demonstration.

He and the Gryffindors had raced outside (braving the bitter cold) to see it in action. Bell had brought with her a trained engineer, who had fastened the device to a stable platform on the ground. After clearing all of the students out of the way, the engineer had flicked a switch and began turning a dial.

Snow had flown everywhere (and vaporized) as the innards of the machine began spinning and making a loud noise. She had increased the power further, and the few leaves remaining on a tree a hundred feet or so away had fluttered wildly, as if in a strong breeze, and blown away. The sound had drawn out some more students, and they had hurried down to the courtyard to see what was going on.

Draco's Death Eater activities may have diminished. However, his ambition had not. He was still a Slytherin, and Slytherins were determined to win at all costs. As the Slytherin Seeker, the entire House was counting on him to succeed at his job and win Quidditch games. He would gain Slytherin a lot of House points -- not to mention prestige as well -- if he managed to pull this off.

The plan would involve attaching the jet engine to the back of the broom and making it invisible. He had found an invisibility spell in the library and managed to get it to work with a bit of practice, so that wouldn't be a problem as long as he remembered where the now-invisible object was. The big issue was making sure the engine didn't fly off midway through the Quidditch match when he turned power on, particularly since it would probably hit him on the head if it did so. He eventually decided on mounting a sheet of metal to the back of the broom using a Sticking Charm and mounting the engine to the metal plate. That way, the exhaust wouldn't damage his broom once he turned the engine on. It would almost certainly surprise several of the Gryffindors in the area, though. It could also throw Bludgers around as well and prevent them from hitting his teammates.

Attaching the engine to the broom had become one of the biggest pet projects Slytherin had for a long time. Pansy Parkinson had contributed the Silencing Spell which would prevent the staff from hearing the sound of the engine. Crabbe and Goyle weren't there, so they couldn't contribute. Zabini (still reeling over the loss of his elf) had contributed the Sticking Charm.

Draco had convinced Bell (stupid Muggle!) that he wanted to study the engine for his term project in
Muggle Studies. Bell had seemed a bit surprised, but she had recovered and told him that she had to return the engine in 10 days. That would be enough, he had assured her. After all, the match against Gryffindor was Thursday afternoon. If he got away with this, he'd probably tap into the fortune he'd inherited from his parents and buy everyone engines like this.

Typical brooms reached speeds of 100-150 kph. Racing brooms like Harry's old Firebolt occasionally hit 200-220 kph, but Draco didn't have to worry about that anymore as the Firebolt had been destroyed. Draco's Nimbus 2001 topped off at about 180 kph, about the same as Harry's broom. Draco could already envision what was going to happen. He and Harry would be racing side by side, heading for the Snitch. Harry would look warily over his shoulder, thinking Draco would shove him away. Harry would send his broom into overdrive and close in on the Snitch. Then Draco would ignite the jet engine, accelerate to 250 kph or so, and zoom right past him to get the Snitch.

Draco had to admit that this was a very dangerous plan. The engine was attached to the back of the broom, and he couldn't really control the direction it was moving the broom in without turning the broom. Furthermore, he'd need to get more acquainted with the dial to make sure he knew which positions corresponded to which speeds. However, he was a Slytherin. He was big on taking risks, and he was going to do this.

He found it somewhat distasteful to be using Muggle technology here given his pureblood background. However, he figured the end -- showing other wizards that he was best -- was worth the means. As it was, none of the other Slytherins were faulting him for his decision to use the engine.

He knew one thing for certain. Thursday's match would be one for the record books.

-------------------------
Mt. St. Helens Facility

David Stern looked at the Mt. St. Helens staff in amazement. "The president has asked you to do WHAT?"

The chairwoman chuckled. "Develop a plan to remove the snow from the sidewalks and streets during the upcoming winter. It's an ambitious goal, but I'm not entirely sure how we're going to do it."

Stern shrugged. "Just fly around and cast the Vanishing Spell on the snow. Piece of cake."

"Won't work, Mr. Stern. All that will do is send the snow back into the atmosphere to fall back down somewhere else."

"How about heating the sidewalks from below so the snow won't accumulate on them?"

One of the other staff members chuckled. "And how do you propose we dig tunnels underneath the ground to get under the sidewalks? You've heard about what's going on in Boston with the Big Dig. I suspect that's not going to fly in places like Seattle and Portland."

"All right, then heat them from above. Not only do you get clean sidewalks, but if you have maybe 10-12 feet of warm air above the sidewalks you'll make it much easier for people to walk around."

The chairwoman thought for a moment. "That would work, but we don't have the manpower to cover all that area for a long period of time. Also, the spell won't last very long. We'll have to keep on recasting it when it starts wearing out."
"Can't you make it permanent?"

The chairwoman shook her head. "I doubt it. We don't know the side effects this will have, and you have to also keep in mind that without regular intervention the warm air will eventually cool to the temperature of the environment."

"How about putting a dome over the city?"

Another staff member frowned. "Doubt it. The dome could collapse from the weight of the snow, for all we know. Also, rain would stay out and pollution would stay in."

"What's wrong with keeping rain out?"

"Drought. There's a reason we're very reluctant to do magical weather modification on a large scale. It will require a tremendous amount of energy and manpower."

Stern shrugged. "Bring people in from Florida. I doubt they're going to run into snow in Florida."

"All right, that gives us double the manpower. That might get us both Seattle and Portland if we're lucky. What do we do with the rest of the country?"

Stern threw up his hands. "It's a start, isn't it? And you only have to do it when it snows, right?"

The chairwoman put her hand on her chin. "That's true. We can always focus on the areas where it's snowing and the snow isn't going to melt immediately because it will be over 32 degrees long enough to melt it. We'll need to get the NOAA involved in this as well. That will only tell us when to do it, not how."

"How about having your wizards hitch a ride on snowplows and cast their spells en route? That way, they won't have to fly their brooms through the storm and will be able to cover the entire city with the Muggles."

The committee was silent for a second. Then, she nodded. "That might actually work as the plows will only be heading to the places with lots of snow. I don't know what it's going to do about the sidewalks, though. We're going to need help here. What do you think we should do about the sidewalks?"

Stern threw up his hands. "Impervius spells to make sure the snow doesn't hit the ground and hovers in midair? That layer of snow could also insulate the people walking underneath it, and for all we know their body heat could melt it from below."

The chairwoman whistled. "You know, that's not a bad idea. Let's consider that a little more..."

--------

Nestor

Andrea Markali was incredulous. "What do you mean, the Americans are backing out of the war?"

Her aide shrugged. "They claim that the risk of escalation into the Muggle world is way too high. This has to be a Wizarding only war, particularly with the Judgment Day option off the table."

"I understand their concern, Jennifer. To be honest, I was a bit concerned about it myself. But still, they promised to help us."
Jennifer smiled. "They actually have. Ever wonder what happened to the merpeople blockading Nestor? Our intelligence has reason to believe that the Americans honored their alliance with us...by speaking VERY strongly with the Archon and his representatives to clean house and get rid of all of those rogue merpeople attacking us."

Markali whistled as she got it. "Clever. The Americans pass the buck to the merpeople and remind them that it's in the Archon's best interest to make sure that all of his subjects listen to him. That would explain that sea battle out near the blockade line and the abrupt departure of the merpeople surrounding the island."

"Exactly, Madame President."

Markali thought back to the report on the sea battle. "Were there wizards involved? I could have sworn that there had been reports of spell use among the merpeople. Unless I'm very badly mistaken, the merpeople don't have wizards. That means a third party operating underwater."

Jennifer shrugged. "Maybe the merfolk do have wizards and we don't see them often. It's pointless to speculate on that, ma'am. The point is, the Americans did their job and helped us by getting the blockade lowered. We should be grateful for that even if they don't provide any more military or technological support."

Markali sighed. "Oh well, we'll take what we can get. Tell everyone that we're going to be raising the draft age to 37 and that we want all of the people involved to meet at the appropriate rendezvous points within 48 hours. And start deploying all of the medical units to Syrdan."

Jennifer saluted. "Yes, ma'am."

-----------------

Urban IX liked what he was hearing. "You've changed the plans and have decided to use a car bomb, flying the car in. That's actually not a bad idea -- you don't have to worry about air traffic control and so forth."

The terrorist on the other end of the line seemed happy. "Yes, Holiness. We've got ourselves a souped up Ford Fiesta with the bomb in it. Hopefully we'll be able to plant the bomb and detonate it remotely. If we can't get out...well, so be it."

"It's going to be tomorrow, right?"

"It's actually going to be Monday, Holiness. You'll hear it on the news."

Urban IX chuckled, never seeing Pavlov staring at him...hard. "Good luck, my friends. I'll be looking forward to this."

Behind him, Pavlov shook his head and sent out an email.

To be continued...

-----------------

P.S. After I wrote this, it just occurred to me: Alastair Moody can see invisible objects, and I don't think Draco knows. I guess it's time to level the playing field during Quidditch matches by forcing people on the two teams to trade brooms every time the combined score reaches a multiple of 100
Rasezar was once again walking towards the Chancellor's office... with far less enthusiasm than before. The dark merwizard had half his body covered in badnages, and walked with a pronounced limp- and he was among the more lucky ones.

Yesterday was a bad day. More then half of the merwizards residing in Theramas had been partaking in the blockade and stalking of Nestor, meaning about 500 of them patrolling the shipping routes and two times as many parading on and near the shore in tribal garb and repurposed civilian driders. Of course, besides the giant crossbows and other oversized weapons of the walkers and the stone age equipment of everyone else, all of them had their wand on their persons in _Fidelius_ holsters... it still wasn't enough.

In hindsight, they should have been looking less at the Veela waiting on the shores and more under the waves of the Atlantic. As it was, they had no warning before the united armies of Trapananda and Roqteratl showed up right under them, and proceeded to beat the crap out of the renegades. Luckily for the Theramarians, the ambushing army respected the general orders of the Archon, limiting magic use as much as they could as long as they were in the sight of the Veelas - Merkali and a handful of others were briefed on merwizards, but with the level of Muggle presence in the country, it was imperative they kept feigning ignorance.

On the other hand, the Roqteratl army had no reason to hold back, and they had giant-sized firearms (_Engorgioed_ Muggle weapons specifically designed for amphibious use), along with other nasty surprises such as camouflage: the merwizards were half expecting this development, but the Roqteratl forces seen back a few day were in civilian walkers just like them, and those were quite easy to notice with their shining gold coloration. Proper army machines, as it turned out, had a midnight blue colour like the sea- they had no problem sneaking up to the enemy.

The coastal battle was over in a few minutes, with the same steps repeating over and over along the whole coastline: the good guys revealed themselves with weapons already trained on the renegades, and those either dashed towards the deeps, Apparated away, activated emergency Portkeys (to a now uncomfortably close fallback location, cursing their own anti-teleportation barriers), or foolishly decided to draw their wands and fight, occasionally even getting lucky at overwhelming the walkers... only to face the loyalist merwizards accompanying those. Figuring their secret was already out, they did not hesitate to return hexes on their own, Veela observers be damned. At least the Nestorians had the foresight to keep Muggle tourists away from the sites...
The initial exchange was followed by a series of underwater skirmishes, as the servants of Syrdan sought to use the vast darkness of the ocean to swim out of the maze of anti-Apparition jinxes and Portkey Barriers they themselves have set up, dodging the overwhelming amount of hostile forces pouring in from all direction. After many hours of playing hide-and-seek, the dark merwizards were either routed, captured or dead, and the Trapanandans could begin to dispell the barriers, while their mundane comrades carried the scattered bodies and equipment from the shores. By dawn, the blockade was gone without a trace. Most of the Archon's enemies had managed to escape, but in all likeness, they would be taken care of soon enough...

Entranced in his musings, Rasezar entered the chamber, bowed before the trio of Syrdani leaders as usual, and looked up... only to notice two unexpected individuals in the room. One of them he knew all too well- Avernus Qelthas, formerly an officer of the Trapanandan military, now Archon of that city-state. Rasezar knew the man well enough to recognise him even in human form. The other was a merperson too, but in his natural form, clad in a midnight blue walker like the ones that kicked their behinds so thoroughly yesterday, only that this one had some rank insignias and more menacing spikes than justifiable by tactical reasons. Rasezar braced himself for the ear-splitting shriek, and asked the metal-clad one the obvious question: "Just who the hell are you?"

Mercifully for the ears of all present, the answer came in only slightly distorted human speech - courtesy to their developers, the newer Drider models incorporated Muggle technology to convert merpeople underwater speech into air-compatible sound waves. "Commander Idris of the Roqteratl Defense Force. You are the one they call Rasezar, I presume?"

Cancellor Vixar interrupted in place of his stunned minion. "Yes, he is. Now, can we cut this short and just brief him in on the deal? We've got a parade to watch in half an hour."
"By all means, yes" agreed the Archon. "The Eldest and I have come up with a new policy, approved by the Merpeople Assembly and thus valid to all of our species: We. Don't. Take. Sides. In wars!" He wasn't shouting, if anything, his voice was dangerously calm. "We know of your oaths to this nation's government, unfortunately made in a way to prevent cancelling them from any ends... so we are willing to make an exception: you and the rest of your group are free to defend Syrdan as you swore to... but only within it's borders. Know this, dark one, once you step out of this nation's borders, we will hunt you down with all our forces."

This wasn't as bad as he feared it would be - of course, with this new policy, invading Syrdan till they sent the renegades away would have qualified as assisting Nestor thus violating their own rule. Still, he had to ask something: "This Assembly includes merwizards now? What's your role, Archon? Honorary wizard-king? Minister of Magic? And why aren't the residents of Theramar given a seat there too? Tribes smaller than our community have representatives in Roqteratl..."

It was Idris who answered. "Don't push your luck, criminal. Syrdan might have taken you in, but in Trapananda and Roqteratl you were not pardoned... and neither in Houyhnhnmland. You are right where we want you, pariahs in a pariah state, but you seem to forget that just like Atlantis, we do not forget or forgive when it comes to dark wizards."

"I... uh oh..." Rasezar has apparently ran out of words from being talked down like this by a non-wizard. Eager to get going, the Archon only said a few more words: "If you have any more
questions, feel free to ask our ambassadors here in the capital. Now, if you don't mind, I have a bunch of Veela to take care of, because you just had to use magic where they saw it. Until next time!" Then he, and the Roqteratli, were off.

Waiting till the doors were closed, Rasezar looked at Vixar, and asked a simple question: "How much do they know?" Despite of everything that happened recently, the ruler of Syrdan gave his answer...with a huge grin. "Nothing."

To be continued...
Update #461: Celestine Kamikaze

Monday, December 9, 1996
Somewhere in the Taconic Mountain Range
New York State
United States of America
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/3.5%

Sergei Borsov still wasn't entirely comfortable with the idea of using a magic-tainted vehicle for this mission. After all, the command to destroy the wizards and their supporters had been given by God. Having magic anywhere remotely near the car would likely be a recipe for disaster.

On the other hand, no one would have expected a Celestine attack on Omega to come from a flying vehicle for the simple reason that the Celestines weren't supposed to use them. And as he had told Urban, using a flying car would raise a lot fewer legal and bureaucratic issues than using an aircraft which would almost certainly have to be tracked by the FAA. He shrugged. If all else failed, he could always tell St. Peter that it hadn't been his car and the end justified the means.

He turned to the tall man in the cowboy hat who was making sure that everything was all set. Hoping to distract himself with some conversation, he pointed at the car. "So this is a DeLorean, right?"

Henry Woodman nodded. "That's right. You must have seen the movie Back to the Future, right? This is the same type of vehicle used for the time machine."

Borsov couldn't help but ask. "Does it travel through time as well as fly? I must confess, that I'm still a bit nervous about using a tainted vehicle in such a holy attack."

Woodman did one final test, nodded, and slammed one of the doors shut. "It doesn't travel through time, though I must confess that would be a very interesting feature. And don't worry about using a vehicle tainted by magic. It's all about the end justifying the means, my friend. At least that's what my America for Humans cell leader said."

Borsov blinked. "You're a member of America for Humans? I thought they were defunct."

"That's what you're supposed to think, Mr. Borsov. However, we're trying to reorganize. America for Humans as the rest of the world knew it fell apart after the attack on the Quabbin. Now the militant wing of the Revelation Party, an anti-wizard political party led by a hot chick named Judith Rodgers. We haven't done much for a while, but we're planning something big. I can't tell you about it, unfortunately. However, you'll probably like the results if it works."

Borsov grinned. "I'll pray daily that your mission succeeds, Mr. Woodman. However, let's focus on what we've come for. I see you've got a large bag of fertilizer in the passenger's seat. I take it that's
the device?"

Woodman pointed at the trunk door. "You got it -- enough explosives to level the main hall or several of the dorms."

Borsov grinned. "I like the label on the bag: 'Sam's Fertilizer'. I thought Sam already was fertilizer."

"He is, but he doesn't seem to realize it. We're going fly over there and look around to see if there are any large gatherings of priests or if you see Samuel himself. That will determine where we attack. If we don't see any obvious gatherings, we'll assume they're all in the main hall. Once we're in position, we'll arm the weapon and push it out the door. The bomb will detonate on impact as we fly away."

Borsov bit his lip. "Are you sure that's safe? People are going to wonder where the flying car came from and are going to put two and two together."

Woodman nodded. "I was concerned about that myself. However, it turns out we're in luck...or God has agreed with our plans. Take a look overhead. What do you see?"

Borsov got it immediately. "Clouds."

"Exactly. Once we're in the clouds, we can fly through the clouds and emerge anywhere we want. No one will be able to see us in there. In fact, if we stay in the fringes of the clouds we'll be able to see enough to aim the device but they will likely not be able to see us."

"They'll hear the engine."

"A risk we'll have to take. Nothing we can do about that."

"What about the problems launching the weapon from a moving vehicle?"

Woodman grinned. "This isn't like an airplane with a stall speed. We'll stop the car right over the target and drop the thing straight down. There won't be any lateral motion to deal with."

The two terrorists discussed the plan for a few more minutes. Finally, everything was all set. Offering a brief prayer for their success, Woodman guided the Aviator into the air and hid the car in the base of the clouds. Unless he was very badly mistaken, Omega was only forty-five minutes or so away, more or less due south.

-------

Omega

-------

Samuel's ghostly presence made his way through the snow on the ground without leaving a trace. The campus sure looked strange with all of the empty buildings in it, he thought. However, there had been no choice: the various conference attendees had to be evacuated. Granted, if everything went as planned the place wouldn't be in any danger. However, it didn't hurt to be safe. The big question would be how many of the priests would actually want to return from Costa Rica or wherever this place was. It was supposedly warm there even though it was December.

He looked up into the sky, but all he saw were clouds. He knew there was something else up there, of course. But it appeared to be invisible.

For the time being, Samuel had the entire Omega campground to himself. That would change, however, in a few minutes.
He waited, standing near the main hall. He still found it amazing that Muggles had learned to fly and had supposedly even managed to go to the moon. Where would they go next, the bottom of the Salt Sea?

The wait was interminable, and Samuel began to wonder if the terrorists had called off the attack. Finally, after at least an hour, he heard the distinct sound of car engine approaching from above. Scanning the sky more closely, he could have sworn that he'd seen an elongated black dot making its way through the clouds. Normally, he would have assumed that it was bird and passed off the noise to an airplane flying above the clouds. However, he knew that it was no bird.

Craning his neck as the dot made its way overhead, he just watched as he rose into the air.

Woodman pointed out the window. "There! That's Omega! And I think I see Samuel!"

Borsov couldn't see much as he was squeezed between the explosives on his right and Woodman in the driver's seat. "Are you sure, Mr. Woodman? We've only got one chance at this."

Woodman rolled his eyes, slowed the vehicle, and brought out some binoculars. "No, it's something else which glows and likes to hover a few dozen feet above the ground. Now hold on a second while I...yup, that's him."

Borsov began to tremble with excitement...and trepidation. He was barely able to contain himself as he asked: "Does he see us?"

Woodman hesitated a minute. "He's looking at us -- scratch that, he's turned away. Now he's heading over to the main hall."

"Do you see anyone else?"

Woodman grunted. "As a matter of fact, I don't. Let's fly around a little more, preferably at a distance as to not attract Samuel's attention any more than we have to."

The two terrorists made their way deeper into the clouds as they circumnavigated the Omega compound. As far as they could tell, the campground was empty. That was extremely unlikely, however, as the place had been jammed ever since Sukkot. Borsov had a bad feeling about this and mentioned it to Woodman.

Woodman laughed. "You're being paranoid, Sergei. They have no idea we're coming -- we've been very secure on our end, and I trust you have on yours as well. They're probably all in the main hall, like I thought."

"What's Samuel doing now?"

"He's disappeared into the main hall."

"Is his interpreter with him?"

"No. However, my guess is the interpreter doesn't want to go outside when it's 20 degrees out there. And keep in mind also that Tiqwael or whatever that other guy's name is will also need an interpreter, so Samuel's interpreter could be helping him."
Woodman rolled down the window, and Borsov winced as the cold breeze hit him in the face. "Let me get into position now..."

Sticking his head out the window, he positioned the car so it was right above the main hall. Nodding in satisfaction, he pulled the steering wheel forward and lifted the car into the air to the point where only the faintest outline of the building was visible beneath it."

Woodman put the car in neutral and shook with excitement. "All right, Sergei! Reach over the bag and open the door while I arm the bomb."

Borsov did so. He flipped the door open and backed off instinctively from the device when a series of beeps emanated from the bag. The temperature inside the car abruptly went from cold to freezing.

"Now help me push it out."

Both men pushed with all their might and eventually forced the bag out of the car. It began plummeting towards the ground.

Samuel stuck his head out of the roof of the building and watched as the bag headed earthward. 900 feet, 800 feet, 700 feet. Some people never learn, he thought sadly.

Looking at the vehicle one last time, his silvery form blurred into a comet as it made its way away from the campground towards the people who were waiting for him.

There was a colossal explosion, and both men began cheering excitedly. Their mission had been a success! God was with them, and He had been at their side as they had vanquished the demons!

Cautiously, Woodman lowered the car closer to the base of the cloud so he could see more clearly. That proved to be a mistake, as a large cloud of smoke and ash made its way through the still-open passenger door. Woodman told Borsov to stay in his seat -- he was going to move the car a little further away so they could evaluate the results of the drop.

They moved off maybe 300 feet and then tilted the car down so they could see the ground. A large area was on fire, and it seemed to be spreading slowly in all directions. The weapon had done exactly what it was supposed to. However, that wasn't what caused the two terrorists to stare at each other in disbelief.

The bomb had detonated about 600 feet above the ground. As they watched, the fire began moving in a bizarre fashion which slowly began to trace out a hemispherical structure hovering in midair.

Omega was covered by a dome which hadn't been there a few days earlier.

Woodman gagged on what was left of the smoke and swore. "Shit! They have a shield up! They must have known we were coming! Let's get out of here!"

The car banked to the left, giving Borsov the chance to approach the passenger door and close it safely without having to worry about falling out of the car. Once the door was closed, Woodman gunned the motor and headed deeper into the cloud bank. Beneath them, the streams of fire cascading down the shield extinguished themselves through magical means.

Borsov's stomach lurched as the distinctive sound of helicopters began audible through the cloud bank. Woodman tried to evade them, but within two minutes both men could hear rotors in all
directions, including above and below them. They were trapped. To make matters worse, they heard the sound of a jet fighter flying overhead.

The dragnet tightened and the noise of the choppers became deafening. Slowly but surely, they forced Woodman to drop out of the cloud. Borsov shrieked as he saw the formerly empty sky above Omega filled with helicopters and people on brooms. In the vanguard of the attacking forces was a shimmering white form with a neatly trimmed beard, flying without any aid from a broom or chopper.

One of the wizards amplified his voice loud enough to be heard over the noise of the choppers. "Attention, Christians for Humans terrorists. We have you surrounded, and you have thirty seconds to land and surrender. If you refuse, we will open fire."

Woodman and Borsov stared at each other in horror. Someone had betrayed them...but who? Borsov didn't have much time to think before one of the wizards shot a thick beam of yellow light across their bow as a warning shot.

Slowly but surely, the DeLorean made its way down to the ground.

-------------
St. Petersburg
-------------

Tsar Alexei's assistant raced into the tsar's office. "Your Majesty! We've got the email from Pavlov! Email addresses, code words, everything! The message has been relayed to the United States as well."

The expression on Alexei's face was grim. "Wipe them out. All of them."

To be continued...

-------------

Update #462: World For Humans: And Then There Was One

-------------
Monday, December 9, 1996
Christians for Humans Headquarters
Ukraine
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/3.0%

-------------
NEXT UP: You Give Me A Stone, I Send You To Heaven

-------------

Urban IX had his eyes glued to the television set. If everything had gone as planned, Borsov and his America for Humans sidekick had dropped their bomb on the Omega compound maybe half an hour ago. It was only a matter of time until CNN reported the attack.

At present, however, CNN was focused on another development on the North American continent, one which potentially could cause more friction the wizards and the Muggles. Unbeknownst to most of the world, the half-giant state of Ietalis had begun migrating south from its traditional homeland in the Canadian Arctic. Apparently a bunch of these colonists had settled on the north coast of the mainland, near where Alaska bordered Canada. The half-giants had proven to be quite civilized, and had actually opened preliminary trade with the Alaskan city of Kaktovik. The only problem had been that one of the things they had found in their colony happened to be a black organic goo which had
been oozing its way out of the ground. This goo, they informed the Muggles, was good for powering torches. The Alaskan natives had recognized the substance immediately, of course.

Oil.

There had been theories that the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, which was near the Ieti colony, could have had an oil deposit. Drilling up there, however, had been too controversial and for the time being it had been abandoned. Things changed completely, however, when the giants promptly started asking American citizens to pay to get their own oil back.

Or was it their own oil? The purported Ieti colony was very close to the border between the United States and Canada. There was a distinct possibility that the oil field straddled the border and that there would have to be three-way negotiations over who got the oil.

The Ieti had deliberately gone out of their way not to settle in places already occupied by Muggles precisely because they didn't want to trigger an international incident. Unfortunately, according to Ieti custom, anywhere the half-giants settled was considered part of Ietalis and ruled by the High Chief. The High Chief had apparently just ordered that the Americans and Canadians be able to retrieve the oil without compensation as Muggle property -- after all, the Ieti didn't do much with it. Problems, however, had arisen when several Ieti realized that they could haggle for lots of Muggle technology in exchange for the oil. The tactics were obvious: we've discovered you have something we REALLY like. We have something you want. How much are we going to get out of this? The High Chief doesn't live down here -- he doesn't realize how difficult frontier life is. He doesn't know what he's talking about.

Urban groaned. Another case where having bizarre creatures and magic around wasn't good for the world. A three way fight to destabilize the North American continent. Wonderful.

His musings about the oil crisis in the Arctic suddenly dissipated, however, as CNN brought out the BREAKING NEWS banner. Was this what he was hoping for? The program showed a picture of the Omega Institute's logo in crosshairs. Urban smiled -- this had to be it.

The announcer began to speak. "Ladies and gentlemen, we have breaking news from the Omega conference in upstate New York. Terrorists from the Christians for Humans quasi-religious organization have attempted to sabotage the Samuelist convention by dropping a bomb on the compound. Fortunately, the authorities had been tipped off beforehand and the bomb detonated harmlessly against a magical shield."

Urban's jaw dropped. Had they been betrayed? It must have been the America for Humans person! None of his men would have betrayed him!

The announcer continued. "The weapon was delivered by a flying car and would have demolished the main hall had it hit its target. Fortunately, the attack was thwarted. Both Wizarding and Muggle authorities arrived on the scene shortly after the bomb was dropped and took both terrorists into custody."

Two mug shots showed up on the monitor. "The suspects were identified as Henry Woodman from Topeka, Kansas; and Sergei Borsov from Ukraine. Woodman is a Christian fundamentalist formerly associated with America for Humans, while Borsov is a member of Christians for Humans. The government is looking to see if Muslims for Humans was also involved in the attack."

Urban's mind raced, and he realized what he had to do. He remembered what had happened to
Britain for Humans and America for Humans after their failed terrorist attacks. It was only a matter of hours -- if that -- until the wizards made their way up the chain of command and knocked out the terrorists' operations.

Urban had to get out of here. Posthaste.

He shut off the TV and stated telling everyone in the room to run for their lives. Judging from the lack of people in the room, several had already taken his advice. He hurried over to his car and saw that people were racing out of the building and into the parking lot as fast as they could.

Multicolored flashes ringed the compound as he gunned the motor, heading for the exit. Unfortunately, the demons in the robes were one step ahead of them. One of them pointed his wand at the road and cast a spell which excavated a huge hole in the driveway. There was no way the cars were going to make it out of the lot.

Shit, he thought. Hesitating for a brief moment, he reached into his glove compartment and pulled out a small gun. He didn't really want to use it against anyone, particularly Muggles. However, this could very well be a life and death situation. He hoped God would forgive him.

Someone in a pink robe suddenly jumped in front of his vehicle and he instinctively hit the brakes. That proved to be a mistake, as two more wizards appeared right at his door. Ten feet away, a member of the strike team pulled open a door and dragged out the driver. The car radio had been broadcasting reports that Christians for Humans were being rounded up as the announcer spoke -- and America for Humans was being investigated once again.

Urban slammed his fist on the lock as the wizard brought out his wand. He wasn't getting in this car, he thought. However, the wizard shouted a strange word:

"Alohomora!"

This caused two things to happen. First, the car's engine died -- damn magic interfering with electricity! Second, there was a click as the door and seat belt spontaneously unlocked. Cursing, Urban tried to draw his gun. The wizard saw this and shouted another word:

"Expelliarmus!"

Urban yelped as the gun suddenly flew out the window and landed in the wizard's hand. The wizard pocketed it, opened the door, and pointed the wand between Urban's eyes.

"All right, you asshole. Let's see your hands. Nice and slow."

Urban tried to look penitent. "I am a Christian clergyman. I'm not actually associated with Christians for Humans. In fact, I was one of the people who turned them in to the Muggles."

The wizard snorted. "Yeah, and I'm Mother Teresa. Unless I'm very badly mistaken, you're the head man here. Urban IX himself. My boss will be happy to hear of this. Get out of the car. Now."

Urban's eyes widened. "Sir, let me exp -- ulp!"

That was far as he got before an invisible force pulled him out of the car and slammed him up against the hood. This wasn't going very well, he thought. He fumed impotently as the attacker immobilized him and placed him in handcuffs.
Urban's lips were stiff -- come to think of it, most of his body was as well -- and he could barely speak. "What you are doing is not something appropriate for a Christian, wizard."

The wizard grinned as a hood was placed over Urban's head, blocking the prisoner's view of the rest of the men being rounded up. "On the contrary. It is."

"Oh really? How's that?"

"Simple. I'm a Christian. You ain't."

Urban found himself bumping all over the place as he was manhandled over to a broom and tied to the back. He somehow managed to let out a scream as the wizard lifted off into the frigid air.

He watched the ground recede beneath him in dismay. Britain for Humans was done for, America for Humans was going to finished off, and the Celestine Church was about to be rounded up. This left only one organization left.

Muslims for Humans, he prayed, you are our only hope.

To be continued...

__________________

Update #463: You Give Me A Stone, I Send You To Heaven
------------
Tuesday, December 10, 1996
Constanta
Romania
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/3.1%
------------
NEXT UP: Does This Mean She Can Now Fix Warp Core Breaches?
------------
Grigori Rasputin made his way through the streets of Constanta, a city of three hundred thousand people on the Black Sea coast of Romania. Virtually unrecognizable without his trademark beard, he headed towards the building which the Black God cult had been using for meetings with their master.

Ideally, they would have met on Buyan. However, Rasputin didn't want to risk knowledge of Koschei's private island falling into the wrong hands. Granted, everyone would have to go to Buyan on New Year's Eve to greet Koschei and defend the island in case the secret of Buyan leaked out.

Rasputin had spent a long time familiarizing himself with the island. Buyan was maybe ten miles across and featured two small mountains maybe 1000 feet high. The easternmost peak featured what appeared to be the remains of an old Roman fort, complete with a few Latin and Greek inscriptions. The fort had apparently served as Koschei's hideout as well, as there appeared to have been signs of magic use in the area.

The fort had been situated on an alpine lake which had featured a small graveyard. Many of the stones had become weathered over time, but he saw that all of them appeared to be members of the Koschei family. He was disturbed to see that the tomb of Maxim Koschei, Lord Koschei's father,
was empty. He had the strong suspicion that Koschei's father's bones had been destroyed by Atlantis shortly after the Atlanteans realized they couldn't find Koschei's Horcrux. If they weren't going to be able to permanently kill Koschei, at least they could prevent him from coming back. Rasputin breathed a sigh of relief when he realized that the Philosopher's Stone provided by Laronov could have well saved his plans to revive Koschei. Without it, there would have been no known way to bring him back despite the Horcrux.

As Koschei's current Gatekeeper, or person entrusted with the safety of Koschei's Horcrux, Rasputin knew where the Horcrux actually was -- roughly. It was apparently 250 feet underground in the valley between the two mountains, with no obvious surface features to identify the location. The defenses surrounding the Horcrux were formidable. The location of the egg containing the Horcrux was Fideliused to the Gatekeeper and Koschei. The egg itself was Fideliused to Koschei with the Gatekeeper in on the secret. Finally, the Horcrux itself was Fideliused to the Gatekeeper with Koschei in on the secret. Destruction of the Horcrux would require breaking through three Fidelius Charms (not including the one protecting Buyan itself), burrowing 250 feet into the soil of Buyan, and figuring out which of the little sticks and stones down there was actually the needle. No wonder people had been trying to find the Horcrux for all these years and failed! To make matters even more difficult for the Atlanteans, the entire western peak of the island was surrounded by ridiculously powerful spells which only he and Koschei would be able to pass through. Koschei had done so to deliberately fool any attackers into thinking that the Horcrux was actually on the mountaintop and not in the valley.

He had a strange feeling he knew how the wizards of the 14th century had managed to make it to Atlantis. Judging from the legends he had been told growing up, Olga Koscheiva, Lord Koschei's daughter, had betrayed her father to Atlantis and allowed Atlanteans onto the island with Atlantis at DEFCON 1. Once that had happened, he had been rounded up in a hurry, with or without the Elder Wand. Hopefully Koschei wouldn't make the same mistake twice.

The island was covered with thick forest near sea level. The forest, primarily pines, thinned gradually at higher elevations and left the top of the mountains bare. There was also a small cave in the northwestern side which he had turned into a storehouse for the Elixir of Life open only to members of the Black God cult. If everything fell apart and Buyan was invaded by Atlantis, it would be a good idea to have extra doses of the Elixir in reserve. The coastline was rocky for the most part, though there was a small cove which appeared to have served as a makeshift harbor at some point in the past.

Rasputin had done a lot of research into the Koschei legend in preparation for this operation. He had initially been a bit dismayed when he considered the implications surrounding Atlantean knowledge of Buyan. However, it was very likely that over the next 600 years that knowledge had been lost. He suspected that Atlantis probably either saw Buyan as a legend (like the Muggles) or, if they knew that Buyan existed, couldn't find it. That had relieved him for a while...until something else occurred to him. There was indeed a complication, one which could prove catastrophic. It was this complication which had prompted him to make his way over to the mainland and speak with his operatives.

Hoping that the raids on the Celestine Church would distract the authorities (damn those Romanovs! Why can't they stay DEAD?) long enough to finish the meeting, he made his way into the house and waited for his contact to arrive.

He didn't have to wait long. About twenty minutes after his arrival, someone knocked on the front door. It was time for the exchange of code phrases.
The guest spoke first. "Hello?"

Rasputin knew the routine by heart. "Huh, a guest? Who is this?"

"My name is Alexandru Valescu. I'm conducting a survey for the electric company here in Constanta. Is this Alin Milestu I am speaking with?"

Rasputin waited the obligatory three seconds. "I am Mr. Milestu. However, I'm not exactly big on filling out surveys. I'm kind of busy right now."

"It will only take a few minutes, Mr. Milestu."

Rasputin unlatched the door and let out a theatrical groan. "Oh, all right. Just a few minutes."

The Mad Monk moved out of the way as Zygonov made his way into the room and closed the door behind him. The hit man bowed to Rasputin, and the two men exchanged pleasantries for a few minutes. Finally, Zygonov got down to business. "You wanted to see me, my lord?"

Rasputin nodded. "Indeed I have, Genya. I've got three people who I want to have eliminated. I was wondering if you could make sure that this happens before the meeting on Buyan."

Zygonov shrugged. "I'll see what I can do. Who are you thinking of?"

Rasputin looked at Zygonov with concern. "This is an extremely difficult mission. It's going to be harder than the hit on Dumbledore."

"I'm game -- hell, I'm one of the best. Who is it?"

Rasputin drew a deep breath. "Dr. Nicholas Flamel, his wife, and his former apprentice Hugh de Lourdes."

Zygonov blinked. "You want me to assassinate the British Minister of Magic?"

"Ideally, yes, and blame it on Britain for Humans. After you do the need, scour his office for any information pertaining to the Philosopher's Stone and bring it back to me. We need to make sure that we're going to be able to recreate the Stone after he's killed."

Zygonov fidgeted nervously. "My lord, killing the Minister of Magic is going to be extremely difficult. Come to think of it, killing all three of them are going to be hard since the other two are teaching at Hogwarts. Dumbledore and his cronies may recognize me and my wife."

Rasputin grinned. "He'll have to go home at some point. What do you think the odds are that he lives at the Ministry? What are the odds that Hugh and Mrs. Flamel live at Hogwarts? Remember how we impersonated Amelia Bell -- just repeat that process."

Zygonov thought for a moment and chuckled. "You have a point, my lord. We'll probably have to hit Hugh's house at the same as we do the Flamels'. After all, the death of one of them could easily put the other marks on guard."

"I agree. Can it be done?"

"Depends. What time frame do we have?"
Rasputin gritted his teeth. "I want them out of the way within two weeks, before everyone starts converging here to make their way over to Buyan."

Zygonov grunted. "That may be difficult, but I'll see what I can do. What exactly prompted this all of a sudden? Why do you want these three people dead?"

Rasputin told him.

Zygonov frowned. "I see your concern, and it's a distinct possibility. However, it makes things a little easier for me. We don't need to kill them as much as make sure they can't endanger the mission. All we need to do is keep them incommunicado until the mission is complete. At that point, Koschei takes over and blows them to bits with you as Primary Disciple."

Rasputin whistled. "That will work as well. I hadn't thought about that. Are you thinking of kidnapping them or something like that? Kidnapping them would actually be a better idea in that you may be able to torture them into explaining how to create a Philosopher's Stone. All right, change of plans. Kidnap all three individuals and make sure they don't escape. If you have to, kill them. However, only do so as a last resort -- particularly with Dr. Flamel himself. Try to pass it off as a Britain for Humans revenge act, though keep in mind Britain for Humans has been more or less wiped out."

Zygonov nodded. "It will be done, my lord. By the 24th, as you requested. If I am not able to do it myself, I will find someone who will."

Zygonov paused a minute, then continued. "Would you be willing to have Muggles help with this? The wizards may not be expecting an attack from Muggles, particularly with Britain for Humans down the drain."

Rasputin nodded. "If that becomes necessary, yes. Use Muggle Black Fist members if possible. However, if you hire mercenaries, be sure to Obliviate them when the mission is complete."

Zygonov bowed. "As you command, my lord."

Rasputin smiled. "That is all I ask. Good luck, my friend, and may the Black God be with you."

To be continued...

___________________

Update #464: Does This Mean She Can Now Fix Warp Core Breaches?

-------------
Wednesday, December 11, 1996
Gryffindor Common Room
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
United Kingdom
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/3.1%
-------------
NEXT UP: This Quidditch Match Has Been Sponsored By Airbus
-------------
Harry was getting good at Wizard Chess. Not only had he reached the point where the pieces were
actually telling him that he had made good moves, he had gotten Ron's pieces to start convincing him to surrender the game so that they wouldn't run the risk of being run through by Harry's men's miniature swords.

Ron glared and picked up his queen. "I know what I'm doing, Queen. Just go where I tell you or I'm going to throw you off the board."

The pointed her scepter towards one of Harry's castles. "But his castle is over there! Can't you see he's threatening me? You really don't want to lose me. I'm your most valuable piece!"

Ron was about to tell her what she could do with her scepter when the door to Harry's room suddenly flew open, hitting Ron on the head and sending him flying into the chessboard. Pieces flew everywhere, and Harry's queen started complaining about "unchivalrous abuse" from under the rug.

Harry looked up to see who it was. It was Neville, and he had an excited look on his face. Ron saw it as well, and his eyes widened. Rubbing his head, he turned to the newcomer. "What's up?"

Neville was jumping up and down with excitement, yet there was a vague sense of unease on his face. "Luna's back!"

Harry smiled. "They finally let her out of the hospital? That's great! I take it she got her eyes back?"

Neville bit his lip and became more subdued. "Sort of."

Ron looked at him warily. "Sort of?"

Neville hesitated, then drew a deep breath. "Her eyes could not be salvaged, so they were removed and replaced with artificial ones."

Harry gasped. "Artificial eyes? You mean like --"

Neville nodded and cut him off. "Yes, Harry. Just like Alastair Moody, except she's got two of them."

Ron shook his head and chuckled. "I thought she was a bit strange before, now -- ouch!"

Harry elbowed him in the chest and gestured pointedly at Neville, who had a dark look on his face. Fuming, Neville said coldly: "You do realize that Luna and I are dating. It's up to me to defend her honor. Please don't say that, especially in front of me."

Ron swore and started rubbing his stomach as well as his head. "Sorry, Neville, I forgot. Do they have all of the abilities Moody has? That is, can she see out of the back of her head and so forth?"

Neville shook his head. "Her eyes are slightly different from Moody's. For one thing, they cannot see out of the back of her head as those are limited only to Aurors. They can't see objects protected by Invisibility Cloaks, either. However, she claims that she can see better than she did before. She mentioned something about 200 to 1500 nanometers but I don't know what that means. Do you?"

Harry looked at Ron, and both shook their heads. "Never heard of a nanometer. I've heard of a kilometer. Must be a unit of distance -- maybe she can see things further away now."

Neville shrugged. "It's possible. At any rate, she's in the hospital wing right now and is allowed to
have visitors. Ideally, they'd have kept her in the hospital a bit longer, but good old Xeno didn't want her missing too much school with her OWLs coming up this year. Would you like to come?"

Ron nodded and began cleaning up the chess set. "We'll come. How is she feeling?"

"Physically, she's recovering very well. However, it's still too early to tell when it comes to the psychological toll. She's getting headaches which appear to be psychological from the stress of adapting to the new eyes. The fact that she can see more than she did before is also taking her brain a bit by surprise, but Moody says it's normal and that will go away over time. The biggest problem that she's had so far is teasing."

Harry frowned. "Teasing her? That's terrible! Haven't Slughorn, Hugh, and so forth put a stop to that?"

"They have, but people are still doing it. The Slytherins, who already thought she was half nuts, are doing it even though Slughorn has docked them a few points. The thing that's most disturbing, however, is that she's been given a nickname by the Muggle-borns which she doesn't like all that much."

Ron led the group out of the portrait hole, and they began walking towards the hospital wing. "That sounds a bit odd -- you'd have expected Muggle-borns would be accustomed to both Muggle and Wizarding medicine. What are they calling her?"

"Geordi LaLovegood."

Harry scratched his head. "Who or what is a Geordi?"

Neville's face was grim. "From what I've been told, Geordi LaForge is a fictional Muggle who underwent a similar artificial eye treatment in a television program."

Ron stopped short and the other two boys barreled into him. "She got a MUGGLE treatment? They're giving Moody eyes to Muggles now?"

Neville shook his head. "They aren't, which is confusing. Maybe Hermione can explain."

Ron nodded. "Hermione can probably explain how these eyes work to begin with, and anything she doesn't know will be filled in by Moody."

They closed in on the hospitai wing and found virtually half of Ravenclaw waiting outside. Hesitating one more moment before announcing himself to Madam Pomfrey, he pulled Ron and Harry over one last time. "One more thing. You may find that she looks...strange...with this new treatment. I'm going to clean your clocks if you laugh."

Ron rolled his eyes. "I've seen Moody's eyes before. I know what artificial eyes look like."

"It's not that. You see, she's got what appears to be a metallic blindfold over her eyes right now to make sure that the new eyes set properly. Think of a girl's headband but gong across her eyes instead of her hair. You can't see the eyes at all at the moment. If everything goes as planned, it will come off around Christmas."

Harry tried to envision Luna with a headband across her eyes and frowned. "That IS a bit unusual. Thanks for the heads up -- we'd have probably been as surprised as the others have been."
Neville looked at both of them, hard. "Are you still up for this?"

Both of them nodded, and Neville made his way past the gaggle of Ravenclaws and into the room.

Luna Lovegood was lying on one of the beds, accompanied by both Madam Pomfrey and Professor Moody. She seemed happy to see everyone. However, Harry couldn't help but be a bit disconcerted by the metallic belt covering her eyes. It attached to implants near her ears and went across most of her face. Ron gaped, and Harry elbowed him once more.

Neville knelt down to talk to her. "How are you doing, Luna? I brought Harry and Ron?"

Luna smiled her usual dreamy smile. "All right, I guess. At least I'm alive -- that's what's important."

Harry asked, "Can you see? What's it like with these artificial eyes? Has Moody been able to help you?"

Moody nodded. "I've been able to help her a little. However, my eye doesn't see into the infrared and ultraviolet. I'm focused on invisible things and the traditional stuff between 400 and 700 nanometers."

Ron blinked. "She can see into the WHAT?"

Hermione charged through the door and stopped next to Ron. "Infrared and ultraviolet. They're forms of light which normal people can't see. They're redder than red and purpler than purple. And -- "

Hermione's mouth dropped when she caught her first look of Luna. Her lips moved silently, and Harry made out the words "Geordi LaForge?". Harry caught her attention and shook his head. Hermione, thankfully, got the message.

Hermione turned back to Luna. "How do you feel? Does it feel strange being able to see things other people can't?"

Several of the Ravenclaws muttered that she'd spent the last five years doing just that. However, Neville shut them up.

Luna nodded. "Indeed, it does. I feel pretty good, and I can actually see your body heat to some extent. You glow faintly in the dark. I take it you know about the electromagnetic spectrum?"

Hermione nodded as Harry gasped and turned to Hermione. "Is that a side effect of the treatment?"

Hermione shook her head. "We all glow in the infrared. You can't see this glow, but Luna now can. Several animals can see in the infrared as well."

Luna continued speaking. "The world looks so much different now. The night sky looks...different. Even people look different now. I may even be able to tell if someone has a fever as the glow intensifies and changes color slightly."

Ron and Harry stared at each other -- what was this?

Luna sounded even more dreamy than usual -- it must be the medication, Harry thought. She
"Guys, I know I look weird with this VISOR contraption. I'm still myself, however. I haven't changed, even though my face looks a little funny. And please don't call me Geordi LaForge. I don't know who he is, but I don't like nicknames."

Everyone promised, and Moody glared at them to make sure they agreed to it.

Harry turned to Moody. "Professor Moody, is what she says true? She'll see things differently from us with her new eyes?"

Moody looked at Luna thoughtfully. "Quite possibly. She's going to be able to see things we can't without serious Muggle technology. This could be a boon for the naturalist within her, to be honest. There could very well be plants and animals which are only visible in the infrared or ultraviolet -- which would make an interesting defense strategy when it comes to evolution as perfect visible invisibility would make an excellent camouflage. And what's more, since both her eyes can see these wavelengths she'll do a better job at it than I could since my special eye doesn't provide stereo vision."

Harry got it immediately. "So those Crumple-Horned Snorkacks and whatever she believes in may actually exist?"

Luna snorted. "Of course they do."

Moody chuckled and ignored her. "The Snorkack, I'm not sure about. However, other creatures...you never know. Luna, you should talk with Rolf Scamander, a fourth-year. He might find your new abilities most interesting."

To be continued...

Update #465: This Quidditch Match Has Been Sponsored By Airbus

Thursday, December 12, 1996
Quidditch Pitch
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
United Kingdom
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/3.1%

NEXT UP: I Always Wanted To Try Out For Aladdin

Harry Potter had a bad feeling about this Quidditch match. For one thing, it was against Slytherin, and matches with Slytherin tended to be very difficult. For another, he and his friends had been so distracted by Luna's return that he had completely forgotten that he had booked the pitch for practice yesterday. To make matters worse, the Slytherins had managed to scavenge Harry's unused time to help Draco try out some new techniques with his broom.

Something was clearly up with Draco, thought Harry. The Slytherin captain seemed extremely smug, and he had been spending a lot of time working with his teammates on his broom. He suspected that he was trying to enchant the broom to accelerate even faster than it normally did. That could give Slytherin a serious advantage in the upcoming match.
The fact that Ron was his Keeper didn’t help much, either. Ron had been a bit distracted during the last match, which had been shortly after the attack on Hogwarts which had cost Ginny her leg. He hadn’t done that well during warmups today either, and it was a bit late to recruit a new goalie. That, and the fact that Ron would probably ditch him (and take Hermione with him) if Harry dropped him from the team.

He told his team to gather together in the hallway leading to the pitch. They huddled around him, and he told them to look sharp. "Draco Malfoy is up to something – I can feel it. If necessary, throw Bludgers at him. I want him distracted long enough to make sure I capture the Snitch without any interference."

Ron in the process of responding when his voice was drowned out by Slytherin's latest anti-Gryffindor cheer. Harry groaned when he heard the chant:

Slytherin's the way to go
Because poor Potter flies too slow.
Watch as Draco steals the show!
Weasley is our king!

Ron swore. "Not the 'Weasley is our King' chant again. I'm going to kill them."

Harry frowned. "Ron, this could be a problem. Have they hexed my broom? Did you see anyone hanging around this tent while we were talking?"

Ron shook his head, as did the rest of the team. Harry drew a deep breath. "All right, here's what we'll do. Draco's obviously trying going to try to mess with my broom. I'm going to cast Protego on my broom to ensure that he won't tamper with it. That should spike his wheel pretty well. In the meantime, keep yourself focused on the match, all right. One, two, three, TEAM!"

Harry and his teammates shook hands and made their way out onto the field. They arrived just in time to see the Slytherin team carry Draco and his broom out onto the field with overwhelming pomp and circumstances. Either that, or the broom weighed a hell of a lot more than it was supposed to.

Draco Malfoy cast a worried glance at the staff box. The biggest problem that he faced involved the fact that Professor Moody could see invisible objects. Hopefully he wouldn't know what a jet engine was and not put two and two together until the match was over. After all, the engine was a Muggle invention, and the only person who really knew about it was Professor Bell -- who didn't have a magical eye.

He'd had to conjure up a little wall behind his seat on the broom because the engine had a tendency to suck in his robes. Judging from the blades flying around in the engine, getting sucked into the engine was a serious health risk. Fortunately, the wall didn't weigh too much, especially when compared to the engine itself. The engine had been so heavy that it had taken most of his teammates to carry the overweigh broom out.

He'd placed the remote control for the engine in his pocket. Although he itched to fly around at high speed throughout the match, his goal was to catch Potter off guard and win the match without alerting the teachers.

Madam Hooch met the two captains in the center and told them to have a, clean safe match. Draco and Harry shook the hands, and Hooch tossed the balls and Snitch into the air. She blew the whistle,
and the match began.

Neville, Luna, and Hermione cheered Harry and Ron as the match continued. They'd need all the help they could get, however. As usual, the Slytherin Beaters started nailing various Gryffindor players and even sent a Bludger flying at Ron at the same time that one of their teammates fired a shot on goal. Ron had to make a split-second decision: defend the shot or be knocked off his broom by the Bludger. Needless to say, self-preservation instincts won out, and it was suddenly 10-0 Slytherin.

Hermione swore. "That is not fair. They shouldn't be Bludgering the Keeper!"

Neville nodded. "I agree. I know we don't do it. However, you have to remember Slytherin is focused on power and ambition. Each person in that house needs to show off how much of a bully he or she is. Luna, what do you think? Was that a fair play?"

Luna was frowning, her VISOR-covered eyes scanning the sky. "I'm sorry, I wasn't looking. I was just watching Draco's broom."

Hermione's eyebrows shot up. "Draco's broom? What about Draco's broom?"

Luna pointed. "I'm picking up faint heat signatures on the back of Draco's broom. I've never seen them before."

Hermione looked at Draco's broom and shook her head. "I don't see anything."

Luna shrugged. "Maybe I'm imagining something, or my eyes are still getting accustomed to these other types of light. I may be paranoid."

Neville nodded. "Yes, Luna, you're paranoid. Next time Slytherin tries to score, keep an eye on those Bludgers."

Alastair Moody's eyes narrowed as he tapped Professor Slughorn on the shoulder. "This is very odd. Horace, can I bother your Omnioculars for a second?"

Slughorn shrugged and handed them over. "Suit yourself. I didn't know you were that much of a fan, Alastair."

Moody grunted as he trained the Omnioculars on the Slytherin Keeper. "I'm not doing it because I'm a fan. I'm doing it because I believe Draco Malfoy has attached a foreign object to the back of his broom."

Flitwick gasped. "A foreign object? I don't see anything."

"That's because it's invisible, Alastair. I can't tell at this point if Gryffindor has tampered with Draco's broom or if the Slytherins are cheating."

"What is it, Alastair?"

Moody looked at Draco more closely. "It appears to be a narrow, metal tube, though it's not within his reach. Looks like Muggle manufacture."

Flitwick scratched his head. "Is he allowed to use Muggle technology in Quidditch matches?"

"He probably shouldn't. However, I suspect it's technically not forbidden for the simple reason that the traditional rules never in considered the possibility of the Statute of Secrecy falling. We should
probably assume it's legal now and change the law as soon as possible."

Professor Bell called in from a few feet away. "Draco is playing with a metal tube? Describe it."

"It's about a meter long and seems to have gratings on either end. I see signs of blades inside. Do you recognize it, Amelia?"

The blood drained from Bell's face. "I do, Professor Moody. I do."

"What is it?"

Bell told him.

---

Harry swore as Ron let in another goal and the Slytherins resumed their chant. It was now 70-30 Slytherin, and the Snitch was nowhere in sight. Harry needed to do something in a hurry.

He had just set off down the field, shadowing Malfoy, when Madam Hooch suddenly blew her whistle. He frowned: had Malfoy caught the Snitch? He certainly wasn't acting as if he'd won the game for Slytherin?

Hooch's voice suddenly echoed through the pitch. "Ladies and gentlemen, your attention please. We are testing out an experimental rule today to ensure that unfair advantages in broom technology affect the outcome of the match. To that end, we're going to have all of the players on the two teams swap brooms with their opponent every 100 points. The two Seekers swap brooms, the two left Beaters swap brooms, and so forth."

Harry's jaw dropped -- that would just make things worse as Malfoy used a completely different type of broom. Nevertheless, she made the rules. Everyone settled back down to the ground and swapped brooms. Malfoy looked absolutely furious, yet he handed over the broom.

Harry's hand nearly broke when he tried to lift it. The back end of the broom was VERY heavy. It didn't seem to interfere with its flying, but it seemed very suspicious. He started patting the back of the broom and found there was something there -- invisible. He didn't know what it was, however. However, whatever it did would likely give Malfoy an advantage -- an advantage Harry now had.

Madam Hooch blew her whistle, and the game resumed. Malfoy's broom was a little more sluggish than Harry's, but whatever was attached to the back of the broom didn't seem to have too much of an impact on its operation.

It was 100-40 when Harry saw a little golden sparkle in the air: the Snitch. Harry dived for it, and Malfoy followed him half a second later when the Slytherins realized what was going on. Malfoy was too far behind, however. It was only a matter of time...unless the Snitch changed direction on him.

Harry closed within five feet of the Snitch. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Malfoy reach into his pocket. Harry looked at Malfoy in incredulity. Was the Slytherin captain going to hex him? Slowly but surely, he reached out with his left hand.

Suddenly, the broom accelerated by a good 50 miles per hour, slamming Harry into what appeared to be an invisible wall behind his seat. Stars flashed through his head as he overshot the Snitch. He tried to turn around and was nearly thrown off the broom by the G forces. What the hell was going on here? Malfoy hadn't hexed him -- his hand was still in his pocket!

---

Luna dropped her banner in amazement. "A powerful heat source just flew out of the back of Harry's
broom! It's pushed Harry out of the way so Draco can catch the Snitch!"

Hermione winced as the spectators gasped in amazement. "Uh oh!"

Bell swore. "Shit! I should have known not to give him that engine!"

Alastair nodded. "Nothing we can do about it now. The question now is whether to expel him for doing something ridiculously dangerous or give Slytherin 100 points for developing an invention which will likely revolutionize broom travel."

Draco yelped in surprise as the exhaust from the engine slammed into him and nearly shoved him off the broom with a blast of hot air. Using all of his skills to stay on the broom, he closed in on the Snitch and caught it. The Slytherins cheered as Madam Hooch announced the game was over. Slytherin had won in a rout.

The crowd was going nuts, and Madam Hooch had been so shocked by Harry's "bizarre tactic" that she hadn't even detected the foul. The Gryffindor players were screaming that he'd somehow managed to hex Harry to prevent him from getting the Snitch. The Slytherins, of course, were boasting that they would be able to defeat anyone with their new toy. Draco's teammates lifted him onto their shoulders and began carrying him in a victory lap around the pitch.

That was when the entire school faculty closed in on Draco with furious expressions on their faces. Draco's smile slowly disappeared. He had taken a big risk with this stunt. He hoped he wouldn't be expelled.

Bell spoke first, and her voice was like a thunderclap. "All right, Mr. Malfoy. Give back the engine. NOW."

Draco saw immediately that this was no time for games. Drawing a deep breath, he removed the invisibility spell and detached the engine from the broom. Bell asked a couple of the other teachers to bring it back to her office.

Filch looked at Flitwick. "What do you want us to do to him? Torture him? Give him latrine duty for a month?"

Flitwick wasn't happy. Draco look at Slughorn, who had a conflicted expression on his face. It didn't look like Slughorn was going to help much.

Flitwick began to speak. "Mr. Malfoy, you have done something extremely foolish which could have cost you or one of your schoolmates their lives. I was seriously considering expelling you. However, one must admit that you may have just revolutionized broom development by attaching that jet engine. Inventors often put themselves at risk when they do their work, and this is no exception."

Draco held his breath. What was the verdict going to be.

Flitwick explained. "Mr. Potter gets the Snitch as it is obvious he would have gotten it were it not for your foul. Gryffindor wins 190-100."

Draco glared at him. "Foul? What foul?"

"Blagging -- interfering with his ability to catch the Snitch, in this case remotely using a Muggle device to control his broom. However, we cannot deny that you've developed a very useful invention. 80 points will be added to Slytherin for your work, and I have instructed Professors Moore and Hawking to help you get this device patented and recognized by the Ministry of Magic."
Draco's frown turned upside down. This had come out better than he had expected. He saw Flitwick cast a glance at Slughorn, and realized that Slughorn had put in a good word for him.

Flitwick fumed for a moment before continuing. "Now get out of my sight before I reconsider this decision."

To be continued...
Update #466: I Always Wanted To Try Out For Aladdin

Thursday, December 12, 1996
Chestnut Hill Mall
Newton, MA
United States of America
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/2.9%

I had originally come to the Mall to go buy a few books. However, I couldn't help but notice that Crate and Barrel was having a sale on flying carpets, reducing the price for a rental to $34.99/month for a one-passenger rug. The idea of having a flying carpet, at least for one month, intrigued me. However, I couldn't help but think that it would be a long way down if a gust of wind capsized the carpet in flight.

The flying carpets were getting more and more cost-effective. Gas was still pretty expensive despite the recession, about $2.50/gallon, and we didn't need to worry about sticking quarters in parking meters with flying carpets. It didn't matter much in my particular case I didn't really use that much gas -- after all, work was a mile away, on the other side of Brandeis. However, I had gotten a bit paranoid over the 10% pay cut and had developed a dangerous tendency to be more thrifty than was likely good for me. Renting a flying carpet could be a good way to try to wean myself of that habit.

I also had to admit that part of the reason I was interested in supporting Guinevere's Flying Carpets was the simple fact that I knew Jelena Kurchatova from Russian House. I hadn't known her all that well, but I had had her on my IM list for a while. Who knows, maybe I could use the fact that I had rented one of her rugs as a pickup line.

I spent a good half hour discussing the flying carpets with the Crate and Barrel carpet specialist. Eventually, they managed to calm my fears enough for me to pull the trigger and choose between three carpets: a former Red Sox towel, a Snoopy rug, and a plain blue one. There were a few more elaborate ones, but they cost more. I chose the blue one.

The salesman led me outside and showed me how to use the carpet. I nearly had a heart attack when the rug got five feet off the ground: was I developing a fear of heights? The salesman saw my reaction immediately and informed me that for an extra $9.99/month I could rent a fence which would fit snugly around the edge of the carpet so I didn't need to worry about falling off. I wasn't keen on spending ten more bucks, but I figured I wouldn't have the guts to buy one of these again. So, I walked away with a rug and a collapsible fence.

I headed back to Waltham, parked the car, and decided to test out the carpet by taking it to work the next day. It was already far too late to test the carpet at today -- sunset was about as early as it could get, and there was no way I was going to take the carpet on its maiden voyage in the dark. If I was able to take the carpet to work without freaking out, I'd probably fly it over to my parents and land on the porch Sunday morning -- little Mr. Showoff was at it again.
I began wondering whether using a flying carpet was actually permitted on the Sabbath, when driving and biking were forbidden. Although all trips were theoretically limited on the Sabbath to about five miles (ten thousand paces), there was nothing specifically prohibiting carpet travel, at least at first glance. Then again, would the rabbis have known about this?

There had been several major developments in the Wizarding world with regard to transportation technology. The Muggle Apparition Network had opened a chapter in Montreal, its first location outside the United States. A new transit system based on Portkeys was under development in New York, and the San Francisco BART trains had gotten a few Portkeys to centralized stops, much like the original MBTA Portkey system. The San Francisco development was hailed as a major breakthrough in a city where earthquakes were in danger of derailing trains and wrecking rails.

Perhaps most amazing was the fact that a British schoolboy had invented what was being called the Malfoy Broom: a broom with a small jet engine attached to the back. Although Muggles could not fly these brooms unaided, Muggle technology would increase the brooms' speed drastically. Granted, there was a limit as to how fast the broom could go before the G forces flattened the rider on turns. However, there were reports out of Britain that racing broom companies were looking into the implication of the Malfoy Broom very carefully.

I rolled up the carpet, stuck it in a corner of the kitchen, and turned on the TV. There were reports coming in that many countries had seen the defensive shield which had been placed over Omega and had immediately started asking the wizards whether cities and important government agencies could get similar domes. Word had leaked out that the inventor was an Israeli, and the same technology had been used to block Hamas missile attacks on Judgment Day. The Israelis, realizing the business opportunities here, had promptly created a company called MagiDome to sell protection services around the world. Domes had been already placed around Mecca, the Dome of the Rock/Third Temple complex, the rebuilt Western Wall, and other religious sanctuaries. The one around Omega supposedly was going to stay as well. Many people were commenting that the Israelis may have just achieved world piece by making it, at least for now, so that defensive technology was ahead of offensive.

Hoping that I wouldn't chicken out of using the carpet tomorrow (and that it wouldn't rain), I turned off the TV, played on the computer a bit, and went to bed.

-------------------
Southern Syrdan

Gabrielle, in a crisp new medical uniform, saluted the woman in front of her. "Nurse Gabrielle reporting for duty, ma'am."

The command smiled and shook her hand. "Welcome to the Nike Division, Gabrielle. My name is Glenda, and I'll be in charge of deployment of nurses here."

Gabrielle blinked. "Nike Division? Like the goddess of victory? Sounds like an odd name for a medical wing, ma'am."

Glenda chuckled. "Not when you realize that victory over death and illness can be much more profound than victory over an evil wizard."

"I see. How can I help you? Be advised that I'm pregnant, so I can't do stuff TOO strenuous."

Glenda shrugged. "Don't worry about it. Half of us are pregnant -- I'm five months along myself, to
be honest -- and it seems like we're picking up virtually all the pregnant women in Nestor. Sometimes it appears as if the number of pregnant women here doubles every day."

Gabrielle grunted. "Sounds risky. If too many of us are caught in battle at any one time we're going to have a population crash in thirty years or so."

"I doubt that's going to happen, Gabrielle. The Syrdani are actually more civilized than they let on, especially to people who are not human Muggles. We've been sent to battlefields several times and there has not been a single case where we have been attacked. If anything, the Syrdani have held their fire so we can rescue injured comrades. Our soldiers, incidentally, have given the Syrdani medical corps the same respect."

Gabrielle breathed a sigh of relief. "What type of injuries are we going to have to treat, ma'am? Be advised that I'm not trained as a nurse."

"Don't worry, Gabrielle. You'll start out by helping the real nurses get stuff like bandages, spell components, herbs, and so forth -- in effect, you'll be their errand girl. In theory, if you study hard enough, you'll be able to actually work on patients. However, in practice that's not going to happen."

"That's good to hear. However, I still want to know what we're dealing with here. I'm a bit squeamish and don't want to see heads chopped off and so forth."

Glenda's response was to head into a back room and tell Gabrielle to follow her. Gabrielle did so and found that the room appeared to a makeshift triage center. One woman had tentacles coming out of her head, and three women were busy treating her. Another had been hit with a bone-dissolution curse and was being administered Skele-Gro. There were a few physical injuries as well, and herbalists were doing what they could to staunch bleeding in a few cases.

Several of the patients were male, which Gabrielle found a bit unusual. Curious, he asked Glenda about it. The commander beamed with pride as she said: "Those are Syrdani civilians caught in the crossfire. We will treat anyone from either side as long as they do not raise arms against us. I doubt the Syrdani would extend the same courtesy to us, but I want to show the world that we are not barbarians."

Gabrielle nodded. "A wise move, ma'am. Is there anything I can do right now, or do I need training first? I definitely want to help."

Glenda looked around the room and frowned. "Actually, I'm not --"

Her remark was cut off by a scream from outside a doorway. Both she and Gabrielle turned to see three women helping a fourth into the room. The fourth woman had a very distended belly which could only mean one thing.

Glenda whistled. "Damn! Beverly's early! She's only eight months! I hadn't expected her to pop so soon. Had I known this was going to happen, I'd have sent her home a couple of weeks earlier. I sure hope it wasn't battlefield trauma. If so, we may have to change our policies."

Gabrielle flinched. "Battlefield trauma? What do you mean?"

"Stress from seeing people hexed or injured in battle. It can happen to anyone, even medics. It's well known that women will tend to deliver their babies when they are placed in stressful situations. Right now the limit for services is 8.5 months; I'm going to drop it to 8 after this."
Gabrielle nodded. "Good thing. Do you want me to help deliver the baby? That's a common enough practice that I know the basics."

"Even for someone delivering a month premature?"

Gabrielle hesitated. "Not for preemies, unfortunately. I can help with filling buckets of warm water and so forth."

Glenda nodded. "Fair enough. Beverly is an actual doctor, so if all else fails she could tell you what to do."

"If she's a doctor, can she deliver her own baby?"

Glenda snorted. "I take it you've never had a kid before. Wait a few months, and then we'll talk about it. In the meantime, get a hospital robe and let's get going. I sure hope this war is over before the rest of us all pop at once."

To be continued...

Update #467: We'll Ignore the Secret Service For Now

--------
Friday, December 13, 1996
Hogsmeade
United Kingdom
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/2.9%
--------
NEXT UP: The Race to Mars Begins
--------

George Jameson had thought that it was only a matter of time until he was arrested along with the rest of the Britain for Humans operatives. He had been lucky, however, and was still at large; the wizards had raided his house when he had been on vacation and not found him. He vowed revenge on the wizards for taking over Britain. However, he had to confess that he couldn't do much by himself, and any attempt to even mention Britain for Humans in public would almost certainly get him turned in to the wizards.

Fortunately, one of his contacts in Muslims for Humans had placed him in touch with another Brit, Jean Sigfried, who had been looking for volunteers to strike a blow against the wizards. He had signed up very quickly and told Sigmund's representative -- some Russian chap -- that he would do anything to support such a noble cause.

This mission, however, was going to be very difficult. His goal was to find where Hugh de Lourdes lived and kidnap him. The dossier Sigfried's colleague had on Hugh claimed that the man was about 630 years old and very wise. He would be a difficult person to subdue, and he had no compunction about using magic to defend himself. Fortunately, a sniper rifle from a few hundred feet would be able to catch him off guard.

Ideally, the goal would be to load the sniper rifle with a sedative and only kill him as a last resort. This was because Wizard de Lourdes could very well be in a position to grant immortality to anyone
who pushed him to do so. Considering that he was six centuries old already, this didn't seem to be as much of a pipe dream as it had been before the Statute of Secrecy had fallen. Once the target was asleep, Jameson would break into his house and drag him away to a safe house designated by Sigmund's men.

This operation was under severe time pressure. It was to be executed as soon as possible, and it absolutely HAD to be done before the end of the year. What's more, it had to be performed at the same time as a mission to knock out the Minister of Magic and his wife. Since de Lourdes was a friend of the Minister of Magic, any attack on one of the three would certainly alert the other two to the fact that something was amiss.

Jameson had blinked when he had been told that a couple of wizards and a few more Muggles were going to go after the Minister of Magic. That seemed an extraordinary dangerous mission: if this Dr. Flamel served the same role as John Major, he would likely be VERY heavily guarded by both Muggles and wizards. He honestly didn't know how his new friend planned to pull it off. However, he assumed that everyone knew what they were doing.

His first task was to figure out where this Hugh de Lourdes lived. The dossier said that he taught at Hogwarts, so it stood to reason that he probably had a house in Hogsmeade -- and even if he didn't live in Hogsmeade, someone in Hogsmeade might be able to point him in the right direction. He hadn't had much success, so far, as the wizards in Hogsmeade had gotten a little more leery of Muggles since the Britain for Humans attack on the Three Broomsticks. He suspected that Flitwick or whoever was in charge of Hogwarts had instructed citizens to not give out personal information about individual wizards to Muggles.

There was one group of wizards, however, which would still talk to Muggles. Grinning, he stepped into one of the stores selling magical trinkets to Muggles. He wouldn't touch any of them with a ten-foot pole, but it wasn't the product that he was interested in.

The proprietor waved to him and came over. "Good afternoon, sir. How can I help you?"

Jameson looked embarrassed. "I was wondering if you by any chance had a restroom in the store. I'm not sure I can hold this in much longer?"

The proprietor nodded. "I can arrange that. Come with me."

Jameson's eyes scanned the walls as the proprietor led him deeper into the store. Eventually, he found what was looking for: a Wizarding address book stuck on a shelf. He didn't have much of a chance to leaf through it because he had to keep on following the wizard towards the bathroom.

The wizard gestured to a door. "Go right in here, sir. I'll be at the front if you need me."

Jameson nodded. "I appreciate this, sir."

The proprietor smiled. "There are still some stores which appreciate Muggles here. Now, if you would excuse me, I have business to attend to."

Jameson entered the bathroom and watched through a crack in the door as the shopkeeper made his way out towards the front of the store. Soon, the proprietor was speaking with another customer.

Now was the time, Jameson thought. He snuck out of the bathroom, grabbed the address book -- thankfully Muggles could touch it -- and brought it into the bathroom. He looked through the L's and
smiled as he came across his target's address. Grinning, he jotted it down and put the book back where it had been.

-------------
West Bank
-------------
The radical Israeli settler looked at the report and smiled. "Well, well, well. It looks like the Nephilim have just managed to squelch a major anti-Israeli protest in the Gaza Strip. Sounds like those monsters may be actually useful."

The second settler frowned. "Really? How so? They do what they can to make sure we don't overstep our boundaries, either."

The first settler winked. "They're not going to be able to do much enforcement here when they're busy focusing on Gaza. There aren't that many of them, and I doubt they can watch both here and there at the same time."

"I see where you're going. Now's a good time to start trying to recruit more settlers, I take it?"

"You got it, Shimon. Can you do it? You'll have to stop once the Nephilim finish their crackdown."

The second settler raced out the door. "I'm on it, Avigdor."

-------------
Dead Sea
-------------
Michal Oved blinked in the glare of the floodlights. Nevertheless, she was able to maintain her calm. "Yes, that's right. We are now absolutely certain that the water produced by the desalination project is safe for human consumption. The test results have come in, and this water is no different from water obtained from ordinary wells."

A reporter raised her hand. "Does that mean you're going to be able to cash in on one of the Millennium Prizes?"

"Probably. This is a wonderful day for Israel and for the world. Water will soon be readily available to places which need it, and a Palestinian terrorist cell in the West Bank is in the process of being broken up by the Nephilim. At the rate things are going, we could actually have peace in the Middle East at some point."

-------------
Waltham, MA
-------------
It was cloudy, but as long as I stayed below the clouds I'd probably still be able do use the carpet safely. With a mixture of excitement and trepidation, I brought the carpet outside and sat on it. Hesitantly, I touched the ctangle in the area which would cause the carpet to start levitating.

It did so. I raised the carpet until it was about maybe five feet above the ground -- I didn't want to go TOO high yet, even with the fence in place. I flew around the yard a bit, and eventually, I became comfortable enough to grab onto the fence and go up above the buildings and trees.

I flew over Brandeis (note to self, do not look down) and eventually crossed the train tracks. Soon, Parametric was in sight. I considered landing on the roof for a moment but couldn't figure out how to get into the building from the roof. So, I slowly made my way back to the surface and let out a sigh of relief when I landed.
It was an interesting experience. However, it wasn't anything to write home about -- I was too nervous about falling off most of the time. I decided then and there that I'd let some of my friends borrow the carpet the rest of the months after I came back home from work.

To be continued...

__________________

Update #468: The Race to Mars Begins
--------

Friday, December 13, 1996
NASA Headquarters
Near Washington
United States of America
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/2.9%
--------

NEXT UP: Fast Food
--------

Linda Warren stuck her head around the doorframe to her supervisor's office. "You wanted to see me, sir?"

The supervisor nodded. "Yes, Linda. Please come in. Do you want something to eat or drink?"

Linda shook her head. "Not really, though if you have water I'll take it. How can I help you? Are you thinking of doing a third Selene-style manned moon mission?"

"Actually, we're not. To be honest, we've got so many rocks from the last two that we won't need to go over there for a while. I figure we'll start heading over there again once Boeing has created enough structures equivalent to the Apollo landers to make setting up a permanent Moon base feasible."

Linda frowned. "That's probably going to take a while. Even getting the remaining Apollo capsules out of the museums will be difficult."

"I agree. I personally don't think we'll be doing much with manned lunar missions for a while. However, there's a place where we haven't sent men before which I think would be worth our while to check out."

Linda blinked. "Really? Where?"

The supervisor grinned and pointed at a large rust-colored globe in front of him. "Mars."

Linda gasped. "You're thinking we're ready to send some people to Mars?"

"Probably not. However, that's why I wanted to run it by you first. Do we have the technology and magic available to pull this off at some point within the next few years?"

Linda sat down across from him and scratched her head. "Depends. First things first: how many people are you going to send over? Four like in the lunar missions?"

"Start with one or two, like Gemini or Apollo. A Mars mission is undoubtedly going to be riskier and
longer than a lunar one. However, given the evidence of past life on Mars, we really should head over there for a better look."

"I agree. Sending a Portkey to Mars is going to be no more difficult than sending it to the moon. The problem, as you pointed out, is that the trip is going to take longer. MUCH longer. Not the six months or more you would have expected from a chemical rocket, but still too long for comfort."

The supervisor steepled his hands on the desk. "How long are you going to expect it to take?"

Linda started drawing some diagrams on a piece of paper. "The best the Portkeys can do at this point is about 1 AU every two weeks. At the very minimum, with Mars at opposition and as close to Earth as possible, that's 0.5 AU. One week each way -- and that's at minimum. If Mars and the Earth are 90 degrees apart from each other, that trip duration increases to about 1.8 AU, or over three weeks each way. You remember how impatient you were for the first Mars rocks to come back? Imagine three people cooped on that spacecraft in zero-G for God knows how long. What are they going to eat, for crying out loud? What happens if they start fighting?"

The supervisor nodded gravely. "That's a definite issue. However, we've been able to avoid that on Mir for the most part."

"Mir is much bigger than an Apollo capsule, sir, and I suspect that there is more stuff to do on Mir. I can already tell you that I had gotten a bit of cabin fever stuck with the four other astronauts on the first Selene mission, and that was only three days. There may be a way to make the journey less boring and to reduce food requirements, but it's VERY risky."

The supervisor whistled. "A risky mission is better than none at all. What were you thinking?"

Linda drew a deep breath. "Use the Draught of Living Death to put the crew into hibernation. One or two people will have to stay awake, on shifts, in case something goes wrong. They'll be waking everyone else up and going to sleep when their watch ends."

The supervisor cocked his head. "The Draught of Living Death?"

"It's a potion which will put the drinker into a very deep sleep, almost a coma. It can be reversed by feeding the sleeper another potion. The potion can be administered by anyone, even a Muggle, as long as the wizard creates it first."

The supervisor thought for a moment. "That's actually not a bad idea. However, I'm concerned about side effects. Are there side effects, such as memory loss, when the people come out of their comas?"

"Not that I know of, sir. Then again, I don't know much about it."

"You can't brew it, Linda?"

Linda shook her head. "No, sir. I'm not a potioneer. However, I suspect the Smoky Mountain facility will be able to help us make the stuff."

"That's a good start. Is there anything we can do about cosmic rays? Long trips like this could endanger the astronauts if we don't do anything about cosmic rays."

Linda shrugged. "Cover the capsules with lots of lead shielding. You mentioned that blocks cosmic rays, right?"
"It does. However, heavier objects are harder to launch, and I'd suspect that Portkeying something which weighs a few hundred tons is going to be rather expensive."

"It will be. However, all that's going to happen is that we'll probably blow out fuses and stuff in a larger area. If we're able to launch from somewhere uninhabited, that's going to be less of a problem."

The supervisor nodded and began jotting down notes. "This may be easier than I thought. Storing food will be less of an issue if most of the crew members are hibernating, so we've managed to dodge that bullet. All right, how about zero-G? Is there anything you can do to prevent zero-G from harming the astronauts?"

Linda shook her head once more. "Not that I know of, sir. However, there is always the option of attaching two rocket engines to the top and bottom of the Portkey and launching them once it has taken off. If we get the capsule spinning fast enough, we can get up to 1 G. Just before we reach Mars, we spin it down, make the capsule horizontal again, and land at zero G."

The supervisor thought for a moment, then shook his head once more. "I don't see how that will work. The axis of rotation is going to go right through the center of the ship, not the top -- remember there's going to be nothing anchoring the top in place. That will require double the speed, which in turn means double the chance we'll spin the ship to bits. Also, people will feel pretty strange when they stand up and are UP at their head and DOWN at their feet. They'll be torn in two."

"Not if the people are only a few inches tall -- recall that they'll be under the Extendatent charm. There will be a bit of a gravity difference between their head and their feet, but if they lie low a lot it shouldn't be that bad. And the hibernators will be sleeping, so they'll be safe."

"What about making sure the ship doesn't break up when you spin it?"

Linda shrugged. "A Strengthening Spell should do the trick. Besides, all that lead is going to be awfully hard to dislodge."

The supervisor jotted down more notes. "Interesting. What are we going to do if there is an emergency and the astronauts need to talk with Earth in a hurry? Is there any way to provide for instantaneous communication across 1 AU or more?"

Linda shook her head. "Faster than light communication is still impossible. However, if you've got multiple people on board they can all work together to solve the problems. Remember that even during the Apollo 13 crisis the astronauts didn't have this problem -- and the Apollo 13 issue was a real emergency. People can wait a couple of minutes."

"Not if the spaceship is hit by a meteor or something."

Linda laughed. "That's not going to happen. The Portkey isn't going to be hit by anything while in transit. No ordinary matter will get in."

"I see. What about waste products? Is there a way you can get rid of waste products?"

Linda laughed even louder. "Simple. Go to the door and throw it out once you land on Mars."

Now it was the supervisor's turn to laugh. "Oh, right. There's no door, just a spell keeping the air in.
That will work. And you'll be able to control the temperature, right?"

"Yes. If the ship is spinning like crazy, the capsule will heat evenly. Granted, Mars is colder than Earth, but the difference isn't enough to wreck the spell."

"Fair enough. However, now that I think about it, is it really wise to throw out junk while on Mars? You can contaminate the surface, especially with foodstuffs. We want to check if life still exists on Mars, not put life there to begin with. Is there a way to sterilize everything before throwing out the trash?"

Linda closed her eyes and shook her head slowly. "Not sure. What's more, it's quite possible that the sterilization spells that do exist will leave some bacteria and so forth left over. All we need is one Earth bacterium to mess up the ecosystem over there. All right, scratch that idea. We don't throw anything out. We'll stick trash in an out-of-the-way part of the ship and go on from there."

The supervisor wrote some more notes down. "All right, how about spacesuits? Is there any way to have people walk around without spacesuits? Keep in mind there's s little bit of atmosphere down there."

"In theory, yes, by trapping the air in a bubble around them. However, it won't let them travel too far before the CO2 level gets too high. Also, we'd be exposing possible Martian organisms to oxygen and possible human parasites, which wouldn't be good for them. The suits stay on while outside the ship. Think of them not as spacesuits but as biological quarantine suits."

The supervisor smiled. "This sounds easier than I thought it would be. How hard would it be to send a capsule directly to the site of the first Mars Portkey?"

"Very easy. However, be advised that we've got nasty terrain down there with canyons and so forth - - and the capsules are much larger than the boxes I sent over there. I'd recommend going to a safer, more open site first and walking or driving some vehicle over there. I suppose we can take a rover along -- it will fit in the Extendatented capsule. Test it out at one of the Viking sites and go on from there."

"A rover would come in very handy. How long do you think it would take to pull this all off -- train a crew, get the Draught of Living Death, the rover, the capsule with the rockets to get artificial gravity, and so forth?"

Linda thought for a moment. "Maybe a year or so, possibly two."

The supervisor clapped his hands. "Great! Let's see if we can get men on Mars before the Europeans or the Russians do."

To be continued...

__________________

Update #469: Fast Food
----------
Saturday, December 14, 1996
Boughar
Algeria
Abdallah ibn Tariq had a big problem. He knew what he had to do, but it was supposedly illegal -- and he wasn't even sure it would work.

His family had been averaging probably 400 calories a day for the past few weeks and was getting very weak. Even worse, they were just about at the point where they would have to slaughter their precious milch cow. His in-laws didn't have much food to spare, and even if they did it wouldn't last long in a family of five.

He needed to find food in a hurry, and he could only think of one way to do it: *Geminio*.

He had never heard of people using the Duplication Charm on food before. He'd have wanted to read up on it, except that he didn't know where to begin. It would probably take him a month to figure out if it was even possible to Duplicate food...a month his family did not have.

There was, of course, another way to do it: simply cast *Geminio* on one of the few remaining pieces of meat left. Like most people, he knew at this point that *Geminio* on a human being produced an inanimate clone which could pass for a dead body. So it seemed to indicate that an organic lifeform could be duplicated to some extent. But would the copy taste as good as the original? For that matter, would it even be made out of edible material?

He had to try. However, he was worried that he would get into trouble because of those idiots in Atlantis who had placed *Geminio* on the list of forbidden spells just because it could be used in the proliferation of nuclear weapons. What was Dagher thinking? Surely there must be a way for Atlantis to focus on WHAT was being duplicated. Duplicating a nuclear weapon should certainly be forbidden. But duplicating food? Especially when human life was in jeopardy because of a famine in the area?

His own personal ethics, as well as Islam, dictated that laws could be disregarded when a person's life was in danger. The Qu'ranic support was a biggie. Since the Qu'ran was the word of Allah dictated by the Prophet, this meant that Allah Himself would back up his decision. Surely the Ministry of Magic would listen to the word of Allah -- and if they didn't, Dagher would understand as a devout Muslim!

Throwing caution to the winds, he brought out his wand and pointed it at his last remaining sack of grain. Envisioning the contents of the sack in his mind's eye, he shouted "*Geminio!*"

There was a flash of light, and when it dissipated two bags of grain were sitting on the threadbare carpets covering the sand. So far so good, he thought. Opening the new bag, he saw to his delight that it was full of grain. Taking a deep breath, he reached into the bag and sampled some of the new food.

It tasted stale and a little bitter. However, he figured it was palatable enough to eat. The next question would be whether it would provide as much nutrition as the original. To determine that, he would have to eat a full meal of it and wait about half an hour to see if it would fill him up.

He did so, and soon his shrunken stomach was ready to explode. All he could do now was wait for his body to digest the stuff...and prepare for the arrival of guests. He hadn't invited anyone, but he had a strong feeling that someone from the Ministry was going to stop by to check what was going
He wasn't disappointed. About five minutes later, just as the food was starting to bring back his flagging strength, there was a flash of light and a snap as a Ministry official Apparated into the building.

The Ministry looked at him warily as his wife shouted, "Abdallah, what's going on here? I wasn't expecting any guests!"

Abdallah screamed over the representative's head. "I'll explain it momentarily. Put on your hijab just in case he looks around."

"He's going to WHAT?"

The representative was starting to get a bit impatient, and Abdallah had to end this quickly. "I'll get back to you. Hold on a second."

His wife acknowledged and went to go corral the children. Breathing a sigh of relief, he turned to the Ministry representative. "Good afternoon, sir. I take it that you've come because I've cast Geminio."

The agent nodded. "That's right. Are you aware that it's now a restricted spell? You need to ask for permission from a Ministry official before you do it. I'll let you off the hook this time, but I recommend you be more careful in the future."

Abdallah's grimaced. "Actually, this is a case where I believe the Atlantean prohibition of Geminio is a bit extreme. Do you want to know what I copied?"

The Ministry nodded. "I was going to ask for that, so yes."

Smiling weakly, he pointed at the original bag of grain. "There. I made a copy of that sack of grain. It is the only food I have in this house, and if you took a look at the rest of my family you will understand that this is an emergency situation. Look how thin I am. My wife is the same way, and we're giving as much food as we can to our three kids. I had to do it, sir. The alternative is starvation."

The agent looked at him for a long time. With a thoughtful expression on his face, he reached into the two bags of food and ate a little of both. He winced a little at the taste of the duplicated food, but he was able to force it down. Slowly, he turned back to Abdallah and spoke.

"This has to be allowed. Allah requires it, for one thing. And yes, I agree with you that this is a case where an exception should be made to the rule."

Abdallah let out a breath he hadn't known he was holding. "So I'm not in trouble?"

"No. To be honest, Geminioing food hadn't even occurred to us up in Algiers."

Abdallah glared at him. "That's because you have much more food available up there, and it's easier to distribute. You don't have to worry about starvation up there, particularly you rich folk who make up the Ministry of Magic."

The Ministry representative had the dignity to look a little guilty at that. "I agree with that assessment."

"Good. Are you going to be make an exception to the rule to allow for the Geminioing of food?"
The agent shrugged. "I'm not sure that's possible. However, what I can do is give you a license to cast Geminio. Do you think you'll be able to cast that spell again?"

Abdallah nodded. "Yes, I think so."

"And are you sure that the Duplicated food has the same nutritional value as the original?"

"That I don't know. However, I definitely feel stronger now that I have eaten it. On the other hand, I couldn't feel much weaker!"

"That's consistent with what I know about Geminio. I suspect that the copide food provides maybe 70-80% of the nutritional value of the original. It's not perfect, and I can tell you it doesn't taste as good. However, if there's nothing else, and you can make lots and lots of it..."

Abdallah finished the sentence. "...then no one will be hungry again as long as there is at least one morsel of food left to copy from."

The representative nodded. "And someone is good enough at Geminio to mass produce the product. Can you imagine what Geminio Maximus can do in a situation like this? It would fill a whole room with copies of the original. It would replenish the storehouses in an instant."

Abdallah blinked. "I didn't even know there was a Maximus-level version of the spell."

The representative thought some more. "There is. However, we don't want TOO many people Geminioing food because for all we know they'll be copying stuff other than food. After all, we can't track what is being copied. So, I've got a proposition for you. Have you ever thought about going into business?"

Abdallah shook his head. "I have no time. I've got to take care of the animals and so forth."

The representative grinned. "You can always hire someone to do that for you once the Ministry starts paying you to Geminio food during this drought."

Abdallah reeled back. "You want me to work for you?"

"Yes. We'll keep the Geminio down to you and only you, so you have more or less a monopoly. You don't need to worry about competition, at least in this part of the country. We may have more people start Geminioing food in different areas, however. In either case, you'll never go hungry again. No one around here will go hungry again."

Abdallah grinned. "I like it. The only problem is: what happens if they're sick of stale food?"

"They'll go after the original, which will taste better -- and likely carry a higher price. That way, the original growers and so forth won't be forced out of business."

Abdallah couldn't believe it. His fortune was made. Allah had rewarded him for realizing that Atlantis's laws could be overridden by a Higher Authority. Punching the air in satisfaction, he called in his family. "I'm in. Wait until the rest of us find out. In the meantime, let me make a few more bags so we can have a real feast here..."

To be continued...
Update #470: Super Mario Brothers

Monday, December 16, 1996
Underworld
Catanzaro
Italy

ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/2.8%

NEXT UP: King of the Warlocks

Don Mario made his way down into the sewers from the ancient Fideliused church which was the local branch of the Italian Ministry of Magic. A good half of the members of the Ministry had mysteriously disappeared, most of whom were had been sent on missions to infiltrate 'Ndrangheta. It was obvious that the crime syndicate was up to something, and up to something big. This time, however, the head of the Auror Department had gotten smart. He'd sent Don Mario in with both an Invisibility Cloak to hide him from the enemy. If he was very careful, he'd be able to complete his reconnaissance mission without being detected.

The Muggle authorities had picked up intelligence that several 'Ndrangheta members may be meeting in the sewers underneath the city. They had sent one of their top agents in there, armed to the teeth. Luigi had reported back that there were some bizarre things floating around in there, including plants and animals he'd never seen before. That had unnerved both the Muggles AND the wizards, and for good reason. When there are missing wizards and unusual plant life showing up strange places, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to put two and two together. It was obvious that 'Ndrangheta had managed to pick up a few wizards and was using said wizards to lure in and neutralize the Ministry forces. After a brief discussion with the Ministry, the Muggles ordered Luigi to proceed deeper into the tunnels. That had been the last they'd heard of him.

Now it was Don Mario's turn. Floating serenely above possible booby traps (and God knows what else) on a hovering bank of cloud, he made no sound as he made his way into the tunnels, keeping his right hand on -- well near -- the wall so he wouldn't get lost. He was armed with a wand, though he was reluctant to use it against anyone but wizards because multicolored beams of light would be a dead giveaway. He was protected from Muggles by a magically-enhanced Kevlar vest, one which would stop anything pointing at anything but his head and legs.

The smell was horrible, so bad that he had to consciously make an effort to not throw up. Not that throwing up would change the complexion of the sewage all that much. Eventually, he gave up and cast a spell on himself which temporarily deprived him of his sense of smell.

As he made his way down the tube, he noticed that there were things actually living in the sewage. He recognized them as Tentacled Centipedes, a dangerous small animal. He was once again thankful for his levitating cloud. All he had to do was touch the tentacles and the toxins in their skin would have corroded him to jelly.

He stopped his cloud abruptly and looked at the centipedes. These animals shouldn't be living in the sewers, he realized. Something fishy was going on here. Conjuring up a small lead pipe -- and being very quiet about it -- he probed the floor of the sewer a few feet ahead of the centipedes. When he retrieved the bar, it was still dry.
Very interesting, he thought. The sewage is illusory, and the smell likely was as well. It made sense, however. The Muggle crime lords had to come through here as well, and they did not appreciate walking through sewage. A few minutes of experimentation revealed that there was a small dry channel, maybe two feet wide, which did not actually have sewage in it. It was in this channel that the centipedes had been wandering. The Muggles must have walked down the channel and the wizards must have put the animals in afterwards to make sure no one came in after them. Grimly, he smashed the centipedes with the pipe and continued on.

He had to jump out of the way as a Fanged Terrapin bounded around the corner and jabbed at his feet with its long, turtle-like neck ending in a fanged beak. He bit back a swear as he bashed his head into the ceiling, breaking what appeared -- of all things -- to be wooden beams in the process. Debris rained down into the channel as he prodded with the lead pipe and knocked the Terrapin upside down and back into its shell. Seconds later, it dissolved as a centipede crashed into it. The incident had made a lot of noise, and the echoes reverberated down the corridor. He froze for a moment, making sure that both the cloud and the pipe were covered by the Invisibility Cloak. Fortunately, no one appeared to have heard him.

He was about to continue when he saw a few gold coins lying on the ground that hadn't been there earlier. It took him a second to realize that there had been a hidden panel in the ceiling. Shining the light from his wand into the hole, he saw that there was a large stash of gold and silver coins there. He had to hurry now -- he had to consider the possibility that he had tripped a Muggle alarm when he had smashed the ceiling. Bringing out his wand under the Invisibility Cloak, he ignored the coins and proceeded down the corridor. Visions of a Muggle digital stopwatch counting down swam in his head.

The pipe branched, and he immediately probed with the lead pipe to determine which effluent was illusory. He headed down the fork with the illusory sewage only to find his path partially blocked by what appeared to be Devil's Snare poking its deadly leaves out of a lower-level pipe. That was easy to deal with, however. Brandishing his wand at the writhing branches, he cast a thin beam of fire at the plant. As he had expected, the plant recoiled out of the way and let him pass. He caught a brief glimpse of gold flickering in the wand's light further down in the pipe, underneath the plant. He didn't have time to go after it, however.

He continued on a few hundred feet, following the trail of illusory sewage and bashing the local wildlife with his lead pipe. Suddenly, however, he froze halfway through a strike on a centipede. Unless he been very badly mistaken, he had heard human voices. He had to be very cautious now. Putting the pipe in his left hand and the wand in his right, he craned his neck to look around a corner. He saw that the wizards had been busy. A large platform had been erected, hovering over the sewage like a small bridge. A series of stairs led from ground level up to the platform, which featured six chairs and a symbol which looked like a Fascist axe. Four of the seats were occupied by Muggles, or at least by people wearing Muggle robes. The last two were occupied by wizards, their wands at the ready. Beyond the seated gangsters was what appeared to be a small building.

One of the Muggles spoke. "I understand, Gerardo. We've got over half the wizards now. I highly doubt the Ministry of Magic will be able to stop us. And we've got enough Muggle weapons to take on a small army."

The wizard nodded. "We're in position to cast the Imperius Curse on several high-ranking mayors and government officials in the South. They'll be doing the Godfather's bidding as soon as you give the word."
Mario bit back a gasp. That was Don Gerardo's voice. Gerardo had been turned by 'Ndrangheta! It had to be...or did it? The man's voice sounded a little resigned. Mario had a strong suspicion that the gangsters had forced Gerardo to take an offer he couldn't refuse.

The Muggle grinned. "That's good to hear. Catanzaro is ours, right? Getting the big cities is going to be critical here."

Gerardo sighed -- yes, Mario thought. Gerardo doesn't want to do this, but he saw himself as having no choice. "Yes, sir. I can assure you Catanzaro will fall."

"Good. Remember the plan: the initial takeover is to be done under the name of Cosa Nostra. We will then ask Rome if they need an ally in a fight against Cosa Nostra. Rome probably won't like it, but they'll probably buy it. The two of us combine to knock out Cosa Nostra, which would leave us in charge without anyone to fight us off. We then tell Rome they're in for one hell of a surprise."

"Won't Rome require that we agree to behave?"

The Muggle smirked. "Probably. However, I doubt there's much they can do about it. Particularly when the Liga Nord is going to start agitating for separation from the rest of Italy, ostensibly to wash their hands of Cosa Nostra. The way I see it is this: we use you wizards and our soldiers to take control of the population and infrastructure and ward off Rome --"

"I didn't think you gangsters knew how to run cities."

"We won't do the dirty work, Gerardo. We'll just tell the mayor what we want to see happen, and he'll make sure it gets done. After all, he doesn't want those acid-backed centipedes in his town's water supply any more than we do. At any rate, we secure our independence and give the 'Ndrangheta syndicate actual political power over a large area. And if Padania breaks free, the more the better. Rome won't be able to focus entirely on us."

"How long do you think it will take until you're in position to take over the South and declare independence?"

"A few months, if that. We're only going to have one shot at this, and we're not going to rush it. We need to get as many weapons as we can as fast as possible. I take it you can't make copies of them magically?"

Gerardo shook his head. "No. The Geminio spell is restricted."

The Muggle grunted. "Oh well, we'll get the weapons on the black market. If we have enough, no one will be able to stop us."

The other wizard shook his head. "You may have a bigger problem than you realize, sir. Atlantis may intervene, not to mention the rest of Europe."

The Muggle glared at him. "I wouldn't be so sure about that. Remember the South has had a bit of an independence movement for a while. We're just going to be strengthening the South's local identity and giving them a strong leader who will actually be able to do the job. If the South WANTS to be independent, what's Europe supposed to do? And as far as Atlantis goes -- wasn't there supposed to be a 5% chance of the destruction of civilization before they would intervene? I thought Atlantis was laissez-faire."
Gerardo nodded abruptly. "The 5% threshold is correct. However, last time I checked we were around 3% or so -- and I suspect that the fragmentation of Italy could do a lot to destabilize Europe. Particularly when one of the nations is going to be run by what is going to be considered -- forgive me -- a pariah state. I wouldn't be surprised if the takeover of the South pushes it up to 5%. And if it does, beware. A lot of the Atlantis bigwigs have rings which make it impossible for them to be hit by magical means. These rings activate once the 5% threshold has been breached."

Another Muggle chuckled. "All right, fine. We put bullets in their heads."

Gerardo shook his head. "The rings will prevent that."

The Muggle frowned and thought for a moment. Finally, he began pacing. "Gerardo, I want you to go in there and make sure they don't reach the 5% threshold. Talk them out of it if necessary, and keep in mind that if you decide to upstage us we can always go after more of your relatives."

"That's impossible, sir. The DEFCON meter is controlled by the Head Astrologer and people like that. I'm not an astrologer, and I won't be able to get into that department. I --"

There was a sudden shout from further down the corridor, past where Mario had entered the chamber. "Sir! There's an intruder!"

Mario spun to see another Muggle race past him into the chamber. In his hand was a piece of painted wood and a few gold coins. Mario's eyes widened as he recognized pieces of the secret compartment he'd bashed his head into jumping over that Terrapin.

The newcomer waved the wood in his masters' faces. "Someone's come in, crushed several of the magical animals, and broken into one of the gold compartments. There's also a dead magical plant in the area as well."

Guns and wands came out as the Muggle leader cursed. "You're sure this wasn't from Luigi's mission the other day?"

"Yes, sir. This is brand-new."

The Muggle slammed the palm of his hand against floor. "Damn! All right, Gerardo. Do your thing."

Gerardo looked at him helplessly. "I'm not sure if --"

All of the guns swerved to point at Gerardo. "Do it. Now!"

Helplessly, Gerardo brought out his wand and pointed it down the hallway, directly at Mario. "Revelio Hominem!"

Mario winced as the spell detected him. The second wizard stared at him and pointed. "The spell is picking up someone in this room! I think he's invisible!"

The Muggles pointed their guns at Mario. "Well, I doubt an Invisibility Cloak will stop bullets. Federico, block the exit. We don't want him escaping. Carlo, can you do something about his Invisibility Cloak?"

The second wizard was happy to comply. "Accio Cloak!"
Mario reached to grab hold of the cloak but found that he had the lead pipe in one hand and the wand in the other. He watched helplessly as the Invisibility Cloak flew off of him and settled into the second wizard's hand.

Gerardo saw him, and his jaw dropped. "Don Mario!"

Mario looked at Gerardo urgently. "Gerardo, you don't have to do this. We're going to --"

The Muggle cut him off. "Gentlemen, fire!"

Guns barked as Mario brought up a shield that deflected the bullets. Unfortunately, that left his back facing the gangster who had just run into the room. There was a gunshot behind him, and his leg erupted in pain as it exploded out from under him. He collapsed as an Expelliarmus sent both the lead pipe and the wand flying from his hands. Damn! Without a wand, he couldn't even send a Patronus back to warn his friends. And he certainly wasn't walking back on one leg.

One of the Muggles suddenly chuckled. "His name is Mario, is it? Well, well, well. Let's introduce him to some Muggle pop culture, shall we? Immobilize him as I bring out the flamethrower. Federico, get out of the way."

The wizards hit him with a Petrificus Totalus and forced to him to watch as Muggle went into the building and came back with a flamethrower. The flamethrower had an image of a dragon drawn on it. Mario had an awful feeling that it was about to turn into a dragon, though he didn't know how the wizards would accomplish that.

The Muggle looked at him with a satisfied expression on his face. Grinning evilly, he pointed the dragon-marked flamethrower at Mario and spoke.

"You wanted to learn more about Muggle culture, did you not? Well, try this one on for size. I'm sorry Mario, but your princess is in another castle."

Mario had approximately three seconds to mull that over before the fire consumed him.

To be continued...
Patrick Stewart saw himself as an accomplished Shakespearean actor. Yet he had never thought that he'd have been asked to play the lead Muggle role of a Shakespearean play he'd never heard of before. The man who had originally been tagged to play the role had been killed during the Britain for Humans attack on Hogsmeade a few weeks ago, and after a hurried discussion with the rest of the Hogwarts staff Headmaster Flitwick had decided to turn to him.

Most of the Hogwarts students had no idea who he was. A few of the kids recognized him from his role as Jean-Luc Picard, but those references were few and far between as it would have required that the child be raised as a Muggle and be interested in Star Trek. Stewart had to admit, however, that he would have preferred this real-life magical world to anything Gene Roddenberry could have dreamed up in his pseudo-utopian 24th century future.

It appeared that the real-life story behind King of the Warlocks was fairly well known, though the details were sketchy. The so-called "King" had in fact been a Russian tyrant by the name of Lord Boris Koschei. Not satisfied with the way Atlantis served the world in an era before the Statute of Secrecy had come into being, Koschei had tried to take over. In an act which had been cited many times as one of the reasons the Statute of Secrecy had to be introduced, this man had turned to evil and unleashed the Black Death on the Muggle world. Millions of people had died before Koschei was in fact finally neutralized by the Atlantean authorities.

The play focused on Koschei's plot and eventual capture. It actually had several tragic heroes, including his own daughter, Olga Koscheiva, who had been horrified at what her father had done and betrayed the location of her family's private island to Atlantis. As one would have expected in a performance like this, all of the bad guys were killed. Shakespeare -- well, Sir Henry Wood -- had added a postscript, however, which claimed that Koschei's body was never found and that he could have survived using a Horcrux. The incident had given birth to the Russian legend of Koschei the Deathless.

Amazingly, two of the Hogwarts staff members were old enough to remember the Black Death personally. Hugh had only been ten at the time Koschei had been captured, and his parents hadn't told him much. Mrs. Flamel, on the other hand, had been an adult, and she had remembered a lot of it. Not only did the private island -- known as Buyan -- exist, but there had been several expeditions there in the late 14th century to try to discover the location of this Horcrux. Mrs. Flamel didn't know much about these expeditions, as they had been highly secret. However, her husband supposedly had been on one of them, and from what he had told her, they hadn't found anything. Either the Horcrux didn't exist -- and Koschei was in fact truly dead -- or it had been so well protected that platoons of
powerful wizards hadn't been able to find it.

Mrs. Flamel's reaction had been a bit surprising when someone had asked her where Buyan was: it had looked like she wanted to say something, but it wouldn't come out. Eventually, she admitted that she had forgotten where exactly it was. All she could remember was that it was in Europe somewhere: perhaps in the Aegean, Black, or Caspian Seas. Perhaps it was further north, up where Azkaban was. For all they knew, it could be in the Aral Sea somewhere and was now part of the mainland thanks to over-irrigation. No one really knew for sure anymore as too much time had gone by.

Most of the characters in *King of the Warlocks* were, not surprisingly, wizards. There were a couple of ghosts as well, and their roles were being filled by a woman known as the Grey Lady and a man known as the Bloody Baron. There was a jester as well, and Stewart was surprised to hear that most of the times fools and jesters appeared in Shakespearean dramas they were supposed to be played by poltergeists like Peeves. From what he had seen of Peives, the man certainly made a very good jester. Granted, half of Peives's practical jokes got students into trouble. But isn't that what jesters were supposed to do?

The general story of Koschei was fairly well known in the Wizarding world, as it had been the last time prior to the fall of the Statute that Atlantis had gone to its highest level of alert, DEFCON 1. DEFCON 1 implied a greater than 10% chance of the destruction of human civilization, and a tremendous pandemic spreading throughout the known world would certainly qualify as a civilization-ending event. Supposedly a similar pandemic had actually made it all the way to Judgment Day back in the 1600's BC.

Stewart was filling the role of Pope Clement VI, who had been a true Muggle (Wizarding popes like John Paul II were few and far between). As Europe's leading spiritual leader, it had been up to him to try to prevent the Europe from panicking when the disease ravaged the countryside. The Pope hadn't been able to do much, however, especially when word leaked out that wizards themselves were falling ill. Even Atlantis bubbles hadn't been able to protect the wizards completely. Yes, the bubbles were airtight and would prevent any diseases from reaching their hosts. Unfortunately, the fact that they were airtight made it so that the hosts would suffocate unless they lowered the bubbles momentarily to bring in some fresh air...and allow rats and germs to begin nibbling at them.

Everyone had immediately began clamoring for Hermione to get involved as soon as word had leaked out that Hogsmeade was going to be putting on the play. Purists complained that only male actors would have been allowed, but it wasn't long before she was placed in the role of Olga Koscheiva. This inevitably resulted in Ron Weasley being offered the role of Fyodor, Olga's husband. Ron couldn't act to save his life, however, and eventually the role went to an actor from Hogsmeade. The role of the Russian prince, not surprisingly, went to King William. Mrs. Flamel complained that the prince in question had supposedly been his forties at the time and that William didn't fit the role all that well. Flitwick, of course, had chuckled at her and responded: "Do you serious think the Muggles will care? They're seeing a Shakespearean play they never knew existed. I think they'll be able to overlook a minor detail like this."

Judging from the throngs of Muggles making their way into Hogwarts, Flitwick had been correct. The show had long since sold out, and fans of Shakespeare had been auctioning off tickets for £250 and higher. Half of Nicholas Flamel's medieval literature department had shown up, probably because the Minister of Magic had pulled strings. Dr. Flamel himself had declined the invitation, saying that he'd already lived through the story and that he was too busy serving the country. Oh, and he'd already seen it.
Mrs. Flamel had been unanimously chosen to be the director thanks to her own experience with Koschei. This had proven to be a good choice. Although the ancient woman had never directed a play before in her life, she had seen enough plays over the years to know what should and should not be done. What's more, she had seen King of the Warlocks a few times herself. Most of the rehearsals had taken place in the Room of Requirement, much to the dismay of students who had been trying to hide things in there.

Right now, Mrs. Flamel was giving the cast members a final pep talk. Hermione looked nervous, but she always did. Stewart was convinced, however, that Hermione would do fine. If there was anyone who was good under pressure, it was she.

---

Kenny Wright, a fourth-year Gryffindor, nudged Harry Potter in the shoulder as they took their seats. All of the Houses were seated together in the Great Hall, as usual. What wasn't usual was that the tables had disappeared and that at least three thousand other people had managed to force their way into the hall. Although a few of them were wearing robes, the vast majority were wearing Muggle dress.

Wright pointed at the program. "Wow! Patrick Stewart! I actually get to see Patrick Stewart!"

Harry glanced at him. "You know Patrick Stewart? I've never heard of him before."

Ron turned to Kenny. "Let me guess. Picard, right?"

Kenny nodded. "Yup. I think he's the best Star Trek captain there is. My father disagrees, however, and we tend to fight about it a lot."

Harry looked at Ron, confused. "Star Trek? Remind me what Star Trek is again. I thought it had something to do with Luna's new eyes."

Ron explained. "Hermione told me all about it. It's a Muggle television show which takes place in the future where a spaceship is exploring the galaxy and encountering all sorts of aliens, astronomical oddities, and so forth. The man who plays Pope Clement played the captain of that spaceship on the show. Geordi LaForge, the character with the artificial eyes, was also on that ship."

Harry grunted. "He must be pretty good then, and he's got a lot of experience. I'm surprised he didn't get the job as the director."

Ron shook his head. "I suspect we'll be content with his role as an advisor. Mrs. Flamel lived through all this stuff, so it would have made sense for her to direct this. If all else fails, she had Stewart to turn to in case she needed some help. I -- whoa, what's this?"

Harry turned to him and saw he was pointing at the Ravenclaw section. Following his finger, he saw that Rolf Scamander was openly ogling Luna. What's more, Luna couldn't seem to figure out what she was supposed to do.

Harry spun and turned to Neville. "Neville, uh, I think --"

Neville took one look and his eyes narrowed. "I'm going to kill that Rolf. Luna's mine."

Harry glared at him. "Neville, he likes her because she can discover new species of animals with those new eyes of hers! He's a descendant of Newt Scamander, the bloke who wrote the textbook! If he's a naturalist, why wouldn't he be interested in learning what she can see?"
Neville's voice came out a growl. "Judging from what I'm seeing, he wants to go beyond ordinary lessons. I'm going to get even with him at some point."

Harry's response was overwhelmed by comments as virtually all of the Muggle-born students abruptly got up, waving their hands and/or pointing at Luna. Ron glanced at the stage and saw that a bald man in his fifties had come onstage.

Patrick Stewart.

Apparently he had come on to recite the prologue. He had to wait a few moments, however, because half of Ravenclaw, a good quarter of Slytherin, and most of the geeky Muggle-born were shouting "GEORDI!" and pointing. Neville looked like he wanted to kill someone; Luna looked like she was about to cry; and Rolf looked paralyzed, as if he didn't know what he had to do. Several Hogwarts staff members were already deducting points across the board.

Onstage, Patrick Stewart had been patiently waiting for the commotion to die down. Once it did sufficiently, he raised his hand. "Good evening, British wizards. My name is Patrick Stewart, and I'm a well-known Muggle actor. I see you've heard of Star Trek. However, I wasn't the person who played Geordi LaForge. I was Jean-Luc Picard. I --"

He froze as he noticed Luna with her artificial eyes. Thinking quickly, he smiled and said the first diplomatic thing that came to mind. "I see we have a fan here who could easily perform the LaForge role as well as LeVar Burton. I must say, I and the rest of the cast are flattered that Star Trek has already made it into this neck of the woods. I hope that my role as the Pope will ensure that the rest of Shakespeare's -- or I should Henry Wood's -- plays make it once again into Muggle society. It actually makes a lot of sense: the Picard role was for the Enterprise much like what the Pope's role is for the Church."

Lots of people cheered, and Stewart noticed that the teachers were taking advantage of the confusion to reprimand a few of the overzealous Trekkies. Oddly enough, the fan with the fake VISOR looked very upset. She was probably expecting an autograph, he thought. He made it a point to make sure she got one after the show was over.

It took a few more minutes for the commotion to die down. When it did, the man who played Jean-Luc Picard started the prologue which reintroduced the Wizarding plays back into Muggle society.

To be continued...

__________________

Update #472: Now We've Got Food AND Water
-------------
Tuesday, December 17, 1996
Atlantis
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 4/1.9%
-------------
NEXT UP: All Right, Who Forgot the Heat Shield?
-------------
The head of the Carthaginian Ministry of Magic hurried over to Dagher. Originally in Carthage, it had moved west after the destruction of Carthage and had changed locations several times over the
centuries. Now, if Dagher recalled correctly, it was hidden somewhere in Algiers and served both Algeria and Tunisia. "Grand Mugwump, we've got an interesting dilemma. I've spoken with some of my men in Algeria and we've come to the conclusion that Geminio and Engorgio should be taken off the Taboo list."

Dagher frowned. "We disallowed those three spells for a reason. We can't let anyone use magic to create nuclear weapons anymore."

"I agree, sir. That's why Compressio will stay interdicted. If you can't compress the fissile material to the critical density, the bomb isn't going to go off."

"True. However, what good is it going to do to keep Compressio interdicted? All the Taboo will do will be to tell us when someone casts the spell. If the only time it's problematic is when it's used in a nuclear device, there will be one big explosion to indicate that someone used Compressio. The point is, it's a useless deterrent all by itself."

The Algerian nodded. "In that case, release Geminio and keep Engorgio and Compressio Tabooed."

"And allow people to start cloning pre-existing Muggle nuclear weapons?"

"I'm not so sure that's going to be as much of an issue, sir. Remember the magic will fry Muggle circuits. And if we keep close tabs on whom we sell Ar-38 to we may be able to tell if that goes into the wrong hands. The point is, we need Geminio free, sir. This is serious."

Dagher scratched his head. "What's all this about allowing Geminio? What just happened?"

"Simple, sir. There are drought and famine in parts of my jurisdiction, and one wizard used Geminio to increase his food supply in what could have been a life and death situation. We realized that we had to allow this, sir. We brought him over to Algiers and he convinced us that mass Geminio of food should be able to at least let us through the famine."

Dagher stroked his beard. "Indeed. That has to be allowed, especially when lives are in danger. I take it there's no way to reproduce food that quickly using Muggle means?"

"No, sir."

Dagher started pacing the room. "This could be a major development, my friend. We've got Portkeys sending supplies all over the world now, and into space for that matter. A school in Colorado is trying to convince Mt. St. Helens to even start sending Portkey boxes underground to sample mantle and core material. Do you realize what it means if we use the Israeli desalination technique, food Geminio, and Portkeys in together?"

The Algerian's eyes widened. "Indeed, sir. All ocean water becomes potable, and we can send it all over the place via Portkey. And if we're able to Geminio food and send it around as well in a manner which can get it not just to wizards but to Muggles as well without worrying about the Statute of Secrecy..."

Dagher smiled. "Exactly. We've just solved world hunger AND world drought, provided that at least some sample of the food exists naturally. And I doubt we'll have to worry about running out of ocean water."

Both men paused as this sank in. Eventually, Dagher continued.
"Granted, we're going to have to do a lot of testing on the Geminioed food. Your friends in Algeria can be what Muggles call guinea pigs: if they can eat the food without getting sick from it or sick OF it, we're in business. Tell Michal Oved that I want to see her immediately. I want both the Israelis and you fellows testing out these new ideas. Michal Oved will send you some of the wizards associated with the desalination project, and you are to send the man who Geminioed the food over to Israel. In the meantime, I'm going to speak to the Taboo Department and instruct them to take Geminio off the list of proscribed spells."

The Algerian smiled. "I can't help but admit, sir, that this is amazing. Now the Muggles will be able to enjoy the same bounty that we wizards do, and we don't need to worry about giving away our secrets."

Dagher nodded. "Indeed. Inform your staff and the Israelis that they may be in the running for a Millennium Prize. Tell them that they should donate at least 10% of the prize money into Lowne Paolte's angel fund so it can be reused to work on the remaining problems. And pray to Allah that Dark wizards won't be able to construct a full nuclear arsenal solely out of Engorgio and Compressio."

The Algerian ran off. Dagher had about two minutes to work on the crises in Italy, Syrdan, and Eastern Europe before a man ran into his office with an excited look on his face. The man was wearing a robe indicating that he was from the Head Astrologer's department.

Dagher turned to him with a smile on his face. "Good afternoon, Paul. What's gotten you so excited?"

Paul grinned. "Something you were probably responsible for, no doubt. Would you believe that the latest numbers on the Apocolypseometer have dropped to 1.9%? It was 2.7% yesterday! We've gone to DEFCON 4! What happened?"

Dagher explained. "We've just figured out how to solve not only world drought but world hunger as well. We are on the verge of solving another of the Millennium Problems, Paul. To top that off, defense is starting to get the upper hand in the arms race with offense thanks to our magical shields."

The astrologer whistled. "That's amazing! Congratulations!"

"Thank you. What are the major focal points now? Maybe this will clear things up a bit and remove a bit of the noise."

"Well, there's a small concentration of negative energy in Italy and another one in Syrdan, as you would expect. However, there is a full-blown vortex developing in Eastern Europe, focused near the Romanian coast of the Black Sea."

"A vortex?"

"Yes. It's on the same order of magnitude as the one Voldemort had triggered in North Korea. To be honest, I'm amazed we're at DEFCON 4. I sense major storm clouds on the horizon, and had a vision of a huge tornado miles across."

Dagher frowned. "It's troubling, but I wouldn't worry about it right now. If it were truly a problem, we'd probably still be at DEFCON 3 or higher. Is Rasputin involved with this?"
"I believe so, sir. His name is coming up a lot in the discussions."

"Where is he?"

The astrologer shrugged. "We don't know. We're looking around in Eastern Europe and are being assisted by the Chinese and Korean Ministries of Magic. So far, nothing. However, it's possible that he's gotten involved with Mab."

"Mab? The insane witch from the medieval era who's been possessing people for hundreds of years?"

"Yes, sir. I don't want Mab involved here, because I see her as a major wild card. For all we know, Rasputin is going to try to pick her up, and that will knock some sense into her. You know Rasputin -- he'd pick up my hippogriff if it were wearing a skirt."

Dagher snorted. "I've got a major file on Mab. Trust me, she can't figure out who she is half the time. If Rasputin is smart, he'll stay away from her because she could leak information to anyone."

"I totally agree, sir. What about the two spies who received Muggle tracking information? Are either of them in the area?"

Dagher shook his head. "The woman is in Syrdan, and the man is in England."

The astrologer froze. "You're seeing Rasputin getting involved in the fight between Syrdan and Nestor? That could expand things in a hurry."

Dagher winced. "I don't know. You're the astrologer, Paul. Figure it out and get back to me as soon as you can. Are either of the recent prophecies in play?"

The astrologer hesitated, then nodded. "I believe so, sir. The one about the Romanovs -- the Dawn Ash Prophecy -- still appears to have to a few years to go before its denouement. However, my men are picking up signs that the Mercury and the Bear Prophecy may be on the verge of being fulfilled."

Dagher nodded. "That could be good to know. How does it go again, and who uttered it?"

"Sybill Trelawney, sir. 'When Mercury is seen in conjunction with the Great Bear, the victor shall be the vanquished and the vanquished shall be the victor.'" [P.S. That was update 356 or 357]

Dagher grunted. "Trelawney is responsible for the Harry Potter prophecy, is she not?"

"Yes, sir. And we know that one came true."

"Indeed. Do you have any idea who or what Mercury and the Great Bear refer to?"

The astrologer looked at him noncommittally. "We're not sure. We know the Great Bear is often associated with Russia, and the fact that this problem is in Eastern Europe is an interesting coincidence."

"Russia has a space program, does it not? Would it involve a Russian mission to Mercury?"

"I doubt it. There have been no Venusian, Martian, or Hermian missions launched from that area. I -- GOOD GOD!"
Dagher cocked his head. "What?"

The astrologer jerked back in amazement as something occurred to him. "I know a little Greek, as you would have expected for someone who studied the oracles at Delphi. As you know, Hermes is the Greek form of the Roman god Mercury."

Dagher nodded. "Yes, I'm aware of that."

"Well, it turns out that there is a feminine form to the name Hermes."

Dagher looked at him in surprise. "There is? What is it?"

"Hermione."

To be continued...

Update #473: All Right, Who Forgot the Heat Shield?

------------

Thursday, December 19, 1996
Mir Space Station
Low Earth Orbit
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/2.1%

------------

Richard Branson had two weeks preparing for this moment. Now that it was upon him, he couldn't wait to become the world's first space tourist.

Getting him up there wouldn't be difficult, as Linda Warren had demonstrated with that Nike so long ago. The question was whether he would be able to adapt to zero gravity. Nothing the wizards could do -- at least that he knew of -- could simulate gravity, and they wouldn't be able to do much to reverse loss of bone mass until they got back to the ground. Yes, the wizards did have something called Skele-Gro. However, they didn't have much experience using Skele-Gro on Muggles.

They'd sent him on the Vomit Comet a few times. True to form, he had vomited -- but only once. He personally felt the long periods of accelerating upwards at 2G or whatever it was more disconcerting than the periods of zero G.

He had gone through a quick briefing on the Soyuz escape module. If the cabin depressurized due to an electrical failure or meteoroid impact, everyone was going to have to leave in a hurry by Soyuz. Sending everyone back by Portkey would be difficult as it would take multiple trips to send everyone back (the mate of the now-famous Nike would only take one person at a time), and if the environment became hostile before everyone escaped it was the Soyuz or bust. He really didn't want to land in this thing -- it was so cramped! How did Apollo and Soyuz era astronauts survive days cooped up in this in the 60's and 70's?

The Mir mission commander had initially been adamantly against any people Portkeying to the station. Granted, the people would likely behave better than the shoe did. However, the people
would likely require much more magical energy to transport due to their higher mass. The shoe had apparently not shorted anything out...but would the people? An electrical failure on Mir would likely knock out both the life-support systems and the Soyuz as well, leaving the crew in big trouble. It had only been after several attempts to Portkey humans into Mir mockups which had convinced him that everything was safe. However, just as a precaution he and the crew would hunker down in the Soyuz at the time Branson came over.

Television cameras flashed as Linda Warren walked into the room with an old phone handset in her hand. Laying it on a table, she pointed her wand at the receiver and shouted "Portus". The handset flickered blue for a moment and drummed on the table for a moment before falling silent. She then helped Branson into a spacesuit. Although the wizards were confident everything would be safe, it didn't hurt to make sure nothing would go wrong on this inaugural mission.

He had originally wanted to do an EVA while he was up here. Astronauts did EVA's on Mir all the time, and they already had extra spacesuits up there. The problem was that he hadn't trained for the sight of having absolutely NOTHING underneath his feet. People often got extreme vertigo the first time they went EVA, and throwing up in a spacesuit would be bad even if you were a wizard.

His second option -- Portkeying up into empty space with a suit on, falling back towards Earth, and being whisked away before hitting the atmosphere -- was also not going to work. If there was nothing underneath his feet, he would likely continue to travel at the speed he would have been launched from on the Earth's surface -- Earth's rotational velocity. This would not have been enough to maintain orbit, so he would have started falling down. Unfortunately, he couldn't go anywhere without a marker to serve as a Portkey destination, which meant he would arrive just OUTSIDE the space station. This proved problematic as landing outside a space station while traveling at a different speed from it tends to cause said space station to crash into you at high speed. Turbulence in the upper atmosphere could have also finished him off before he had the guts to pull the trigger on the return journey. And without a heat shield even a temperature increase of 50 Fahrenheit inside the suit would likely endanger his health.

He reminded himself he should be thankful to able to spend a couple of days on the station as is. Waving one last time to the crowd, he reached over to the old handset and grasped it in the suit's stiff grip. He held on tight as the ground zoomed away beneath him, and fought a brief bout of vertigo as the sky turned black and he found himself hovering over miles and miles of emptiness. He starting to have second thoughts about all this when he finally materialized in the middle of a decent-sized module. The bizarre alternate world of the Portkey disappeared around him and he gasped for a minute in surprise when he realized gravity wasn't coming back.

He was on Mir, all right. And much to his relief, the lights were still on. He couldn't tell if the fans and so forth were still running -- the spacesuit was soundproof -- but everything looked to be OK. There was a brief delay as the Russian space agency told the cosmonauts everything was all right, and after a few minutes a bunch of men floated into the chamber. All of them were wearing Russian uniforms.

The man in the front looked like he had swallowed a sour apple. However, the expression on his face softened quickly. "Welcome to Mir, Mr. Branson. I'm in charge of this facility, and I give the orders. When I tell you to do something, you do it without hesitation. Magic or no magic, there are only a few centimeters of material separating us from hard vacuum, and I don't want you to endanger the rest of us for your...jaunt. Understood?"

Branson nodded and handed over a suitcase. "I do, Commander. In exchange, I give you a bottle of Skele-Gro to deal with any problems with your bones you have suffered due to the low gravity."
The commander took the bottle and gestured with his other hand. "Thank you. Now come with me. And congratulations on being the world's first...space tourist."

---------------------
Sanders Household
---------------------

Melissa Sanders squealed in delight. "It's great! She'll love it!"

Her husband looked at the magical teddy bear warily. "Melissa, Hermione is only a couple of months old. I doubt she can even see it. We can't give it to her yet. Besides, won't she be intimidated by something about three times as big as she is?"

David Stern frowned. "If you want, I can exchange it for something smaller. Perhaps you would prefer one the smaller animals I had for my nephew?"

Sanders shook his head. "Don't worry about it -- this will work out fine. We've already got several introductory toys for her, after all. We'll give the bear to her in a few months."

Not surprisingly, the bear promptly spoke up. Whimpering softly, it said: "You don't want me?"

Stern laughed quietly to himself, but Sanders actually felt sorry for the animal. "Don't worry, bear. We'll give you a nice home. However, our daughter is still a bit young for you."

The bear shook its head. "I'm good for kids ages 6 months and up. Is your child six months old? I can also shrink to a more manageable size you can stick me in a closet or pocket."

Sanders's eyes narrowed, and Stern grew embarrassed. Softly, Stern muttered "oops" as Sanders began to explain. "She's actually two months old right now. Will it be all right for us to put you in a closet for the time being? We'll introduce you to her four months or so from now, when she outgrows her current toys and needs a new one."

The bear seemed to cheer up. "That would be nice! I'm sure she'll be happy. I'll sing songs to her, make funny noises for her, and so forth. With four months to prepare, I'll have some really good ones!"

Melissa looked at the bear hopefully. "I don't suppose you'll be able to feed Hermione and change her diapers as well?"

"I'm sorry, I can't do that. However, I CAN turn different colors. Watch this!"

Sanders rolled his eyes as he picked up the bear -- which had abruptly turned a hideous shade of purple -- and put it in a closet along with no fewer than ten other Slinky Snakes, Bubble Rattles, and other toys both magical and mundane. The bear waved goodbye as Sanders shut the door. Amazingly, it didn't start complaining it was scared of the dark as soon as the door was closed.

Stern looked at Sanders apologetically. "Izzy, it's not my fault. The guy from Mt. St. Helens said that people use this toy for Wizarding children as young as 2 months. They told me to disregard the label."

Sanders sighed. "We don't have wizards in this house most of the time. If something goes wrong because the toy was inappropriate, we're not going to be able to fix it immediately. I'm sorry, Dave, but I think the toy will have to wait."
West Bank

The phone rang in Avigdor's office, and he picked it up. "Hello?"

Shimon sounded frantic on the other end. "Avigdor, look out! The Nephilim have just come after us! They're evicting us unless we're willing to share our community with Palestinians!"

Avigdor bit his lip. "Shit. Can't you do something about it?"

"Do something? How about running? They've got a least one wizard, and they're all twice as tall as we are!"

"You're supposed to be a soldier in the army of God, Shimon. Soldiers don't chicken out!"

"Against humans, yes. But against these guys? That's cheat --"

The phone suddenly went dead. Avigdor groaned, hung up, and turned to the rest of the people in his group.

"All right, fellows. The Nephilim are onto us. Be very careful from now on in. Oh...and arm yourselves. I'll ask for backup. We can't let these terrorists and heathens take possession of our land."

To be continued...

Update #473.5

Thursday, December 19, 1996
Copenhagen city.
Denmark.

It was five months already. Five months since Andrei ran from that cursed island.

He experienced great pains during his travel from Tragura to Denmark.

Thankfully, a group of Merpeople helped him survive.

When they realized that he is a vampire and that Tragura is not so far away, they realized that he escaped.

Fearing that they will call the wizards to kill him, he was surprised to see that they congratulated him.

One of them explained that for many years, Merpeople have been against the things that are going on on that island. They then helped Drakovski get to Denmark so he can find other vampires and contact the Danish Ministry of Magic.

However, his plans failed. Just as he predicted, the Wizards on the island realized that he faked his death and began searching for him.
When they found out that he is not on Tragura and that the Death Barrier is deactivated, a full-scale alarm was raised and everybody was searching for him.

They managed to get to the Danish Ministry before him and lied to Minister Djorn Kiersted that Andrei is a wanted Vampire-Criminal. This of course erased any possibility for him to speak to Kiersted.

Andrei was forced to live in the sewers with some homeless muggles. He didn't mind that, as he got plenty of blood thanks to that.

At first he wasn't so eager to kill them, they were innocent people after all. But he had to survive somehow and wizards in the area would surely get him if cows and other animals started dying.

After about two months, he encountered another Vampire, named Peter Fieldman. He was British.

He approached him and explained the situation. Peter of course didn't know about Tragura's existence, but was more than happy to hear that Andrei escaped. Freedom was a beautiful thing after all.

Drakovski and Fieldman then became close friends and moved to a hotel.

Today they were supposed to meet a friend of Peter's who supposedly had enough power to free the vampires.

When he finally arrived, Andrei immediately sensed that something wasn't right about the man. He seemed suspicious, but the vamprie kept this to himself.

"Welcome. My name is Boris Gawrilenko. I work for a very powerful and wise man. We are currently recruiting for potential allies. Here's the deal: we help to free your vampire friends and when the time comes, you help us fight our enemies."

Drakovski considered the option. Vampires were no pushovers, so certainly a fight wouldn't be that hard. And his people would be free! That's a good option.

"Okay. I agree. Can I know how your master is named?"

Boris grinned and looked at the sky for a moment.

"Well, let's just call him Mr. Grigori for now."

To be continued...

__________________

Update #474: Half-Anniversary
------------
Friday, December 20, 1996
Hermione Granger always thought that she was eloquent and had a strong vocabulary. More often than not, she was not at a loss for words. However, this was a speech that she was going to have to work on a great deal. She had only found out about it two days earlier, and she had been absolutely swamped that day with J. K. Rowling visits, cleaning up the *King of the Wizards* set, and mid-terms.

Your mission, should you choose to accept it: write a dignified speech for the six-month anniversary of the Judgment Day attack and be prepared to present it to the people of Britain within 48 hours. Oh, and keep in mind that millions, perhaps billions, of people will be watching you as quite arguably the most famous witch in Britain.

The company that ran the Hogwarts Express had chartered a special train so that everyone from Hogsmeade could make it to the ceremony, which was going to start at 1:08 PM on the dot -- the time the initial nuclear weapons had gone off in the Ministry of Magic. All of the students had been told to dress in the most formal robes they had. There were a couple of exceptions, though. Hermione was to wear formal (and modest) Muggle clothing because she was going to be speaking. And there was also King William, who would be wearing clothing appropriate for his rank. The king wouldn't be speaking, however, as a representative of the Regency Committee would be doing it in his place.

There had been a brief meeting in the Great Hall before the students and staff had headed off to the train station. There, Professors Flitwick and Moody had read off, one by one, the list of students who had died in the Judgment Day attack. The reading had brought back a lot of memories: Colin Creevey, the owner of a well-known Muggle camera; Justin Finch-Fletchley, the boy who would have been attacked by a snake had Harry not discovered his Parselmouth ability. A large number of them had been Muggle-borns who had been living in and around London with the rest of the Muggle families.

The list had then gone on to include students who had lost relatives in the attack -- that list was also long and included several students who were now orphans. It also mentioned the staff members who had been killed in the events leading up to Judgment Day: Minerva McGonagall and Dolores Umbridge. Such was the solemnity of the occasion that not a single student laughed or cheered at the mention of Umbridge's death. Finally, Flitwick had mentioned the people who had been injured or killed in the two attacks on Hogsmeade: Severus Snape, Albus Dumbledore, and so forth. Ironically, it had been the attacks after Judgment Day which had done more harm to Hogwarts than the Judgment Day nuke itself.

Ron's face had whitened when Flitwick mentioned the name Fred Weasley. It wasn't much of a consolation, but Hermione reminded him that had it not been for the fact that the Weasleys had been on bereavement leave at the time Judgment Day had taken place, Ron would have likely lost his father as well as another brother. Percy and Arthur Weasley had been working in the Ministry, after all.

As the students marched into place in the park which now lined Lake Scrimgeour, Ron turned to Hermione. "I hope this speech goes well, Hermione. I -- whoa, look at Malfoy!"

Ron pointed, and Hermione saw that Malfoy was staring in horror at the ruins which were still
standing. Without Crabbe and Goyle around to bolster his ego, the former school bully collapsed and fell to his knees. Pansy Parkinson hurried over to his side, and Ron heard Malfoy sobbing in a trembling voice: "The horror...annihilation...mercy killing...Pansy, hold me!"

Harry, who had been walking behind Ron and Hermione, nodded. "I was told Draco was brought to this area shortly after the bomb had gone off and saw the ruins before they were submerged. Apparently what he saw jolted him enough that he renounced his Death Eater allegiance. I don't LIKE him all that much, but I can tell he's not as nasty as he once was."

Ron nodded. "If there is anything good that came out of that attack, it was Draco's reformation."

Hermione glared at him. "I don't think that's appropriate, Ron. One person's change of heart is not worth the death and traumatization of millions of people. Particularly now."

Ron nodded in understanding as a large group of wizards escorted Nicholas Flamel -- in his formal robes as Minister of Magic -- over to the Hogwarts delegation. Accompanying the wizards was a large group of Beefeaters. People melted out of his way as he approached the Gryffindors.

Flamel put his hand on Hermione's shoulder. "Are you ready, Hermione?"

Hermione nodded. "It's not perfect, but I think it will do. Hopefully the other speakers will take up my slack."

"Probably. Where's William?"

Hermione pointed, and it was easy to make out King William due to his unusual garb. Flamel nodded, and the royal guards came and began escorting him to a hastily prepared box on the shore where he would be watching the ceremony with the Regency Committee. Hermione saw, much to his surprise, that the Wizarding Queen -- Laura Spencer -- was also in the royal box along with an Auror in what appeared to be ceremonial garb. Seated next to Princess Diana, Hermione suddenly noticed how much the two women looked like each other. Granted, Diana was significantly older. However, it was fairly obvious they were related.

There were people all around the perimeter of the lake. Ideally, the people invited to speak would have done so from the center of the lake, right at ground zero. However, there was no real way to get the Muggles out there, there was still a risk of residual radiation, and it was still considered disrespectful for anyone to actually enter the water. In lieu of a floating platform, a large podium had been hastily constructed by the wizards facing away from the lake, so that the lake would be in the background. Many of the speakers were already there: Prince Andrew, ex-Grand Mugwump Dialonis, Michael Heseltine, and so forth. There were two empty chairs reserved for the Minister of Magic and Hermione.

Crowds moved out of the way as the Beefeaters and Aurors cleared a path to the podium. Hermione was the first to speak, and cameras flashed in her face as she mounted the podium.

- - - - - - -

"For thousands of years, wizards and Muggles lived, worked, and played together. Wizards were responsible for helping the human race through many of the difficult periods in history, and were it not for the close cooperation between our two groups it is quite possible that the human race could have perished. Most of the interaction between wizards and Muggles has been done in a spirit of cooperation knowing that it takes both magic and muscle to create a flourishing society. As Charles Darwin would have said, why would hominids have evolved Wizarding genes unless they benefited the species in some way?
"This union would not last, however. A little over three hundred years ago, influential members of Muggle society fostered distrust between wizards and Muggles and began to persecute wizards. This caused the wizards to go into hiding, and the Industrial Revolution took place as the Muggles found themselves turning to technology to replace the skills which had been lost via magic. Several generations of people grew up not knowing that magic was even possible. Yes, stories about witches and wizards existed. However, with no evidence to support them, they soon were passed off as myths or legends.

"It took a sheer accident to pierce the wizards' veil of secrecy and bring them back to the attention of the Muggles. In August 1995, a young British wizard was caught on film when a Muggle soft drink company was preparing a television commercial for the Super Bowl, the championship match for American football. The wizards tried to prevent the information from spreading into the Muggle world, but to no avail. The footage with the wizard was shown during the Super Bowl, and it soon made it onto the Internet at the end of January 1996. Once it reached the Internet, the information spread worldwide and the wizards admitted that they could no longer contain it.

"After a brief period of time when the two communities were feeling each other out, the wizards went right back to helping the Muggles improve their world. This time, however, information went two ways: Muggles introduced wizards to the wonders of modern technology, and wizards showed the Muggles what magic could do. The combination of technology and magic has ushered in a brand-new era of discovery when problems which had been deemed intractable to one of the two groups suddenly were found to have easy solutions if one looked at the problem another way.

"Magic has made childbirth significantly simpler, and safer, for both mother and baby. It is now possible to travel from place to place in a snap, reducing the stress on the environment and fossil fuel use. Just recently we sent the first tourist into space as we finally begin to send human beings into space on a regular basis. We have explored planets we have never been to before, and we have discovered evidence of past life on Mars. New landmasses have been discovered in the Pacific Ocean, and Jonathan Swift has been vindicated in his geography lessons. World hunger and world drought have been solved, two problems which have been synonymous with impossibility in the Muggle world. We have discovered several new hominid species and have found that they are, for the most part, all versions of Homo sapiens. What's more, these species are all intelligent and civilized. My boyfriend's future sister-in-law is, in fact, a veela, an attractive woman who looks to most people like a normal person but is in reality a member of Homo sapiens nestora. Very likely these veela have been walking among you without anyone realizing they weren't stock Homo sapiens. Some of you may even be veela and not know it.

"The wizards have benefited from Muggle technology as well. It was widely believed that lycanthropy, the disease which turned people into werewolves, had no cure other than a risky potion which needed to be taken once a month. Thanks to science, however, not only do we have a Wolfsbane Pill in the works but there has been work on a lycanthropy vaccine. Geneticists have discovered the genes responsible for magic use and have shocked the Wizarding world that it is possible to be a "half-wizard"...and the half-wizards are two hundred times as common as full wizards. Thanks to this discovery, we may be on the verge of a revolution where the number of people eligible to be wizards has been increased by a factor of 100. Magical devices for storing data and information, such as Pensieves, can now be supplement by computers. What is easier to misplace, one sheet in a package of 50 unbound pieces of parchment or an entire personal computer where one can call up anything one wants on a moment's notice?

"Unfortunately, just as there are criminals in the Muggle world, there are also bad apples in the Wizarding world. Lord Voldemort, also known as Tom Marvolo Riddle, was about as bad as they
A firm believer that wizards were superior to Muggles, he was also a believer in eugenics and thought that 'inferior' individuals such as a Muggle-born wizards and Muggles should be eradicated or controlled. If that sounds a lot like what Hitler did to the Jews and other minorities during the Second World War, it should. In one very real sense, Voldemort and the Death Eaters were to the Wizarding world what Hitler and the Gestapo were to Europe.

"On May 21st, about a month before Judgment Day, Voldemort came to power in a coup in North Korea. With the power of a nation at his beck and call, he began to plot his takeover of the world in the name of eugenics and 'blood status', as he would call it. He was eventually overthrown on June 20th, at 1:08 AM London time. However, he had planned a nasty surprise for the world, and his death curse detonated a nuclear bomb in the British Ministry of Magic, right beneath our feet, twelve hours later.

"Once again, the world was threatened with the destruction of civilization, and once again the wizards responded. For the first time in over 3500 years, Atlantis executed the Judgment Day protocol and destroyed the rest of Voldemort's forces, including several terrorist groups he armed with nuclear weapons. Atlantis did precisely what it was supposed to do: stay out of the way for the most part and let the world do its thing without interference. However, when the security of the human race as a whole was threatened, in this case due to nuclear war, it had to intervene. And intervene it did. Had it not been for the gallant work of Grand Mugwump Dialonis, we would likely not be here listening to this speech.

"The message I would like to leave you with is this. There is a long history of cooperation between Muggles and wizards. Yes, there will be times when wizards will try to have their way with Muggles. When that happens, disasters can happen, like the one which happened here. However, one must realize that those are the exceptions rather than the norm. Just as most Muggles are not like Hitler, most wizards are not like Voldemort. We are here to help the Muggle world, just as we always have. Do not let the misguided actions of one lunatic poison a relationship which is beneficial to both parties."

To be continued...

Update #475: Maybe I Can Introduce the Crumple-Horned Snorkack
-------------
Friday, December 20, 1996
Shores of Lake Scrimgeour
London, UK
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/2.1%
-------------
NEXT UP: I Know, Old People Like To Sleep
-------------
Luna Lovegood was bored. Hermione’s speech had been interesting, but the other speakers hadn’t really turned her on all that much. To make matters worse, it was snowing out and they were going to be out here until at least 4:30, the moment the anti-magic EMPs had drained away after the Judgment Day declaration. She knew, of course, that she had to stay put, especially as a member of Ravenclaw. A large number of the Ravenclaw sixth-years had been trapped on top of the Astronomy Tower when that animated snake had attacked Hogwarts, and most of those people had lost their lives. She had to admit that had Professor Sinistra scheduled the Astronomy classes any other way, it would have been Luna herself who would have been trapped on top of the tower.
That wasn't to say that Luna had gotten away scot free. The second attack, the Britain for Humans one, had ruined her eyes and forced her to wear Moody-style artificial eyes. Considering the alternative, she didn't mind the artificial eyes. However, the fact that she had to wear -- at least for the time being -- that bizarre headband over her eyes had made her the butt of Geordi LaForge jokes. Merlin's beard, even the Muggle actor who had played the Pope had compared her to LaForge! Although the actor had explained that LaForge had done amazing things on the show and had saved the characters time and time again, that knowledge didn't do much good when it came to preventing other students from taunting her.

She got up momentarily -- earning her a frown from her Head of House -- and moved her chair closer to the edge of the lake. If she was going to stay here for an extended period of time, she would at least give the naturalist within her free rein and look at the fish. Not surprisingly, Rolf Scamander followed her over to the lakeshore. Luna didn't really know what to do about Rolf. She wasn't exactly crazy about him, and she didn't need a boyfriend as she was already dating Neville Longbottom. However, it was obvious that he was crazy about HER -- and it wasn't entirely because she was a naturalist. She had tried to convince him several times that she wasn't available, but of course Rolf wouldn't take no for an answer. Damn fifth years!

She had to admit, though, that Rolf's desire to learn more about wildlife through Luna was a valid reason for him to sit next to her. Grunting silently to herself, she made room for him next to the lake and started looking into the lake so she could focus on something more interesting than long-winded British diplomats.

She watched as a few fish swam lazily around near the edge of the lake. Most of the floating litter which had been lying in the drowned towns had been cleaned up and washed downstream, and the water was relatively clear. She saw a few fish here and there, though most of them were small and familiar. There wasn't enough radiation at this point anymore to really endanger anything which stayed there for short periods of time.

Her eyes widened as a bizarre purple sea snake about a couple of feet long undulated its way downstream. She had never seen anything like that before, and come to think of she could remember seeing anything that color before. Hoping that it wasn't her new eyes messing around with colors, she tapped Rolf on the shoulder and winced internally as he stared hopefully at her.

She shook her head and pointed at the snake. "Rolf, what kind of snake is that?"

Rolf's gaze followed her finger. "What kind of snake is what?"

"That. The purple one."

"Huh! I don't see any snake. Is this another of your Crumple-Horned Snorkacks or a real invisible creature you're picking up with your new eyes?"

"It's there all right. Look, it's coming in our direction now. And yes, the Crumple-Horned Snorkack exists."

Rolf shook his head. "I -- wait a minute. I do see ripples on the surface which could be made by a swimming eel or fish, yet I don't see the fish. I don't know if the snow is in the way, though."

"It's not -- I can see it quite clearly. It's a brilliant purple, a shade I didn't realize was possible before I got these new eyes. I suspect it's an ultraviolet-only species."
Rolf's excitement began to grow. "I think you're right. This could very well be creature invisible to normal sight. There's only one way to find out. We need someone with one normal eye and one...artificial eye. If it can only be seen with one eye..."

Rolf and Luna looked at each other, nodded, and started scanning the crowd for Moody. Moody was around, of course, but he was sitting with the rest of the teachers and paying attention to the speakers. A lot of good that was going to do, she thought. She wasn't going to get a chance to complete this discovery.

Unless...Luna looked down the row of Ravenclaw students until she saw a seventh-year. Discreetly telling the students in between to get her attention, she mouthed: "Robin! You're seventeen, right?"

The seventh-year looked at her in bewilderment. "Yes. Why?"

Luna pointed at the ripples in the lake above the mysterious snake, now maybe twenty feet from the edge. "You can cast spells outside of school. There's an unusual sea snake in the water where those ripples are. I need you to cast a spell to make sure it doesn't go away."

The seventh-year turned to the lake and blinked. "I don't see --"

Luna caught a glimpse of her Head of House out of the corner of her eye and realized she had to hurry. "I know, you can't see it. However, I can. We need to catch it so we can study it."

Robin looked at Luna irritably. "Luna, this isn't the time to be catching fish. In case you're wondering, I lost my boyfriend in the attack on --"

An adult's voice cut Robin off. "WHAT ARE YOU DOING? Ten points from Ravenclaw!"

Rolf gulped as Luna spun to see her Head of House staring her in the face. With Flitwick forced into the headmaster's office by virtue of his seniority and the deaths or incapacitation of most of the staff members present during the Super Bowl Breach, a man from Hogsmeade -- a Ravenclaw alumnus -- had taken over duties of Head of House.

Luna tried to explain. "Sir, I have a very good explanation for this. You're aware that I'm able to see things with my new eyes which were invisible to human beings before?"

"Yes, I'm aware of that. However, excitement over your new eyes does not allow you to besmirch the reputation of Hogwarts at a time like this! Particularly given how many of our housemates were killed during the snake attack!"

Luna shook her head. "This is important, sir. You see, I believe I've discovered a brand new species of snake. We believe it's visible only in the ultraviolet, and I can see ultraviolet with these eyes. Now that you're here, you can cast a spell which can keep it near the edge of the lake until the end of the ceremony, at which point we can capture it and study it". The Head of House looked at her warily as Rolf added: "I think she's right, sir. I can see ripples in the lake but no animal making them."

The Head of House looked as if he were going to explode. "That's the wind, Mr. Scamander. It's not an animal. We see that all the time."

"It's not, sir. For all we know, those wind ripples could be due to these snakes half the time and we'd have never known unless we'd been able to see ultraviolet. I'll swear under Veritaserum."
The Head of House raised an eyebrow and grinned slightly. "Will you also swear that Moody will be able to see it as well? For some reason, the Muggle story of the boy who cried wolf comes to mind."

"Absolutely, sir."

The Head of House hesitated. Luna could understand what he was thinking: this could be a once in a lifetime discovery, particularly if she was the only person who could study it...a discovery which could conceivably earn Ravenclaw more points. Ravenclaw had a lot of ground to catch up, especially now that Slytherin had padded its lead with Draco Malfoy's jet-powered broom. Eventually, he grunted and brought out his wand. "All right, I'll humor you, at least so you can shut up and treat this ceremony with dignity and respect. Where is the beast?"

Luna looked over the lake. The snow was getting heavier, and she was having trouble seeing. Eventually, though..."There! It's about thirty feet away from the shoreline now. You can't see it, so follow my finger."

Judging distances with a critical eye, the Head of House brought out his wand and waved it irritably. The surface of the water shimmered for a moment, and a barely visible bubble about twenty feet in diameter suddenly cut off part of the surface of the water. The snow slowly started to accumulate on top of it, and the Head of House quickly heated the surface of the bubble so that the snow would melt and not distract from the proceedings.

The Head of House pointed. "There. Is that good enough?"

Luna glanced at the bubble and saw that the snake was indeed trapped. She watched as it bashed into the bubble, reared up (oddly enough, there were little yellowish polka dots on its underside, which presumably were there to mimic flashes of sunlight), and tried to figure out what was going on. "It is. Thank you for your assistance, sir. I assure you, this discovery will earn our house points and not distract from the ceremony."

The Head of House walked away. "It had better, Miss Lovegood. It had better. If it doesn't, this house is going to be losing ten more points and I'm going to be very cross with you."

Rolf and Luna looked at each other and smiled. Rolf, naturally, took this as a come-on, and she firmly shook her head once again and changed the subject. "All right, Rolf. We've got ourselves a new snake. When we're done with this meeting, we'll hand it over to Moody and Grubbly-Plank and see what they make of it. I think we've earned ourselves at least thirty points for this. Agreed?"

Rolf nodded. "Agreed. Now let's get back to the ceremony before we get ourselves into even more trouble."

With that, the two students turned to face the speakers and distracted themselves by thinking about the new snake (and occasionally glancing at it). Without even thinking, two words came to Luna:

"Serpens lovegoodii".

Unfortunately, at the same time they came to her, Rolf distracted her with two of his own:

"Serpens scamanderii".

To be continued...
Update #476: I Know, Old People Like To Sleep

Friday, December 21, 1996
de Lourdes Residence
Hogsmeade
United Kingdom
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/2.4%

Hugh de Lourdes looked at the Pensieve and frowned. The normally clear liquid was starting to
glow faintly, a sign that it couldn't hold much more information. Most modern Pensieves boasted that
they could hold 600 man-years of information, far more than any family needed. However, Hugh
wasn't an ordinary man. He had already lived for over 600 years, and if he ever chose to reconstruct
the Philosopher's Stone from the memories stored in the Pensieve he'd have to find one which stored
memories for even longer.

The first Pensieve he'd used, back in the fourteenth century, had been only able to store 100 years'
worth of information. That had naturally run out by the middle of the fifteenth century, at which
point he had been forced buy a second Pensieve and start filling IT up. He thought back to his little
house back in the 1700's which had been chock-full of Pensieves. Eventually, Pensieve technology
had improved to the point where he would be able to get away with one Pensieve...but for how
much longer? Should have try to bring out one of the old fourteenth-century Pensieves out of storage
and fill that up? He had no idea how well it worked after all these years.

He eventually decided that he would stop putting memories in the Pensieve once it filled up. He
figured that he only had maybe forty more years of life left, which was probably about the amount of
memory space the Pensieve had left. If he ever decided to reconstruct the Stone out of the memories
in the Pensives, he'd buy another to keep the memories going.

He had placed an enchantment on the Pensieve which would allow only him to access the Stone. If
someone else stuck his head in the bowl with thoughts about the Elixir of Life in his mind, he'd just
draw a blank. Hugh hadn't been kidding when he had told Sofia Dippet that no one would be able to
access those memories. Hell, the Pensieve itself was in a closet with a locked secret door!

He tapped his head with his wand and extracted a stream of memory from yesterday's Judgment Day
commemoration. It had gone more or less as planned. His master had given a speech and had gone
briefly into the chaos which had accompanied the last time Atlantis had gone to DEFCON 1 prior to
this year. Most people knew the story, of course, and now the Muggles did as well thanks to the play
the Hogwarts students had put on. He explained that in one sense Atlantis had been at a greater risk
of losing its own wizards during the Koschei crisis than during Judgment Day because there had not
been any anti-magic EMP's protecting the wizards at the time the Black Death was going on. That,
and the fact that even wizards weren't 100% sure what caused disease to spread in those days.
He had been stunned to hear that Hermione had actually written her own speech. She was becoming extremely popular, though Hugh, and it was only a matter of time until she became Minister of Magic. You couldn't pick a better Minister in the post-Statute era, especially since she came from a Muggle background!

He had just finished storing his memories and putting away the Pensieve when he heard a knock on his door. He looked at the door and frowned: he hadn't been expecting guests. What was this? Cautiously, he walked to the door and said: "Hello?"

A man's voice answered. "Mr. de Lourdes, I'm George Galway, and I'm a senior at Cambridge. I'm doing some research on senior citizens my thesis and I was wondering if I could interview you."

Hugh looked at the door in surprise. "You're a Muggle, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'm not really sure if I count as a senior citizen in this regard. Biologically, I'm only in my fifties. Yes, I'm a bit older than that, but in terms of physical health I'm like anyone else in his fifties."

"I'm studying memory issues, sir, and the possibility that people's brains can fill up as they get older. You're about the oldest person I can get my hands on without trying to get an audience with the Minister of Magic."

Hugh looked out the window and saw that there was a station wagon parked outside. Oddly enough, it had the name of a delivery company on it. The Muggle must have come in that car, he thought. He wondered if the Muggle's father ran a delivering company.

The Muggle spoke once more. "Do you have the time to answer a few questions, sir? It will only take maybe 30 minutes or so."

Hugh shrugged. "I don't see why not. There's nothing urgent going on right now. However, I'm surprised you didn't call beforehand."

"I didn't know they had phones in Hogsmeade, sir."

Hugh laughed. "That's understandable. If you need to contact me again after this, look me up."

The student chuckled. "Thank you, sir. Can I come in?"

"Certainly. However, I don't really have much food for you right now. Let me get the door."

Hugh opened the door and saw a man who appeared to be in his mid-twenties, perhaps younger. Not surprisingly, he had a Cambridge sweater on. He had a briefcase in his hand and a sly smile on his face.

Hugh held the door open so that the student could walk in. The smile was easy to understand -- if you want to talk to someone with a lot of memories, why not get someone who's overflowing Pensieves with them? An interview with one of the three ancient wizards would be an absolute coup.

The student walked in and sat down on the couch. Hugh, ever the gracious host, started walking off to the kitchen as he heard the student starting to open his briefcase. "I'm afraid all I have in the Muggle drink areas are Coke, Sprite, ginger ale, and -- ow!"
Hugh winced in pain as something pricked him in the neck. He spun, and his eyes widened when saw the student standing behind him with a syringe in his hand. He began to grow sleepy, and he had just enough time to wonder 'what the hell?' before he fell unconscious.

Henry Woodman threw the syringe back into the suitcase and did what he could to catch the wizard before he fell to the ground. If the Russian fellows were right, Hugh would be out for at least eight hours and would have virtually no memories of what had happened for about twenty minutes before the attack.

He dragged the wizard over to the couch and went back to the station wagon, where he spoke with his accomplice. "Piece of cake, my friend. He headed out to the kitchen and I got him in the neck. He went out like a light. He trusts us Muggles a great deal, it looks like."

The accomplice smiled. "Good. I'll unlock the trunk so we can take the... other type of trunk out. I hope we're going to be able to lift him -- how much does he weigh?"

"He looks to be about 65 kilos or so. Not a bantamweight, but there are two of us here. We'll be able to do it."

Both men smiled as the accomplice put the moving company's hat on his head (where had those Russian blokes gotten the car from?) popped the trunk, and brought out a large, padded box marked with the moving company's logo -- and a few air holes. They brought it into the house and laid it next to the sleeping wizard.

Making sure the wizard was still alive and the padding was good enough to transport their new hostage without hurting him more, they folded up Hugh like a pocket knife and placed him in the trunk. The handling wasn't particularly gentle, but the man never noticed.

They tried to play it casually as they put the syringe back in the suitcase, but the suitcase in the trunk, closed the trunk, and carried it back over to the car. They then placed Hugh's new home back in the trunk of the car. Once that was done, they lowered the partition between the trunk and the back seat designed for large loads. Hopefully that would improve Hugh's air circulation during the trip back.

Woodman grinned. This had been easy, and no one had really noticed anything. As far as the rest of the community knew, someone had delivered a Muggle item to Hugh's house. Perhaps he was interested in Muggle items now that he could collect them more freely.

Inevitably, the wizards would catch them. However, by then it would be too late. Hugh would be in the safe house and -- at least according to the Russians -- even the wizards wouldn't be able to find him there. He didn't know how the Russians would be able to manage that, though, and he sure hoped the Russians knew what they were doing.

Woodman was happy at least for one thing. They had struck back against the forces of evil and taken a wizard hostage. If everything went as planned, they would have the Minister of Magic completely at their mercy. The goal was to retrieve Hugh, alive, as a possible hostage and make sure he stayed put until the end of the year. Mission accomplished.

Flamel Residence

The two Black Fist members parked their moving van outside the Flamels' house. As far as they could tell, no one was suspecting anything. Their spotter confirmed that Hugh and his wife were
both in the building and were ready to be taken out. The spotter did not see Hugh, however, which was good -- it would have been more difficult to take out three people. Hopefully Woodman would get the job done over at Hugh's house.

The two men had heard rumors that someone had already broken into the Flamel house once and that it was only protected by a Muggle burglar alarm in case Muggles had visited prior to the fall of the Statute. Both Black Fist members were good with dismantling alarms, and they were convinced that as long as they didn't try to steal anything the magical alarms inside the house would not go off.

Grinning, the first cultist came up to the door. He knocked, and for a few seconds nothing happened. Finally, someone responded. But it was neither Flamel nor his wife.

A man in a gray robe tapped the cultist on the shoulder. "I'm sorry, sir, but this is a restricted area."

The cultist blinked. "Who are you? I need to talk to Dr. Flamel about something. He's expecting me."

The robed man's eyes hardened. "He's actually not expecting anyone right now, which makes me wonder why you're here. As far as your other question goes, I am an Auror who has spent time with British special forces. I'm part of the Minister of Magic's personal guard."

The cultist didn't like where this was going. He glanced back at the car with a worried expression on his face as the Auror said: "May I see your ID please? This is highly irregular, sir. Perhaps the Minister simply forgot to tell me, in which case I'll let you right in. This is all for the Minister's safety, after all. Britain for Humans has just been taken out of business, which means that there are probably several pissed off Britain for Humans members seeking revenge."

The cultist's eyes widened at the last statement, and the Auror's eyes went flat. It finally dawned on the cultist that the last statement had been a trap and he had fallen right into it.

The Auror took out his wand and Stunned the cultist as no fewer than three more Aurors appeared out of nowhere. "Sir, you are under arrest. Keep your hands where we can see them. Otherwise, we may be forced to hex you with worse than a Stunning Spell."

Two of the Aurors dealt with the cultist as the other two started walking towards the car. The second Black Fist member, realizing the game was up, immediately gunned the motor. He didn't get far, however, before a blue beam hit the car and it screeched to a halt with smoke rising from its engine.

To be continued...

________________

Update #477: Wizard Travel Agent
----------
Friday, December 21, 1996
Baghdad
Iraq
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/2.6%
----------
Daryna Vovchanckaya had just finished meeting with the Death Eaters, and as far as she could tell they were all ready to launch their attempted takeover of Iraq. The Death Eaters, supplemented by several Black God cultists, would Apparate into Saddam Hussein's government compound (or at least as close to it as possible), assassinate or Imperius him, and take over the country. This scheme had already been shown to work during the run-up to Judgment Day, and it would actually be relatively easy in Iraq because of two reasons.

First, Atlantis was (at least for the time being) not allowed to intervene because the city had been at DEFCON 3 for a long time. Second, the Iraqi Ministry of Magic -- such as it was -- consisted almost entirely of Death Eaters and Black Fists. If Saddam expected his own wizards to help defend his state, he would be sorely mistaken.

If everything went as planned, the Death Eaters would transform Iraq into a Wizarding state similar to Syrdan but with Islam as its primary faith. Any Muggle or Atlantean interference would result in a magical blockade of the Straits of Hormuz along with possible disruption of the world's oil supplies. The destruction of the oil wouldn't hurt the Death Eaters at all because they could supply stuff by magic. Muggles, on the other hand, would not be as lucky. They would depend on the wizards to supply them with everything, which would place the wizards in a position of authority over the Muggles.

In exchange for this assistance, Rasputin and his underlings would be allowed free rein in Iraq as long as they did not try to overthrow the government. They would be allowed into the government in advisory roles provided that they converted to Islam. They would also be allowed yahoos at a reduced price.

What the Death Eaters didn't realize is that the treaty was with Rasputin, not with Koschei. Rasputin was indeed planning to honor it. However, there was nothing saying Koschei had to. Koschei could order the Black Fist to take over Iraq and there was legally nothing the Death Eaters could do to stop it. Since Koschei would have had to get rid of the Death Eaters at some point anyone to consolidate his control over the world, it would only be a matter of time until he turned on them. The Death Eaters, naturally, didn't know about Koschei. They didn't really have to know, after all.

A loud hoot interrupted her train of thought. She turned and saw a snowy owl in the window with (to most people) nothing in its talons. She knew, however, that there was an invisible piece of parchment in its claws. Making sure she was alone, she probed the animal's leg until she found the parchment. She retrieved it, placed it on the table in front of her, and tapped her wand on it to make it visible once again.

---

To all of my followers, Muggle and Wizarding.

The time has come to prepare for Lord Koschei's return to our world. As you know, in less than a week and a half I shall perform the ceremony which will restore Koschei to child form and then use the Elixir of Life to bring him back completely. This will take place on the secret island of Buyan, whose location only I know. This is because I am currently Lord Koschei's Gatekeeper, and by extension Secret-Keeper for the island.

It is extremely unlikely that Atlantis knows that Buyan still exists, let alone able to find it. However, I do not wish to take any chances with our lord's return. To that end, I would like all of my followers to travel to the safe house in Constanta, Romania, over the next ten days. Once there, I will personally escort you to Buyan and let you in on the secret. If Atlantis does try to interfere when I
bring Lord Koschei back, we will be there to stop him.

You do not have to come immediately. However, make sure to be there by the 31st. Be advised that once I escort you to the island, you are not leaving Buyan until I have performed the ceremony. After all, the fewer people outside Buyan who know of the island's existence, the better.

There are few facilities on the island, and those which do exist are mostly based around an old Roman fort. You will need to bring food for however long you wish to stay, which must be at least until the end of the year. I recommend bringing tents and heating equipment as it can get very cold out here. Muggle agents should get in touch with one of the wizards to provide them with magical shelter before traveling to Buyan.

I will make one trip every two or three days until all of you are on the island. You will be escorted offshore as a group and then be given the coordinates of Buyan where no one else can see you. We will then fly to Buyan and get set up. Muggles, be advised that you will have to travel behind wizards on broomsticks. We cannot allow Muggle cameras and satellites to tell everyone where we are going.

This is our moment of triumph, ladies and gentlemen. 1997 will usher in the beginning of the Age of Koschei, when our master will supplant Atlantis as the ruler of the Wizarding, and soon the Muggle world. All of us will become part of Koschei's cabinet and will soon find ourselves with power over billions.

We will likely be immortal as well. Thanks to the ingenious work of our late friend Laronov, we have our own pirated copy of the Philosopher's Stone. As long as we prepare and drink the Elixir of Life, we will not age. In addition, we have kidnapped Hugh de Lourdes, one of the people who helped develop the Stone. If we are lucky, he will be willing to save his own life to create more Stones for us and ensure that we are the only people who have them. All other copies of the Stone have been destroyed, and we plan to send a message to Nicholas Flamel telling him that we will kill Hugh if Flamel ever tries to interfere or create another Stone. Ideally, we would have kidnapped both Flamels as well, but we were unlucky in that regard.

Until such time that we have multiple Philosopher's Stones, use of the Elixir of Life will be on an emergency-only basis. There is going to be a large cache of Elixir in cave on the northwest shore of the island. I have placed a spell upon it which will only allow people in if they are in life-threatening situations. We will not waste the Elixir on anything trivial, my friends, until we no longer need to worry about wasting it.

Note that you will be able to Apparate here. Our men have already taken control of the Russian and Ukrainian consulates, Imperiusing everyone so they work for us and don't tell anyone. Since the vast majority of us are Russian or Ukrainian citizens, this is not considered an international Apparition. This will make things much easier for all of us.

Ten more days and the world will be ours. Long live the Black God.

Sincerely,

Grigori Rasputin

---

Vovchanckaya looked at the note in amazement. It would take her a day or so to pack and put everything together. However, she wanted to go to Buyan as soon as possible. Buyan was, after all, the ultimate safe house. No one would be able to threaten her once she moved there.
She would spend the rest of the day preparing for the journey, magicking up warm tents and clothing. First thing tomorrow morning, she’d head on over there. She was really excited about this. It was about time their dream came true and it became more than just talk.

The Death Eaters in Iraq would probably be excited when Rasputin told them to launch their attack as well. What they did not realize, however, was that their takeover of Iraq would only be a diversion from the main event on Buyan.

--------------

British Ministry of Magic
London
-------------

Nicholas Flamel, flanked by no fewer than eight Aurors, looked at the captured Black God cultist in a fury. "All right, Mr. Kamalin. Who are you working for, and why did you try to break into my house?"

The cultist sneered at him. "Go to hell, you bastard."

Flamel shrugged and turned to the Auror next to him. "All right, Dave, give him the Veritaserum."

The Auror's face was grim as he nodded at the two men standing behind the prisoner. In one sudden movement, the men forced open the cultist's mouth so that Dave could pour the Veritaserum down his gullet. The prisoner tried to spit it out, but the guards clamped the man's mouth shut after pouring in the potion and forcing him to swallow it. It took a few moments for the Veritaserum to take effect. When Flamel judged that the time was right, he resumed the interrogation.

"All right Mr. Kamalin. What's your name, and who do you work for?"

The man stared at him through partially glazed eyes. "My name is Ivan Kamalin, and I'm a Black God cultist."

There was an audible gasp as several of the Aurors registered their surprise. Everyone had thought that he had been working for Britain for Humans and had planned this attack to avenge the group's capture.

Flamel's eyes narrowed. "You're a Black God cultist, I see? One who just happens to have been supporting Britain for Humans as well?"

Kamalin shook his head. "I'm not a member of Britain for Humans, Minister. I've met a couple of Britain for Humans members, but I haven't done much work with them."

"So Britain for Humans has nothing to do with this home invasion?"

"No, sir. At least as far as I know."

"Who's your immediate supervisor? Who sent you on this mission?"

"Genya Zygonov."

Flamel whistled: the name sounded familiar. He shot a questioning glance at the Auror next to him, and the Auror nodded quickly. "He's Grigori Rasputin's primary hit man. Zygonov was the man behind the attack on Hogwarts that killed Severus Snape and injured Albus Dumbledore."
Flamel grimaced. "The one that won Rasputin the Elder Wand?"

Dave nodded. "The same, Minister."

Flamel turned back to the prisoner. "Where is Zygonov, Mr. Kamalin?"

Kamalin shrugged. "I don't know, sir. He said he would contact me within five days if the mission succeeded."

One of the other Aurors swore. "Zygonov's being very careful here -- he figured that there was a strong possibility this mission would fail given the security forces protecting the Minister of Magic."

Flamel nodded and continued the interrogation. "Zygonov works for Rasputin, right?"

"Yes, Minister."

"Why has Rasputin targeted me?"

Kamalin shrugged. "I don't know, Minister. All I was told to do was kidnap, and if necessary kill, you and your wife."

Flamel's heart leapt into his throat. Growling ominously, he pointed his wand between Kamalin's eyes. "You planned to attack my wife as well?"

Kamalin nodded. "Yes, Minister."

The Auror nodded brusquely and cut in. "There were two crates in the back of the moving van, both with air holes. It was obviously both you and she were being targeted."

Flamel could barely restrain himself from obliterating the man where he stood. "What has my wife done to you? Why are you doing this?"

Kamalin winced. "It was just a job. You'll have to ask Zygonov if you run into him."

Flamel's mind raced. "Why..."

Then it hit him. "The Stone! Admit it, Mr. Kamalin! He's after the Stone, right?"

The prisoner shrugged. "I don't know. It's possible, though. I've heard amazing things about the Stone. I wouldn't mind having one myself. I don't suppose..."

The Aurors started all started babbling at Flamel at the same time. "You can't give it to him, Minister. You know better than that."

Flamel shook his head. "I can't give it to him as I don't have the instructions either anymore! However, something doesn't make sense. Why would he try to kidnap both me and my wife? Kidnapping me makes sense because they could force me to make more Stones -- they didn't know any better. Kidnapping her makes sense because she would make a good hostage if they were to force me to make the Stone. Kidnapping both of us, however, makes NO sense."

He paused, and his eyes widened. Suddenly, he turned back to the prisoner. "Wait a minute. You
said one option was to kill both of us, right?"

The prisoner nodded. "Yes."

Flamel swore even more loudly. "Then it can't be the Stone he's after. He must know that if I die, no one can make the Stone. Everyone associates the Stone with me and only me -- and now that we've taken out Harold-Green, they're no longer an option. They must already know that if I die, the Stone goes with me!"

A third Auror frowned. "What you say makes sense, Minister. I don't think he is after the Stone. I --"

The Auror was cut off by an abrupt "Sir!" from the doorway. Everyone turned to face the door, where another aide was waving a document in his face.

Flamel rolled his eyes and glared at the aide. "Michael, this is not the time. I'm busy with the interrogation here."

The aide shook his head. "This is urgent, sir. We have a letter from Grigori Rasputin. He claims to have kidnapped Hugh de Lourdes and threatens to kill him if we try to rescue him. He also demands that you not make any more Philosopher's Stones, nor instruct anyone else in making Philosopher's Stones."

Flamel shrieked, "WHAT? What the hell does Rasputin want with Hugh? And did I hear you right? He's trying to tell me NOT to make Stones?"

The aide nodded. "That is correct, sir!"

"Let me see that!"

Flamel snatched the document out of the aide's hand and began to read it. Sure enough, it said exactly what the aide had told him it had. This made less and less sense. How could this be?

The room was silent for a few minutes. Eventually, another of the Aurors began to speak.

"Minister...Hugh de Lourdes was your apprentice, right?"

Flamel nodded. "Yes, he was. A damn fine one at that. I wouldn't have been able to create the Philosopher's Stone without his help."

The Auror nodded. "Minister...could Hugh create the Stone on his own, if Rasputin and his men provided him with the necessary components?"

Flamel's jaw dropped. "Oh, shit. In theory, Hugh can. I believe he's got a second set of instructions, but they're under serious magical protection -- and only he can get at them, for what I've been told. However, it's extremely unlikely that the instructions are with Hugh right now. Without them, Hugh is as powerless as we are to create a new Stone."

A fifth Auror shook his head. "Forcing Hugh to create a Stone doesn't fit Rasputin's actions, sir. If Rasputin wanted to get his hands on someone who could make the Stone, why go after you when all he needed was Hugh? Hugh would have been a much easier target. There was no reason to go after all three of you."
Flamel shook his head furiously. "You're right, Kevin. That doesn't make sense either. Hell, NOTHING makes sense here. Do any of you have any idea what's going on?"

There was dead silence. Finally, a timid: "No, sir."

"Well, find out! And FAST!"

To be continued...

Update #477.5: Side effects include...

Friday, December 21, 1996
Somewhere in Southern Syrdan

Pleasant musical voices, the soft rustling of feathers, and the song of birds- quite a nice start of a day, dreamily thought Floppy the house-elf as she slowly returned to the land of the conscious.

... Now wait a minute! Fractured memories of the previous ...days? weeks? came back to her in a rush: the pain and that sickening crack as the building came down on her head, then the constant vertigo as she came to, the worried expressions of her companions, Samanar Naztheros pleading with someone for access to a book... She stopped her train of thought, and even breathing for some time, so big was her shock as she just discovered something: her compulsion to call the wizard 'Master' has disappeared. Forcing herself to keep her calm, she decided to investigate this change further. The results were surprising.

For one, she had no problem thinking of herself in first person, nor did she see anything bad about being free. Rare as it was, she had heard of such cases- mistreated elves occasionally snapped, left their masters at the first opportunity and reverted to free will- and quite often, actively sabotaged the human's activities till then. This was not the case here: Floppy -note to self, get a name fit for a Being ASAP- was far from being angry at the wizard. In fact, having spent most of his life in exile and poverty, with only the elf as company, young Samanar has treated this elf with respect and kindness. "Almost as a friend... though the fact that we both knew I am compelled to follow his every wish made things complicated."

Perhaps, then, it was some effect of the head injury? She tried to remember as much as she could about that... which didn't really help her understand. Memories came forward: Soon-to-be-Mistress... ehh, scratch that, Myrtille, giving her some kind of potion to take the pain away- she smelled the odor of chocolate, but the dose was carefully measured, enough to give her a high but not causing lasting harm... so it wasn't that.

His wizard being ambushed as he carried her, hit in the back of the head by a yahoo of all things as they approached an old temple of Water under a shimmering forcefield dome- but somehow they managed to fall in a way that she wasn't injured, and the two of them (the Veela became violently
sick half a mile before that, it must have been some racial repelling ward) were brought before a group of 'loyal' (read: under Imperius and/or pissed off by their mates being seduced away by Nestorians) yahoos and some wizards... his wizard asked for a certain book of his family, containing an experimental treatment for house elves. That must have been it- the treatment worked, but with some side effects.

At least she was still in Syrdan... coming to think about it, her sense of location was much more developed now. And she had a strange feeling also, at first attributed to lingering pain from the injury, but now the elf started to notice, it was yet another sense she didn't know of: somewhat like feeling the wind, or heat... no human words could describe it accurately. Nor the pain it caused when overwhelmed: looking around, she tried to pinpoint sources of the new feeling, but all she could feel radiating it were completely mundane and inert items: a pair of nails here, a pin there...

She couldn't dwell on it long, for as soon as she started to notice they were all made of iron, the entrance flapped open and Samanar Naztheros stepped into the tent. Noticing that his house-elf was finally awake, the wizard pulled closer and whispered: "I'm glad to see you're back among us. Hopefully, you'll be able to Apparate now, and not a moment too soon- looks like we'll have to leave in a hurry. You feel up to doing the usual side-along trip?" Floppy nodded. "Good. Then I'd like you to try it, but first, let me Disillusion you." He drew his wand and cast the spell nonverbally. "Now, please Apparate somewhere in this tent, where no-one will step on you. Stay hidden, and be ready to take Myrtille and I to an empty location as soon as I snap my fingers." He heard the usual cracking sound of Apparition, followed by approaching footsteps from outside. Hiding a smirk, he forced his face into a desperate expression, and turned to address the quartet of Veelas entering the tent.

His lover was there, accompanied by two uniformed witches with wands drawn, and a crone in gaudy robes... "Oh crap, that's Merkali herself," he realised. "Looks like it's really serious." Bowing politely to the Veela president, he sheathed his wand lest the bodyguards curse him into a pool of goo, which judging by the looks on their faces was still a very real possibility. Merkali spoke: "Mr Naztheros, it looks like your free ticket out of here is gone. With this in mind, let me repeat the alternatives my ambassador has already offered to you: Stay here in Syrdan, be a good little figurehead for a new puppet government that serves the needs of everyone on the island, and of course expresses it's gratitude towards us. In exchange of your cooperation, you'll be able to finally complete the reforms your late father proposed, and pass into history as the man whose contribution to the integration of the new territories into Nestor has proven invaluable..."

Seeing the look of disgust on the wizard's face, Merkali's tone changed. "But you already said no to that, didn't you? Well, allow me to throw in another boon for you: the freedom of you lovely little fiancé!" At that, both his and his lover's eyes went wide as saucers, and they asked simultaneously: "WHAT?"

With an insufferably smug expression, Merkali continued. "As you are probably aware, we have laws against charming people. These laws clearly say that any suitably young Veela, which you my dear clearly are, has to be accompanied by chaperones on any and all journeys abroad, which you clearly neglected to do. Considering our agent's reports about your abuse of charm during your stay in Roqteratl, the punishment will be five to ten years of inprisonment in the lovely company of Dementors."
Incredulous, Myrtille snapped: "Now THAT's just bullshit. Take a look around, no one cares about that idiotic law, it's just the thing you say to foreigners who you hadn't yet managed to enthrall. Also, my 'abuse of charm' happened with informed and consenting adults, so I really don't see a snowball in Hell chance of a jury finding me guilty for it. And last I checked, we don't even HAVE Dementors! Why can't you just return your attention to your oh so important war for conquest, and let my boyfriend and I be?"

Merkali flashed a smile, the kind that smile was as funny as the one that moves very fast towards drowning sailors. And has a fin on top. "You hail from quite a powerful family of witches, girl, but you forget your place if you think I won't arrange just such a trial for you. Especially considering that, since your arrest took place in a war zone, you won't be seeing any civilian juries at all. And about the Dementors: I'll get some, just for you."

Her words certainly managed to break the young witch. Merkali was also satisfied by seeing how this affected the Syrdani, who was now trying to comfort the crying girl with hugs and whispered reassurances. "It would really have made things more complicated if he had turned out not to be in love without Charm... now at least I don't have to find one of my girls to seduce him, or Imperius him." Still, the president winced when Samanar looked into her eyes with a great deal of hatred.

"You can force me to take the job, but even then, it won't end well," he said. "My father was a brave fool who got exiled because he dabbled in politics, and I always wanted to avoid his mistake. With or without your invasion, Syrdan has issues, and you really can't expect me to set them right by just snapping my fingers!"

"Still, you'll keep trying because you know the alternatives are even worse," Merkali responded... then her jaw dropped as the wizard's expression changed into a mischievous grin. "Fine then, see if it works for you" he lifted his gloved right hand. A metallic SNAP was heard, then Merkali heard the rustle of little feet on the floor, felt something small but powerful impact her at waist level and shove her aside, and before anyone could reacy, the couple disappeared with a thundering CRACK.

--------

A few miles away
--------

Rematerializing in a forest clearing, the unusual trio could still hear a harpy's scream of rage. Smirking at the wizard, the elf remarked: "You really do have a talent for the dramatics, sir."

"Thank you, Floppy..." Then, realisation dawned on him. "Wait. You speak differently since you wake up... how come you didn't call me Master like you always did?"

The elf shrugged. "I actually hoped you could tell me. Whatever you did to save me caused some changes... I found that I have free will, but also some wierd new sense. And I never in my life was angrier than when that old hag threatened you. Fear not, I still like your company." She winked at the shocked human. "After all, we have been through some real interesting adventures together, saving each other's life and all that. Still, there are two things I'd like to ask."
Trying to take it all in, Samanar said: "Go on, I'm listening."
"First, I'd like to say it's been an honor to work for you, sir, and I'd gladly stay your employee. But,
and that ties to my second request, I really need some time to get to know the new me... to discover
my new limits, and also to find out my true name, as I find 'Floppy' quite an inadequate name for a
free-willed Being."

"Of course you can keep working with me" responded the wizard. "As for your leave, I think I
understand your situation... and of course you're free to do as you wish, as long as you wish. Seeing
how my wealth grew, I'd be able to support you in this, so if there's anything you need, just ask me,
you're always welcome in my house. Just please take us out of Syrdan first."

"Naturally. Though, aren't there some more of those family grimoires to be found?"

"Sure there are, and I still intend to get them back," the wizard said. "But this trip to Syrdan has
opened my eyes. It's time for me to stop behaving as the impoverished exile I was. It's time for me be
responsible, to do the sensible thing and just send bounty hunters while we stay behind to govern the
company, and it's also time to settle down, which reminds me..."

He turned to his Veela girlfriend, and kneeled before her, and finally asked the question he has
delayed so far, and got the answer he hoped for... not that we particularly care about it.

Thus ends the tale of the adventures of the exiled Syrdani Samanar Naztheros, his faithful house-elf
Floppy, and his Veela love interest Myrtille Trepanier. (Whew. One less loose end to tie up.)

__________________

Update

#478: Love Bites

------------
Tuesday, December 24, 1996 [note that 12/21 was a Sat -- I messed up]
Black Fist Safe House
Constanta
Romania
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/2.7%

------------
NEXT UP: Santa Got Run Over By a Broomstick

------------
It seemed an eternity. Finally, Zhukov eventually snapped back into reality and felt solid ground
beneath his feet once more. Letting go of Zygonov's hand, he turned on his Wizarding colleague.

"I hate Apparition! I hate it! Don't do that to me again!"

Zygonov shrugged. "Up to you. This way is a hell of a lot faster, though. And you don't have to go
through customs now that we've taken control of the embassy in Bucharest. One trip to the embassy,
a step outside onto Romanian soil, and another jump to here. Piece of cake."

Zhukov groaned. "Maybe to you, when you're accustomed to zipping all over the place this way. I think I'll stick to airplanes next time."

Zygonov chuckled as he looked around the room. "There should be a lot of people here by now, and unless I'm mistaken Rasputin is going to be sending us over pretty soon. Let's see if we recognize any familiar faces here."

The two men walked deeper into the building and saw that Rasputin was loaded for bear. There were bizarre herbs and stones which looked to be spell components of some sort, and he had no idea what they were for. What he did recognize, however, were the guns stashed in a corner. He whistled in admiration.

"Where'd you get the AA-12 automatic? I'd kill for some of these things."

Zygonov barely spared a glance at the guns. "We forged some documents and Obliviated people into thinking that we were authorized to carry the weapons. You'd be surprised what useful stamps and stuff you can find in an embassy. To be honest, though, I'd prefer spells to shells. Spells can do more things and -- no offense -- are a bit more elegant."

Zhukov looked at the weapons wistfully. "Can I have one? I'll feel a lot better, especially if we're going to run into wizards."

"It's not up to me to decide. However, to be honest, you're not the only person who's asked about the guns. I suspect he's going to have a lottery to see who gets them."

Zhukov squirmed. "Can you rig the lottery so I get one?" This elicited a laugh from Zygonov: "And you're the third person who's asked me that, Zhukov."

Zhukov grumbled as Zygonov led him around the corner and into a room which was filled with Black God agents. He didn't see Rasputin, but Zygonov reassured him that their leader would be with them shortly. He recognized a few of them, but not many. He hadn't realized how big the organization was.

He knew one person fairly well, however, and walked up to her. "Good evening, Miss Vovchanckaya. It's good seeing you again after that near miss in Atlantis."

Vovchanckaya nodded. "And it's good seeing you as well. I still can't believe we made it out of there in one piece. I thought we were goners."

"Did they do the water torture with you as well?"

Vovchanckaya winced in recollection. "That they did, Zhukov. That goes to show how corrupt is and how Atlantis needs to be replaced with a competent man like Koschei. They go out of their ways to start with this Aes Sedai nonsense and have their own Aes Sedai convince themselves they're not 'attacking' us."

"Amen to that, Daryna. I'll be glad when we're finally able to show the world how things should really be done. They told me that you confessed -- did you?"

Zhukov hesitated. However, that was long enough for Vovchanckaya to know what his answer was.
Realizing it was hopeless, he sighed and nodded. "They said you'd already confessed, so it was pointless to keep on fighting."

Vovchanckaya swore. "Really? They told me that you had confessed and that it was worth my while for ME to talk. What this means is that they lied to us. Whichever one of us was interrogated first was told that the other one had already confessed even though he hadn't even been questioned yet. Sounds like the Atlanteans played a bit of a dirty trick on us."

Zhukov was furious. "Indeed. And I bet the person who said that was an Aes Sedai as well and violated his own vows."

Vovchanckaya nodded. "Accepted, not Aes Sedai. They were allowed to lie."

The two agents chatted for a few more moments. The conversations, however, cut off abruptly when someone mentioned Rasputin was standing in the doorway.

Zhukov turned and blinked in surprise. The Mad Monk was barely recognizable, having shaven off his trademark beard. He seemed excited, and for good reason. Standing next to him was one of the most handsome men Zhukov had ever seen. Zhukov shot a quick glance at Vovchanckaya, who appeared to be ogling the second man openly. And judging from the reactions of the other women in the room, she wasn't the only one.

Rasputin began to speak. "Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming. As you know, I am the Secret-Keeper for Buyan and in a few minutes I will be telling you where the location of Buyan is. I will then escort you by broomstick over to the island so that you can set up your camps and settle down.

"Everything is going according to plan. We appear to have Nicholas Flamel at bay for the time being, now that we have Hugh sedated and under our control. Don't worry, he's been tied up and relieved of his wand: he won't be able to escape or Apparate out of his room. I had hoped that he would give us more information about the Philosopher's Stone, but I suppose we'll have to live with what we've got. Atlantis still appears to be at DEFCON 3, so they don't seem to be getting involved. However, I would not be surprised if the DEFCON reading escalates to 2 or 1 when we actually try to bring back Lord Koschei. This could result in Atlantean interference if they somehow figure out where Buyan is. To that end, I want all of you to complete all of your preparations on Buyan by the 29th at the latest. Defense is going to be word, my friends. Defense, defense, defense."

Rasputin then indicated the man standing next to him. "Now, you may be wondering who this man is. This man is in a position to improve the stamina, strength, and reflexes of anyone who is willing to take him up on the offer. His services will also provide customers with increased healing speed and partial resistance to magic."

The cultists muttered among themselves as Zhukov looked at the man curiously. Perhaps this was what the doctor ordered.

Rasputin held up a hand, and the crowd quieted instantly. "There is a catch, however, which may cause some people to decide against taking him up on his offer. His services will also provide customers with increased healing speed and partial resistance to magic."

The cultists muttered among themselves as Zhukov looked at the man curiously. Perhaps this was what the doctor ordered.

Rasputin held up a hand, and the crowd quieted instantly. "There is a catch, however, which may cause some people to decide against taking him up on his offer. You see, Edvard here is a vampire."

The cultists began talking again as Zygonov drew a sharp breath. Zhukov gawked at the vampire and turned to Zygonov. "Genya, you fellows have VAMPIRES as well?"

Zygonov looked at Edvard hard, but nodded. "Indeed. There are actually two kinds of vampires, half
vampires and full vampires. Full vampires age extremely slowly and are very hard to kill with weapons. However, sunlight incapacitates them and several spells can ward them out. Perhaps the biggest drawback is that a transformation to a full vampire causes the subject's body to transform into a bat shape, and the vampire will have to wear an illusory body to safely interact with people. Despite what you may have heard as a Muggle, not all vampires are evil, and they can only cast spells if the person had been capable of spell work before being transformed into a vampire. They need to feed on blood, however, and that tends to make them unwelcome in many communities.

"Half-vampires, on the other hand, combine several of the traits of both humans and full vampires. They have improved stamina and strength, but they are not incapacitated by sunlight. Their condition can be reversed by the Elixir of Life, turning them back into ordinary humans. They do, however, have a mild need to consume blood."

The vampire, who had been listening to Zygonov, nodded. "That's about right, Genya. You seem to know your stuff. At any rate, I'll finish Mr. Zygonov's description. A person starts the transformation into a vampire by being bitten by a full vampire such as myself. Yes, I have fangs, but I prefer not to show them in public because I don't want to freak people out. Once a person is bitten, he becomes a half-vampire and receives all of the benefits of half-vampirism. However, it is important that he not give in to his temptation to feed on someone else's blood. Once he does so, he becomes a full vampire and there is no turning back. I personally would have preferred to have stayed a half-vampire, but there isn't much I can do about it now."

Rasputin nodded. "Well spoken, Edvard. Now, ladies and gentlemen, here is my offer. If you wish, Edvard will bite you to give you half-vampire abilities. Be very careful with these abilities, as you may feel immortal but in fact are not. People who take him up on his offer will remain half-vampires until they consume the Elixir of Life, which as you know we have in abundance. They must be careful, however, to not be tempted by any blood which is shed during the battle. Once you become a full vampire, the Elixir of Life will not save you.

"Note that if you are injured in battle and need to take the Elixir of Life to save your life, you will lose your half-vampire abilities. However, I would recommend that you allow your natural improved healing powers to take care of the injury for you. Half-vampires are hard to permanently kill, and full vampires even harder. The drawbacks of being a full vampire, however, outweigh the benefits in my opinion."

Edvard nodded. "And in mine as well. Don't become a full vampire unless you know what you're doing. And you already have access to immortality through the Elixir."

Rasputin smiled and patted Edvard on the back. "All right, ladies and gentlemen. If any of you want to become a half-vampire, at least for this battle, talk to Edvard before we go. You'll need to be very disciplined to not transform completely into a full vampire during the battle, however, should the battle take place. Any questions?"

One of the cultists raised his hand. "Lord Rasputin, are you going to become a half-vampire?"

Rasputin shook his head. "I don't want to risk it, and I've always had a history of giving in to my...urges. Besides, I've got the Elder Wand. Nothing can hurt me. Anything else?"

There were no more questions, and Rasputin nodded. "All right. We'll get all our half-vampires ready and then head on over."

Zhukov thought about Edvard's proposal for a moment. He really didn't like the idea of turning into a
monster. However, the transformation was reversible though the Elixir of Life. Considering that he would have one dosage of the Elixir of Life on him all the time, he could always use it to reverse the half-vampirism in case he found the temptation to feed too hard to deal with. Maybe he'd watch and see what everyone else did.

Judging from the reactions of the people in the room, about 40% of the Muggles and maybe 20% of the wizards were thinking of taking the vampire up on his offer. Edvard bowed in acknowledgement and told the candidates to follow them into a side room so he could administer the bites.

Zhukov circulated around the room a little more, meeting more people while Edvard was working with his new recruits. He saw that one man was looking at Rasputin thoughtfully, with repeated glances at the Elder Wand. Unless he was badly mistaken, Rasputin would have more of a fight for the Elder Wand than he had anticipated.

---------
Atlantis
---------
An aide raced over to Dagher with an excited look on his face. "Sir! Something has come up and I need to talk to you about it!"

Dagher grunted. "I'm a bit busy right now, but I think I have a few minutes. What's going on?"

The aide produced a piece of parchment. "Remember how you wanted me to report when the two Rasputinite spies who had infiltrated Atlantis converged in the same place?"

Dagher nodded in recollection. "Yes. The theory is that they will all converge on Rasputin's hideout. If they're both tracked to the same place, odds are Rasputin is there and we'll nab him. Are you telling me that they're both in the same place now?"

The aide nodded excitedly and handed the document over. "Yes, sir. Here, read."

Dagher looked at the parchment and frowned. "They were simultaneously in Constanta, Romania? What the hell are they doing there?"

"I don't know, sir. But I thought you might want to know."

Dagher nodded. "I can't imagine Rasputin setting up shop in Romania. However, it's better than nothing. Write down their current location and feed it to the special ops people. I want our men there within 12 hours so we can grab the first person we see. If it's Rasputin, perfect. If it's one of these two goons, it's better than nothing. Maybe they know more now. Are both of them still in Constanta?"

The aide bit his lip. "I'm not sure. Shortly after they arrived in Constanta, their signals just disappeared. I suspect it's either a Fidelius or someone figured out they were being tracked."

Dagher grunted. "A distinct possibility. Still, it's worth the risk. Let's get going."

"Yes, sir."

To be continued...
John Paul and Samuel stood together up on the balcony in St. Peter's Basilica. The conference had adjourned for the time being, with a lot of people wanting to take a break for Christmas anyway. What the various clergy weren't sure about, however, was whether it would resume, as it was fairly obvious that no permanent solution was going to be reached. If anything, Samuel's beliefs would just serve to create a fourth Abrahamic religion -- or at least a major Abrahamic philosophical movement.

Samuelism (as it was being called) was starting to make inroads everywhere, particularly among people who had been raised religious and had found the strict dogma distasteful. Supposedly already a few million people practiced at least a few Samuelist customs, and if that weren't good enough they were still being recognized as saintly people in their churches, mosques, and synagogues. The strong moral character shown by most Samuelists ensured that the new faith would avoid the persecutions and discrimination usually suffered by new religious sects.

Regardless of whether people practiced Samuel's customs, a good 80% of the Abrahamics accepted him for who he was and saw him as an important guide to understanding the word of God. As a result, John Paul had asked Samuel to stand at his side as he gave the Christmas sermon at the Vatican.

It was normally difficult to figure out what to talk about for the sermon. However, this time there was no problem. So many amazing things had happened over the past twelve months that he wasn't sure where to begin. The wizards had been exposed, and he had admitted to the world that he himself could cast spells. Heroes from the Bible had returned in ghost form, and an evil wizard had nearly triggered a nuclear holocaust. The Philosopher's Stone, a magical artifact of incalculable power, had emerged and had nearly been mass-produced by an American pharmaceutical company. And all of this had been because one teenage wizard had been caught on camera by a small American soft drink company filming a Super Bowl commercial.

He turned to the crowd and continued his speech. "The arrival of a new, more benevolent era will almost always be accompanied by turmoil as the old one is overthrown. You can compare what has happened with the wizards to what happened with the Savior at the end of his life. In both cases, a series of amazing events paved the way for a new, more prosperous and kinder world. However, several of those events were tragic. God sacrificed His own son in order to improve the lives of future generations, and many millions of people had their lives shattered by the events surrounding Judgment Day. However, just as the word of God began to spread throughout the world, making it a better place, the benevolent work of wizards began to make itself known after Judgment Day. God willing, we have made it through the tumultuous early years of the new era. If things continue to go as I hope, we may be on the verge of a long era of prosperity.

"I have no idea if the events of Judgment Day are the fulfillment of the prophecy in Revelation. I may be a wizard, but I am not an experienced prophet. I have been told that several people in
Atlantis are well-versed in prophecy and may be able to answer that question. However, they have been ordered not to reveal any prophecies to laypeople, particularly those with religious and theological connotations, unless it is an absolute emergency. I personally hope that it is the fulfillment of Revelation, because if it is so a long period of prosperity is going to follow -- and we will never have to worry about war for a long, long time.

"As far as the omens surrounding the beginning of the Savior's life go, we all know that Jesus's birth was heralded by a strange light in the sky, the Star of Bethlehem. Now that magic has returned, strange lights in the sky are becoming commonplace -- and interesting coincidence. Just as the Savior's birth was acclaimed by the Three Kings, several important political leaders announced the arrival of the wizards to the world. In fact, I found myself in the awe-inspiring position to have been one of those messengers, a position which I do not believe I deserved. Jesus performed miracles almost as soon as he was born -- remember the Infancy Gospels and so forth -- and the wizards started performing amazing feats almost immediately after they were introduced. The parallels are staggering, and it seems almost impossible for it to be coincidence.

"I cannot help but wonder, if the stories of the lion lying down with the lamb refer to what happened over the Jewish holiday of Sukkot, when people from all three denominations converged on the Third Temple for their pilgrimages under the banner of Samuelism. Jews, Muslims, and Christians, enemies for such a long time, literally slept in tents together in the shade of God's mountain. And the one time a fight broke out, God Himself sent an angel down to deal with the perpetrators and stop it. Yes, I know that some people say that there was a wizard behind it. However, there is no proof the wizards did it. Furthermore, even if the wizards did do it, which Power inspired them to do it?

"I encourage all of you, my flock, to keep your eyes and mind open to the marvels which will be revealed over the next few years. Although the kingdom of God may or may not have finally arrived, the kingdom of those whom God has granted amazing powers has most definitively arrived. Treat our new visitors like the awe-inspiring mortals that they are, and we will likely all benefit greatly."

---------------------
Russian Embassy
Bucharest
Romania

Halyna Zygonova rematerialized into realspace with a snap and began looking around the room. Not surprisingly, the first thing she saw were several embassy employees with vacant expressions on their faces. She walked down the hall towards the front desk and approached the robed man behind it.

The man looked at her appraisingly. "Welcome to the Consulate, ma'am. How can I help you?"

Zygonova knew the routine by now. "I'm here because my friend Boris wants a passport."

"Do you have his birth certificate and his other documents."

"I do, sir. However, they're pretty old. I hope you can read them."

The man behind the desk relaxed now that the guest had passed his challenge. "Welcome to the embassy, Mrs. Zygonova, and merry Christmas to you."

"Merry Christmas to you, as well. And unless I'm badly mistaken, we're only a week or so away from a major celebration."

The desk man chuckled. "You've got that right. Would you believe we've even got a guy here who's
been transforming people into half-vampires? A good third of the crowd has taken him up on his offer."

Zygonova flinched. "My husband is already here. Did he --"

The man shook his head. "No, he didn't try it. To be honest, he seems a bit weirded out by it. It's understandable, considering that if you lose control and try to feed on someone else you turn into a monster."

Zygonova's response was interrupted by another voice. "Vampires are not intrinsically evil, David. I should know, as I am one. Are the windows closed? I'm hurt by sunlight."

The desk man looked around the room. "Yup. You're Edvard, right?"

The vampire emerged from the shadows, and Zygonova saw that he seemed like an ordinary, albeit rather attractive, man wearing a Muggle suit. Checking the windows one last time, the vampire nodded. "Yes, I'm Edvard. And I think I underestimated the number of people who wanted to become half-vampires. If I bite anyone else I'm going to go nuts. You must be Mr. Zygonov's wife, right?"

Zygonova nodded. "I am. I'm a bit relieved my husband didn't take you up on his offer. Sleeping with him would be a bit...complicated."

Edvard laughed. "No, that should not be a problem with a half-vampire. To be honest, I'm a bit surprised he didn't join the club. He's extremely disciplined and would probably be able to resist the --"

The vampire's response was cut off by a whole series of snaps arriving one after the other. Seconds later, multicolored beams shot down the hall and crashed into a defensive screen the cultists had placed across the entrance of the office the three people had been talking in.

Zygonova screamed as she and David brought out their wands. The vampire swore, brought out a gun, and shouted. "Stay behind me! I'm stronger than a normal person and am somewhat resistant to magic! I'll help you deal with these guys."

The two witches tried firing a few blasts down the corridor, but they didn't get very far as the force field stopped spells in both directions. Edvard's bullet, however, passed through the shield and was promptly neutralized by a _Protego_.

Stalemate, Zygonova thought. I guess we'll have to wait until they get closer.

Seconds later, no fewer than fifteen men barged down the corridor towards the office. Some were wearing Romanians robes, and some were Romanovs. David yelped and cast a spell which prevented people from making their way through the door. That didn't last long, however, as one of the head Romanovs waved his wand and neutralized not just David's spell but the spell preventing curses from crossing into the office as well.

Both David and Zygonova lanced out with their wands, and a couple of intruders went down. However, it was fairly obvious they were outnumbered. It appeared a retreat was in order here.

Edvard took advantage of his lightning-fast reflexes to dodge an attack, an act which caused several of the attackers to gasp in surprise. Glancing at Zygonova, he shouted, "I'll hold them off! Get out of
here and warn the rest! Head over to the safe house!"

Zygonova nodded and dragged David along with her. Free to attack the enemy without having to worry about hurting his own people, he switched the machine gun to full automatic mode and began firing into the crowd. Five or six people went down as a few more spells shot out at him. One hit him in the side, and he went woozy for a second before his magic resistance took over. He recovered just in time to dodge an *Avada Kedavra* curse.

---

Igor Romanov had hoped to capture all three of these fellows and have them tell them where Rasputin was. Ideally, he would have wanted to take Rasputin as well. Unfortunately, the raiding party hadn't expected the embassy to have been compromised. It looks like the surprise was gone. Rasputin would likely be on his guard after this.

With both of the tracked Black God cultists having lost their signals, he needed to interrogate someone else to see what was going on. This guy would work, he thought. He's attractive and got amazing reflexes, which was an interesting combination. He's somewhat resistant to magic. And he's using a gun, so he's likely not a wizard.

He had a suspicion he knew what exactly he was dealing with here. Raising his wand in the air, he waved it in a circle as the man in front of him fell to a bullet.

"*Stefnimyerus!*

The cultist's body began to glow and sparkle, and the cultist began to curse. Realizing what he had discovered, Igor shouted:

"Look out! He's a vampire! I just cast a vampire detection spell!"

The Auror next to him nodded quickly. "I'll handle that! *Lumos Solaris!*

A blast of yellow light -- stored sunlight from the outside -- shot out of the wand and illuminated the room. Faced with his bane, the vampire shrieked, dropped the gun, and began writhing on the floor. Score one for people who remembered how to deal with vampires in Defense Against the Dark Arts, Igor thought.

Three people ran over to tie up the vampire -- conjuring extra-strong cords to make sure the well-built man didn't escape -- as Igor ordered the rest of the raiding party into the building to search for Rasputin. It took about twenty minutes to search the complex, and the word eventually came back that the rest of the people had fled the coop, probably via Apparition.

Igor swore and pointed at Edvard. "I should have put up an Apparition shield before we got started. Well, I won't make that mistake again. Let's take this fellow back to base and interrogate him. Anyone have a cloak which we can put over him so he doesn't fry outside en route?"

To be continued...

__________________

Update

#480: Ed the Singing Vampire
Heydar Dagher was starting to get worried about the DEFCON readings again. Although they werelower than they had been earlier -- when they had been up in the 3's and 4's -- Ndukaku had been
reporting that they had been climbing steadily, without any obvious cause, over the past few days.
Just a few days ago, they had been under 2. Now, the latest estimate had it at 2.8.

The problem was still centered in the western Black Sea. To the best of his knowledge, there was
nothing there. However, events had transpired which were making it increasingly likely that the
Apocalypsometer was not malfunctioning. Black Fist agents had been sighted in eastern Romania, in
the city of Constanta -- not far away from the "nexus of evil", as Ndukaku had taken to calling it.
They had apparently managed to take over at least one of the embassies in Bucharest as well so they
could Apparate to it from abroad and go from there to Constanta. Had it not been for the tied-up
Muggles they had stumbled across in the embassy upon immediately Apparating there, they wouldn't
have known that they had Apparated into a trap. They would have likely made their way over to the
front desk only to be taken out by the vampire and his two friends.

There was still disagreement over whether the "nexus of evil" was actually hiding a Black Fist base.
Legends existed of private islands Fideliused by their owners, so it was not inconceivable that
Rasputin had claimed an island back in the teens or so and made sure no one remembered it. On the
other hand, the majority of people argued that there were in multiple bases, one in Constanta and
others around the shore of the Black Sea. The existence of multiple bases would explain the rapidly
worsening DEFCON readings, and it would explain why the center of the problem appeared to be in
the Black Sea itself...in between all of them.

Rasputin was getting increasingly bold, Dagher mused. For some bizarre reason no one could
fathom, he had kidnapped Hugh de Lourdes and nearly caught both Flamels. Dagher couldn't
imagine why Rasputin would want all three of them, and neither could Flamel. Dagher's initial
assumption that Rasputin had been after the Stone didn't hold water, as Flamel pointed out. Combine
that with the fact that Rasputin had demanded that Flamel NOT produce Stones, and most of Atlantis
was baffled.

There were other issues in the world, of course, but for the time being they were being placed on the
back burner. Intelligence had reported that Sofia Dippet had just sent a large donation to Lou Harold
Pharmaceuticals -- formerly known as Harold-Green. It was obvious that she was trying to urge them
to reconstruct the Stone from whatever detritus the American agents had left behind. She would
likely be disappointed, however, as both Radner and Ariadne had told him that there was absolutely
no way they'd be able to reconstruct ANYTHING. The agents had been quite thorough.

The war between Syrdan and Nestor was getting worse. Basilisks, manticores, Acromantulas, and
other creatures were "accidentally" being transported to the main front on Syrdan. It appeared that
Andrea Markali had resigned herself to the fact that she wouldn't get American support and decided
to get creative. Dagher suspected that Syrdan wouldn't be able to last much longer. The yahoo had
taken complete control of the southwestern part of the island and were threatening to march on
Syrdasch. With limited Muggle technology in their hands, an individual Muggle likely wouldn't be
able to do much. Throw in a few tens of thousands, however, and things got tricky. There was a
spell which would exterminate Muggles, but use of such a spell would almost certainly get Syrdani
leaders executed for war crimes.

Italy also was having problems. A strong secessionist movement had abruptly started brewing in the
southern half of the country, and to make matters worse it looked as if many of the missing wizards
from the Ministry had defected to the south and were now consolidating their power. The Liga Nord,
the peninsula's northern independence movement, was all for this. With the Liga Nord in control of
the north and secessionist gangs in the south, Rome had its hands full -- and didn't have wizards it
could rely on.

Dagher pushed all of those thoughts out of his mind as he and at least ten other people made their
way into the interrogation chamber which was holding the captured Black Fist vampire. Although
Edvard had been administered Veritaserum, the vampire had been quite cooperative up to this point.
It was obvious that he didn't want the wizards hitting him with sunlight again. And considering that
the interrogation chamber had windows and Atlantis was on the surface, all the questioners needed to
do was tie him up and shove him into the sunlight.

The interrogator nodded as Dagher walked into the room. "We're ready to begin, sir. We've hit him
with a bunch of Stunning spells as well as Veritaserum doses, both for his good and ours. We don't
want him thrashing around, falling into the sunbeams, and frying himself. You wouldn't believe how
strong this man is."

Dagher grunted. "I'm not surprised. Vampires can be tough to deal with, especially if they turn bad
on you. I take it he's still behaving?"

"Yes, sir. I can tell he wants to get out of here, but he knows there's no way he's leaving here with
the sun out. Maybe he figures that if he behaves well we'll let him off easily."

Another of the Aurors snorted. "Let him off? He opened up on us with a machine gun!"

The vampire rolled his eyes. "You attacked us first. We did it in self-defense!"

Dagher waved him off irritably and sat down across from the prisoner. "Spare us the philosophical
discussion, Edvard. We need to talk to you about your friend Rasputin now. Do you know who I
am, Edvard?"

Edvard nodded. "I do. You're Grand Mugwump Dagher, are you not?"

"Yes. I apologize if we've done you any harm to this point. That blast of sunlight must have hurt, I
suspect."

The vampire winced. "It did, sir, and I'd appreciate it if you didn't do it again."

"We won't, Edvard, unless you force us to. At any rate, let's talk. You work for Rasputin, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where is he, and what are his plans? And why is he recruiting vampires?"

Edvard shrugged. "I haven't seen him much. He generally visits every so often, welcomes in the
Black Fist members as they arrive, and shuttles them off to the island. He's recruited my people so
we can make them half-vampires and give them some extra stamina and faster reflexes."

Several Aurors began muttering to themselves uncomfortably. DAGHER knew enough about vampires that Black Fist half-vampires could be a problem, particularly if they were spellcasters. Cautiously, he asked: "You're making people into half-vampires?"

"Yes, sir."

"How many vampires are working for him, and how many people have your kind...modified?"

EDVARD looked angry for a moment, and DAGHER kicked himself for using the words "your kind". However, the prisoner answered the question. "We've got a few vampires interested in Black Fist, but I'm the only full member. I've done all the conversion, and so far I've transformed about 50 wizards and 80 Muggles."

IGOR ROMANOV swore. "Fifty vampire wizards. Wonderful."

EDVARD continued. "I administered the bites, and the new half-vampires are recuperating on the island right now. I've paired them up so they can watch either in case they start to get too attached to their new...impulses."

DAGHER frowned. "How many men do you have there?"

"Maybe four hundred, all armed to the teeth."

"Yet only a third opted for these vampire abilities?"

EDVARD grinned. "I gave them fair warning about what happens when a half-vampire gives in to his impulses. It was only appropriate that they know everything so they could make an informed decision."

DAGHER breathed a sigh of relief at this -- finding yourself facing 130 vampires was a lot better than having to deal with 400. The Grand Mugwump went on: "All right, so now we know about the vampires. Now, to Rasputin. Where is Rasputin now, and what island are you referring to? What is Rasputin's plan, and why did he threaten the British Minister of Magic?"

There was a long pause, and the vampire's face grew pale. It suddenly occurred to DAGHER that the prisoner may not be magically allowed to spill the beans on Rasputin. The prisoner's face contorted as the Veritaserum's demand that he speak his secrets fought with the spell which demanded that Edvard keep silent.

Finally, Edvard sighed. "It's obvious you're going to imprison me for attacking your men, so I might as well put myself out of my misery and talk. Rasputin has been shuttling the cultists to the island of Buyan so they can protect the island when Rasputin brings back Koschei on New Year's Eve."

The Aurors began shouting at each other in incredulity. Igor Romanov's eyes went as wide as saucers as DAGHER raised his hand. "Guys, don't overreact. Those are probably code words. He may not be high enough in the organization to know what locations they refer to."

The prisoner, who appeared to be aging rapidly, shook his head and turned to Igor. "No, sir, this is the real thing. Koschei the Deathless has a Horcrux, and that has kept him alive all these years. I can
tell you are a Russian, sir. You probably know the tale, or at least the little which has made it to our time since the Black Death."

Dagher looked at the prisoner and then at one of the Aurors. "Could he be lying? Even under the Veritaserum?"

The Auror shook his head. "I gave him enough to make a politician tell the truth. Also, he's aging -- that has to be a curse he triggered for speaking the truth. I'd believe him if I were you."

Dagher's mind raced as the vampire's hair started to turn gray. They didn't have much time left. Frantic, he yelled at the Aurors to apply Legilimency to the prisoner. It took a good three people to overwhelm the vampire's natural defenses, but they eventually made it to the point where they were able to probe his mind.

Time ticked by, and Dagher watched as the Legilimens's blood drained from their faces. Finally, one of them shuddered and turned to Dagher. "I caught a few shots of Rasputin in there talking to, and biting, several known Black Fist members. Rasputin seems absolutely convinced that he's going to be able to bring Koschei back and mentions a Fidelius protecting the island of Buyan. Rasputin says he's the Gatekeeper, or Koschei's Secret-Keeper. He's been the Gatekeeper for over eighty years."

Dagher didn't like where this was going. Although he didn't know the location of Buyan, he had seen documents deep in the bowels of Atlantis which claimed that Koschei had had a Gatekeeper. The hypothesis was that the Gatekeeper was the highest-ranking wizard on the Russian leader's advisory board (or equivalent), and it would change only when the wizard died. Upon the Gatekeeper's death, the spell would automatically look up the next leader and determine the Gatekeeper from that. The vast majority of the time, the Gatekeeper probably didn't even know what this mythical island he had dreamed up was referring to. But now...

If everything had gone as planned and Rasputin had died when he was said to have died, Igor Romanov -- or possibly Tsar Alexei himself -- would have likely qualified as the Gatekeeper. However, all of those plans had gone out the window when Rasputin had created his Horcrux. Rasputin would be immortal -- and the permanent Gatekeeper -- unless that Horcrux was destroyed. Where the Horcrux was, no one knew. Simply destroying Rasputin's physical body would not get Atlantis any closer to Buyan as it would render the Atlanteans incapable of contacting the Gatekeeper.

Dagher realized what had to be done. They had to find Rasputin's Horcrux -- or at least Rasputin -- and neutralize him before he could bring back Koschei. And they had to do it VERY quickly. This had to be a legitimate threat -- hell, the return of Koschei would certainly explain how rapidly the DEFCON readings were worsening!

He turned and faced the men behind him. "Gentlemen, this is very disturbing. I remember seeing a document in the bowels of Atlantis which supports this man's story. The position of Gatekeeper stayed in the Russian cabinet, which is understandable for someone with Koschei's background. It passed to its successor with the death of the previous Gatekeeper. Rasputin was part of Nicholas's cabinet. And if he had a Horcrux so he never died..."

People muttered in horror as Dagher spun and grabbed hold of Edvard's lapel. "Tell us where Buyan is! NOW! What does Koschei want?"

Edvard, his voice increasingly hoarse, shook his head. "I can't. He hasn't told anyone until they're en
route to Buyan, and once they land on Buyan they aren't leaving until Koschei is brought back."

Dagher cursed silently to himself. Rasputin was playing it smart: everyone who knew about Buyan was finding himself ON Buyan so no one else could get to him.

Edvard continued. "Besides, I wouldn't be able to tell you anyway. I'm not the Secret-Keeper."

Dagher didn't like this at all. Turning back to the Aurors, he told them to Legilimens the fading vampire once more to see if they could pick the location of Buyan out of his head and bypass the Fidelius. A few more minutes went by, and the Aurors glared at the vampire furiously as the prisoner withered in his chair and finally fell to the floor, dead. There was a flash as his body disappeared and transformed itself into the hideous batlike shape that was the vampire's natural form.

Dagher rounded on the head Auror. "Well?"

The head Auror raised his hands helplessly. "As far as I can tell, he was telling the truth. He didn't know. Either that, or he'd been Obliviated."

"Did he know why Rasputin threatened Flamel?"

"No."

"Shit! Did you at least get an idea as to what Koschei wants?"

"He doesn't seem to know that either. I'm guessing the only person who does is Rasputin at this point, and he's probably spending most of his time on or around Buyan."

Dagher looked around the room and saw the sea of somber faces looking back at him. However, not all was lost, as one man commented: "Actually, I suspect that we DO know where Buyan is, at least its general vicinity."

Dagher glanced at him. "You do? Where?"

The man grinned. "The vampire said Buyan was an island, and that matches the story which has been handed down since the Black Death. If Rasputin is shuttling everyone to this island from Constanta, it would seem logical for the island to be pretty near Constanta."

Igor got it immediately and gritted his teeth. "It's in the Black Sea. It's got to be."

Dagher smile and punched his fist in the air. "And Ndukaku's Apocalypsometer target is probably pointing right at it! Well done!"

Igor shook his head. "It's useless. We may know where the island IS, but without a way to break through the Fidelius we can't actually GO to it."

Dagher winced. "Damn, Your Highness, you're right. All right people! Everyone put pn your thinking caps and get to work. We've got one week until the end of the world, and we're going to do everything we can to stop it!"

To be continued...
Update #481: Michal Oy-Veyed

19 TO GO

----------

Saturday, December 28, 1996
Muslims for Humans Headquarters
[location classified]
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/3.1%

----------

NEXT UP: Sodomized Hussein

----------

Salah Antoun figured watched as the Syrian militants unloaded the boxes of fertilizer from the truck. As far as he could tell, everything was there and accounted for. They had enough resources to develop a relatively powerful bomb. The question was: how were they going to deliver it to the Israeli Ministry of Magic and get away with it?

Going through the Nephilim was a nonstarter. First, there was a reason their group was called Muslims for Humans. Not only were the Nephilim not Muslim, but they weren't even human. Granted, they LOOKED human, and could have passed for human had someone shrunk them to half their normal size. However, anyone that big must have come out of a djinn's bottle or something like that. As one would have suspected from infidels, they had no interest in following the word of the Prophet voluntarily. Unlike most infidels, however, they were strong enough to wear thick armor most of the time and weren't easy to convince using weapons.

This implied that the device would have to be delivered to the Ministry using mundane means, which would be extremely difficult. It wasn't as if Muggles never came in and out of the Ministry: the building had a secret Muggle entrance which allowed people like Benjamin Netanyahu access to the facility. The problem was that Antoun suspected that there were security checkpoints in place inside the Muggle entrance to protect the wizards and any Muggle bigwigs who were in the area. They would have likely been able to fool an Israeli soldier by hiding it in bales of hay and so forth, or disguising it as something else. However, he doubted that the group would have been able to fool the wizards, particularly after the American and Bulgarian Ministries of Magic had already been attacked.

Fortunately, they wouldn't have to rely on the Muggle entrance. One of his colleagues had found herself cursed with a trait which she had been ashamed of at first but which, thank Allah, would come in instrumental in this operation. Both she and her husband had been worried that they may have inherited some of the Wizarding genes and had taken genetic tests to reassure themselves that they were human. He had been human, much to his relief. She, however, had been outed as a Q-only witch.

The fact that they had Q-only witch had their disposal made their life much easier. Although she refused to take classes in Apparition and other Wizarding skills, much to her credit, the fact that she could hold a wand (even though she disliked doing so) would come in handy here. All the Muslims
for Humans personnel had to do was waylay a Ministry employee who was wearing a burqa, steal her wand, and dress the Q-only witch up in her garb. There were enough religious Muslims in the Ministry for this to be doable, and with only the woman's eyes visible it wasn't out of the realm of possibility that the Ministry officials wouldn't realize that there was an impostor under the robe.

The Muslims for Humans personnel would then pressure the captive Ministry employee for information about other entrances, including a few which allowed wizards -- widely believed to be anyone with a Q when it came to spell detection -- access to the Ministry if they flushed themselves down the toilet. The terrorist would then pose as an ordinary Muggle shopper and buy an Extendabag, a bag enchanted with the now-ubiquitous Extendatent charm. She would stuff the explosives into the bag (how ironic to be using a magical item here!), hide the bag under her robe, and enter the Ministry through the toilet after hours. She would then plant the bomb in a closet or somewhere appropriate like that, set the timer so it would go off at 8 AM, and then exit the way she came in. Piece of cake. With luck, the entire facility would collapse. The captive witch would be given the opportunity to flee after the attack, and she would almost certainly take advantage of it. However, all she would do would be to say Muslims for Humans had been behind it -- which was kind of the point.

There were several complications with this plan, however. The first involved how exactly they were going to keep sure the captive witch didn't escape, either by Apparition or by hexing her captors. Simply pointing guns at her wouldn't help as witches could always Apparate on the spur of the moment -- the guns wouldn't do much good if she disappeared before they could fire. Antoun supposed that the Q-only witch could grab her wand after the terrorists had knocked her out. He doubted that she would try to escape without her wand.

Another major complication involved the timer. Antoun knew enough about magic to know that magic tended to mess with electrical equipment. Although it was extremely likely that the wizards had hacked up the Ministry of Magic so that Netanyahu's computers would fry when he visited, there was always the possibility that an electronic timer would fail to function properly. Fortunately, there were always analog options: a bit obsolete, but obsolescence was actually a virtue here.

There could also be an issue as to where exactly the bomb should be placed. Simply sticking it in the first closet she found wouldn't do any good if all the terrorist blew up was a bunch of brooms. For all Antoun knew, most of the important areas of the Ministry of Magic had additional security requirements which the Q-only witch's newly-"acquired" ID card wouldn't give her access to. She would also likely not have much time to explore much of the facility before planting the bomb.

There was another possibility: that she stay behind and detonate the device as a suicide bomber. Neither she nor her husband liked the idea all that much: they were fond of Allah, but weren't THAT fond of Him. Normally, they would have just reassigned the infiltration to someone else who would have been willing to blow herself up. Except there wasn't anyone else.

Antoun watched as the last box of fertilizer was unloaded and the terrorist began taking out boxes full of heavy weapons. If Allah decided that it would be impossible, or unfeasible, for them to break into the Ministry of Magic without alerting anyone, then the Muslims for Humans personnel would start attacking Nephilim with their new bazookas and so forth. It was fairly obvious that neither the Israelis nor the Palestinians were particularly fond of the giants, and Antoun suspected that one or both of them would join him to get the giants out of there. That would likely draw people out of the Ministry to defend the Nephilim, which in turn would allow the Q-only witch easier access to the facility.

Regardless of how this went, this would be a difficult task. However, Allah often demanded
sacrifices from His followers, and this would be no different.

---------

Buyan

---

At least it was warm, thought Hugh. They could have dragged him over to this island and left him to
die out in the forest somewhere. However, they were at least courteous enough to leave him and his
rotating guard a tent of their own.

They're not going to kill me, he thought, as they obviously want me to create a Stone for them. Since
they were unable to abduct my master and his wife, they have no other option but wait for me to do
it. It would probably be to my benefit not to tell them that I actually CAN'T do it without the
instructions in my Pensieve.

He had gotten a brief glimpse of the island before they had shoved him into this tent. It didn't look
familiar, which was somewhat surprising as he thought he knew the area around the Black Sea pretty
well. How could someone misplace an island a good ten miles across?

He answered his own question with a frown: Fidelius Charm. Koschei must have cast the Fidelius on
him and made himself the Secret-Keeper. However, that didn't make sense, he realized. If Koschei
was the Secret-Keeper, and he wasn't around, how had Rasputin been able to gain access to it?
Rasputin and Koschei had never been active at the same time, so Koschei would have never had the
opportunity to tell him!

The tent flap opened and Rasputin made his way into the tent. He seemed very excited and was
completely unconcerned that Hugh would try anything. The simple truth was Hugh couldn't do
anything: six people were pointing wands at him and the tent was blocked against Apparition.

Rasputin smiled evilly at him. "How are you doing, Mr. de Lourdes?"

Hugh glared at him. "Fairly well, considering you've stuffed me in this tent."

The Mad Monk laughed. "Don't worry, we're going to take good care of you. You are going to
make a very good hostage, after all."

Hugh's eyes shot up. "Let me guess. You're going to tell my master you'll kill me unless he gives you
a Stone."

Rasputin's smirked. "That would be a logical thing for us to do."

"Indeed, it would. And it would be absolutely barbaric. I thought you were beyond that, but I see
you are no better than a fourteenth-century warlord."

Rasputin muttered something into one of his attendants' ears, and the man bowed and left. Turning
back to his prisoner, he smiled once more. "Fourteenth century warlords could do what they did
because they had immense power over other people. Why can't I do this when I've got so much
power here?"

Hugh shook his head angrily. "He'll never create a Stone for you. Never. He sacrificed his own
immortality to keep it out of the hands of people like you."

Rasputin looked thoughtful for a moment. Suddenly, his grin widened. "We will see, Mr. de
Lourdes. We will see."
The two men spoke for a few more minutes. Hugh found, much to his dismay, that Rasputin was keeping most of the information very close to his vest. The Russian was being smart, Hugh realized, and smart villains were tough to deal with. Although Rasputin was making sure that Hugh wouldn't escape, he wasn't telling Hugh anything which could have helped his adversary in case Hugh DID manage to escape.

Hugh sighed. "I can't believe you're going to try to bring back Koschei. Although I was too young at the time to remember many of the details, both my father and my master told me about Koschei. My master said that he started working on the Philosopher's Stone so he could help undo some of the damage caused by Koschei!"

Rasputin rubbed his hands together as the man came in with a ceramic bottle and two small crystal goblets. "Koschei is a misunderstood man, my friend. Besides, I believe I have something for him which will make him look upon me favorably."

Hugh jerked his head at the bottle. "And what would that be? Are you going to get him drunk? The Ministry officials will be all over you!"

Rasputin shook his head. "They won't be all over me thanks to this Fidelius Charm. And as far as this little potion goes, I believe you may be somewhat familiar with it."

The Mad Monk grinned like a schoolboy as tilted the ceramic jug and poured a glowing white liquid out into them. Hugh's jaw nearly hit the floor when he realized what it was.

"Oh my God! Is that what I think it is?"

In response, Rasputin handed one of the vials to Koschei and lifted the other in his hand. "I'd like to propose a toast to Dr. Nicholas Flamel, our mutual benefactor."

Hugh took a whiff of the potion in the vial and shrieked in horror. It was the Elixir of Life, all right. Rasputin had a Stone!

Rasputin nodded at him savagely. "Drink up, Mr. de Lourdes. We've got a lot more where that came from. We don't need to worry about wasting it."

Hugh downed the potion -- it couldn't hurt, after all. How had he done it? He couldn't imagine his master caving in. Yet that was the only other option, as all of the illegally-produced Stones had been confiscated!

Hold on a second, he thought. That's a decent amount of Elixir he's got there. There's no way my master could have recreated the Stone and produced that much on such short notice, let alone manage to get it to Buyan! This meant Harold-Green.

Had Rasputin brokered a deal with Harold-Green to produce an extra Stone and hand it over when no one was looking? It was a distinct possibility, especially if someone from Black Fist infiltrated the company and produced a Stone...or Stones. Hugh shuddered at thought of a mass-produced Philosopher's Stone in the hands of a criminal.

Rasputin's sinister laugh echoed in the tent as he pointed his wand at Hugh once more. "Thank you for allowing me to share the toast with you. Now, if you don't mind, I think I'll Obliviate you to make sure that you don't tell anyone about the Elixir..."
British Ministry of Magic
- - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -

Flamel's aide threw the scrolls all over the place. "No, I don't know where they took him! The owls are returning empty-handed!"

Flamel swore. "Get me the Romanovs. Hell, get me Atlantis! I want 24-hour guards around my wife!"

------------------

Hall of Portraits
Atlantis
- - - - - - - - - -

Dagher looked at Grand Mugwump Zerind's portrait and frowned. "What do you mean, you can't tell me where it is? You know where it is! You sent everyone over there to take out Koschei!"

The fourteenth-century Mugwump grimaced. "I indeed know. However, I'm no longer the Secret-Keeper. I can't tell you."

"What do you mean, you're no longer the Secret-Keeper? Olga Koscheiva told you and died, making you the Secret-Keeper!"

Zerind looked at him apologetically. "Remember the nature of the Fidelius Charm, Wizard Dagher. It has to be stored in a living soul. When I died, I lost my ability to store the secret."

Dagher's eyes widened in horror. "Oh shit. You're probably right. The position of Secret-Keeper passed to your Aurors after you died, then?"

"I would suspect so. And judging from the fact that you're telling me it's almost 1997, they're obviously dead too by now."

"Did you jot down any notes about Buyan's location while you were Secret-Keeper?"

"They were put in my Pensieve, which has almost certainly been erased or possibly even lost during the centuries. All I can say is see if anyone else in this room was in on the secret and took some notes before he died."

Dagher looked at the wall full of portraits. "That's going to take forever!"

Zerind nodded. "Indeed, it may. However, it's the only chance you've got. The library in the vaults was too extensive for me to pore through everything even in my day. Nowadays, it's probably intractable."

---------

Baghdad
- - - - - -

Dear Death Eater Followers:

Your moment has arrived. Atlantis may have gotten wind of part of our operation. The time has come for the diversion we've been planning.

**Execute Operation Nineveh.**

Good luck, and may Allah be with you.
Update #482: Sodomized Hussein

18 TO GO

Sunday, December 29, 1996
Presidential Palace
Iraq
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/4.8%

Saddam Hussein was pleased with the way the recruitment of the wizards had gone so far. Most of
the members of his new Ministry of Magic were in fact Muslim, just as he had hoped. There were
both Sunnis and Shi'ites in the group, and much to his amazement they were actually getting along.
Perhaps the rumors that the wizards were more tolerant of social distinctions were true.

There were several hundred wizards in his service now, and he had given them lavish apartments in
a tony neighborhood in Baghdad. Although the apartments were veritable slums compared to the
magical buildings he'd read about, they seemed to be pretty grateful.

He wondered whether it was time to start picking on Iran and/or Kuwait again. He had no idea if the
Iranians had wizards. However, he knew the Kuwaiti didn't. That gave him a bit of a tactical
advantage. Granted, there was always the possibility that the Americans would try to get involved to
maintain their hold on Middle Eastern oil. Hopefully he'd be able to fend them off by threatening
magical attacks on Israel and on American civilians.

He caught a brilliant flash of red light out of the corner of his eye and looked up from his desk to take
in an amazing sight: one of his Ministry of Magic members casting spells in the corridor outside his
apartment. What the hell was going on here? He reached into the desk for a small handgun as he
asked one of the wizards for an explanation.

The wizard's response was worrisome: "Mr. President, stay down! There are Black Fist assassins in
the building! They're trying to overthrow you and take control of your oil!"

Saddam growled. "Black Fist? Those Russian crazies? What would they need oil for when they've
got magic?"

"I don't know! Now, if you would excuse me, I've got some bad guys to stun!"

Saddam let the guy continue his fight as he pressed a button on the bottom of his desk. The button
was connected to a secret door which led to an emergency exit, to be used in just such a scenario.
The wizards couldn't take him out if he wasn't there, could they?
There was only one problem: the button didn't seem to work. It must have been shorted out by all of the magic in the corridor, he thought. But if that were the case, why were all of the hotlines on his telephone starting to light up? Hoping that the attackers hadn't blocked his secret exit, he made sure his gun was loaded and headed for a closet. It was a tight fit, but he made it in. He opened the door a crack so he could see out.

The fight lasted for a couple of more minutes. Finally, the flurry of colored lights subsided and five people in Ministry robes walked into his office. Someone cast a spell, and Saddam felt a brief chill go down his spine. The caster smiled and walked right over to his closet. Opening the door, he smiled. "The palace is secure, sir: the Black Fist members have been run off."

Saddam smiled. "That's good news. I'm glad to have you on our side."

The wizard saluted and stood aside. "Indeed, sir, you're lucky you recruited us. Now, I recommend you head over to the phone to see what all those messages are about. I'll cast a spell on you to make sure that you aren't disturbed while you do this."

Saddam thanked the wizard and began hurrying back to his desk. Virtually every hotline was active now -- were the Black Fist people trying to take over the whole country? He reached for the handset as a grinning Ministry member pointed a wand at him and spoke two words.

"Avada Kedavra!"

Huh? Wasn't that --

Making sure that the security cameras had been shorted out, the Death Eater shoved the Iraqi dictator's body out of the way and reached for the handset. Chuckling to himself, he lifted the Muggle contraption. "Hello?"

"We've got a problem here! There are people in robes and masks attacking our forces here! It's a surprise assault, and we're getting mowed down! We need help!"

The Death Eaters stifled laughter as the wizard held up a hand and spoke once more. "Sir, this is Wizard Khan from the Ministry of Magic. I'm in charge of the president's magical guard."

"Where's Saddam?"

"He's somewhere safe now, where no one can hurt him. We've fended off some attackers and are cleaning up here."

The Death Eaters grinned at that. It was the truth, wasn't it?

The soldier on the other hand spoke quickly. "Khan, do you have any forces you can spare us? We're getting annihilated by what look like science fiction laser blasts!"

The wizard thought he heard a scream in the background. Feeling a little relieved that everything was going as planned, he considered his response. Finally: "We'd like to send someone down there. Unfortunately, there are attacks all over the country right now and we're stretched very thin. Furthermore, we're going to need a decent number of wizards here just in case the bad guys sent reinforcements after Saddam. We may be able to spare one or two people, but that's it. I'm sorry. You'll have to make do with what you've got."
The soldier sounded furious. "What good is a Ministry of Magic if you can't protect the -- SHIT!"

There was the sound of a phone handset being dropped on the floor, followed by several swears and screams. The Death Eater suspected he knew what was going on, and he wasn't surprised to hear someone shout "Avada Kedavra" on the other end of the line. Seconds later, there was a heavy thump which was the unmistakable sound of a body hitting the ground.

The Death Eater hung up the call. Unless he was highly mistaken, the soldier didn't have much to say anymore.

White House

Clinton stared at his aide in disbelief. "What did you say?"

The aide spoke so quickly and excitedly the president could barely understand him. "Sir, we're hearing rumors that there has been a coup in Iraq. Saddam Hussein is out of power, and there are unconfirmed reports that he is dead."

The Secretary of State gaped at the aide. "Who did it?"

"We're still not sure. However, there were reports of wizards attacking military bases."

The Secretary of State frowned. "Iraq has a volunteer Wizarding force, if I recall correctly?"

Clinton nodded. "I believe so. You think they turned on their Muggle overlords and tried to take over the country, much like what Voldemort did?"

The Secretary of State turned back to the aide. "It's a disturbing possibility. Mr. Pike, whose side are the wizards on, the attackers or the defenders?"

"From the reports that are coming in, the attackers."

"Did they face any magical opposition?"

"Very little, if any. It looks like an inside job. They caught the government completely unprepared."

There was a flash of light as Persephone Ariadne Apparated into the room. Normally, it was impossible for people to Apparate into the White House. However, high-ranking Department of Magic officials got special dispensation.

Ariadne's face was grim. "They're Death Eaters, or at least the Death Eaters are being framed for it. Word has just come in, Mr. President."

Everyone turned to her, and Clinton closed his eyes. "How do you know, Secretary?"

Ariadne shrugged. "They set the Dark Mark loose over the presidential palace, sir. What's more, there are rumors that the Dark Mark has appeared all over the place there: military bases, oil refineries, major cities."

Clinton stared at Ariadne in horror. "That's impossible! They've got to be someone impersonating the Death Eaters! The Death Eaters were all destroyed during Judgment Day!"
"Apparently not, sir. There are enough reports of people wearing Death Eater masks to make this plausible."

"Anyone can wear a Death Eater mask!"

"Yes, but we've got hundreds of attackers here. Unless they've been mass-producing Death Eater masks, we've got to consider the possibility that some Death Eaters were left behind after Judgment Day and orchestrated this."

"What do you think the odds are that this is Rasputin and not the Death Eaters? I heard you guys talking about him."

Ariadne thought for a moment. "I'd say maybe 30%. Rasputin hasn't shown any interest in the Middle East. Besides, it would be out of character for him to suddenly show himself now after laying low for so long."

Another terrible thought occurred to the president. "Could the Black Fist organization, Syrdan, or Tsalasia join forces with these characters? Could they be financing this attack?"

Ariadne nodded slowly. "It's a distinct possibility, sir, but we have no way to tell at this point."

The Secretary of State chimed in. "Are they attacking the oil refineries like Saddam did during the Gulf War?"

"Not yet, sir. However, I wouldn't be surprised if they hold the world's oil hostage to get their point across. The wizards aren't dependent on oil for their power, after all, so they have nothing to lose. Fortunately, I suspect right now they're still consolidating power, so we may have some time to prepare and try to defend the oil pipelines."

"What is Atlantis doing?"

"Nothing yet. Atlantis is still at high DEFCON 3. However, they are watching the situation closely."

"What do you recommend we do?"

Ariadne paused for a moment, then sighed. "Latest reports have the DEFCON meter at 4.8%. The barrier for Atlantis intervention is DEFCON 2, or 5.0%. At the rate things are going, this could very easily hit DEFCON 2, at which point Atlantis gets involved. I'd recommend a draft of all capable wizards, to be supervised by my department under DEFCON 2 and by Atlantis if DEFCON 2 or higher. We won't deploy them until we have no choice."

Clinton nodded. "Make it so. Do you think that this will go all the way to Judgment Day again?"

Ariadne shuddered. "I doubt it, sir. Iraq isn't a nuclear power, and we need nukes and other weapons of mass destruction to get the situation dangerous enough to threaten mankind as a whole. That's a good thing, because we will not be able to use the Judgment Day protocol again for another four and a half years."

The president told the Secretary of State. "Have the news media already found out about this?"

The Secretary of State nodded. "I sure hope not. Secretary Ariadne?"
Ariadne looked at her feet in shame. "CNN’s website just broke the story, including the fact that wizards are involved. There are reports of panic buying all over the world. We tried to Obliviate people, but they got it onto the Internet. And once it's on the Internet...you know what happened last time."

"Shit!"

-------------------
Hall of Portraits
Atlantis
-------------------

The late Grand Mugwump Chen (1421-1527) looked at Dagher apologetically. "Yes, I supervised a mission to Buyan to try to find Koschei's Horcrux. I jotted down some notes about its location shortly before I launched it in 1494."

"How did you find out about it?"

"A document of the late Grand Mugwump Zerind's which was in my predecessor's possession."

Dagher looked at him hopefully. "Do you think you would be able to identify this document?"

Chen shook his head. "I doubt it's still around, and if it is, it's in the vault where --"

Dagher finished his statement: "-- there is so much junk it will be hard to find it. I'm amazed Dialonis was able to find Noha-Pishtin's work about Judgment Day!"

Chen chuckled. "I'm not. Judgment Day was a rather big event, and as you know there's a whole section devoted to the two Judgment Days."

Dagher bit his lip. "Three. We had one six months ago."

Chen's eyes widened. "God help us. You'd have figured out we'd learn from these mistakes!"

"Well, apparently we don't, and we don't have time to chat about Judgment Day OR go through the whole vault. This means the only chance we have is to try to find documents outside of Atlantis, which means visiting your colleague's homes. We'll start with yourself. Did you jot down any notes about Buyan which we may be able to find?"

Chen nodded. "I did, but I put them in the Pensieve --"

"-- which has likely been erased and reused. I know. All right, think back to some of the people you spoke with and sent to Buyan. Were any of them famous? Did they have estates somewhere where they wrote diaries which may have contained this information? If they wrote entries while they were Secret-Keeper we may be able to not only get the information but become Secret-Keepers now that he's dead."

Chen thought for a moment. "I only remember a few people. Charles St. Pierre, Lone Wolf, Nicholas Flamel, John--"

Dagher abruptly held up a hand in amazement...and hope. "Nicholas Flamel? Did you say Nicholas Flamel?"
Chen nodded. "Indeed I did. The reason I remember him was because he was supposedly over 140 at the time, but he didn't look a day over 60. I wish I could have aged like him! Hell, there were jokes running around that he actually had a Philosopher's Stone! We brought him along because he was one of the few people left who dated from Koschei's time and remembered what Koschei did when he was active."

Dagher was speechless. He couldn't believe his luck as he reasoned it out himself. Olga Koschieva tells Zerind. She dies, making him Secret-Keeper. After he dies, Zerind informs Chen in writing. That makes Chen a Secret-Keeper. Chen tells Flamel, and Flamel outlives him. Which means --

Thanking Chen profusely, he spun on his heel and raced towards the door. He now knew why Rasputin had targeted Flamel...and the other two ancients, considering that they would likely have become Secret-Keepe  

Rasputin had targeted Flamel because of what Flamel knew. Rasputin knew that Flamel could blow the whistle on Buyan.

He raced down the corridor and nearly collided with three of his aides who had been running in his direction. All four men went down in a jumble of robes.

One of the aides spoke first. "Sir, thank God we've found you! We've got a problem --"

Dagher bellowed right over him. "GET NICHOLAS FLAMEL OVER HERE, NOW!"

To his amazement, the aide shook his head. "I'm afraid we don't have time for Dr. Flamel right now. The Death Eaters have re-emerged and taken over Iraq."

Dagher froze. "WHAT?"

To be continued...

Update #483: I Thought Old People Didn't Know How To Use Computers

17 TO GO

-------------

Monday, December 30, 1996
British Ministry of Magic
London
United Kingdom
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 2/5.0%
-------------

NEXT UP: Is There a Draft In Here?
-------------

The transparent bubble appeared around Nicholas Flamel with no warning, neatly slicing the table in two. The British Minister of Magic looked around the room in horror and found the expression on his face mirrored on those of his colleagues.
Flamel was the first to speak. "I sure as hell hope that I've got a malfunctioning ring. Please don't tell me that this insanity in Iraq has gotten Atlantis to DEFCON 2. I've only got a few years left, and I was really hoping for a more peaceful retirement, especially after Judgment Day."

The deputy Minister of Magic shook his head. "I'm afraid not, sir. The Apocalypsometer just hit 5.0%. Panic is starting to grip the US, and oil prices have risen to $150/gallon as refineries all around the world are starting to hoard the stuff. A few aircraft carriers have left the United States and headed into the Atlantic, ostensibly for 'security measures'. The Middle East looks like it's about to explode. Iran has started to deploy troops over to the border and is requesting assistance from Atlantis. And now that we're at DEFCON 2, they're going to get it."

Flamel grimaced. "Wonderful. Who's been sent over there? If it's the Second Division of the Standing Army, that's Dumbledore's Army, and I would have known about it."

"It's the First Division, sir, the Durmstrang battalion. It's being headed by Stanislav Drakul, who has you know showed promise in the Koreas."

"Not Karkaroff?"

The aide shook his head. "Dagher doesn't want any former Death Eaters anywhere in the area. I think he's being paranoid, but I figure he knows what he's doing."

"I understand. How's Israel reacting to all of this?"

"Israel, strangely enough, appears to be unchanged, at least on the surface. However, I cannot help but suspect Michal Oved is doing something in case the Iraqi wizards head in their direction."

"Are the Nephilim still maintaining control over there?"

"As far as I can tell, yes, which is a miracle in and of itself. Then again, when you've got wizards backing up a bunch of four-meter tall people, you've got a pretty effective deterrent."

"I assume the United States has asked Heseltine to join another coalition against the Iraqis?"

"They haven't yet, but we can assume there's going to be a formal invitation soon. What's interesting here is that this is going to be a VERY widespread coalition, at least at the start since the Death Eaters are EVERYONE's enemy. The Russians are actually backing us for a change, as are the Germans and Chinese. The Saudis are flaming mad as well."

Flamel nodded. "That goes to show, since the Iraqis just gave the former Saudi Minister of Magic the proverbial finger. Has anyone started sending weapons to Iran yet in case the Iranians do invade?"

"Not yet, sir. There's still bad blood between the United States and Iran, as we all know. It looks like the United States doesn't know what to do at this point. They're trying to choose the lesser of two evils, and they don't know who that is yet."

Flamel looked at his feet, shrugged, and took off the ring, causing the Atlantis bubble to wink out. Sitting down heavily in a chair, he scratched his beard. "I can't imagine why this has gotten us up to DEFCON 2. Had I been a betting man, I'd have figured this would push the Apocalypsometer to 3% or so. Not 5%. Something else is going on, and I want to know what it is."
A voice behind him answered that question. "Dr. Flamel, I believe we can answer that question."

Everyone spun as a large group of Atlantis representatives made their way into his office, followed by -- oh great -- a large number of Muggle and Wizarding reporters. The vast majority of them were high-ranking Aurors, undoubtedly being called upon to spearhead the attack on the Death Eaters. What was most surprising, however, was the person leading the delegation: Ambassador Dialonis.

Flamel picked up a Ministry report on the Iraqi takeover and shook it angrily. "Anastasios, what's going on here? Why are all you guys here instead of in Atlantis trying to get rid of those idiots in Baghdad?"

Dialonis looked grave. "Dr. Flamel, we have reason to believe there are two threats at this point. The first, as you know, is the Iraqi incident. There is a second, however, which has the potential of being significantly more serious."

The room was silent for a good twenty seconds. Finally, Flamel said: "You've got to be kidding me. What's possibly worse than the return of the Death Eaters? Wait a minute -- did you lose the damn Resurrection Stone, giving them a chance to bring back Voldemort? I told you to keep --"

Dialonis cut him off. "The Resurrection Stone is safe, Dr. Flamel. However, the primary threat isn't Voldemort. We believe we know what Rasputin's plans are, and we have about 24 hours to thwart them. And for that...we need your help. You're the only person who can do this."

Flamel stared at the former Grand Mugwump incredulously. "Rasputin can wait until we've gotten rid of these guys. I --"

Dialonis interrupted once more. "Rasputin has gone to the secret island of Buyan so he can bring back Koschei. We have testimony under Veritaserum that this is true. You DO remember him, do you not?"

No one moved for a good two minutes, and Flamel stared at Dialonis, absolutely thunderstruck. The Iraqi news bulletin fell from his hand as Flamel shook his head slowly.

"This cannot be happening. No way. You've been Confounded."

Dialonis shook his head. "The evidence is overwhelming, sir. I suspect this has been in the cards for a while, and according to Grand Mugwump Zerind Koschei can only be brought back in a twelve-day period centered on New Year's Eve."

Flamel exploded: "Zerind? Zerind is dead! Has Dagher been chatting with the portraits again? Trying to get inspiration for throwing the Death Eaters out of Iraq, is he?"

One of Aurors stepped forward. "Dr. Flamel, we think we know why Rasputin tried to attack you. It only makes sense if he is indeed trying to bring back Koschei. He believes that you may know the location of Buyan and are a Secret-Keeper for that fact. If he takes you out, plus anyone who could possibly have heard the secret from you, he makes it so we can't interfere with his operation. Is it true? Are you a Secret-Keeper for Koschei?"

Flamel paused once more as the cameras snapped everywhere. Finally: "I do know where it is, and I was sent there back in the late fifteenth century by then-Grand Mugwump Wu Chen, and --"

The Auror talked right over him. "Would you be able to see on a map, even if it is not normally
Flamel, still somewhat confused, nodded. "Yes, I would. Let me guess: the risk of these reports being true is high enough that Dagher has no choice but to divide his forces and send some over to Buyan to deal with Rasputin. And in order to do so, he needs me to blow the whistle on the island."

Dialonis nodded. "I'm afraid so, Dr. Flamel."

The head Auror reached into his robe and pulled out a large map of the Black Sea area, with a thick grid of longitude and latitude lines. "Where is it, Dr. Flamel?"

Flamel looked over the map as everyone held their collective breaths. Finally, he jammed his wand down on what appeared to be an empty spot. "There. The island of Buyan is right there."

Cameras snapped like firecrackers as he removed his wand. When his wand was gone, everyone saw a small island sitting precisely where the wand had been.

The Auror grabbed the map and checked out the coordinates. "44 degrees, 2 minutes north. 29 degrees, 57 minutes east. I think we've got it!"

Flamel shook his head. "You've got it, all right. However, you can't TELL anyone because you're not the Secret-Keeper, and I highly doubt you're going to kill me to spread the word. It has to come out of my hand or out of my mouth."

Dialonis stared at the floor in dismay. "I thought would be a problem, Dr. Flamel. We've got to think --"

Suddenly, one of the news reporters at the back of the room raised her hand. Flamel, increasingly irritated, called on her.

It took a bit of prodding, but the reporter eventually spoke up. "If I would make a suggestion, I work for the Daily Mail and am somewhat familiar with computers. The Daily Mail has a website. If I get you in touch with our software hackers, would you be willing to enter the information onto the Web page? Unless I'm mistaken, anyone given access to the Web page will be able to read it. It will be the Super Bowl Breach, all over again."

Flamel laughed and slammed his fist on the table. "Perfect! Tell every single person who is to set foot on the island to go to that Web page. Do you think it will be able to handle the traffic?"

The reporter gritted her teeth. "I hope so, Minister."

Flamel walked over to her and shook her hand. "Congratulations, Ms. Rowling. You may have just saved the world."

He started making his way out of the room and called back over his shoulder. "On my orders, all of Dumbledore's Army is to start heading over to Buyan. Anyone who is of age in that organization, either the original school organization or the Hogsmeade version, must go to that island within 12 hours or be subject to imprisonment in Azkaban. Anyone who's not of age stays put. It's time for a military draft, and if Atlantis has a problem with it Dagher goes through me. Got that?"

Dialonis smiled. "I would have suggested something similar myself, Dr. Flamel."
The British officers nodded and started issuing the appropriate orders. Cameras flashed as Rowling and Flamel started heading towards the exit. Suddenly, however, Rowling stopped in her tracks with a worried expression on her face.

Flamel looked at her uneasily. "Shit. There's a problem, right."

Rowling blinked and shook her head. "Not really. It's just that someone I know may be affected by this."

Flamel threw up his hands. "We can deal with that later. Let's get Buyan on the map...again."

Flamel headed off, leaving Rowling frozen for a few moments. Slowly, sheepishly, she turned to the rest of the reporters and explained why she was so uneasy.

"Hermione Granger is going to war."

Muslims for Humans Headquarters

Salam Antoun looked at the news report in disbelief. The Death Eaters, the sworn enemies of the human race, had dared take over a Muslim nation? They would pay for that. Allah willing, they would pay for that!

He stared screaming to the rest of his colleagues. "Change of plans! Forget Israel -- they can wait until later! We're only a few hundred miles from Baghdad. We're going to blow the crap out of those Death Eaters!"

Everyone cheered, and no fewer than three people admitted that they had hoping for this new order to come through.

To be continued...

Update #484: Is There a Draft In Here?

16 TO GO

Monday, December 30, 1996
Suburbs of London
United Kingdom
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 2/5.0%

NEXT UP: I Knew Elves Had Some Fight In Them (.5)

Hermione had told Ron a lot about Nirvana, the Buddhist version of paradise. However, her description didn't seem to match what was coming out of the radio in her mother's 1992 Toyota Corolla.

And I forget just why I taste
Ron held onto the door handle for dear life as the car spun around a corner. "Hermione, be careful! Someone almost hit us there!"

Hermione didn't take her eyes off the road. "I'm doing what I can! However, be reasonable. There's only one first drive after you've gotten your driver's license, and I'm going to make the most of it. Besides, you should be accustomed to cars by now -- you flew one into Hogwarts."

Ron's face was turning green. "Yes, we did that. However, I didn't know what we were doing -- and we didn't have other vehicles and buildings we could hit! Can you slow down, Hermione? I'd rather ride a dragon!"

Harry chimed in diffidently from the back seat. "You know, Hermione, he's got a point. Ron's never been in traffic before. Besides, you're not exactly an experienced driver. And there IS slush on the ground."

Hermione sighed, turned down the volume, and slowed down. "Oh, fine. Better be safe than sorry, at least until I put some charms on this vehicle."

The three spent the next couple of hours traveling around London. Hermione showed Ron some of the lesser-known sights. Despite all that had happened over the past year, Ron still wasn't entirely familiar with Muggle London. Nor was Harry, for that matter, since he had been cooped up in the Dursleys' house most of the time. All of the Christmas lights were still on, and people were stampeding into stores in the annual ritual known as the returning of dud Christmas presents.

Ron pointed at a banner in a toy store's window and fell over laughing. "Look at that! £149.95 for a Wizard Chess set! How much do they go for in Hogsmeade, 9 Galleons or something like that? We can make a lot of money off this, Harry!"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Ron, don't you realize that probably every single wizard in this country is thinking the same thing? Besides, it will never work now that Hogsmeade has lowered the security and let Muggles back in again...at least for now. I can't imagine them raising the barriers once more now that the Death Eaters have taken over Iraq. However, what law requires that people act rationally?"

She looked at her watch, an battered analog Timex which had only three hands. "It's starting to get a little late. I think we'd better head home to my parents' house. You two won't mind sharing a bed, won't you? We've got you set up in the guest room."

Ron's eyes narrowed. "Can't you just cast a spell which will turn one bed into two? The Geminio spell is legal again, is it not?"

Hermione shook her head vehemently. "In theory, yes. In practice, where are we going to put the second bed? The house isn't exactly a monstrosity now, is it? Then again, we could always put the second bed outside, I suppose."

Ron shivered at the thought. "And have me freeze to death? I don't think so."

The three students wended their way back through the streets of London and turned onto the street leading to Hermione's house. Harry saw immediately that something strange was going on. There were several television crews parked on her block, and she saw no fewer than three brooms outside.
Cocking his head at Hermione, he asked her if she had been expecting guests.

Hermione shook her head, as puzzled as the other two were. "I haven't. I wonder if they're going to interview me about the attack in Iraq."

Ron snorted. "But you don't know anything about Iraq!"

"I know more about it than you do, Ron. In all fairness, however, we are pretty good people to talk to about the Death Eaters. I'll try to get rid of these people in a hurry so we can break out your new Muggle Christmas presents."

Ron gaped at her. "I've got Muggle Christmas presents? Whoo! Now THOSE would be worth something in the Wizarding world, at least as curiosities!"

Hermione parked the car in the driveway and began fumbling for her door key as she and her two friends made their way to the door. However, she didn't need them, as her mother opened it before she got there.

Mrs. Granger looked serious. "Hermione, an owl stopped by our house and delivered you some mail. It's marked with the seal of the Auror Office of the Ministry of Magic. I haven't opened it, but I've got the impression that it's very important."

Hermione blinked. "The Aurors want to talk to...me?"

"It seems like it, Hermione. Have you done anything wrong?"

All three kids looked at each other and shook their heads as Hermione said, "I don't know of anything, Mum."

Harry suddenly thought of something and began to speak. "Mrs. Granger, did Ron and I get letters as well?"

Hermione's mother shook her head. "No, just her."

"What are all these people here for, Mrs. Granger?"

"I don't know, Harry. They said they would explain what's going on after Hermione read the letter. They claim that they've got some stuff to give her."

Hermione led the trio into the kitchen. "Who's here? What am I getting?"

"I don't know what you're getting, Hermione. However, there seem to be a lot of people here. J. K. Rowling has come, the man with the fake eye is here --"

Hermione grunted. "Alastair Moody?"

"That's him. There's a bloke named Aberforth as well -- he's the old headmaster's brother, right?"

Ron nodded. "Yup, that's him. I liked Albus better."

"I see. What's most surprising of all is that the Minister of Magic has arrived here in person. At least I think he's the Minister of Magic. His name is Nicholas Flamel and he claims to be six billion years old."

The three kids stared at each other for a moment before Hermione spoke. "What is Dr. Flamel doing here when he's supposed to be taking care of Iraq? Is he going to give me a present too?"
To everyone's astonishment, Hermione's mother nodded. "He says he has something for you, and that he doesn't have much time. He also wants you to open the message as soon as possible so everyone can discuss its implications."

Hermione didn't like this. "Implications?"

"That's what he said. Now we don't want to keep the Minister waiting, particularly if what he says is true and Voldemort's men are on the loose in the Middle East. The letter's on the table, next to the washing machine."

"Have you read it, Mum?"

Hermione's mother winced and shook her head. "No, Hermione. I don't want to open official Wizarding correspondences which, for all I know, will explode if the wrong person reads them."

Vaguely unsettled, Hermione walked over to the letter and opened it. She started scanning through it, and her eyebrows suddenly shot up in shock as Rowling, the other reporters, and the wizards began making their way into the kitchen. The room was soon packed with people.

Harry waved his hand at her to get her attention. "Hermione, what's wrong? You look like you've seen a dragon."

Hermione lowered the letter and began shuddering. "This can't be happening. This CANNOT be happening."

Ron rounded on her. "Hermione, what is going on here? I haven't seen you this frightened since we caught you in the bathroom with that troll!"

The voice that answered was Alastair Moody's, and it was surprisingly gentle. "It's an order for a Wizarding military draft, son. All Dumbledore's Army members age seventeen and up are have been ordered to report to the Ministry of Magic by 7 PM today so they can be briefed and transported to the war zone. Failure to do so will result in imprisonment in Azkaban. Miss Granger is of age, so off she goes. And yes, she has to leave within 60 minutes."

Hermione's mother shrieked in horror. "You're sending my baby off to Iraq? You can't do that!"

Moody rounded on her. "She is no longer a baby, Mrs. Granger. She is considered a full adult in the Wizarding world, and she has taken five and a half years of Defense Against the Dark Arts. I should inform you that Dumbledore's Army is now considered the Second Division of the Wizarding Standing Army. Atlantis has us in reserve precisely for situations like this. Hermione has enlisted, and she must therefore serve."

Mrs. Granger sounded desperate. "She can't serve while she's still in school, can she?"

Moody wasn't moved. "Troops currently enrolled at Hogwarts will serve until the Christmas break ends. Once break is over, they will return to Hogwarts and study triple Defense Against the Dark Arts until the end of the year. They will then serve their country once more in the summer, assuming the emergency lasts that long."

Ron and Harry started looking at Moody with determination. "She won't be alone, Professor! We'll go with her!"

Moody shook his head savagely. "No, Mr. Weasley, you will not. The order specifically forbids the call-up of anyone under seventeen."
The Auror turned back to Mrs. Granger, who was sobbing. "Mrs. Granger, you can take some comfort in the fact that I will be there with her. I feel like I owe it to her as her teacher."

"Don't send her to Iraq! She can serve if she has to, but don't send her to Iraq! Send her somewhere safer! What are you going to do with her?"

Moody shook his head. "You don't want to know, and besides, I wouldn't be able to tell you anyway."

Mrs. Granger turned to Flamel. "Can you get her special dispensation? She's done wonders for Muggle-Wizard relations!"

Flamel shook his head. "Much as I would like to, I have to be impartial as Minister and therefore can't make any exceptions. I'm sorry. She has to serve, just like everyone else. If it makes you feel any better, I'm going as well."

Ron blinked at him. "But you're the Minister of Magic! You have to stay behind and keep everything under control!"

Flamel nodded. "I'm aware of that. However, the mission Hermione, Moody, and I will be going on requires expertise which only I have. Besides, I've been to this place before, something virtually no one of this generation can claim."

"Who's going to be running the Ministry while you are out, Dr. Flamel?"

Flamel shrugged as he reached into his pocket and brought out a small box. "My wife. She isn't going to be needed at Hogwarts, at least for now. I'd been hoping Hugh would take the job, but I suspect Hugh is still incommunicado. Now, Hermione, hear me out. I had intended to give you this later, but considering that your mother will probably kill me if I don't do it now I might as well get it out of the way. Would you be so good as to give me a lock of your hair?"

Hermione's eyes widened as she plucked a strand of hair from her head. Pointing at the box, she asked: "My hair...are you going to be Polyjuicing into me?"

The wizards laughed and shook their heads as Flamel accepted the hair. Still chortling, Flamel tapped his wand to the hair and then to the box. The box glowed like a small sun for a moment, then it faded away. Harry had never seen anything glow that brightly. Whatever was involved was very serious magic.

Presenting Hermione with the box, the Minister said. "It's not Polyjuice, Hermione. It's something far more valuable. And you've certainly earned it, considering all that you've done."

Suspicious, Hermione took the box and opened it. Inside it was a small circlet of gem-encrusted gold. The ring took the form of a serpent biting its own tail.

Hermione stared at it in disbelief and showed it to the crowd. "Oh my God. OH MY GOD!"

Ron looked at her in horror. "King William proposed?"

Flamel's eyes widened, and everyone started laughing again. Wiping his eyes, the Minister shook his head. "Now THAT I had never even occurred to me. Go ahead, Hermione, put it on. We hit DEFCON 2 earlier today, so we'll be able to see if it works. Oh, and everyone else get back."

The wizards backed off, with Ron and Hermione convincing Hermione's mother to get out of the way. Taking a deep breath, Hermione put the ring on her finger.
There was a brief flash of light, and a brief cracking sound. When the light had cleared, it revealed Hermione surrounded by a thin, transparent hemisphere. Ron and Harry stared at each other, and then at Hermione. When Ron spoke, his voice was filled with awe. "Hermione, you've got yourself an ATLANTIS RING!"

Moody nodded. "And a broken sink, it looks like -- that barrier cut right through the sink. We'll fix it before we leave."

Hermione's mother gaped at her daughter. "What is this bubble surrounding her?"

Hermione explained. "It's an Atlantis bubble! I'm...flattered to get this! It renders me completely invulnerable to anything short of a direct hit from the Elder Wand or a nuclear weapon! Nothing will be able to hurt me now, Mum!"

Hermione's mother screamed out in joy and raced to hug her daughter, but she didn't get very far before she crashed into the protective shield and fell onto her rear end. Helping her up, Moody explained: "This ring can only be warn by her, and it is one of the greatest rewards a witch or wizard can receive. There are only a two drawbacks to the ring. It is completely airtight, which will prevent poisons and gases from harming the wearer. However, the wearer will have to take it off momentarily to replenish his or her air supply. Second, this engagement will be under DEFCON 2 rules. That means, she will not be able to cast spells out of the ring unless they are in self-defense."

Moody looked at Hermione wistfully. "I've been an Auror for many years, and even I haven't gotten one of those. Getting one at her age is...extraordinary, to say the least."

Hermione took off her ring, and the bubble disappeared. Water started leaking out of the sink as her mother raced over to hug her. Soon, Harry and Ron were doing so as well. Harry had a brief vision of Voldemort killing her, and he shook his head to clear it. Paranoia wasn't good in this situation. However, he couldn't help but think that this could very well the last time he'd see her...in this world at least.

Flamel put his hand on Hermione's shoulder. "You'd better hurry up -- we have to meet at the rendezvous in less than an hour. Let's have Professor Dumbledore give you the sword so you can start packing. There's no time to waste."

Hermione nodded and shook the Minister's hand. Flamel then vanished as Harry turned to Moody and asked: "Sword? What sword?"

Aberforth Dumbledore's deep voice answered that question as he brought an object out of his robe. "This sword, Mr. Potter."

Everyone gasped as the lights from a row of Sylvania bulbs reflected off the gems embedded in the sword of Godric Gryffindor.

Hermione looked at Aberforth in astonishment. "Professor Dumbledore -- I'm flattered once again, but why am I being given this? I have a wand, after all. Besides, this belongs to the school, not to me."

Aberforth smiled. "Yes, and as Gryffindor's Head of House I have a say on who gets it and when. The sword should always go to those in dire need, and if there is any time it should be in the hands of a Gryffindor it should be now, particularly given the stakes in this mission."

Hermione frowned. "But won't the sword get in the way? It's big and bulky. In all fairness, Professor, the only thing I can imagine the sword is good for is destroying Horcruxes."
Aberforth nodded. "Exactly. And that's precisely why you're getting it. There may be up two Horcruxes involved here, and we already know that the sword works well against Horcruxes. As of today, the sword is on loan to you until you return from your mission. These Horcruxes will be difficult to find, and odds are that we won't find them. However, it's better to be prepared in case we get lucky."

Mrs. Granger scratched her head. "What's a Horcrux?"

Aberforth shook his head and smiled. "You don't want to know, Mrs. Granger. Trust me."

Hermione nodded and jerked her head at him as she placed the sword on the table next to her. "Trust him."

Aberforth wished Hermione luck and vanished as abruptly as Flamel had. Moody fixed the sink and followed soon thereafter, leaving Hermione and her friends at the mercy of the reporters. It took a lot of coercion, but eventually Hermione managed to convince everyone that there was no time for interviews. Besides, Hermione wasn't entirely sure where she was going to be deployed yet. Iraq made a lot of sense. However, why would she be going after Horcruxes? Voldemort was already dead. He had no Horcruxes left.

By 6:45, Hermione was all packed, and everyone gathered in the living room one last time. Her mother was a little less nervous, considering that Hermione had been given an Atlantis ring. Her father, who had come in during the packing session, had been caught completely off guard, but even he admitted that if Hermione had been called to duty, she had to serve. Harry and Ron spent a good five minutes each hugging her, and Ron added a few special treats which -- for the first time in almost a year -- didn't earn a reproach from anyone else in the room.

Finally, the time had come. Drawing a deep breath and raising the sword of Gryffindor in a solemn salute, she disappeared into thin air, leaving her civilian life behind her.

To be continued...

-------------

Update #484.5: I Knew Elves Had Some Fight In Them
16 TO GO
-------------
1857Z
Monday, December 30, 1996
Suburbs of London
United Kingdom
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 2/5.0%
-------------
NEXT UP: Uh, You Do Realizes Wizards Don't Rely On Radar
-------------
Hermione rematerialized near an old public toilet with Professor Moody at her side. She blinked at him, put down her suitcase, and frowned. "Uh, Professor, are you sure we went to the right place? We're supposed to be going to the Ministry of Magic, right?"

Moody nodded, his artificial eye scanning the area for watchful Muggles. Hermione still couldn't get over how it swiveled in its socket like that, even after having him (or someone who looked like him)
as a professor for a year and a half.

Seeing nobody other than a stream of wizards and witches heading for the toilets, Moody started stomping his way towards the toilet. "This is one of the entrances to the Ministry, Miss Granger. It's disguised as an old, out-of-order bathroom."

Hermione got it immediately. "It's a secret door, sort of like with the Room of Requirement?"

"Sort of. The toilets in there are actually enchanted so that people who step in them are transported into the Ministry."

Hermione's nose wrinkled. "We flush ourselves in with all of the --"

Moody chuckled. "No, there's no...other stuff that goes in with us. Trust me, it's safe. And it isn't going to smell, either. Now, if you would excuse me, I'll have to get into the men's line."

Hermione took her place at the back of the women's line. If they were going to be flushing themselves in with garbage, these ladies weren't dressed for it. Some of them were wearing some pretty expensive robes, including one woman who looked as if she could have been a model. Now that she thought about it, the woman looked familiar. In fact, unless she was mistaken...

She blurted it out: "Fleur Delacoeur?"

The woman turned around. Sure enough, it was Bill Weasley's girlfriend. She was wearing what appeared to be a formal Beauxbatons uniform, which seemed more or less appropriate for a military draft.

Fleur stared at her. "Hermione Granger, is that you?"

Hermione whistled: Fleur's English had improved greatly. "Yes, Fleur, it's me. You were called up as well?"

Fleur nodded. "I'm in one of the Dumbledore's Army chapters, just as well as you. Besides, I had experience fighting dragons and dealing with danger during the Triwizard tournament. I can only hope that they're not going to have us swim underwater or get lost in enchanted mazes. I'm surprised Harry and Ron aren't here...oh wait, they're not seventeen, right?"

"Nope, they're not. Where's Bill?"

"He's already in the Ministry. I had an errand I had to run first, so I had to come a bit later."

"I see. Do you know what you're going to be doing in Iraq? I assume that's where we're going, after all."

Fleur smiled. "I can't really say. However, I have already been given my instructions. Let's say the powers that be like the fact that I'm partially veela and that I'm capable of seducing men."

Hermione stared at her. "But you're already seeing someone. Besides, doesn't that make you feel like a bit of a...well..."

Fleur actually blushed. "Sort of, to be honest. I'm not particularly thrilled about it myself. However, these are troubled times, and we're going to have to do what we have to do."
Fleur's face grew serious as they entered the women's room. "Hermione, we are going to be in serious danger. This isn't going to be a walk in the park or a vacation. Think of it as being on the same level as the Triwizard Tournament, which you saw firsthand. However, this time it's for real. In this case Dumbledore and Madame Maxime aren't going to be around to bail us out if we get caught by grindylows. If it is our time to go, so be it. Hopefully we'll go out like my fellow Triwizard contestant Viktor Krum: a hero in the Koreas."

Hermione nodded, but she couldn't help think of what happened to the fourth Triwizard champion: struck down unprovoked by one of the nastiest Dark wizards of all time. A Dark wizard who, for all she knew, could have just resurfaced in Iraq. Not wanting to think about that, she turned to the stall in front of her and watched as the woman before her stepped into the toilet, pulled the handle, and vanished.

The toilet transported them into an alcove which seemed to have originally been designed for Floo travel. What was most unusual, however, about the entrance was the fact that there was a laptop computer staring the new arrivals in the face. Floating next to the computer was a sign which read: "ATTENTION: PLEASE READ THE INFORMATION PRINTED ON THE SCREEN TO YOUR LEFT. THIS IS EXTREMELY IMPORTANT AND IT WILL AFFECT YOUR MISSION."

Hermione looked at Fleur in astonishment. "They're using computers in the Ministry now? That's...progressive!"

Alastair Moody's voice echoed out from the corridor beyond the alcove. "They normally don't use computers, Miss Granger. However, this particular operation requires that some information be conveyed electronically. Read what's on the screen and let's go."

Hermione looked at the screen and frowned. "It's from a Daily Mail reporter. That's odd: why would...Oh!" Hermione's tongue froze to the roof of her mouth as the highlighted sentence in the middle of screen caught her attention.

I, Nicholas Flamel, inform you that the Island of Buyan is located in the Black Sea at coordinates 44 degrees, 2 minutes north and 29 degrees, 57 minutes east.

Fleur gasped, and she wasn't the only one. Shocked comments about Buyan resonated throughout the alcove as the latest group of travels headed deeper into the Ministry.

Both Fleur and Hermione turned to Moody. Fleur asked: "Professor Moody, is this a joke? There wasn't really an island called Buyan, was there? And if there had been such a place, wouldn't its location have long since been forgotten?"

Moody shook her head. "It's there, all right. Nicholas Flamel was there over five hundred years ago, and as things turned out he is now a Secret-Keeper for its location. And unless I am very badly mistaken, we're going to be heading over there shortly."

Hermione scratched her head. "What would we be going to this secret island for? Are we going to gather there as a safe house?"

Moody shook his head. "Far from it. I suspect we're going over there because we're going to have to finish off Rasputin before he brings back Boris Koschei."
Hermione stopped short and nearly toppled over as Fleur walked into her. "Excuse me, Professor. Are you telling me that the man who triggered the greatest crisis of the first millennium managed to survive? And he's taking advantage of the fall of the Statute of Secrecy to come back and threaten the Muggle world once again?"

Moody nodded gravely. "That is precisely what we are afraid of. We have reason to believe that Rasputin and the Black Fist have gathered a huge force there to hold us off long enough until Rasputin completes the nine-plus hour ritual required to bring back Koschei. Once Koschei is back...well, you know what he did last time from the play you just put on. Both Rasputin and Koschei HAVE to be stopped, and destroyed permanently this time if possible. And to make matters worse, we blew our Judgment Day on Voldemort so we won't be able to use it again for another four and a half years."

Fleur put her hands to her face. "Merde! This is terrible!"

Hermione nodded. "You've got that right. I take it that's why Atlantis is at DEFCON 2? I highly doubt a bunch of wizards in charge of Iraq would be enough to make it all the way to 2."

Moody nodded. "You are correct, Miss Granger. The issue with Iraq is of little consequence compared to what could go down if Koschei returns to Earth. The Muggles, of course, are going mad because they're concerned the Middle East will destabilize. They don't realize that if Koschei returns you can get a worldwide pandemic which can kill half the world's population or more. Imagine Koschei repeating the Black Death, but this time with anthrax, dengue fever, or ebola...and taking advantage of airplanes to spread the contagion more easily among the Muggles."

Fleur's face was white, and Hermione had the sword of Gryffindor in a viselike grip as Moody continued. "We MUST NOT FAIL here. Do you hear that, everyone? We MUST NOT FAIL. I expect everyone here to lay down their lives to make sure Koschei does not come back, and if he does that he does not get off that island."

Hermione shook momentarily. However, the sword in her hands brought her to her senses. Gryffindors were renowned for their courage, so how could someone entrusted with the sword be allowed to quiver in fear?

Everyone was silent as Moody and the Ministry officials escorted them into a large room which Moody explained was normally used as an atrium. The traditional fountain in the center of the room, however, had vanished. In its place was a greatly-enlarged image of an ancient map, looking to have been from the fifteenth century and marked with the initials NIF. It depicted what appeared to be a small island about fifteen miles so across, dominated by two mountains and a small valley in the middle. Situated behind the map was a podium, and behind the podium was the Minister of Magic.

Flamel was speaking, and Hermione listened in attentively. "Yes, I have brought you together from all walks of life to confront an evil on the same level as Voldemort's, possibly even worse. When I was in my twenties and thirties, Professor Koschei brought the world to its knees by taking an existing strain of bubonic plague and turning it into the worst pandemic in the history of Europe. Had it not been for the fact that the Norse had already found evidence of the New World, this would have likely gone to Judgment Day. And what's even more frightening is that Koschei managed to pull this off with fourteenth-century Muggle technology. No planes. No genetic engineering. No nothing other than magic."

"Each of you has something to give here. Some of you are SEALs, very good at infiltrating enemy encampments and taking out targets. Some of you are Aurors or members of the Order of the
Phoenix, with great experience fighting Dark wizards like Voldemort. Some of you are members of Dumbledore's Army, Britain's newly formed magical militia. If the real world James Bond exists, he would be in this room right now. And there are veela among you as well who are hoping to take advantage of the fact that Rasputin is an inveterate womanizer."

Hermione turned to Fleur, who was actually blushing. It was obvious what Fleur was supposed to do. Glancing around the room, Hermione thought that she saw a few more veela in the crowd as well.

"Let me reiterate what we know. Koschei survived all these years by placing his Horcrux on the island of Buyan and Fidelius using the island's location to himself. When he was incapacitated at the end of the Black Death, the Fidelius Charm transferred itself to his most obvious successor: the highest-ranking magical advisor to Koschei's old kingdom in central Russia. This man or woman, called the Gatekeeper, kept the role for the rest of his or her life. When he died, the spell sought out the new ruler and reassigned the Fidelius to the new ruler's chief advisor. This spell continued for the next six centuries, and it began applying itself to the head of Russia as Koschei's old kingdom fell under the rule of the tsars.

"Normally, this would have assigned the Fidelius to trustworthy individuals such as Tsar Alexei Romanov. However, Koschei had not considered the possibility that one of his Gatekeepers would create a Horcrux and then join the Black God cult. Because of this Horcrux, Rasputin never died. As a result, he remained the Gatekeeper long after the tsars -- and eventually the Soviet Union -- died. Had Rasputin not been revived by the Black Cultists after the Breach, it is quite possible that it would have been lost to history for good, as the only person who had access to the island no longer had a corporeal body. Unfortunately, that was not the case."

Flamel pointed at himself. "What Koschei and Rasputin did not know is that I am also a Secret-Keeper for this island. You are probably all familiar with the story of Koschei. Suffice it to say that since I was a relic from Koschei's time, a fifteenth-century Grand Mugwump who had learned of the secret from his predecessors -- in a direct chain of communication to Olga Koscheiva -- invited me to go to Buyan as a consultant so we could hunt for Koschei's Horcrux. We never found it, of course. However, that was without modern technology. And now that I have outlived Grand Mugwump Chen, it is up to me to warn the world about this new threat.

"Here is what we are going to do. After we adjourn this meeting, you will be assigned into divisions and your division leader will brief you on your individual mission in case we do have to assault Buyan. Hopefully, we will not have to do this. Everyone here agrees that assaulting Buyan is going to be extremely expensive, and the body count is going to be high. To that end, we have asked the Muggles to make the first move."

Flamel waved his wand in the air, and the ghostly image of an odd-looking aircraft hovered over his head. "The aircraft you see above me is an American B-2 bomber, also known as a Stealth Bomber. This Muggle vehicle is extremely difficult to detect, and it can carry tens of thousands of kilos' worth of bombs. While we organize our forces, the Muggle air units will fly one of these planes over to Buyan and drop its entire payload of bombs on it. Officials plan to drop explosive devices on every square meter of that island they can reach. This will almost certainly destroy everybody on Buyan. If everything goes as planned, and the spotters report that the Black Fist members have all been destroyed, we will go to the island, find Koschei's Horcrux, and destroy it once and for all. If we find Rasputin's as well, we'll destroy it as well. You will get to visit what is left of this island in relative safety and may participate in an expedition which will rid the world of a major Dark wizard."

Flamel's tone grew somber. "If, on the other hand, the bomber is destroyed or the bombs don't do
enough damage to kill everyone, then a ground assault will be ordered. The odds of the bomber's destruction are pretty low, as the aircraft is black, will be flying without running lights, and will almost certainly not be visible from Buyan. However, we have to assume that Rasputin and his men have been organizing the defense of the island. We have reason to believe that they've been there for a week at least, and that's a lot of time to prepare...especially when no one knows where you are. This assault will be costly, and I freely admit it. For the Muggles among you, think of D-Day with wizards."

Flamel paused one last time, then drew a deep breath. "At present, we have no plans to use nuclear weapons in this battle. Although we are almost certain that a nuke will destroy most of the people on the island and win the day for us, the world is still reeling after the events of Judgment Day. We do not want to open that can of worms again. However, it is my pleasure to inform you that Atlantis will be helping us out. Several people here have Atlantis rings, and they will be instrumental in protecting their colleagues from enemy attack. Be advised that since we are at DEFCON 2, their role must be defensive only."

Hermione blinked and stared at her pocket, which had the ring in it. Was she going to be in the forefront? Yikes!

Flamel continued. "We will also have the elves of Britain on our side as well. As you are aware, elves have their own special type of magic. Now that many elves burdened with harsh masters have won their freedom through the work of the Society for Preservation of Intelligent Welfare, we at the Ministry and Atlantis have invited them to work for us and join us in our crusade. Many of them, I am happy to admit, have accepted. And most of those who have joined want to avenge themselves on SOMEBODY."

Hermione gawked at him. Was this good or bad? SPIW's work now allowed the elves to effectively choose between a harsh master and Atlantis. However, was Atlantis any better if they were going to be sending elves on military missions which could get them killed? Why was everything this complicated?

Flamel nodded. "That's all for now. Let's all pause for a moment of silence and prayer before we get your own units' briefings underway."

Hermione tried to calm herself with Buddhist meditation practices. It took a few seconds to calm herself down, but eventually she began to focus on the thoughts and began telling herself: these stressful feelings are impermanent, just like everything else.

Including life.

To be continued...

__________________

Update #485: Uh, You Do Realizes Wizards Don't Rely On Radar
15 TO GO
----------

0055Z
Tuesday, December 31, 1996
Beach Area
Buyan
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 2/5.2%

NEXT UP: B-2 Versus Dome (.5)

Grigori Rasputin watched as the last group of Black Fist operatives landed on the beach in the south-central part of Buyan. There were now approximately 1500 agents on the island, with a good hundred or so still in transit...or not bothering to come at all. Ideally, the Mad Monk would have waited to make sure everyone was there before he started raising the island's final defenses. Unfortunately, he was running out of time. He couldn't wait for everyone to show up, and it was getting close to the time he had planned to bring back Koschei. It wasn't up to his followers to question his orders: they were supposed to be at the new safe house by midnight, and if they weren't there, so be it.

Clearing centuries' worth of rampant tree growth out of the way with his wand, he led his small army up the eastern hill on the island, into what were once the ruins of the Roman fort on top of the hill. They were ruins no longer, however. The various pieces of stone and concrete had been Transfigured and mutated into a modern fort which, Rasputin hoped, would be capable of withstanding an army chock-full of wizards. Granted, it was unlikely that the Atlanteans would interfere. However, Rasputin couldn't help but worry that the inability to capture Flamel and his wife could have left the door open for Atlantis to come to Buyan.

He told his colleagues to put up various magical defenses as he thought through the complicated ritual required to bring back Koschei. The powerful medieval wizard had apparently managed to cast a spell which automatically imbued the Gatekeeper with the tools required to bring him back, which was a good thing. Unfortunately, as far as Rasputin could tell it would take a good seven hours or so of uninterrupted concentration and rune drawing to set up the construct necessary to bring him back. Once he started on the ritual, he could not allow himself to be disturbed for any reason or he'd have to do it all over again from scratch.

Zygonov would be in charge of the Wizarding defense of the island once Rasputin began working on the ritual. Borodin, one of the newly-upgraded half-vampire Muggles, would be in charge of the Muggle defense. Both men were experts at what they did and Rasputin was convinced that they would be able to hold off the Muggle forces long enough for Rasputin to complete the ritual.

These weren't exactly the best conditions to fight under. It was cloudy right now, with occasional stars visible through breaks in the clouds. If the enemy attacked during the night, there wouldn't be any stars for the attackers to occult with their brooms. It was quite possible, in fact, that they could attack under complete surprise. Rasputin still had something to say about that, however.

The thick tree cover would mean that could be snipers around every trunk. People would be easy to track thanks to the snow on the ground, which would make even invisibility not a sure thing. Invisible people still made footprints, after all. To make matters worse, the forecast was for rain to start in the mid-afternoon and change to snow and sleet during the night. Only an idiot would fight a major battle in the middle of a snowstorm in a forest. Unfortunately, Rasputin didn't have much of a choice. It was obvious Atlantis was onto him as they may have already held Zhukov and Vovchanckaya. He needed to do this as soon as possible, before Atlantis figured out what was going on.

Rasputin was excited, and he was not the only one. Most of the Black God cultists were amazed that they were actually standing on Buyan, an island which didn't exist as far as the world was
concerned. Many of them were imagining what they would do when they had the world at their feet. Rasputin let them fantasize, of course. In practice, however, Koschei wasn't a god. He couldn't fix everything, and even if the Black Fist organization did become masters of the world individual operatives would likely have their dreams thwarted by reality, Koschei's orders, or Atlantis. He couldn't say anything because high morale would be useful at a time like this.

Rasputin made his way into what used to be the fort's main hall and began to speak. "All right, my friends. The time has come for me to start work on the ritual. Whatever you do, make sure if there is any interference, you deal with it. I'm going to get rather irritated if you interrupt midway through the ritual and force me to restart it all over again."

Zygonov put his hand on Rasputin's shoulder. "We will do our best, my lord. You can count on us."

Rasputin smiled and lifted the Elder Wand. "Good. And now, let me put the finishing touches on our defenses courtesy of the Elder Wand. Yes, my friends, this is the infamous Elder Wand. It is unbeatable, and I plan to relinquish control of it to Koschei when he comes back. In the meantime, though, I can use it to cast spells which would be far beyond those of ordinary human beings. Watch this."

He thrust the Elder Wand into the sky and shouted: "Protego Maximus Domus!"

There was a thunderclap which probably could have been heard in Istanbul. Rasputin's ears rang -- he hadn't anticipated the amount of energy that would be released by the Elder Wand fired at maximum power. Several Muggles complained that the circuits on their weapons had blown out. Fortunately, however, the simpler weapons still worked.

It was unlikely they would need their weapons, particularly now that a huge dome was covering virtually the entire island. Normally, domes fifteen miles across would have been difficult to establish without the work of several wizards from Atlantis. This was not the case here.

Rasputin added a Portkey barrier around the island, something he thought would come in quite handy given recent events. Satisfied with what he had done, he put the wand back in his pocket and began working on the runes.

He had barely started writing the first rune when the Elder Wand suddenly flew out of his robe and was replaced by someone else's wand. Shit, he thought. Someone had just Disarmed him and taken control of the Elder Wand. He should have known this would happen. Judging from the exclamation of joy about a hundred feet behind him, the wand's new master was a woman, and Rasputin now held her old wand.

The woman's elation didn't last long, as another Expelliarmus shattered the silence. This was followed by a third and a fourth. Soon, small duels were breaking out all over the fortress.

Rasputin groaned inwardly to himself. Just what we need right now: a few hundred Black Fist wizards fighting over the Elder Wand instead of concentrating on Koschei -- or at least getting some sleep!

He hoped that the rest of this operation would go more smoothly.

----------------------------

0100Z
Somewhere over Europe

----------------------------
United States Air Force Captain Chase "Chevy" Dunham could not believe he was actually going to
be flying a Stealth Bomber into combat. He had always wanted to fly one of these things -- it looked
so cool, after all. He had been a bit nervous at first when he saw all of the dials and gizmos and
HUDs he'd have to deal with while flying the plane. Fortunately, he'd done well enough on the tests
to become a candidate for the mission...and he'd had enough luck to win the lottery as to which pilot
would actually attack Buyan.

His aircraft was loaded to the gills with the heaviest conventional bombs the Air Force could call up
on short notice. If everything went as planned, he was less than an hour away from dropping a whole
arsenal on an island which he hadn't known existed a few hours earlier.

He would be releasing the weapons far enough away from the target to be safe yet near enough for
the GPS homing beacons to reach the desired latitude and longitude, where they would explode on
contact with the ground. And they would explode with enough oomph to level everything in the
area. Given that the plan was for them to carpet-bomb the island, there was no way that the Black
Fist personnel would be able to hide from this attack. Dunham would then fly over the island, where
he would report on the results of the attack (presumably, the entire place would be on fire and torn to
shreds). With a launching point far away and the plane invisible to radar, this should be easy.

The wizard in the copilot's seat would then cast *Revelio Hominem* and check to see if there was
anyone left down there. If there were no survivors, a mission would immediately set out for Buyan
and wizards would come ashore looking for Rasputin's Horcrux, Koschei's Horcrux, or both. Any
Horcruxes discovered would eventually be dispatched with the Sword of Gryffindor, a British
artifact which had been brought along by the famous British witch Hermione Granger.

The problem, of course, was that the bad guys had magic as well. He didn't know of anything which
would be able to detect him a few hundred miles away, particularly when it was raining ordnance.
However, it was obvious magic could do things he had always thought impossible.

The Stealth was being accompanied by two "small" escort fighters crewed by a combination of a
wizard and a Muggle. Dunham's mission was to focus on the island and only the island. Any threats
to him or his squadron would be dealt with by the escorts.

He watched as his HUD counted down the distance to the target. Less than half an hour was left
until showtime.

------------
0116Z
Iran/Iraq border
------------

It hadn't taken long for the Atlantean wizards to knock out the Muggle defenses separating the two
countries. Soon, the Iranian armed forces were making their way into Iraq. Reports from the south
indicated that the Saudis were making good progress as well.

The goal they had agreed on was to get rid of the wizards and restore Iraq to its Muggle rulers. That
was easy enough to live with. Now of course, if it became necessary to leave a few Iranian regiments
behind to make sure the wizards came back...they'd do that too.

------------
0119Z
Baghdad
------------

A good three city blocks of the city were on fire. Purple fire.
People were running everywhere as multicolored beams crisscrossed the sky, followed by hails of bullets. More often than not, the beams bounced off improvised shields or crashed into the walls of buildings, knocking them down one at a time. Urban warfare was never pretty.

This looked to be Operation Desert Storm all over again. Unfortunately, at least at this point it seemed the bad guys were winning. The Death Eaters had planned very well, and for the time being their central stronghold in Baghdad appeared to be impregnable. Hopefully that would change.

There had been a brief moment of tension when Iranian forces suddenly found themselves working with Mossad agents. A few angry words were bandied back and forth. However, the two sides eventually agreed to bury the hatchet for now and deal with a much more pressing issue. Crises like this made strange bedfellows.

To be continued...

Update 485.1: No Country for Muggles

0055Z
Tuesday, December 31, 1996
Broadleaf Forest Area
Buyan

When he heard the enormous thunderclap, Sevastyan Orlov threw himself on the ground by reflex, completely sinking into snow and fallen leaves. After a minute of complete silence, his enhanced hearing picked up his squadmates moving around, then standing up.

"That was damn magic, I say! Look, it even ruined my rifle's red dot!" Complained one of the cultists. Sevastyan checked his own weapons- true enough, electricity was gone, but with half-vampiric eyesight, their aim would hopefully still be sufficient should hostiles came to fight them. Sidearms and melee weapons - even half-vampires with no experience with these got a sword or axe, their newfound abilities made this option too lethal to pass up. Their wireless comm unit was, surprisingly enough, working with some interference- then again, it was based off the Wizarding Wireless, it made sense if it was magic-resistant. Now, to see whether the higher ups knew what it was about...

"Commander Borodin, sir! 5th squad requesting orders, standing by."
The calm voice of their superior came into line moments later: "Borodin to all perimeter units, the thunderclap was a friendly spell, I repeat, friendly spell, no hostiles contacted. Continue assuming your designated positions, be ready for incoming hostiles. May the Black God keep your wits sharp and your hands steady, over."

However, enhanced hearing wasn't always an improvement, all things considered. "Am I the only one who heard wizards quarrelling in the background, guys?" asked one of the half-vampires. Orlov sighed, he suspected the cause of the wizard mayhem- the artifact wand Rasputin used to heal his scars to test it. "Shut up, all of you. It's wizard business, and we ain't no wizards. Grab your stuff and
get going to the valley, and don't forget to pray to Tchernobog for some wind when you thank him for good news."

"Good news?" asked one of his bretheren. "Indeed" he smiled, "Though Syrdan isn't coming, it's because they keep Nestor busy- no Veela will come here tonight."
"Since when is that good news?" asked the guy, "I always wanted to see them Veelas, heard they are so beautiful you'd never look at human women the same as before..."
"Trust me" growled Orlov. "You don't want to see them as hostiles. Fireball-throwing fliers and mental domination" here he shuddered, even though his memories of The Incident were blissfully muted "don't sound so good when you're on their wrong side."

----------
Merpeople Assembly Chamber
Roqteratl
----------

The Elder of House Zace yelled at the Eldest, voicing the thoughts of a significant part of the amphibian species.
"We can't stand idly while those tricksters and babysnathers get more and more privileges! With all due respect, sir, this city has had it's trustworthy wizards for thousands of years, there's no reason to stop relying on them!"

Archon Avernus I of Trapananda, on his newly established place at the Eldest's right side, facepalmed. The more primitive tribes have mostly kept their mouths shut so far, but he wasn't naive enough to attribute it to gratitude for their uplifting -the effects of which were already visible- instead of fear. Perhaps in a few generations, with wizards of their own blood living among them, there would be trust, but for now, all they achieved was the silent submission of the Thousand Tribes, and the watchful eye of Roqteratl.

"Gentlemen" softly began the Eldest, and all others became silent. "You are too hard on this young man." Avernus resisted the urge to roll his eyes at the patronizing tone. "He and his followers did a very brave thing, coming out of hiding to help us, discarding five thousand years of tradition for the sake of doing the right thing. You should not condemn them for the sins of their predecessors!"

"Still, as we all know, a single support is often too unstable to bear a weight, and even with their impressive command on magic, our new brothers and sisters don't have the power nor the desire to lead us alone, in any way. Those fearing that their gifted children would be taught to despise their Muggle parents should therefore be relieved to learn that Roqteratl also opens schools for merpeople of all ages with magical talent." The Archon looked like he has eaten something bitter. "Consult my aide about the details of..."

He fell silent as a glowing ethereal squid materialized near the Archon, and spoke with a woman's voice: "My lord, I've just heard the news: Atlantis is going to war, and they request our help. The battle will start in a few hours, I humbly suggest you gather our best and most trusted available battlemages, and send them to Atlantis for a briefing as soon as possible. I'm waiting for your
The Archon reached for his wand, but stopped as he felt the Eldest's hand on his arm. "You're not alone in this" said the old one, "it's time to show the world we merpeople stand as one!"

The wizard shook his head. "I appreciate the thought, but this is a war of wizards. It's our duty to ensure the safety of normal people, not to let them walk into deadly danger with us."

The lord of Roqteratl smirked. "Who said anything about normal people?"

To be continued...

------------------

Update #485.5: B-2 Versus Dome
**15 TO GO**

------------
0136Z
Tuesday, December 31, 1996
Eastern Mountain
Buyan

ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 2/5.2%

------------

NEXT UP: A Dangerous Escalation (.8)

------------

Genya Zygonov spun in astonishment as the Caterwauling Charm went off. His surprise was twofold: first, that something was actually approaching Buyan; and second, that he had been able to hear the alarm over the sound of the dueling Black God cultists.

Shit, he thought. Either we've got a malfunctioning spell or Atlantis has figured out how to get to Buyan. In either case, we're in trouble. Fortunately, they had time to prepare. The alarm had been set to trigger twenty miles or so from the island, which meant that the invaders still had a while to go to before they actually became a problem.

He had to reorganize the troops quickly. He had no idea who currently held the Elder Wand, and for the moment he didn't care. All he was concerned about was giving Black Fist the ability to meet this possible intruder.

He amplified his voice and bellowed at everyone to stop fighting. Much to his amazement, a good half of them obeyed. Unfortunately, that still left a good 300 wizards or so duking it out over control of the Elder Wand. He fumed when he saw that several wizards were already dead, killed by their own colleagues without even Rasputin's help. Incensed, he began to launch into a tirade which would hopefully bring everyone back to their senses.

He had scarcely opened his mouth when the five-mile Caterwauling Charm went off. Doing some quick math in his head, he realized that whatever it was was coming in very, very fast. He doubted even Portkeys traveled at that speed, and he wasn't even sure Muggle aircraft could do it. What on earth could it be? He turned to look at Rasputin, but Rasputin was still busy with his runes and could not be disturbed. His gut feeling was that it was a mistake of some sort, a problem with both spells. True, that was unlikely, but --
Then all hell broke loose.

Several tremendous explosions suddenly blossomed on the far side of the island, the side nearest Romania. The earth shook as nearly invisible objects crashed into Rasputin's dome and let loose with unimaginable fury. The dueling wizards stopped what they were doing and stared in amazement at the fireworks on the other side.

Zygonov didn't know whether to be grateful or terrified. He was troubled by the fact that the Atlanteans, or at least the Muggles, had discovered Buyan. On the other hand, he was happy that the shield was powerful enough to deflect these powerful explosives.

His mind raced, and he frantically tried to figure out what was attacking them. It had to be a series of Muggle missiles or bombs, probably launched from a submarine or an airplane. If that was the case, the attacking vehicle was likely nearby. He told everyone to scan the skies as the explosions continued on the other side of the island.

The Black First agents promptly reported that they couldn't see much because the clouds were in the way. Others complained they had lost their night vision. Shit! He should have figured they would try an attack like this, particularly if the attackers were hidden by the clouds! The only problem with this theory was the simple fact that the attackers couldn't see what they were --

His wife suddenly shrieked and pointed at the western side of the island. "Everyone, take cover! The shield is starting to weaken!"

Zygonov glanced back at the attack site and saw, to his horror, that his wife was right. The shield was beginning to fluctuate, which was not a good sign. Hopefully the attack would let up soon, but it didn't seem to be cooperating. The bombs continued streaming into the western side of the island as Zygonov shouted, "Those of you tasked to guard Rasputin, stay here. Everyone else, scatter and start casting Shield Charms in that direction! We don't want to be around if that dome --"

There was a final flash of light, and the dome disappeared. Within seconds, the explosions began detonating all over the island, focusing on areas near the mountaintops...and Zygonov's men.

The next twenty seconds or so were absolute hell as the bombs began to fall within two hundred feet of the Black Fist encampment. Tree limbs and shrapnel flew everywhere, and at least a hundred wizards fell to the ground, clutching themselves in pain. The sound was absolutely deafening, and Zygonov had his hands midway to his ears when a piece of trunk maybe three inches wide suddenly sliced through his left arm, cutting it off at the wrist.

Someone screamed, and it took Zygonov a second to realize that it was him. One glance at his arm told him immediately that this was a fatal blow. He couldn't believe that it would end like this, so close...

Suddenly his eyes widened. The Elixir of Life! Each cultist had been given a dose of the Elixir of Life! Black God, please make it that the vial was still intact. Rasputin had told him it was Unbreakable, but would the spell hold up to such an attack?

He was already starting to fall into shock. Barely able to concentrate enough to remember what he was doing, he reached into his robe with his good hand and pulled out the vial of Elixir. He poured the potion down his throat as he took shelter behind a tree.
The potion's effects astonished him. The pain stopped almost immediately, and his severed hand quickly started to grow back. Within ten seconds, it was as if he had never been injured! He had survived, at least for now!

The bombs continued to come in. Oddly enough, they were all focused on the same point for the most part about five hundred feet away from the mountaintop. He didn't know why exactly they were targeting over there: nothing was there, after all. Maybe they were having targeting problems because they couldn't see through the clouds. Thank the Black God for this miserable aim!

Figuring it was only a matter of time until the enemy realized their aim was off, he reached for his wand...only to find that the shock waves from the explosions and the buffeting had thrown it from his robe. He had to scrabble through the snow for a good ten seconds before he found it, praying the whole time that he would make it through this raid.

Suddenly, without warning, the bombs stopped falling and the night was peaceful once again. However, it was no longer silent as cultists were strewn all over the area, screaming in pain and shock. Zygonov saw at least a hundred people down, unmoving. A good two hundred had been forced to use their Elixir of Life to keep themselves going, just like he had.

The fact that he had been able to see well at all was due to another, equally disturbing development. All of the bombs had set part of the forest on fire. Flames licked at trees four hundred feet from him or less, and he was concerned a little that the entire island would be consumed. Fortunately, the snow slowly began to inhibit the fire. It took a good two or three minutes, but several of the uninjured wizards eventually managed to put it out completely.

Rasputin suddenly appeared behind him, and Zygonov's eyes widened. "My lord! You should go back to your runes!"

Rasputin shook his head. "It's too late for that now, Genya. We have to get away from these mountaintops. It's obvious that one of the Flamels told Atlantis we're over here, and they're going to do everything in their power to stop us. You do know why we have to get away from the mountaintops, right?"

Zygonov nodded. "Yes, my lord. If you're a Muggle tactician with a map of the island, the first places you'd go after would be obvious high points, particularly above the tree line where you can see forever."

"Correct. I want everyone to head further down the mountain into the valley between the two hills, as far away from the beach as possible. We'll reorganizes our defenses down there and I'll start with the runes once more. We'll leave skeleton crews on the mountains to see if anyone makes it onto the island some other way."

"Fair enough, my lord."

Rasputin looked out over the rest of the cultists. "Good God, we've got at least a hundred people down in one attack. What was it?"

"I believe a Muggle aircraft attacked us with missiles or bombs. Your dome held back a few of them, but eventually they overwhelmed the dome and made it in. We were very lucky that they were off-target."

Rasputin thought for a moment, then nodded. "Actually, it's not that unexpected. I suspect they only
have Nicholas Flamel's old map of the island, and you know how inaccurate old maps tended to be. Remember they haven't been here yet to get a real look at the terrain. Unless I'm badly mistaken, those missiles were aimed at where they thought the two peaks were. They were slightly off, just enough for us to come out of here with only 100 dead."

Zygonov winced. "We won't be able to handle many more attacks like this, my lord. What I recommend doing is reconstructing the dome, and doing so before the Atlanteans figure out that they've killed a lot of our men. The fact that we've put out the fire near us will work to our advantage: if whoever owns the Elder Wand puts the dome back, we just may be able to convince our attacker that their raid didn't do any damage."

Rasputin grunted. "I don't see how that's possible -- they'll look down and see the flattened trees."

"I don't think so, my lord. Remember, it's cloudy. If they stay above the clouds, they won't be able to see anything. And if they venture below the clouds, we'll be ready for them."

Rasputin hesitated a minute, then nodded. "Sounds reasonable. All right, let's start cleaning things up. I want everyone who's still injured and able to walk to Apparate over to the cave with the Elixir storage -- as long as you don't try to get off the island, you'll be fine. There, they are to heal their injuries and get a new dose of Elixir. Half-vampires should not take advantage of the Elixir unless it is a life-and-death situation: recall they lose their abilities."

Zygonov nodded approvingly. "Sound thinking, my lord."

"Thank you. And tell everyone to reconstruct that dome as soon as possible...and this time, start casting Protego spells in whichever direction the Caterwauling Charm indicates any future attacks are coming from. If we're lucky, concentrate all of the magical energy in one direction will likely generate a stronger shield than if we try to spread it equally all around the island."

Within half an hour, all of the surviving Black God cultists had been healed and the owner of the Elder Wand had relinquished the wand to Zygonov. There were now not one but two Elder Wand-created domes over the island, one created by Zygonov and one created by the previous owner of the Elder Wand. The island was now even better prepared for an enemy attack, now that Rasputin's men knew that the Atlanteans knew where Buyan was.

The final casualty total was 121 dead in the bombing raid, 41 half-vampires reverted back to human form due to consumption of the Elixir of Life, 2 half-vampires evolved to full vampire after failing to resist the temptation for blood, and no fewer than 260 at least partially injured. The attack had been costly, but the Rasputinites had learned their lesson and would be ready next time.

-------------------
0219Z
Far above Buyan
-
---
The wizard in Dunham's bomber grunted. "Uh oh."

Dunham turned to him with a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach. "Uh oh what?"

The wizard pointed at the ground. "We've got at least 1300 people down there. There is evidence of damage to both mountains, but not enough to kill the enemy. Most of them seem to be concentrated in the valley between the mountains."

Dunham got immediately. "They figured we'd go for the mountaintops because that's what a normal
"Exactly, so they went for reverse psychology. This is problematic. They now know we're onto them, and they've done something quite rash which could make things a bit trickier in the long run."

"Oh? What's that?"

The wizard pointed out the window at the cloud deck, illuminated faintly form below by what appeared to be flames from burning tracts of forest. "You see that faint twinkling just above the clouds?"

Dunham nodded. "I do. I figured that was just stars or something like that?"

The wizard blinked at him. "Stars between us and the clouds? Nope. What I believe you are seeing is a magical defense shield. They've put up a shield to make sure we can't get through again."

Dunham whistled. "That's not good. Can we overwhelm it with bombs?"

"Possibly. However, you have to keep in mind that they know we're coming now. They'll be watching out for us now and will try destroying us if they see us. At the very least, they'll cast spells at anything even before our weapons make it to the shield."

Dunham grunted. "What do we do?"

"Nothing right now. All I can recommend is report back to base and tell them what's happened. If I were HQ, I'd go after them again, either with another B-2 or with some Tomahawks. And I sincerely hope it's enough to make it though the shield."

"Makes sense. And if that doesn't work? If the shield is able to keep bombs out?"

The wizard bit his lip. "We'll have to go underneath the shield, or through it on the strength of Atlantis bubbles. You have to understand that the *Protego* dome spell is designed to work with Atlantis bubbles -- the two shields will merge and let the wizards with the bubbles through. That means a ground assault."

Dunham groaned. "A ground assault on a stronghold with up to 1300 wizards defending it. That's going to be expensive."

The wizard sighed. "Tell me about it."

To be continued...

__________________

Update #485.8: A Dangerous Escalation

15 TO GO

0230Z
Tuesday, December 31, 1996
White House
Washington, DC
Bill Clinton was still in the Oval Office after a long day of work. Being President wasn't easy, he mused. Sometimes, he wondered why he had decided to run for re-election in the first place.

He had thought running the country had been difficult even before the world had found out about the wizards. Now, of course, it had gotten infinitely more complicated. He had no experience trying to tell wizards what to do, and he still didn't know what exactly an enemy wizard would try to do to his nation. Were all of them as powerful as Voldemort, or was Voldemort an exception?

The latest reports on Iraq weren't encouraging. Voldemort's rejuvenated Death Eater movement had entrenched itself in Baghdad and was proving extremely difficult to dislodge. Supposedly the Death Eaters had taken a few civilians hostage and were threatening to kill them unless the Atlantis forces backed off. The city, already ravaged by the first Gulf War, was now in the throes of anarchy and urban warfare. The only good news was that the invasions from Saudi Arabia and Iran had at least managed to distract the Death Eater forces in other parts of the country from going to the assistance of their brethren in the capital.

It was now about 9:30 PM, and he had just heard a report from the Buyan front claiming that the Stealth bomber raid had struck the island but had done so off-target and as a result left a lot of people alive. Radar imaging provided by the bombers had revealed the explanation: Nicholas Flamel's fifteenth-century map, the only clue the Americans had had as to the island's configuration, had been inaccurate -- and the enemy had anticipated that the bomber would attack the mountaintops. Fortunately, the Americans would not have to make that mistake again.

The latest reports on Iraq weren't encouraging. Voldemort's rejuvenated Death Eater movement had entrenched itself in Baghdad and was proving extremely difficult to dislodge. Supposedly the Death Eaters had taken a few civilians hostage and were threatening to kill them unless the Atlantis forces backed off. The city, already ravaged by the first Gulf War, was now in the throes of anarchy and urban warfare. The only good news was that the invasions from Saudi Arabia and Iran had at least managed to distract the Death Eater forces in other parts of the country from going to the assistance of their brethren in the capital.

It was now about 9:30 PM, and he had just heard a report from the Buyan front claiming that the Stealth bomber raid had struck the island but had done so off-target and as a result left a lot of people alive. Radar imaging provided by the bombers had revealed the explanation: Nicholas Flamel's fifteenth-century map, the only clue the Americans had had as to the island's configuration, had been inaccurate -- and the enemy had anticipated that the bomber would attack the mountaintops. Fortunately, the Americans would not have to make that mistake again.

It didn't take long for the United Nations's Security Council's conference call to come in. Within two minutes, all five nations were represented and the meeting began. Due to the urgency of the situation, they didn't even bother with the traditional pleasantries before getting started. It had been unanimously agreed that the Council expand to six members, adding the Wizarding Ambassador to the traditional mix of the United States, Russia, China, France, and Britain.

Dialonis spoke first. "Gentlemen, good evening. Here is the latest update on the fight against the Dark wizards. Iraq is still at a standstill, and we're about to send in a few wizards equipped with Atlantis bubbles to try to clear things out. The First Division of the Wizarding Standing Army is doing an admirable job keeping things in line, but we're going to need more manpower to turn the tide. We probably have enough forces deployed right now to deal with either Buyan or Iraq, but not both."

The Chinese diplomat asked, "Don't you have two of them? What's the second division doing?"

The Briton answered that. "They're destined for Buyan. They were waiting to see whether the B-2 raid would finish off the wizards without forcing us to revert to a ground assault. Unfortunately, that does not appear to have been the case."

Clinton winced. "He's right, unfortunately. It appears that the map we had for Buyan was inaccurate, which should have been expected with medieval cartography. We've got a more accurate map now, however, thank to the flyover. In addition, the Rasputinites anticipated we'd go after the high ground and seem to have congregated in the valley instead."
China: "How many people are down there?"

Dialonis hesitated before responding. "The spotter claims there are at least 1300 people down there."

The rest of the Security Council members swore as Clinton asked: "Are they all wizards? Or are they both wizards and Muggles?"

"We don't know at this point, Mr. President. The spell only detects living people. It doesn't say if they're wizards or Muggles. We should probably assume the worst case scenario: maybe 1200 wizards and 100 Muggles with very advanced weaponry."

France: "Did the spotters see any evidence of damage on the island? What about wizard defenses?"

Clinton answered this. "They couldn't see the surface very well because of the cloud cover. However, they saw evidence that several parts of the island were on fire. As far as the defenses go, one of the spotters claimed that there was a magical shield surrounding the island. I suspect they put the shield up shortly after the attack once they realized we know they're there?"

Dialonis: "I don't like this. Was there evidence of one shield or two?"

Britain: "Why does that matter, Ambassador?"

Dialonis: "Because two shields can be maintained indefinitely by recreating an inner shield whenever the outer shield is wavering. With two shields, there will always be at least one shield up, even if the outer shield falls before the inner shield is recast. As long as there is room inside the inner shield to make a new one and protect all of the defenders, they can just wait us out. If there are two shields up, we're going to need a ground assault...or a nuclear weapon."

The British representative swore once again. "We can't allow a stalemate, because if we do so they're going to bring Koschei back. In this case, the tie goes to Rasputin."

Clinton breathed a sigh of relief. "They claim they only saw one shield. Would they have been able to see both of them were there?"

Dialonis: "I believe so, Mr. President. All right, here's what we can do. We need to figure out if our weapons can get through the shield. Are there any other B-2 bombers ready for a mission?"

Clinton: "No. However, we've got units which can launch Tomahawk missiles in the area. Is there a way you can hack a missile so that it tracks Rasputin?"

Dialonis: "Possibly, but we don't know how. And we don't have time to figure it out at the moment. Looks like you Muggles are going to have to do this the old-fashioned way."

Rasputin was getting tired. However, he couldn't rest very long or the runes he was working on would lose their power. At one point, someone had been forced to hand him a Pick-Me-Up Potion in one hand while he wrote intricate symbols with the other. It had been a gamble, but it had worked.

There were still about five hours left for him to finish the construct. He really hoped he could stay up
the whole time.

Suddenly, the Caterwauling Charm went off once more. All eyes turned to the mountaintops, and people brought out their wands. Rasputin turned back to his work as Zygonov told everyone to get ready.

Zygonov thought he caught a glimpse of a cluster of gray streaks heading in their direction, all spouting fire from their tails. They seemed to be missiles, probably launched by ship. And, much to his chagrin, he saw they were targeting the center of the island. Hopefully, the shield would hold.

The objects slammed into the shield and exploded. They weren't as powerful as the first set of explosions, but there were sure a lot of them. And sure enough, it was only a matter of time until the front shield began to waver.

Hoping he had enough strength to produce another shield, he constructed another dome inside the inner dome and managed to bring it up just as the outermost shield conked out. The missiles promptly began pummeling the second shield, which was now on the outside. Exhausted, he told someone else to Disarm him, take the Elder Wand, and construct a third shell inside the one Zygonov had just created if the original second shell failed.

It didn't take long for the wizards to realize what they were planning. The Elder Wand, fought over so viciously a few hours earlier, was handed from wizard to wizard as they each took turns putting up replacement shields. Eventually, the half-vampires took over the bulk of the shield generation due to their unusual stamina.

It took a good six or seven shields to get the job done, and the eventual final line of defense had left a good half mile of the island undefended as the various barriers had retreated. However, they did what they had to. They had fended off the latest assault and were confident that they would be able to ward off any others.

The only problem was that Rasputin had broken off his rune writing to come on over and check on everyone. It would now take seven more hours for Koschei to come back. This time, however, the Black Fist agents were certain no one would interfere unless they tried a ground assault...and they couldn't imagine any way a ground assault would be any more effective than the air assault. They had time to kill, and soon the world would be theirs.

0500Z
White House

The world leaders listened in dismay as Clinton issued his final report. "The latest spotter planes have confirmed that there are now two shields surrounding the majority of the island. It appears that Rasputin's men have realized that a double shield will ward off all future attacks, at least from the air. There is no additional damage to the center of the island."

Dialonis: "You're saying that majority of the island is covered. Let me guess: they gave up part of the island in order to implement the retreating shield tactic when the Tomahawks came in?"

"That's what it looks like, Ambassador. We may have a place to launch a ground assault from. The question is whether we'll be able to get through the shield at ground level."

Dialonis sounded hopeful. "It's possible. I suspect that the Atlantis bubbles will temporarily disrupt the dome and allow people to pass through. People can remove their rings outside the dome, let
someone stand next to them, and put the ring back on so it includes both of them. That way, they'll be able to shuttle people into the area."

"Where they'll be picked off immediately."

The hope drained from Dialonis's voice. "We can only try, however. If we bring in Marines with hand grenades and so forth we can have them launch them at the enemy."

"From inside the Atlantis bubbles? I didn't think anything could pass through in either direction!"

The Chinese representative offered a suggestion. "How about Transfiguring people into blades of grass which are plucked, so to speak, and brought by the ring bearer into the dome? The wizard drops them on the ground and then leaves the area. He then goes back onto the other side as the people resume their normal forms and start attacking."

Dialonis: "That's possible. However, someone is going to have to figure out how to transfigure the wizards back -- and do so without penetrating the shield. I'm almost thinking we should go underground --" 

The British ambassador coughed for a moment. "Gentlemen, we have to consider all possibilities here. From what you are telling us, a ground assault is going to be extremely difficult, and even if we do penetrate the dome we're probably going to be mowed under. An air assault may also be out of the question. This may leave only one option, as distasteful as it is in the light of recent events. We need something powerful enough to destroy the shields and ensure that the wizards won't be able to bring them back. Ideally, we need something that would destroy everything in the area so we don't have to risk a frontal assault."

There was dead silence as people slowly understood what he was referring to. Finally, Clinton let it out. "Good God. Are you asking for what I think you're asking?"

The Briton's answer was terse. "Yes. Tactical nuke. Center of island. The end."

The Russian nearly exploded. "What the hell are you thinking? You realize what happened six months ago. Do you want to let the cat out of the bag Again?"

The Briton's voice turned frosty. "I know, sir. Believe me, I know. Look what Voldemort did to --"

Dialonis cut in. "I don't like the idea of using a nuke, to be honest. However, it may very well be our only option. If anything, a nuke will likely be powerful enough both destroy Koschei AND his Horcrux, particularly if it's big enough to decimate the island."

He paused for a moment and let it sink in. "I recommend that we at least grant our members the authority to use a nuke as a last resort, and ONLY a last resort, if the ground assault fails."

There was a brief hesitation. Eventually, the rest of the Security Council agreed to this proposal. Clinton, however, had one reservation.

"What happens if we can't get our friendlies off the island before we deploy?"

Dialonis's voice was sad. "We let them make the call. If the men on the ground think they can do it without nuclear assistance, we leave it to them. If, however, they believe there is no option but to use the weapon...so be it."
Clinton pressed him: "You're willing to sacrifice the friendlies."

"Yes, Mr. President. Koschei was a major threat to civilization, possibly even more dangerous than Voldemort considering that he did what he did six hundred years ago. And keep in mind that if things do escalate, there is no Judgment Day to fall back on. Remember we can only use that once every five years."

The Russian spoke. "Which way is the wind blowing down there?"

Clinton bit his lip. "It's coming out of the south-southeast."

The Frenchman swore. "It's going to rain fallout all over the Romanian coast. I don't like this idea. Besides, it sets a bad precedent --"

Dialonis interrupted smoothly. "We'll have everyone we can spare create a rainstorm and precipitate the fallout before it reaches the coast, just like we did in Ogdensburg and New York."

The discussion continued for a few more moments. However, it was obvious what the decision had to be. Koschei was too dangerous to be kept alive, there was no Judgment Day to fall back on, and even the Grand Mugwump wasn't convinced a ground assault was going to work. Furthermore, if one or both of the Horcruxes was under a Fidelius it could very well take a nuclear explosion to destroy it. They had to make sure that Koschei never got off the island, as once he did that it would be almost impossible to track him down. This meant they had to catch him completely by surprise and not give him a chance to Apparate out of there.

Clinton drew a deep breath and committed himself. "All right, gentlemen. We will have a 100 kT Trident waiting for orders. God help us all if we are forced to use it."

To be continued...
Update #486 through Update #490

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Mislagnissa

Update #486: Humans for Muslims

14 TO GO

----------
0821Z
Tuesday, December 31, 1996
Baghdad
Iraq
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 2/5.4%
----------
NEXT UP: Strange Bedfellows (.2 -- note Penguin writes .5)
----------

Stanislav Drakul didn't really like the idea of fighting a battle in a mosque. Although he himself was not Muslim, waging war in a sanctuary designed for religious contemplation was rather distasteful. Unfortunately, he didn't have much of a choice in the matter. Intelligence reported that the Death Eaters had held the high-ranking Iraqi officials hostage in the mosque, possibly expecting the wizards to be reluctant to attack a sacred shrine. They had also turned the mosque into a heavily defended fortress, desecrating the place even further.

Drakul was indeed reluctant to attack the shrine. However, what else could he do? He had orders, and orders had to be carried out. He tried to console himself with the thought that Allah would not have approved of a mosque in this format. If that was the case, he was enforcing God's will with this attack.

At the moment, however, he wasn't anywhere near the mosque. Rather, he and his platoon were pinned down by a large number of Death Eaters in an office building about a block or so from the mosque. Thankfully, the office building was deserted, so there was an easy way to deal with it.

Making sure that his comrades were covering him, he took off his Atlantis ring and waited for the bubble to wink out. The was no way he'd be able to contact the Muggle command post with the bubble up. Although the bubble kept all sorts of radiation and energy from entering, it had a notorious tendency to block transmission in the other direction as well.

He lifted the walkie-talkie to his lips. "Echo Base, this is Rogue Leader. We've got some problems here. A large number of Imperial stormtroopers on Hoth has pinned us down. Request assistance, preferably an ion cannon strike."

The Muggle general on the other end of the line answered quickly. "Rogue Leader, this is Echo Base. How far are you away from the enemy?"

"About a block and a half."

"That's too close -- the ion cannon can do a lot of damage. Is there anyway you can get out of the way while making sure that the stormtroopers don't follow you?"

Drakul grunted. "I'm not sure, but I'll do my best. And if I don't, I still want you to attack. I've got a
personal shield, after all."

"Acknowledged, Rogue Leader. We'll send a strike over there in a couple of minutes. We will --" The signal dissolved into static as one of his colleagues yelled, "Sir! They're coming out". Dropping the radio, he jumped out in front of his men and slid the Atlantis ring back onto his finger. Seconds later, three *Avada Kedavra* beams slammed into the shield, which rang like a bell.

Drakul longed to fight back. However, they were still operating under DEFCON 2 rules of engagement and as a result the Atlantis bubbles would not permit him to use his weapon to attack the enemy. His colleagues, who did not have Atlantis rings, could. However, they couldn't shoot around him in the narrow alley. Anything they fired at the "stormtroopers" would be blocked by Drakul's own bubble.

There was one thing they could do, however. Pointing his wand further down the alley, he said: "Heads up, everyone! I've called in a strike! That building with the Death Eaters is going to be Tomahawked in a minute or so. Let's get further away from so that we don't go up with it!"

His second nodded. "Sounds all right with us. Let's go! Let the shield down momentarily so I can make sure they don't follow us!"

Drakul's brow furrowed. "I can only have it off for a second or so before they realize what we're trying to do. You have to understand also, Hector, that I won't be able to defend you."

Hector nodded. "I'm aware of that and am willing to take the risk."

Hoping that this wasn't the last time he'd see Hector in this world, Drakul took off the ring and shot a stun beam at the Death Eaters as Hector ran past. The Death Eaters, in turn, responded with an *Avada Kedavra* just as Drakul got the ring back on. Hector ducked, and it slammed into the newly-restored Atlantis bubble. Hector promptly retaliated with a few more curses, backing slowly away from the Death Eaters at the end of the alley.

Suddenly, the man serving as rear guard shouted. "Sir! Death Eaters just entered the other end! We're trapped -- aagh!"

Drakul spun to see a red beam hit the rear guard in the head, dropping him like a sack of grain. Beyond him, at the other end of the alley, were more Death Eaters. Drakul had the strong suspicion that both sides had been caught off guard by this encounter.

This was a problem. There was only one Atlantis bubble to go around, and that was in the middle of his unit. Drakul wasn't in a position to ensure that his entire unit was safe. It looked like he would have to choose the lesser of two evils and consider the second group of Death Eaters the main threat. After all, the first group could only target Hector, and he had taken cover beyond a few trash cans.

A veritable rainbow of beams shot out from Drakul's unit's wands, followed almost immediately by another rainbow from the newly-arrived Death Eaters. By the time the smoke had cleared, four Death Eaters were down along with five of Drakul's men. To make matters worse, the new arrivals were screaming for backup and more Death Eaters were running in their direction.

Frantic, Drakul watched as one of his lieutenants transfigured the body of one of the dead soldiers into a brick wall. Drakul approved of the idea. Unfortunately, someone *Evanesco*ed the wall approximately three seconds later as even more people -- this time in Muggle dress -- began running
towards second group of Death Eaters.

Drakul heard a groan behind him and spun to see Hector fall with a burning hole in his robe. Fortunately the Death Eaters stayed behind in the building, sitting targets for the upcoming missile strike. Drakul understood their reasoning: with their opponent completely blocked by an Atlantis bubble, what good was it to come out and expose themselves?

There were more shrieks, and Drakul turned back to see roughly twice as many Death Eaters at the far side than there had been earlier. Half of his men were now down, and one of them was acting strangely in a way which suggested he was under the Imperius Curse. If this kept up much longer, Drakul would be the only person left to report this disaster to HQ.

Suddenly, a staccato popping sound burst out from beyond the Death Eaters. It took Drakul a good five seconds for him to realize what it was: a machine gun. Although he was grateful for the support, he could have sworn that there were no machine gun units anywhere in the vicinity.

Death Eaters shrieked and fell to the ground in droves, and the remainder suddenly cursed and start pointing their wands at the newcomers. Deadly beams burst forth as three familiar words suddenly exploded from the general vicinity of the machine gun:

"Muslims for Humans!"

Several of Drakul's men gasped, and Drakul himself did the only thing he could think of. "Lower your wands and let Muslims for Humans take care of them! Do not use magic against them!"

The fight between the Death Eaters and Muslims for Humans men lasted a good ten seconds before a tremendous explosion caused everyone on both sides to turn towards the office building, which was a smoldering ruin. Nothing could have survived that attack -- nothing. The road was clear to the main Death Eater stronghold...if the Muslims for Humans units would let them through.

At the moment, the Muslims for Humans soldiers were finishing off the Death Eaters and cheering the destruction of the office building. Acting on impulse, Drakul tore off his ring and moved to the rear guard's former position, reactivating the ring between the Muslims for Humans men and the rest of his unit.

Several Muslims for Humans shouted and aimed their guns at Drakul's men. Drakul watched their leader, however. It was obvious that the leader recognized the bubble surrounding him and what it represented. Much to Drakul's relief, the leader raised his hand and told everyone to hold their fire.

Drakul nodded and put his wand back in his pocket. "Thank you for your support, gentlemen. We thought we were goners there. I'm Stanislav Drakul, acting leader of the First Division of the Wizarding Standing Army. I take it you're associated with Muslism for Humans?"

The leader of the Muslims for Humans cell nodded. "Indeed. I am Lieutenant Antoun, and these are my men. I can tell you are from Atlantis, Mr. Drakul. Although for the most part, we do not entirely trust wizards, we learned enough during Judgment Day to understand that there are good wizards as well as bad wizards. It is fairly obvious which is which in this case."

"That's good to hear, Lieutenant. I take it you're here because a Muslim nation is under attack by wizards?"

"Correct."
An idea formed in Drakul's head, and the Durmstrang deputy headmaster indicated his men. "As you can see, we are not attacking you. In fact, my wand is not in my hand and this bubble will protect our men from any attacks, either ours or yours."

Antoun nodded. "That is consistent with what I have heard."

Drakul spoke carefully. "I propose a truce for the duration of this fight. It's obvious both of us are being inconvenienced by the Death Eaters, and both of us will benefit from our ridding Iraq of them. What do you say?"

Antoun spoke with his men for a few minutes. The discussion was fairly heated, but Antoun eventually started speaking firmly enough to get his point across. Finally, the rest of the group nodded and Antoun turned back to Drakul.

Antoun smiled. "As Allah is our witness, we have a truce until the Death Eaters are gone from Iraq."

"Good. Now let's join forces and raid that headquarters building. We deal with the wizards, you free the hostages. Given your distrust of magic, we will not cast any magic spells on you without your permission. Since there are hostages there, and it's a religious shrine, try not to use weapons unless you have no choice."

Antoun nodded. "Fair enough. Let's go."

-----------------------

Kurd Partisan Base
Northern Iraq

Agent Babur looked at the television broadcast and whistled. "Well, look at that. It appears that the government and wizards are finally making progress against the Death Eaters running the country. I wouldn't be surprised if we get rid of those assholes."

Agent Behawta nodded. "Indeed. And this brings up a rather fascinating development."

Babur smirked. "Let me guess. With Saddam dead and the government crippled, there's a wee bit of a power vacuum right now. Not to mention that Iran and Saudi Arabia are on Iraqi soil as well."

"An astute observation. Now if I'm reading this right, the government is nonfunctional and needs some assistance. And if the government can't be saved, it is up to us to make a new government. In the latter case, deft political manipulations can make the Kurds power players in that government."

Babur chuckled. "I'm confused, Behawta. Are you advocating control of the government in Baghdad or independence from the disintegrating state of Iraq?"

"Whatever works, my friend. The point is, if there's a time we Kurds will truly be able to make ourselves felt, it is now. If we're lucky, we'll be in charge when the dust from this fighting settles."

To be continued...

__________________

Update #486.2: Strange Bedfellows
Drakul turned around the final corner and held up his hand. "Mr. Antoun, tell your men to back off! They've got the door guarded! First Division members, stand next to me and face off against these guys! Aim into those slots! Make sure you're partially covered by the man in front of you, and make sure the lead men are covered by my Atlantis bubble! Hurry!"

Beams of multicolored light flashed as the Aurors arranged themselves into a wedge shape. A couple of the wizards went down, but reserves quickly took their place. Antoun watched as his new allies returned fire. Judging from the expressions on their faces, their opponents were putting up a good fight.

Antoun wanted to help, but he didn't know how. He tried to get one of the wizards' attention, but all that managed to do is distract him long enough to get him gunned down by a blue laser beam.

He caught a brief glimpse of the entrance to the Death Eaters' headquarters. The door (as it was) was shut, and people were shooting multicolored light out of slits in it. No wonder the attackers were having so much trouble: they were effectively trying to raid a medieval fort with the enemy firing out of arrow slits! He watched as a multicolored beam shot out of one of his allies' wands and crashed into the door a few inches a way from the slits. The door simply absorbed it as several more beams burst out from behind it. A groan betrayed the fact that one of the Aurors had been hit.

Suddenly, one of the Aurors in the back of the wedge walked over to him. "This is getting nowhere, which means we have to get creative. Mr. Antoun, please tell me one of you has a hand grenade or something equivalent."

Antoun floundered weakly. "Well, I suppose we have a --"

The wizard cut him off. "Will it knock down the door? I'm just hoping that they haven't hardened it against Muggle explosives. Guns aren't enough."

"Uh, yes, but..."

"Give it to me. I'll make it invisible while you throw it at the door."

Antoun gaped at him. "Now wait a minute, I --"

The wizard threw his hands up, then dodged out of the way as a purple beam missed him. "For the love of God! Accio Hand Grenade!"

The last sentence was spoken in a whisper, and Antoun still wasn't entirely certain what exactly the wizard had said. However, the Muslims for Humans leader's eyes widened as a hand grenade suddenly flew past him towards the wizard. The wizard reached out to grasp the grenade and was promptly struck by one of the beams shot from the door. Antoun watched the man go down with a
thud as the grenade rolled around the ground near him.

Antoun wasn't sure how the grenade had gotten over there. However, he knew what to do with it. Figuring that those beams wouldn't be accurate enough to hit a small object like the grenade and that they wouldn't be able to hit it once it got too close to the door, he reached for the grenade, pulled the pin, and tossed it towards the door.

The grenade bounced off Drakul's Atlantis bubble and landed at one of the other wizards' feet. Antoun shrieked that it was live, and the wizard alertly grabbed it and cast a spell which delivered it to the base of the door and attached it securely to the bottom.

Drakul told everyone to get behind him, and they managed to do so just in time as a colossal explosion ripped through the early morning light. When it cleared, the door was still intact...but the entire frame had been blown to bits. The wooden panels comprising the door itself were lying on the ground, completely intact.

Drakul motioned with his wand, and both Muslims for Humans and Aurors roared as they charged the compound. They stopped short, however, as Drakul held up his hand once more. "The door is booby-trapped: the Atlantis bubble is registering interference with a spell in the doorway. Hold on for a second while Oleg here gets rid of it!"

Antoun watched as one of the other wizards pointed his wand at the jagged hole in the wall. Oleg uttered the word "Finite", and the hole briefly shimmered with a white light. Drakul motioned forward once more as several more enemy beams crashed into the Atlantis bubble.

Drakul blocked bolts while one of the other wizards raised his wand and shouted "Revelio Muggletum". Antoun winced as the spell detected him, and it took him a few moments to realize that the wizard was using the spell to figure out where the hostages were.

The third wizard smiled and pointed upwards. "They're upstairs, directly above us!"

Drakul, completely unconcerned about enemy attack thanks to the Atlantis bubble, turned to Antoun. "You and your men should find your way upstairs and rescue the hostages. We'll deal with the wizards out here. Do you want any of us to go with you? There may be magical defenses you'll need to overcome. I'm only asking first because I know you're uncomfortable about magic in general."

Antoun figured Allah would have agreed as well, given that the wizards were working on the side of good this time. "We'll take a wizard along with us. However, I'd appreciate it if we were the ones to actually rescue the Iraqi officials. The hostages may not be happy if they see wizards running at them with raised wands."

Drakul nodded and turned to Oleg. "Oleg, go with them. I'll deal with the wizards down here. I suspect the prisoners are left lightly guarded since we're actually invading the complex right now! And Antoun, I'm telling you in advance we're taking the machine gun in here! Now move!"

Antoun and Oleg moved off as Drakul and the rest of the wizards began to make their way deeper into the compound. However, he didn't go far before he saw a building map on one of the walls. There was only one staircase, and it was at the other end of the building. They would have to go through all of the defenses after all, it seemed like.

Oleg shook his head and grinned. "I don't think so. Watch this, and get out of the way."
Antoun watched as the wizard pointed his wand at the ceiling above and shouted two words: "Silencio! Reducto!"

There was a flash of light, and the ceiling immediately above Oleg broke apart. Debris fell to the ground, revealing a hole in the ceiling. The sound of the falling pieces of plaster was soon accompanied by the stuttering of the machine gun in the main room and the sounds of spells being shot off in all different directions. Oddly enough, the explosion itself had made no sound. Presumably this had been done to not alert any guards upstairs.

A yellow beam suddenly appeared out of nowhere and took down one of Antoun's men. Oleg spun, fired something into the smoke, and turned back to Antoun. "Have your men cover me! I'm going to send you up there to free the captives!"

Antoun blinked. He issued the orders, and he nodded in approval as his men began trading shots with the wizards. Turning back to Oleg, he asked: "Me? I can't fly! I don't know if --"

Oleg pointed his wand at Antoun, and the Muggle fell silent. "I'm sorry, but there's no other way to get this done. Levicorpus!"

Antoun bit back a shriek as an invisible hand lifted him into the air. He went sailing through the opening and soon found himself on the second floor in the middle of a group of prisoners. He recognized several of them from Iraqi news reports.

There were no guards visible. However, Antoun figured it was only a matter of time until the Death Eaters figured out what was going on.

He turned to the first prisoner and began untying his bonds just as Oleg launched another Muslims for Humans member through the opening. Within thirty seconds, five prisoners had been freed.

Antoun began working on prisoner number six when he heard footsteps in the corridor. Reaching for a brick which had been blown back into the second floor by the Reductio explosion, he stood next to the door to the prisoners' room and waited. A few seconds later, someone shouted for the prisoners to stay where they were and for their rescuers to freeze. Antoun's response was simple: he hit him on the head with the brick. The Death Eater crumpled and the rescue continued.

There was a sudden howl downstairs which suggested Oleg had been hit. There was a scuffle for a moment, and then suddenly all noise downstairs ceased. It sounded like the battle was over. But who had won?

Antoun herded all the prisoners together and asked them how to get to the nearest staircase. One of them remembered, and they all started heading in that direction. They were just starting down the stairs when they heard a large group of people coming upstairs. Quietly lowering the brick, Antoun reached for his sidearm as the first glimpse of the enemy came around the corner.

It was an Atlantis bubble. Antoun lowered the weapon as Drakul led the wizards around the corner and onto the second floor. The prisoners cheered loudly and pressed Drakul for an update.

Drakul smiled. "We got all of them. Had it not been for our friends in Muslims for Humans, we'd have been hard-pressed to pull this off. But pull it off, we did. Thank you, Mr. Antoun, for providing that machine gun. It took out a good ninety percent of it, and the rest of the wizards took the remainder prisoner after they were injured. It's a pity we lost Oleg there at the end."
Antoun smiled. "You're welcome, Mr. Drakul. I never thought I'd be fighting side by side WITH a wizard for the benefit of humanity. If we're lucky, we'll come to our senses and agree to not kill each other once this battle is finished."

Drakul laughed. "I hope that's the case as well."

-----
0900Z
-----

Word soon began to spread that the Death Eaters had been eliminated in Baghdad. However, the battle in Iraq was not yet over. Rumors were spreading that one of the dead Death Eaters had invoked a death curse which would mine the Straits of Hormuz, something the world truly did not need. Oil refineries were going up in smoke, and a few of the airfields in other parts of Iraq were starting to host dragons instead of aircraft. There was a report where a dragon had bitten off the wing of an airplane only to find itself blasted out of the sky by a heat-seeking missile. The surviving First Division members, along with their new Muslims for Humans allies, were immediately ordered to one of the airfields to eliminate one of the remaining pockets of Death Eater resistance. By 0915Z, the combined Muslims for Humans and First Division unit had liberated their assigned airfield. During the battle, Lieutenant Antoun was killed by a dragon. He was mourned by both Muslims for Humans and Wizarding forces, and his successor immediately agreed to maintain the truce with the wizards against the Death Eaters.

It looked like the tide was slowly starting to turn in Iraq. There was still a lot of work to do, but it was definitely progress.

-----
1000Z
Atlantis
-----
"Ladies and gentlemen, the time has come for our ground invasion of Buyan. May the Five Gods be with us."

To be continued...

-----------------

Update #486.5: From the Halls of Montezuma to the Shores of Buyan
13 TO GO

0400Z
Tuesday, December 31, 1996
Old Roman Fort
Buyan
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 2/5.2%

Grigori Varlamov struggled to relax to the point where he could get some sleep. The missile attacks had just ended, with the result of Rasputin moving even further into the valley to protect against any interference whilst he tried to bring back the Black God. As he slipped into his sleeping bag, he heard a loud hollow sucking noise, then the Caterwauling Charms going off. He and the others present at the fort, along with the others tasked with defense all over the island, sprang into action. He pulled out his wand, pointed at the direction of the noise, and yelled “PROTEGO!” A shimmering light confirmed his success. The noise grew until it was almost on top of him. Could this be the end? The Muggle Christian God bringing down His vengeance? His fears were all for nought
as two F-16s screamed overhead, making the loudest noises he had ever heard, flames pouring out of
their behinds. They flew over and banked hard to the southeast, heading towards Turkey.

F-16CJ 89-2047 ‘AV’ 510th FS
“BUZZARD 21”
15,000 feet over the Black Sea (five miles southeast of Buyan) and climbing. Mach 0.95
Tuesday, December 31st, 1996
0405Z

“Hot damn, Poncho! Best flying I’ve had since the exercise at Spadeadam,” Captain Nick “Mongo”
Miller exclaimed through his mask. His wingman, Captain Pete “Poncho” Barnes replied “Yeah, I
know, Mongo. Probably gave them boys a good scare.” “Damn right we did. You see them fucks
scatter?” “Roger. How’s your Italian girlfriend right now? Ain’t her brother part of that wizarding
army they’re staging?” “Yeah. She’s been worried sick per the phone calls we’ve had. The jarheads
will make sure nothing happens to him.” “Roger that. Let’s get back to Constanta.”

F-14A 160395 ‘AC-203’ VF-32
“GYPSY 31”
5,000 feet (and climbing) over the Black Sea, fifteen miles south of Buyan. 550+ KIAS
Tuesday, December 31st, 1996
0455Z

Lieutenant Commander Jack “Firkin” Grigsby pulled back on the stick of his F-14, taking the
Tomcat to an altitude that would clear the ‘Buyan Superdome’ yet still be in range to get good
quality photos. The pilots, especially those detached to Mihail Kogalniceanu International Airport in
Constanta, started making comparisons to the football stadium in New Orleans after the failed
Tomahawk attack. As of yet, nobody made any jokes about the Saints playing the Damned. But that
would change.

“GYPSY 32, climb to seven thousand. Advance to mil power.”
His wingman, Lieutenant Fred “Daysin” Weeks responded “Roger Firkin.”

“Island dead ahead now, eight miles,” piped up Firkin’s Radar Intercept Officer, Lieutenant
Commander Shaun “Guru” Witmer. Grigsby responded “Roger Guru. GYPSY 32, arm your
camera.” “Roger.” Daysin’s RIO, Lieutenant Junior Grade Tom “Redrum” Redrick, flipped a few
switches to turn on the cameras in the TARPS pod, slung underneath in the “tunnel” between the
engines. The pod would give Minister Flamel and the other senior commanders the best imagery
available. Five miles out and the Tomcats leveled to seven thousand feet. “Don’t get down too far
Daysin, else Guru’s bonking your wife when we get back.” “Don’t count on it.” “Yeah sure. Excuse
me, Grigory Yefrimovich, this is Firkin at the desk. It is your zero five hundred wake-up call.” The
jets engaged their afterburners just before reaching the coastline. The plan was to be supersonic or
damn close to it as they passed over the main part of the island.

Central Valley
Buyan
Tuesday, December 31st, 1996
0500Z

Evgeniy Borodin groaned inwardly. The Caterwauling Charms were going off again and that
godforsaken noise, like giants rolling down a hill, was back. Suddenly, silence. Borodin cast the
shield charm and looked overhead. Two gray arrows streaked over, almost too fast for the eye to
The arrows suddenly sprouted wings of white and a horrendous thunder-like noise could be heard. As soon as the noise started, it stopped. Borodin started thinking. Could this be a message from the gods?

0600Z

The flybys kept coming, the latest by two B-1s based out of Diego Garcia, a long trip for these crews to perform a Mach 1 flypast. They met their tanker and recovered to that small group of islands in the middle of the Indian Ocean.

0700

This one was eight A-10s from Spangdahlem, who stayed around for a little bit, making mock attack runs from 10,000 feet to the imposed hard deck of 8,000. The concrete practice bombs made loud thumps upon hitting the dome. The 30mm rounds from the huge Avenger cannon made sounds like hail hitting a car roof. Men were being driven out of their minds.

0850

South Beach
Buyan

Vladimir Konstantinov walked his patrol inside the dome near the southern beach of the island. Cradling his AKM rifle in his arms, close to his chest, he expected no surprises, no sudden arrival of Atlantis wizards. The half-vampire Muggle was sure of his decision to join the Black Fist militant group, if not only to get away from St. Petersburg and the continued troubles after that bastard Mikhail Sergeyevich started the path to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. A dark spot in the corner of his eye caused him to stop and turn so the objects were centered in his vision. He gazed upon the shapes of the USS Nassau and USS Vicksburg in abject horror. Even more worrying, he thought he could see tiny wakes in the water. He turned to run towards the treeline, where the command post stood, screaming “Amerikantsy! Amerikantsy!” all the way.

Bridge, USS Vicksburg (CG-69)
Black Sea, eight miles south of Buyan
Tuesday, December 31st, 1996
0900Z (1100 EET)

“Gun crews report ready in all respects, Captain.” “Very well.” Captain David McCullough picked up the mouthpiece. “Fore and aft gun crews, commence firing!” Bells rang and horns sounded as the five-inch guns roared in anger, shooting over the Marine Amtracks making for the beach.

Vulture’s Row, USS Nassau (LHA-4)
Black Sea, eight miles south of Buyan
Tuesday, December 31st, 1996
0930Z (1130 EET)

Hermione Granger stood on Vulture’s Row, looking at the AAVs sailing towards the beach of Buyan and the hive of activity on the Nassau’s flight deck. Two Cobra gun ships sat on the far edge of the deck, ready to launch when given the word that the dome had fallen. A Harrier was being lifted on the aircraft elevator to the flight deck. Two black helicopters sat at the front part of the deck. Those MH-6 Little Birds would fly her, Moody, and Flamel, along with a fire team of US Navy
SEALs from the highly secretive Team SIX, to the general area of the Central Valley where Rasputin was likely bringing Koschei back to a corporeal form.

She moved her eyes from the helicopters, which freaked out Moody to no end, to the area of the deck that contained her real and hopefully lasting contribution to the cause. Sixty mannequins, bought at cost from Constanța boutiques, were being made to look like wizards trying to Apparate in. Delayed Portkeys were being attached to the lifeless foam dummies, along with wizard clothing and blood bags, to make it look like they really went splat upon reaching the shield. The Russians would call it a maskirovka- an illusion, a great fake designed to make the fatigued enemy on the island have second thoughts on where the invasion was actually going to take place. The plan was to have real wizards Apparate in, but Hermione was able to convince Dialonis, with the help of Marines, that if Rasputin cast a dome over the island to keep bombs and missiles out, then it can only be logical to assume that he cast anti-apparition wards as well. He took it well, as well as anybody can take having their plan torn to shreds by a seventeen-year-old girl and a couple big men in funny clothes with splotches of green and brown all over.

She reached into her back jeans pocket, and pulled out a small picture, somewhat worn and wrinkled, but if it got too far gone, she could always Reparo it and it would be good as new. The picture was of her and Ron, taken at a photo booth on the pier in Brighton, a rare moment in time when two teenagers could act like, well, two teenagers. The Trio went down to Brighton after Hogwarts let out for the summer and before the nuclear blast in the Ministry of Magic. Ron and Hermione were able to sneak off and have time to themselves, which culminated in that visit to the photo booth. She smiled inwardly at the memory.

The sound of turbines winding up snapped her back to reality, and she looked at the two Cobras readying for flight. She was so focused, she didn’t hear the footsteps beside her. “Penny for your thoughts, Granger’.”

“Oh, you startled me, Major.”

Major Darlene “Scarlett” O’Hara, a Cobra pilot, took pity on the scared seventeen-year-old when she arrived on board yesterday, reflecting on how scared she was when she reported to Annapolis for Plebe Summer. “Sorry about that, sugar. But really, how are you feeling?”

“I’m scared, terrified really. This isn’t how I envisioned spending my winter break. I just hope this isn’t the last one,” she choked out, glancing down at the picture.

“Is that your man,” O’Hara asked, looking over.

“Yes, Ron. We’ve had it for each other since First Year, but we were too stupid to realize it until recently.” She chuckled. “When King William came to Hogwarts, he was so jealous, he even punched him, right in front of the King Mum.”

“Sounds like he’s loyal to a fault, bless his heart. Especially if he punches the King of England in front of his momma. Oh, he’s a darlin’,” she said after looking at the picture. “You hold onto that boy, y’hear? If you keep those memories close to you, you’ll make it home after this mess winds down. This can be something you tell your kids someday. He truly loves you, and not in that teenage crush kind of way. He was willing to punch the King of England for you.” At Hermione’s perplexed expression she added “Honey, I grew up in Savannah, Jawjuh. I’m a born and bred Southern girl, and we Southern Belles like our men to be strong and loyal. As long as they’re respectful to us and to others, and work hard, we don’t mind if they get a little green with envy once in a while. As far as I am concerned, that boy’s a good catch for you, and you need to get back to him as soon as this little
Hermione took in the elder woman’s words, then reached into her left front pocket and pulled out a folded-up piece of lined paper. “Major, if I don’t make it off that bloody island, I want you to deliver this to my parents when you have the ability to.” She handed it to O’Hara and she took it and shoved it into the breast pocket of her flight suit. “You’re getting it back after it’s all over, y’hear? You got too much to live for. You do your job here, and get back to your boy and screw his brains out. And punch out that Minister of yours for pulling a stunt like this. Drafting a girl with no combat experience and throwing her into the fight? If you’d have been my daughter, I’d have shoved a shotgun into his face and dared him to take you. Now, you got any chow yet?” Hermione shook her head. Her stomach was turning too much to even think of the prospect of breakfast. "C’mon, you need to go into battle on a full stomach and the cooks are pretty good for being Squids."

Granger Residence
15 Blakesley Avenue, Ealing, Greater London
Tuesday, December 31st, 1996
1000Z

"Evelyn, do you need help with the dishes? I can have Ronnie help you."

"No, it's fine Molly, I'll just thrown them into the dishwasher."

"A...dishwasher? How does one of those things work?"

"I rinse the dishes, put them in the rack inside-top's for cups and mugs, and the bottom's for the bigger plates and the utensils. Measure the correct amount of soap, and push the button."

"Absolutely amazing."

“Be careful to not let Dad hear you say that Mum,” chuckled Ron, walking into the kitchen. His face turned to a solemn and depressed look. Mrs. Granger noticed. “Don’t worry, dear. She’ll come back.” “Yes, Ronnie. She’ll come back. Any girl than can stand you is too strong to be defeated by those wretched Death Eaters.” Ron replied sardonically “Jeez, thanks Mum.” Just then, Mrs. Granger yelped in surprise. "That idiot! Reggie, that Moody fellow didn't fix the sink like he should have!"

Her husband, Reginald "Reggie" Granger responded from the living room. "Can you do without it for a couple days love? B&Q's closed for New Years."

She responded while walking in with Molly and Ginny. "I could use the slop sinks for a couple days, but only a couple days. If I need to cover your appointments, so be it." "Okay dear."

The morning show anchors suddenly changed from talking about the newest store in Milton Keynes to a more serious tone. "We have been informed that the King Mother is addressing the nation about the recent events in Iraq and in the Black Sea. We divert from our original programming to bring you
to the Royal Residence in Windsor, Berks."

"My fellow Britons, I appear on your screens and on your radio speakers not only as Queen Regent, but also as a fellow citizen. As I speak, United States Marines and British Wizard forces are conducting an invasion of Buyan Island, off of Romania. These forces are tasked with stopping perhaps the greatest evil we have faced since the events over the summer and indeed, since the start of recorded history. The brave men and women of the Second Wizarding Army may not be your sons, daughters, sisters, brothers, and friends, but they are Britons, defending this country against the greatest evils in the magical world.

"Before a young man named Harry Potter flew through a commercial for the Super Bowl, the magical world remained largely obscured from our eyes, but ever since then, we have had our eyes opened to this hidden world. We have witnessed great triumphs and even greater sorrow and devastation. The events that propelled me into this position of great responsibility showed the world both the absolute worse and the absolute best that our shared humanity can offer. The nuclear attack in London caused great devastation and loss of life, but one girl was determined to save as many lives as she could. Hermione Granger was working at her parents' dental practice when the attacks occurred. Without thinking of her own safety or well-being, she endeavoured to save as many lives as she could. Using magic, she created shelter and distributed lead vests to mitigate against the effects of radiation and undoubtedly saved many lives. I have come to know this young woman personally as a classmate of my son, the future King William the Fifth. She does have a family, a mum and father that love her very dearly and are proud of her every achievement. She has a loving boyfriend, unyieldingly loyal, willing to confront even the future King of England to defend her honour. I know that she will do everything in her power to help stop this latest evil in defense of her nation. I fervently pray that she, and the others that have been enlisted in fighting this depraved man, Grigoriy Rasputin, do not experience failure and that they return to their loved ones. If some must give the ultimate sacrifice, may our Lord hold their families in His comforting hands. May God bless the Second Wizarding Army, the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit, and all those who are fighting for freedom around the globe, and may He grant us an everlasting peace."

There was not a dry eye in the house.

South Beach
Buyan
1000Z

The AAVs crawled onto the beach, the engines rising in pitch to provide the additional speed. They raced off the beach to the coastal plain, receiving no resistance. A crewman in the lead AAV announced that he could see people on the other side of the plain, in the treeline. They were approaching the platoon of vehicles, but stopped a thousand yards in front. They appeared to be forming a line. Igor Romanov, sitting in the commander's hatch, spoke through the intercom to the driver. "Shield barrier in range. About five hundred more meters then we'll breach. Gunner, be ready to engage." "Aye, sir. Forty mike-mike and the Ma Deuce are ready in all respects." "Okay." The 15 AAVs reached the dome and then went through. Using the tactics developed in the Battle of Diagon Alley, all of the AAVs were magically enhanced to drive through the dome without being adversely affected. They all went through. That's when the enemy started shooting bullets and firing off spells. The rounds and spells pinged off the hulls harmlessly. The roar of the M2HB .50 caliber machine guns and the 40mm Mk 19 grenade launchers in the vehicles' turrets roared to life. The rear hatches opened up and Marines and wizards stormed out and began to move forward. The Marines responded with their training in infantry tactics and squad movements. Still, some went down, often while pulling down their wizard counterparts when they decided to stand up at the wrong time. A
Few wizards also paid for their mistakes with their lives. The Marine/Wizard team still moved forward, Marine machine gunners providing covering fire for their fellow Marines and the members of 2nd Wizard. The half-vampires, Muggle and Wizard alike, provided stiff resistance, often recovering from being shot multiple times. It took a coordinated effort between the dismounted platoon and the AAVs to defeat the threat. They soon eliminated the Muggle half-vamps, but the Wizard half-vamps proved a tougher nut to crack.

Igor Romanov led the effort, locating the half-vampire with the Elder Wand quickly due to the unusual strength of the spells being launched from that direction. He dove behind a tree and pulled out his gun, reasoning that the gun would be less likely than the wand to have trouble with the Elder Wand. Removing his ring so he could fire without having the bubble in the way (and using the tree for cover), he drew a bead on the Elder Wand's owner when he was distracted and promptly shot him in the chest.

The vampire howled and collapsed, forcing Igor to react quickly before the Rasputinite healed himself. Taking careful aim, Igor Disarmed the vampire to gain control of the Elder Wand and promptly Summoned it to his hand. Elated, he screamed into his communications device. “I’ve got it! I’ve got the Wand! FINITE INCANTATEM!” The magical dome that protected most of the island came down in a shimmering light. Corporal Darnell Perkins spoke into his radio. “Nassau, Griffin Two One Actual, the superdome is open. The superdome is open.”

The Marines and Wizards’ elation were short-lived, as the Atlantis shields suddenly disappeared and more Rasputinite wizards popped up on the ridge in front of them. “We need to pull back,” yelled Pierre Ribeau, an Atlantis wizard. Perkins yelled back “Fuck that!” Another Marine yelled “Corporal, we need to Go Ugly Early!” Perkins spoke into his radio. “Any Allied aircraft, any Allied aircraft, this is Griffin 2-1 Actual. Requesting fire support.” “Griffin 2-1 Actual, ABRAXAN Flight. Four A-10s with 30 mike-mike and 500-pound bombs. Where you need us?” “ABRAXAN, 2-1 Actual. I need you to obliterate the ridge. Give them everything you got.” “Roger, what’s your position?” “300 yards south of the ridge. Wait one ABRAXAN.” Corporal Perkins turned to Ribeau. “Can you shoot sparks from that thing?” “Yes, but…” “NO BUTS WIZARD! Shoot some sparks or we’re overrun!” Ribeau raised his wand, said a few words, and red sparks came out from the tip.

A-10 81-0952 ‘SP’ 81st FS
“ABRAXAN 21”
1045Z
Tuesday, December 31st, 1996

“2-1 Actual, have your position. Dropping 300 yards north of your line. Boomer, Humor, Nacho, drop on my line. Next pass with the gun.” “2.” “3.” “4.” Major Tom “Bowie” Smith nosed over and put the nose of his Warthog parallel to the ridge. The pipper in his Heads-Up-Display showed where to drop, and he pushed the button on his stick. Twelve 500-pound bombs fell from the aircraft and white balloons sprouted from their tails. “WHUMP WHUMP WHUMPWHUMP WHUMP WHUMP WHUMP WHUMP WHUMP WHUMP WHUMP WHUMP WHUMP!” The ridgeline became a wall of fire and debris as the bombs found their mark. The other planes followed suit. A second pass wasn’t really needed, but for the sake of completeness, Major Smith and his flight rolled in- going for guns. The roar of 30mm bullets hitting their target was heard before the “BVRRRRRRRRRRRMMMMMM” of the Avenger cannon. That pocket of resistance was eliminated.
Grasping the Elder Wand in his hand, Igor stood up, fully intent on moving forward. He reached for his ring so he could put it on and insulate the Wand from further attacks.

Too late. A wet “thud” was heard as his head exploded in a red mist, then the crack of the rifle that did him in. “SNIPER! STAY DOWN!” Corporal Perkins crawled to the other squad leader in his area. “Did you see that Frank?” Corporal Frank Cummins responded. “Naw man. Sounded like it came from the summit.” “Fuck. What the…” Perkins trailed off as he saw the Elder Wand zoom off into a copse of trees. He thought he heard a small “pop” as well. “That wand… it’s gone.” Another wizard made to stand up, but Perkins hauled him down. “Stay the FUCK down!” “We need to go after the Wand!” “Not with that sniper up there we don’t!”

Flight Deck, USS Nassau

1045Z

After hearing the message on the radio about the dome being brought down, Hermione, Moody, Flamel, and five very mean-looking men in camouflage ran to the Little Birds and strapped into the bench seats on the outside of the helicopters. The landing zone was too small for the 160th’s Blackhawks, but a perfect fit for the Little Birds. The team would be escorted by two Cobra gunships. Hermione pulled down the goggles on her helmet—which was provided on request. She was taking no chances with her well-being. She wore a WWW Shield © shirt under her jacket and Kevlar vest—again, provided upon request. Moody thought she was mad and even more paranoid than him, but Flamel could understand her thought processes.

The latest reports from the front lines was that the beachhead was secured and Marines were streaming in and headed towards the battle. Atlantis wizards and members of Second Wizard were Apparating in on Black Beach and moving in Marine LAVs towards their objectives—some were going to try to get into the Elixir repository in the northwest part of the island, while the others were going to storm the old Roman fort. The platoon of AAVs and the First and Second Platoons of Alpha Company were pinned down near Phase Line Scrimgeour, where the forest transitioned to mountain, on the western side of the island.

They took off, with the Cobras on either side of them. As they flew, Hermione’s curiosity got the better of her and she looked down. The world raced by below her. The Vicksburg flashed past, the crew on her deck looking like ants. As they flew over the beach, she saw vast amounts of equipment and Marines and members of Second Wizard moving towards the fight. They flew towards the western mountain. Moody looked at her and pantomimed to cast Revilo Hominem. After a few minutes of hand signals and lip-reading, she got the idea and cast the spell. There was a glowing spot near a cluster of bushes halfway to the summit. The sniper was under an Invisibility Cloak. Moody Summoned it to him and one of the Cobras let loose a stream of 20mm rounds. The sniper was no more. The group proceeded to the LZ, an open field before the valley itself, separated from the valley by a stand of trees. The two MH-6s flared and landed in the field, the Cobras providing overwatch. They moved quickly off the benches and moved towards the trees, the SEALs with their weapons at the ready. The Little Birds didn’t waste time leaving the area.

They made it to the trees and began scouting the valley below. One SEAL looked through a spotting scope. “Hey, Minister, there’s some activity down there, about a thousand yards downrange. There’s one bad guy, looks like he’s drawing something in the ground, and the rest— about twenty—are looking around.” He reached for his radio earpiece. “That airstrike on the ridge killed about five hundred bad guys. Drone footage shows they were all bunched up ready to charge. The other thousand are unaccounted for. They just disappeared.” “Damn, that means they could pop up behind
us for all we know. Can I look through that thing?” “Sure Minister.” Flamel looked through the scope. “Well, that’s Rasputin. I can’t make out the others, but…oh, wait. Somebody just popped in. Yep, that’s Zygonov. Handing him something… Bloody hell! It’s the Elder Wand!”

Update #487: Bubble Bobble
13 TO GO

-------------
1030Z
Tuesday, December 31, 1996
Mosul
Iraq
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/4.9%

-------------
NEXT UP: Wait Until Gardeners Get Their Hands On This

-------------
Stanislav Drakul looked in approval as the Death Eaters controlling the airfield began to be swarmed under. It was only a matter of time now, he thought. Not only were the Death Eaters facing a large force of wizards dotted with Muslims for Humans irregulars, but there were now reports that an expeditionary force from the Iranian army was heading in their direction.

The Death Eaters had given it the old college try, however. They had managed to erect a small protective dome over the airfield and find a few dragons to defend it. The dragons had proven to be both a blessing and curse. It was true that they made attacking the target extremely dangerous. However, their arrival had caused almost all of the civilian onlookers to start running for their lives, particularly after one of them nearly burned down a small apartment building in an attempt to get at one of Drakul's men. There would be very few civilian casualties as a result.

It was fairly obvious that the end was nigh for the Death Eater movement, hopefully this time for good. They were outnumbered at least 6 to 1, at least in this particular location. Drakul had watched in admiration, and even a little shock, as the dome surrounding the airfield collapsed under a barrage of laser-guided bombs. Ideally, the attackers would have used Tomahawk missiles, but with all of the civilian buildings in the area precision and human judgment were going to be much more important.

Many of the Muslims for Humans soldiers had suddenly discovered that they really wanted to be somewhere else once the dragons had shown up. Fortunately, some of them -- including Antoun's successor -- had mustered the courage to attack one of the dragons with a machine gun. The bullets had actually managed to tear through the creature's fragile wings and forced it to the ground. The only problem was that the dragon hadn't taken the loss of its wings philosophically, choosing to breathe fire on its tormentors instead. A good half of the Muslims for Humans recruits had been caught in that raid, and the wizards were barely able to cast a spell in time to protect their new allies. Some of the Muslims for Humans men grumbled about the spell, but they didn't complain THAT much considering the alternative was to have been turned into charcoal.

Drakul watched as one of the special forces men near him aimed a bazooka at the last remaining dragon. The round hit the monster in the head, destroying it in a colossal explosion. Bits of blood and gore sprayed everywhere as the dragon's carcass crashed onto the airfield's runway. He glanced at the Death Eaters and saw that they were all looking at the dragon and standing very still. Drakul could already sense the gears churning in their heads: should we surrender or die?

The decision didn't take long. Seconds later, the Death Eaters took off their masks, pocketed their
wands, and raised their hands to the sky.

Drakul thought he saw his Atlantis bubble flicker a little as he ordered the rest of his men to cease fire. It was nothing, he thought. Some rogue Death Eater probably launched a spell and I saw the beam's reflection in the bubble. It's not like it could have been anything else. However, the incident forced him to focus on the fact that this could be a trap. He would have to proceed very carefully here. The simple fact that they still had their wands in their pockets made him nervous.

Gathering a small group of wizards and Muggles, he led the delegation over to the remains of the Death Eater encampment to take the enemy's surrender. At first, everything was peaceful. The Death Eaters came up to him, surrendered their wands, and did not fight as his comrades placed them in handcuffs or magical binders depending on the background of the arresting officer. As he worked, reports began coming in from places like Basra where the Death Eaters were also starting to surrender.

Drakul was about to take the wand of the next prisoner when something which he thought was impossible happened.

His Atlantis bubble flickered once more...and vanished. Suddenly, he was unprotected with a Death Eater two feet from him. He heard a grunt of surprise next to him and caught a glimpse of the man next to him also without his Atlantis bubble.

This could be a problem.

----------
Atlantis
----------
Ndrukaku hurried over to Dagher with an expression of alarm on his face. "Grand Mugwump, we've got a bit of a problem here for our friends in Buyan and Iraq."

Dagher frowned. "A problem? From what I've been hearing, things have been going pretty well. The Death Eaters are being rounded up in Iraq, and the coalition forces have just breached the shield wall on Buyan."

Ndrukaku grinned slightly. "That, sir, is part of the problem. We may be in a situation which could endanger our forces."


Ndrukaku stared at the floor, a little embarrassed. "Well, I just had them recalculate the Apocalypsmometer reading now that the Death Eaters are about to be eliminated from Iraq. It's dropped, as you would expect. It's now at about 4.97%.

Dagher was confused. "It's dropped 0.4%? That's pretty good, and not unexpected. What's the problem?"

Ndrukaku looked back at the Grand Mugwump. "Well, we've just downgraded to DEFCON 3, sir. We're no longer above the 5% barrier, which in turn means we should stop intervening in Buyan and Iraq."

Dagher snorted. "We're already there. It's not like we can extricate ourselves easily. You have my permission to proceed."
Ndukaku nodded distractedly. "I was expecting you would say that. However, there's even a bigger issue. Once we hit DEFCON 3, the Atlantis bubbles go down all over the world. Including Buyan."

Dagher's eyes widened, when he realized what that meant. "Oh shit. I should have thought about that! Damn me!"

Ndukaku tried to calm his boss. "You've done a pretty good job so far, even though you're relatively new to Atlantis."

"Not good enough. Can you turn those rings back on?"

Ndukaku shook his head. "They're tied to the 5% boundary, and we can't control that. All we can do wait until it exceeds 5% again and not recalculate the DEFCON value until the battles end or things get bad enough that we get out of the phase transition on the DEFCON 2 side."

"Phase transition? What do you mean?"

Ndukaku explained. "Suppose we're exactly at 5% and we make progress in a way which relies on the bubbles. The value will drop below 5%, at which point the bubbles would have shut off. However, since losing the bubbles will allow the enemy to advance, the value will start rising towards 5% again, bringing us back where we started."

Dagher began to see where this is going. "I get it. And if we breach the 5% barrier going up, the shields will come back up which will reduce the enemy's progress. That will cause it to go back down to 5% again."

"Correct. It's a phase transition, just like when we're at zero celsius and are converting from water to ice and vice versa. There's a long period of time when trying to heat the water-ice mixture doesn't change the temperature."

Dagher thought about it. "I like your idea: recalculate until we're above 5% and then don't do anything until the situation dictates that shields should be raised or lowered for good. Then recalculate based on the new data."

"That's it, sir."

"Good. Make it so."

"Yes, sir."

-------

Mosul

- - - -

The Death Eater and Drakul spent a good second or so staring at the where the Atlantis bubble had been. Then all hell broke loose.

The Death Eater had been handing the wand hilt-first to Drakul. The prisoner suddenly reached for the wand with his other hand, clearly intending to turn it around. Drakul was only vaguely aware of that as he brought his own wand into his hand. He didn't know why the shield was down, but he had to defend himself now.

He cast *Expelliarmus* just as the Death Eater opened his mouth to cast something which would have likely made life unpleasant for him. The Death Eater's wand flew away, where it was picked up by
one of the Aurors in the First Division. Drakul then hit his Death Eater with a Stunning Spell which kept him docile long enough to put him in binders.

A quick glance down the line revealed that several other Death Eaters had tried to attack the Atlanteans when the shields had dropped. Two of the Atlanteans had actually been caught off guard and succumbed. However, it hadn't taken long before their backups subdued their attackers.

Drakul shuddered to think about what would happen if the bubbles went down on Buyan as well. He had about five seconds to ponder this when gunfire broke out a few blocks away, far from the front. Was he imagining something, or were the Muggles fighting each other now?

Then it occurred to him. Saddam Hussein was dead and the Iraqi government was in disarray. The Death Eaters had been rounded up...leaving a power vacuum for the Muggles. The door was open for the Sunnis, Shiites, Kurds to bid for control of the nation. To make matters worse, troops from Iran and Saudi Arabia were converging on Baghdad to oust a Dark wizard government which no longer existed. Only time would tell if they would actually LEAVE Iraq.

Uh oh.

--------

U.S.S. Nassau
Buyan

Nicholas Flamel may have already been on Buyan. However, his Patronus was already on the ship, and the glowing phoenix turned as a wizard flew in and landed on the deck. The man's face was bloody, and he had a scar on a cheek. He and the rest of teh advisory council listened as the man began his report.

"Gentlemen, we've got a bit of a problem. Shortly after we destroyed the shield, all the Atlantis bubbles turned off, catching everyone off guard. A good forty people were taken out while our side was trying to figure out what the hell was going on. Progress appears to have stopped for now."

Igor Karkaroff blinked at the messenger. "How could the Atlantis bubbles just turn off like that? They're not supposed to do that."

The messenger shrugged. "I don't know, sir. They just disappeared, and they haven't come back since."

Flamel didn't like this. "Could Rasputin have done something?"

One of the Atlanteans shook his head. "I don't think so. Those rings are controlled from the Prophecy Department on Atlantis. I sure as hell hope Atlantis hasn't been compromised."

Flamel didn't want to bring this up, but he had to. "Diversion. Could this whole thing with Buyan and Iraq be a diversion?"

The Atlantean frowned. "It's possible, but I doubt it. That vampire we interrogated didn't mention anything about an Atlantis takeover. However, it's a good thing to check. I'll see if I can send a message over there to ask for clarification."

He issued the appropriate orders and turned back to the messenger. "Do you have an update on the Elder Wand?"
The messenger looked at his feet. "There's still fierce fighting over it. We actually had it inside an Atlantis bubble for a while, something which I thought would keep it ours for good. That had been, of course, until the damn bubbles went down. The Hapsburg princess who had been holding it was blown away by a sniper before she could bring out her wand."

Karkaroff blinked. "We're getting nobles killed?"

"Looks like it, sir. Igor Romanov is also down. He was killed shortly after using the Elder Wand to remove the shield. He had to bring down his bubble so he could disarm the wand's prior owner. We've got to get the nobles out of here until we can at least get those bubbles back. Most of them are just being invited just because they've got the rings. They don't have much practical fighting experience."

The Atlantean nodded. "I agree. Tell them to retreat and leave the fighting to the professionals. Any news on that potion the Black God cultists are carrying around? I remember you saying Slughorn didn't recognize it."

"Don't know, sir. Slughorn claims it's some kind of healing potion, and the few of us who have quaffed it say it has amazing healing powers. It once saved someone from the brink of death. If it's a healing potion, it's the strongest one I've ever encountered."

Flamel frowned and began scanning the carnage around him. "Maybe I can identify it -- I've been around longer than you have, and I've seen lots of strange stuff. There's a headless Black Cultist here with a vial. It's a glowing...God, no. It can't be."

Karkaroff didn't like this. "Can't be what?"

Flamel unstoppered the vial and took a whiff. A horrified expression appeared on his face as he drank a few drops. Shaking his head in disbelief and pocketing the vial, he answered quickly.

"Bloody hell. That's the Elixir of Life. They've got themselves a Philosopher's Stone!"

Everyone started talking at once until the Atlantean suddenly amplified his voice and shouted: "HOW IS THIS POSSIBLE?"

Flamel looked towards the old Roman fort. "They have Hugh hostage, and he knows how to make the Stone. I bet they tortured or Legilimensed him. He wouldn't have given out that information willingly. I don't know where he'd have gotten the spell components from, though. They're pretty obscure."

He turned to the messenger. "Tell everyone to start looking for the Stone as well. If they find, have them confiscate it immediately and return it to me so I can destroy it. It would be a small red gem, probably under heavy guard. Also, try to steal as many of those Elixir vials as you can. We don't want those in the hands of our enemy."

There was a brief moment of silence. Suddenly, the Atlantean chuckled. "Well, at least we now know how Rasputin is planning to revive Koschei."

Flamel stared helplessly into the heavens. "First the Elder Wand, and now the Philosopher's Stone. If those get into Koschei's hands we're in deep, deep trouble."

To be continued...
Update #487.5: Wait Until Gardeners Get Their Hands On This
13 TO GO
--------------
1103Z
Tuesday, December 31, 1996
Buyan
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 2/5.6%
--------------
NEXT UP: Well, At Least THESE Guys Have An Exit Strategy
--------------

Judging from the increasing sense of anticipation he was getting from the guard, he figured it was only a matter of time until Rasputin was finished with the runes. Once he was done, he could cast the spell which would bring back Koschei, albeit in child form. Normally, that would have been the end of it as the traditional ritual to bring back someone from a Horcrux required the use of the father's bones -- and Atlantis had long ago destroyed Koschei's father's body.

Of course, Atlantis hadn't considered the possibility that someone would create the Elixir of Life. Hugh had been too young during the Black Death to remember much about Koschei. However, his master had told him enough. Bringing back Koschei, particularly in a world full of chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons, wouldn't be a particularly good idea...unless for some reason Koschei decided to repent.

Turning Koschei back to the light side seemed, oddly enough, not completely implausible. There were old rumors claiming that Koschei had initially rebelled against Atlantis because he believed Atlantis to be too laissez faire when it came to interfering with international politics. From what he had heard coming out of today's Atlantis, there were several people arguing for increased Atlantean interference, particularly with the Statute of Secrecy down and the Muggle world in desperate need of magical assistance. Would Koschei suddenly give everything up if Dagher realized that Koschei had a point given the fall of the Statute? Only time would tell.

Hugh's musings were suddenly interrupted by gunfire in the distance. He looked up to see the guard spin and stick his head out of the tent. The gunfire sounded again, this time closer. He heard voices outside telling everyone to hold just a little longer as Rasputin was almost done.

Hugh tensed. The guard's back was still turned, and it was unlikely that the other guards were watching the tent with enemies approaching. Now was his chance.

He picked up a rock which weighed at least five kilos and slowly crept behind the guard, who paid him no notice. Hugh lifted the rock over the guard's head and released it just as the guard realized something strange was going on. He spun and caught a glimpse of Hugh staring at him before the rock hit him on the head, knocking him out.

Hugh grabbed the guard's wand and dragged him into the tent. Once both he and the guard were safely out of sight, he cast Geminio on himself, arranged the clone body on the bed, and then dressed up in the guard's robes. If anyone asked him why he had left his post, he would say the prisoner was sleeping.

Relieved to be free, he made his way out of the tent and looked around. He couldn't see much
through the trees, but he thought he had caught a brief glimpse of Rasputin in the distance. The man was surrounded by a bizarre set of runes Hugh had never seen before.

Hugh had to do something to disrupt Rasputin's concentration, and do so quickly. Gripping his trusty rock, he crept towards Rasputin.

-------------------
Rasputin grinned as the last rune was put into place. He heard the gunfire in the distance, but he was now fairly certain that he would be able to bring Koschei back in time to allow him to finish off whoever was attacking them. In the meantime, he trusted his men to deal with any potential interruptions.

Stepping into the center of the circle of runes, he uttered ancient words which had not been spoken in over six hundred years. Lightning flashed everywhere, and thunderclaps temporarily blocked out the sound of the approaching gunfire. Rasputin had to look away to prevent himself from being blinded. When he turned back to his handiwork, he saw that he was no longer alone. A distorted, deformed child lay on the ground next to him. The child's body was covered with sores and wrinkles, and its face was that of a man in his fifties with short gray hair and intelligent eyes.

The child spoke something in a language which sounded remotely like Russian, yet for some reason Rasputin only understood two or three of the words. Telling the child to hold on a second, he reached into his pocket for his extra vial of the Elixir of Life. The child looked at it curiously -- obviously, Koschei didn't recognize the Elixir as he predated it -- as Rasputin told him to open his mouth to receive the liquid. The child looked at him blankly for a moment.

It was at this point that Rasputin realized Koschei hadn't understood a word of Rasputin had said. And it soon became obvious why.

Koschei spoke Russian, but likely not the traditional dialect that Rasputin had been. There were several dialects of English which were mutually unintelligible, and Russian presumably had the same problem in some cases. However, that issue was nothing compared to fact that Koschei was in effect speaking a dead language -- one which had evolved drastically since the fourteenth century. Shit, Rasputin thought. I need to find a Middle Russian scholar in a hurry! This guy had the same problem Samuel did!

Desperate, Rasputin resorted to sign language to try to explain to Koschei what he was doing. Koschei understood -- thank the Black God for Koschei's intelligence -- and opened his mouth. Rasputin unstoppered the vial and lifted into the air.

That was when something hit him hard between the shoulder blades and knocked him to his knees. Furious, he turned his head just in time to see Hugh de Lourdes pointing a wand at him and shouting "Accio Elixir". The vial of Elixir tried to jump out of Rasputin's hands, and the Mad Monk clutched it desperately to prevent it from escaping. However, that distraction proved costly as Hugh ran up and tackled him like an American football linebacker.

The child that was Koschei looked on in confusion as the two men struggled. Hugh kicked at Rasputin's arm hard enough to knock the Elixir of Life loose. The vial spilled and fell into the snow, causing a patch to glow briefly. Koschei shouted something which didn't seem particularly pleasant, and Rasputin responded by screaming for help.

Suddenly, the ground underneath them shuddered. Rasputin and Koschei looked down in confusion, and their eyes widened as trees and vines suddenly growing at hundreds of times their natural rate. Within seconds, a large hedge had appeared between Rasputin and Koschei. And it was still
Hugh wasn't fazed by this, and Rasputin realized that the Elixir of Life had likely drained through to the forest floor and fertilized all the leaves and seeds down there enough to revive them. Apparently the Elixir worked on plants as well as on animals -- something Hugh had already known.

Black Fist cultists soon raced into view and fired at Hugh from behind him. The ancient wizard stiffened and collapsed as Rasputin's allies helped their master to his feet. Watching in satisfaction as Hugh was dragged back to the tent, Rasputin turned to his rescuers' leader and noticed that it was Zygonova.

"Thank you for rescuing me. You did your job well: I've revived Koschei, and his child form is hiding behind that hedge over there. Do you have any more Elixir? Hugh spilled mine when he jumped me."

Zygonova nodded and reached for her pocket. However, she didn't have much time to react before she suddenly spun and shot a Killing Curse out into the forest. It hit a tree, which abruptly withered and collapsed. As it did, gunfire responded from further back in the forest. Rasputin and Zygonova dove behind more trees in an attempt to lead the enemy away from Koschei's vulnerable form. They watched as a large group of soldiers made their way into the clearing.

Rasputin looked back at Koschei and tried to send him a message by thought: Hold on, my lord. We'll be with you momentarily. Just let us get rid of these fellows first. Whatever you do, don't leave that hedge. You're pretty well hidden in there, I'd expect.

Turning back to Zygonova and his rescuers, he pointed at the attacking wizards. "All right, you guys. Annihilate them, and keep them away from that hedge!"

---------------------

Black Cult wizard Viktor Karmov caught a brief glimpse of bright light high overhead. Reacting instinctively, he shot a thick beam of yellow light into the sky. There was a faint explosion, and he risked a glance up to see a fighter jet tumbling out of the sky. Heh, he thought. I got one!

Zhukov didn't give him time to gloat, however. Putting his hand on Karmov's shoulder, he told him to hide behind a tree. "Take cover! I think we've got an LAV coming in our direction!"

Karmov frowned. "A what?"

"An LAV! It's a armored vehicle for transporting personnel! What's more, if it's one of those from the beach it's probably immune to magical attack!"

Karmov flinched. "You're the Muggle. What do we do about it?"

Zhukov thought for a moment. Suddenly, he grinned and nudged Karmov. "You any good at Transfiguration? Thank God I know English!"

---------------------

Marine Lieutenant John Jameson held up his hand as the LAV came over the ridge. "Hold a second here. I see someone waving us down. Damn, he's got an injured soldier in his arms. Do we have any room in here to take the casualty back to base, or at least make sure we can start triaging him without fear of Black Cultist attack?"

Harold Clarkson looked at the rest of the people in his unit. There wasn't much room. However, they had seen too many people die on the field to characters out of monster movies. They had already
endured several horror flicks' worth of nasties, and they hadn't even found Rasputin yet. It may have been a tight fit, but considering that there were no immediate threats...the vote was unanimous.

Jameson nodded. "All right, stop and cover me. I'll go out and bring in the wounded man."

The rest of the troops stood back respectfully as Jameson and the uninjured soldier helped the hurt man into the vehicle. Both newcomers thanked them greatly, and Jameson told them that it was nothing. There weren't any threats right now, and they didn't want to see more men dying if they could help it.

As a matter of fact, they wouldn't. Shortly after the vehicle got underway again, the healthy man suddenly pulled out his machine gun and began firing away at the rest of the Marines. All four of them went down in a heap. Jameson, fortunately, had a good enough of reaction time to fire on his attacker, and the man's eyes widened as the bullet hit him in the chest. The man crumpled, reached for his pocket, and pulled out a vial of glowing white liquid. Jameson didn't care what it was -- he was just happy that he'd thwarted the attack. He REALLY didn't want to give these assholes one of the LAV's.

That was when the supposedly injured Marine suddenly kicked him in the side. Jameson spun and caught a punch heading towards his face. He had barely started struggling with this second attacker when the machine gun barked again and hit him in middle of his back.

The last thing Jameson saw was the first attacker pointing the gun at him. Apparently he had miraculously recovered from a gunshot wound to the chest. Hell, he didn't look hurt at all anymore...

------------

Zhukov tossed the last body out of the LAV and grinned. "All right, Karmov. Where do you want to go now? Thank God I know how to drive this thing!"

To be continued...

-------------

Update #488: Well, At Least THESE Guys Have An Exit Strategy

12 TO GO

------------

1113Z
Tuesday, December 31, 1996
Mosul
Iraq
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 2/5.7%

------------

NEXT UP: A Civilian Reacts

-------------

Stanislav Drakul had thought that his work would have been done as soon as the last group of Death Eaters had been rounded up. Unfortunately, there had been a major fly in the ointment, one which had nothing whatsoever to do with the Death Eaters.

Right now, he and six other members of the First Division of the Wizarding Standing Army found themselves in the unenviable position of trying to separate two rioting groups of Iraqi Muggles who were fighting for control of the city center. One bunch consisted entirely of Sunni Muslims, and the rest consisted entirely of Shiites. Both sides were armed with handguns and a few grenades here and
Drakul's fears had come true. Although the Death Eaters were gone, it soon became obvious to everyone that a new government needed to be installed in Iraq...and there were at least five or six different parties who wanted to be in charge. It was true that several of the old administration's people had survived thanks to his raid on the Death Eater safe house. Unfortunately, the decrees of a small group of politicians wouldn't do much good when the other people had guns. The police force was hopelessly overwhelmed by the sheer number of insurgents, which had put the government in a situation that they would have called in the army to clean everything up.

Except that the army had its hands full. Dagher, as a former Saudi minister, had enough influence on the Saudi command structure to convince the government to call back the Saudi troops which had been headed into Iran now that the Death Eaters had been ousted. On the other hand, most of the Iraqi army veterans knew what had happened between 1980 and 1988 when it came to the Iranian army.

It soon became obvious that the invasion to remove the Death Eaters had served as the perfect pretext for restarting the Iran-Iraq war. Iran had been on the offensive when the war had ended in 1988, and they soon found themselves with troops in Iraq and no obvious Death Eaters to attack. Several commanders figured: might as well try to go after Iraq again now that their government is in shambles and we've already got troops there.

To make matter worse, the Kurds were starting to get restless up north. There had been a few incidents where Kurdish soldiers had fired on Iraqi and or Iranian forces. For the time being, the Kurdish leaders had managed to keep everything under control. Drakul was unsure, however, as to how long it would remain that way.

Gunfire brought Drakul back to reality, and he immediately ordered the men around him to cast *Expelliarmus* on both sides while he covered the wizards with his Atlantis bubble. The bubbles were now on again, and as far as he could tell they were on for good. He had received a bulletin from Dagher explaining the temporary fall of the bubbles, and he was hoping that the fact that the bubbles were on again was due to the increasing chaos in Iraq and not because of something going on somewhere on Buyan. The reason was simple: Iran and Iraq going after each other was one thing, but a wizard who liked to throw around biological weapons was something else entirely.

After confirming that both groups of civilians had been completely disarmed, he removed his bubble and amplified his voice. "Attention, citizens of Iraq. I am Stanislav Drakul of the First Division of the Wizarding Standing Army. Your country is in tough enough shape as is, and you don't need revolutions stirring things up further."

One of the rioters sneered at him. "And what are you going to do about it? We've been oppressed for a while, and now it's time for us to take control with a new government."

Dagher glared at the speaker. "And what makes you qualified to run the country?"

"It's our turn, wizard! The previous administrations got us into war and dictatorship!"

"I see. And do you have any experience running a country, good sir?"

The speaker hesitated, then said: "I must admit I haven't run a country before. However, I know what should NOT be done, and I know to not make those mistakes."
"I assume treating everyone equally and fairly is something which must be done by a just government, right?"

"Yes."

Drakul slammed the point home. "Then why are you attacking these people because they're from a different ethnic group? That makes you unjust and unqualified in my opinion. What we need is government by a neutral party, like what we had in the Koreas."

One of the rioter's opponents cut in. "And who's going to run that? The United Nations? Atlantis? Hell, you? If it is one of you wizards, what makes YOU qualified to do it?"

Drakul responded smoothly: "Because we have experience doing so in Korea and because we aren't troubled by Muggle vendettas and prejudices like you characters are. In fact, it is my fervent wish that the Saudis and my forces stay in this area to keep everything under control until the United Nations or some other authority can create a temporary government."

The first man shook his head. "We're not Koreans. You don't know Iraqis at all, don't you?"

"No. However, we know human nature. And we did pretty well in Korea even though we didn't know the Koreans very well. Trust me, son. This will work. Do you want anyone else to die?"

"Of course not. That's why we need to create a new government, with us at the head."

Drakul tried to negotiate with the two parties for a little longer, but it soon became obvious that they weren't getting it. He told his men to prepare for another peacekeeping mission, this time in the Middle East. Against his better judgment, he began hexing people from both sides and told them that they would keep on getting hexed as long as they continued to fight each other. That eventually worried them enough to get them to back off. Thank God for those Expelliarmuses early on in the encounter!

He had scarcely escorted the two sides out of contact with each other when he saw a Patronus fly in from Atlantis and land right in front of him. He recognized the scorpion easily: it was Dagher's.

The scorpion spoke. "Good morning, Stanislav. How are things going?"

Drakul bit back a curse. "Problematic. It looks like this whole region is going to explode. It's obvious that you're going to send us on a mission to stabilize Iraq, sir, and I've already told my men to get ready."

The scorpion shook its head. "That won't be necessary, Stanislav. You're going on a mission, but it's not going to be in Iraq. Now that the Death Eaters are out of the way, I'm going to be sending you and the rest of the First Division to Buyan. I want you to Apparate over to the American warship Nassau in 15 minutes so we can debrief you on what is going on."

Drakul was aghast. "Sir," he said, "are you sure that's wise? The Middle East is going to completely self-destruct unless we keep things under control!"

"You won't be going there permanently, Stanislav. Once we have Buyan well in hand and Koschei back in Sheol where he belongs -- or dead -- then you will be able to spend as much time as you want in Iraq."
Drakul gritted his teeth. "You've already got men there, sir. We're needed here!"

The scorpion shook its head. "It's true that help is needed where you are. However, you have to understand that this is right now a Muggle-only fight. Let the Muggle authorities take care of that. It is not up to us to determine who rules Iraq, and keep in mind that although wizards can deal with Muggles, Muggles can't deal with wizards easily. The simple truth is this: while it is true that wizards can clean up Iraq, that would leave Muggles to deal with Rasputin and Koschei...which they CANNOT do."

Drakul felt his fighting a losing battle, but he had to try. "Sir, I just separated two gangs of rioters who would have killed each other. Can't we stay a little longer?"

"I'm afraid not, Stanislav. The battle for Buyan has been extremely bloody, with hundreds of wizards killed on both sides and Rasputin still at large. We're going to need reinforcements, and you're the reinforcements."

"Sir, I respectfully request --"

Dagher cut him off. "Request denied. We'll be expecting you on the boat in fifteen minutes. Dagher out."

The Patronus disappeared, and Drakul glared for a good five seconds at where it had been. However, orders were orders. Sighing, he shouted to his men: "Attention! We've been redeployed to Buyan! Prepare to Apparate over to the Nassau in fifteen minutes!"

His second frowned. "Sir, is that wise? This whole country will likely blow up if we aren't here to defend it."

"Probably. However, if we finish off Koschei fast enough, maybe we'll be able to win both of these fights. Now move!"

------

1135Z

Buyan

Atlantis Auror Johann Stein turned his head just in time to see the Elder Wand fly into the hands of the wizard next to him. He didn't know English all that well, and he doubted that the man next to him knew German. However, if all else failed, there was always Latin.

He took off his ring momentarily -- thank God it had come back on -- and reached out. "Surrender the wand! Hurry!"

The Elder Wand's new owner nodded and let Stein Disarm him. The Elder Wand flew into Stein's hand, and he slammed the ring back onto his finger just as machine gun fire tore into the wand's prior owner. The man's body collapsed in a pool of blood as the trail of bullets flowed in his direction. They got him, but too late. Soon, they were bouncing off the Atlantis bubble and falling harmlessly to the ground.

Stein punched the air in excitement and turned to one of the other soldiers. "Ernst, send a message to Dagher and tell him that I'm the master of the Elder Wand and that I've got it in an Atlantis bubble!"

Ernst saluted and ran off as an odd mechanical sound caught Stein's ear. Frowning, he turned and saw that the sound was coming from what appeared to be an LAV, one of those magical-resistant
vehicles the Muggles had used to storm the island. It must have recently seen action, as its machine gun was steaming.

Ernst shouted that he was going to take the LAV back to base. Stein nodded and watched as he climbed into the back of the vehicle to spread the good news.

----------------
Zhukov waited for the enemy soldier to make it into the vehicle before jumping him, closing the door, and grabbing his gun. Thinking that firing the weapon would alert the Elder Wand's new owner as to what they were doing, Zhukov conked poor Ernst on the head with the butt of the weapon. He'd probably be out for a long time. A quick look at the man's uniform revealed that Zhukov wouldn't be able to fit in his clothes. Oh well.

He headed over to the driver's section and spoke in Karmov's ear. "I've taken our intruder out of the picture. You think you can get that wand out of the bubble?"

Karmov smiled. "I think so. This vehicle has a field which converts magic to electricity, right? And the Atlantis bubble is made out of magic, is it not?"

----------------
Stein frowned as the LAV approached him. What was going on here? Why didn't Ernst tell the driver to go back to base and report the capture of the Elder Wand? He approached the vehicle and started waving for the driver to return to base.

The LAV just trundled on in his direction. Slightly disturbed, he braced the Atlantis bubble against a tree and prepared to block the vehicle's path. This was important. What on Earth was Ernst doing?

The vehicle made its way up to the Atlantis bubble...and promptly passed right through it in a shower of electric sparks. Stein stared at it for a moment, and it took him a moment to realize that the anti-magic field was likely disrupting the magic of the Atlantis bubble. He made a mental note to warn his commanding officer about this effect.

He cupped his hands over his mouth and began screaming at the driver. "Go back to base! The Elder Wand needs to be taken out of the fight!"

The LAV didn't move for a moment. Then, the machine gun slowly began to turn in his direction. Realizing what had happened, he pointed his wand at the LAV and cast a spell.

Nothing emerged from the wand other than a mild electric shock.

Meanwhile, the LAV's new owners trained their machine gun on him and set loose on him under full automatic.

That weapon worked.

-------------
Inside the LAV, Karmov lowered the gun and began whooping it up. "Check it out! I'm probably the master of the Elder Wand now!"

Zhukov didn't take his eyes off the displays. "Good for you. Now let's get the Wand if possible and get out of here!"

To be continued...
I knew that New Year's Day was a holiday. However, most of the festivities were on New Year's Eve. Why didn't people get New Year's Eve off as well? It was kind of a surprise to find that we had to work on the 31st. On the other hand, this was my first full-time job which included a winter session. Perhaps other companies were not like Parametric.

On the other hand, who was I to complain? I still had a job, and that was the important thing. Many of my friends from MIT and Brandeis, including those in the high-demand software engineering field, had either lost jobs or not been able to find one. Some had taken temporary employment as waitresses, janitors, Christmas elves (the fake kind), and so forth. My parents urged me to work my rear end off because I did NOT want to join that throng, particularly with my poor social skills.

I turned on the television for the morning news and saw that a wizard's hat was displayed on the television monitor behind the anchor desk. Clearly, the fighting in Iraq was still going on. How high would gas prices climb today? $4.25 per gallon? I felt damn lucky I could walk to work if I so chose! There was no way I was going to move to Cambridge or Brookline and deal with gas prices like that for my commute!

The announcer was in the middle of his report: "...right, the last Death Eaters have been ousted from Iraq, and the land of Saddam Hussein is once again free from wizard tyranny. Unfortunately, we're not out of the woods yet. Although the Death Eaters are gone, the Iraqi nation has suddenly found itself with foreign troops on its soil and a nonfunctional government. Multiple sources are reporting that no fewer than four factions in Iraq are vying for power and that the nation is about to devolve to civil war. Shiite Muslims are fighting Sunni, a few army commanders want to turn the country into a military dictatorship, and several Kurd partisans are taking action in the north. However, that is not the only story. Let's contact Rebecca Walsh, who is coming to us from just outside the city of Mosul."

An attractive young woman -- in order to be a good reporter, looks tended to be helpful -- appeared on the screen the middle of what seemed to be a clearing. She appeared to be in a desert somewhere, and I couldn't identify any landmarks. Without warning, there was a puff of black smoke in the distance. A few seconds later, a faint boom reached the microphone. The explosion must have been pretty loud to have been heard from the reporter's location.

The woman on the scene began to report. "This is Rebecca Walsh from just outside Mosul, where the engagement between the Iraqi and Iranian Muggle forces is continuing to escalate. There are mortars shelling Iraqi soldiers just over the horizon here, and there has been a steady stream of refugees reporting of major warfare between the Iraqi and Iranian armies."
The anchorman asked, "Why would the Iraqis be fighting the Iranians?"

"They believe the Iranians are planning to take advantage of their armies' position inside Iraq and resume the Iran-Iraq war from 1980-1988. Officially, the Iranians say they are there to ensure that their Iraqi neighbor doesn't fall into civil war. No one here believes that, though. There's no peaceful reason for the Iranians to be advancing anymore now that word has gone out that the last pockets of Death Eaters have been eradicated. Besides, if the Iranians intended to help the Iraqis, why are they shelling Iraqi positions? Another thing to keep in mind is that Iraq just took some land from the Iranians as a reward for Saddam's work during Judgment Day. The Iranians could very well believe that they are no longer entitled to that land because they let Dark wizards similar to Voldemort take over their country. This could also be a land grab."

"This doesn't sound good. What are the Saudis doing, and why aren't the Wizarding forces maintaining the peace? From what we've been told, Wizard Drakul's division is currently in Iraq and they did a fine job in the Koreas."

The reporter's face darkened slightly. "The Saudis have reportedly ceased their invasion of Iraq and are heading back to the border, where they're maintaining a defensive position until all of this plays out. That's what one would have expected Iran to do as well, if you think about it. As far as Drakul's unit goes, it was supposedly here half an hour ago and then promptly disappeared all over the country."

"Where did they go?"

"They didn't say, but people have been speculating. If the reports coming out of the Black Sea are to be believed, there is a major Wizarding operation going on there. Experts suspect that the wizards left to join that operation. They figure the UN and the neighboring states can deal with what is, at this point, an all-Muggle crisis."

I blinked. Another major Wizarding operation? Was there another group of Death Eaters which the world hadn't known about and who were now seeking to avenge the death of their leader? Just what the world needed at this point, I thought.

The anchorman clued her in. "Rebecca, we have more information on that operation in the Black Sea. It appears that a large force of wizards and Muggles from all over the world is trying to suppress an uprising by a Russian cult worshiping the god Tchernobog. At least, that's what Atlantis is saying. However, there are rumors that it's gone beyond that. Supposedly the purpose of this cult is to restore a legendary Russian Dark wizard to power. They're concerned that he will try to take over the Muggle world now that the Statute of Secrecy has fallen."

The reporter frowned. "Sounds like a good description of Voldemort, but I didn't know Voldemort was Russian."

"Voldemort wasn't Russian -- he was British. This Russian seems to be a completely different individual, but Atlantis is taking him as seriously as they did Voldemort."

"How much do you know about him?"

"Only what we're hearing out of CNN. Just that he is considered a major threat to the area and that they are focusing on a location known as Buyan. They have been reassuring us that he is unlikely to return to power and this is all being done as a precaution."
The reporter's frown deepened. "I've never heard of Buyan."

"Neither have I. Supposedly it's another hidden island like Syrdan, and no one seems to know where it is other than the people involved in the operation itself. Now -- Rebecca, can you hold for a moment? We've got a new bulletin coming out of Iraq."

The reporter's response was drowned out as a tank suddenly rumbled past her. It had Arabic symbols on it which I couldn't read, so I couldn't tell where whose side it was on. However, it was clearly heading in the direction of that smoke plume.

Rebecca's image vanished and was replaced by that of the anchorman by himself. "Ladies and gentlemen, we have more disturbing news out of the Middle East. There is a report, at this point unconfirmed, that an American oil tanker has struck a mine in the Straits of Hormuz and is sinking. No one has claimed responsibility for this attack, and at this point it would be premature to link this incident to the fighting between Iran and Iraq.

"Mines in the Straits of Hormuz indicate a disturbing escalation of the conflict. This is because all Middle Eastern oil exported to the Western world has to travel through the Straits. If the Straits are blocked off, the American people loses access to all Middle Eastern oil. For those of you who remember the 1970's oil embargo, be prepared. We may have to go through that all over again."

I had been a child at the time, and I remembered very little of the embargo. I vaguely recalled something about us not wanting to turn lights on Shabbat as often not just because it was traditionally forbidden but because of an embargo of some sort. However, if something had been serious enough to worry my father, it must have been problematic indeed.

I turned the television off. The world was scary enough as it is, particularly now that it knew what damage a Dark wizard could do. It was probably time for me to get dressed and go to work.

------------------------------------

Krivak-class FFG Ladnyy
247th Independent Submarine Division
Under the Black Sea
------------------------------------

Captain Konstantin Sokoloff looked at the message from HQ and his eyes widened. Swearing viciously, he raced back to the bridge and started shouting out orders.

"Attention, all hands. We have been given new orders. We are to head to the island of Buyan to help destroy a group of...wizards. Set course for the following coordinates, where we will rendezvous with the American warship Nassau."

There was a long pause. Finally, the XO drew a deep breath. "Captain, this has got to be a joke. There's no island of Buyan, that's a myth, and --"

Sokoloff looked grimly at him. "This isn't a joke, I'm afraid. Get us over there as fast as possible. Cavitate if you have to. And yes, that's an order. Make sure all torpedoes are ready for use."

The XO blanched, but orders were orders. "Yes, sir. Helmsman, enter the new course into the system and let's get going. Engineering, check the torpedoes."

The helmsman nodded and began entering the information into the computer. "Yes, sir."

The XO looked at the captain in disbelief. "Captain...what's going on? Are we really going to be
Sokoloff nodded. "Indeed, we are. And apparently there IS an island of Buyan, like the myths say. I don't know where it is, but I get the impression the people on the Nassau do know. This is a joint American/Russian operation which involves both wizards and Muggles, and supposedly both Moscow and the Americans are nervous about this. If you want any provocation for our side, there are rumors that these wizards have killed Igor Romanov, a member of the Wizarding nobility. Tsar Alexei is furious, and he's gotten Yeltsin all riled up as well."

The XO frowned. "We're sending a sub over there because someone messing around with the Wizarding Romanovs? Who the hell's running the operations there, Grigori Rasputin?"

Sokoloff chuckled. "Judging by all of these crazy surprises we've had over the past year, I wouldn't be surprised."

The helmsman gulped and turned to the captain. "Sir, if Buyan really exists...is the rest of the story true as well? I mean, about Koschei the Deathless?"

The smile melted off Sokoloff's face. "I sure as hell hope not. From what I recall, he was one nasty piece of work. However, even if he does exist and is still alive after all these years, I doubt his magic will stop a torpedo aimed at his balls."

To be continued...

__________________

Update #490: Mad Eye Bye Bye

10 TO GO

------------

1241Z
Buyan
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 2/5.8%

------------

NEXT UP: Free Trip to Oz

------------

Far away from the center of the action, Hermione, Flamel, Moody, and their band of special agents made their way across the northwestern portion of the island. They had spent the last hour or so scouring Buyan for Koschei's reputed Horcrux. Unfortunately, they were not picking up any conclusive traces of objects mentioned in the Koschei legend: hare bones, dead oak trees, egg shards, and so forth. Flamel hoped that Koschei hadn't gotten creative and simply dropped the needle on the ground without anything to identify it. Finding a needle in a haystack would be nothing compared to finding a needle in a forest full of pine trees!

They had avoided Black Fist patrols for the most part because Moody was able to see through the trees with his magical eye and catch sight of enemy troops before they could see Flamel's band. This allowed Flamel and friends to get out of sight, or at least under camouflage, before the Rasputinites got close. Although Flamel was fairly certain that they would be able to fend off any intruders, he didn't want Rasputin finding out what they were trying to do. If he realized that they were after Koschei's Horcrux, he would probably become VERY irritated and send virtually every single minion on the island after them.
The only thing which looked remotely suspicious to this point was a large concentration of defensive spells focused on the top of the western peak. These spells had been there ever since Flamel had first investigated the island under Grand Mugwump Chen five centuries earlier. Chen, not surprisingly, had forced his way through to the center of the complex and done extensive digging in the area. He had found nothing, however. The investigation had left the island with a third of the people thinking that the Horcrux was there ready to be picked up, a third convinced that the Horcrux was there but inaccessible, and a third sure that it was a red herring designed to lure attackers away from the Horcrux's actual location. As a result, Flamel had resumed his investigation up there and had no better luck than he had centuries earlier. If anything, his luck was worse because the island was now completely overgrown with five centuries worth of forest. Back in the old days there had been large clear patches.

Flamel couldn't decide whether the Horcrux was there or not. He had to continue looking, however. Operating under the assumption that they had been looking the wrong place the whole time, he turned to his map and stabbed his finger at the northwestern corner of the island.

"This is our next destination, ladies and gentlemen. There's a small cave up there which we noticed the last time I was here but did not have much of a chance to explore. It's hard to reach, and in an out of the way location. It sounds like it would be a perfect place to hide a Horcrux, either Rasputin's or Koschei's."

Hermione looked at the map and frowned. "You said you were here earlier. You looked through it already and didn't find anything? How do you know we're not making the same mistake twice?"

Flamel sighed. "I don't know, to be honest. However, we've got a hell of a lot more people searching this time, some of whom are armed with fancy Muggle technology. Back then we only had five or six people. Now we have several dozen."

Moody pointed at his artificial eye. "Don't forget this, Minister. If it's invisible, I'll pick it up."

Flamel nodded. "Exactly. Now everyone be careful -- unless I'm mistaken, it's less than half a mile from here. Don't make any noise unless you have to, and if you see any footprints alert the rest of us immediately."

Fighting their way through thick forest littered with trees downed by the B-2 bomber attacks, they made their way closer to the cave. Soon they saw evidence of footprints leading to and from their destination. Moody grimaced when he saw that.

"Everyone, keep your wands and guns at the ready. We don't know if the Horcrux is there, but that doesn't mean that the Rasputinites aren't using it as a command center. Hermione, Minister, you two take the lead. Leave just enough of space between your Atlantis bubbles to allow me to shoot between them. And keep it quiet!"

They made their way over the last ridge and caught sight of a black speck in the distance. Flamel was about to press forward when Moody suddenly hissed and pointed at the cave.

"Look out -- it's guarded. There are no fewer than four people there, two wizards and two Muggles."

Hermione thought for a moment. "Interesting coincidence, a possible Horcrux location with guards around it. And it's in the middle of nowhere. Of course, it could just be an enemy base."

Flamel nodded. "Indeed, Hermione. I personally am not looking forward to infiltrating an enemy
base, particularly one with only one entrance. However, remember our mission: we're here to take out Horcruxes, and it's possible Koschei's Horcrux is in there. We have to try it -- we have no choice. Besides, it's quite possible that the cave is guarded because there's a Horcrux there which isn't Koschei's."

Moody grinned evilly. "Rasputin's. We never did figure out what happened to it."

"Exactly. From what I've been told, it's an old music box. If you see any thing from the Koschei myth or a music box, call for Hermione. She's got the sword, and the sword is the only safe means of destroying Horcruxes. At that point, everyone is to focus on giving Hermione the chance of knocking out the Horcrux. Understood?"

Everyone nodded, and Flamel continued. "Unless you see evidence of the Horcrux, do not get into a fight. If necessary, Imperius the guards into thinking they haven't seen anything. Like I told you earlier, we don't want Rasputin finding out we're out here."

The rest of the group agreed, and Flamel told everyone to slowly move ahead. They crept through the snowy forest, barely making a sound. Their stealth lasted approximately five minutes, when a Caterwauling Charm went off directly over their heads.

Moody pulled out his wand as the guards -- now in plain sight -- reached for their weapons. "Everybody, get down until I deal with the wizards! Hermione, Minister, you know what to do!"

Flamel kept his wand in his pocket -- he couldn't use it in the bubble anyway. To his left, Hermione stood stock still in her bubble. She was trembling visibly, and it occurred to her that this was the first time she had ever seen real combat. She was acting like a Gryffindor, however, and toughing it out, just as someone from her House should.

Multicolored bolts flashed through the forest and spent most of their time hitting trees. Five minutes later, all that had managed to do was point out the marauders' location to the enemy. Gunfire suddenly erupted from behind them, and the SEALs in the back suddenly found themselves returning fire.

Hermione turned to Flamel and had to scream to be heard over the din of the spellcasters. "There's got to be something there all right. Look at all those people defending it. I wouldn't be surprised if it is the Horcrux!"

Flamel slowly nodded. "Neither would I, at this point. This is very interesting."

"Should we call in a missile strike?"

Flamel shook his head. "Don't bother. All that will do is bury it in rubble. We're going to need to get over there and --"

Flamel's comment was cut off by a shriek of pain between him and Hermione. Both bubble bearers turned to see Moody writhing on the ground, a bullet through his wand hand. Swearing loudly, the Auror tore off a piece of his robe and screamed for one of the men to help him make a tourniquet. Once the tourniquet was in place, a white-faced Moody turned to Flamel.

"Damn! The bastard got in a lucky shot through the hole! That makes me mad. And NO ONE wants to see me mad."
Hermione tried to keep Moody down. "Professor, stay down! I --"

Moody put his wand in his other hand and shoved Hermione's bubble out of the way so he could stick his left hand through opening. Roaring like a lion, he cast a hideously complex spell. A fraction of a second later, the entire clearing outside the cave caught fire. The four guards suddenly shrieked in pain and fell to the ground. Within seconds, they were all dead. No guards replaced them from further back in the cave.

Everyone looked at Moody, who stared in satisfaction at the burned remains at the front of the cave. Seconds later, he collapsed to the ground once more. Pointing the wand at himself, he cast a healing spell. He couldn't concentrate well on it given his pain, but he did manage to prevent himself from going into shock. Meanwhile, the battle around the perimeter of the marauders' army soon petered out as the tenacity, bravery, and skill of the SEALs took out all of the attacking units.

Flamel reached for his ring. "Professor Moody, I need to heal you. You can't go on this way!"

Moody waved him off irritably. "Don't endanger yourself, Minister. Besides, I'm an Auror. I've been through worse. Imagine Evan Rozier hitting me in the eye."

Hermione whimpered: "I hate to think."

Moody glanced at Flamel's belt. "Minister, if you insist, you can give me that Elixir --"

Flamel nearly exploded. "No! No one uses the Elixir anymore!"

Hermione turned to Flamel. "Dr. Flamel, he's badly injured --"

Flamel shook his head violently. "Absolutely not."

Moody spoke over her. "Stop arguing. Let's get to the cave and search it before Rasputin figures out we're here."

They encountered no more resistance, and soon the raiders found themselves outside the entrance to the cave. The entrance was dark, but there seemed to be an odd white glow emanating from inside.

Flamel looked at the cave suspiciously. Suddenly, without warning, he removed his ring and took a whiff of the air.

Hermione noticed the smell as well. "Is it just me, or does something smell very sweet around here?"

Flamel suddenly started racing towards the cave. "Shit! I know exactly what's going on now! That glow is the glow of the Elixir of Life! They've got the Philosopher's Stone in the cave! The smell clinches it!"

One of the SEALs gaped at him. "Are you sure about that?"

Flamel didn't stop running. "I'm positive! I invented it, I know the --"

CLANG.

Flamel's charge suddenly stopped short as he ran into what appeared to be an invisible wall at the mouth of the cave. He fell to the ground, rubbing his head, as Hermione barely avoided plastering
herself against the barrier.

Moody cast Finite Incantatem as the SEAL told him to lie down. The barrier shimmered a little, but it held. Furious, Moody raced up next to it...and walked right through it.

Moody, Flamel, and Hermione stared at each other. Suddenly, Hermione hit on an idea. "Remember Voldemort's defense at his Horcrux cave? You can only pass through if you're injured? This would be a perfect thing to apply here to prevent people from using the Elixir until they absolutely needed it."

Flamel smiled. "You know what? I think you're right. Alastair, check it out and come back here. If you see anyone, take them out."

Hermione rounded on Flamel. "Dr. Flamel, he's --"

Moody growled: "-- injured. I know. However, I'm an Auror. I do things like this all the time. Now shut up and let me explore."

Moody stayed in the cave for about five minutes. Suddenly, a swear emanated from the cave, followed by a sigh. That didn't sound good, thought Flamel. Don't tell me someone was waiting inside there and finished Moody off.

Two more minutes went by. Finally, Moody emerged from the cave.

He was a changed man.

Moody now had two natural eyes and legs, and the hideous battle scars from his face and arm had disappeared. He seemed in perfect health and free all of the fatigue had that had crept up during the campaign.

Hermione stared at him. "Bloody hell! How --"

Flamel stared at him in amazement. Then, rolling his eyes, he threw his hands up. "Judging from your new appearance, I take it you found the Elixir there."

Moody nodded, reached into his pocket, and soon began bouncing a little white ball up and down in his hand. "Indeed I did, and it works like a charm. Thank you, Minister."

Flamel fumed. "I don't like you using it. People should not be using the Elixir."

Flamel suddenly realized what the little ball he was bouncing was. Pointing a trembling finger at him, he asked: "Is that..."

Moody lifted the ball for everyone to see, and Hermione nearly retched when she realized that it was his old eye. "Yes, it's my old eye. I liked it better, for God's sake. I could see invisible objects. I guess I can say goodbye to my Mad-Eye persona."

One of the SEALs grinned. "We can always poke your eye out for you."

Moody shook his head. "I don't like it THAT much. At any rate, toss me a few hand grenades. I'll look in there for a few minutes. If I see any signs of the Horcruxes, I'll report it immediately. If not...well, I guess a hand grenade or two should take care of your Stone."
Hermione cut in. "And if the Stone isn't there?"

Moody grinned. "Then we deprive them of the Elixir of Life, which is just as good when it comes to this battle."

To be continued...
Update #491: Free Trip to Oz

9 TO GO

-------------
1324Z
Buyan
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 2/6.0%
-------------
NEXT UP: Koschei ISOT
-------------

Grigori Rasputin was running out of time, and his men were starting to get fatigued. His forces were surrounded, and they had spent the last hour or so fighting off a seemingly endless supply of Atlanteans, SEALs, and so forth. Most of their supply of the Elixir of life had been used to treat various wounds suffered during the encounter, and Rasputin had told everyone to not use their Elixir unless they were absolutely certain they were going to die.

A few feet away, in the depths of the newly grown thicket, Koschei was moaning piteously. He did not look happy, and he was throwing increasingly irritated glances at Rasputin. The Mad Monk had the impression that Koschei was having second thoughts about making Rasputin Primary Disciple. On the other hand, Koschei didn't seem surprised that there were people fighting on the island. After all, that was how he had met his match last time around.

Rasputin needed a lot of help, and he needed it fast. He wanted to kick himself for leaving so many people behind to guard the Elixir cave -- the Stone wasn't even on the island, and there was no reason for the invaders to go there unless they knew it was hiding the Elixir. Frantic, he sent a Patronus over to the cave asking anyone there to join him. He didn't get a response, however. That in itself was a bad sign. Could the invaders have actually knocked out the guards and made their way into the cave after all?

To make matters worse, he could feel the temperature dropping. It was likely only a matter of time until the drizzle which had built up during the day would turn into flurries and later that night into heavier snow. He really wanted to get the battle over with before that -- fighting in the middle of snowstorm was going to be a pain in the neck.

He spun as two huge explosions let loose in the enemy ranks. Had they brought a mortar along to perform the coup de grace? The enemy fire had stopped, and it appeared that they were going to use the mortar to give their own soldiers a break.

Or were they? More explosions erupted in the distance, followed by a hail of machine gun fire. Rasputin stared in astonishment as several of the enemy attackers were mowed down and the remaining opponents started focusing their efforts on something out of Rasputin's sight.

Soon, their quarry came into vision. It appeared to be one of the machines Zygonova had called an LAV: an armored personnel carrier which had been hardened against magic. He watched as the machine gun sprayed death over the battlefield once more, dropping another rank of enemy soldiers. Thank the Black God! One of his men had commandeered the vehicle!
Bullets and spells closed in on the vehicle only to be repelled by its anti-magic armor. Realizing this was his chance, Rasputin told everyone to counterattack and handle everyone which was not in the line of sight of the LAV. Within ten minutes, the battle was over and the field was littered with the bodies of members of Dumbledore's Army.

Rasputin's weary men cheered as the LAV made its way over to their commander. The door opened, and two men emerged. Rasputin ran over and embraced them like brothers.

"Zhukov! Karmov! Thank the Black God for your timely arrival! How did you take over the vehicle?"

Karmov grinned. "Simple -- we Transfigured ourselves to look like enemy soldiers and pretended we were injured. The crew picked us up and let us in, and we promptly let loose with the machine gun."

Rasputin grinned. "Good thinking."

"Thank you, my lord. Speaking of our lord, I've got a bit of a present for you. I think you may find it will come in handy, especially if you need help bringing back Koschei."

Karmov reached into his pocket and showed Rasputin the Elder Wand. The Mad Monk pumped his fist in the air and smiled ear to ear. "Well done, Karmov! Well done! I hope you don't mind if I Disarm you so I can take control of the wand."

Karmov grinned. "Promise you'll make me Second Disciple."

Rasputin slapped Karmov on the back. "You've certainly deserved it given your success here. We owe you are lives. Congratulations."

Grinning, Rasputin Disarmed Karmov and retrieved the Elder Wand. He turned back to the hedge -- which had grown further -- and began trying to figure out how to reach Koschei without resorting to an axe. It occurred to him that *Avada Kedavra* would likely work on trees. He'd just have to make sure that he didn't hit Koschei. He didn't want to go through that crazy ritual with the runes again!

He lifted the wand and started blowing trees out of the way. He didn't get far, however, before the Caterwauling Charm warning the Rasputinites of incoming missile attack went off. Seconds later, missiles started landing in the middle of the Rasputinite forces.

Karmov collapsed immediately as leg was torn off by shrapnel. He reached for his Elixir but went into shock and expired before he could get to it. Hoping that the Elder Wand would enhance his draining energy reserves, Rasputin protected a roughly two-mile diameter area centered on himself with a dome. The missiles detonated merrily on the surface of the dome for a while, giving everyone a well-deserved break. Satisfied, he went back to hacking his way through to Koschei.

Then, of course, the dome collapsed under the barrage of missiles. Rasputin dove for cover as screams erupted from his men. Hiding behind a tree, he tried to think of what to do. He didn't have the energy to bring up another dome, and he didn't want to relinquish the Elder Wand. Besides, the domes inevitably blew apart when too many missiles hit them.

Finally, an idea came to him. He would take advantage of all of the loose debris and shrapnel around them. If there was a way he could get all that stuff flying around at high speed, it would likely destroy the missiles or force them to fly off target. And best of all, since the explosions would
produce more debris, this kind of defense would be self-perpetuating. He wouldn't have to maintain
it!

Telling everyone to watch the sky, he raised the Elder Wand to the sky and began uttering words
which would control the weather. The words were barely audible over the sound of the explosions.
However, their effects soon became obvious as the dome was soon replaced by a rotating ring of air.
At first, the winds in the ring blew slowly: 10 to 20 miles per hour. However, he amplified the spell
more and the wind speeds increased. 30. 50. 80. Trees started snapping and flying around as he
broke 100.

He waited for a few more minutes. When he lowered the wand, his men were in the eye of a mile-
high tornado covering most of the western half of the island. Angry clouds surrounded his forces, but
here inside the storm everything was protected.

The missiles continued to come in for a few more seconds, and one of them hit the LAV dead center
and blew it out of existence. However, it didn't take long before the immense winds began blowing
them off course, throwing debris into their path, slicing off stabilization fins, and so forth.

Zhukov looked at him in amazement. "Man, my lord! That's one hell of a storm you've got there!"

Rasputin nodded. "Indeed, it is. I think that will handle our enemies and give us enough time to bring
back Koschei and head on over to the Elixir cave to replenish our Elixir supply. Speaking of
bringing back Koschei, who here wants to give me his Elixir vial? Don't everyone jump at once."

No one responded. It was obvious they wanted Koschei back, but how long was this tornadic shield
going to hold? Rasputin shrugged, turned to Karmov's fallen body, and neatly plucked the unused
Elixir vial out of the dead man's pocket. "Thank you again, my friend. Your sacrifice will not have
been in vain."

--------
1356Z

Fleur Delacoeur, with her charming instincts at full power, closed in on the latest group of guards.
She was lucky to have headed for Rasputin when she did: with that tornado now in place, she would
have never been able to get through!

Her latest quarry consisted of two men. He whistled to get their attention, and they turned to look at
her. It didn't take long before that look turned to a leer, and they started hooting at her and drooling.
She didn't particularly care for that sort of people, so she brought out her wand and promptly
Stunned both of them.

A few hundred feet later, she stumbled across a man and a woman. This was going to be a bit
trickier. However, she knew what to do. She called out, and both the man and the woman turned to
look at her.

The man immediately succumbed to the charm. The woman, however, promptly challenged her and
shot a green beam at her. Fleur dove behind a tree, and it crashed into the trunk and set it ablaze.
Fleur shot a weapon back at her as the woman called to her colleague for help.

Fleur's beam forced the woman behind a tree of her own, leaving the man staring at her lovingly.
Drawing a deep breath, Fleur shouted:

"Good sir! That woman tried to kill me! Help me! Neutralize her and I will be eternally grateful to
The man didn't think twice before turning on his colleague and hitting her with a Stun beam. The woman crumpled as the man, now clearly aroused, began walking towards her and grinning.

He pointed at his nether regions. "Want to see my wand and go to bed with me?"

Fleur raised hers. "Fine with me. In fact, I'll even go out of the way to help you sleep. Somnolens!"

Seconds later, the man was asleep and Fleur stepped over the two prone bodies. She figured she less than a half mile away from Rasputin at this point, and judging from the experience she was picking up he was as good as hers.

To be continued...

----------------

Update #492: Koschei ISOT
8 TO GO

-------------

1400Z
Buyan
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 1/10.7%
-------------

NEXT UP: Conservation of Incapacitated People
-------------

Grigori Rasputin took a good look around the area. Everyone was looking at him expectantly, and some of them were even holding their breaths. As far as he could tell, Hugh was still subdued and there weren't going to be any more interruptions. A few aircraft and choppers were trying to peek over the edge of the tornado, but the wizards who had survived to this point tended to be pretty good at shooting down aircraft. Natural selection in action, Rasputin mused. Those who don't know how to evade bullets and destroy airplanes are already dead, leaving a small group of survivors who knew how to fight.

Casting one glance at Halyna Zygonova's hideously mangled body, he brushed the last branches out of the way and retrieved Koschei's childlike form. Telling Koschei that everything would soon be right, he carried Koschei over to an open area and laid him down gently in the snow. Had this been a normal child, Koschei would have likely been shivering and close to death. However, this was a projection of a soul in Limbo. He wasn't sure what Koschei could feel right now and what he couldn't.

Focusing himself on the task at hand, he gestured for Koschei to open his mouth. The ancient legend did so as Koschei uncorked the late Karmov's Elixir vial and poured it into the child's distorted mouth.

Within seconds, the childlike form began to glow with a blinding white light similar to that of the Elixir itself. Rasputin had to look away as the trees cast writhing shadows on the trunks behind them. One of the rear guard blasted a helicopter out of the sky, and it crashed to the ground less than a mile away. No one batted an eye.

The light show lasted a good fifteen seconds or so. Suddenly, Rasputin felt a small package
materialize in his hands. Puzzled, he opened it and saw that it contained two objects: a wand and an Atlantis ring.

Rasputin grinned. Well, well. Unless he was badly mistaken, these two objects belonged to Koschei. He had no idea Koschei had been given an Atlantis ring! Having an Atlantis ring on THEIR side would probably even things up a lot. Closing the package once more, he turned back to Koschei as the light began to fade.

Standing before him was a man about 5'7" in height. He was wearing what appeared to Rasputin to be an archaic dress robe which looked like something a college professor would have worn during a graduation. He was clean-shaven and had short gray hair. Rasputin watched as the man looked at his body in amazement and began pinching himself to make sure he was really there.

Rasputin couldn't help but think that Koschei looked...well, like a college professor. Hell, the guy would have looked like a computer geek had he worn glasses! He vaguely remembered stories about Koschei having worked at Durmstrang and having once been a healer in the old days.

Koschei beamed as he looked around the group. Finally, he punched his fist into the air and shouted one word.

"Sic!"

Everyone cheered and fell to their knees, and Rasputin bowed in respect. Rasputin, however, felt somewhat uneasy. It was fairly obvious that Koschei had given up on speaking to him in Middle Russian and had decided to switch to Latin. Although it made perfect sense for him to do this, Rasputin had to admit that his Latin was terrible. He knew a lot of Greek and Russian, but he hadn't done any work with Latin since his school days! He wouldn't get very far in his Primary Disciple campaign if he didn't know what the hell Koschei was saying!

What Koschei did next didn't require any translation, however, as he abruptly embraced Rasputin in a bear hug which knocked the package from Rasputin's hands.

Professor Boris Koschei looked at the people around him, and at his body, in amazement. Good Lord, that Horcrux had worked! He hadn't been entirely comfortable with creating one of the accursed things, but Grand Mugwump Zerind's thugs had been hounding him like crazy and he'd had no choice. He had to stay alive until the time was right to stop that pandemic he'd created. Only by healing the Black Death would he be able to convince the world and Atlantis that he was qualified to rule the submerged city and introduce his political reforms. He hated to think how far the pandemic had spread, as he had never intended for it to get loose among the Muggles. To make matters worse, Atlanteans had had the temerity to put him out of commission (Olga, you MORON!) before he could actually try to stop it!

What was that glowing white goo the Gatekeeper had fed him to bring him back? It was a healing potion, obviously. But a healing potion strong enough to revive a man from a Horcrux? He certainly didn't know of anything powerful enough to do THAT! He made it a point to try to get more of that stuff. Perhaps he could use it the next time he tried a pandemic.

Judging from the fighting his followers had had to endure while he had been sitting around in child form, it looked like Zerind's men had followed the Gatekeeper here. He swore to himself: this Gatekeeper must be an idiot if he let Atlantis in on the existence of Buyan again. However, he owed whoever this fellow was -- Grigori something -- a tremendous debt of gratitude.
He was a bit surprised that no one here spoke Russian, particularly this Grigori fellow who certainly looked Russian to him. Those names Karmov and Zygonova (how could a civilized woman wear pants?) were Russian as well. And where had all these trees come from? The last time he'd been here, there had been lots of plowed fields here! Glancing at the mountaintop near him, he had a feeling that it was the mountain on the western side of Buyan, the one he called Mount Natasha after his wife.

His first order of business was to help his men beat off these Atlantis thugs. They had to be from Atlantis: they were creating explosions which were far beyond anything the Muggles had been able to throw at them (unless they managed to do something with Greek fire? Those Romans were notorious for using that). He also couldn't figure out what those flying contraptions with spinning wheels on top of them were supposed to do. Were they a form of military transport for Atlanteans he hadn't known about? If they were, they weren't doing anyone any good as they were being blasted out of the sky by his colleagues.

He wondered whether the cult of the Black God still survived. He had never been a big fan of the cult, and to be honest some of their rituals scared him. However, a politician often had to make sacrifices and do things he didn't like to get the job done. A new pandemic would likely kill a few thousand people, but this time he vowed to not let it get out of control.

First things first: reintroduce himself to the world, get himself up to date (what was it? 1420 or something far-off like that?), and do what must be done to make Atlantis the worldwide leader it had the potential to be.

---------
Atlantis
1401Z
- - - - -

Dagher knew something was wrong as soon as he saw no fewer than seven people from the Department of Prophecy running in his direction with Ndukaku himself in the lead. Hoping it wasn't what he thought it was, he asked Ndukaku what was going on. He was already having enough trouble now that that damned tornado was making it almost impossible for his men to reach Rasputin!

The Head Astrologer reached into his pocket and pulled out a small golden key with an eye on it. Dagher recognized it immediately, and his heart sank. There was only one reason he would be bringing out that key.

Ndukaku's face was grim. "The latest Apocalypsometer result just came back. 10.7. We've gone up 4.7% in a span of less than a minute. We haven't seen a jump that high since right before Judgment Day."

He paused, and when he spoke again his voice was somber. "I think we know what that means, sir."

Dagher nodded. "I think you're probably right. A helicopter flying over the edge of the tornado caught a glimpse of a vivid flare of light the color of the Elixir of Life's glow less than thirty seconds ago. It was shot down shortly thereafter."

Ndukaku gulped. "That was just about the time we made our calculation. The two can't be a coincidence, sir."

Dagher shook his head sadly. "I don't think it is. And I know why you have that key out, my friend."

---------
Ndukaku's tone of voice turned formal. "Grand Mugwump, I, the Head Astrologer, report that the odds of the end of civilization are now in excess of 10 percent. The time has come to go to DEFCON 1. Do you concur?"

Dagher reached for his pocket and pulled out the Atlantis Key. "I concur. Follow me to the control panel so we can change the setting on the rings."

The two men made their way down the corridor at the head of a growing crowd of onlookers. Everyone was silent. They knew what this meant. After all, they had seen it six months earlier.

The two men inserted their keys in the panel and turned it them. The panel glowed red momentarily, indicating the transition to DEFCON 1.

Dagher turned to one the chief Aurors. "Execute Operation Antidote. Did that helicopter report the position of that flash before it went down?"

The Auror nodded. "It did indeed, sir. We're going to throw everything we have at it. We've got a submarine trying to make its way underneath the storm, and we've got another series of missiles trying to make their way through the tornado."

"What about the B-2's?"

The Auror made a face. "Out of action for a long time -- they need to be refueled and reloaded."

Dagher groaned. "Wonderful."

Hermione gasped as Flamel's Atlantis bubble suddenly turned opaque. "What the hell?"

Flamel swore. "Hermione, please don't tell me my bubble has also gone opaque."

Hermione blinked. "It has. What does that mean?"

Flamel hesitated, than let it out. "It means DEFCON 1, which could only mean one thing. Koschei is probably back, and we're running out of time. We need to find that Horcrux, and do it very, very soon. Let's hope it's not on the other side of that tornado."

1402Z
Laboratory of Infectious Diseases
Bethesda, MD

Doctor Samantha Davis nearly dropped her beaker in shock as three robed figures suddenly materialized in the room. "Who are you?"

The woman reached into her robe and brought out a card with the insignia of the Department of Magic, "My name is Theresa McGee, and I am an Auror from Enfield, MA. I work for the Department of Magic."

Davis blinked. "You're a wizard?"

"Technically, I'm a witch, not a wizard, but that's beside the point. We have come because we have reason to believe that there may be a magical threat against chemical, biological, and nuclear stockpiles all over the world. We're here to make sure no Dark wizards infiltrate this lab."
Davis's brow furrowed. "Does this have anything to do with what's going on in the Black Sea or Iraq?"

"I'm afraid I can't answer that question, ma'am. I take it that you have a stockpile of infectious disease cultures here?"

Davis's mind raced. "We do, but I'm not allowed in there --"

McGee cut us off. "Take us there, and make sure that no one tries to enter it for the next few hours. If they do, we will not be held responsible for what happens to them."

To be continued...

__________________

Update #493: Conservation of Incapacitated People

7 TO GO

-------------

1403Z
Buyan
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 1/10.2%

-------------

NEXT UP: Phlegm Suppressor

-------------

Koschei released Rasputin and shook his hand firmly. "Thank you for bringing me back, sir. Hopefully I'll be able to finish what I started last time. I take it Atlantis is giving you trouble? Who are you, if I may ask?"

Rasputin stared at him blankly and slowly took a look around. It didn't long for Koschei to realize that he was looking for someone who knew Latin. This fellow didn't speak either Russian or Latin? What kind of an ignoramus was he? Eventually, one of the men raised his hand and offered to serve as an interpreter.

Rasputin replied: "My name is Grigori Rasputin, and I'm your Gatekeeper. I'm one of the leaders of a sect of wizards and Muggles dedicated to the Black God, Tchernobog."

Koschei grunted. That answered one question: the Black God cult still existed half a century or so after his apparent demise. Now would they still be willing to support him in his quest for Atlantis reform? He wondered if Zerind was still running the show over there. A tendency to attack people prematurely fit Zerind's personality very well.

He turned back to Rasputin. "Why are they attacking my island? Are they scared I'm going to cause another pandemic? Had they done what I had requested, I wouldn't have had to launch the enhanced bubonic plague in the first place!"

Rasputin nodded. "I think so, my lord. Had things turned out differently, you would have likely found yourself the ruler of the world. Hopefully we'll be able to pull that off this time and remake the world in our image. You will be our general and leader, and we will be your obedient servants."

Koschei had mixed feelings about this. His plan had worked...but it had worked too well. And trust
Zerind to knock him off before setting the cure in motion! Aloud: "It's true that having the only known cure for the pandemic would have given me a lot of influence in Atlantis. I wouldn't mind ruling the world, but getting into a position of power in Atlantis will be a good start. We need to start helping out the Muggles more and not only get involved at DEFCON 2. First things first -- let's get these thugs off my island. Try not to use lethal force unless there's no choice."

Rasputin's response puzzled him. "Zerind? Who's Zerind?"

Koschei rolled his eyes. "The Grand Mugwump. Don't you remember him?"

"The Grand Mugwump's a man named Heydar Dagher. This Zerind you're talking about is long dead, my lord. He's been gone over six hundred years."

Koschei froze: he couldn't have heard that right. "Excuse me? What do you mean, six hundred years?"

Rasputin drew a deep breath and braced himself. "My lord, tomorrow is New Year's Day 1997. Black God willing, 1997 will be the beginning of the age of our ascendancy."

Koschei reeled back in surprise. "WHAT?"

-----

1405Z

-----

Captain Sokoloff had the radar operator ping actively as the submarine cautiously made its way underneath the storm. The waves were pretty big, and they rocked the boat back and forth even down here. The radarman had his hands full making sure they were far enough away from obstacles to prevent the ship from being pushed into them by the surf.

The vessel made slow progress, inching its way towards the coast a few feet at a time. Eventually, though, Sokoloff felt the buffeting of the waves lessen. Cautiously, he told the helmsman to go to periscope death so Sokoloff could look around.

The periscope went up. They were a good tenth of a mile or so inside the inner wall of the tornado, and there were still 5-7 foot waves slamming against the hull. Shooting from here wasn't a good idea, he thought. Lowering the periscope once more, he headed in another mile or so and came to surface depth once more. The sea was much calmer, enough to shoot from.

Sokoloff turned to the radio operator. "Can you send a message through that storm?"

The radioman gulped. "I'll try, sir."

"Do your best, Mr. Turchin. Tell the Nassau we've passed through the storm and are awaiting instructions."

It took a few moments for the message to get through, but eventually the radioman received a response. "Sir, HQ reports that Koschei has likely returned. What's more, they believe they have pinpointed where he was brought back. Your orders are to fire everything you have at the following coordinates while we distract them with a few helicopters..."

-----

1406Z

-----

Rasputin watched as Koschei moved off to one side. It looked like the man was in shock, having
suddenly found himself transported six hundred years into the future. Rasputin admitted that he
wouldn't have done much better if someone transported him to the 26th century. Hell, he was having
enough trouble dealing with the end of his own century!

Koschei puzzled him. The man didn't seem like the criminal mastermind Rasputin had thought he
had been. If anything, he sounded like a politician trying to rally the troops to change Atlantis!
Furthermore, it almost seemed as if Koschei hadn't really wanted to initiate the Black Death. What
was going on here?

Rasputin couldn't believe he was thinking this, but he had to consider the possibility that this whole
scheme to bring back Koschei had been a fool's errand and the cult of the Black God would have to
take over the world without Koschei's help. A few quick glances at the rest of his men revealed that
they were starting to think the same thing.

- - - - - - - -

Koschei heard an odd mechanical sound overhead and looked up to see one of the bizarre flying
contraptions the wizards had been traveling in. It most definitely wasn't a broom, and it appeared to
be hovering in midair. Trying to distract himself from the fact that the world he knew was gone, he
began walking towards a clearing so he could get a better look at it.

Suddenly, yellow lights started flickering on it and projectiles of some sort began strafing the ground.
He shrieked and hid behind a tree, and he heard a series of thunks as the projectiles slammed into the
trunk. He turned to warn his new underlings and saw that they were all facing the new threat. Wands
and bizarre Muggle weapons he had never seen before were pointing into the sky, presumably at the
flying vehicle.

Koschei suddenly glimpsed something long and narrow hurrying towards his group at an
inconceivable rate of speed. It looked to be the size of an obelisk and it had flame coming from its
bottom. Whatever it was, it didn't look friendly. He blinked, and his eyes reopened to find the object
hugging the ground -- and half the distance to the Black God cultists. Oddly enough, it made no
sound, as if it had been traveling faster than sound. But that was impossible...wasn't it?

His new allies were facing away from it, completely oblivious to the danger. What's worse, there was
no time to warn them -- and there were now three of the objects heading in their direction. Acting on
instinct, he dove into the snow and covered his head with his hands.

- - - - - - -

Rasputin caught a glimpse of something odd out of the corner of his eye. Frowning and clutching the
Elder Wand, he turned to take a look at it.

He barely had time to scream before the sub-launched missile exploded less than five feet from him.
Black God cultists fell in droves as no fewer than six missiles detonated among the surprised cultists.
By the time the dust had settled, almost 100 cultists were dead.

Rasputin's childlike form lay at the bottom of a crater. The Elder Wand was nowhere to be found,
and the package containing Koschei's ring and wand were also nowhere to be seen. There were no
other surviving cultists within 20 feet.

About fifty feet away, in a small grove of trees, Koschei lifted his head and saw the carnage. This
was not good. It sounded like he would have to start his crusade all over again, without any
supporters.

To be continued...
Fleur Delacoeur made her way around the boulder, took one look at what she saw on the other side, and hid behind it. She had to plan her next move very, very carefully.

She had to be getting very close to Rasputin's home base. The ground in front of her was pockmarked with craters which hinted at a recent missile or bomb attack. There were at least thirty bodies in the area, and ten more people were walking around trying to care for the wounded. She watched as one of them bent over one of the fallen men, retrieved a vial from his side, and brought it to the injured man's mouth. The injured man took a drink, glowed momentarily, and restored himself to full health. Fleur looked on in amazement as a detached arm spontaneously regrew itself on what had been a bleeding stump.

That had to be the Elixir of Life, she thought. Flamel had briefed her on the mystical substance back in London. She wondered whether she should get a sample of her own in case she was injured herself.

People were calling out for Rasputin and were getting no response. They had no idea that Rasputin had in fact managed to survive in child form but his feeble voice was being drowned out by the screams of the injured. In all fairness, however, the cultists had been doing the right thing in focusing on the injured subordinates first as they didn't have Horcruxes to fall back on if they died before they were healed.

One of the healers seemed to be getting a lot of attention from the rest of the crew, and some were even bowing to him respectfully. Fleur didn't recognize the elaborately-dressed, silver-haired man. Probably Rasputin's second-in-command, she thought. It certainly wasn't Rasputin himself! She decided that she would try to charm him in case Rasputin had been killed.

One of the newly-healed people suddenly accosted the silver-haired man, who appeared to be using methods which did not involve the Elixir of Life. Very interesting, she thought.

The patient spoke in Latin and shook the silver-haired man urgently. "My lord, it's dangerous out here. We need to get you away from the targeted areas. Get back into the forest where no one can see you."

The healer rounded on him angrily. "Sir, I am a healer. I swore an oath to make sure everyone got treatment. This included putting myself in danger to help people. Now let me help people. Considering what I did before, at least I can atone for my past transgressions and do that!"

The patient gaped at him. "But --"

One of the other cultists barked something at the newly-healed man. The patient turned to him, and
the second cultist shook his head and waved his hand dismissively. Fleur frowned: what did that mean? Were there internal struggles in the Black God camp? How close were they to restoring Koschei? Did some people not accept this healer as the second-in-command?

Fleur began pondering how to get to this new officer when someone shouted: "Incoming!"

Fleur looked up and saw a group of missiles emerge blast their way through the tornado wall and make their way towards the Black God camp. She had been amazed that the weapons had made their way through the storm in one piece.

Or had they? Several of the missiles were corkscrewing out of control, and Fleur saw that one of the errant missiles had a tail fin with a hole in it. Cultists dove for cover as the missiles came in.

Fleur jumped back behind the boulder and covered her head with her hands as titanic blasts went off behind her. The rock, a good twenty feet across, even moved a few feet from the force of the blasts. She opened her eyes just in time to see one of the errant missiles hit the ground no less than ten feet in front of her.

There was a brief flash of yellow light, and that was that.

- - - - - - -

Koschei dove back into the trees as soon as he saw the flying obelisks heading in his direction. Considering what happened last time, he didn't want to be anywhere in the area when they hit the ground, and he had to stay around long enough to heal any more wounded men. Envisioning the old Roman fort in his head, he tried to Apparate over to a safe place.

Nothing happened. What the hell?

Koschei didn't have time to think about why the Apparition had failed. The forest around him was soon decimated by explosions, and the next thing he knew he was lying on his back with his ears ringing and an ache in his side. Casting a quick healing spell on himself, he came to his feet with his borrowed wand in his hand. He had to destroy whatever those things were before they attacked these men again! Where was his Atlantis ring?

The sky was clear once again. Drawing a deep breath, he turned once again to the Black God cultists’ camp. Once again, about half of the cultists were down. This time, however, most of them wouldn't be getting up because they had already used their healing potions.

Koschei’s thoughts went to the healing potion. There was something familiar about it, something he couldn't place. Then it occurred to him: the smell! He knew that smell! His old lab in Kiev came to mind, and he forcibly ejected it from his thoughts so he could focus on the issue at hand.

The obelisks had targeted a wider area this time. Although most of them had gone after the same area the first group had attacked, several had gone awry. One had impacted the hill about ten feet or so behind a boulder and had triggered a small avalanche which had thankfully been blocked by the rock. Two more had fallen behind him.

He still weren't entirely sure why they were attacking his island. Was it because these Black God cultists were up to something? It was a distinct possibility: although he wasn't against using the cultists, he would have preferred different underlings. Well, he'd take what he could.

There was another, more disturbing, possibility. He thought back to the Black Death, back in the fourteenth century (he still couldn't believe he was in the 20th century). It was now obvious that the
disease had gone out of control because he had not been able to stop it in time. Considering that it had started spreading among the Muggles, which had not been his intent...he couldn't imagine what the final death tally would have been. A few thousand? Ten thousand, perhaps even a hundred thousand? If that was the case, he could have gone down in history as one of the worst villains of the fourteenth century. Considering that people had come back to Buyan to try to revive him...

He shuddered. It made all too much sense. They wanted him out of the way before he could kill more people. The thought knocked him to his knees as strongly as the obelisk had. A healer gone down in history as a killer!

He briefly considered using Avada Kedavra on himself, but these fools would probably just bring him back. Besides, that would just be chickening out. He decided that he would atone for his sins the best he could by spreading his knowledge of healing throughout the world during his crusade to reform Atlantis.

He would continue to do what he could to reform Atlantis. However, he swore a solemn oath in the name of all the gods he knew of. He would never again try to attract Atlantis's attention by starting a pandemic and trying to stop it.

Two hundred and fifty feet below the surface of Buyan, a needle in an ornate egg trembled slightly as its owner experienced a pang of regret. The Horcrux remained intact, however.

--------

1413Z
Atlantis

--------

Koschei's decision did not go unnoticed. Back on Atlantis, Ndukaku raced out of the Prophecy Department and nearly ran over the flunky talking to Dagher. "Sir, you're not going to believe this!"

Dagher turned to him. "Let me guess. You've hit 15% now because Koschei has taken control of the entire Black God cult. We don't seem to be making much progress."

Ndukaku shook his head. "We're at 5.7% now. It's dropped from 10.2%!"

Dagher's jaw dropped. "What?"

Ndukaku shoved a parchment in the Grand Mugwump's face. "Take a look! The only explanation I can think of would be that someone either incapacitated Koschei again or destroyed his Horcrux!"

Dagher frowned. "I didn't think we were getting anywhere with him. Yes, we're pummeling Rasputin's men with those missiles, but they've got lots of the Elixir of Life to play with. We'll probably have to hit them a lot more to exhaust their supply."

Ndukaku shrugged. "Be that as it may, this is the only explanation I can think of for such a steep drop."

Dagher nodded and thought for a moment. "All right, here's what we'll do. The First Division is being briefed on Buyan as we speak, right?"

"I believe so, sir."

"Good. Tell half of them to return to Iraq and maintain order. They'll operate under Drakul. The rest of them will go to Buyan and take orders from Karkaroff. If Koschei is out of the picture, or at least
hampered in some way, we can take advantage of it. In the meantime, let's go back down to DEFCON 2."

"Yes, sir."

-----

1414Z

-----

Flamel told the SAS scouts to start checking out the far side of the mountain. They were going to look for the Horcrux in that area next. However, they need to be sure that there weren't enemy troops there before sending the rest of the team over.

The SAS team saluted and headed off. Flamel turned back to Hermione and rest of his group and opened his mouth to report what he had done.

Hermione's Atlantis bubble turned transparent. Inside it, Hermione's eyes widened and she pointed at him. "Sir, your bubble is now clear. Does that mean what I think it does?"

Flamel froze for a moment. Finally, he managed to compose himself. "DEFCON 2. How long were we at DEFCON 1, fifteen minutes? What the hell is going on here?"

"Did they get Koschei?"

"That's the only thing I can think of, Hermione. We'll find out momentarily, I suppose. However, the fight isn't over as we've still got a lot of Black God cultists to get rid of. Besides, what good is getting rid of Koschei if we haven't found the Horcrux? They'll just bring him back. Unless I'm badly mistaken, we'll go back up to DEFCON 1 as soon as someone gets around to bringing Koschei back."

-----

1417Z

-----

Zygonov saw the towering pillar of smoke rising over the site of the brilliant white light seventeen minutes earlier. It didn't take a Grand Mugwump to realize what was going on.

He gathered his group of reinforcements. "It looks like Rasputin, Koschei, and my wife are in danger. Come with me. We're going to help."

Vovchanckaya shook her head. "We're supposed to stay here, aren't we?"

Zygonov glared at her. "We've already killed all of the Marines inside the tornado, and no one else can get in. We're just wasting our time here. Besides, if Koschei is destroyed permanently this is all for naught. Now let's move!"

---------------------

1420Z

Ministry of Magic

Madrid, Spain

---------------------

Minister of Magic Rodrigo Calderon glared at Ernesto Dippet angrily. "Forget it, Don Ernesto. I'm not touching him with a three-meter pole."

Ernesto blinked. "Sir --"

"I know exactly why you want us to ally with Koschei. You've heard the reports he has a
Philosopher's Stone and you want someone to give you your toy back now that Flamel destroyed his."

"But --"

"The answer is no. Go away and stop bothering me. Oh, and be advised that I'm going to be sending some people after you. If you do try to do anything in support of Koschei, you can kiss both yourself and your mother goodbye."

To be continued...

__________________

Update #495: Divine Wind

5 TO GO

1425Z
Buyan
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 2/5.8%

NEXT UP: Nobody Wants Me

United States Air Force pilot Mark Yoshimoto had climbed into his fighter jet in Constanta as soon as the call had come in. His task was to fly over to Buyan, make his way above the tornado, and fly just low enough to be able to see how well the missiles from the submarine and aircraft had decimated the enemy forces. With luck, both Koschei and Rasputin would be dead -- or at least incapacitated.

Yoshimoto came from a long line of fighter pilots. His paternal grandfather had given everything for the cause, flying a kamikaze mission against an American cruiser in the waning days of the Second World War. His father had served in Vietnam and had gained lots of experience shooting up Viet Cong. Now it was his turn to continue the tradition.

He was hoping he wouldn't have to engage the wizards. Several helicopter crews had been lost to multicolored beams along with a few fighter jets. Yoshimoto's mission was probably one of the most dangerous ones he'd engaged in so far. Since it was a reconnaissance mission, he'd have to fly below the clouds so he could see the target area -- or at least in the fringes of the cloud. He had to admit that he would have to give the terrorist who had attacked the Omega Institute credit for THAT idea!

Hiding in the clouds until the last minute, he took a deep breath and slowly descended to the point where he could see the Black God camp. The area had been absolutely devastated, with bodies lying everywhere. Here and there a few people squirmed, obviously in pain. There were a few people still walking around dazedly, and one man in a particularly garish robe was bending over one of the bodies. As far as he could tell, the operation had been a resounding success. It looked like a good 50% of the wizards had been killed and most of the rest of them had been injured. The explosions had been so intense that they had actually triggered a small avalanche on the northeastern face of the mountain.

He caught sight of what appeared to be small child writhing in the center of one of the craters. This had to be either Koschei or Rasputin. At this distance, however, he wasn't able to tell who. And he wasn't crazy enough to try to take a closer look.
He was in the middle of reporting his observations back to home base when the world suddenly turned yellow. His fingers jerked back as electrical shocks danced over the consoles, and he looked out the window to see some of the surviving wizards pointing wands at him. Damn, he thought. They had seen him through the fringes of the cloud. Either that, or they had heard him coming in.

Rubbing his fingers, he soon realized that he was in an even worse predicament. The engines had conked out completely, and he could barely steer. The enemy spell had turned his fighter jet into one of the world's most expensive gliders. The aircraft was losing altitude quickly, and at only a thousand feet or so above the ground he had no way to get back to base.

Yoshimoto acted on instinct, reaching for the handle for the ejection seat. However, something occurred to him. He was of Japanese descent, and he had been shot down. There was something he had to do in order to save face.

Snarling, he pulled back on the joystick and aimed his fighter jet at the man with the garish robe. He pressed some buttons and strafed the Black God camp with his machine gun. Double-checking that his plane was on target, he pulled the handle on the ejection seat and escaped from the falling aircraft.

He watched in satisfaction as an area over a hundred feet across erupted in flame. The plane blew up on impact, aided conveniently by several unfired missiles. When the smoke cleared, only two or three people down there were still on their feet. Everyone else was clearly dead, and in some cases literally dismembered.

Yoshimoto grinned. Mission accomplished. He felt an immense sense of relief, and he imagined his grandfather's spirit watching over him.

The pilot's elation lasted approximately six seconds, when a green beam suddenly lanced out of the forest less than half a mile away.

Zygonov recognized the kamikaze tactic immediately, and he screamed at everyone to hit the deck as the plane crashed into the ground. Virtually the entire area went up in flames, and huge pieces of debris slammed into trees near him.

He had a very bad feeling about this, and he fervently prayed that his wife had come out of this all right. Vovchanckaya, meanwhile, entertained herself by shooting the pilot out of the sky. Apparently the man had ejected before crashing his jet. The pilot was a sitting duck out there as he was hanging from a big parachute and not moving very fast.

Zygonov bared his teeth. If those men had killed his wife, they would pay for it.

Zhukov didn't know how he had survived. The men on either side of him had been completely obliterated by the explosions, yet he had managed to make it through. He thanked the Black God profusely for that.

However, he wasn't out of the woods yet. A branch had been sent flying into his knee, breaking it and knocking him to the ground. Zhukov was barely able to crawl at this point, but he had the Elixir of Life at his side.

A green flash split the sky, and he looked up to see a body dangling limply from a parachute. For the time being, he was more or less safe.
He reached into his utility belt, brought out his vial of Elixir, and downed it in one gulp. Within seconds, the pain had diminished and his leg was whole again. Hesitating for a moment, he turned back to his two fallen colleagues and began searching through their belongings to see if they had any more vials of Elixir he could use.

He didn't see any Elixir on them -- they must have either used it or the vials had blown away. However, he saw something odd lying in the snow. Curious, he bent down and touched it. It didn't shock him -- wands tended to do that -- so he picked it up.

The object was a small finger ring in the form of a Great Serpent. He suddenly realized what he was looking at: Lord Koschei's Atlantis ring. He remembered seeing Rasputin drop the ring along with Koschei's wand when Koschei had hugged him.

Zhukov grinned. Might as well try, he thought. He stuck the ring on his finger half expecting that he'd get blown up.

Nothing happened.

Oh well, he thought. Gun at the ready, he started towards the center of the explosion. Although Koschei himself was useless in the struggle at this point, Rasputin certainly wasn't. He tried to remember where Rasputin's body -- or at least child form -- was. If he could get his hands on another vial of Elixir he would be able to revive Rasputin and continue the fight for the Black God.

He eventually did manage to stumble across two more sealed vials, one for himself and one for Rasputin. Pocketing both of them, he gingerly made his way through the bomb craters looking for Rasputin.

He saw Koschei's child form first -- the silver hair was an immediate giveaway. Next to the child was an ornate wand, presumably Koschei's, half-buried in the rubble. He couldn't touch the wand, of course, and ignored it. Koschei promptly started beseeching him to heal him with "the potion". Zhukov didn't bother, and he kept on looking.

Eventually, he found Rasputin's child form in the center of another crater. Rasputin realized what he was trying to do immediately and opened his mouth. Zhukov poured in the Elixir, and the forest glowed once more. When the glow dissipated, the Mad Monk was standing before him.

Rasputin breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you so much, Viktor. I owe you one."

Zhukov nodded graciously. "It was my pleasure, Lord Rasputin."

Rasputin began looking around. "Looks like we're in trouble. I hope Zygonov came to his senses and started the reinforcements over here when he saw those missiles attack us."

Zhukov shrugged. "Don't know, my lord. I haven't been looking out for them."

"Keep an eye out for them, if you can. Now, for two important questions. Where is the Elder Wand, and where is Koschei?"

Zhukov shook his head. "I wasn't paying attention to what the Elder Wand looked like -- all the wands look the same to us Muggles. And as far as Koschei went, I saw his child form a couple of craters away."
Rasputin gritted his teeth. "I'd have preferred the Elder Wand, but if we can't find it so be it. Help me look around for another body, preferably an intact one. I need to steal someone's wand and revive Koschei."

Zhukov stared at him. "Revive Koschei? Why? He's just going to get in the way."

Rasputin shook his head. "He's got an Atlantis ring, which means if we play our cards right we can have him defend us. Furthermore, he appears to be an expert healer as well, so if all else fails we could have him heal us if we get injured. We want him back, Zhukov. He won't be any use AFTER the fight, but he can come in handy during it."

Zhukov showed Rasputin the ring. "I've found the ring, my lord. It doesn't do anything."

Rasputin rolled his eyes. "That's because it's tied to him, not you. He's the only person it will work for. And for it to work, the ring has to be on his finger. This in turn means he has to be alive."

The Mad Monk looked around his crater and caught sight of a body which had fallen in. Stripping it of its vial of Elixir, he explained his plan to Zhukov. "Here's what we do. I revive Koschei and you point your gun at him. That should attract his attention -- hell, he probably doesn't know what a gun is. Meanwhile, I Imperius him to do everything we tell him to do. The Imperius will last maybe fifteen minutes or so. We then jam the ring on his finger so the bubble comes up. Hell, we could conceivably force him to put the dome back up for us: he's not as tired as we are."

Zhukov looked at the ring. "How will I be able to get out of the bubble once the shield goes up?"

Rasputin looked at him as if he was stupid. "You're not going in there: we're using Wingardium Leviosa instead. We levitate the ring over to his finger and put it on. The shield goes up and moves exactly where we tell Koschei to move. We can use him as a mobile shield/battering ram which can heal people from time to time."

"How long will this mind control work?"

"Fifteen minutes."

Zhukov stared at him. "Fifteen minutes? That's not very long."

Rasputin grinned. "In a pitched battle, fifteen minutes is forever. Now let's get going. Cover me and keep an eye out for reinforcements on either side."

--------

1426Z

------

Igor Karkaroff pointed furiously at the tornado. "I know! I know you want to attack Rasputin and Koschei! I do as well! Unfortunately, they've got that damn tornado in the way and we can't get through it. All we can do is try to fly over it, and if we do we get shot down!"

One of the First Division members, newly come to Buyan, grunted. "Why can't you terminate the spell?"

Karkaroff stared into the sky. "I can't! It was created using the Elder Wand, and the Elder Wand is the only thing that can destroy it -- that, in the hands of its master!"

"Where's the Elder Wand?"
Karkaroff look at him helplessly. "Inside the tornado."

The recruit winced. "Oops."

"Tell me about it. In the meantime, I want you guys to start taking out enemy troops on the eastern side of the island. I get the impression that most of them are in the west at this point, but there could be a few stragglers here or there. Do you think you can do that?"

The recruit nodded. "Yes, sir."

To be continued...
Update #496 through Epilogue

Chapter by acgoldis (orphan_account), Mislagnissa

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Update #496: Nobody Wants Me

4 TO GO

-------------
1432Z
Buyan
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 2/5.8%
-------------
NEXT UP: It's A Trap!
-------------
The Elder Wand was confused.

The last person to have wielded it had been its master, and that man had rightfully earned its allegiance by Disarming its prior owner. This man, Rasputin by name, had worked great wonders with it and had deserved its powers, at least given what the Wand had known at the time.

That was, of course, until he had been Disarmed in turn. The Wand could not tell if Rasputin had been killed: the magical energies it was reacting to were inconclusive on that regard. Nevertheless, the Wand knew that once again it had made a mistake. Rasputin was not an appropriate master. The person who had incapacitated him would be much more fitting.

The only problem was that according to the information it was receiving, Rasputin had not been Disarmed by anyone. No one within a five-mile radius was broadcasting the telltale mark indicating that he or she had attacked Rasputin. The only other possibility left was the fact that Rasputin had died of natural causes and dropped the Wand that way -- but that did not fit the facts very well. Furthermore, Rasputin had been in perfectly good physical condition before he had abruptly lost everything. It was unlikely he had just spontaneously died. Having been created by Death, the Elder Wand knew a lot about mortality.

The Wand extended its awareness further and discovered, much to its surprise, the mark of Rasputin's conqueror far, far away. Normally, that would have been a relief. However, in this case it had to have been a malfunction. For one thing, there were no wizards in that area, and as a result no one could have possibly cast the spell that had felled Rasputin. Second, the signal was being broadcast from a location a good hundred feet beneath the surface of the Black Sea. The only way to explain an underwater source would have been use by a merperson. Yet there were no merpeople within a fifty miles.

This had to be a mistake, thought the Wand. What was it to do? It had not found itself in this situation before, not in hundreds of years of use!

The Wand pondered its predicament. Finally, it reached a decision. It could not reattach itself to Rasputin given what had happened. However, it could not associate itself with anyone else since no one else had earned it. This meant, at least for the time being, that it had no master.
Normally, in situations like this, potential suitors fought over the Wand. This inevitably led to the strongest, and therefore most worthy, candidate actually taking possession of the Wand. The Wand sensed that there was a lot of fighting going on in the area, which meant that this conflict was likely ongoing. All the Elder Wand had to do was wait for the first person to pick it up and make him or her its new master. After all, the fighting was naturally going to be over it, and it would only be appropriate for it to reassign itself to the eventual winner.

Relieved that it had made its decision, the Wand contented itself with lying in the snow and waiting for someone to come to it. Granted, there was a Horcrux-supported spirit at its side, but what use was such a spirit if it had no functional hands and was already half dead?

- - - - - - - - - -

Rasputin, with Koschei's Atlantis ring in his hand, made his way over the lip of the crater and breathed a sigh of relief when he saw Koschei's child form squirming at the bottom of the crater. Gesturing desperately, he showed Koschei the ring and a vial of Elixir. Koschei got the point immediately and opened his mouth.

The Mad Monk thought he heard something behind him, something which sounded like a branch snapping. He spun around and scanned the forest from whence he had come. Nothing, other than the fact that the snow was starting to get a little thicker. There were a few footprints here and there, but there was no way to tell which were old and which were new.

Hoping he wouldn't break his neck, he slid down into the crater and nearly impaled himself on a wand which, amazingly, had survived the explosion intact. He examined it briefly, and his eyes widened when he realized that it was the Elder Wand. Trust the Elder Wand to survive a plane crash!

Would the Elder Wand still acknowledge him as its master? He hadn't died, and no one had Disarmed him (unless that bomb blast counted as a Disarmament?). Hoping against hope that the wand still liked him, he picked it up. A wave a recognition flooded from the wand, and Rasputin nodded. The Elder Wand still accepted him as his master.

- - - - - - - - - - - - -

The SAS agent had originally come into the area to scout it out for Flamel, Hermione, and the rest of their unit. Hidden under an Invisibility Cloak formerly owned by Harry Potter and given to Nicholas Flamel, he had taken the opportunity to track Rasputin and see what he had been doing. If Rasputin was around here, the agent mused, Koschei probably was as well.

The agent accidentally stepped on a branch, and he froze. Rasputin stared at him and looked right through him. Shaking his head, the Mad Monk slid down into the crater as the agent came a little closer. What was in there?

The agent grinned in satisfaction and brought out his gun. There was a childlike shape in the bottom of the crater, which meant that it was either Koschei or Rasputin. And the agent knew it wasn't Rasputin.

Rasputin had a vial of the Elixir in his hand. Clearly, he was planning to revive Koschei. The SAS man wanted to see the look on the Rasputin's face when the newly revived Koschei found a bullet in his head after Rasputin had used up his Elixir.

He whispered orders into his radio, telling people he had a shot at Koschei and could not pass up this target of opportunity. He would rejoin the rest of the unit after this incapacitation attempt. He also radioed in his current position -- if the incapacitation attempt failed, there was always the possibility of an air strike.

-----------------
The First Division forces were taking a lot of casualties, more than Karkaroff had been anticipating. It wasn't easy to storm a fortified island filled with trees perfect for guerrilla warfare. Nevertheless, they were definitely making progress picking off the Black God cultists stranded outside the tornado.

Karkaroff watched as a Muggle attached to his unit let loose with a flamethrower, causing five people to screamed and fall to the ground. One of them, a wizard, managed to bear the agony long enough to cast a spell which would douse the flames. The other four weren't as lucky.

The Durmstrang headmaster pointed at him. "Take him prisoner! He's a wizard! *Expelliarmus!*". Karkaroff waved his wand, and the survivor's weapon suddenly flipped up into the air and landed in Karkaroff's hand.

Reports began coming in from all over the eastern half of the island. A good hundred cultists had been neutralized to this point, and several groups had made it away from the coast and into the interior. The half-vampires near the beach, meanwhile were still putting up a good fight. In fact, they had been slowly starting to get the better of the Marines outside the shield as Muggles, no matter how well trained they were, often didn't consider the ways wizards could attack their foe.

A Patronus came in explaining that the vampires were now caught between the tornado, the First Division forces, and the Marines. It was only going to be a matter of time now. There was likely more to the report, but the Patronus suddenly cut off without warning. This probably meant that the wizard had either been distracted or had been killed before finishing his report.

He stared at where the Patronus had been for a good two or three seconds, wondering what it portended. That proved to be a mistake, however, as a bullet hit him in the temple while he was distracted. He was dead before he hit the ground.

---

Baghdad
---

Drakul had spent the last five minutes Disarming both Shiites and Sunnis alike. So far, he'd broken up four firefights yet only lost three men. As he had feared, the situation had deteriorated drastically during the few minutes he had been out.

He fervently hoped that he would be able to restore order.

To be continued...
The blaze of white light faded, and once again Rasputin found Koschei standing in front of him.
Koschei breathed a sigh of relief, but this time it was tinged with some suspicion. Rasputin blinked:
what had he done wrong? Finally, it occurred to him: the ring. Koschei had seen his ring and wanted it back to prevent any more...mishaps.

The Mad Monk hesitated for a moment. However, he shrugged and took it off his finger. Since he was still the master of the Elder Wand, he would always be able to shoot right through the Atlantis bubble and order Koschei around. It would be prudent to not give the game away just yet.

He held the ring out to Koschei, who took it with a big smile on his face. Rasputin was about to comment on this when he saw something much more disturbing: a faint red spot on Koschei's forehead. Rasputin knew enough about modern weapons from his experience with the Black Fisters to realize a laser targeting device when he saw one.

Yelling in surprise, he spun around, faced the forest, and began to cast Revelio Hominem. There was a brief popping sound, accompanied almost simultaneously by a brief hum as Koschei's Atlantis bubble activated. Less than a second later, there was a flash of blue light as the bullet bounced off the Atlantis bubble and landed in the snow.

The spell revealed two large groups of people converging on the area. One was coming from the northwest, where the Elixir cave was. He suspected that those were the Atlantis forces who had knocked out the guards at the cave. The second group seemed to be coming from the south, roughly where Zygonov and his men would have been coming from. He estimated 300 people in the southern group, 100 people coming from the cave, and about 5-10 snipers and sharpshooters in the area, including one nearby who likely had a gun pointed at Koschei...and almost certainly was in the process of aiming it at Rasputin himself.

With most of his guards dead and Koschei more or less useless, Rasputin needed reinforcements in a hurry. Figuring that there was no need for stealth anymore, he shouted at the top of his lungs: "Zygonov! Vovchanckaya! Get over here!"

That done, he turned to face the invisible SAS man and began fighting him.

---------------

The SAS agent watched in horror as a translucent bubble appeared around Koschei and deflected the bullet. Jesus Christ, he thought. Koschei had an Atlantis ring! He was using Atlantis's own power against it!

How had he gotten the ring? Had he stolen it? Had Rasputin given him one? He had no idea. What he did know, however, was that he had to send word in a hurry. He'd do so as soon as he took out Rasputin. Thank God Koschei wouldn't be able to shoot out of that bubble...or would he?

Regaining his composure, the agent turned the gun on Rasputin as the Mad Monk shouted arcane words. A brief chill washed over him, which he thought was a bad sign. Just to be sure, he dove behind a tree, making sure the Invisibility Cloak stayed on. The dive proved to be a lifesaver as a green beam zoomed right past where his head had been.

Sticking his head around the tree, he saw that Rasputin had dived behind Koschei's Atlantis bubble. Koschei seemed very confused, and he seemed to be trying to figure out where the bullet had come from. The agent watched as the infamous wizard put his hand in his pocket and began waving his hands frantically. It looked as if he was trying to get everyone to stop fighting, but that was obviously a ruse. He was naturally trying to cast something nasty.

---------------
Koschei had no idea what had hit the shield, and he didn't really want to know. He had enough trouble as it was, seeing that he had to make an important decision. He had seen Rasputin's child form earlier, which implied that Rasputin had a Horcrux and was likely a Dark wizard. Koschei doubted that Rasputin had created the Horcrux out of self-defense, as Koschei himself had.

Allying with a bunch of weird cultists was one thing. Allying with a Dark wizard, however, was something else entirely. It was true that he owed his revival to Rasputin -- he couldn't deny that. However, was it ethically appropriate to join a group of Dark wizards?

It suddenly occurred to him that Rasputin probably wanted to ally with him because he was under the assumption that Koschei himself was a kindred spirit, a Dark wizard who liked to kill hundreds of thousands of people. Well, he was going to dissuade Rasputin of THAT! This might be a good time to feign allegiance to Rasputin, help him enough to satisfy his revival debt, and then turn him in.

There wasn't much he could do now, however, now that the Atlantis bubble was on his finger. All he could do was try to get everyone to stop fighting and wait.

It took a lot of maneuvering and hiding, but he eventually managed to strip the SAS agent of his Invisibility Cloak and take him down. However, the noise had attracted other people's attention. More of the SAS agents nearby opened fire, and Rasputin jumped under the Cloak to hide himself. He didn't know how well the Elder Wand would work against six people at the same time.

Where were his reinforcements? And what the hell was Koschei doing, just standing there trying to stop the fighting?

Zygonov heard shouts in the distance, followed by gunshots. Gunshots meant almost certainly that enemy troops were closing in on Rasputin and Koschei and they needed to be dealt with. Shouting at the top of his lungs to distract the enemy, he immediately ordered his men to start fighting Rasputin's attackers.

Flamel and Hermione led the group of Horcrux hunters around the side of the mountain. The report from the SAS operatives had come in, and they had said that the coast was more or less clear. Only three or four people were there, and the agents would be able to take them out. Thankfully, Rasputin himself had been among the group. One of the agents had stayed behind, claiming that he might have a shot at Koschei himself.

At first, everything was peaceful. However, there were signs of a struggle. The ground was littered with dead bodies, and Hermione gasped as she saw corpses of people she recognized from Dumbledore's Army. Most of the Dumbledore's Army victims were clustered near the remains of what appeared to have been one of the LAV's.

Hermione nearly retched, and Moody barked an order at her. "Stay sharp, Hermione! We need your bubble up there! Keep on guarding the rest of our men. We don't know what surprises Rasputin has planned."

They made their way forward, and Hermione hoped that the SAS agent had taken out Koschei. She thought she had heard a gunshot, but she wasn't sure. Seconds later, a single voice burst out in Russian. She didn't know much Russian, but she did recognize two words: Zygonov and Vovchanckaya. Flamel swore and told everyone that Rasputin had noticed them and was calling for reinforcements.

Everyone brought their wands out as gunfire erupted around them. One of the SAS agents -- the cute
one -- went down with a green beam in his chest. Hermione's face paled a little, and to distract herself she turned back to the source of the initial shout. All she saw was an elaborately dressed man in an Atlantis bubble. Seconds later, another shout burst out some distance to their south and more spells began whizzling through the trees.

Flamel grunted and hurried over to the man with the bubble. "This is odd -- how did one of our guys get over here? Let's see if he'll explain what's going on."

Hermione nodded, and Moody started questioning the man. The man shook his head furiously and pointed hurriedly over their heads. He responded in Latin, and his response was surprising.

"Behind you! I'll explain later!"

He had barely gotten the words out when Hermione suddenly screamed and pointed behind Flamel. "Dr. Flamel, look!"

Flamel spun, and his jaw dropped when he saw hundreds of people coming out of the trees. There were a few SAS men among them, which seemed odd at first. However, that surprise was nothing compared to what they felt when the SAS men started shooting at them.

Moody swore. "Shit! They've been Imperiused, which means these are Rasputin's men! We're in trouble! Hermione, take point!"

Hermione squeaked. "Me?"

Moody glared at her. "HERMIONE, DO IT! We'll need everything we've got!"

------------

Zygonov's eyes widened in surprise as he saw the enemy forces come into view. It was a damn good thing he had defied orders and come to help when he did! Had he stayed behind, Rasputin would have been overrun! As it was, it appeared he had a good 3:1 advantage over the opponents.

He looked around for Koschei, then shook his head when he realized that he didn't know what Koschei looked like. What was even more surprising was the fact that Rasputin himself had disappeared. Was he dead? And what was that new fellow with the Atlantis bubble around him doing? He was just standing there, seemingly in shock!

A flicker of light suddenly appeared next to him, and Zygonov jerked his wand out. However, Vovchanckaya called him off. "It's Rasputin – he was wearing an Invisibility Cloak."

Rasputin was hyperventilating. "It's good you came, Genya. Here's the story. We brought Koschei back, but he isn't the mastermind we thought he was. That's him in the bubble. It looks like we're going to have to take over the world by ourselves."

Zygonov blinked. "What do you mean? Koschei triggered the Black Death!"

"That he did. However, he doesn't seem to be as excited about causing mischief and mayhem as he was earlier. Keep him around, however, as we could use his Atlantis bubble as a shield if necessary."

Lights erupted everywhere as the enemy forces engaged them. Moving a bit out of the way, Rasputin continued his report. "We outnumber these fellows 3:1, and only two of them have Atlantis bubbles -- including, oddly enough, a teenage girl. I've got the Elder Wand, so the bubbles aren't going to be a problem."
Zygonov grinned. "Let me guess. We get rid of them like we did those Marines earlier."

"You got it, Genya. Finishing off these guys should be easy. Don't let them get away and warn their allies, if any are left inside the tornado."

Zygonov barked an order at one of the other men in his unit, and the man started casting spells. "Sergei here is still pretty much refreshed, and he should be able to cast a shield this immediate area. Rest assured, my lord, none of them will come out of this alive."

---------------

Moody whistled and turned to Flamel. "We're outnumbered, Minister. We need reinforcements. And I don't think we're going to get them with the tornado in the way."

Flamel nodded worriedly. "I think you're right. I'd recommend a dignified retreat to a more defensible position."

"This may be our only chance at Koschei and Rasputin, sir."

Flamel looked at Rasputin, who had reappeared in the midst of his army. "That may be true. However, we can't fight 3:1 odds, plus the Elder Wand and Koschei. We need to retreat to a more defensible position."

Moody bit his lip, but he slowly nodded. "I don't like it, but I think you're right. Let's head up that mountain."

It was like herding cats, but eventually Flamel convinced everyone to start heading towards higher ground. The Rasputinite army continued their pursuit, and although the higher ground gave Flamel's men a bit of an advantage, it wasn't much. And certainly not enough to --

Flamel suddenly walked right into Moody, who was staring at a flickering wall in horror. "A shield! They've put a shield! They know what we're trying to do, and they're not letting us escape!"

Flamel drew a deep breath. "And we can't really shoot through the tornado -- it would be too imprecise and would likely hit us. This is not good, not good at all."

Moody groaned. "Well, if we're going to go out, we're going to go out with honor. I'll take every one of these bastards with us."

Flamel thought for a moment, then looked down at the enemy forces. "Hopefully it won't come to that. There's still one card we still have to play."

"Oh, really? What's that?"

Flamel gritted his teeth. "I know Middle Russian -- remember Koschei was my contemporary. I'm going to talk to Koschei."

To be continued...

_______________

Update #498: Primary Disciple [this episode was TOUGH!]
Koschei watched as the battle unfolded. It looked, much to his chagrin, that Rasputin was winning. Koschei had originally hoped that these new people would explain what was going on, or at least kill off Rasputin. Unfortunately, that did not seem to be the case. The newcomers were badly outnumbered and were up against the Elder Wand as well. To make matters worse, one of Rasputin's followers had raised a shield to prevent their opponents from escaping the trap.

He would still need to be careful with the new arrivals, however. After all, one of them had fired some kind of projectile at him (with what, a slingshot?). They hadn't tried to attack him since, however, and he thought he knew why. As long as he had the Atlantis bubble up, attacking him would have been a fool's errand. If he lowered the bubble, however, they would probably turn on him.

He knew he was going to side with the new arrivals over Rasputin. Rasputin was obviously evil thanks to the Horcrux. These new people were clearly fighting Rasputin, and the enemy of his enemy was his friend. It slowly occurred to them that being on the side of good, they were likely going to try to kill him because they thought he was evil. He needed to convince the newcomers that he wasn't going to hurt them. Once that happened, things would be golden.

His mind was still racing, and he turned back to watch the fight. Rasputin's men pounced on their trapped adversaries, mowing them down in droves. The two people with the Atlantis bubbles did what they could to protect everyone else, but they couldn't be everywhere at the same time. One of the men who had been accompanying the girl with the Atlantis ring was proving to be a formidable fighter, casting spells as if there were no tomorrow. This man -- Koschei believed his name was Moody -- must have been an Auror at one point. But Moody was constrained to one place just as badly as the people with the bubbles were.

Koschei hated to admit it, but it was only a matter of time until the Rasputinites annihilated their opponents or forced them to surrender. Sure enough, the man in the Atlantis bubble reached into his pocket, found a white handkerchief, and began waving it frantically. Time to parley, Koschei thought.

Dagher looked at the latest report and grunted. "If I'm reading this right, our men are probably on the verge of being wiped out inside the tornado. On the other hand, we've forced the cultists on the eastern half of the island into their last stand."

The assistant nodded. "Exactly. My suggestion is to tell the Nassau to fire more missiles at the shield protecting the eastern mountain. If the shield goes down, the First Division forces should be able to retake that part of the island."

"Make it so, David. What about the western half?"

The assistant stared intently at the floor. "I don't think there's much we can do about those fellows. I'm hearing reports they're trapped in a shield inside the tornado, so they can't escape. The only thing we would be able to do would be to try shooting missiles through the tornado at the shield, which
could conceivably lower the shield. Attacks from above are useless, as we've already found out. The problem with the missile attacks is that the tornado may deflect the missiles...and once the shield goes down, they're as likely to take out our men as they are the enemy as the two groups are probably all mixed together."

Dagher groaned. "Rasputin and Koschei are in there, aren't they?"

"Yes, sir."

Dagher looked out the window. "Damn. If you're correct about the missile attacks, they won't improve the situation at all. I think you're right, David. There may not be much we can do there unless we overwhelm them with helicopters or destroy the tornado even though it was created by the Elder Wand. We don't have enough troops to spare at this point, and there's no way I'm going to use a nuke."

The assistant's eyes widened. "Can you send the First Division forces in once they've cleaned up the eastern half of the island?"

Dagher pursed his lips. "You know, that's not a bad idea. If we crush the people on that mountain fast enough, we'll be able to redeploy them via helicopter -- or broom, for that matter, as brooms are smaller than choppers and harder to hit -- inside the tornado. Their orders will be to go after the remaining Rasputinites and rescue any survivors from the Horcrux hunting group."

David sighed. "I don't like it, but I don't think there's anything better."

"Neither do I, David. Make it so."

"Yes, sir."

-------------------

Koschei watched as the man in the Atlantis bubble put his wand to his throat to amplify his voice. He doubted Rasputin's men would agree to anything other than unconditional surrender, but it was worth a try. The man in the bubble spoke in a booming voice. "Is Professor Koschei here? I would like to speak with Professor Koschei."

Koschei's jaw dropped. The man had actually spoken Russian! Rasputin stared at the man in disbelief, then looked at Koschei along with virtually everyone else in the area. The man in the bubble, meanwhile, kept his eyes focused squarely on Rasputin.

Drawing a deep breath, Koschei raised his hand. "I'm Professor Koschei. Who are you, and who is fighting whom about what here?"

The man in the bubble gaped at him. "YOU'RE Koschei? I thought you were one of us! You have an Atlantis ring, and you warned us that those men were closing in on us!"

Koschei nodded. "You may not believe this, but I'm not the monster you think I am. I am actually a trained healer, and I earned my Atlantis ring working on a healing draught called the Healthful Concoction. However, you seem to already know that as you appear to be using it, or something derived from it. I recognize the smell. I'm actually pleased it's still in use after all these years."

The teenage girl spoke at this point. "He's correct, Dr. Flamel. Koschei was a healer at one point. I
read -- Dr. Flamel?"

Flamel was staring at Koschei in absolute shock. Slowly, he put his hand to his head. It took him a
good ten seconds for him to continue the conversation.

"YOU were part of the Healthful Concoction Committee?"

Koschei blinked: how the hell had this fellow learned about an obscure committee six hundred years
earlier? Cautiously: "Yes, I was. I was actually secretary of the group, and we did a lot of the work
in the lab in Kiev. I'm surprised you're aware of the Committee, since from what I gather it disbanded
over six hundred years ago."

Flamel's next remark absolutely floored Koschei. "Professor Koschei, your Healthful Concoction
work helped lay the groundwork for the creation of...a powerful healing artifact...less than half a
century later. Come to think of it, I may have actually cited your group in my paper!"

It was now Koschei's turn to be amazed. "How can that be? You'd have to be six hundred...wait a
minute, did you actually pull off a Philosopher's Stone?"

Flamel looked like he wanted to kick himself. "Well...we've since destroyed the Stone to keep it out
of the hands of people like Rasputin and...you, but apparently they managed to get a specimen. That
white potion they're --" 

Flamel suddenly slammed his jaws shut, but Koschei understood immediately and completed
Flamel's sentence: "-- is the Elixir of Life. So that's how I was revived. Apparently it can return
incapacitated people to their bodies. Congratulations! You've probably changed the world with that
device. I take it people don't age anymore in 1996?"

The Auror named Moody suddenly barked something at him in Latin. "All right, Koschei. What do
you want? We're not going to let you kill another fifty to seventy-five million people. I --"

Koschei's reaction took everyone off guard: he fell to his knees and began sobbing. "NO! Seventy-
five million! What have I done? WHAT HAVE I DONE? That was never supposed to have
happened!"

-------------
Flamel stared at Koschei in amazement...and with a hint of suspicion. He glanced at Moody, who
was looking hard at the crying Koschei.

Moody didn't say anything for a long time. Twenty seconds later, however, his eyes widened.
Turning to Flamel, he whispered. "You're not going to believe this, but I think he means it. I can read
facial expressions pretty well, and this guy looks VERY distraught."

Flamel gasped. "You mean to tell me --"

Moody nodded. "He didn't mean to cause the Black Death. All these years, he's been seen as a
monster...whereas in real life it was probably just an accident. Plagues got out of hand very easily in
those days."

Flamel grunted. "I know all too well."

He paused. "I'm still not sure I don't believe him. If he was a healer, he would have known that
biological warfare could get out of hand and wouldn't have done anything to trigger a plague."
However, he knows about the Healthful Concoction Committee. NO ONE knows about that. And he certainly seems to be remorseful for what he has done."

He turned back to Koschei. "All right, Koschei. Explain. What exactly happened?"

Koschei could barely make speak through the tears. "I am a political activist who advocates increased Atlantean intervention in the world's affairs."

Flamel whistled. "That actually does sound familiar -- I remember people talking about it during the Black Death."

"Exactly, Dr. Flamel. I figured I needed to do something that would allow me to demonstrate my leadership ability to Atlantis and score myself some political points. So, when the bubonic plague arrived in my area, I took advantage of my work on the Healthful Concoction and made it more virulent. I let it loose among the wizards in my area, planning to use the Healthful Concoction to cure it once it made the news. I was hoping I would be able to heal everyone before it finished them off."

He paused and hung his head again. "Unfortunately, I did my work too well. The disease unexpectedly spread to the Muggles, and soon thousands of people were getting sick. I immediately started planning my healing crusade when my idiotic daughter turned on me and betrayed my private island of Buyan to Atlantis, which turned against me. They invaded, and I was knocked out before I was able to apply the cure. The net result was a plague which got...completely out of control."

Koschei began sobbing once more. "I am a healer, not a killer! I never intended to cause the Black Death! You must believe me! I'll swear under the Veritas Potion! Think about it -- if I were a killer, why did I not attack you after Rasputin revived me?"

Moody glanced at Koschei. "Veritas Potion?"

Flamel kept his eyes focused on Koschei when he answered the question. "We now know it as Veritaserum. It's been around for a while. At any rate, Koschei, you've got a nice story. However, there's one thing that doesn't fit. If you're got such a noble heart, why did you create a Horcrux? You must have known it was Dark magic."

Koschei winced. "Believe it or not, it was out of self-defense. Atlantis was already on my tail, and I had to keep myself alive long enough to perform the cure. Unfortunately, Atlantis got to my father's body before the Gatekeeper could revive me."

Flamel didn't buy it. "You still had to kill a person in order to create the Horcrux. That alone is enough to put you in Azkaban."

Koschei shook his head. "I don't deny it. However, you have to realize it was a mercy killing. The man had bubos all over his body. He was in great pain, and he didn't have long to live. I put him in that predicament, so it was my responsibility to deal with it. I figured I would do two things for humanity there: put a plague victim out of his misery and ensure that I lasted long enough to invoke the Concoction."

Koschei looked at Flamel with pleading eyes. "As God is my witness, I swear I will never unleash a plague on mankind again. I will do everything possible to atone for my despicable acts. If necessary, I will kill myself."

Moody flinched and turned to Flamel. "He may have a point. Remember I was forced to perform a
mercy killing when we visited London immediately after Judgment Day."

Flamel hesitated a moment. He wasn't convinced of everything Koschei was saying, but he didn't buy the suicide thing for a moment. "Killing yourself doesn't mean much, Koschei. You've always got a Horcrux to fall back on."

Hermione chimed in once more. "Actually, Dr. Flamel, that may no longer be the case."

Flamel frowned. "What do you mean? We never found it."

Moody looked back at Koschei and spoke softly. "I think Hermione's right, Minister. I think the Horcrux has been destroyed."

"Huh? Why?"

Hermione answered that with a whispered comment of her own. "Regret."

Several miles away, a First Division patrol was making the rounds outside the tornado when the ground suddenly shook underneath them. Everyone brought their wands out in a hurry, but nothing attacked them.

The captain looked at the ground warily. "What the hell was that? It's like something exploded down there."

His lieutenant shrugged. "A tree probably fell nearby. I wouldn't worry about it. What I would worry about is figuring out how to get in and out of the tornado so we can help out those poor guys."

It took a good five minutes, but eventually all of Flamel's forces were convinced, as were the Rasputinites. Koschei had been telling the truth the entire time, and his decision to not introduce another pandemic had been the momentous event which had dropped the DEFCON meter back under 10%. Koschei had even confessed under Veritaserum, which Moody had brought along.

Koschei had removed his ring and thrown it into the snow, saying that he didn't deserve it. Flamel, however, gave it back to him. "You've earned it, and you will earn it once more after we combine forces to improve the health of everyone else on this planet. You will more than atone for your sins, Professor. I'm confident about it."

A Patronus approached Rasputin as Koschei accepted the ring -- but put it in his pocket instead of on his finger. When some of the people looked at Koschei strangely, he explained: "I am a healer and I will offer my services to anyone injured during this battle."

He then offered his hand to Flamel. "Dr. Flamel, when this is over I will make you my Primary Disciple and Gatekeeper. Together, we will heal the world."

Rasputin was getting tired of all this. He had already known that Koschei was useless. However, now Koschei had become a liability in that it was obvious he was going to defect to the other side. He was tempted to kill Koschei, but he figured it wasn't worth it as the Atlanteans would just revive him from that buried Horcrux.

Clearing his throat, he pointed the Elder Wand at Flamel. "I hate to break up the festivities, but I believe our men are under attack on the eastern side of the island. You have two minutes to call off the attacks on our men and let us leave the island in piece or I will personally strike you down with
the Elder Wand -- you recognize this, don't you? Once you are dead, we will go after the rest of your men. This is your last chance, Flamel. What will it be?"

Rasputin chuckled. "Don't worry, I won't kill everyone. We'll need at least one person to survive to report your destruction back to your authorities. Know that if you defy me, you will be putting your life in danger. From now on in, the cult of the Black God will rule the world."

The Mad Monk then turned to Hermione and winked. "Don't worry, young lady. You may get off easy. After all, I need a new wife now that my old one is dead. I've always liked younger women."

To be continued...

__________________
Update #498.2: Mercury and the Bear

2 TO GO

-------------
1450Z
Buyan
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 2/6.1%

-------------
NEXT UP: Penguin, I Apologize, Your Suggestion/Request Came In Too Late

-------------
Nicholas Flamel didn't like where this was going. Rasputin was pointing the Elder Wand at him and was demanding that the Atlantean forces let him escape...or else.

There was no way Flamel could let the Rasputinites off the island again. After all, the world knew where they were right now -- and they were all in one place. If they escaped, they would likely scatter to safe houses all over the world and would be extremely difficult to get rid of completely. He would do whatever was necessary to ensure that the world still had a chance of getting rid of these creeps. Thank God Koschei hadn't been the monster Flamel had thought he had been or there would have been REAL trouble!

It was fairly obvious at this point that Flamel would have to sacrifice himself for the cause. He had hoped that he would have had more time with his wife, at least enough to tell her goodbye. However, he had lived a long and fulfilling life -- a VERY long and fulfilling life. He had no right to complain that he hadn't done enough.

He turned to look at Moody and Hermione. Moody seemed furious, and he seemed to be concentrating on casting a nasty spell. Hermione, oddly enough, seemed calm and had her eyes closed. She was probably doing something Buddhist or Samuelist, he mused. She had one hand on the hilt of the Sword of Gryffindor, and she was probably preparing to meet her fate with dignity.

Drawing a deep breath, he started telling Rasputin to go to hell. However, he didn't get very far before something truly remarkable happened.

Hermione suddenly jumped in front of him, waving her free hand wildly. "Stop, all of you! Can't you see there's a better way than fighting?"

-------------
Hermione didn't know why she had done it. All she knew was that she had felt an irresistible urge to go and protect Flamel, or at least try to get the two sides to start negotiating. She knew it was
foolhardy in the extreme, but the drive was too strong for her to hold back.

She thought back two years earlier to the Shrieking Shack. There, she had jumped in front of Harry in an attempt to shield him from a curse from Sirius Black. It had been reckless in the extreme, and it could have gotten her killed had Sirius actually been a criminal. Fortunately, Sirius had been an innocent man and had not actually tried to attack her.

She tried to calm herself by focusing on her breath. She had a strong suspicion that Rasputin would not be as forgiving as Sirius was -- and that he would not be amenable to negotiation, particularly when his side was winning. However, she was a Gryffindor, and Gryffindors were one with courage.

- - - - - - - -

Flamel stared at Hermione in disbelief. "Hermione, what are you doing? Get out of there!"

Hermione didn't budge, and she started hard at Rasputin. "There's got to be a way other than fighting. Ask him what he wants and maybe we can reach a settlement, just like what Professor Moody did with Koschei."

Moody growled at her and pointed his wand at Rasputin. "I doubt Rasputin's actually good, Hermione. Besides, I'm the Auror. Get out of the way, I'll handle this. I -- oof!"

That was about as far as he got before one of the other Black God cultists hit him in the head with a Stunning Spell. Moody fell to the ground, slurring swears to beat the band.

Flamel instinctively turned to check on Moody, but he couldn't do much with the Atlantis bubble up. Fortunately, Koschei immediately jumped up and raced over to Moody's side. Several cultists glanced at Rasputin, but he shook his head. "Don't bother -- they'll just bring him back again. Stay focused on the people we CAN kill. Speaking of killing, that was just a taste, Auror. You interfere again and you're getting an Avada Kedavra."

Koschei took a look at Moody and began waking him up again. As he worked, he turned to Hermione and spoke in Latin. "Young woman, this man is extremely dangerous and is the master of the Elder Wand. You should get out of the way if you have a chance. This is no time for games. I know teenagers think they're indestructible, but that's not the case."

Flamel glanced at Koschei before turning back to Hermione. He opened his mouth to order Hermione to back off when something occurred to him.

He was seeing both Hermione and Koschei at the same time. Unbidden, the words of Sybill Trelawney's prophecy came to mind. He considered the implications, and he froze.

"When Mercury is seen in conjunction with the Great Bear, the victor shall be the vanquished and the vanquished shall be the victor."

Hermione's code name was Mercury, and Koschei's was the Great Bear. Everything matched all too well. What's more, Hermione was involved in a confrontation with a powerful Dark wizard who was threatening them all. Hell, the fact that the prophecy had even occurred to him was probably a sign that was involved in some way. And unlike the most popular interpretations of the Dawn Ash Prophecy, Flamel and Trelawney were both somewhat involved with Hermione's life.

It occurred to him that the knowledge of this prophecy gave his side a distinct advantage. As the Minister of Magic, he felt it was his duty to remember as many of the prophecies as he could. He
doubted that the prophecy was known to anyone else outside the Department of Mysteries.

The Mercury and the Bear prophecy seemed to imply that whichever side won the showdown between Hermione and Rasputin would likely lose the war. Victory for Rasputin made a lot of sense: if Rasputin were to suddenly die, killed by Moody or someone else, his followers would get very upset and kill off the entire rest of Flamel's unit in revenge. Victory for Flamel and Atlanteans, however, DIDN'T make all that much sense. What could Hermione's capitulation -- or possibly death -- do to help Flamel's cause? Their forces were still outnumbered, now at least 5:1. Rasputin still held the Elder Wand, and it didn't seem as if any help was forthcoming. Hermione would just be the first in a long series of casualties.

Flamel decided upon a course of action. He didn't like it, not one bit. However, he had no choice. It was the only chance the world had, and he fervently prayed that he was interpreting the prophecy correctly.

Hermione Granger had to lose this fight against a man who had already shown he was capable of \textit{Avada Kedavra}. That could only mean one thing. He couldn't allow anyone else to help Hermione out here, as distasteful as that seemed.

He thought back to King William, who was almost certainly going to be told about the events which would transpire here. He muttered under his breath: "Forgive me, Your Majesty, for what I am about to do."

He raised his hand and amplified his voice. "All right, Rasputin, you've got yourself an audience. Let's hear what you have to say. Everyone, put down your weapons and hopefully we'll get out of this without any further bloodshed."

1453Z
Bridge, USS \textit{Nassau}

The aide saluted the captain of the \textit{Nassau} and began his report. "Sir, the missiles are starting to make their way through the shield on the eastern side of the island. The shield will be down momentarily, if it is not already, and the enemy wizards are scattering all over the place on brooms and on foot. Some of them are heading for the tornado."

The captain nodded. "They're making sure we can't take them all out in one blast. Tell the First Division to continue their advance, and try to make sure Flamel's units don't get even more enemies to deal with."

The aide saluted and raced off. The captain turned to look at the western mountain, where the tornado was still raging. In the southwest, the sun was getting low in the sky. He would have to finish this battle as soon as possible because he didn't want the cultists to escape in the dark.

Suddenly, an explosion rocked his ship. He turned to the first officer and said: "What the HELL? Damage control!"

The damage control officer was looking at his monitor in disbelief. "Something hit the hull, sir! It must have been a torpedo!"

"A torpedo? A torpedo from -- SHIT!"

The captain cut off his remark when another explosion buffeted the bridge. The damage control
officer shouted, "Port side, this time!"

"Is it the Russian sub? Why would they fire on us?"

The first officer suddenly pointed out the window, and his finger suddenly started moving. "Oh my God! Look!"

The captain turned to follow the first officer's finger and watched as he saw the tip of a wizard's head skimming the surface near the ocean. As he watched, the wizard shot powerful yellow beams at the waterline, triggering more explosions.

An alarm hooted, and the damage officer spun. "Shit! We've got flooding in sections 2 and 4!"

Reports started coming in all over the ship. "Help, we've got wounded...I saw a yellow light....What does Reducto Maximus mean?"

The captain tried to compose himself -- he needed to be a rock in times like this. "All right, gentlemen. It looks like we've got wizards trying to sink us by poking holes in the hull. Bring out the deck guns and waste them!"

The first officer shook his head. "That's no use, sir. They're right down near the surface, only a few feet from the ship. If we were to fire on them, the guns would shoot right into our own decks. Furthermore, these bastards are FAST! And it's getting dark out, so they're easy to overlook except when they fire!"

"Dammit! I want everyone with their sidearm on the hull shooting at these guys! I'm not going to let a bunch of purple-robed jerks take out the pride of the United States Navy!"

There was another explosion, and the ship lurched again. Slowly but surely, the vessel began tilting to port.

The damage control officer swore. "This is getting ugly, sir! I'm not sure how much longer we can keep this up! To be honest, sir, I think we know where all the wizards went after we knocked their shield down."

The captain grunted. "They're trying to knock out the missile launchers as the missiles are the only things which will penetrate a shield. A clever plan, I must say. Now, it's our turn to thwart it. Do we have any wizards left on board?"

The first officer nodded. "Yes, a few."

"Good. Tell them to start casting spells to plug the holes in the hull and deal with these bogeys. The rest of you guys, grab your guns and blow these assholes' heads off!"

To be continued...

__________________

Update #498.5: Fall of a Gryffindor

2 TO GO

----------
Grigori Rasputin liked where this was going. Against all odds, he had gotten the representatives of Atlantis to beg for mercy, including a man he was fairly certain was the British Minister of Magic. It's not like his opponents had much of a choice, however, as they were very badly outnumbered.

He looked at the brave young woman who had jumped in front of Flamel. She wasn't THAT unattractive, and she seemed extremely brave and strong-willed. What's more, she even had a dowry: an ornate goblin-made sword in her hand. That was too much of a coincidence, he thought. It must have been the Black God in action.

First things first. He needed to make sure the rest of his colleagues made it off the island in one piece. Gesturing imperiously at Flamel, he began to issue his demands. "First thing I want you to do is stop firing on my men on the eastern side of the island."

Flamel shook his head. "Those are not my men. Those are likely American soldiers, and I'm not their commanding officer."

Rasputin pointed his wand at the teenager. "They're part of the invading army, which probably means you communicate with them. Send a Patronus over there and issue the order. If you don't, I'm going to vaporize you."

The teenager closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and reopened them. When she spoke, her voice was astonishingly calm. "You'll have to kill me first, Rasputin. Do you want the death of an innocent child on your hands?"

Rasputin snorted and looked at her. "Innocent? You're part of the group as well, and you have a sword in your hand. You don't seem that innocent to me. What's more, you've got an Atlantis ring, so we know who your master is. I don't know how you got the ring, and to be honest I don't care. I'll tell you what: I'll let you go if you agree to sleep with me."

The girl shook her head. "Just like you slept with all your five hundred mistresses back in the teens, right?"

One of the Aurors nearby held up a hand. "For God's sake, Hermione, don't provoke him! Minister, can you calm her down?"

Rasputin turned back to Flamel, who glanced thoughtfully at Hermione for a moment. Finally, he shook his head slowly and turned back to Rasputin.

"All right, you win. I'll send the Patronus."

The glowing phoenix materialized abruptly in front of the captain, who drew his gun instinctively before he realized what it was. The enemy wizards were still attacking the ship, and the friendlies on board the ship were constantly teleporting to hull breaches and patching them up before the flooding got too bad. Unfortunately, the wizards were starting to get winded and the amount of water inside
the ship was still increasing despite all of the *Evanesco* and bilge bumps. The ship was no longer tilting to port for the simple reason that enough water had entered the starboard side to set her upright again.

It was only a matter of time, he thought. Granted, four or five of them had been taken out by lucky machine gun fire. However, there were still five left, and those five were pretty adept at dodging bullets and killing soldiers.

The phoenix spoke in Flamel's voice. "Captain, we have a delicate situation here. I need for you to stop firing missiles at the cultists on the eastern hill."

The captain stared at the phoenix. The code words "delicate situation" meant Flamel was speaking under duress and the conversation was likely being monitored. He had to choose his response carefully.

"Are you sure about this, sir?"

The phoenix nodded. "I am, Captain."

The captain grinned slightly and winked at the phoenix. "Order acknowledged. Captain out."

The phoenix disappeared as the captain turned back to his first officer. "Tell all of our...normal...crewmen to continue the missile attacks. I suspect that these enemies are from the eastern mountain, which in turn means the shield must be down. Now's our chance to finish off that base. Fire everything we've got at the base, and do so before those flying monsters turn this ship into Swiss cheese. With luck, the cultists will recall these fellows attacking us."

-----------

Rasputin smiled at Flamel. "See? That wasn't so bad. You follow orders, and you get to live a little longer. Hopefully it will become habit-forming."

Flamel rolled his eyes. "That's very comforting, Rasputin."

"It's a start. Now, let's get on with the rest of my demands. I want Atlantis to publish a decree which encourages wizards to be placed in charge of Muggles whenever appropriate. Wizards can always be given technology, but Muggles cannot be given magic. Only people adept in both disciplines should be allowed to rule people."

Flamel slumped. "In other words, you want the world to be ruled by people who can use both wands and guns."

"If necessary, so be it."

"You do realize that you're forcing your Muggle allies into a subservient role, right?"

Rasputin shook his head. "Actually, I'm not. The rulers may have to be wizards, but their cabinet and staff members don't have to be. Now, let's get on with the rest of the demands. The Black God cult is also to be recognized as a valid religious belief, and people must be a member of this cult to hold high political office. There is to be no religious discrimination against the cult, either."

Flamel's voice began to sound desperate. "You do realize that I can't speak for Atlantis. I can just convey the message."
Rasputin pointed at Flamel's hand with the Elder Wand. "You've got a ring. They'll listen to you. Believe me, you're going to want them to listen to you."

---

Eastern Mountain
-- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- --

The First Division officers watched and waited as the latest barrage of missiles lit up the top of the mountain. Jurgen Helmholtz, the wizard now in charge of the forces on Buyan after the death of Karkaroff, felt a brief sense of relief that the tornado was in place. Had it not been for the tornado, everyone across Buyan would have likely seen the explosions on the mountaintop...including Rasputin. The ruse would never have worked.

The last fireball dissipated, and the wizards prepared themselves for another attack. Yet none came. Thirty seconds went by, then sixty. The delay stretched to two minutes, and nothing happened.

Had the forces on the mountaintop been finished off at last? There was only one way to check. Telling everyone to stay put, Helmholtz mounted his broom and let a group of volunteers over to the top of the mountain.

The cultists were all dead, and in some cases blown to pieces. There was no motion anywhere on top of the mountain other than the fall of the snowflakes. Telling everyone to stay sharp, he cast *Revelio Hominem* to check for invisible soldiers.

Nothing.

Helmholtz breathed a sigh of relief. The battle was over, and the eastern half of the island was in their hands at last.

Punching the air in elation, he led the scouts back to the First Division's headquarters and made his report. "They're all dead, ladies and gentlemen. The eastern half of the island is ours."

There was a brief cheer, and Helmholtz allowed the men to celebrate a little before he gave the next order.

"If you're injured, stay here and get treatment. If not, and you've got enough energy left to deal with another fighter, follow me. We're going to fly over the tornado and help out Flamel's men...whatever's left of them. Who's with me?"

The response wasn't encouraging. Out of the 1000 or so First Division units left on Buyan, a good 700 had received either serious injury, were exhausted, or were Muggle attaches who couldn't fly on brooms. Helmholtz himself was on the verge of collapse, but he had to keep on going to set a good example for his men.

Minutes later, a force of 300 wizards headed west, towards the tornado.

---

1501Z
-- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- --

Rasputin continued his list of demands. Flamel had fought tooth and nail over each one, but he had eventually given in. The teenager, named Hermione, stood there in her bubble with her eyes closed most of the time. She seemed to be doing some kind of meditation practice to calm herself down.

He looked her over once more and saw that at one point she was smiling. He blinked: had she lost it completely? He wouldn't want a wife who was half-crazy now, would he? He recalled stories from
the Great War where people had lost their mind after witnessing the horror of the trenches.

He turned back to Flamel. "Second, I am to be placed in charge of the Russian Empire and crowned the new tsar. If the Russian Empire no longer exists, then whichever political entity rules Moscow will suffice."

Flamel was starting to look like a broken man, which was good for Rasputin. "Russia is now a democratic state ruled by a Muggle. Tsar Alexei does have a role in the government, but it's effectively a ceremonial position. They're not accustomed to have wizards in government, and the ruler is no longer absolute."

Rasputin grinned. "Well, you'll have to get them accustomed to that. Now -- what?"

The Mad Monk frowned as a Patronus approached him. The message was in Russian, and it sounded frantic. "My lord, there are hundreds of brooms flying over from the eastern side of the island! It looks like this parley was just an attempt to stall! They've got reinforcements en route!"

Rasputin swore viciously and pointed his wand directly at Flamel and Hermione. "You tricked me! This was all a delay tactic so you could send reinforcements over!"

Flamel looked hopelessly confused. Hermione, meanwhile, still had that unnerving smile on her face. Scratching his head, Flamel said: "That wasn't me! I wasn't involved with that! However, I'm more than willing to get reinforcements."

Rasputin was fed up. "I do not like being betrayed, and you will now face the consequences. Goodbye, Dr. Flamel. Miss Hermione, move out of the way so I can finish him off. This will not be pretty, I'm afraid. You will not want to watch this."

Hermione didn't move. She just stood there in front of Flamel with that smile on her face.

Moody abruptly lashed out with his wand. However, Zygonov fired a red beam at him and hit him in the chest. The Auror groaned and fell to the ground.

Slowly, Hermione opened her eyes and spoke calmly. "Like I said, you'll have to kill me to get to him."

Moody could barely speak. "Dammit, Hermione, move! Minister, push her out of the way!"

Flamel shook his head slowly and looked away. He knew what had to happen, and besides he wouldn't been able to cast a spell through the bubble anyway.

Rasputin's eyes narrowed. "Miss Hermione, I do not want to kill a potential spouse or mistress. Get out of the way."

Hermione shook her head. "You can't win, Grigori. If you strike me down, I shall become more powerful than you could possibly imagine."

Flamel and several of the Muggles cheered. Rasputin, however, nearly exploded in rage: he did NOT like being taunted. Pointing the wand at Hermione's chest, he roared: "Woman, this is your final warning. MOVE!"

Hermione closed her eyes one last time. Smiling once more, she grasped the hilt of the sword in both
hands and lifted the blade in a formal salute to an enemy.

Rasputin had had enough. This woman was too stubborn to make a good wife anyway. He spoke three words, and three words only.

"So be it."

Gathering all of the anger and power he could muster, Rasputin channeled it into the Elder Wand and spoke two words.

"Avada Kedavra!"

Moody screamed as the green beam smashed through the Atlantis bubble protecting Hermione and hit her in the chest. Hermione fell to the ground like a puppet with cut strings, the sword of Gryffindor at her side. The Atlantis bubble winked out as she passed on.

A powerful blast of magical energy suddenly raced through him as soon as Hermione hit the ground. He didn't know what it was, and he frowned for a moment. He looked around and saw that all of the wizards on both sides were reacting the same way. Whatever it was, however, didn't seem to do any harm. If anything, it brought several hundred astonished wizards back to their senses.

Screams of "NO!" and "HERMIONE!" echoed throughout the enemy forces as Rasputin turned his baleful gaze on Flamel -- who, oddly enough, was smiling now. What the hell was going on with these smiles?

Flamel spoke calmly. "You made your last mistake, Rasputin. We've got you now --"

That was as far as the Minister got before his Atlantis bubble suddenly disappeared. Rasputin grinned, walked up to Flamel, and pointed the wand right between his eyes from five feet away. "I don't think so, Dr. Flamel. Farewell, my betrayer."

A brief furrow creased Flamel's forehead. Rasputin could imagine what was going through the man's head: what the hell happened to my bubble? I guess I'm not in such as good of a position as I thought. Well, he wouldn't have much time to worry about it.

Rasputin cast Avada Kedavra again, and the green beam hit the startled Flamel right between the eyes.

To be continued...

__________________

Update #498.8: For The Love Of The World
2 TO GO

-------------

1456Z
Buyan
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 3/3.4%
-------------

NEXT UP: The Flaw in the Plan
-------------
Hermione Granger's first taste of battle had been nothing like what it had been like in the storybooks. The stories, both Wizarding and Muggle, featured knights in shining armor and other heroes going off to war, defeating all their enemies, and gallantly saving the princess. Real life, however, was much more disturbing.

Bodies littered the ground as far as she could see. Many of them had been mangled beyond recognition, and some of casualties had fallen into rigor mortis with looks of absolute horror frozen on their faces. She had already retched at least three times, possibly more.

The worst of it was the fact that she recognized many of the students from Dumbledore's Army. When Hogwarts resumed after the winter break -- if it even did -- it would be without a good half of the seventh-year Gryffindors. The school had taken a tremendous hit over the past year, considering the events of Judgment Day, the attack on Hogwarts, and now this. Half of the staff was gone as well: Snape, Lupin, Umbridge (which Hermione admitted ahad been a relief), McGonagall, Sinistra, Dumbledore. Even Sirius Black had been killed -- by American friendly fire.

The thing which had finally pushed her over the edge had been discovering the body of Fleur Delacoeur crushed against a rock by what appeared to have been an avalanche. One of her arms had been sliced off, and that mesmerizing silver hair had now been dipped in blood. Considering what had happened to Krum, she wondered if there was a curse against Triwizard contestants. There had better not be, because if there were Harry would be the next target.

The story of Jephthah as described by Samuel had warned her that people could go mad after seeing the horrors of the battlefield. Fortunately, Samuelist practices kept her from losing her senses. She had always had strong powers of concentration, an ability which helped her do well in school, and over the past few months she had become adept at Buddhist/Samuelist metta meditation. This practice allowed a person to mitigate sadness and anger by focusing on love and compassion. That allowed her to remain calm and at least somewhat happy even in the worst of times.

---------

Hermione was trying to practice metta as Rasputin pointed his wand at her. Even so, there were times where her instincts and fears broke through and terrified her. There wasn't much else she could do, what with the Atlantis bubble up and so forth. She had felt a bit nervous that she was being sent off to war without any combat experience outside Dumbledore's Army training. However, it had soon become obvious that they didn't need her for the war as much as her Atlantis bubble.

She had read up a little on Rasputin in the library. There wasn't much there at Hogwarts, of course, as he had been a foreign wizard. However, there had been a good deal of information about him in the Muggle libraries near Hogwarts. Neither of the libraries had much information on Koschei which wasn't already covered in Sir Henry Wood's play. At first that may have been surprising. However, considering the fact that a good half of Europe may have died in the Black Death, it was understandable that a lot of material may have been lost in the ensuing chaos.

Trying to ground herself once more with the meditation practice, she watched as Rasputin leered at her. "Innocent? You're part of the group as well, and you have a sword in your hand. You don't seem that innocent to me. What's more, you've got an Atlantis ring, so we know who your master is. I don't know how you got the ring, and to be honest I don't care. I'll tell you what: I'll let you go if you agree to sleep with me."

She felt a brief burst of anxiety, but focus on her breath calmed her once more. She glanced at the sword, having almost forgotten that she was still carrying it. She had a momentary vision of lopping off Rasputin's head with the sword, but she knew that she would never get that far if she tried with the bubble in the way and so forth. She felt a brief sense of satisfaction as Rasputin's comment
confirmed the Muggle histories about him being a womanizer.

She threw his comment back in his face. "Just like you slept with all your five hundred mistresses back in the teens, right?"

A couple of people laughed. Moody, however, did not find it was funny and screamed at her to not provoke Rasputin. Koschei just stared at her blankly, having not understood the English comment.

Flamel's reaction was strange: he just looked at her thoughtfully for a moment and then looked back at Rasputin. She had suspected him to agree with Moody -- what she had done had been a bit reckless. Clearly, he knew something that she didn't. But what?

Could Rasputin's insatiable appetite for women help her out here? Unless he was faking it, he seemed interested in her. And who could blame him? She was smart, brave, and a British national heroine. It was true, she was only seventeen. However, Rasputin had lived in a time when people married much younger than they did today. Seventeen- and eighteen-year-old brides hadn't been as unusual in those days as they were today.

If that was the case, Rasputin might be reluctant to kill her. This could work to her advantage. If she stayed in front of Flamel, he'd have to get through her to get at Flamel and most of the rest of the Atlantean forces. And he likely wouldn't do that.

She considered taking her jacket off and letting Rasputin see her figure. Despite her self-image issues, she must have been attractive enough to win the attention of the superstar Krum when it came time to choose a partner for the Yule Ball two years earlier. However, she wasn't as adept at shrugging off physical sensations as she was with metta meditation. Yes, it would distract Rasputin even further. However, it was still below zero outside Centigrade. She'd probably freeze to death before Rasputin seduced her.

She turned back to Rasputin, who was starting to dictate terms to the allied forces. The Mad Monk was in a position of power here, and he knew it. Most of the demands were completely unreasonable, yet the allied forces had to accept them because they didn't have much of a choice.

The idea of the Black God's wizard in charge of Atlantis worried Hermione a great deal. The world would need a lot of tender loving care at a time like this, and she went back to the metta practice. Focusing on love was much more productive than listening to Rasputin recite his demands. Deep down inside, however, she wondered if Rasputin would in fact try to kill her and Flamel...and whether she would defy him long enough to call his bluff. She wondered that if Rasputin did take her out, she would be too immersed in the metta practice to even get nervous.

Suddenly, something occurred to her. Being killed while focusing on love.

She remembered talking with Harry about how he had survived the *Avada Kedavra* curse from Voldemort. Supposedly his mother had protected him by broadcasting feelings of love in his direction. When she died, the protection lingered, and it lingered to this day. Voldemort had been unable to touch him or cast spells on him until the Dark Lord had been revived using Harry's blood.

A ridiculous plan began to materialize in her mind. She was now a fairly accomplished metta practitioner, and she had gotten to the point where she could broadcast love for large numbers of people fairly easily. Would it be possible for her to try to protect the entire unit from Rasputin and his men? She thought it was definitely plausible...and it could very well be the only way they were going to get out of this in one piece.
There was only one small problem with the plan: her own role in it and what would have to happen to her.

She fought back a tremendous surge of fear strong enough to break her concentration momentarily. Had she not already been performing Samuelist practices which were intended to calm her down, the plan would have fallen apart then and there. As it was, however, she was able to think her way through it.

The Sorting Hat chose you for Gryffindor, she realized. It saw in you qualities of courage which Godric Gryffindor would have likely approved of himself.

You stayed behind after the nuke went off in London to put up a shield to protect the Muggles from fallout.

You defied Sirius Black in the Shrieking Shack when you still considered him to be a killer.

You confronted Devil's Snare, a three-headed dog, and a basilisk in order to remove threats to Hogwarts and its students.

You have what it takes to go through with this. You are a soldier in the Second Division of the Wizarding Standing Army, and soldiers are often required to risk themselves, and in some cases sacrifice themselves, for the sake of the overall mission.

Not only that, you are likely the only person capable of accomplishing this. How many other people are currently on Buyan, do not need to focus on fancy wand work, have the luxury of protection in an Atlantis bubble, and are competent enough in metta practice to do this?

Besides, remember what you learned back in your second year. Even if you are called upon to make the ultimate sacrifice, it may not be the end after all.

A brief vision of Sybill Trelawney arose unbidden in her mind's eye. The normally wide-eyed, half-crazed ex-teacher had a look of intense focus on her face. She spoke five words.

*Do what must be done.*

Ignoring Rasputin's pompous boasting, she closed her eyes once more and recalled Samuel's recommendations for increasing the number of people affected by a metta meditation. She began focusing on Ron, the person on the planet she loved the most. It didn't take much of an effort to do that, and she wondered how he would react if she were in fact to fall in this confrontation.

Next, she widened her circle to include Harry and the rest of her closest friends. That was also relatively easy, as was the next step, one of her own devising: extending the love to all of her year at Gryffindor.

The next few stages were more difficult, but she focused on the urgency of the situation and forced her way through it. The sphere of love was extended to cover all of her year in all four...er, five houses, even the still-insufferable Draco Malfoy. It was then extended to all seven years and the surviving staff members.

Then came all of Hogsmeade, followed by all of England, Muggle and Wizarding. She felt her attention starting to diffuse a little, but she was able to get herself back on track by envisioning her
parents in her mind's eye. After all, they were English...and quite possibly unaware of what was going on here on Buyan. The presence of her colleagues here on Buyan were also material enough to bolster her meager abilities.

She continued to expand her sphere of love as the confrontation continued in the material world.

---------------

Somewhere, far far away, a Patronus came to visit Rasputin and began screaming at him urgently in Russian. Hermione didn't know Russian all that well, but she got the gist of what was happening. Reinforcements were on the way, and Rasputin wasn't happy about it.

Rasputin's face darked and he rounded on Flamel. "You tricked me! This was all a delay tactic so you could send reinforcements over!"

Somewhere equally far away, she heard Flamel's voice. "That wasn't me! I wasn't involved with that! However, I'm more than willing to get reinforcements."

Rasputin: "I do not like being betrayed, and you will now face the consequences. Goodbye, Dr. Flamel. Miss Hermione, move out of the way so I can finish him off. This will not be pretty, I'm afraid. You will not want to watch this."

Hermione didn't move. She was focusing on expanding her awareness to encompass most of Europe. So far, so good. Risking a loss of concentration, she opened her eyes and spoke calmly. "Like I said, you'll have to kill me to get to him."

Moody: "Dammit, Hermione, move! Minister, push her out of the way!"

Rasputin: "Miss Hermione, I do not want to kill a potential spouse or mistress. Get out of the way."

Hermione forced the image of her parents back into her mind's eye and went back to focusing on England once more. Aloud, she said: "You can't win, Grigori. If you strike me down, I shall become more powerful than you could possibly imagine."

Flamel and several of the Muggles cheered. Hermione, however, paid little attention as she expanded her circle of love to cover all of Europe.

Rasputin was not pleased. He shouted: "Woman, this is your final warning. MOVE!"

Hermione closed her eyes one last time. Smiling once more, she grasped the hilt of the sword in both hands and lifted the blade in a formal salute to an enemy. Her smile broadened when she achieved her ultimate objective: broadcasting love with her mind focused on a large blue-green ball with continents and oceans traveling through the blackness of space. Keep the world safe from the Black God cult and Rasputin, she thought.

Then, very faintly, she heard Rasputin's final comment.

"So be it."

She sensed Rasputin raising the Elder Wand, even though she couldn't see it. All of her powers of concentration were focused on keeping that image of the planet in her mind's eye.

For the love of the world.
There was a mind-searing flash of green light, and it was over.

To be continued...

__________________

Update #499: The Flaw in the Plan

1 TO GO

-------------

1501Z

Buyan

ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 4/1.7%

-------------

NEXT UP: A Second Coming

-------------

Nicholas Flamel watched as the green beam flashed and hit Hermione in the chest. She collapsed, and the sword of Gryffindor plummeted to the snow at her side. It was now or never, he thought. If he had interpreted the prophecy correctly, the battle would start to turn in his favor. If not...well, he likely wouldn't be around long enough to worry about the consequences.

A brief surge of magical energy rushed past him, something which he had never experienced before. Was this the prophecy fulfilling itself? He wasn't familiar with the details when it came to fulfillment of prophecies. Maybe he'd get in touch with Trelawney after this was all done. At the very least, it was a good sign. Glancing around, he noticed that everyone was puzzled by this latest development. One more advantage for him to work with, he realized.

He grinned and turned to Rasputin. You made your last mistake, Rasputin. We've got you now --"

Suddenly, his Atlantis bubble disappeared, and he abruptly shut his mouth. This could NOT be good, he realized. It was highly unlikely that Atlantis had gone to DEFCON 3, particularly while Rasputin was still active and held the Elder Wand. This meant that the ring must have malfunctioned somehow. Was he being punished for misinterpreting the prophecy or triggering it prematurely?

Concern creased his brow as Rasputin walked to him and pointed the Elder Wand at his face. The Mad Monk was jubilant, and for good reason. "I don't think so, Dr. Flamel. Farewell, my betrayer."

Flamel heard Moody tensing himself to act. However, there was no way he was going to be able to react in time to save Flamel. Oh well, he thought. At least I lived a long and happy life.

Rasputin shouted two words: "Avada Kedavra". A powerful green beam similar to the one which had killed Hermione lanced out from the wand and hit Flamel in the forehead.

The curse suddenly bounced off Flamel's forehead and began heading back towards Rasputin. The Russian barely had time to react before it hit him in the stomach, bounced again, and threatened Moody. Moody's eyes widened as the spell crashed into his arm, bounced a third time, and made its way into Rasputin's forces. It hit Zygonov in the shoulder, and the man fell to the ground. He didn't get up.

For a good five seconds, no one moved. Flamel's forehead hurt like hell, and he reached up with his glove to see if he was injured. The skin felt rough through the fabric, and he realized that the curse had left a scar on him. The scar appeared to be about two or three inches long and had the shape of a
lightning bolt. He glanced towards Moody and saw that there was a jagged tear in the fabric of his robe where the curse had hit him.

A lightning bolt-shaped scar in the forehead from a rebounding *Avada Kedavra* curse. Flamel recognized what that meant. Suddenly, he realized what Hermione must have done and crowed: "WAY TO GO, HERMIONE!"

Time suddenly resumed. Rasputin looked at his wand in disbelief as Vovchanckaya shouted Zygonov's name. Koschei looked at the scene in amazement and asked: "My goodness! Have you developed a counter curse for *Avada Kedavra*?"

Rasputin pointed the Elder Wand at Flamel once more, but his wand suddenly leapt into the air and landed in Moody's hand. Rasputin roared in anger and launched himself into the air. He landed on Moody and began grappling with the Auror for the Elder Wand as the fighting resumed between the Black God cultists and Flamel's men.

Spells were launched into the air on both sides. Those triggered by the attacking Atlanteans hit their marks and took out some of the cultists. Those launched by the cultists, however, all backfired. Every single one of them bounced or missed, and the colored beams hit trees or other cultists. No fewer than thirty cultists went down in that first flurry of activity.

Flamel suddenly heard a loud scream of pain. He spun and saw Moody with his bare hand against Rasputin's face. Had the Auror punched him? Flamel looked a little more carefully and saw, to his amazement, that Rasputin's face was starting to redden and blister. Moody, suddenly realizing what was going on, grabbed onto Rasputin's hand, pulled off his glove, and began touching there as well. It was only a matter of time before the Mad Monk's hand began to swell as well. The Mad Monk screamed for help, and no fewer than four spells hit the Auror at the same time. All of them bounced, and Flamel watched as one the boulder which had stopped the avalanche and sliced it in two. Freed from the obstacle, the snow advanced a few more feet and covered yet another cultist with pieces of Fleur Delacoeur.

Suddenly, one of the Muggle cultists let loose with a machine gun and several Atlanteans went down. Casting Protego about himself with the Elder Wand, Moody bellowed at the top of his lungs. "Take out the Muggles first! They still seem to be able to hurt us -- the bullets aren't bouncing! Minister, you take charge while I deal with these goons!"

Flamel nodded and began issuing orders. As an Aes Sedai, he was not allowed to use magic as an offensive weapon except against Dark wizards. Since these were Muggles, he could not attack them. However, he could issue orders. Looking around the area, he began deploying his men. Several Muggles went down, and Moody grimly kicked a body out of the way and told one of the SAS men to take the machine gun.

Seeing that everything was starting to get under control, it was time for Moody to deliver the coup de grace. He watched as Moody lifted the Elder Wand to the sky and shouted, "*Finite Incantatem!*" Lightning flashed everywhere, and the powerful tornado surrounding the western half of the island slowly began to dissipate. Moody cast the spell once more, and the shield which had previously held in the Atlanteans suddenly disappeared in a flash of light.

---------------

Daryna Vovchanckaya stared in disbelief as what had once been a promising advantage suddenly blew itself apart. The machine gun suddenly spat death in her direction, and she barely had time to duck out of the way before the bullets slammed into the tree behind her, taking out one of the Muggle cultists in the process. Acting on instinct, she aimed her wand at the soldier operating the
weapon and let loose with a Killing Curse. It bounced off the man's shoulder and shot off into the sky where it would likely threaten some birds or weather satellites.

The soldier noticed she was still alive and fired on her again. This time, she was hit in the leg and had to reach for the Elixir with one hand while shooting at the Muggle again with the other. Realizing that going after the Muggle himself would be useless, she pointed her wand at the gun and it disappeared in an actinic red flare.

That brought her approximately three seconds of relief, as shortly after she vaporized the gun no fewer than fifteen multicolored bolts rained down on them from above. She glanced up and saw hundreds of brooms heading in their direction. One of them hit her with a Stupefy and she fell, twitching, to the ground.

-----------------
Helmholtz couldn't believe what he was seeing, but he knew to take a gift when it was offered. "Attention, men! The Aurors appear to have cast a spell which renders the enemy wizards' magic harmless. I'm not sure how if the Muggles are still dangerous, however. Take out the Muggles first, and go after the wizards as targets of opportunity. Thank God that tornado is out of the way. Now let's MOVE!"

-----------------
No fewer than a quarter of the Marines roared in satisfaction as the tornado protecting the western side of the island began to dissipate. Their commander, however, brought them back into line with a brief sequence of orders.

"All right, men, listen up! Nicholas Flamel and his friends need help over there, and it's up to us to deliver it. Remember that the Black God cultists have distinctive robes and go after them. Don't go after a wizard or someone in Muggle dress or they attack a known enemy -- we don't want any friendly fire casualties here. Got that? Good. Now, march!"

-----------------
The captain of the *Nassau* had been on the verge of ordering everyone to abandon ship when the explosions suddenly stopped. Telling everyone to stand by, he asked the first officer to find out what was going on.

It took a few minutes, but the first officer eventually came back with a look of disbelief. "Sir, you're not going to believe this. I think the enemy spells just stopped working. One of the men reported seeing one of the wizards cast a beam at us only to have it bounce off the hull and blow himself up."

The captain cackled smugly. "Serves them right. What happened to the rest of them?"

"They've run off, sir. I suspect they're heading over to the island to get help."

"Shit! Track them, figure out where they're going, and fire some missiles down the shafts of their brooms. Knock them out of sky. Meanwhile, let's take advantage of this lull by getting this damn water out of our hull."

The first officer ran off as the second officer suddenly shouted and pointed out the window. "Sir, look! The tornado! It's dissipating!"

The captain looked towards the western side of the island, saw the weakening tornado, and rubbed his hands together easily. "About time we got some luck. Send some fully armed choppers over there to figure out where the bad guys are. If they're all together in one place and are far enough away from friendlies, we'll loose the rest of our missiles at them. Otherwise, have the choppers use their guns."
"Yes, sir!"

-------

By 1530Z, it was all over. Completely overwhelmed by the Marines, helicopters, and First Division wizards, the Black God cult had finally been crushed. Of the three hundred cultists who had been present in the tornado at the time Rasputin had killed Hermione, 152 were dead, 95 were unconscious, and the remaining 53 had been taken prisoner. The unconscious men had been triaged by Koschei and the Marines' medical staff and had been sent off to the Nassau to recuperate before their interrogations.

Genya Zygonov and his wife were both dead, and Daryna Vovchanckaya had been taken prisoner. Rasputin had been assassinated, and his child form was kept under high security to ensure that anyone who tried to revive him would get caught. The Russian government, still smarting from the death of Igor Romanov, immediately assured everyone that they would get to work trying to find his Horcrux.

Perhaps most amazing had been the discovery that Koschei had actually not been a monster as much as a good man who had done some foolish things in an attempt to save the world -- things he had since regretted. Several of the wizards didn't believe it at first, but repeated testimony from the Marines and Muggles seemed to confirm this unbelievable rumor.

There were conflicting stories about what had turned the tide. Some people attributed it to the enemy wizards running out of energy. Others thought it was become the enemy's wands had overheated. Yet others believed it to have been a tactical issue, where the cultists never figured out how to get wizards and Muggles to work together.

The most bizarre theories of all, however, came from Nicholas Flamel and the people who had been inside the tornado at the time their luck had changed. Depending on who was telling the tale:

1. Hermione Granger had either pulled a Joan of Arc and put herself in danger to save the rest of the team,
2. Hermione Granger had cast a spell which had caused the enemy attacks to miss, or
3. Hermione Granger had seduced Rasputin and tried to kill him, or
4. Hermione Granger had been instrumental in triggering a prophecy which would ensure that Atlantis win the battle.

The captain of the Nassau didn't know what to believe. However, he did know one thing. Turning to Flamel, who was back on board, he said: "I must say, this Granger girl appears to have saved all of our necks. Where is she? I want to congratulate her personally."

Flamel bit his lip. "Sir, I'm afraid she's dead. She was killed by Rasputin just before everything turned around. I have reason to believe that her death may have been the catalyst that turned everything around for us. Had Rasputin not killed her, the battle would have ended much differently."

The captain looked at the ground for a few minutes. Finally, he sighed and turned back to Flamel. "That's a real shame. I was really starting to admire that girl. Rest assured that she's going to get a posthumous award out of this from the United States government."
Flamel nodded. "She'd appreciate it, I suspect. Then again, perhaps she'd just think she was doing her duty."

"Maybe. Where's the Elder Wand now? Does Rasputin still have it?"

Alastair Moody, who was also on the bridge, reached into his pocket and brought out the Elder Wand. "I have it right here, Captain. I'm its master right now, and I intend to be its master for a long time. Once we're done over here, I'm going to head over to the British Department of Mysteries and leave the Elder Wand there until Atlantis has a chance to pick it up and put it under Grand Mugwump-only security. No one is going to have to worry about this wand again, gentlemen."

"That's good news. What about the Philosopher's Stone and Koschei's Horcrux?"

Flamel grimaced. "I'm not worried about Koschei's Horcrux anymore since he's actually a good man and does not appear to be in any danger of going back to the dark side. The Philosopher's Stone, however, may still be an issue. We searched the island, and it wasn't there. It's still out there, probably in one of the Black God cultists' houses. Rest assured we'll interrogate them thoroughly. We'll find it, Captain."

The captain nodded and paced the bridge a little more. Suddenly, he stopped. "Hermione was seventeen, right?"

Flamel nodded slowly. "Yes, sir. She turned seventeen in September, and she had just become old enough to be eligible for the draft. I personally didn't want to put her in danger, but I could not allow myself to make exceptions for personal reasons."

The captain's face was grim. "My youngest daughter is seventeen. I can already tell you that she would not have been able to handle this as well as Hermione did."

"It's understandable, sir. She had some training fighting Dark wizards as part of Dumbledore's Army."

"Which army?"

Flamel slapped himself on the head. "The Second Division of the Wizarding Standing Army, sir."

The captain was even more impressed. "A heroine, scholar, and soldier as well. It's amazing. That's a combination which you only find in fantasy children's books. Sounds like something J.R.R. Tolkien would have written about."

Flamel chuckled. "Possibly, though he got a lot of the magic wrong."

The captain stared out into the sunset a little longer. Finally, he brought his hand up in a formal salute.

"To Hermione Granger, the greatest saint of our time."

To be continued...
Thursday, January 2, 1997

Great Hall
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
United Kingdom

ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 4/1.3%

NEXT UP: EPILOGUE -- 2011: A Space Odyssey

Harry made his way into the Great Hall in full dress robes as the news continued to spread. Hermione Granger was dead, and a memorial service was going to be held Thursday evening at Hogwarts.

Yes, the Battle of Buyan had been won and the First Division of the Wizarding Standing Army had been deployed to Iraq to stabilize the country much as it had done in the Koreas. However, that was scant consolation for the people whose lives Hermione had touched. Harry couldn't imagine what life was going to be like without Hermione.

It had taken a long, private conversation with Minister Flamel and Alastair Moody to cheer Ron back up again, along with a visit with the enigmatic Professor Boris Koschei. Much to everyone's surprise, Koschei had proven to be a very polite, good man who had created his Horcrux out of a mercy killing for self-defense. Not only that, he had managed to both convince Atlantis to call off the Aurors AND consider his petition for increased involvement for the Muggle world. Apparently Koschei had done something which convinced Dagher that he had been trustworthy. Harry wondered what it could have been -- it would have had to have been something truly spectacular.

Koschei was supposedly going to be at this ceremony as well, along with several people from Durmstrang. After some brief discussions, Koschei had been allowed to return to Durmstrang to take up his former post as Deputy Headmaster. The position of headmaster, formerly filled by Karkaroff, had been given to Drakul. Helmholtz had been given command of the First Division of the Wizarding Standing Army. Supposedly Koschei and Flamel were working on founding a research hospital on what was left of the island of Buyan.

Harry had asked Ron what the officials had spoken with him about. Ron had just winked at him, however, and told him that it would be one hell of a surprise. Ron even admitted he had barely believed it himself at first. However, he had seen proof that Moody et al. were telling the truth.

The House tables had been removed from the Great Hall and had been replaced with long rows of seats, much as it had been for the production of the "Shakespeare" play (would that have to get rewritten now that everyone knew the truth about Koschei?). The podium normally used by the headmaster had been placed at the front of the room. Before the podium lay a coffin which had been draped with the Hogwarts, Atlantis, and British flags. The lid of the coffin was closed -- apparently the Grangers had decided on a closed-coffin ceremony. Lying on the coffin was the Sword of Gryffindor.

Hundreds of people were crammed into the room, and the back of the room was filled with reporters. There seemed to be an even mixture of wizards and Muggles, and a few ghosts were wandering around. Harry caught sight of Moaning Myrtle in the crowd, and she winked at him. "Hello, Harry."

"Hello, Myrtle. How have you been? I don't think I've ever seen you outside the bathroom before."
"Hermione was one of the few friends I had, Harry. Besides, this is a special occasion, something which I helped make possible. You'll soon see why."

Harry stared at her in disbelief. MOANING MYRTLE had helped out? What was going on here?

Telling Myrtle he'd return later, he made his way to the area which had been reserved for Gryffindors near the front of the room. Thankfully, most of the reporters ignored him until he was safely hidden in the crowd. They seemed to be concentrating either on the king or Samuel, who had come to pay his respects once word had leaked out that Hermione had been a Samuelist.

Something seemed out of place for a moment, and it took Harry a good two or three minutes to figure it out. Samuel had been a priest, which meant he shouldn't have been in the room with a dead body. Perhaps he had changed his mind about this practice now that he was dead? He'd try to get in touch with the interpreter after the ceremony.

Flitwick stepped up to the podium and delivered the first eulogy. Samuel (along with the ever-present interpreter) spoke second, followed by Myrtle and Ron. Hermione's mother followed Ron, with tears in her eyes of both sadness and pride. Next came Grand Mugwump Dagher, Flamel, and a rather embarrassed Boris Koschei.

The speeches went on for a good two hours. Finally, Flitwick looked down at the coffin and appeared to tense slightly. A brief expression then flitted his face which reminded him of something one of the Weasley twins would have had. Something very strange was going on here. He said there would be one more speaker, and she would arrive shortly.

Nothing happened for a good twenty seconds or so, and Harry wondered if the last speaker hadn't come. Then something happened which caused everyone in the room to gasp in amazement and start chattering excitedly. Harry was in the front of the room, and he had a good look at what was going on. He himself couldn't believe what he was seeing.

In front of all of the guests, and on live television, the lid of the coffin suddenly opened of its own volition. There was a brief flurry of fluttering flags, and Hermione Granger stepped out of the coffin with an expression of relief on her face. Turning to Flitwick, she said: "It was a bit stuffy in there. Next time you want to do something like this, add more air holes."

Hands shot up all across the room and people started screaming. Flitwick, having expected this, amplified his voice. "This is not a joke, ladies and gentlemen. Hermione Granger, Countess of Hogsmeade, has in fact been returned to us, and she will prove that she is not an impostor by casting a Patronus."

Hermione waved her wand, and a glowing otter suddenly appeared over the coffin. It flew around the crowd for a few moments as Flitwick continued. "It was extremely old magic, magic which had been long forgotten by everyone other than Professor Koschei. Now, please pay attention as Miss Granger explains what has just happened. The sequence of events is quite...extraordinary."

Flitwick clapped his hands, and the somber decorations in the Great Hall changed to celebratory tapestries of red and gold. Hermione came to the podium and could barely be heard over the din of flashes going off and people taking pictures.

Hermione began to speak. "Ladies and gentlemen, I have returned. To be honest, I wasn't expecting it. However, I'm not going to complain about it."
"Let me explain to you what happened. As Samuel explained, I have studied Samuelist techniques and am adept at metta meditation. Realizing that I stood a good chance of being killed by Rasputin, I began practicing metta meditation for the benefit of the world and provoked Rasputin into killing me. For those of you who are unfamiliar with the story of Harry Potter, that is precisely the sequence of events which allowed Harry Potter to survive the curse from Voldemort as an infant. In my case, however, the practice allowed me to protect the entire world from Rasputin and his men when I was killed.

"Yes, I was dead. I was in Sheol for a little while before I searched my memories and realized that I had the ability to return as a ghost. I had spoken with Moaning Myrtle, hovering to my right, a lot during my second year when I had been working on a draught of Polyjuice Potion. When I accidentally transformed myself into a cat and found myself unable to embark on the mission I had been planning for, I spent the next hour discussing the nature of ghostly existence with Myrtle. I learned a lot about ghosts at that time, including what Myrtle did to return as a ghost.

"I returned as a ghost after the battle was over and the Atlantis forces were starting to take the prisoners away. By this time, it was dark, and my ghostly form lit up the area for thirty feet or more. People came to investigate and nearly fell over when they saw that I had returned.

"I told Professor Moody that I was going to offer my services to Hogwarts as the Black House ghost. Moody seemed surprised at the offer, but he immediately accepted. Koschei, however, asked me if I wanted to come back to life again instead.

"Needless to say, that comment got a lot of attention, and Moody immediately told him that I couldn't return because I didn't have a Horcrux tying me to this world. Professor Koschei disagreed, however. I may not have had a Horcrux per se, but there had in fact been enough linking my soul to Earth to bring me back."

She raised her hand and pointed to the Great Serpent ring on her finger. "This, ladies and gentlemen, was effectively my Horcrux. My Atlantis ring.

"Professor Koschei explained that the standard spell used to create an Atlantis ring uses a piece of the candidate’s hair to prime the ring with the essence of the person who is going to be using it. This is done to ensure that no one else abuses its power. We all knew that, of course. What we didn't realize, however, was that the concept of a Horcrux was developed by Dark wizards who wanted to preserve themselves without having access to an Atlantis ring. They turned this ancient magic to evil purposes and created the Horcrux as a means of illegally tying themselves to Earth without use of an Atlantis ring.

"Why is it that no one knew that people could be revived from an Atlantis ring? It's very simple, in fact. The conditions required to revive someone from an Atlantis ring are so strict that it was performed maybe once every two or three hundred years. It eventually reached the point where the spell was forgotten, simply because it was only known to the most important healers of the day -- and no one used it anymore. According to the notes Dagher found in Atlantis, the last revival from an Atlantis ring occurred in 1392.

"In order to be revived from an Atlantis ring, four conditions must be met. First, the candidate must receive permission from the Grand Mugwump himself and provide a VERY good reason why he should be revived. This, by the way, explains why Koschei decided to rely on the Horcrux instead of his Atlantis ring: he had already been targeted by Atlantis for starting the Black Death, so he would never have received permission from Grand Mugwump Zerind. Flamel, incidentally, relied on the Philosopher's Stone because he wasn't a healer and therefore wasn't aware of this possibility."
"Second, there must be a way to access the soul of the deceased so it can be returned to the body. Although there are supposedly ways to access souls hidden in the Department of Mysteries, the easiest way to do that turns out to be if the dead person comes back as a ghost. I didn't know that at the time, but I was more than willing to take advantage of it.

"Third, the body of the deceased must still be intact and not have been subject to physical trauma. Reinserting a soul isn't going to do much good if the body it's going to inhabit has no head. This means of revival is best suited for people killed by basilisks or *Avada Kedavra*.

"Finally, the deceased must not have died of natural causes and must be no older than 100 years old. Atlantis officials realized that people could try to use the Atlantis ring to obtain immortality, and they put in rules to make sure no one tried to abuse its power.

"Amazingly, my case seemed to satisfy all of the conditions. Dagher agreed to drop the inevitable charges against Koschei if he were indeed telling the truth and reintroduced Atlantis to this kind of magic. Koschei immediately accepted these terms and told him where to look in the Atlantis library to find the information. Needless to say, the process worked. Here I am."

Hermione paused for a moment and turned to Flitwick. "Headmaster, I'm still open to becoming the Black House ghost. I love Hogwarts, and I would give everything to see what magical wonders have been hidden in the depths of the library here. The idea of spending eternity perusing the books really appeals to me."

Harry couldn't help but laugh. Turning to Neville, who was sitting next to him, he said: "Yup, that's Hermione all right. No one else would think like that."

Neville chuckled as well. "I agree, Harry."

Hermione continued. "Moody himself admitted that as a Muggle-born I would be perfect for Black. We agreed that my Atlantis ring would be Black's signature artifact, much as the sword is for Gryffindor. However, considering that I'm only seventeen right now, it's probably going to be a long time before I take that job."

Everyone laughed at that, and Hermione resumed her speech. "Most of the people here at the front of the room were aware that I had returned before you were. I had wanted to come out earlier, but George Weasley seemed to have other ideas and convinced me that he might be able to help out a little. I thought it was wildly inappropriate, but George threatened to preempt me and go to the press."

Harry groaned. Having someone jump out of the coffin at her own memorial service sounded like something one of the Weasley twins would have done. He was going to have a long talk with George about this.

Hermione began to wrap up. "And now, in celebration of my return, the well-treated elves of Hogwarts are going to be treating all of you guests to a banquet fit for noble wizards. Have a good evening, everyone."

She stepped from the podium to deafening applause, and everyone rose to their feet. Eventually, one of the reporters at the back of the room shouted loud enough to be heard. "Miss Granger, what are you going to do now that you've returned?"
Hermione shrugged. "Break out my Ancient Runes textbook. I've still got three chapters to read before school resumes next week."

And finally, the epilogue, fifteen years later...

__________________

EPILOGUE -- 2011: A Space Odyssey

-------------

August 26, 1346
Near Crecy
France
ATLANTIS DEFCON STATUS: 5/0.7%

-------------

Special thanks to my relatives and friends, who have had to put up with me babbling about this timeline for a year and a half. I would also like to thank everyone else who contributed to and help with this timeline. I would also like to go out of my way to honor J. K. Rowling, who created most of this world to begin with.

-------------

Eighteen-year-old Nicholas Flamel, apprentice wizard, watched with the rest of the Royal Wizards as the front lines of French knights melted in a storm of English arrows. He had seen enough of war to realize that it wasn't nearly as glorious as the tales made it out to be, and he had a strong feeling that this was not going to be pleasant.

The English loosed again, and the second row of French knights collapsed. Another volley took out the French horses, leaving the knights without mounts in longbow range. This was going to be ugly, he thought. Turning to his mentor, Richard Montaine, he asked to see if there was anything he could do to help stop the bloodshed.

Montaine shook his head and patted his horse's neck. "I understand what you're thinking, son. Unfortunately, we can't act without authorization, or at least without the orders of the king. If we do, the Minister of Magic is going to have our heads."

"But our forces are being annihilated!"

"I can see that, son. However, we can't be too rash. I see the English wizards on the other side standing with their wands at the ready. If we just wade in there now, we're just going to tie ourselves up and make matters worse."

"But --"

Montaine snapped at him. "Stay where you are! That's an order!"

Flamel grumbled to himself, but he reined in his horse. He watched helplessly as an errant arrow, tip on fire, slowly arced into the air and began to come down...

-------------

Tuesday, December 27, 2011
Spaceship Albus Dumbledore
Over Ecuador

-------------

Flamel's view of the battle disappeared and was suddenly replaced by darkness and pain. Welcome back to the ravages of old age, he thought. A disembodied voice spoke out of nowhere:
"Oh good, he's waking up. I thought we'd lost him there. We knew he doesn't have much time left, and it would be a shame for him to pass on before getting to the station. Minister de Lourdes, are you sure you're sure won't --"

Hugh's voice snapped back at the speaker. "No. The Stone dies with us, end of story. The human race is not ready for it yet, and you know how long it took to track down the one that was lost after the Battle of Buyan. Besides, he hasn't been the same since his wife died two years ago. Let him go."

The first person spoke once more. "Mrs. Weasley, do you concur?"

A woman's voice answered. "I agree. We've got enough trouble with people living too long. I should know, considering the spread of that Hermionist cult."

Hugh grunted. "They're still spreading? I though you told them to stop!"

The woman sighed. "I did, but what else would you expect? They see someone sacrifice herself for the sake of the world, apparently die, and come back to life in front of witnesses. Shortly thereafter, mankind takes several steps forward. If that doesn't sound like the Second Coming of Christ, I don't know what does. As far as my denial goes, they claim it's just God or Christ being modest."

"How many members does it have now?"

"About 4,000,000. And it's growing."

Flamel slowly opened his eyes as Hugh continued to argue with Hermione. "And we've got enough people converting to Samuel -- oh, my master is up! Master, how are you feeling?"

Flamel rubbed his aching head wearily. It was hard to breathe, but he thought he'd be able to manage it. "About as well as I could have expected, I guess. Where am I?"

Hugh explained. "You're aboard the Albus Dumbledore right now. We're approximately 11,000 miles above Ecuador at the moment, about halfway to the Ecuador Space Ring. We should be there in about an hour and a half. The wizard behind the mass accelerator did a pretty good job launching us out of there: we're making good time."

Flamel grunted. "Why did they put the Space Ring so far up?"

Hermione shrugged. "There's nothing they could have done about it; the laws of physics dictate that. If you want the Space Ring to stay in the same position relative to the ground, it has to be a little over 22,000 miles above a point on the equator."

"Why didn't they Apparate me?"

"They didn't think you were in good enough shape to handle the rigors of Apparition or Floo. So, we had to do it the other way. However, you should at least be proud you've been able to take a trip to the station. It's still extremely expensive for people to come up here."

Flamel tilted his head up a little to look around his sickbed. He recognized Hermione Weasley and Hugh immediately. Next to them was a doctor and a tall Slavic man who looked vaguely familiar but Flamel couldn't place him.
The Slav nodded in understanding and reintroduced myself. "I'm Tsar Alexei Romanov, Dr. Flamel. I'm acting as Russia's Minister of Magic and am in the Muggle Head of State's cabinet."

Flamel let out a weak laugh. "I remember you now. You were the man who threw the big party in St. Petersburg when Rasputin was finally killed once and for all and none of you guys died."

"Indeed, Dr. Flamel. Who would have thought that Rasputin's death curse would have no effect since all of the people he had sentenced to death had already died? As far as the Dawn Ash Prophecy went...well, that goes to show how hard it is to interpret prophecies."

Flamel knew all too well. Long believed to have foretold the death of the Romanovs, the prophecy uttered by Jelena Kurchatova-Luryev had proven to refer to the disbanding of the Russian House dormitory in 2004, a little over five years after a student named Dawn Ash had moved into the dorm. Flamel couldn't imagine how someone who wasn't Russian could have made it into the house, but he didn't know much about MIT other than the fact that it had once hosted a gate to the American Department of Magic.

Flamel turned back to Alexei. "Whatever happened to Kurchatova-Luryev? I haven't heard much about her recently."

"She's got a six-year-old daughter now and is heading one of the American Department of Magic's prophecy departments. The mucky-mucks in Enfield already think little Julia is going to be a seeress. From what I've been told, she's been spending most of her time predicting that she's going to beat Jennifer Morgenstern at checkers."

Flamel grinned for a moment. "Guinevere and Jennifer. What a surprise." Then he looked at the doctor's face, and the grin disappeared. "All right, Doctor. Let's hear the bad news."

The doctor shook his head slowly. "We nearly lost you there, Dr. Flamel, and to be perfectly frank I'm not sure how much time you have left. It could be hours, it could be days. Whatever it is, it's not much."

Hugh looked at him in sympathy. "We're both getting old, Master. Several of my friends have recommended that I retire and turn the Ministry over to Mrs. Weasley here when she gets old enough. In all honesty, though, I think she could use more seasoning. Besides, she doesn't have much experience working with the higher levels of the Ministry yet. Hell, she says she's got at least a couple of more years left in her PhD."

Alexei grinned. "I bet she'd taste good with it."

Hermione glared at him for a moment and turned back to Flamel. "I'm not really sure I'm ready, Dr. Flamel. I'm only 32 and I have two young children. I've got a PhD to finish as well. Surely someone more experienced should take the position. Besides, Ron's already stuck up as is --"

Hugh put his hand on Hermione's shoulder. "I wasn't ready either, Hermione, and neither was my master. However, we learn on the job. Don't worry, you'll have lots of people helping you out."

"But --"

"Hermione, you can work in both the Muggle and Wizarding worlds with equal ease. Everyone loves you. If you did choose to enter the Ministry of Magic, you'd become the perfect Minister."
Hermione grumbled a little. "The perfect Minister. And they think I'm the second coming of Christ as well. Oh boy, George Weasley has a lot to answer for. He's the one who forced that damn prank on me. Did you know there are four million people who think Judgment Day was the Tribulation and that I'm the new version of Christ?"

"I'm afraid so. Religion's gone all topsy-turvy ever since the Breach. We've got 250,000,000 Samuelists, 4,000,000 Hermionists, a few hundred thousand Traditional Celestines, and God knows what else!"

The conversation continued for about another hour with the familiar refrain of Blue Danube playing through the intercom. Eventually, though, the intercom beeped and the captain began to speak. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is Captain Alexander L. Tirion of the Dumbledore. We're going to have to make a little burn here as the Space Ring does not use magic to produce artificial gravity. As most of you know, the Space Ring spins slowly to produce a 1G acceleration at the perimeter. This means that we're going to have to start rotating as well so we can line up properly with the station. I want everyone to tie themselves down so they don't start floating all over the place. You may want to get away from the windows as well unless you want to prepare yourself for the spinning world which will meet you at the station."

The next five minutes were spent securing Flamel's bed with spells to make sure he didn't move around too much. By the time the incantations were complete, Flamel's weight had increased slightly and stars were moving lazily through the window.

Hermione winced and turned away. "I think I'm going to be sick. I think I'll wait until I'm at the station to look."

Hugh smiled. "You're sure it's not morning sickness again?"

Hermione looked like she wanted to punch Hugh but restrained herself. Seconds later, Flamel fell unconscious again. When he came to once more, the doctor was hovering over him with a very worried expression on his face. "Dr. Flamel, if you plan to use the Stone, now is the time to do it. I'd say you've got an hour left, maybe two."

Flamel shook his head. "I'm ready. To be honest, immortality isn't good when you see all of your friends die. And getting over a six-hundred year marriage is...well..."

Hugh shuddered. "I can imagine. I had trouble when my wife died in childbirth after a few years of marriage. Your case...God, I can imagine."

It had become difficult for Flamel to turn his head. However, he did what he could and saw the Space Ring in front of him. The space station itself thankfully was not rotating from the perspective of the Dumbledore. But the stars beyond it still were.

Flamel felt a brief pang of regret that Dumbledore wasn't here to see this. The great Hogwarts headmaster had died in 2005 when his heart had finally given out, and the entire Hogwarts community had mourned him. Supposedly the funeral had attracted over forty thousand Hogwarts alumni from over forty years of classes. Dumbledore had known this was coming, however, and told everyone to not mourn his death, but to celebrate his life instead.

The spacecraft headed towards a small rectangular opening in the center of the station. Docking between two other ships, the people began filing out of the ship. Captain Tirion spoke one last time. "Thank you for flying on the Dumbledore. You don't need spacesuits in the central hub there."
However, be advised that you are in zero-G there. Use the ladders to go down to the habitation ring, and if you are handicapped use the elevator. Remember that your weight will increase as you head towards the edge."

Hugh and the rest of his comrades helped coax his bed out of the spacecraft and over to the elevator. Flamel blacked out once more a few seconds after he left the spacecraft, when the artificial gravity field suddenly disappeared and left him floating. When he woke up, gravity had returned and he was looking out the window at a large orb of blue and white.

The entire Earth, floating in space.

Tears filled his eyes as it slowly began to rotate underneath him like hands on a clock. It was one of most beautiful things he had ever seen.

He thought back to his childhood when knights fought each other and no one knew of the New World. In a span of seven hundred years, mankind had grown by leaps and bounds. When he had been born, people had been nervous to leave the cities they had been born in. Now, they could leave the planet, and there was even a small base on the moon. The average lifespan was up to 82 and was likely going to increase further. The amount of CO2 in the atmosphere was down to 310 ppm and dropping further. Against all odds, humanity had made it.

There had been various mistakes along the way, more mistakes than he could have counted. However, over the long term, life had become so much easier. Mankind had prospered, and he thought that with the increased ties between Atlantis and the Muggle world it would continue to prosper further.

His heart suddenly screamed in pain, but he was able to get out a final remark.

"Robert Jordan was right. The First Age of Mankind has ended. The Age of Legends has begun."

THE END

Chapter End Notes

All right, here is the list of canon Hogwarts characters who were killed or otherwise incapacitated. Assume dead unless otherwise specified.

STUDENTS

Colin Creevey -- Judgment Day nuke [I just had a crazy vision of a camera with pictures of dead people being thrown through a Deathgate]
Padma Patil -- Judgment Day nuke
Parvati Patil -- Judgment Day nuke
Dean Thomas -- Judgment Day nuke
Justin Finch-Fletchley -- Judgment Day nuke

Many other Muggle-borns killed by the nuke since they were living in the area

Many sixth- and seventh-year Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs, Rasputinite raid on Hogwarts to get the Elder Wand
ORDER OF THE PHOENIX

Albus Dumbledore -- INJURED, now retired
Remus Lupin -- killed by Muggle while in wereform
Severus Snape -- killed by Vovchanckaya
Fred Weasley -- Battle of Diagon Alley
Fleur Delacoeur -- friendly fire, Buyan [admit it -- she didn't exactly cover herself with glory during the Triwizard Tournament]
Minerva McGonagall -- Battle of Diagon Alley
Sirius Black -- radiation poisoning from nuclear attack on Pyongyang

OTHER HOGWARTS AND MINISTRY STAFF/ASSOCIATES

Dolores Umbridge -- Judgment Day nuke
Kingsley Shacklebolt -- Judgment Day nuke
Professor Sinistra -- Rasputinite raid on Hogwarts
Rufus Scrimgeour -- Judgment Day nuke
Firenze -- presumed killed during fighting in the Forbidden Forest after the attack on Hogwarts: the centaurs were getting nailed
Igor Karkaroff -- Rasputinites on Buyan
Cornelius Fudge -- ALIVE, Wizarding ambassador to Togo. You can have him plotting to return to the Ministry in Shared World
Rubeus Hagrid -- ALIVE, British ambassador to Ietalis
Sybill Trelawney -- ALIVE, fortune teller/soothsayer for Muggles

DEATH EATERS
All canon Death Eaters are dead or in prison with the exception of Draco Malfoy, who has reformed. Assume they're down for the count.

OTHER NOTABLES
Osama bin Laden -- killed by Damodharan Dilmi

CURRENT HOGWARTS STAFF ROSTER (* = Muggle)

Filius Flitwick -- Headmaster
Aberforth Dumbledore -- Transfiguration
Perenille Flamel -- History of Magic
*Amelia Bell -- Muggle Studies
Horace Slughorn -- Potions
Alastair Moody -- Defense Against the Dark Arts
Hugh de Lourdes -- Charms
Wilhelmina Grubbly-Plank -- Care of Magical Creatures
*Stephen Hawking / *Patrick Moore -- Astronomy

NOTE: DIVINATION DISCONTINUED, though I expect to have Trelawney back teaching at the school in the epilogue

NOTE: ALL OTHER SUBJECTS STILL HAVE THEIR ORIGINAL TEACHERS

CURRENT BEAUXBATONS STAFF ROSTER
Madame Maxime -- Headmistress

CURRENT DURMSTRANG STAFF ROSTER
Stanislav Drakul -- Headmaster
Boris Koschei -- Deputy Headmaster
WIZARDING STANDING ARMY, 1st DIVISION
Jurgen Helmholtz -- Commander

WIZARDING STANDING ARMY, 2nd DIVISION
Nicholas Flamel -- Commander in Chief
Alastair Moody -- Interim Commander, that may change

CURRENT MINISTERS OF MAGIC
BRITAIN: Nicholas Flamel (to retire in June 1997 to give speaking tours, at which point Hugh takes over)
UNITED STATES: Persephone Ariadne (Travis Radner, Secretary Emeritus)
SPAIN: Rodrigo Calderon
RUSSIA: His Majesty Tsar Alexei
GERMANY: Jorg Eichmann
TURKEY: Dalan Demir
BRAZIL: Dom Pedro José Ferreira
ISRAEL/MIDDLE EAST: Shoshana Meyer (known as Michal Oved)
BULGARIA: I forgot, he's in there somewhere because Somebody for Humans blew up his ministry
INDIA: I forgot, but he's in there as well going nuts when his ministry is taken over on Judgment Day

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!