One Floo Over

by nimodes

Summary

After reading a number of Harry Potter fanfics, and particularly the list of things the author states they will never do - i felt the urge to do some of those very things and see how it turned out.
To begin with

I was aware of only one thing to begin with. Pain. All consuming pain that didn't leave room for anything else.

Eventually that faded and awareness of other details was allowed to seep in. I was lying down on an uneven surface. It was cold. It was dark. I was naked.

More details gathered as the pain retreated enough that I could concentrate on a pain-blocking technique. I was in a forest, an old-growth forest at that.

I got to the point where I could lift myself up and begin looking around. Open wounds had been bleeding but were now in the process of closing. Still naked.

Some memories, but there were gaps. Sizable ones too. Why was I here? What was my mission?

Mission. Yes. I was with the Reality Relief Office. A sort-of volunteer group of the Afterlife that was aligned with but apart from any of the various Heavenly Bureaucracies. Not aligned with the Adversary or any of those iterations either. More along the lines of the mortal earthly charity groups that sought to help people who were in dire straits of one type or another.

It was most definitely not normal for an operative to appear in the forest naked or injured though. So something had gone seriously wrong, but what?

"Inventory?" I tried. Nothing.

"Status?" I tried next. This got a result, but it was all gibberish with, symbols and letters and blinking blocks of alphanumeric text. Not what it should be.

Okay. Things were really really REALLY screwed up.

Because the Reality Relief Office was not part of any Celestial Bureaucracy, it had to do without the sort of resources that groups like the Divine Intervention Office (DIO) had available. Quite often, that included items and skills acquired in other realities. Having no inventory access meant that those resources that I might have had available were out of reach. It also unfortunately meant that naked in a forest was not going to be remedied quickly.

Status though - the mechanism for that should have been available even if nothing else remained.


So - something had gone seriously wrong. I was on a mission of some kind as that was the only reason I could come up with for being on a mortal plane and not bunking with the einherjar or something. I had no mission details, no equipment, and was seriously injured though the repair mechanisms seemed to be working. A bit slow, but still working.


IF that was working, I could give it some time and could check back and maybe get some results. Maybe. Providing the whole mechanism didn't go down, and I'd give it fifty-fifty odds to be optimistic.
Now to find clothing, food, and information - preferably in that order.

And painkillers. Some naproxyn would be lovely.

The arrival of some sort of spotlight indicated that certain priorities might just have to be shuffled about a bit.

- Interlude 1 -

Wye Valley Constabulary Report (Preliminary)

At 0140 hours response to reports of strange lights and scream in the Forest Of Dean discovered a naked adult male with evidence of severe physical trauma. (See Medical Report)

Area near subject's location was burned in a radius of approximately five meters with no indication of damage beyond that. Possible incendiary device, further investigation continuing as to possible type.

Subject responsive to questioning but showing signs of possibly severe mental trauma. Alcohol tested for but not present in system. Initial assessment was cult victim of unknown type, with physical torture of subject (see photographs) as evidence.

Subject unable to provide name or identification, denies knowledge of past and shows signs of confusion when questioned. Subject placed in hospital under guard until further questioning can be done.

- Interlude 1 end -

I groaned.

"Quiet you."

I managed to say something.

"What language was that?" asked a different voice.

"Sounded kinda like French or something," said the first voice.


I opened an eye slowly, resulting in a stab of pain at the light level. A hospital bed. Lovely. I'd already detected the restraint. Two security guards nearby. One nurse in plain black medical scrubs.

I closed my eyes again. "Inventarium."

It wasn't Latin. They were just hearing it as Latin. What I was speaking was Celestial, which was something else altogether - Latin was just the closest thing to it locally. Aramaic wasn't all that close. Greek might have been closer.

[Recovery at 35% - Abort?]

That was the most encouraging response yet. "Cancel."

"Cancel what?" asked one of the security guards.

"Hallucinations," said the doctor. "Nothing showing up on the toxicology, but severe
malnourishment and we still don't know what is killing him. Not unusual for his responses to not make any sense in this state - especially with the head trauma."

"So even with him being conscious now, we can't get answers?" asked one of the guards.

"The police will be here shortly," said the doctor. "They'll ask the questions."

"Loci Forma." Usually, when an operative was inserted into a timeline - a preset form was chosen. Reality Relief Office operatives normally had several of these, developed ahead of time, which fit more or less into whichever sort of setting you found yourself in. The one I currently had was cobbled together and malformed. So switching to a different form/avatar/trope was pretty much mandated.

I could feel this body failing. Waiting for me to be alone so I could do this in private was pretty much a death sentence and I didn't know what was going on with everything scrambled as it was.

Three folders came up as usable with a quick count of twenty-seven folders that were unusable. Some, like cyborg, might have been just because the local universe or environment didn't support them. Some were definitely file-corrupted by whatever had done the damage to me and everything else involving the Avatar Insertion Mechanism.

That wasn't even something on the RRO equipment list, that was a mechanism overseen by Forgeworks - which was overseen by Hephaestus.

So the choices were Cleric, Ninja, and... Schoolgirl?

What the hell?

I'd been born male, but sometimes you got inserted into a female role. Souls not necessarily being Yin or Yang after all and the whole wheel of reincarnation was what the Avatar Insertion System was based on. It just wasn't comfortable, like when you were something in one of the worlds where humanity's base equation was slightly off. But "Schoolgirl"? Really?

Base matches with this reality indicated the Cleric file was 51%, the Ninja file was 32%, and the Schoolgirl was 97%.

Nope. Nope nope nope and get on the nope train to no-way-ville. No slam against the female gender, I just didn't want to spend any time AS one.

Let's see. Basic data size indicated that I must have spent a fair amount of time in these particular identities. Decades. How was that possible? Ninja could be the sneaky assassin type or the legendary magician type, I couldn't tell at this point. Cleric was a White Mage sort of thing.

Ah. That might explain it. When the files were rebuilt, data might have gotten merged from corrupted files to fill portions missing in these three? Working theory at least.

An emergency at one of the other beds drew attention away. Now was my chance. I checked to make sure they were distracted and hit the choice.

- Author Notes -

Been reading a bunch of Harry Potter fictions, including some very well-crafted SIs but mainly alt-universe stuff. Just writing this to express a few ideas and scratch a creative itch. If you don't like, that's very nice but just go on to another story thank you very much.
Cleric Path

Chapter Summary

In which the First Law of Comprehension is invoked - which is to say that multiple people get entirely the wrong idea and just run with it.

Chapter Notes

This branches off following the Cleric path mentioned in chapter 1. There will be separate paths for the other two choices.

I'd chosen Cleric. Which was a spellcaster with the Divine or Infernal subtype, specializing in either healing and protection or corruption and destruction. Of course, considering my bosses and missions - it was the Divine (or more properly Celestial) variety that was indicated.

Some file corruption was, unfortunately, confirmed as the Cleric bit normally didn't come with a sword. A wakizashi to be exact, in a belt next to a tanto-style knife.

Still, one could see that being caught with those would not be an ideal situation in any sort of police custody. Fortunately, despite one arm being handcuffed to the bed railing, there was an out for a high-level White Mage.

"Exit."

I appeared at the entry to the hospital, and quickly made my way down the street. Noting that what I was wearing was fairly distinctive, mainly being something the local theological authorities would wear, I decided that perhaps I should change to something that blended in a bit more.

Though without local currency that might be a bit tricky.

- Interlude 2 -

Police Report
Eyes Only
Desk of Chief Harriman
RE: Case 91-1138

I'm afraid this is going to have to go to the "Black Cat Brigade" and the usual cover stories applied. John Doe was found under mysterious circumstances, transported to the nearest hospital, and security footage shows things which most definitely are not considered standard practice.

The official story, as with the last time something of this nature transpired, is that our John Doe was a drug addict and vagrant - probably from Eastern Europe. Subject was remanded to proper authorities, and so on and so forth.

Mind you, nothing precisely like this has happened before, but the whole thing has the usual "Black
Cat" thing going for it. Certainly we don't want whatever it is happening at this office that happened in the Cardiff Station. Latest word down the pipe was that they're still having problems with gaps in memory and moments of confusion over what happened when they questioned things a bit too much regarding some case of theirs.

- End Interlude 2 -

Now that I was apparently "off the grid" I had a bit more time to figure things out.

A newspaper machine revealed I was in a Earth-line that was probably in the main cascade. This particular place was called "Heresford" and was in some version of "England" that was in "Great Britain" and the date on the newspaper indicated we were approaching the end of the millenium.

It was, if the paper could be trusted, July 27 1985.

While my memories were still mostly missing, I still wasn't getting a clue as to why I was here.

Typical operations involved major Dark Lords and the like, and since Cleric/White Mage and Mage were files unlocked for this universe - there was magic SOMEWHERE.

Problem was that there was no indication of it in the news, on the television or anywhere else that I could find wandering around town. So the obvious conclusion was that this was one of those Masquerade or Hidden Society thingies. The magical or mystical or alien society kept the public-at-large from finding out about the existence of real magic.

Problem number one was finding out what kind of magical society there was and where. In the United States, I'd check Pungo first, followed by Salem, and then a couple off-the-beaten path small communities where such things were typically found. In Japan, there were areas like Kyoto and Kobe where if you knew where to look you'd find the hidden communities. England I had no experience with.

Though London seemed a likely place.

Inventory still hadn't recovered and if the Avatar system had been that screwed up, I really wasn't going to get my hopes up. Of course, I didn't know what all was in there. I suspected, like some of the Avatar Files, that a lot of it was going to be unfamiliar.

Some of the blocked off files had interesting titles too. Would have been nice to see what "Detective" or "Dragon" or "Oracle" would have been, but the process was supposed to be automatic and would have stuck me in a role right away.

Possibly as a "Schoolgirl" - hmmm. Clue there. Mission might just involve a school. Dark Lord or Dark Lady takes over a school? I've heard more ridiculous possibilities coming down the old probability curve.

Once I'd come to rest in a nearby park and a quiet corner, I could review a bit.

White Mage or Cleric, depending on your frame of reference. Spells were Celestial based, but mana-dependent. Meaning I had so much internal magic energy that would gradually refill and I wasn't using the od - or the magic energy of the environment. Spells were something I could change out with assistance from a divine patron.

Divination, Healing, Protection, Purification - these were the usual roles of the White Mage types.

So. Divination. Read Magical Scripts, Detect Magical Fields, Analyze Magical Fields, Weather
Sense, Direction Divination, Sense Water, Speak With Animals, Speak With Spirits, Find Object, Locate Person, Third Eye, Point Me, Analyze Curse... The only ones I could cast though, at present, were 'Point Me' and 'Detect Magical Fields' - everything else I had prepared was curative or defensive in nature.

"Point Me," I cast. It was a spell that gave a base direction but didn't indicate distance or a path around obstacles. It just pointed to the thing you were focussed on. In this case, my mission objective.

Then it was time to start walking.

The spell was easy enough to cast but really only worked in one universe in a dozen where even this kind of magic worked. You used a stick or dowsing rod and it would respond with a twitch or pull when you were pointing it in the proper direction.

"Oi. Vicar. You need a ride?"

I glanced at the car and tried to act in a manner that would be consistent with the local priesthood. "That would be lovely. Bless ye."

"Where were you heading?" asked the young lady sitting in the shotgun seat as I settled into the back.

"Near as I can tell, London," I answered honestly.

"You don't know?" asked the driver, puzzled by the tone.

"The directions I've gotten aren't precisely clear." I was still being honest. Most priesthoods had strictures on that sort of thing and "When In Valhalla, Do As The Einherjar" and that sort of thing.

The swords had been stored in my satchel, which was kind of like an old fashioned physician's bag except for the clergy symbol on the outside and that it was larger on the inside than the outside dimensions would indicate.

"Your superiors tend to keep you in the dark in the Church?" asked the driver. "Well, we're going as far as Birmingham. Got family up that way."

"Any distance you can give me is quite welcome," I told him. "Bless ye for this."

I listened to the news on their radio, trying to fit this in with what little I knew about things in the multiverse. Most of it was the usual stuff that just plain didn't matter in the grand scheme of things - even in this one timeline and worldlet. Celebrity A doing this, Celebrity B commenting on it, the usual posturing from one politician or another, and the usual people doing something inadvisable that ended up with themselves or others getting hurt.

Nothing to indicate magic or anything of the sort. Which meant I'd have to wait until I was alone again before trying the Point Me spell again.

It turned out that there was a "Hollywood" outside Birmingham. Pleasant little place, lots of small farms and cottages and such. I thanked my ride and picked up my satchel and started off.

I found some money not long after that. Which was part of the Avatar System, actually. The coins were unusually heavy, and there was an odd enchantment on them.

Of course, there WAS a complication.
"Eh? What're these?" asked the pub owner when I attempted to get a sandwich. Mainly because I hadn't eaten yet in this universe and it WAS getting late.

"All I got, I'm afraid, I was sent to deal with an emergency and didn't get to pack," I told him. Which was, as far as I knew, completely true. Just phrased a bit loosely.

"Is this gold?" asked the pub owner, holding one of the thick gold coins. "Never seen these before."

"Honestly, I'm not sure," I admitted. "Just got into the country, and haven't had a chance to do much localizing."

"Explains the accent I s'pose," said the owner as he handed the coins back, save one. "I collect coins though, mainly from foreigners like yourself. I'll keep this one as payment."

"That would be lovely," I told him.

While he put together a toasted turkey on rye, I looked over the coins that had been scattered at the one curb. Five coins of bronze, featuring an antelope, and with the words "unum knut" on that side. "Unum sickle" was a silver coin with a wyvern on that side, I had ten of those. The gold coin, I had six remaining. What looked like the silhouette of a wizard on one side, the tail of a dragon on the other.

If there was a Masquerade on this world, then they had their own currency. Which was odd, as this was exactly the sort of thing that could mundanes (or whatever they called non-magicals) could stumble across.

Currency also implied that whatever the Masquerade was - it was old and well-established. That meant a side-dimension was the most likely reason, something that interfaced with this less-magical universe at specific time/space locations. Less likely, but still possible, they used time/space manipulation to hide off the beaten path but more-or-less in plain sight.

Even less likely was that their Masquerade was using the old "shrink things down and hide in the cracks" variety.

I finished my sandwich, washing it down with some ice water, and hit the road again.

A quick check revealed that my Inventory was almost recovered to the point where I could check and see what was in there and could actually be used.

The system Hephaestus and the others had cobbled together was supposed to withstand nearly anything and was mainly meant to settle an operative in place. The Divine Intervention Office was supposed to have a much better system in place.

There was a train station, but without the sort of local money that it required - not a viable choice.

I wondered again what the role I was supposed to play was while I walked. Frequently we were placeholders, the soldier who got shot in the opening salvo or the guy who left the keys in the ignition of the spaceship that the hero would get away in. Little support roles. With "Cleric" and "Mage" as possibles for this timeline, providing that they weren't glitches, I was guessing that I had the "old adviser" or "sensei" role. Meaning I'd help the hero discover their abilities and train but then die when the main plot got going.

I took another reading with my "dowsing rod" to check. Still pointing in the same direction.

Hopefully, I'd have another clue when my Inventory came up.
London. There was something in a lot of the tech-universes beyond a certain point where populations soared and you ended up with something else called "Urban Sprawl" where the cities spilled over into the surrounding areas. It was kind of like a boiling pot flowing over to cover the stove it was on.

In civilizations with Tech 8 and above, or environments that were actively hostile, there were other approaches. Arcologies, geofronts, and so on. Magic-based universes had other approaches but mainly didn't get that densely populated to that extent.

I was able to find another ride, this one much less comfortable as the two children in the back seat were rather uncontrolled. I could and was sorely tempted to cast a Silence spell. Didn't do it, but oh it was so very very tempting.

This time I got off a bit closer, and was able to triangulate a bit with the aid of a map at a fuel station.

I was in Surrey County, at a tip where "Greater London" was a short distance away (relatively) and not that far from Heathrow Airport.

I wondered, briefly, if this was one of the Doctor Who universes. That could be interesting. Also bad if I wanted to try and blend in. Timelords were capable of seeing four-dimensionally and I'd stick out as an Outsider to them. Someone not fitting into the timeline I was going about in. Most likely he (or she depending on the universe) wouldn't call me out on it when I was in a crowd but it would blow my cover nonetheless.

After more consideration, I dismissed it. If there was a Masquerade going of THAT nature (one involving extraterrestrials and Tech 15 societies) then I shouldn't have been a Cleric or had spells. Unless the Avatar system was so screwed up that it was overwriting local worldlaws to make it possible - which should require a lot more power than anything the Reality Relief Office had.

So, my objective, which as near as I could tell was to guard and guide some Major Protagonist (not the official term but what we generally called them in the field) to where they'd eventually need to be.

When I arrived at the proper spot, I was hungry and cold and it was night. Long past where I could reasonably knock and get some answers. The house itself was unremarkable as far as I could tell. Looked to have been made in the 1930s or so, if what I could tell about the major way the timeline had gone was true.

Since "Point Me" had taken me here and I'd had enough time to recover my internal energies to do so, I cast the other spell in the Divination group I had prepared.

Analyze Magical Fields (which had much wordier names) did exactly that and left me pondering the nature of this particular world again.

Blood Wards - intent based. You couldn't enter if you intended harm to one of the occupants unless you were of close lineage to the one warded here.

Blood magic could be beneficial but it was also normally one of the paths to the whole dark magic field. Ritual magic using blood was usually about as dark as you could get. Runes and wards were sometimes enhanced by blood, but it was more of an exception and not the rule.

I let out a deep breath. Time to try and gather some information locally, get food and drink and some rest. Pray for spells and otherwise recharge. Then I could plan on how to best go about this.
Chapter Summary

In which the usual goings on get further out of whack.

Harry Potter by JK Rowling. Other bits by others.

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One Floo Round, chapter 3

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By the time morning had rolled around, I'd gotten a bit of food and water by scrounging up some local coinage and finding some vending machines. I'd also gotten a brief sleep and the prayers done to switch out a number of spells.

The local magical fields seemed fairly weak but that might just be the distance to the nearest ley line.

Talking to the locals had given me a bit more information. Apparently there was a five year old boy whose parents had died while drunk in a car accident and he had been sent to live with relatives. He was a delinquent and troublemaker by some accounts. By other accounts the boy was just quiet and sullen, while the family itself was a bit of a problem.

The Dursley family had always been a bit strident and blustery and whiny but had gotten much more so after their nephew Harry had come to stay with them. And it was getting even worse as time went on, according to their neighbor down the street three houses.

I'd also accumulated some information via a Speak With Animals charm I'd used. Mind you, squirrels are NOT a great source of information about things other than foraging. Nor, for that matter, are birds. Cats watch everything but have a bit of an attention deficit disorder going.

Still, I'd put together a fair picture and could remember enough about how such situations generally went to get an idea of what was going on. The Primary was no doubt the five year old nephew. Just observing the boy leaving for school in the morning was confirmation enough about that - the wards reacted to his passage in a way they did not for the rather portly child who was observed bullying the shorter child.

Then I went to the local authorities as a priest, producing the appropriate (if retconned) documentation to establish me as a member of a different branch of the same faith.

"The Vatican Special Branch? So, you're real..." The old man adjusted his spectacles to look at me. "I had heard rumors."

I nodded at him. "I'd appreciate your cooperation. All I need is some local information."

"Of course," said the man. "Father Aloysius Gamp. What exactly do you need?"

"Well, first, a hot cup of tea would certainly be welcome," I said, having noted the local customs
regarding tea seemed to regard it almost as a sacrament in itself.

That produced a chuckle and Father Gamp relaxing quite a bit. "Oh. I think I can manage that."

After following the good padre into his office and letting him get on with the making of a pot of tea, I went ahead with the basic gathering of information. "Four Privet Drive. Anything you know about them?"

"Not church-goers, the Dursley family, moved here about twelve years back as a young couple. Boy hasn't been baptized - the family refers to religion as 'codswaddle' I believe." The padre paused. "They're not with... Them, are they?"

"Never assume conspiracy when it can be explained with stupidity," I paraphrased. There was an old saying to that extent in a lot of realities.

"Well, true, but you ARE Special Branch and, well, here," explained Father Gamp.

"True," I admitted. "If what I'm led to believe is true. Rather the opposite - and it's involved with the child."

"Dudley Dursley," noted Father Gamp as he set poured the hot water into the kettle to settle. "Kicked me in the shins when I greeted him one morning on his way to school. Bit of a ruffian among other things."

"Not that one, the other one." I considered the office briefly. Something seemed "off" somehow.

"Harry?" asked Father Gamp. "Quiet boy. Sullen even. From what I've heard he's a bit rebellious. Neighbors though say that he's usually puttering about in the garden or working on the lawn when they see him."

"Well maintained from what I saw," I noted aloud. When Gamp began pouring the tea, with his back to me, I did a quick "Analyze Magical Fields" - which is a much more detailed version of the standard "Detect Magic" which itself is a basic first circle spell.

Nothing. Not so much as the faintest cleaning charm showed up. So whatever was going on - this office wasn't connected to it directly.

Even though the spell-file part of this Avatar had been corrupted, it was pretty detailed and had all the signs I'd been using it a good while. I was pretty sure that "Analyze Magical Fields" was sufficiently detailed that I should have picked up something if there had been anything lingering in the area.

"Yes," said Gamp, turning back to me with the cups of tea. "I suppose so - but there isn't much I can do. What did you mean 'the opposite' of Them?"

"The child is important," I said, nodding my head upwards. "The details though - I don't know. We don't get details."

"True," said Father Gamp. "He works in mysterious ways."

"Indeed," I said, before turning the conversation to more common details. His parrish, the overall tone of the neighborhood, any concerns he might have had in the area. There were the usual local and mostly-inconsequential things that were only of importance on the local and personal level.

It took about two hours for our conversation to conclude, and by then I had something else to
An owl had taken to watching me from a branch near the window.

I went to the local park, waiting, and soon enough the owl landed on a branch to consider me from that position.

"Speak With Animals," I cast quietly before turning my attention to the owl. "Something wrong, night-hunter?"

The owl nearly fell off his perch. "No. Nothing. Just an ordinary owl."

"I believe the local phrase is 'pull the other one'," I told him. "I take it you're with the woman coming this way?"

The owl's head rotated, looking in that direction, then swiveled back. "You're not local."

"No. I'm not," I agreed.

"You don't have a wand, so that wasn't a spell," said the owl. "I've heard of Parseltongues of course, but never an owl-speaker."

"I'm a man of many talents," I told the owl, noting that the local spellcasters were apparently of the focus-type and used wands. Not that uncommon actually.

The old woman stopped nearby and looked uncertainly between me and the owl.

"Anything you want me to relay to her since we're speaking at the moment?" I asked.

The owl shifted uncertainly. "Don't use mouse poisons and leave the mice out where I can get to them. Made me quite sick."

I nodded and shifted my attention to the woman. "He says not to use poisons on the mice. Makes him sick."

"He does, does he?" asked the woman, glaring at the owl. "Then maybe he shouldn't go through the rubbish bin! Wait. You WERE talking to him?"

"Yes," I said. "I take it my inquiries about young Harry got your attention? Took long enough."

"I had to be sure you weren't a Death Eater before I went forward," said the woman, slightly defensive.

"Death Eater?" I asked. "That's a fairly ridiculous name for a cult."

"If you'd been alive in the War, you wouldn't think they were 'ridiculous' young man," grumbled the woman.

"Father Ryuvian Argent of the Vatican's Special Branch," I said as way of introduction as apparently that was on my identification.

"They're REAL?" asked the woman. "Why are you getting involved THIS late? Where were you when He Who Must Not Be Named was going about using the Unforgivables on people?!"

I made a note about those statements as that really did give me a lot of information about the way things were in the local magic community. "I don't know about any of that. What I do know is that
Harry there is apparently getting abused and no training to meet his actual destiny."

The woman stared at me for a moment before going and taking a seat. "So you know about the Prophesy too but not the War."

I nodded, adding to my mental notes that there was a Prophesy involved. I'd kind of expected it in all honesty. "I just got involved less than two weeks ago. Spent most of this week just getting here."

The woman got up. "I need to tell Dumbledore."

One name. Not a "Fred Dumbledore" or something like that. Usually a sign that someone was powerful or famous. It being a magical community meant that both was definitely a possibility. I had to nod though. "I understand. You have to do what you have to do. I think we both agree though that young Harry's safety is the priority here."

"Yes," said the woman slowly. "The Boy-Who-Lived must be kept safe. Where can I reach you?"

"I'm planning on being around in the area," I told her. "I have an offer to stay with the local church down on Magnolia. I'll be here perhaps a few more days as I investigate."

She got up, dusting off her seat quickly. "Arabella Figg."

"Well met, Ms. Figg," I responded. "Blessings go with you."

I hadn't actually intended the faint enchantment that caused a breeze to swirl around us, but the woman simply raised an eyebrow before nodding.

The owl lingered after she left, then nodded to me before he left himself.

I waited briefly, but whatever was going to happen was apparently not immediate.

It wasn't until I got into a spirited conversation with a badger that I noticed someone concealed nearby. Invisible, not merely concealed. The presence was definitely off in that area though. When I cast "Analyze Magical Fields" it became more obvious though the invisibility field was diffused over a large area. Probably near the center though, or offset a bit as those capable of casting such a spell were often aware of the problems of being in the exact center.

After a few moments, the invisibility effect was apparently dismissed and a textbook Old Wizard type was walking forward and drawing a wand. "I'm sorry about this, but we can't have muggle authorities getting involved."

THAT sort of statement with the magic equivalent of drawing a gun was more than enough warning. "Shell Three."

"Obliviate."

A spell hammered out from the wand and struck the anti-magic shield I'd just thrown up. Whatever the spell was, it wasn't sufficient to break through.

"So you're one of those 'Death Eaters' eh?" I told the old man. "Well, let's see how you handle someone who can fight back."

"I, what?" said the old man.

I didn't have all that many Divination spells, ones that would let me gather information strictly through magic. One of the spells I had through the corrupted files though needed testing and here
was one of the Bad Guys of the setting to test it out on. There was enough distance between us, maybe five meters at this point. "Source of all power, crimson fire burning bright. FLARE ARROW!"

The old man's eyes grew comically wide as the arrows of light appeared around me during the casting, and when I threw my hand forward, he apparently realized exactly what was coming. He used a quick teleport - his wand moving in a practiced blur.

So. An experienced enemy instead of the usual low-level grunts testing me out. Have to step up my game.

My spells were mainly defensive and support-oriented. That said - I still had Flare Arrow, Freeze Arrow, Spirit Hammer, and Flame Strike that could affect non-spiritual targets like an enemy wizard. While he was doing that short-range teleport to escape an ice field I'd created with Freeze Arrow I checked my Inventory and found it had recovered everything it was going to. And there was a weapon.

Perfect. Clerics were slightly better with melee than wizards in general.

"Wait!" called out the wizard on seeing me produce a large iron-bound staff with a glowing crystal at one end. "I thought you were a muggle!"

"Father Ryuvian Argent, Vatican Special Branch," I answered. "My kind has faced yours before, Death Eater. Why should I listen to you?"

"Because I have reinforcements which have just now arrived," said the old wizard as several others began appearing.

"Why should more Death Eaters concern me?" I asked, though having five more of these around WAS a bit concerning.

"Albus? He thinks you're a Death Eater?" asked an old woman in a witch costume.

"Well, you DO outnumber me, but now that I know there are those hunting the Boy-Who-Lived this close," I mused aloud. Bad habit I know. "Exit."

I reappeared at the train station. Time to make plans. My mission was at least obvious now. I had to rescue the kid and get him trained for some Epic Quest with a Prophesy involved in an Urban Fantasy environment that had a Masquerade going.

Always helped when you had a clear idea of the goals.

Oh. And one item in my inventory was a D-Jumper. THIS had possibilities.

- Interlude 3-1 -

"So. Let me get this straight," said Minerva McGonagall, rubbing the bridge of her nose. "The spy you placed upon Harry is a squib named Arabella Figg. She reported to you that a foreign wizard with the Church was checking on Harry. You appeared, noted he had no wand, and then proceeded to try and Obliviate him."

"No wand," noted Filius. "Yet he was chasing you about the park with conjured fire."

"I had no way of knowing he was capable of any magic, much less wandless," countered Dumbledore. "My only intent was to protect Harry."
"This unknown wizard didn't take the attempted Obliviate well," said Minerva, making a face. "Not that I blame him. He took it as an attack, which technically it was, decided you must be a Death Eater, and fled."

"Whatever the case," said Albus Dumbledore, "we are now prepared for -"

The windows of 4 Privet Drive rattled and there was a brief flare of blue light visible.

"That does not bode well at all," said Filius Flitwick as the other two dashed across the street.

- end Interlude 3-1 -

Stepping across dimensions to a nearby uninhabited, I flicked back and forth a couple of times to check locations. Then it was a simple matter of walking across a marshy location in one world to where 4 Privet Drive was and then flicking back.

Which led me to grabbing a young boy and then flicking across universes twice more.

"Sorry about that, Harry," I told him when I could let go of his shirt and put the D-Jumper away. "Don't know when those killers were going to come after you, but best to do it quickly."

"K-Killers? What just happened?!" asked the VERY startled five-year-old.

"I've a great many things to tell you about, Harry. Just watch the dinosaurs for a bit and I'll explain after I finish setting up the wards."

"D-dinosaurs?" asked Harry, adjusting his glasses as he watched the proto-dinosaurs in the distance. "Wait. Those are real?"

"Let me know if something spooks them," I advised the child. Not that a Freeze Arrow or Fire Arrow wouldn't take care of a wide variety of problems. Once I finished the wards though - that'd take care of any number of hostiles.

- Interlude 3-2 -

Albus Dumbledore wasn't quite sure what to make of these readings.

One instrument indicated Harry Potter's general status. Which was healthy and well. In fact, in the month since his disappearance - he was doing VERY well if he understood what this shade of blue indicated.

The wards at Privet Drive would fail by the end of the year though if Harry didn't spend at least two weeks there. That would mean that Harry could not find refuge there, which was one reason that he'd been frantically trying to find out where that interloper had taken The Boy Who Lived.

"So he's completely out of the Country?" asked Minerva McGonagall, whom Albus had taken into partial-confidence just to see if a second set of eyes could find some detail he was missing.

Yes, as a matter of fact, he WAS that desperate.

"Yes, that was my thought as well, but every attempt to narrow down his location has thus far been futile," said Dumbledore aloud. "I have been told that the Vatican doesn't even have a Special Branch."

"Well, if it's a secret branch, they're hardly going to come out and admit it," said Minerva. "Why didn't the wards stop him? Surely kidnapping counts as a hostile intent?"
"You would think so," admitted Dumbledore.

"Well, if the boy is-" began Minerva.

*CLACK!* went a device.

"He's within five kilometers of Hogwarts?" asked Dumbledore. "But he's also not registering as within England?"

"Here but not here?" asked Minerva. "Could it be a polyjuice transformation or something along that line?"

-end interlude 3-2-

"Wait. Why am I younger again?"

"Because this is your main timeline and it's - complicated." I considered how to try and explain it when it wasn't a subject that I was all that clear on.

"Oh, thanks. That really explains it."

"Look, Harry. It was explained to me with two holographic whiteboards and lots and lots of math when I asked about this sort of thing. Just call it a 'Narnia Effect' and let it go."

"They couldn't explain it without high-order pandimensional equations?" asked Harry.

"Apparently not," I huffed. "It only occurs with dimension travel back and forth between someone's universe-of-origin and smaller universes that have high-energy densities. Your training at the Magic Academy in Wales was in that sort of universe."

"Okay," said Harry. "So WHEN are we?"

"Hang on," I said, going to a magazine seller and looking at the newspapers before moving on with Harry. "Looks like we came forward a month since we left."

"Is this going to happen again when we go back? I'm just out on summer break," complained Harry.

"Most likely - yes. It will happen again," I told him. I pulled out one of the devices I'd picked up in another universe and then modified a bit. "Oh my goodness. You ARE a Main Character."

"What does that mean and why does that fill me with a sense of dread?" asked Harry.

"You've read some stories over the past couple of years," I told him. I wouldn't call him Genre-Saavy, but he at least had heard of the concepts. "We're here to make contact with your allies-of-the-future."

"That's the magic mirror you modified while I was in school?" asked Harry. "What's it show, the fairest of the land?"

"Not quite," I said. "Currently it uses that 'akai ito' effect to show those you'd be romantically linked to in the future."

"I'm FIVE. Well, I suppose I'm seven mentally, but I'm five years old," pointed out Harry.

"I did say 'in the future'," I pointed out. "Nothing to keep you from getting engaged or becoming a friend in the meantime."
"I suppose," said Harry with a sigh. "Can we get on with it?"

"There are magical reasons for doing this as well," I told him. "That seal I placed around your scar will end up reinforced by the bonds you forge with others."

"I still think you should just bloody remove the thing," Harry grumped.

"Can't. It's a link between you and your enemy. I'm an outsider that can assist you, offer advice, and work mainly behind the scenes." I shook my head. "We've been over this. The moment I stand on the stage with you - it guarantees that I'll die before you get on with your main story. Which, as near as I can tell, begins when you hit age eleven for whatever reason."

"Great, so it's a shonen manga," said Harry. "Can I get my Big Arse Sword now?"

"No, if that happens it will probably be when you're ten or so," I told him. "These things always happen in a certain order and getting a Legendary Weapon is usually part of the main quest."

"So this'll keep THAT from happening?" asked Harry.

"That may not have been this world's future, but that's the intent here," I told him.


"Too much chance it'd fall into the wrong hands," I told him. "Besides, it might not have been THIS reality that book was reflecting."

It'd been a horror book one of his fellow students had pointed out. A horror series that had come out during their version of the 1990s featuring a character who shared Harry's name. Notable particularly as everyone got a bad ending. The woman who wrote the series had apparently been struggling with depression and various prescriptions for it when she'd written them.

That happened every so often. You come from one universe only to find that the events of that universe was a work of fiction in a second universe. Part of it might be sheer number of universes but some of it might be the author getting dream-visions of those other universes.

I was really hoping that THIS world was NOT a reflection of a horror series where literal soul-sucking demons were being employed by the local authorities. Shinigami were bad enough, depending on the version of course.
In which the harem part is explained, and how Harry at age five can still foresee how much trouble this is going to be later on.

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One Floo Round, chapter 4

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"You're Harry Potter? THE Harry Potter? The Boy-Who-Lived?"

Harry frowned slightly, pulling up a fringe of hair to show the lightning-bolt scar on his forehead.

"Oh my."

Can't blame Harry for getting slightly irritated as he keeps getting the same reaction.

"We need you to remain silent on this," I told the father. "Nobody must know where he is or where he is going. No one. The Dark Lord still has allies and followers about."

"Y-yes, of course," said the wizard, his wife standing nearby and nodding her own understanding.

"How can I help you?"

I held up the mirror, showing an image of Harry with a red string leading from one ankle and then branching off before fading into invisibility. "Are you familiar with the 'red string of fate' concept?"

"That's just a myth," began the wizard. He stopped though.

"Yes, that's the thing isn't it," I responded. "So are wizards and broomsticks and the like. So I came up with something that would indicate who Harry's potential soul-mates are. Those whose destiny could be linked to Harry Potter and are likely to end up fighting by his side in the future when the Dark Lord returns."

"But... Harry killed He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named," said Jaya Patil, wizard and father of twins.

"No body. You should know enough history to know that when there's no body, you can't discount the Dark Lord from returning, sometimes not even then," I told him. "That's why we're here."

"You said 'potential'?" asked the wife.

"Yes. As any potential future fiancees," I began, pausing only as Harry made a few gagging noises. "Ahem. Anyway, the future is likely to be dangerous and so I've come up with this."

The husband took the scroll and his wife sidled up close to read alongside him. "This. It's a marriage contract?"
"Yes," I told him. "Not to take place before the age of sixteen. Can be cancelled at that time by either party without penalty beyond losing whatever empowerment and equipment that they received as a partner in this pact."

"Empowerment?" asked the wife. "Equipment?"

"Harry's training to be an Epic Hero," I told them. "You've studied magical history enough to be familiar with how dangerous and uncertain that sort of thing can be."

Two nods. The wife looked as if she was going to start crying.

"Well," I said, holding up a card between two fingers. "These are not only symbols of that contract, but carry some benefits. They won't activate fully until things start getting serious. Which I believe won't happen until Harry reaches his eleventh birthday."

"About when he'll receive his Hogwarts letter, I understand," said Mister Patil.

"That was what I've heard," I told him. "That's when everything starts to move. These cards allow instant silent communication between the girl depicted and Harry. They'll also give the girl some equipment or enhanced ability. You know in the muggle stories about the hero usually has Stalwart Companions - that kind of thing."

Mister Patil seemed very unsure of this and exchanged a look with his wife.

"I'll be back within the week to see if you agree to the terms in the contract," I told them.

"Which of our daughters is -" Mrs Patil's voice trailed off as she pointed at the mirror.

"I don't know," I told them. "Spell isn't THAT detailed. Might even be both of them. Keep in mind that without it - they're still going to be in danger if they're anywhere nearby. All this is meant to do is give them a better chance."

"How can you tell which?" asked Mr Patil.

"Part of the ceremony is a kiss," I said, deciding to ignore Harry's gagging noises. "Yes, I know. Magical ceremony though so certain actions are symbolic. If the card forms - then there's the link."

- Interlude 4-1 -

Albus Dumbledore looked around. He'd kept Harry's vanishing as quiet as he could, considering the allies he'd had ready in case the muggle had turned out to be a Death Eater.

Except that the muggle hadn't been a muggle OR a Death Eater. Death Eaters were wizards after all. Their spells he well understood and didn't involve drawing complex magical circles without the benefit of a wand.

Minerva had helpfully pointed that out as one of those who had arrived, expecting to find that he'd been holding off a Death Eater hit-squad.

Had he been more familiar with the odd wizard's spellcasting and not taken completely unaware as he had been - he was sure he'd have been able to defeat this person handily. As it was, he was left trying to make sense of things after his plans had been completely derailed. How he was to get them back on track would require understanding what exactly had happened.

This location was just another of several possible locations that Harry had visited of late. Ottery Saint
Catchpole in Devon. Several wizarding families around here, it was the right approximate distance for the readings he'd taken from his various attempts at making a "Harry Tracker", and he had a hunch.

Minerva thought it unlikely that Harry was being transported against his will, the boy living in a cupboard under the stairs of the Dursleys among other things indicating to her that this other most likely had good intentions and lousy timing.

Albus himself wasn't as willing to extend benefit of the doubt. The child could be Imperiused or similarly coerced after all.

Neither he nor Minerva had any idea what the kidnapper was trying to do now. If he'd gotten away, as indications had led them to believe, why return?

It was a puzzle and one he truly did not like. Unfortunately he had to put things together to understand what he needed to do to put these events into his own plans.

- End Interlude 4-1 -

"Yes. Oh. We don't attend church, sorry."

"It's about your daughter, and not about church attendance." I paused. "Though if you want to discuss that at some later date."

"Hermione?" The man frowned. "I think you ought to explain yourself."

"Light," I cast with one hand, causing the book in his hand to begin glowing like a lantern.

"What the-?!" asked the man, checking the odd effect.

"I can demonstrate further, but we need to be out of sight of the street," I told him. "There are things going on in the world that your daughter will likely be caught up in - and knowledge of these things allows you better planning."

He let us in, and before the three Grangers I demonstrated three more spells. One caused the wilting flowers in a vase to straighten and freshen. One was a Levitation on Daniel Granger himself. Third was a set of images from Harry's stay at the Magic Academy.

"Magic is real?" asked Emma Granger at the end of it. "Can we do it?"

"As far as I can tell - no. Hermione is the only magic-wielder in your family," I told them. "I haven't studied the genetics involved but I think it is a recessive gene that allows tapping into the magical field. The local wizards use wands in order to cast spells."

"You didn't use a wand," pointed out Emma Granger.

"I'm not from around here," I replied.

"You're from another universe then?" asked Dan Granger.

I raised an eyebrow at that. "You catch on quicker than any of the wizards I've run across."

"I watch Doctor Who," answered Dan, his wife and child both nodding.

"Ah," I said. That really did explain a lot. "Well, if you're familiar with the genre - then this might go easier. Are you familiar with the typical plotline of a fantasy story? Young prophesied boy has to be
the one to defeat the Dark Lord, gathering allies and such as he goes along?"

"Or finds a magic ring or something, yes," admitted Dan.

"Harry's the prophesied hero. I don't know what the prophesy says exactly, and he's got bad guys after him already. Which is why I'm hiding him as we make early contact," I told them. "As near as I can tell, this will all start in his eleventh year when he and your daughter will be enrolled in the local magical school which is named Hogwarts. And apparently it is the ONLY magical school in Great Britain and only one of three in Europe. The Dark Lord miscast a spell or something and hasn't been heard of since he attacked Harry as an infant and has been missing since then."

"Ah," said Emma Granger. "They never found the body did they?"

"You are familiar with how things go," I agreed. "So, Dark Lord has a miscasting or something, ten years go by - he returns to kill Harry and enact his Diabolical Plan."

"How can you say something like that where I hear the capitalization?" asked Dan.

"Practice," I told him.

"Do we know what his diabolical plan IS?" asked Emma.

"From what I've gathered, he's what they call a 'pureblood supremicist' - a magical racist basically. Might be like Hitler in that he's just espousing the belief in order to gather minions and resources from an existing mindset." I shrugged. "Basically, if you can't trace magical heritage from both parents and document it, you're subhuman in their way of thinking. Quite often the belief is simply put forth in the cause of greed or having someone to blame for your own lack of success or wealth or whatever. I've seen a lot of groups like that over a lot of years and the words and targets vary while the activities look very much alike."

"And our girl is going to get mixed up in all this?" asked Emma.

"I'm afraid so," I told her. "Are you familiar with 'akai ito' or the 'red string of fate'?"

"No," admitted Dan.

"I am. I saw an old Japanese cartoon," said Emma.

"Okay, the tradition is Chinese and links ankles instead of fingers but the idea has been out there for awhile and symbols and belief are forces within magic," I told them. "Hermione is one of those with a POTENTIAL link to Harry. They could end up soul-mates, best friends, close friends, rivals, I'm not sure what else. However, their fates are already linked at better than nine-out-of-ten chances they'll be together at Hogwarts at the appropriate time."

"So - you're forming a Fellowship Of The Ring or something?" asked Dan.

"Yes," I said, not hiding my pleasure at someone understanding a lot of this. I pulled out a scroll. "In about a week I plan on coming back here. If you agree to these terms, this should increase your daughter's chances of survival."

Dan took the scroll, unfurling it slightly and making room on the chair for two other sets of eyes. "A betrothal?"

"It's a form of magical linking - again dealing with belief and symbols - that will allow your daughter to speak at a distance with Harry and each can draw power through the link when they need to. It
can also be ended by mutual consent later on."

"How many of these are there?" asked Emma.

"Seven," I told her. "Seven is a number that comes up with magic a lot. So does twelve, thirteen, and fifteen. If Hermione goes through with the contract, you signing it as her parents and her placing her hand on that end of the contract, and they kiss:"

Harry AND Hermione made gagging noises at that.

"-then you and Harry will have a Hermione card. It won't work when Harry is in another universe, at least as far as drawing power or communicating - but it will work otherwise if she gets an artifact or special ability out of it. Per a condition put in by a Mister Chang - additional training in magic or special abilities will be arranged if I can swing it. No promises there though since I'm having to coordinate with other people."

"Don't you know what she'll get out of it?" asked Emma.

"No," I told her. "One, I'm not that familiar with the process. It was something I ran across in the universe where Harry's training. Two, it apparently involves the contractEE's 'inner qualities' to find an appropriate match."

"Let's do it!" said Hermione. "I want magic now!"

"Even if you have to kiss a boy?" asked Emma.

"BLEH. Just has to be once though, right?" asked Hermione.

"Just once to set the contract," I agreed. "Though don't make too many statements about how you won't do it again. In a decade or so you might change your mind."

"I doubt that," said the five-year-old girl, absolutely certain that boys were icky.

"Not likely at all," seconded Harry.

"You shouldn't sign ANY magical contract until you've read it, thought about it for a good long time, and made sure that you're not under any magical compulsions," I told them. "Likewise, be careful of any magical items you might handle as there are various curses and such that can be laid on them."

"How do we determine if we're under a 'magical compulsion'?" asked Dan Granger.

"Good question," I told him. "Unfortunately, any answer I could give you would be biased unless you had reason to trust me. Since you just met me, you shouldn't."

"Not going to tell us to trust you?" asked Emma, sounding very surprised by that.

"If anyone tells you to 'trust them', especially when you've just met, you really need to start questioning motives," I told them. "'All men bear the blood of Cain' is the old saying."

"Understood. One week you said?" Dan Granger looked at his wife and child and I could see many family discussions coming up. You certainly didn't need Divination magic for that.

"About one week," I told them. "That's for you to come up with a straight yes-or-no. If you say 'no' - I leave and you're on your own later on. If 'yes' we'll do the ritual right there. Takes about two minutes if you've already signed it at that point. Now - you three have NO magical defenses on the house or on yourselves other than a slight Threshold effect. If one of you starts acting really strange,
"It might be one of the groups after Harry. I'll be checking before I show up, just in case."

"I really don't like that you're involving us in some magic war," said Emma, making a face. "I can't believe I just said that."

"Well, it IS a bit of a paradigm shift for you," I agreed. "But I'm not. Hermione was going to get involved anyway. I'm just trying to give you a bit better chance."

Things were pretty much over at that point and so we made our goodbyes and left the Grangers by foot.

"'Seven'? Fiancées?" asked Harry when we were alone.

"You saw the contract I drew up and copied," I pointed out to him. "Being engaged isn't a problem when any of you can opt out at any given point, is it?"

"I don't think either of us have been engaged to even ONE girl before," noted Harry. "Even so - I think this is gonna be trouble."

"The Chinese symbol for trouble is two women under one roof," I said. "I think. At least in one world. I'm not too sure about other worlds."

"What if you're wrong?" asked Harry. "What if I'm not the big hero you're talking about?"

"Then you're going to be really well prepared for running away from a bunch of women with your flying skills." I kept my tone dry. Really, with HIS flight skills? I couldn't see that many of his little clique keeping up with him.

"Can we fly yet?" asked Harry.

I considered it before nodding. "I'll manage the perception filter, you handle the flying, you're better at it."

We'd just taken off when Harry asked another question. "Seven? We've only visited six."

"Patil family - twins."

"Oh yeah," said Harry, not really concerned from the sound of it.
"Mister Granger. Missus Granger. Hermione."

The two adults looked uncomfortable, whereas Hermione was practically smirking.

"Have you come to a decision then?" I asked.

"Can we see one of the others' cards before we tell you our decision?" asked Dan Granger.

Harry got up from his chair, made a gesture, and was abruptly holding a card in his hand. He handed it over.

"Padma Patil,' read Dan Granger aloud. "Quaesitor Veritatis'? One who seeks truth? Picture of a young Indian girl with a large magnifying glass and wand. Looks like she's wearing a Sherlock Holmes costume."

"The glass is her artifact, something she can summon with her card," I told them. "Through it - hidden aspects are revealed. She used it to look over various enchantments in her home and determine what they did. Found a portkey in her library but couldn't figure out what the trigger was."

"What's a 'portkey'?" asked Emma Granger.

"An object enchanted to teleport someone to a predetermined location," I informed her. "Sometimes used as a trap, sometimes used as a shortcut to get to specific events. From what I've heard they're one-time deals, when it goes off the enchantment is spent."

"One more question. Is this sort of arrangement normal?" asked Dan, handing the card back to Harry.

"No. The pactio system is in use in another universe and adapted to work in this one," I told him. "So I'm advising everyone involved to keep quiet about it until stuff starts hitting the fan. Harry is the 'Magister', the contracted is called a 'Ministra' and the card itself is called a Pactio Card."

"We're going with it," said Emma. "As long as the contract can be broken later."

"Certainly, that's why there's conditions in there for breaking it," I reassured them. "Currently almost everyone's five years old. I plan on bringing Harry back in three years to see about additional training at that point for everyone who has signed on."

"'Almost'?" asked Emma.

"There's a family in France with two daughters. Not sure if either will sign up. One's older than Harry, one's younger. I'm pretty sure it's the older one who is connected to Harry." I shrugged. A lot of things were guesswork and my own spell research, so things could go any number of ways. I knew there was some potential connection, probably romantic, and that one or both was fated to get involved with the main plot.

"So, what do we need to do?" asked Dan.
"If you signed the contract, and Hermione has put her handprint down, then what's needed next is for them to kiss in a magic circle I'll draw." I waited for the two children to stop making gagging noises. "If a card manifests - then I make a copy so that Harry has one and Hermione has one. Keep your copy in a safe place."

The circle was made of a blue powder that I'd managed to acquire in that other universe. Their version of the ritual had been updated to not require such measures - but my research had been that magic was slightly different in this universe and so I was doing everything I could to adapt things. So far it had worked but this was the first 'non-magical family' I was trying this with.

Fortunately it went off without any problems, unless you counted Hermione running off to use mouthwash and acting like she was afraid she was going to catch some nasty disease. Not that Harry was particularly happy with it either.

When she got back, it was to make comments about her hair in the card's picture, whereas her parents thought the picture cute.

The picture was of young Hermione, raising a wand above her head as she read from some enormous old-looking tome that had been opened before her.

Dan blinked at the latin. "'Scientiae Inventorem' - Inventory of Science?"

"Sometimes the Latin is a bit imprecise," I noted. "I think it means 'researcher' or something like that."

"You're sure this spell worked right?" asked Dan.

"Yes, I've seen 'pactio cards' in the universe Harry's been getting trained in basic spellcraft in," I told him. "The cards are identical to that sort. This is the fourth time we've done this and the results have all fallen into this pattern."

"Padma got a magnifying glass to examine objects and people with," said Harry. "Her sister Parvati got a shield."

"That's going to be difficult to carry around openly," noted Dan.

"No, they can change their artifact back to card form at any given time," I told him as I finished using the Copy spell to manifest a duplicate of the Hermione Card. "Here you go, child. Try manifesting your artifact. You hold the card up, try to let your magic flow into it, and the activation phrase is 'adeat' and the deactivation is 'abeat' when you want to put it away."

Dan scribbled the two terms down. Hermione waited until he was done, taking several deep breaths to try and calm herself.

"ADEAT!" shouted Hermione.

Colored lights flowed briefly around her, and her outfit changed to a set of robes and a bent pointed witch hat to resemble her picture on the card. A large book appeared before her, looking as if it weighed nearly as much as the five-year-old.

Hermione's eyes were gleaming as she touched the book and it opened with the pages turning themselves.

"Just call it, don't shout it," I advised her.
"My artifact is a book on spells!" proclaimed Hermione.

"Now, when Harry is in a different universe, you probably won't be able to manifest the book," I cautioned the Grangers. "I'm told the pactio energy is largely provided by the Magister but I'm not sure how the results of my adaptations are going to play out with the details."

"What kind of spells?" Harry asked Hermione.

"These are wards that can be cast to provide protection over a home," said Hermione, an eager expression on her face as she went over the scripts and diagrams.

"I'm going to leave contact information for one of the other families with you," I told Daniel Granger, glancing once at his wife to indicate I was talking to the adults in the room. "The Patil family is fairly old and has a number of contacts amongst the magic society. They volunteered as a contact group for the various Ministra. Just remember to be quiet about details and to not mention Harry outside of their wards and away from people you don't know."

"How long do we have before you go back to that other universe and the card deactivates?" asked Dan Granger, showing that he was already making plans.

"We'll be here another week unless something happens where we have to get moving sooner, like a Death Eater attack," I told him.

- Interlude 5-1 -

"Albus, I just got done speaking with the Weasleys."

"Oh?" asked Albus Dumbledore.

"They were visited by Harry Potter and the Reverend Argent earlier in the week," said Minerva McGonagall.

"Oh?" asked Albus Dumbledore, looking up from his paperwork. "Did you find them then?"

"I was able to get some details from Molly Weasley," said Minerva, indicating the clan matriarch was her source. "They swore the family to secrecy - apparently the Reverend is still under the impression that the one attacking him was a Death Eater. The Weasley family didn't realize that the attacker was you."

Albus sighed, settling back into his chair. "I trust you set them straight?"

"No," said Minerva. At Albus' raised eyebrow she elaborated. "You may want to suggest that it was NOT the Headmaster of Hogwarts who made first contact with a foreign spellcaster by attacking them."

"I see," said Albus. Minerva was concerned with his reputation - no. Concerned with the school's reputation - oh yes.

"He casts wandless magic and apparently has magical engagement contracts that he swears can be used to empower an individual," Minerva told him.

"Sounds somewhat fishy to me," summed up Albus. He was fairly old and was pretty sure if such a thing existed - he would have heard of it before now.

Minerva nodded. "They declined, of course. They went over the contract and didn't see anything
untoward and that the whole thing could be negated at any point. Still, Molly Weasley felt that the whole thing sounded like a bad idea."

"Hmm," hmmmed Albus. "Do we have a copy of this contract?"

"No. I've made discreet inquiries but so far the Weasleys are the only family I've found any details on," said Minerva.

"A marriage contract between Harry Potter and an established pureblood family," mused Albus aloud. "I'd think it was a pureblood political ploy but that doesn't fit with the Weasleys at all."

"True, the Malfoys and the Weasleys take rather diametric views on many subjects," agreed Minerva.

"Agreed," said Albus.

"There's also fifty-seven more complaints about Severus' teaching style," noted Minerva.

"Oh, it's gone down from last year?" asked Albus, thinking some positive news was more than welcome.

- End Interlude 5-1 -

"So, this is Saint Mungo's - it doesn't feel like sacred ground," I noted, walking around and checking the place out.

"It's a hospital, not a place of worship," said the old woman. "You said you're a healer. This is a place of healing."

"You said if I could do this for you, that you'd assist in any way you could," I reminded her.

"Do you really think you can do this?" asked the chubby little boy.

"I'm a spell-priest. Healing and Protection are my specialties, Divination is a secondary. I just end up using it a lot."

"I'm surprised you didn't bring the child," said the old woman.

"Less danger without him here," I told her.

"Longbottom?" asked one of the nurses. "You're here to see them again? There's been no change."

"Experimental treatment," said Augusta Longbottom. "This foreign mage thinks his treatment can help."

"What exactly is the illness, anyway?" I asked the nurse.

"Repeated crucio exposure, they were physically and magically tortured until..." The nurse looked down at young Neville uncertainly.

"Well, if that's all that was done, I should be able to help," I said. "Where are they?"

"We can't let just anyone walk off the street and throw magic at a patient!" protested the nurse.

I let the old woman argue with the nurse, the next nurse who came along because of the first argument, and the floor's designated healer. Dealing with a bureaucracy was NOT one of my
specialties. If they wanted to argue, that was their decision. I was here to heal.

Which is probably why I had a crowd following me when we finally got to the room where the two Longbottoms were.


The doctor, or local magic equivalent, was still protesting when I decided to go straight to my client on this. "I'm going to start with a Fifth Order spell in case there's a lingering curse involved. I'll then use the strongest healing spell I've got, which is Sixth Order. I can only do two of those in succession - it'll take me a full day before I can recover enough to do that again."

"I'm not familiar with those terms," said Augusta Longbottom. "But I get your meaning. How many of these 'orders' of spells are there?"

"I can cast a single spell of the Ninth Order," I told her. "The problem is - that would exhaust me to the point that if that Death Eater shows up I'd be pretty quickly killed."

"A 'Death Eater'?" asked the doctor, sounding skeptical.

I cast "Break Enchantment" first. I considered using a broad-application poison-nullifier but figured most likely if there HAD been a poison, it wouldn't have lasted too long.

Celestial or Divine magic doesn't work exactly like Arcane magic but it has some common ground. Intent is important. So is having an idea of what you're trying to get the magic to do.

These were all wand-wizards, which meant they used a magical focus to make specific gestures and had magic words they intoned.

My magic was a bit different visually as well. Symbols and diagrams formed in the air as I coaxed the energy into the patterns that would fit the results I needed.

The glow faded away and I staggered back, trying to catch myself because it was pretty darn draining to throw spells like that.

The woman in the bed reached back to brush her remaining hair back and looked around the room as if not quite sure how she got there.

I stepped back as everyone started babbling. Looks like nobody really expected it to work, except me of course. Really should have been a family moment except the nurses and the doctor were all going on about tests and checking vitals and casting diagnostics and such.

I also noted that I was getting more and more uneasy. Not because of the crowds though, so I did a quick Shield at the door. It wouldn't stop much but...

"Stupefy!"

My Shield spell was smashed down by the force of whatever that spell was, however it gave me sufficient time to activate a quick spell of my own.

"Exit!"

I reappeared on a rooftop about a block away from the hospital at which point I realized that most likely I would not get a chance to cure the second Longbottom. Pity. Would have been nice to finish what I started.
Well, if I could get back to the Longbottoms at some point, maybe I could heal the other one.

- Interlude 5-2 -

Padma Patil was the studious sister. Parvati the more adventurous. Whenever the five-year-olds did something, Parvati was the reckless one and Padma the one who just wanted to find a decent book.

Not to say that they didn't do things together - if you found one the other would be nearby. They were sisters and best friends and looked out for each other.

"Adeat!"
"Adeat!"

"Hmmm," hmmed Padma as she used her magnifying glass to inspect Parvati's shield. "Latin. Bad Latin."

"Magic," said Parvati. "So what's it do?"

"Priwen, the..." Padma's voice trailed off.

"What? What?" asked Parvati. "Why did you turn pale?"

"Uhm... I have to research this!" declared Padma. "PAPA!"

"What?!" asked Parvati. "Hey, this armor is heavy ya know!"

- Interlude 5-2 end -

- Interlude 5-3 -

"Where did he go? Anyone, did you see-"

"ALBUS?" asked Augusta Longbottom. "Why did you throw a stunner at the healer and go running him off?!"

"Because he's a kidnapper and you mustn't believe anything he might tell you," tried Albus Dumbledore.

"The staff must have notified you," said Augusta, turning her gaze towards the healers.

"Well, yes, and-" Albus began.

"And you ran off the healer before he could do anything for Frank." Augusta Longbottom glared at her old friend. "You still have that tendency to go charging in and assuming YOU know best, don't you?"

"Well, yes, but then again I am-"

"Completely wrong in this case," interrupted Augusta. "Come along Neville. We'll let the healers look over Alice and run their tests. Alice, we'll be back shortly. It appears that I must honor a deal."

"You made a deal with that false priest?" asked Albus.

"That I'd throw what support I can behind the ancient and noble House of Potter when the time came," said Augusta. "Something I would have done anyway. I swear Albus. Might check with the healers yourself, you used to at least TRY finding out what's going on before throwing stunners
"But he was going to escape... Well, I suppose he DID escape," said Albus. He sighed. This was not going at all by The Plan.

- Interlude 5-3 end -

"So, France?" Harry asked.

"Not going to ask how it went?" I countered.

"You rushed in here, checked for attackers, and are still eyeing the exits like you expect sudden attacks," pointed out Harry.


"Too bad," said Harry. "Back to the Magic Academy after that?"

"It's a plan," I agreed.
"Okay," I said after the D-Jumper had been secured. "We're here."

"Where's here?" asked Harry, looking around him with some enthusiasm. One thing you could say about stepping across a portal to another world - it was almost guaranteed to be different. Sometimes insanely dangerous, but different.

"Well, you've got the basics of wand-based magic down," I told him. "The main thing is to practice and build up your spell strength with what you've got."

"And in the meantime you're going to be building... whatever that is." Harry sounded somewhat put out about that.

"You're British, in a magical community which has 'bigger on the inside' spellwork," I told him. "This HAS to be done."

"I don't get it." Harry shook his head, seeming bemused by the very odd adult he'd come to associate with.

"I'm just glad I know enough fuuinjutsu to adapt the runework in these books," I told him. "I wonder how I know this stuff."

Harry was silent for a few moments. "You think you'll ever get your memories back?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "If they're suppressed - yes. If they were erased - probably not. It's annoying as anything though, tell you that much."

"So where is here?" repeated Harry.

"Here is a world of great magic and ancient empires," I said expansively, making a dramatic gesture from the hilltop we were on. "A world of adventure around every corner, or nearly so. A world where Dark Lords are a dime-a-dozen and Epic Heroes in varying degrees of epicness strive against them."

"Sounds dangerous," said Harry.

"Not so much as you might think," I told him. "This is on the border of a halfling village. The world is called Abeir-Toril, I think. Some call it the 'Forgotten Realms' but there's a pantheon I can connect with - Ilmater. Also Gond the Wondermaker. Hoping to get a blessing or two on this device when I finish it up."

"Ah, and the native magic - you're hoping I pick up a spell or two?" asked Harry.

"You got it," I told him. "Having a spell or two that your enemy doesn't know - that's always handy for a wizard type." Heroes having some "ace-in-the-hole" was usually a good thing for his or her side.

"So, odd jobs for the local hedge wizard?" asked Harry.
I nodded. "I'll send you along with a couple of blast tags to trade as well."

Which was how Harry Potter ended learning Detect Poison, Flare, and Ray Of Frost while gaining scrolls for Alarm, Feather Fall, and Sleep.

- Interlude 6-1 -

Hermione sat back at her desk, glancing towards the dulled surface of her Pactio Card where it lay. A slight frown crossed her face. Did it seem a little brighter somehow?

She picked it up to inspect the card closer.

*Hello?*

Hermione blinked as a voice in her head had NOT been expected. "Uhm. Yes?"

*Oh. So we CAN use these for communication with someone besides Harry.*

*It's nice to see a theory work out.*

"Yes, I suppose it is," agreed Hermione. "Who is this?"

*Oh. Pardon me, I simply got excited by this. My name is Parvati Patil.*

*And I am Padma Patil.*

"Hermione Granger. My pleasure," identified Hermione, remembering that 'Patil' had been given as a contact name but they'd had no way to contact them and the number of 'Patil's in the phone book had been staggering.

*So, I'm guessing you picked up your card and are holding it, much as we are?*

"Yes. So physical contact or concentrating on the card itself is necessary for this," said Hermione, not sure what term to use for this as she was hearing them telepathically.

*Yeah.*

*Yes. This means that even when Harry is off somewhere, we can use basic functions of this contract. I can see where this may have uses in the future.*

"He's offworld. Like in 'Doctor Who',' said Hermione.

'Doctor Who'?*

*Interesting. I heard the name and got flashes of images that I didn't understand. A possible advantage to semi-telepathic communication.*

*I've got an idea!*

*Miracles do happen.*

*PADMA! No, seriously. We should meet up while Harry's off. Face-to-face and all. We'll all be going to Hogwarts in a few years after all.*

"That might be good, I've many questions about wizarding society," agreed Hermione.

*And I about muggle society.*
Hello?

Oh. You saw your card glow?

Yes. My name is Cho Chang. Who is this?

- Interlude 6-1 end -

I felt a bit like a mad scientist as I hit the great big knife switch in the center of the console. The grind-thump noise played over the speakers, the D-Jumper buried in the central column activated, and we went from Abeir-Toril pre-spellplague back to Harry's homeworld.

It wasn't a REAL Tardis though. I could leap from World A to World B, but I couldn't travel in time. It also, at this point, would leak atmosphere if I tried to appear in deep space.

However, I COULD travel from Point A on World A to Point B on World B and then back to Point C on World A. As long as I left a sort of tag on both Point A and Point C. Point B was somewhere I'd been before, but as I had only hazy (at best) recollections of the location and had a different body in any case - it was sort of a case of revisiting a place I'd never been before.

Yeah, dimension travel can be almost as confusing as time travel.

So, we were back in Harry's world but I'd been aiming for an area of Switzerland that would accomodate us.

So when I opened the door and found a crowd was staring at me, I realized immediately I was in the wrong area. When I looked around, I saw we were at a place I'd seen before - but never in person.


I quickly closed the door, locked it, leapt the short distance to the control console, switched destinations quickly, and switched it on again. Grindng thumping, dematerializing from London and appearing in a different dimension, resetting and trying again.

Grindy-thumpy. Rematerialize. Open the door and...

I blinked as I realized I was apparently where I'd actually intended to go. Or at least I was in a very cold place on a roof in a mountainous area.

"Harry, I'm going out a bit, make sure we're where I wanted to be. Be back in a bit," I told him.

"Right," said Harry, not looking up from his scrolls.

Well, I was pretty sure that nobody had had time to get any footage of a Tardis appearing in London, so it would quickly end up as an urban legend and debunked by the usual people who debunked such things.

Huh. Professional debunker. Now there was an odd job description. Wonder how you got into such a line of work.

It didn't take long to determine that I was actually quite close to where I had intended to land. Almost spot-on considering I was going from universe to universe and could literally end up not even in the right world altogether.

So, frankly, being about ten kilometers from the spot I'd been aiming at was quite good.
Still, ten kilometers was ten kilometers. I observed from the roof where I'd landed between two large devices that I thought might be air conditioners despite the cold, checked the map again, and re-entered my work-in-progress Tardis in order to try a bit better.

That turned out to work a lot more precisely and we set out for our outing.

Fuuinjutsu was a lot like computer programming using a text editor in some ways, the language was different and you had to be really precise about some things. You wrote it all out, and when you thought you had it you compressed the thing into a single diagram. If you were really really good at it - you ended up with something that looked very artistic. I had had a flash memory of some Japanese-looking woman who'd managed to write a collapsible space-time shelter and make the whole thing look like some ancient calligraphy painting. I was nowhere near that good, whatever other skills I might have buried in those lost memories.

While I'd been working on my ersatz Tardis and a couple of other little projects (Protection From Evil amulets being the primary side-project), I'd had a few flashes and bits of memory surface. No long memories to provide great details, but enough to indicate that I'd been using various iterations of similar skills for quite awhile. The same with my carpentry skills. The outer shell was just nails and wood and plastic after all. Reinforced up as much as I could, but still.

As for the target location, Switzerland. Geneva. Since I knew there was a Masquerade (or Wainscot Society) there were most likely small areas in each major nation and there would be places which would serve as 'hubs' - and an influx of strange people would be less noticeable in some areas than in others.

So you then look at specific areas and try to figure out where someone with space/time folding abilities would put in a little secret alley or city.

Of course, if this WAS the usual technology level of the 1980s as I vaguely remembered it - that meant satellite imagery was around but more importantly there were also planes to consider. Planes crossing space/time folds tended to get screwed up. Even if their electronics didn't get muddled up, there would be things like fuel usage to indicate that something odd was going on.

While there was as yet no vast computer network that regular people could hook into - there were computer forums that could be accessed. Private pilots had just such a forum - as it was a distinct niche where sharing information was useful.

Getting ahold of a personal computer that was shielded from magic mucking about with the quantum effects just required me heading over to a universe five over and back and then installed into my little ersatz Tardis. That I also loaded it with about 300 movies, TV series, and so on was entirely to maintain appearances in that universe.

It helped that apparently I had spent time in that universe as my default username and password had pulled up an account that had been sitting idle for twenty-three years. Local funds were always helpful.

Harry told me after I finished installing it that I had a rather pathetic "Evil Laugh" - but we can't all do the Mad Scientist thing can we?

It was a set of forum posts that had narrowed down my search and I found that there was a very old style tavern there. Taverns are generally a good choice for Masquerade entries - as there are all sorts of odd people coming and going at all sorts of odd hours.

The place was called "L'Atelier Cocktail Club" and was a bit more upscale than I would have
thought likely. Since an "atelier" was an alchemist - it seemed a probable.

Using "Analyze Magical Fields" though - it was a nearby space that the eye tried to skim past that was the likely culprit.

"Come on, Harry. That's it."

"The sign says 'Service Entry Only'," noted Harry.

"They must put that there just in case anyone slips past the anti-non-wizard spell," I told my young student. "Should be okay though."

Going through the "Service Entry" revealed a cluttered-looking storeroom. Except that if you went straight, the path was clear and dust-free. I was still running "Analyze Magical Fields" and could see that the stuff to the side was not only clearly junk, but had an illusion on it to make even less appealing. The wall at the back was magical and had a faded poster for some stage magician on it.

"It's a wall," noted Harry.

"Probably requires some sort of password or passcode," I told him. "Common enough, but they'll make it something either easy to remember or easy to guess because they'd get people from out-of-town coming through."

"Oh?" asked Harry, peering at it.

"Well, time to go with the disguise," I said. "Did you decide?"

"Phineas Ruddygore," said Harry.

"Then I'll continue with my name and identity as an agent of the local church," I told him.

"Shouldn't you at least change your name?" asked Harry.

"No, while you're here I'll be nearby but we won't be all that close while you're training," I told him. "Remember the details on Phineas - he's supposed to be a runaway from an arranged marriage back in England. That means you'll be on your own, just touching base with the local church because you felt your prayers had provided a miracle to get away."

"Which everyone listening will think just a normal young wizard boy manifesting his magic," said Harry. "Got it."

I reached into a pocket and pulled out a small stage-make-up kit to hand him. "They'll look for magical concealment, means that nonmagical stuff will likely be overlooked."

Harry took it without comment and quickly used an appropriate color to cover his scar.

"First I get you situated, then I can get in contact with the local clergy, then I can stay in the Tardis in the meantime. Still want to work on those Protection From Evil amulets." I finally pulled out my ersatz-wand and decided to do a counterclockwise spiral.

The bricks began shifting to reveal an archway.

"How did you figure it out?" asked Harry, curious.

"The design of the poster, spiral design on the magician's hat," I explained.
So. He's back. sent Parvati's voice.

That is how I understand it, responded Hermione.

I'm right here you know, sent Harry.

Nice of you to respond, Mister Potter.

Where have you been the last three years, Harry? asked Cho.

Wait. Three years? Oh. That's what he meant by 'no Narnia effect' - time was flowing regularly.

Ah! Hermione sounded happy. I got that reference!

I did not. Nor, I suspect, did any of the others from wizarding families, responded Cho.

So all of you know each other? How? asked Harry.

As long as we are holding the card, we can do this telepathic communication, responded Fleur.

Both myself and Miss Delacour are already in school. It has been quite interesting to compare the two.

This is helping us to prepare for Hogwarts next year, responded Hermione.

This also means that we can practice producing our Artifacts, pointed out Fleur. We'll have to do it while we are alone and unobserved, but any advantage we can get should things get troublesome?

Cho Chang made an interested noise. Harry - anything you can tell us about your training?

Uhm, yeah. But it'll have to wait. I'm meeting with a 'Master Rivendan' - I'm supposed to learn math and stuff. Argent says that since I'm the clan heir of Potter I need to learn how to do finance and such.

- End Interlude 6-2 -
I nodded to the man working the counter. "Just dealing with bureaucrats, Gunther. A trial that man inflicts upon himself."
"I hear you, Vicar," said Gunther, polishing a mug as he slid a ceramic cup over that he proceeded to fill with tea. "Gotta nice one today, see what you think."


"You know your tea," said Gunther with a nod.

"I'm afraid I'd never make it as a monastic where they make wine or beer," I admitted. "Pity there's no monastery where they grow tea."

"I've been looking for you."

"Ms. Longbottom. A pleasure. Though that one gal running around is hardly any kind of pleasure." I nodded to the stool next to me. "I take it you are here regarding my offer."

"Alice is doing well, and I was hoping to have you take a look at Frank." Augusta Longbottom sighed. "I was hoping to contact you discretely but apparently my owl post was intercepted."

"Apparently." I noticed the woman look in our direction without apparently seeing us. "Your work?"

She looked pointedly at Gunther.

I sighed. "You guys really think that 'Statute of Secrecy' thing works all that well?"

Gunther nodded and went off to the other end of the counter.

"It's kept us safe for centuries," said Augusta.

"There's squibs who are cast out from their families, people missed during your magic-police running around and flashy-thinging people, and people who have friends and relatives who died under mysterious circumstances," I pointed out. "Also people who aren't wizards but contain enough magic themselves that they can see past your various wards."

"But we have people who monitor the muggle press and government to make sure those trying to break the Masquerade are discredited," countered Augusta.

"Heck, I'd give your Masquerade another fifty years before it breaks," I said. "The 'muggle' scientists are working out a couple of things called 'quantum mechanics' and trying to develop a 'unified field theory' - when they start closing in on that they'll 'discover' magic. They'll just call it something different."

"So - the bartender?" asked Augusta.

"Descended from a magical line. Not enough magic to manifest as a wizard, but enough that he could probably do a basic light spell if he had a wand." I put something out on the counter. "This has an invisible-to-muggles charm on it I picked up at a local shop. You set it out on the counter and you'll notice some people look directly at it, and some can apparently just almost see it."

I could see the idea penetrate and it obviously scared the heck out of her. I could see why - hundreds of years of separation and hiding from the nonmagical population and the clock was ticking to where all that would come to an end.

Well, let that idea settle into place. Fair warning.

"So, you want me to go to this 'Saint Mungo' place and heal Frank Longbottom?" I asked. "With that Death Eater and these magic-cops running around?"
"About that Death Eater," said Augusta Longbottom, finding something amusing. "Would you believe he's the Supreme Mugwump?"

"Which beggars the question - what is a mugwump?" I asked. "The definition I know of is that means someone who is not aligned to a single political side. Well, that and a swamp-dwelling creature that raids gardens and farms."


"Hogwarts the school, or are we talking about some other Hogwarts?" I asked.

"The school," Augusta replied.

"So the school's chief administrator goes around attacking people on a random basis?" I asked.

"Well, sometimes," said Augusta Longbottom. "Not usually though. I expect he's slipping a bit at his age. He has the very best of intentions."

"Well, you can tell him even if he had good intentions, he's right off my Christmas list," I told her. "Good intentions does not always work terribly well."

"I would expect so, and that has been my experience," she agreed. "So, if I can arrange for Frank Longbottom to be transferred to the local branch of Saint Mungo's?"

"I'd be happy to help," I admitted before another sip of tea. The Assam truly was lovely.

-- Interlude 7-1 --

"This is Sian Shelby, shopgirl turned reporter! Another TARDIS sighting, and it's apparently the one that actually acts like a TARDIS. This time it was spotted out where the same scene as played out in front of the Tower of London."

"The BBC, which shows Doctor Who, has still not commented on these events."

"That's right. So far, every time the TARDIS shows up, it follows that same pattern," said the perky blonde news presenter. "Appears with the expected sound effect. Some vicar sticks his head out and comments on how this is still the wrong location. Followed by the TARDIS vanishing again."

"Where exactly has this particular TARDIS appeared so far?"

"Tower of London, twice now. Death Valley in the US. Hanyang University in Seoul South Korea. Olaf's Produce in the Faroe Islands. The parking lot of Finnegan's Wake in Dublin. And this latest sighting in Geneva."

"Sounds like he has a little navigational problem, Sian."

"Right you are, Dennis. Just like the BBC's fictional character. In each case, we've gotten some surveillance footage of the box and vicar appearing. If this is a promotional stunt, the Beeb has to be commended on it."

"Considering the BBC's budget, I'm not inclined to credit them for this. Next up: Soccer hooligans found themselves cornered by something most unpleasant in Belfast today..."

-- End Interlude 7-1 --
I finished casting Heal on Frank Longbottom and stepped back as he shook off the effects.

"How?" asked one of the Swiss healers.

"I use Divine magic, which is different in many respects from Wizardry - which is what you use," I told him. "My spells are mainly concerned with healing and protection."

"Divine?" asked the healer, looking over my clerical outfit. "You claim divinity?"

"Not myself, no, I am merely a channel for such things," I told him. "I'm a lot better for personal skills at fuuinjutsu."

"You're better at what?" asked the healer.

Augusta Longbottom spoke up, letting Frank and Neville get reacquainted. "It's something like Ancient Runes with a side-dish of Advanced Arithmancy from what I've seen."

"Okay," said the healer, not sure what to make of that statement.

"I'd better get going," I told them. "Last time I did this, someone started throwing attack-class spells at me."

"I sincerely doubt that Albus Dumbledore is going to show up here and start-"

"STUPEFY!"

The moment she'd started saying something to that effect, I'd started looking for something to duck behind.

The medic went down, shuddering from whatever the spell was supposed to do.

"ALBUS!" Augusta Longbottom wasn't all that tall, but she positively LOOMED when she wanted to - advancing on the gray-haired wizard as if she was going to rip his beard off by hand.

I considered casting Exit again but after using it twice to get away from him - most likely he had taken some sort of precaution against it for the third time. I went through my various spells, but very few of them were suitable for direct combat. That left some of the purchases I'd made off-plane, but unless this guy was actually the Dark Lord I didn't want to pull out anything like that just yet.

Instead I pulled out a Sonic Screwdriver that wasn't. It looked like one, sounded like one too, but I'd picked it up on Mid-Childa along with the magic computer system to install in my pseudo-Tardis. It was actually a wand of sorts, very primitive and limited by the standards of THAT world. Compared to the sort of spell-focus available in the Celestial Planes it was on the order of a flint knife or something.

There was a patient, Neville, and an unconscious medic still in the room though.

"Neville," I said, reaching around in my pocket and pulling out something to toss him. "Here. Use it when you need a familiar. Later."

I could use the wand to unlock a door and slip out of the room normally after all.

It's a bad habit I have. Picking up odds and ends to use as gifts later on. Gets me into trouble on occasion. People will misinterpret anything if given the chance.

Neville looked uncertain as I slipped out the door, most everyone else drawn to the drama taking
place with Augusta Longbottom actively berating this 'Albus Dumbledore' person.

Once outside the building I felt it safe to try an Exit spell and make my way to my ersatz-Tardis to move it again.

Which ended up with me back in Mid-Childa briefly. Then, as far as I could tell, I ended up briefly in Cardiff and some pyramid in Central America before I finally got to where I was aiming.

I'm pretty sure I did not intend to copy the original TARDIS's tendency to arrive completely off-course, so I'm not sure where that's coming from in my fake Tardis.

I added two sets of environmental seals and a circle of protection on the theatre before I left.

By that time, Augusta was waiting for me at the local church I'd been using as my base-of-operations. Nor was she alone, the medic who'd been at the hospital was there.

"So what is this 'fuuinjutsu' again?" asked the medic. Well, one expected a medic to have a certain degree of dogged persistence after all.

"Fuuinjutsu is a mixture of art, science, creativity, and obsessive focus," I explained as I walked into the church. "It's one of the shinobi arts of Japan and similar areas. It's a way of using magic to hack the fundamental forces of the universe and make it give you specific results that you describe in the setting of the magic. It's also called the 'Sealing Arts' or 'Runecrafting' or 'onmyodo' among other things."

"So it's like Ancient Runes," concluded Augusta.

"Do you have an example?" asked the medic.

I nodded and pulled something out of another pocket. "Here. It's a 'Protection From Evil' amulet. It'll work three times before you have to get another one."

"'Evil'?" asked Augusta, taking the amulet and looking it over. It looked a lot like the little charms they sold at various shrines in Japan, not that she recognized that.

"Like the curse that hit the two Longbottoms," I said. "Mind-affecting magics, possession, that sort of thing."

I was aware of the two stopping as we continued on, and so I had to turn and look their way to see what was going on. Both had just come to a stop and were staring at the amulet in Augusta Longbottom's hand.

"This will stop a 'Crucio Curse'?" asked Augusta, managing to sound shocked.

"Yeah. I'm pretty sure you must have something like that already, but I can't do much research into the magic you've already got." I figured maybe I had just reinvented the wheel and that's why they were acting shocked.

"What about the Killing Curse?" asked Augusta.

"If it's what I think it is - it'll block that too," I told her. If the term was descriptive it was basically a "Finger Of Death" or "Word Of Power: Death" spell, an insta-kill. "Only three times though before it burns out and it has to be replaced, but hey - that's three more chances to survive whatever is throwing that sort of thing at you. Also - it's no good against poison or something like that."
"I have to go," said Augusta, nearly running over the medic in her haste to leave.

"Huh, wonder what that was about," I said, hoping to draw a response out of the medical wizard.

He simply stared at me for a minute before rushing off himself for some odd reason.

I concluded it must be a wizard thing. They had to have things like that themselves in a world where they had wizards throwing around nasty little memory-altering magic on a regular basis.

-- Interlude 7-2 --

"It does what?" asked Amelia Bones.

"Blocks the three Unforgiveables. It only works three times before it has to be replaced, but I thought you'd want to investigate it personally," said Augusta Longbottom.

Amelia looked it over. Just a little origami bag surrounding a scrap of parchment, with a loop of string around it. "I'll test it out in secrecy. Where did you get it?"

"Argent made it," Augusta Longbottom told the head of the Aurors.

"Doubly secret then," said Amelia Bones. "If this works..."

-- End Interlude 7-2 --

"Okay, so this is the transportation I arranged," I told them, letting the group see what I'd parked in their tiny little English backyard.

"You have a TARDIS," noted Dan Granger.

"You have a TARDIS?" asked Emma Granger a moment later.

"The box has some significance?" asked Padma Patil.

"When in Rome," I explained. "I needed transportation so I built this."

"You BUILT a TARDIS," followed up Emma Granger.

"Well, it's not quite a TARDIS, it's called a 'Tardis' but that's more a convenient way to refer to it," I pointed out. "So more of a proper name than an acronym. Also it's various charms and spells and such all fitted together with a D-Jumper."

"YOU'RE the one who keeps popping a TARDIS up in odd places," realized Dan Granger.

"Trouble with navigating?"

"Well, yes," I admitted. "Now we're just heading off to the beach though, so it shouldn't be too much trouble at all."

"Where have I heard THAT before?" grumbled Harry.

It was just a little group get together. Everyone was expecting their Hogwarts letters next year, excepting the two who were already in school (Cho and Fleur), and so the Patil family had come up with the idea of a little meeting and shopping expedition.

Hermione was a bibliovore. Or was that librovore? Whatever the case - going and visiting some bookstore was vastly more interesting to her than the beach. Even if it was a very different beach.
"Now, I can't go to a lot of places, and I don't know WHY on a lot of them," I said as I led them into the Tardis.

"OH MY GOD! IT'S BIGGER ON THE INSIDE!" said Dan.

"Well, yes," I agreed, glancing back at him.

"Sorry," said Dan with a shrug. "Always wanted to say that."

"Ah," I said, accepting that. "Anyway, that door there leads to the theatre. That one leads to a corridor with the bedrooms, kitchen, toilets, a Japanese-style bath, and a dojo."

"A dojo?" asked Dan.

"Japanese-style gym room for practicing martial arts," I explained. "I'm not that good at them in this incarnation, but I've gotten Harry some instructions. It's good for reflexes, avoiding combat, disarming opponents, and there's just something about heroes being able to fight hand-to-hand or with swords even if they ARE wizards."

"I'd rather nobody has to fight anything," said Emma.

"That's always good, but not always an option," I pointed out. "At least with me able to throw healing spells they can recover from injuries quickly."

"What about that door?" asked Dan, pointing to the remaining door.

"Still working on that one," I told him. "If I get it all working right, it'll be a library. Not like the Infinite Library but still pretty large."

"Really?" asked Hermione, instantly interested.

I threw a switch and the door closed. I made an adjustment, hit the switch, then hit the sound effect button. Have to do things right after all. Especially with three of my passengers at least familiar with the source material. "First we go to a location in another universe. Then we hop back to a different location in your universe."

"Like having connecting flights then," reasoned Dan Granger. "What universe are we going to then?"

"Like I said, a lot of universes are closed off to me for reasons I don't know," I told him. "I haven't even been able to send messages to the Celestial Planes. Only been able to get to six other universes, and one has a Narnia-effect where you could spend days there and only a second has passed back on your world. It's that one we're using as it's got some safe locations to appear in and I can use that time dilation to ease things along. And now... we're there!"

"Miami Beach at last! Yeah!" said Harry, opening the door and running to it. "Oh. That's not where we are."

"Well, are we close?" I asked, sticking my own head out the door.

A large crowd, including a few TV cameras, were turned our way. We were on a stage, apparently in London.

"I told you to take the left turn at Albuquerque," said Harry drily.

"Uhm hi," I tried, holding up a hand in the Vulcan sign. "Uhm. Sorry about this. C'mon Harry. Tea's
getting cold."

Some officious-looking guy recovered. "That's trademark BBC-" I closed the door as soon as we'd both ducked back through, cutting off whatever the guy was saying, clicking a couple of switches, throwing a lever, and spinning a dial. "Right then. And dematerialize back to the Magic Academy, then back and here."

"Any bets?" asked an amused Harry.

"No," I said, going to the door, throwing it open and looking outside. "Hmmm. Change of plans."

"Still not at Miami Beach?" asked Harry.

"No, it's Miami Beach, but wrong universe," I told him. "This is the dinosaur one."

"Missed the entire universe this time?" asked Dan. "Wait. Dinosaurs?"

"Most movies completely screw up the predator-prey ratio by overemphasizing the number of predators," I told him. "Still, let's tarry here a minute because how often do you suppose anyone here has a chance to get a photo-op with a whatever-those-are?"

Hermione bolted to the door, sticking her head out. "Oooh. Bactrosaurus."

"How well-armored is this Tardis of yours?" asked Dan.

"Level three seals, level four reinforcement, and level two barrier," I said. "Protection From Evil with the three meter radius effect, linked to a Protection From Chaos, Elemental Protection. Also a Repel Elements. Why?"

"What kind of barrier?" asked Padma.

"Shell and Protect," I answered.

"Because those are hadrosaurs and they travel in herds," said Dan. "And they just started running."

"Ah. Right you are then." I quickly shut the door from the console switch, activated the appropriate sequence, and went back to another dimension.
chapter 8 - Cleric Path

Chapter Summary

in which a shopping trip goes a bit awry, but connections are made.

One Floo Over
Cleric Path
Chapter 8: Shopping

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The small crowd of wizards, witches, mundanes, and myself, looked around and quickly came to the obvious conclusion.

"Diagon Alley at last, and without going through the Leaky Cauldron," said Harry with some satisfaction.

"Let me just finish locking up," I said, suiting action to word and turning to them. "Where first?"

"Bookstore," said Hermione.

"Gringotts," said Padma.

"Madam Malkin's," said Parvati.

"Somewhere I can get a stomach pill," said Dan Granger.

"Don't look at the Escher paintings," said Padma. "They do a lot of people like that."

"Right," said Dan, still looking a bit ill.

"What about you?" I asked Emma Granger.

"I'm fine," answered Emma.

Lavender Brown added her two knuts. "How about Gringotts first. I think that not all of us have wizard coins, right? I don't know much about muggle life, but I do know you've got your own coins and stuff."

"Good point," I conceded.

"So, what's your artifact do?" asked Hermione. "I forgot to ask."

"Don't talk about them in a crowd," I said in as low a volume as I thought would still carry in this crowd. "People might get the wrong idea." Or worse - the right one.

"Gringotts is the wizard bank?" asked Dan Granger, apparently recovering. "Sounds like a plan."

I let the purebloods lead the way as they were most familiar with the layout.
There were seven girls who had a pactio with Harry. Not all could make it, of course, but I'd wanted as many as could meeting up before the Main Plot started up. It would vastly simplify matters in that case, and this seemed to be the sort of reality you'd have Epic Destinies around. I'd found out that there was a Prophesy involved and no matter that I didn't know the actual wording - those tended to ratchet things up.

I'd also found out there was something called an "inferi" which was a form of evil undead. Dark Lord Sorcerer-King, possibly undead himself, with the possibility of an undead army. Yep, some prepwork would definitely not be amiss.

We were parked next to a store called "2nd Hand Brooms", which sold exactly what the sign declared. I cleared the parking arrangement with the proprietor with a promise I'd be picking up one particular model (to experiment on mostly) after the money exchange.

I listened to Lavender and Parvati going on about investigating this shop or another, Padma throwing in her own opinion from time to time, and how Cho or Fleur would have loved to come along but their schools weren't too keen on quick trips through space and time.

It had been an initial plan to go to the Japanese version of Diagon, which I had discovered was in the city of Koka (which used to be named Koga) and was just off their ninja-themed historical recreation village. I'd thought that fairly clever actually, if non-wizards wandered through the wards they'd think it all just part of the attraction. Meanwhile the wizards there could take a wrong turn and just be thought of as tourists or cosplayers or something.

Unfortunately one had to go to Diagon Alley because the textbooks the children would need at Hogwarts were available there and darn few places else.

"So," said Dan as we waited in line. "You've referred to these 'trope' things and 'archetypes'?"

"Yes," I agreed. "It's not an exact fit, usually, but it does make for a handy form of shorthand. Hermione, for example, is the Brainy Brunette or The Researcher."

"She is quite intelligent," said Dan, fitting into the proud father stereotype without any qualm at all.

"Honestly?" I asked, glancing at him. "I've spoken to her perhaps on five different occasions so far. I think if I'd been able I'd have taken her to the same Magic Academy as Harry and she'd have never wanted to leave but would be far happier with a magic system that made more sense."

Two of the girls ahead of us glanced back but didn't say anything. How much they'd heard, I didn't know.

"The ones I chose to accept cards were those who could have ended up as Harry's partner in the future," I told Hermione's father. "As I said - each of them is considerably more likely to be associated with him in the future than others. Some rejected the arrangement. Others, like you, decided that giving an advantage to your child was more important."

"When 'advantage' means 'better chance of survival'," said Dan. "You know the Patil family doesn't really believe Voldemort is gone."

Judging from the flinches of the two Patil and the single Brown, they WERE listening at least some. I nodded. "I've gone over the reasons I think he's still about. Doesn't matter though - whether it's him or one of his followers taking up the mantle - it's all going to start happening next year."

"That reminds me, I want to see if 'muggles' can use these 'portkeys' - I want to keep an emergency one at home in case we get targetted," said Dan.
"Survival favors the prepared," I agreed.

"You don't normally operate this openly though, do you? I got the impression your 'agency' operates behind the scenes," said Dan.

"Well, true, I would've been hidden through all this except for being attacked while investigating," I said. "Once that happened, everything was going out of control anyway. So why not take refuge in audacity?"

"Wait. So the whole thing. Us meeting, the girls getting pactio, and all - was a MISTAKE?" Dan had stumbled a bit as the thought hit him. "That because you thought that the Death Eaters were already attacking?"

"Well, yeah, so really - it's all that Dumbledore's fault," I concluded. "Standard Operating Procedure would have been just saying a few things to the right people and then concluding. Thing is - nothing has gone the way it should so far. I'm cut off from the main office - tried contacting them every way I could think of. Figured that when I started tracking the girls down, that maybe they'd contact me. Didn't work. Then the first time I ended up in the wrong place in my Tardis, that they'd send me a complaint. Nothing happened. It's very worrisome to me."

"Really?" asked Dan. "So this mysterious Celestial Agency would send you an e-mail or something?"

"Depends on who does the sending, but something low key would be my guess too," I said, wincing at a very bad feeling that swept over me at that statement. Maybe some buried or erased memory there? "If it were Thor or Odin or someone I'd expect lightning to come out of the sky and engrave it on the ground. Same with the Greeks. Subtle isn't normally their modus operandi."

Dan stared at me for a minute as the line slowly moved. "It's a bit odd for someone dressed as a Christian priest to be discussing Norse gods as if you've just seen them the other day."

"Well, I think I have," I admitted. "I had a flash of memory the other day. Was hanging in the corner of a meadhall, having a quick meeting with Forseti while Thor and a bunch of einherjar were feasting and otherwise being quite loud. Only about a minute and a half of memory but it was at least something."

Dan was silent for a moment before Emma revealed she had been listening. "So you don't remember why you were sent here. It could have been something not related at all to us or Harry."

"Well, yes," I admitted. "Still, I'm fairly sure it is Harry. Dark Lord, undead, evil magic, prophesies and the like. The multiple girls fated to interact with Harry is a bit unusual here in the West. In Asian settings though - it's a lot more common."

"Seriously?" asked Emma.

"Oh yes, there was one..." My voice trailed off as I tried to remember. "Well. I think so. There was something. As for being a Christian priest - I don't see the problem. I was raised Presbyterian and I merely hang out with some of the friendlier deities and such."

Finally it came up with Hermione handling the exchange as the only magically inclined of the Grangers.

"How often does this happen - with magic children born to nonmagical parents?" asked Dan. "The goblins there don't seem at all surprised."
"Because they're not," I said, rooting around in my pocket for an orb. They were a handy little enchantment, basically the magitech equivalent of flashdrives or something. A glowing set of names and lines appeared in the air above it. "There's some sort of magic registry here, supposedly that's how they know to send those Hogwarts letters out. In any case, it was fairly easy to check into things and this is Hermione's ancestry tree."

I noticed that when I said and did that, there was a pause and practically everyone in the bank was now paying attention.

I shrugged and went on with it as Hermione dickered with the goblin over exchange rates. Which was fairly important as the goblins didn't respect anyone who didn't fight for a good bargain. Now my explanation and display were actually helping as Hermione was focussed on getting a good deal while the goblin himself wanted to listen in on this for whatever reason.

"The magic gene occasionally misses a generation, producing what they call a 'squib' or non-magical descended of an established magical line. The names in green are wizards and witches, the names in yellow are non-magicals. You see both of your names are in yellow? But if you look at your great-grandparents in Emma's case and your great-great-grandparents in Dan's case - you are descended from two magical lines. Most likely she's going to be a powerful witch when she gets a bit older." I indicated the two sets of green names up higher in the branches.

Lavender studied it. "I wonder if that means she'll be able to claim the contents of her ancestral vault. Be nice if she was wealthy - money is its own power."

One of the other tellers who'd been openly watching spoke up. "We would need further proof of identity than this bit of magic, but it would definitely be something a senior manager would be interested in. The last war left several families without any inheritors and it could clear out some outstanding accounts if it worked out."

"Something to explore later," I admitted. "Today's a shopping day and I have an unfortunate tendency to be attacked out of the blue for reasons that are entirely too troublesome."

"Not in Gringott's," said the clerk with a sneer. Goblins are pretty good at sneering, all those sharp pointy teeth helping them in that.

"We'll see," I told him, and set up an appointment for the following week where I'd show him one of the devices. If it generated some wizard-money for the Grangers it might be time well spent. Sending a kid off to wizard-school couldn't be cheap.

"I'd wondered about this after you mentioned there being some prejudice against those from non-wizarding families," admitted Dan. "So how prevalent is this with someone nonmagical having a wizard hidden in their family tree?"

I shrugged. "I was curious about that myself. Didn't do much investigation but a rough guess is that one in ten thousand British citizens has at least one wizard ancestor. So, just in London, you're looking at eight hundred and fifty three potential parents of a wizard."

Someone in the line abruptly dropped their handbag.

The goblin teller from earlier flashed a smile. "Actually, we estimate it would be more like one in five thousand muggles have a wizard ancestor. So, using the census figures compiled from their 'Greater London Authority' of twelve point seven million muggles - there are two thousand five hundred and forty muggles who have some wizard family in their ancestry."
"I take it you have bets?" I asked that goblin.

"Perhaps, a bit maybe," said the goblin teller.

I allowed that point with a nod of my head. Depending on what the source of their data was, of course.

"As I understand it, it's ripples in the od that tips off their system that someone's a wizard or witch," I continued as Hermione finally got the best deal she could out of the teller she'd been negotiating with.

"'Ripples in the od'?" asked Dan.

"I use mana - internal magic or spiritual energy," I told him. "As near as I can tell, the wizard realm uses 'od' which is the magical energy in the environment and that courses through ley lines. Their wands form a bridge between themselves and this magic field but they also can have desires or emotions shift that field in what they call 'accidental magic' that basically acts as a confirmation of their wizard status."

"Things were so much simpler before we learned of all this wizardry," admitted Emma. "Did you get a good deal?"

Hermione scowled at the goblins. "Cheated me every step of the way, but that's as good as I could get."

The teller looked pleased, as being difficult and pinching every penny he could was a compliment in goblin terms.

"I didn't know you could barter with them on the exchange rate," noted Lavender as we walked away.

"I mailed them a book on 'wizarding society for the muggle-born' awhile back, there was a section on goblin banking," I noted.

"She memorized it," admitted Emma Granger. "Even though it was over a hundred years out of date."

"Maybe I should read it," mused Lavender. "I didn't know that about the goblins."

"It was written back in eighteen-forty-five," I told her. "I ran across it in a second-hand bookstore off of Victoria Street. You wouldn't believe what else was there."

"What?" asked Lavender.

"Something that should never ever be found among the wizards of any world," I told her.

"Dark Rituals?" Lavender guessed.

"You could definitely say that," I agreed.

"Well, as long as it isn't Lovecraft," joked Dan Granger.

I glanced at him, but remained quiet.

Dan glanced at me, saw my expression, and turned white as he came to a complete stop.
Even Lavender, whom I charitably wouldn’t call the brightest candle in the room, caught on as our little group came to a stumbling halt. "What's a Lovecraft? Like love potions?"

"You're kidding, right?" asked Emma Granger.

Hermione had turned pale herself, her dark eyes contrasting to make her look a bit ghost-like.

"No, Lovecraft has nothing to do with love potions. It's really best not to dwell on that," I said. "He got some things very very wrong in most realities. And this was just a notebook. From the look of it, it was just some of his research notes."

"Oh, good luck trying to sleep tonight," said Dan.

"Do I want to know?" asked Parvati.

"No, I don't think you do," answered Hermione.

"Actually, on that subject, you might want to look into magic storage seals and potion-making," I suggested to Hermione. "If your parents and other non-magical sorts could make magic potions and have them handy - it would represent a resource the other side wouldn't expect."

"Wait. We could make magic potions? Like what?" asked Emma.

"Calming Draught, Cure for Boils, Essence of Dittany, Pepperup Potion, Wit-Sharpening Potion..." I let my voice trail off. I didn't really know that many potions, but it was obvious to me that with hundreds of years of experiments with potion-making that some purely utilitarian potions had been created.

"They actually have 'love potions'?" asked Emma, making a face about the thought.

"Yes, but they don't work all that well," answered Lavender. "Only work for a brief bit, have to re-dose constantly, and they lose effectiveness over time as well."

"I think we should try a bit sometime,“ said Parvati, prompting everyone else to stop and stare at her. She hastened to add her reasoning. "Just in case we get hit with it at some point so we know what it's like. Better able to fight it then. You know what some of those families like the Malfoys are capable of."

"I'd rather not," said Padma primly. "I'm not sure why the Ministry has failed to ban such things in the past considering their potential for misuse."

There was some silence briefly before Dan decided a change of subject was quite overdue. "So, where first?"

"Hogwarts has a list of books needed, that you can have an owl or toad or cat, and a your wand and robes and such," said Lavender.

"Why 'owl' or 'cat' or 'toad'? There are much better choices if you're going to have a familiar," I offered.

"Tradition," answered Lavender.

"Books first," said Hermione.

"Robes," said Parvati. "Maybe some quidditch gear."
"Let's start at the bookstore," seconded Padma.

"Robes first," seconded Lavender, making it a tie.

"You're not allowed to use your wands until you're eleven, and then only at Hogwarts or on the Express," pointed out Lavender. "We can also cross off the Junk Shop, the Ice Cream Parlour for now, and the cauldron and potion ingredient shop can wait too."

"I've already got a wand," complained Harry.

"Well, you need a local version as well," I pointed out. "Though if we go ahead and set up a tight ward set we might be able to have a practice room to get spells down before Hogwarts."

"That would be nice," said Dan Granger. "What happens if she tries out a few spells before then?"

"Fines, goes into her record as an offense, but purebloods and wizarding families can usually get off as they can't tell who used the spell unless they examine your wand," supplied Lavender. "You've already gotten your wand."

"Harry has A wand," I corrected. "He doesn't have one specifically tuned for this environment."

"Wait, you mean a wand he got from some OTHER magic world?" Dan Granger shook his head. "If the local magical world wasn't confusing enough."

"First then," decided Emma Granger. "How about we get Hermione her wand? She can always go over to the Patil home to practice."

"Most likely Ollivander's will not sell a wand to someone before they turn eleven," put in Lavender.

-- Interlude 8-1 --

"So, anyway, there the Beeb was giving a big ol' press conference as to how they were bringing 'Doctor Who' back and that they were not in any way responsible for these Tardis sightings."

A lanky man raised his glass as the rest of the bar chuckled. The results had been documented and were still being talked about.

"So, Mister Eccleston," said one of the others at the pub, "how does it feel to be the Ninth Doctor?"

"It feels like regular employment," said the actor. "Considering I've got one job down and have another job I'm working on now, and this is all going on next year. I'm feeling like I might actually be able to make ends meet sometime in the future."

"So, they saying anything different now? And who's the Vicar?" asked one of the locals.

"No, Who's the Doctor," quipped back another local to some degree of laughter.

"Well, some are thinking the little boy is supposed to be the Doctor and the Vicar is his Companion," said the actor. He shrugged after draining his glass. "Whatever. Up until then I was thinking it was some sort of stage magic thing the higher up management was pulling. Now - I was close enough to get a good look at the whole thing. Even saw inside the open door and there was a whole slew of kids and a couple of adults. AND it was bigger on the inside. If it was some stage magic, I sure don't know how they could do it."

"They've had stage magicians looking over the footage and examining the stage," offered one of the other patrons. "It don't bloody look likely to be some trick."
"So, there's a real Doctor, or something close enough," said the actor. "I just hope there's no Daleks. Anything running around, yelling 'Exterminate' and zapping people isn't going to go over quite so well."

-- Interlude 8-1 --

"Look, you're ten. Getting your robes now just means getting new ones next year because you're growing."

"I still want to know what this 'Infinite Library' is." Hermione looked up at one adult after another as if she was sure that they were all keeping secrets from her.

"Another world and I don't have access to it," I admitted. Mind you, I'd love to have a look around it, but that was something not likely to happen. "Supposedly it's a Magical Library with an auto-update function. As soon as a book is published a copy appears there. Heard that it isn't sorted though and finding what you want requires a very specific and specialized skill in spellwork."

Hermione was practically sparkling at the thought of being able to browse a library like that. I had a feeling that if she had the chance, she'd vanish into the stacks and be lost for all time.

"So, you said there were seven 'Ministra' to Harry being the 'Magister'?" asked Emma Granger.

"Right," I agreed. "We're here."

"Not going to answer?" asked Emma.

"Not here," I replied.

"Why not?" asked Emma. "Hardly anyone here right now."

"Have you heard of the 'Sacred Twenty-Eight'?" I replied.

"Eh?" asked Emma, apparently not ready for what she clearly assumed was a topic-shift.

Padma decided to explain. "The 'Sacred Twenty-Eight' is a group of pureblood magical families who are known for keeping their breeding 'pure' with regard to magical bloodlines."

"They're not all going to be your enemies, but they're old and politically powerful and have money," I told them. "Every so often some 'muggles' turn up missing, or someone who absolutely never shows any hint of violence commits violence against his own family. Using divination spells, I found out that a number of the Sacred Twenty-Eight use spells to harm and manipulate the muggle population. They also make sure that the 'muggleborn' and 'half-bloods' finish low in the class."

"How do they manage that?" asked Lavender, clearly never having heard of this.

"Magical families can have their children at home and practicing with their magic and potions. Because there are spellcasters there, they can sign off that any magic done was by them. If the Ministry of Magic detects spells going off at a muggleborn or half-blood home it gets noted in a file and enough notes get a message per their laws against Underage Magic," I told her. "That's just one of the advantages they give full-blood families."

"So what does that have to do with discussing the 'Ministra'?" asked Emma.

"Another advantage they have is that they share information and have been known to leave listening charms and the like around, just to be sure of whom they associate with," I told them. "For example,
I noticed Ollivander's wand shop has a charm on the doorway that allows him to know the name of anyone entering.

"Oh that," said Lavender, sounding a bit relieved. "He likes to pretend he mysteriously knows everyone entering the shop. Just a tendency to be dramatic in his case. My mum told be about that, said to just humor him as it doesn't cost you anything and makes him happy."

"You're running that 'analysis' spell? I thought that gave you a headache if you kept it going for long," commented Dan.

"Yes, well, magical shopping." I indicated the entire area and not just the shop we had entered. "Want to avoid anything in the Dark category. Like that book on the third shelf down, six from the left."

The shopkeep had been listening with a faint smile on her face until I indicated that book. At which point she looked slightly concerned and went to it, gave off a soft "eep" and then used a pair of fireplace tongs to pull that book and hustle it off into a box.

As soon as the lid was closed there was a growl and a faint scrabbling noise from within, but the shopkeep was already chaining the box shut.

"Good eye you've got there Padre," said the shopkeep eventually. "Welcome to Flourish & Botts."

"What WAS that?" asked Emma Granger, some of her hair sticking up oddly at the indication of unsafe reading.

"A particularly malevolent cursed tome that shows up every so often," explained the bookshop salesclerk. "I'm Pam, by the way, and that book was written by Grindelwald back when he was rising in power."

"Hello, Pam," I said. "Would you like it purified?"

The box stopped rattling as if what was inside was listening.

"We've tried just Vanishing it and Banishment charms," said Pam. "So far nothing works."

"While the young ones look over your selection then. I'll just see what I can do."

I quickly took a few items out of my pockets.

"A salt shaker?" asked salesclerk Pam.

The protective circle was quickly drawn and empowered. Especially when dealing with cursed items - safety first.

Grindelwald's name had come up when I'd done a bit of research at a local library, and yes they DID have libraries on the magical side. Sparse, severely underfunded, but with a number of interesting things there. I wondered if Hermione knew about them or if her parents wanted to risk the rather severe penalties for being overdue on them.

Once things were in place, the ritual began. At the first sluggish response of power - the thing in the box went from silent to desperate.

"It's not Gellert Grindelwald," I told Pam. "This is a bit older."

I went through the exorcism, ringing the small silver bell at the end of it. From the box shot out a
thick black smoke which briefly took on shapes of the sort of toothy maw you'd expect on a shark. Then it was gone.

Pam was reluctant to check at first, but finding the box now contained softly glowing ash seemed to satisfy whatever concerns she had. "You able to do curse-breaking then?"

"Depends on the curse, I expect." I had human limits after all - it was one of the things that made the difference between a 'Servant Of The Heavens' and a god. Though there were categories and limitations on them as well, just not human limits.

"So you can cure werewolves or something like that?" asked Pam with a bit of a smirk and raised eyebrow.

"Oh, lycanthropy? Yeah."

The salesgirl gave a bit of a laugh and then noticed I wasn't smiling or smirking. Those sorts of curse though - that's serious business. Curses like that could sweep through a community, destroy entire families in a single night, and generally throw things into a right mess.

"You're serious? I have a cousin..."

Well, that explained why she had brought it up. I made an appointment and explained the process. Had to be done when the werewolf or whatever was in the throes of the transformation and restrained. Took about an hour to cast the proper spells and such. If it didn't work the first time, you had to repeat it. Eventually you just hammered your way through it.

Hermione and Padma had to be convinced to return roughly half their stacks of books to the shelves. Some of the titles were a bit concerning, particularly as the girls involved were all of ten years old.

I might have to look over some of those myself though as there were still gaps in my understanding of this world. My grasp of both the "wizarding world" and the "muggle world" was missing a few things and just scanning through a few sections would assist there.

Well, it looked like Harry had a few. I could always borrow his for a quick look-see.

"Which of this brood is yours?" asked Pam.

"All of them in one sense of the term," I told her. "None in another sense. They all know they're going to be heading to Hogwarts next year, anything you'd suggest as prep-work?"

"Actually," began Pam thoughtfully. "The young lady with the bushy hair is muggle-born?"

"Yes, that IS the local term," I noted. "Though honestly I find the Japanese term 'mundane' or 'latent' to be somewhat less grating."

"'Latent'?" asked Pam.

I waved the point off. "Just referencing that the gene for magic is a bit more widespread than is generally thought of around here. You were saying?"

"Books on history and wizarding society might be appropriate," said Pam. "Particularly with regards to some of the old families. They can be somewhat..."

The way her voice trailed off indicated that she was likely familiar with some of the discrimination herself. I nodded at her. When I heard the bell clatter on someone else entering, I naturally glanced
that way and saw evidence once again that Harry was the 'tal varu' or 'protaganist' of this particular period. The elven term also means a few other things, some of which were not appropriate to be used in polite company.

"Speaking of which," indicated Pam under her breath before she hurried to go off and speak with the customers.

Blond obvious father and son pairing. Aristocratic bearing. I was still running my 'Analyze Magical Fields' spell so I could clearly see that the father was Marked.

Was this the Dark Lord then? Hmmm. No. More likely a major minion. Most Dark Lords were the markER and not the markEE type. So, the father was a major minion and the son a minion-in-training. Or minor minion. Could be the Mole or the Spy or something though those tended to die tragically as they attempted to redeem the sins of the father.

You get in enough of these situations you see the patterns, you see the patterns you write them out and they ended up taught to other operatives.

Major Minion was striding through the store as if it was his own personal kingdom. Little Minion was trying to act the same.

I wandered over towards Dan and Emma's attempt to convince Hermione she could not purchase a stack of books taller than she was. "Be wary. Don't draw attention to yourself."

Both blinked and looked at the newcomers.

"And for crying out loud, don't stare," I added.

I herded them to the desk, waited until Pam could get free and ring up the purchases, then acted as shepherd to get them out the door. Meeting the Major Minion (and his erstwhile Mini-Me) would set the tone for future interactions, possibly locking the future into a set track. I wanted to avoid that as much as possible for as long as possible.

"What was all that about?" asked Emma as we were out the door.

"The adult of those two had a marking on one arm, concealed by the clothing but still radiating black-band," I told them.

"What's 'black-band' mean?" asked Lavender.

"Magic has a spectra, and the spell I keep running allows me to see the colors of magic," I told her. "Holy magic is white. Most necromantic spells and spells specifically designed to torture or drain life show up as black-band. A lot of mind control spells fall into that category as well."

"When isn't mind control a bad thing?" asked Emma.

"There's a spell called 'Zone of Truth' - those within the field can't deliberately lie," I told her. "Sleep spells to cause a violent drunk to sleep it off. There are therapeutic spells to deal with addictions. Things like that."

"Those don't sound quite so bad," admitted Emma Granger.

"There's one that's one of the three Unforgiveables," said Padma. "All three are considered the darkest of dark magics."
"Those are the ones your lockets will protect you from, with the limitations I spoke of earlier," I told the Grangers. "Hmmm. Harry, you and I might want to wait outside."

"Why?" asked Harry.

"Because we're at a place called 'Madam Primpernelle's Beautifying Potions'," I told him. "There are some things best left to others."

"Sounds like a plan," said Dan, realizing how much problem could be involved and wanting to distance himself as well. "How about we head to the cauldron-sellers."

"I hate splitting the party, but it does seem advisable," I agreed.

This earned us a few dirty looks from the females within our group, except for Hermione who was still going through one of the books she'd gotten. Honestly, if there was a Zombie Apocalypse going off around us she'd probably have to be shaken to get her to notice if there was a book anywhere nearby.

"Good. I wanted to throw an idea or two out while the young ladies are away," I told Dan as we made our way to the store that sold cauldrons.

"Oh?" asked Dan, who stopped to check his shoe. A small flattened bug peeled itself off the bottom and proceeded to fly unsteadily away.

"You know about the pureblood prejudice, I've brought it up several times. Sometimes even on purpose." I kept an eye on the bug because anything that could fly after being partially squished was a formidable vermin.

"Yes," said Dan.

"There are a large number of those who are not pureblood who fail to find employment in the wizarding world due to that prejudice." I sighed as Dan put his shoe back on, but I noticed that he was eyeing the bug until it went down a sewer grate. Nice to know he wasn't being overwhelmed by the weird factor yet. "Even if you get good grades and maintain high academic standards, a witch or wizard might not be able to advance further in that society."

"Why are you bringing that up now, she's ten," pointed out Dan as we resumed walking.

"He's not expecting to survive the war," said Harry.

"What?" asked Dan.

"No, the Mentor always dies before the Hero faces their Nemesis," I told Dan. "I'm the Mentor. You get used to it after awhile. Besides, I'm clergy around here. I'm supposed to give advice."

"You really expect to die when things are going on?" Dan had slowed a bit, causing us to walk a bit slower as well. "I know you've said something similar but-

"Now, Mister Granger, you're missing the important bit," I told him. "Wizards go to Hogwarts, graduate with academic excellence, and then?"

Dan shook his head. "Well, if they can't make it in the wizarding world then I guess they..."

Noting that Dan had stopped dead in his tracks, Harry nodded. "He got it."

"Well, part of it, I suspect," I answered. "Mister Granger, are you aware of the spell 'Obliviate' and
its long-term consequences?"

"Uhm, no," answered Dan Granger.

"You're a dentist," I said, waiting for his nod before I continued. "Do you ever use anesthetic?"

"Just the local," Dan responded.

"What about full sedation?" I asked. "See, the thing is that if used correctly and just once or twice on someone for small events - it's a lot like putting someone under for surgery. Hardly ever goes wrong that much."

"Are you suggesting that if she goes through Hogwarts and fails to get a job in the wizarding world, they could Obliviate her entire time there?" asked Dan.

"Yes, it would be rather like a coma victim and not just missing a few hours," I tapped my head. "The human brain uses holographic storage. Bits connected here and there."

"Yes, I'm familiar with the MRI studies," said Dan. "Oh god."

"Now, Hermione is the only one I'm worried about with this," I told him. "The others all have families. However there are those who end up going into the 'muggle world' after graduation and trying to make a life for themselves afterward because of the lack of opportunities for those without connections or pure blood status."

"I heard they feed some of them to the vampires," put in Harry.

"I heard that rumor as well, but I'm pretty sure that's NOT the case." I hadn't been able to find much of any information about the vampire population. Except that they apparently had to obey the local laws and that there was apparently blood-flavored lollipops and sodas for them.

"Is it too late to pull Hermione home and just keep her safe?" asked Dan.

"Yes," I answered. "She's already mixed in it. If you pull her out, someone from the magical law enforcement group will do that Obliviate spell as soon as they learn of it. It's a dangerous world, all we can do is prepare as much as possible."

The rest of the shopping trip went fairly quietly.

Unless you count when the return trip ended up briefly in Fiji. I was ready to return immediately, but I was outvoted.

On the other hand, I got tired of everyone of the magical community flinching when I said the name "Voldemort" so I started calling him "Lord Moldy Shorts" - and that seemed to scandalize the magicals and amuse the non-magicals so I decided to keep doing that.
Chapter 9: Kings, Queens, and Knaves

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Things got busy. Busier.

The goblins were indeed quite interested in the spellwork on the sphere that displayed the whole family tree thing of someone present. I left them one, which they were going to hold as a working model and they'd have their own people try to fine-tune the spellwork for their own official Gringotts use.

The werewolf was cured, revealing a young woman who had been bitten when she was a child and had been facing that battle for well over a decade.

And then there was this.

"We travelled in time," noted Harry.

"Apparently so," I agreed.

"This is the London Blitz," noted Harry, who WAS up on British History.

"So it is," I agreed. "This isn't supposed to be possible."

"Wizards, dimensional travel," said Harry.

"I built this Tardis," I told him. "It is NOT a real TARDIS. It should simply be a tech-safe magic-shielded construct that has a whomping lot of shields and defenses. It shouldn't be possible to travel in time on a single timeline. Maybe this is a seventh universe I managed to access?"

Harry waited by the door while I checked the possibility. Nope. Base reading was the same. This was the universe Harry had come from, it was just that it was September 7 1940. A timepiece I picked up in Mid-Childa, handy little enchantments on it from a universe where dimensional travel was regularly done.

I looked up to find Harry missing from the doorway.

I suppressed the desire to say something nasty. It appeared that not only did I have the whole "Never Arriving Where I Was Aiming For" thing going, I had the "Companion Wandering Off At Inappropriate Times" thing going as well.

I grabbed up a couple of purchases and left, scanning for Harry's presence.
I confirmed the date by a newspaper that had been hastily discarded. Mainly because with everything else going wrong, I wanted to make sure the watch wasn't on the fritz.

The first person I stopped and cast a Cure Serious Wounds on was a policeman who looked shell-shocked and had a head wound. Not likely to shift the timeline, there were a lot of people whose life or death didn't alter things beyond the most local of scales.

It was night and visibility sucked. I stopped and healed two more civilians caught up in this before I found where Harry was and kept from making any sort of exclamation at that.

She was NOT supposed to be here, at least I don't think she was supposed to be here. I was pretty sure that if she had lived through the London Blitz it would have gotten better mention in some timeline I'd been in. Unless I just couldn't remember it.

I used a Cure Serious Wounds on the leg wound while Harry used his wand to shift bricks away.

"What- What is this?" asked the fourteen year old girl.

"It's really best if you don't comment on this until much later, Your Majesty," I told her. "Wizards tend to get a bit overboard with those memory-altering spells. It's complicated. Is your escort...?"

Harry made a slight retching noise. "Guard's here."

"Ah," I said. "Well, here we go. Let's get you to safety."

"This going to cause a paradox or something?" asked Harry.

"I don't know," I admitted. "Is she supposed to be here?"

"I'm right here you know," said Elizabeth II.

"No, I don't think so," said Harry. "I thought I heard something about she was supposed to be in Windsor Castle."

"You could ask me, you know," said the future Queen.

"Sorry, you're part of this timeline and you therefore wouldn't be aware of any alterations in the timeline," I told her. "Trust me, dimensional travel is tough enough without adding in the time travel aspects."

"Wizards and time travel?" asked Elizabeth. "Clearly I was a bit more rattled by that bomb than I thought."

"Windsor Castle?" I asked Harry. "Don't suppose you know the coordinates."

"Actually, I wrote them down," Harry told me. "One of the places I wanted to see when we got the chance."

"Now's a good time," I indicated as another bomber went overhead.

We made our way back to the Tardis easily enough. A lot faster when you know where you're going.

She made the usual remarks of how it was bigger on the inside, followed by a more atypical comment about how if you could do this with her purse it would be ever so handy.
"We're not going anywhere?" asked Harry when I stopped throwing switches.

"No. I still don't know how we ended up here." I was very thoughtful about that. So much that could go wrong after all. What if we ended up in our present, her future?

At which point both Harry and I looked at each other and realized that the future Queen of England had wandered off. In my Tardis. Which was bad enough.

I'd been working several projects of late, and sleep had been one of those things getting short-changed as a result. So when we found Elizabeth the Second in the supposed-to-be-locked Armory hefting a device called the Belkan Overpowered Shock Shell Impactor, which had been in a curio shop in Mid-Childa where such things were considered quaint antiques, I experienced the distinct feeling that perhaps I needed to have a quick lie-down. The expression of glee on her face was not what one would expect of the British Royal Family, but did have a good indication that she knew exactly what the device was.

I'd picked it up because one of the six worlds I was currently capable of visiting had large dinosaurs - some of which are carnivorous. Something with a decent range and capable of stopping a large charging dinosaur was appealing. Just in case I ever got stuck there, or was faced with daleks or something else that really shouldn't be there.

"At least it's not loaded," I noted after I noticed that the power pack was still disconnected.

"I can't believe she's holding BOSSI. You won't let ME hold BOSSI," said Harry. He was ten years old after all. Big guns that made satisfying holes in objects was perfectly all right for him as far as he was concerned. As far as I was concerned he couldn't wield any weapon capable of taking out small spacecraft until he was at least sixteen.

She eventually put it down, but I did grant her that it was quite understandable that she would find such a thing of interest when her home town was currently being bombed.

Eventually there was a break in the bombing, Elizabeth left the party, and we tried again.

As stated, I could reach six worlds and my attempts to check with the home office had failed every single time. The worlds were: Harry's world, Mid-Childa, Dino-Earth (for lack of a better name), the Magic Academy world that had a Narnia time-compression effect, some post-apocalyptic Earth that I didn't stick around in once I'd determined that it WAS some sort of post-apocalypse, and finally a Forgotten Realms kind of magic world.

I was glad that I wasn't going to Krynn as I'd have to fumigate to get the kender or tinker gnomes off my Tardis.

I'd been bouncing mainly to the Magic Academy world to take advantage of the time-dilation effect. Then back to Harry's world in order to travel across distance in the same plane as the D-Jumper wasn't made to travel across distance in the same universe.

So we bounced again, opened the door and found a forest.

So, either wrong place or wrong time and we had to go look to find out which. Because my much-vaunted self-adjusting watch was now giving me an error message.

I have to ask a physicist sometime if there is a law about the technology you're beginning to rely on picking that time to start acting up. Maybe it's something about quantum physics and that Heisenberg Unreliability something-or-other.
As we tried to track down a local and ask, I'd figured out that we were approaching "soft points" in time where something was out-of-place and therefore the timestream had been disturbed. Why, how, and what were all things I had no data on.

It was an operating theory at least.

I remembered a briefing, though the details were fuzzy. Something about "soft places" in a timestream that could be created by something altering that timestream. Ripples that could radiate into past and future from an event, if you don't take the water metaphor too far. Elizabeth not being out of London during the Blitz could be one of those alterations - possibly from something happening in her future or someone mucking about with the past. It was probably centered on England though, the ripples in time didn't necessarily go very far in space. Related but different mediums or something like that.

Hopefully Elizabeth the Second would dismiss her experience as a weird dream or something and forget about it.

I could hope, couldn't I?

-- Interlude 9-1 --

"I'm positive," said Elizabeth the Second, cleaning her glasses. "That is the same Vicar and the same Harry I met back in 1940."

Her liason with the Wizarding World sighed as he looked at the TV screen with the grainy frozen picture of Harry Potter sticking his head out of the TARDIS that had been captured during the BBC press conference. "Harry Potter. The Boy-Who-Lived."

"Quite, and the Vicar," said the Queen. "I realized as soon as the TV programme had begun that they had based their TARDIS on his Tardis, despite their denials of such knowledge."

"This completely blows the Statute of Secrecy," said her liason in a grumpy fashion.

"How so?" asked Elizabeth. "Everyone assumes he's a space alien or at least using advanced technology. Nobody has put forth the idea that this is all magic in nature."

"It's easier nowadays to believe in aliens with advanced technology than magical beings," pointed out the Prime Minister. "So the press is just going with that."

"Just so," said Queen Elizabeth, who had been using the pronoun "I" instead of the Royal "we" because this was relating to her personal experiences prior to the throne. "It was considered briefly during the seventies that perhaps this Vicar was attempting to pave the way for the eventual collapse of the Statute Of Secrecy."

"'Eventual', Your Majesty?" asked the liason.

"Recent findings by particle physicists can be seen as stumbling across the basics of magic," said the Prime Minister. "I've already been briefed on it. There's a bet on it from those in the know in fact. Odds generally given is that it will happen around 2050."

"Plenty of time then," said the liason, as the date put it firmly into the Someone Else's Problem section.

"Hold on, breaking news," said the PM as the news programme going on about how the pseudo-Tardis had been spotted at some pyramid with a tongue-twisty name over in South America went to
They'd broken from that with some news helicopter going over the city had spotted a blue box on the roof of some office park and gone for a closer look.

The door opened and a vicar and small boy exited, waved a small device at the blue box, and then went to the fire escape.

"Was that a METAL wand?" asked the liason.

"A sonic screwdriver. He has a sonic screwdriver?" asked the PM. The liason's question registered a moment later with him. "Well, I suppose that's kind of a wand."

-- End Interlude 9-1 --

"So we had an Adventure," I told the Grangers. "Can't recommend those. Prefer getting regular meals myself."

"Oh, what came out of it?" asked Dan, picking up a cup of hot tea and squeezing a lemon wedge over it.

"I got to shoot a gun!" said Harry.

"What? Like a shotgun?" asked Dan Granger.

"No, it's a gauss rifle. I picked it up the same time I picked up the BOSSI," I explained.

"Which tells me absolutely nothing," noted Dan aloud.

"A mass accelerator," I explained. "It takes a metal slug about the size of a shilling, accelerates it with magnets to a bit over Mach Three, and sends it off to slam into a target at that speed. I picked that and BOSSI up just in case we ever have to spend some time in that dinosaur world."

"So it's more a sniper rifle sort of thing?" asked Dan, not having that much experience with such things.

"I suppose it could be," I allowed.

"Wouldn't that be BOSSI?" asked Harry.

"No, that's more of an anti-ship weapon," I told him.

"'Anti-ship'?" asked Dan Granger. "What kind of ship are we talking about?"

"I maintain that if a tyrannosaur is ever charging me, I'm going to want something capable of stopping it with the first shot," I told him. "Which brings me, actually, to my next question."

"What?" asked Emma, entering and closing the door behind her again.

"Well, it was against my better judgement, but Harry apparently has these 'rescue things' instincts," I told them. "And there were these eggs-"

-- Interlude 9-2 --

"So I told him flat out 'no,'" said the zoo worker. Elaine Montgomery-Fowles had been employed at the London Zoo for ten years. "The nerve of the man! Thinking he could just waltz in and drop off
some eggs of some unknown creature just like that."

Jeremiah Benton had been the zookeeper for five years, having worked his way up the chain from the Reptile House custodian over fifteen years ago. He fixed his subordinate with a flat stare that communicated his complete lack of amusement. "Which is how Longleat Safari Park accepted the offer of TWO TRICERATOPS. Do I have that right?"

"How was I to know?" asked Elaine. "I thought he was barmy!"

"When a blue box appears out of nowhere directly in front of you, and a strange fellow who MIGHT be a time-travelling space alien offers you a pair of recently hatched dinosaurs, you say YES!" Jeremiah informed his subordinate. "And you say 'thank you' and you politely ask if he might have any more! You do not run him BACK into the aforementioned blue box and watch him disappear again."

"But he was a priest! I thought he might be trying to pass off some of that literature they're always trying to force on me," protested Elaine.

"Priests of that sort generally don't travel about in a bleeding TARDIS, now do they?" asked Jeremiah Benton. "Only because you've been an employee for this long is why you're still here and not turned out."

"Well, what about that Stephen King story where the dinosaurs go around eating people? I'd say it was better we not have them at all!" protested Elaine.

"Triceratops," said Zookeeper Benton. "Herbivore. They'll get rather large and there's a chance we'll be able to get them when they're a bit bigger but there's a better chance of getting trampled by them than getting eaten. Still, you might have a point in that it might mean some bad press for Longleat."

-- End Interlude 9-2 --

"I didn't expect the London Zoo to turn you down," said Dan, much later.

"Are they still trying to prove that they're not triceratops?" I asked him, seeing that the television had someone examining the two currently-small dinosaurs.

"They threw out the idea of them being disguised rhinos after the first exam," said Dan Granger. "Now the theory being thrown around is that they're genetically engineered from mosquito blood in amber. Which the experts on that sort of thing say is complete rubbish because DNA doesn't last all that long."

"You here to give us that list?" asked Emma as she walked in, apparently having finished with a patient.

"Yeah," I began, but then there was an interruption from the front desk of their office. Apparently the press had shown up as they were barging past the technicians up front in order to try and confront me.

"Exit." Have I mentioned that I love that spell? Because I really truly do.

Without catching me there, they had no evidence of the Grangers being caught up in it. So when I appeared down the strip, I merely went in and got a couple of little Indian pastries and then left there. I made sure to flash it at the driver of the newsvan in the parking lot.

Still, this meant I'd have to avoid direct contact with the Grangers in the future. Wasn't sure how they
knew I was in the neighborhood, unless they'd spotted the Tardis. Hmmm. Might have to get some of those "don't notice me" spells the local wizards seemed to love.
Death Eaters & Englishmen

Chapter Summary

In which some of the Pactio Card information is revealed, oh and the Death Eaters

One Floo Over
Cleric Path
Chapter 10: Death Eaters and Englishmen

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I had indeed prepared a list for the Grangers. I gave it to Padma who was talking to the various girls through the Pactio cards so that Hermione could scribble something out, as long as they kept it from the news agencies that were apparently on a watch out for my Tardis.

Hermione Granger was down as "Scientiae Inventorem" and had a large book as her Pactio Artifact. The literal translation of the title was "Knowledge of the Inventor" as near as I could find. Her book was a Magical Encyclopedia that accessed all books nearby in her vicinity. The limits were that the information had to be allowed her - privately owned books or ones specifically forbidden her would not be accessed.

Padma Patil was "Quaesitor Verititis" and that meant (apparently) Seeker of Truths. Her artifact was a book that displayed the truth when a lie was spoken in its presence.

Parvati Patil's artifact was the shield of King Arthur, Priwen. It was an impervious shield, or mostly so, with the limitations that it would only stop those attacks which were coming from a single direction and while deployed it could not be moved. She was "Defensor Antemurale" which apparently came across as Shield Defender.

Cho Chang, already in her First Year at Hogwarts, had the title of "Quaesitor Procul" and her artifact was a pair of glasses that basically did what my "Analyze Magical Fields" spell did except she didn't get headaches from overusing it. Just started running low on her magical energies after awhile as it required Harry's magic to manifest it but then it ran on her own magic power afterwards.

Lavender Brown had been kind of "iffy" - hers the single case where the "red thread" I'd tracked to her had the habit of getting tangled or fading out. Unfortunately, I don't know enough of the legends of such things to determine what that actually meant. No books on the subject that I could find within the limited amount of time I had. She was listed as "Veloces Libritor" and her artifact was a handgun. In fact, it appeared to be a copy of the Browning M1911 except that it was white and gold in coloration. It also fired spells off very quickly, with the default being something called "Expelliarmus" that took Lavender's initial dislike for the weapon to pure joy at the sheer potential usefulness for the thing. Her parents had also been pretty happy to learn that the "muggle weapon" was actually something which could disarm hostile wizards. She could also apparently fire a low-powered "Stupefy" spell-bullet to momentarily stun opponents.

Fleur Delacour I was also uncertain of. I was pretty sure that the thread had connected to her and only grounded out through her sister Gabrielle. I did try checking on several occasions, and only cut it short at the evident concern of her parents. As near as I could tell, nearby universes with the two of
them had either Fleur or Gabrielle or both ending up as close friends or romantically linked to Harry and it was confusing the issue.

Fleur's title was "Igneus Bellator" - which didn't surprise anyone much as she was enough veela to have a fire affinity and she was a "proud warrior" type enough to terrorize local kids growing up. Her artifact was a sword that could ignite when she willed it.

Which brought us to number seven, which I had gone with because it was considered slightly more lucky than three and allowed for some potential diversity. Also, every time Harry practiced magic or the Ministra drew on Harry's power for their Pactio, it drew power from Harry. He already had pretty good reserves but it was like a muscle in that constant exercise would cause it to grow. He couldn't keep all seven going for long, despite most of the maintenance coming from the Ministra herself, but he could keep the Pactio transformation going on two for a few hours or until their own reserves depleted.

Number seven was named Hannah Abbott, and her title was "Arma Sanctorum" with her artifact being a white robe. From what I could tell, it was a Robe of Armor that had a Protection From Evil Ten Foot Radius going.

All seven had been using the telepathy function of the Pactio Cards, with Harry trying to ignore them. Good mental training there, as if you couldn't detect his mind you couldn't attack it.

After dropping off the list, it was back to my Tardis and a quick trip to Japan's version of Diagon Alley for some fuuinjutsu supplies. The unintended side trips to Cardiff and the island of Saba were fortunately uneventful.

-- Interlude 10-1 --

"So it works," said Augusta Longbottom as she took a seat.

Amelia Bones tapped the corroded amulet. "Exactly as advertised. It will stop three attacks and no more, but - as you pointed out - that's three more chances for an Auror to survive."

"The Vicar uses a completely alien system of magic, but it is possible for our own system to work out something that does the same thing now that we know it's possible," said Augusta. "Is that the only reason you gave me an appointment?"

"I heard that Neville has an unusual familiar," said Amelia Bones.

"Yes, the Vicar handed one off to him, a summoning matrix," said Augusta. "I was going to get him a toad when he developed magic. They were all the rage in my time, you know."

"Yes, I understand owls are more in vogue nowadays," said Amelia. "What exactly IS it?"

"A turtle that has a pair of leaves on its head," said Augusta. "I believe it's called a 'turtwig' and it is a form of Elemental Beast, with the element being plant-based."

"How odd," said Amelia. "It's been studied?"

"Yes, and it would be considered at least a double-X class," said Augusta. "Though it's actually quite friendly, particularly with regards to Neville. Takes to combat training quite well and has some potential as a sort of magical guardian."

"There may be some problems taking such a thing to Hogwarts," said Amelia. "You're aware of what Fudge has been saying about the Vicar?"
"I'm aware of what Lucius Malfoy has been saying through Fudge, yes," Augusta said.

"So, officially, I can't actually do anything with this Vicar besides arrest him," said Amelia Bones. "My hands are tied in that regard."

"Ah," said Augusta Longbottom with a nod. "That's why I'm here then."

"Why not at all," said Amelia, mock-scandalized. "I'm just touching base with a known supporter of my department and old friend. That's all this is."

-- End Interlude 10-1 --

There were times that tried men's souls, but rather more frequent were the times that tried men's patience.

"A newspaper called 'The Daily Prophet'? Isn't that kind of pretentious?" I asked.

Harry shrugged.

"Well, I suppose it's fairly typical in its way," I said, turning my attention back to the newspaper. The way the pictures moved in a short loop was kind of interesting, but really it wasn't all that different from a Tech 8 newsfeed without the hyperlinks. "Advertising hype starts with the name and all. Still, you'd think a wizard newspaper would get the basics right."

The person who'd brought me this newspaper, after contacting Harry via Pactio Card, merely snorted to show what he thought of it.

"M'sieur Delacour," I said. "Much of my memories are gone. I remember only snatches of my past. I can, however, say with absolute certainty that I am NOT affiliated with Moldy Shorts, Voldemort, Vole De Morte, or an alien invasion of wizards."

"Of the two British newspapers, one would expect the Quibbler to take this approach more than the Prophet," said Fleur's father. "However, this Minister Fudge seems to have it in for you."

"I would expect him to be more someone's pawn than a player himself," I told the elder Delacour.

ALIEN WIZARD AT LARGE!
The Prophet has recently learned that a new species has arrived on our fair planet and begun infiltrating Wizarding Society! Though it looks human, this inhuman wizard practices a strange form of magic and is completely nonhuman internally - part of its plans for infiltration!
This time and space traveling creature is considered a XXXX level Magical Beast, similar to a Sphinx, so approach with caution and a readied wand!

Sources within the Ministry, speaking confidentially, have confirmed that this alien is repeatedly in violation of the Statute Of Secrecy and has also violated laws on time travel and unregistered magical devices.
The Ministry is currently hunting this alien, which calls itself Doctor Hue and disguises itself as a village priest. Contact the DMLE if you have sighted or contacted this creature.
Story continued on Page 4
For details on DMLE charges, page 6
For exclusive Prophet coverage of the Hunt, page 9

"You said there's a rival newspaper?" I asked Mister Delacour.

"Much smaller circulation, and they tend to write about things which don't actually exist," said
Delacour.

"What about your local paper?" I asked. "Mind you, I'd have to bring the Tardis along for the interview. I haven't been able to get the translation effect to extend more than a mile or so."

"Ah, that explains why you are now speaking French so well," said Delacour. "And why your lip-sync is off."

"Only so much I can do, and only so much time to do it," I admitted to him.

"As for the wizarding press," said Delacour, "I think perhaps I know someone who might know someone."

--Interlude 10-2 --

INTERVIEW WITH AN ALIEN
by Arsene Reinhault

The Vicar, a mysterious figure seen in the muggle press and causing such a stir within Wizarding Britain recently sat down with Wizardly World to explain a few things.

Albus Dumbledore found one of his eyebrows twitching and quickly got it under control.

"I see you found the article in question," said Minerva McGonagall from her chair nearby. "Did you see the bit about werewolf cures?"

"What?" asked Dumbledore, quickly scanning the article.

"It's been out over a day in France by now, so the Ministry may be able to stop the International Edition of this French newspaper, but I suspect that will be unable to do much regarding their previous stance," said Filius Flitwick from his own position at the breakfast table.

"They're trying to do something called 'back-engineering' on his own cure procedure, which has been successful on three different werewolves," read Minerva.

"That's simply determining how this 'clerical magic' affects the infected individual and working out how to do the same thing with a wand," said Filius. "There's been some interesting words on that within my own specialized studies."

"Oh?" asked Minerva.

Septima Vector put down her cup. "I take it you have been brought in to consult?"

"I can neither confirm nor deny that, officially," said Filius with a nod.

"Confidentiality agreements being what they are," said Septima agreeably.

"I see," said Dumbledore. They were, after all, considered experts in their field. If the problem were sufficiently difficult, then it could be expected that they were consulted with at least part of the problem.

"Actually, mine isn't part of such an agreement, but I understand it might send some ripples through the magical community," said Septima, reaching into a pocket and pulling out a stone. "Display."

Names and lines connecting those names appeared in flickering blue above the stone.

"What is THAT?" asked Minerva.
"My family tree," said Septima. "This copy of the original device goes back four generations and lacks some of the details of the original, but this much I've been able to figure out from examination of the original currently held at Gringotts."

"Interesting," admitted Dumbledore, not really seeing the point which came across in his voice.

"There are muggle-born in the student body who would be able to trace their lineage to some of the established wizarding families that were wiped out during the war," pointed out Septima. "Meaning that those families were not, after all, completely wiped out."

"Oh," said Albus Dumbledore, eyes widening. Yes, that would certainly put a few feathers up certain behinds.

"The original could go much further and has annotation abilities and color changes that this doesn't," said Septima. "This is just one of the things that this 'Vicar' has come up with. I don't have a copy of that newspaper. What does it say about him specifically?"

Minerva passed her copy over. "Mainly that he isn't a danger, he uses a different system of magic, he's not from around here, and that he's willing to help out where he can. Oh, and also that the blue box he travels around in has a problem with the navigation that he hasn't been able to fix yet."

"So the rumor that he's an extraterrestrial wizard who travels time and space and is a madman with a blue box?" asked Septima as she began reading the article.

"Pretty much confirmed actually," said Minerva. "The article doesn't actually come out and say it, but it does a good job of speaking around it. And he apparently refers to his own style of magic as 'celestial' - therefore of the stars."

-- Interlude 10 - 3 --

"THIS terrifies muggles?" asked Lucius Malfoy.

"So I am told," said Lord Nott, of the Ancient and Noble House of Nott, which was not Knott at all - who were an entirely different family. "It is also the enemy of this Vicar."

"It looks rather silly," said Lucius Malfoy. "Still. It's muggles and it would do to further conceal our identity from any Aurors popping in."

"We'll plan a little something over Halloween perhaps?" suggested Lord Nott. "We really ought to do something to mark the occasion."

"Maybe if we put a skull mask here, and maybe change that suction cup into a scythe?" suggested Lucius.
Chapter Summary

In which the story dealing with the Philosopher's Stone and Voldemort's return actually begins.

One Floo Over
Cleric Path
Chapter 11: Beginning The Tale

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We'd done everything we could to prepare for this.

Harry had balked a few times, which was when I realized he was floundering a bit from all the responsibility.

I'd advised him to have as normal a life as he could in between plots by the Dark Lord.

I had a feeling that this would be at least an Epic Trilogy. Which meant at least three major plots/battles/etc before he could finally bring the Dark Lord down. Hopefully it wasn't going to be a case where he defeated the Dark Lord and he immediately came back in Epic Dark Lord form like some evolving pokemon. I always hated those, it seeming a bit cheap. The Darkness only having to win once, while the Light had to win multiple battles and all.

Harry had trained and I had experimented and built things, shopped and researched and done everything I could to support his efforts.

Now he was going off to Hogwarts via a hidden train. The main plot would probably start as soon as he was on the train.

Though I could appreciate the whole train as metaphor, the logistics of the thing really got me puzzling over it. Seriously, you're going to stick "don't notice me" charms over a length of track going all the way from London to Wales? The set of illusions and conditional magics just on the train station was a mess of old and new and sometimes conflicting spells according to my magical analysis spell.

For example - there was a one-hundred year old spell to exclude children under the age of eleven, a fifty year old spell to adjust that down to ten year olds, and a twenty year old spell to patch over the whole age requirement thing altogether. They just layered stuff atop the old whenever a policy change was done instead of removing the now-outdated one.

This was now officially Harry's story, so I was fully prepared to take my official position in the sidelines with the occasional bit of mentoring or stepping in to heal wounds and cast protective spells. Until my death in some part of the Dark Lord's plot. I just hoped it was quick and relatively painless - some of those Dark Lord types get into the whole torture and humiliation thing. I didn't remember all the times I'd died, but it had come to me a few times over the past couple of years.

Usually it would be things like looking out at a still lake and suddenly getting overwhelmed with a
flashback of being held under the water until I'd drowned. Or I'd been part of a cheering crowd at one of the quidditch games in France (the rules having been explained to me and still not making a whit of sense as far as I'm concerned) when I remembered someone coming up behind me at a similar venue and literally ripping my heart out. Or one dark night when I remembered a time when the darkness had literally come to life and devoured me with what seemed to be a thousand little mouths.

Before dropping Harry off, I tried again. It might be time one thousand and one, but nobody would say I hadn't at least TRIED to contact the home office or a deity in charge of something. Heck, at one point I'd tried to call up every name I could look up in the Norse, Babylonian, and Greek pantheons plus the local Light and every Saint in His church. The best I'd gotten was a busy signal, which shouldn't even be possible, but the whole thing was giving me a most unpleasant nagging feeling. As if I'd forgotten some detail which would explain my current difficulties but the memory was just out of reach.

I tried the ones I'd developed working relations with. Though I'd been raised Christian and maintained a bit of that faith, it's hard not to believe in Thor when he's putting you down (in a friendly but pitying manner) for not having a better tolerance for "proper drink" or when you went off studying under Hephaestus. After all, I had a memory of one of the archangels speaking rather severely to me, though I couldn't recall exactly what had been said.

Contact Other Plane just didn't work. Communion - busy signal. I went through the list of spells until I was nearly out of magical energies.

Finally I just went ahead and brought the Tardis to King's Cross station where the Hogwarts Express would take Harry off to his Grand Adventure. And exams and homework and the whole lot of things that went with a young boy's School Adventure with Epic Quest overtones.

Hopefully I'd gotten the genre right. I was going to feel awfully foolish if it turned out the Dark Lord really was dead and young Harry was in a Harem Comedy setting instead.

-- Hermione --

She went over the spells she had available, ticking them off in a sort of mental inventory. Which wasn't something she'd gotten from the Vicar or her Pactio, it was something of her own devising. Other girls, even many of those she shared the Pactio with, seemed a bit flighty to her - though Padma seemed mostly okay in that regard.

She'd read all the spells in the schoolbooks available to First Years at Hogwarts of course, however the whole stricture against underage magic had been against her practicing much with her wand except for quite recently and even then only when she'd gotten the Knight Bus over to the Patil house.

Incredibly unfair to monitor underage usage of spells as how was one to practice or grow proficient at anything.

So here she was, about to undertake her schooling at Britain's primary school for wizardry. In fact, many stated it was the greatest and oldest school of magic in the world. Though apparently that had to be taken with an entire pinch of salt as many other schools apparently had similar claims.

Castelobruxo in Brazil and Ilvermorny in America both claimed they were great, and Mahoutokoro in Japan was described as ancient - possibly more so than Hogwarts.

Rather than focus on the rather intimidating thought of being alone in a strange place and facing
possible Dark Lords and the like, she simply occupied her time with pondering her preparations.

In addition to the usual wand-based spells, she had learned a few other little charms and spells. Then, of course, there was her Magic Encyclopedia through her pactio.

Her ears pricked as she heard a familiar noise, and she couldn't help but roll her eyes. Grind-thump, grind-thump, with a blue box that began fading into view as if the air itself was becoming more solid.

The Vicar had suggested that they all try to learn at least three spells to have handy. An attack, a defense, and a support spell. Everyone said the Dark Lord was dead though, and that the Vicar was just a rabble-rouser. But he was a rabble-rouser with access to magic that absolutely nobody else in the Wizarding World had - so it was a bit of a toss-up.

Her own parents had mostly gone along with the odd Vicar's plans because it gave her an advantage in a world that was stacked against her for not coming from a "proper" magical family.

Still, the man was a bit dotty, obviously. Kind of like The Doctor, or at least several of the portrayals of the title character from Doctor Who.

A Tardis materializing on the Platform 9 3/4 was enough to cause some families to hurry their children on the train platform, causing another roll of the eyes. She really didn't see the big deal, it wasn't as if the Vicar went about casting spells willy-nilly like some of the Aurors apparently did. There was even videocamera footage aired on Sky News (briefly until someone took it down) where some oddly dressed people were chasing down actors screaming "Obliviate" and having all sorts of odd speculation coming around.

Well, it HAD been close enough to "exterminate" for certain parallels to be drawn, hadn't it?

Hermione hung back a bit, not really feeling all that comfortable as the center of attention. Yes, there was Lavender and the Patil twins. Ah, that Chinese girl must be Cho Chang - undeniably pretty that one. Must have to fend the boys off with a stick. Which was likely to be a wand, wasn't it?

"Let's find a compartment quickly," said Parvati, waving at her. "Hermione! Need help with your bags?"

The Tardis opened and Harry came out, looking as if he were dressed for a performance in Pride & Prejudice. Quite dashing actually.

"I can't wait to switch these out for robes," grumbled Harry as the door closed behind him and that asthmatic-thumping noise started up, signalling the ship was leaving.

"What? He's not going to see you off then?" asked Parvati, sounding a bit scandalized.

"No," said Harry. "He's worried that Fudge is still trying to arrest him for being a foreign undocumented wizard and some other garbage."

"Well, he should be worried," Padma said. She nodded to where several wizards had popped out of the shadows with brandished wands only to see their prey escaping.

One brave soul ran towards the disappearing box and yelled out a Finite Incantatem that bounced off something around the Tardis and hit a piece of luggage nearby. Clothes exploded outwards.

"MY LUGGAGE!" yelled some young blonde girl she didn't know, who'd apparently ducked and covered when she'd seen the Tardis but not departed due to the aforementioned case.
"So that's what happens when you cancel out the shrinking charms in an object designed to contain them," mused Hermione aloud as the clothing flew through the air.

-- End Hermione --

-- Harry --

Everyone was there, nobody was using their pactios. Well, everyone except Fleur was there on Platform 9 3/4.

After spending a few seconds on the puzzle of why it wasn't '9 1/2' instead, since it was directly between 9 and 10, Harry dismissed the puzzle as just another weird thing involving what Argent had called 'wizard logic' on one occasion.

Even Cho was there, looking bemused and ignoring the questions about the Sorting. Apparently that was a tradition.

"Honestly, we can't be expected to wrestle a troll for the Sorting," complained Lavender.

Some other girl was attempting to gather her luggage by hand, and Harry helped with that, using a Levitation charm to swiftly gather bunches of it. The girl smiled at him and nodded, but then it was time to board and find a compartment.

Cho had to go up front, and then it was just him and his girls sharing the one set of seats.

There was speculation about the Sorting, but Hermione had apparently researched it and discovered that there was a hat involved.

We had to separate in order to fit, if we had to do this again we'd have to arrive early apparently. Cho went to join her classmates. Lavender, Padma, and Parvati to another compartment with a couple of girls who had a "pureblood" air about them.

"Hello. Do you mind sharing a compartment? Everything else appears a bit full up?" Harry asked the sole person in that compartment.

"No, I... Goodness sakes. Are you Harry Potter?" asked the slightly chubby boy.

"Yes," said Harry, remembering some of the wizarding customs he'd found in a book. "Harry Potter, of the most Ancient and Noble House of Potter, descended of the Prewitt clan."

"Ah," said the boy, getting up. "Neville Longbottom, of the Ancient and Noble House of Longbottom."

"I see," said Harry, taking a moment to remember his readings on the subject and then nodding. "Our Houses were allies since the 1850s. Good to meet you."

"Right," said Neville, uncertain for a moment but then taking the extended hand and shaking it once. "Uhm. Pleased to meet you."

"This is my friend, Hermione Granger," said Harry.

"Ah, good to meet you," said Neville, who started to extend his hand then began to bow, before he decided the handshake was probably safe enough.

"Charmed," said Hermione.
"You're with the Vicar, aren't you?" asked Neville. "He got me my turtle."

"I think I heard something to that effect," said Harry as he put his own suitcase away.

"A turtle?" asked Hermione.

"A turtwig," added Neville.

Hermione blinked a couple of times before she decided to just go ahead and ask. "What's a 'turtwig'?

-- End Harry --

I found my attempt to get my Tardis out of the ambush to be a bit flawed. Not the wards though. I had put in some high level Shield (protection from physical attacks), Barrier (protection from energy attacks), and Shell (protection from magical attacks) enchantments on the Tardis. Partly because I can be paranoid as hell and secondly because I have bloody good reason to be paranoid as hell.

Still, unless you're Superman or Dreadnaught or something like that, you don't just stand there and let someone throw everything they've got at you while they chip away your defenses.

So I threw the Tardis from King's Cross to that field in the dinosaur world and went over the defenses to make sure nothing had gotten through. During which some small birdlike dinosaurs came nosing around to see if I had any treats. Or was one. A Speak With Animals spell was enough to get them to leave me alone in exchange for a good-sized chunk of bread and some bits of chicken I had left over from breakfast.

After that I tried again, opened the door and took a quick look around.

"Okay," I told the startled-looking group on the other side. "This doesn't look right. NASA?"

"Uhm yeah," said a young pretty girl at one of the computers, apparently recovering faster than anyone else.

"Oh, love the hat," I said. She was wearing a NASA baseball cap. "Trade you for it."

There was a certain change in the atmosphere, and the girl in question got an almost-evil gleam in her eye. "What have you got?"

"Hang on a sec," I told her. If I showed up in a NASA hat, wouldn't it further cause the conspiracy theories to flow? Why yes, yes it would. And that might further distance myself from those wizards upset about me blowing secrets if I was actively working the misdirection as an alien thing.

Going through my recent purchases at that curio shop on Mid-Childa, I picked up a child's toy. A featureless silver sphere about the size of a coffee cup. Not a British teacup, one of those monster coffee cups they've got in Norway.

I brought it out. "How about this?" Then I activated it and started it gently floating across the room.

"Deal!" the redheaded girl quickly stated and tossed the cap to me.

"Now if you take it apart, it'll stop working, but I figure clever people like you can tell a lot without cutting the thing open," I told her as I put the hat in place. Probably looked a bit off with the Vicar uniform. "I'm wearing a NASA hat, NASA hats are cool."

"How's it sealed," asked the girl, looking it over and examining it quickly.
"Molecular welding, it's about Tech Level Ten I think. 1991 Earth I think you're an Eight or so," I told her. "Good luck."

Back in the Tardis with my new prize, activate the sound-effect, dematerialize, back to the dino-world, back to Harry's world, open the door.

"Vicar," said a bored-sounding man in some formal uniform. "The Queen will see you now."

I blinked. "Is she expecting me?"

"Indeed," said the man with a condescending sniff at the end.

"How?" I asked reasonably. "I wasn't expecting me."

"We didn't know when, we just knew you'd show up sooner or later," the man said and rolled his eyes for emphasis.

"Oh," I said. That actually did make a certain degree of sense. "Will there be tea?"

"At this hour?" asked the man, giving a sniff.

"Too bad," I replied, closing and locking my Tardis behind me. "I have a feeling I could use a cup. Oh, by the way, what's the proper method of addressing the Queen in this century? For a non-subject who nonetheless respects the individual and that kind of thing?"

"Ah," said the man, probably a seneschal or somesuch. He relaxed slightly, possibly because this was more familiar ground. "There is, as you've guessed, a protocol."

-- Harry --

"Is it true? I hear that Harry Potter is on this train," said someone as he slid the door open and stood there flanked by two others.

"Huh," said Harry, looking up from a disc-shaped device. "Someone with hired muscle?"

"So you're Harry Potter? My name is Malfoy. Draco Malfoy. You'll find that some wizarding families are better than others."

"Ah," said Harry, thinking back to a book he skimmed. "You're of the line of Nicholas Malfoy then?"

Draco straightened a bit at that. "Yes. You've heard of my family then?"

"Ran around killing muggles in such a way that their death was blamed on the Black Death," said Harry. "Also known for creating the spell Senex Fluidum - used for aging wine and various alcoholic beverages faster. Made your family quite a bit of money as I understand it."

"Well, one must have one's hobbies," said Draco, not liking that he was admitting his family had at one point actually worked for a living.

"Are you a major antagonist?" asked Harry, glancing again at the two bulky kids standing to either side of Malfoy.

"A what?" asked Draco, not understanding.

"Oh, right, my manners," said Harry, standing. "I am Harry Potter of the Ancient and Noble House
of Potter, heir to the Ancient and Noble House of Peverell. This is Neville Longbottom, of the Ancient and Noble House of Longbottom. He is not, unfortunately, a hobbit despite the name.

"A what?" asked Draco.

"A what?" asked Neville.

Harry indicated the witch in the room. "And that's my friend, Hermione Granger. Not of an Ancient and Noble House."

"Charmed," said Hermione, not sounding terribly sincere.

"You might want to reconsider your friends, Potter," said Draco, glancing at the witch and then dismissing her as completely inconsequential. "There are those who can be of benefit to you, and there are others that can only drag you down."

"Well, the Vicar said I shouldn't make any inter-House alliances yet, something about keeping options open," said Harry.

"Well, think about it anyway," said Draco with a nod. He turned about and made as impressive an exit as he could. Which actually wasn't nearly as much as he thought it was.

"Uhm, about the Malfoy family," began Neville.

"I read a bit about them," Harry said. "They made their money with 'muggle finance' and hanging with the rich, being the 'power behind the throne' and so on. The Vicar made me read up on the major families. They only became muggle-haters after the Statute Of Secrecy."

Neville was silent briefly before he asked. "What about the Longbottom family?"

"Your family and mine were allies in the last war," said Harry. "Also your family has a 'gentleman farmer' thing going, get the most yield out of your land than anyone around."

"Uhm, yeah," said Neville, not sure of that himself.

"I read up on them too," said Hermione. "Well, I'm going to change. I suggest you two do so as well."

Harry snapped his fingers, his clothing abruptly changing to a bowler hat and black suit. "Wrong one. Hang on." (Snap) "There we go. Hogwarts uniform."

"How did you do that?!" asked Hermione, thinking this was one of the most mind-bogglingly useful spells she'd ever heard of.

"The costume change charm," said Harry. "You get several outfits, then set a condition when you throw the charm on the outfits. I also got a pair of swimtrunks and another couple outfits in there."

"Why do I get a sudden feeling of doom?" asked Neville.

"No idea," said Harry, watching Hermione practically skip down the hall.
Meetings

Chapter Summary

In which meetings take place, plans discussed, and Harry suffers a terribly long train ride.

One Floo Over
Cleric Path
Chapter 12: Meetings

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I bounced from Harry's world and headed to the Academy world and then back to Harry's world - it was the usual method of things after all and nine times out of ten worked as planned.

My phone began ringing as soon as I landed again.

There was a brief flash of hope that it was the Home Office and I'd finally get some answers about my mission, why my memories were still largely gone, even just some indication that I had the right Hero and right plotline.

And, yes, I had put a phone in my Tardis replica. Phone booth kinda should have an actual phone and all.

"Hello?" I asked into the handset, trying not to hope too much.

"Sir. You might want to look at where you've landed."

I opened the door to take a look, thinking again I ought to get some camera or something so I could just check a screen inside the Tardis instead. So many tweaks and add-ons that I was losing track of them. Might have to get some post-it notes and start plastering the control room with them.

I blinked. There was a guy in a formal suit standing there with a phone, a bunch of guards behind him, and I had apparently landed in some well-appointed manor sort of place.

"This does NOT look like the Welch countryside," I commented into the phone.

"Rather not," agreed the formal-looking guy into his own phone.

I nodded, went back inside, hung up the phone, and then returned to the door. "Just a quick question. How did you get my number?"

"Her Majesty remembered it from her earlier visit with you. You have the number written down on the phone itself," said the formal guy.

"Ah," I said. "Which 'Her Majesty' are we talking about?" I hadn't run into a terribly large number of royal persons but there WERE still holes in my memory and I'd recently run afoul of time travel as a possibility. Time travel complicated EVERYTHING.
"The Queen of England," said formal guy.

"Which one? I haven't accidently gone back into the past again, have I? Or the future? That could be rather more complicated than I'd like."

Formal Guy's mouth twitched slightly. "I could see where that might be the case. Queen Elizabeth the Second. She requests an audience, if you are not overly busy at the moment."

"I'll see if I can make time," I said, trying to match the dryness of delivery there.

"In your case, that might just be true," said Formal Guy.

"The Cleric, Ryuvis Argent," I said.

"Daniel Radcliffe. Royal Advisor on matters of the wizarding world. This way, please."

"Oh? She keeps tabs on such things?" I asked. "That's certainly hopeful."

"I gather that you had something to do with that actually," said Radcliffe. "Most of the Royal family find it rather inscrutable. Something about boxes that are bigger on the inside."

"Should I just leave my Tardis here?" I asked.

"Oh, please, Vicar." Radcliffe rolled his eyes. "If you try to park it elsewhere on the grounds, I shouldn't be at all surprised if you ended up atop Ayer's Rock or in Mumbai or something."

I couldn't really argue that point. I managed to avoid protesting it wasn't my fault, at least out loud. Inwardly I protested that. Instead I just went with the obvious. "So, any local customs or laws that I need to observe? I'm not really up on the protocols involved."

-- Harry --

"Hi, my name's Weasley. Ron Weasley."

"Bond. James Bond."

Ron looked puzzled, apparently not getting the reference. "I thought you said you were Harry Potter."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Reference to muggle culture."

"Oh," said Ron, sounding confused.

"Yes, I'm Harry Potter," said Harry. "See, I've even got the scar."

"Why do you suppose it looks like a lightning bolt?" asked Hermione, apparently just thinking of this.

"You got me," admitted Harry. "The Vicar might know. I know he put a seal around it because it was made with dark magic and that sort of thing tends to have side effects."

"My Mom says you really can't trust that Vicar," put in Ron. "Fiddling about and messing around with people. Probably has some sort of agenda or something."

Harry nodded. "Yes. Everyone does, after all."
"Does what?" asked Ron.

"Have an agenda," said Harry, relaxing back into his seat.

"I don't," said Ron.

"Of course you do," said Harry, matter-of-factly. "It's one of the things that humans have in common with other species. Well, most of them. There's a few nonhuman species which don't have anything like that."

"Like house elves?" asked Ron.

"I'm not familiar with 'house elves'," said Harry. "I was talking specifically about Enchanted Beasts like talking ermines, genius loci, and dolphins. You'll talk to them and everything's going swimmingly and then they'll say something that indicates they're not human in a funny suit. Except they have agendas too. Though the dolphin agenda usually involves getting fish."

"A 'genius loci'?" asked Hermione. "One of these days that Vicar HAS to take me to some of those other worlds."

"How can you trust that Vicar guy? He's not even a wizard, or so I hear." Ron paused. "Actually, I hear a lot of things that don't make any sense. The Daily Prophet ran an article on him and Percy pointed out that the Page 3 said one thing and Page 2 said something that didn't agree with that."

"The word you're looking for is 'contradicted'," said Hermione. "What about you, Neville?"

Neville looked bemused. "I've only seen the man a few times. He DID get me a familiar that is damn useful, I'll give him that."

"Really?" asked Hermione. "What?"

"A turtwig," said Neville.

"A wha?" asked Ron.

Neville took out a white-and-red sphere and caused it to go from marble-sized to softball-size by touching something on the surface.

"Oh. THAT," said Harry.

"A ball?" asked Ron, not seeing what was useful about that.

Then there was a flash of light coming from the ball that somehow resolved itself into a very peculiar-looking creature.

-- Vicar --

Queen Elizabeth the Second held up her hand. "First. Might we get a bit of confirmation?"

"Confirmation of what?" I asked.

"You have traveled in space and time?" asked Daniel Radcliffe, Her Majesty's Advisor on Wizarding Matters.

"Well, yes," I admitted.
"Your world of origin is not this one?" asked Radcliffe.

"No, it's not," I agreed.

"You are not a wizard in that you normally don't use a wand, however you are capable of using other magical systems?" continued Radcliffe.

"True," I said.

"You have fought, in the past, those who would harm or slay Her Majesty's citizenry?" asked Radcliffe.

"Yes, though mostly I simply support the local hero," I told him. That was the role of the Reality Relief Office after all - sort of like that "Doctors Without Borders" group except that we just tried to assist the local heroes or the closest equivalent. "Rules and such."

"You're not here to actually cause any trouble?" asked Radcliffe.

"I wouldn't think so," I told him.

"You've lost large amounts of your memory and cannot contact your superiors?" asked Radcliffe.

"Yes, and how did you know about that?" I asked.

A French newspaper was held up. Radcliffe raised an eyebrow.

"Ah," I said. "I'd forgotten about that interview."

"So this is accurate?" asked Radcliffe.

"As far as I know." I shrugged. "The Daily Prophet seems largely inaccurate and I wanted to counter some of their more inaccurate statements."

"Well, the Prophet is the major wizarding newspaper in Britain. Then there's the Quibbler and a couple of smaller ones. Accuracy of facts is often less important than other considerations," said Radcliffe.

I sighed. "Just an outsider asking a quick question if you could clear it up for me, Mister Radcliffe?"

"Yes?" asked Radcliffe.

"Your pardon, Your Majesty," I said, not entirely clear on the role of monarchy in modern Britain. After all, I'd been in many other worlds where things were different and despite my time here in this world - I'd not really paid much attention to the government and such things with my time mostly concerned with various local projects. "When Voldemort was doing this Wizarding Civil War thing a few years back, non-wizards were being killed."

"Yes," said Radcliffe. "Mostly families connected to muggleborn but a few others as well. It was covered up in keeping with the Statute Of Secrecy."

"Why didn't you use Special Forces?" I asked. "I've already determined that many of these 'muggleborn' and 'squibs' go through your wizarding school system and then end up going back to the nonmagical world because the job opportunities in the magical world aren't available. You could train them up and then smack down these terrorists using modern weapons."

"Guns are generally illegal here in England," said Radcliffe. "And there are laws against using
military force against civilian targets."

"So it's mainly a legal matter," I summed up. I'd figured something like that. Too bad though, as I'd found that shooting villains tended to keep them from popping back up for their revenge later. Didn't stop all of them of course, but it surely did cut down on their hired help.

"Do you have some particular concern to address there?" asked Radcliffe.

"Yes," I told him. "I have reason to believe that Moldy Shorts insured his immortality through a soul-splitting method, storing his life into several different objects using a ritual and murder by specific spell. That he has also used magic to create something called 'inferi' and has an army of them in wait."

"Wait. Voldemort is ALIVE?" asked Radcliffe.

"Yes," I said. "Look, I've run across similar methods of immortality in the past. They ALL have serious drawbacks. I've located one of these soul-shards and put it behind a couple of layers of seals until I find a way to safely destroy it. " Well, that and it might be important to the plot. And that it was on Harry's forehead which made some of the more forceful methods of destruction somewhat less attractive.

"He's using a horcrux then," said Radcliffe.

Queen Elizabeth stirred. "What exactly is this 'horcrux' then?"

"Dark Magic, Your Majesty," said Radcliffe. "As described, it requires a ritual and then a murder using the Killing Curse to split off a section of one's soul and then store it within an object. The object becomes harder to destroy after that, magically reinforced by the soul fragment stored within it."

"The old story about the wicked Vizier storing his heart inside a tower so that he can't die? Same thing," I explained further. "Since this soul-splitting thing he's most likely gotten more insane. Probably has some problems with planning things out too. Something you can take advantage of."

"He's done more than one?" asked Radcliffe.

"Yeah, at least two more," I told him. "I was working on a 'horcrux detector' but I'd need at least two more to try and experiment with it."

"Might I ask what the horcrux you've found is?" asked Radcliffe.

I considered telling them that it was a scar. I considered telling them it was sealed until I could be sure it wasn't something that would be of critical importance later. Instead I just played it safe. "I'm not saying at the moment because I don't have all the details. I COULD destroy it using divine magic, but that would likely alert Moldy Shorts that someone's figured out his trick. Best to hold off on destroying them until we're actually making a move."

"Ah, I see," said Radcliffe. He didn't sound convinced but that was expected.

"So young Harry Potter has gone to Hogwarts?" asked the Queen.

"Yes, and that is not someplace I'm particularly welcome at," I said, basically confirming what they already likely knew. "I'm afraid that I don't particularly get along with Mister Dumbledore or some of the others there."
"Actually, Her Majesty had an idea there and I was able to... negotiate something," said Radcliffe.

"Oh?" I asked.

"You have a means of protecting technological items from the effects of strong magic, do you not?" asked the Queen.

"Well, yeah," I admitted. "Electronics get fried from the quantum uncertainty factor being ratcheted up even if it's only from sub-particle-level to nearly molecular-level in the case of major wards. Had to come up with that sort of thing on my own, then I found out Mid-Childa had already perfected it." That had been a major bummer, only requiring a few tweaks for the particular type of magic they had locally. Not that I didn't take advantage of it, but it was still months of work that ended up discarded because it turned out someone else had already done all the research and experimentation.

"Huh?" asked Radcliffe, looking as if he didn't understand one word in ten.

One of the guards raised a hand, waiting until he was acknowledged before speaking. "Quantum physics. Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. You can't know the exact location of a particle and know its velocity at the same time. It's one of the problems in trying to shrink computers beyond a certain size because if the circuits are too tiny, they short out because the electrons will wander."

"Something like that," I said. After all, that sort of thing got WAY too complicated when you started factoring in all sorts of things like slightly different Realities like those with superpowered mutants and the like. And that didn't get into the technical details about waveform versus particle versus whatever. People debate that sort of thing and it's best to avoid going into the fiddly details if you can avoid it. Especially when in an audience with royalty whose hobby this was not. "It's basically using magic to create an magic-dampening or anti-magic field."

"You make it sound easy," offered Radcliffe.

I judged from the tone of his voice that someone had tried to do the same thing at some point, and hadn't gotten very far.

"You want my research notes?" I asked him. "They're not complete, and they involve fuuinjutsu - which is a Japanese magic system involving calligraphy."

"Yes," said Radcliffe immediately. He looked a bit surprised and shot a glance at the Queen.

The Queen though was smirking for just a second or so, followed by a very softly muttered. "Told you so."

Yeah, it was basically a major step forward for the muggles if they had any way to keep their electronics or other equipment frying in the presence of magic. It wouldn't save anyone from magic directly shot at them though. A blast-spell would overwhelm that level of protection without slowing down. A fireball or other such spell would still burn a television that was shielded by those methods. On the other hand, a wizard going into a modern Emergency Room wasn't going to fry all those electronics when they tried to save a life if there was a shielding method in place.

"So, what's this deal you've made?" I asked, getting back to the matter at hand.

"Ah, well, I still have some contact with my teachers back at Hogwarts," said Radcliffe.

"Oh?" I asked. Why did I have a bad feeling about this?
Hogsmeade turned out to be a wizarding village near Hogwarts. A large fireplace was used for Floo travel, but my experience with the Floo network was less than pleasant.

First, there seemed to be the same problem with the uncertainty of arrival that I had with the Tardis.

Second was the feeling one had being flooed. They make these drinking straws that bend and twist in on themselves, called in some locations "silly straws" or something like that. Going through a Floo was rather like being sucked through one of those. Some people find it more pleasant than others. Some people must not be aware of the whole process of being sucked through a superspatial wormhole and spun through multiple branch locations at an extremely high rate of speed.

I, unfortunately, was quite aware of such things as an Outsider and attuned to such things.

In fact, due to being an Outsider and attuned to such things, the "near instant" teleportation effect seemed to last at least two minutes. Two very very uncomfortable minutes.

I staggered when I came out of the fireplace and had to suppress throwing up. I wasn't sure if some of that was because of the shifting of momentum. If you're in London and going to Wales, the ground is moving at a different rate because of altitude and lattitude. Flying isn't a problem because you're lifting up from one spot to another where relative velocity doesn't factor in. Trains aren't a problem because you're shifting along with the ground. It's only a problem with some forms of teleportation.

"Reverend Argent, I take it?" asked someone nearby.

"Yeah," I answered, straightening up.

"First time by floo?" asked the woman.

"No, I've gone once before like that," I said. "One of the reasons I built my Tardis."

"I'm Aurora Sinistra," said the woman, turning and walking towards a table. "I understand you've a way to keep muggle equipment working even at Hogwarts."

"Direct and to the point," I said, smiling a bit despite my stomach still trying to adjust to the shift. As I followed her, the nausea and shakiness faded. "A welcome change. There's a way, yes."
"Excellent," said Sinistra, reaching a table with two others already there. "We have telescopes with various charms on them to enhance their performance, but there are muggle resources that would be quite handy if the Hogwarts wards wouldn't fry them."

"I fail to see how such things would be of use to a Potions class," said the male already seated.

"Potions?" I asked, not bothering to conceal my interest. "Do you have a method of testing ingredients to determine if they're suitable?"

The guy was silent and regarded me with that whole sneery look to him for a few moments until the woman next to him did an entirely nonmagical elbow to the ribs trick. "To some extent."

"Great," I said. "I had Harry going through his Potions workbook and at one point we were wondering about things like powdered triceratops horn, or tyrannosaur tooth - what those would be like as potion ingredients."

The Potions guy did a slow blink. "I see."

"I can brew some potions as well, but I expect our methods are completely different and don't work at all for Harry," I told him. "Mainly healing potions and the like. Maybe you could take a look at a couple and see if there's anything you can do with them."

"Possibly," said the man, sounding very grudging even on that slight acknowledgement.

"Septima Vector," said the woman who had provided an elbow. "My associate is Severus Snape."

"Reverend Ryuvius Argent," I told them. "You can call me Ryu, Argent, Reverend, or so on."

"You didn't use that ridiculous contraption of yours to arrive, and are clearly not comfortable with floo travel," said Snape. "Why?"

"Are you familiar with the French newspaper articles on me?" I asked in return. On seeing three nods, I continued. "The first was correct, the second somewhat less so, and the third was mostly correct for the first half and considerably less in the final three paragraphs."

"So you are not here to fight alien wizards bent on exterminating us?" asked Septima Vector.

"I don't even KNOW of any alien wizards in this world," I told her. "If there were then I'd have trained Harry to fight them properly."

"Hmph," hmphed Snape.

"In any case, there's some tests being done on the Tardis exterior, and a little package being prepared for deployment by one of the space programs that the British government has contact with," I told them. "No reason not to. "It bothers me that one of the worlds I can still access is a post-apocalypse. Why can I access that particular world? Is there some part of my past involved with that world or is there some resource I should have available to me from there? Is it the future of this world? What disaster struck it that I could see what appears to be a devastated and abandoned city in the distance?"

"You didn't approach?" asked Snape.

"No, I've seen several post-apocalypse scenarios where getting closer would be BAD." I started ticking them off. "Zombie apocalypse, nuclear radiation, gamma ray burst, nanite virus, mutant insect swarms, and then there's the worlds where the Dark is openly active."
"You've contact with one of the space agencies?" asked Aurora Sinistra.

"More like contact with a contact," I said. "I did a couple of divination spells, mainly to make sure it wasn't something that was going to carry an infection or something back. The official story on the probe is that I'll be testing out a prototype so that they can see how well their probe works."

-- Interlude 13-1 --

"Are you kidding? The chance to have a space alien drop a probe off on an unknown alien world and collect data as long as we share the information?" asked the representitive from the European Space Agency.

"So," said David Whiting, the go-between assigned to this activity. "Interested?"

"I'll need the technical details for the probe," said the ESA rep. "How big it can be to fit in that box and get wheeled out. How long do we have to put one together?"

"Details are on this," said Whiting. He put a small disc on the table. "Six months to put together whatever will fit in that amount of space. He'll pick it back up after three months. Not on the disc, but something my superiors picked up - there may be hostiles so having it armored or not easy to take apart again is a consideration."

"Maybe some form of camouflage?" asked the ESA rep.

"That's up to you," said Whiting.

-- Interlude 13-1 end --

"Before we go, I have to ask." I held up a hand as my lunch companions prepared to go their separate ways. "Do you want me to remove that?"

I pointed to the location of the dark magic I could feel.

"Pardon?" asked Severus Snape.

"I can feel the presence of that dark-band magic on your arm," I told him. "I can remove it."

All three stared at me momentarily.

"As tempting as that offer is, I shall decline at this time," said Snape. "Perhaps later."

"Fine, I could put a sealing around it too just so that it doesn't influence you or cause some other problems," I told him. If he didn't want that curse removed, then I couldn't do anything about it. People had to be able to choose their path in life after all. Even if I wanted to throw a Word at it and watch the thing burn. Just the presence of it was giving me a twinge right behind the right eye.

"I'm sure," said Snape with a tone that indicated he truly doubted it.

"The snark is strong in this one," I said, mostly under my breath. To my surprise, Snape's lips actually twitched in something approaching a smirk for a moment before the expression vanished. Neither of the other two placed the reference.

"In any case, I'm not on your floo network so you can't reach me that way," I told them. "How do you want me to contact you?"

Snape raised an eyebrow. "You have a way of checking with Harry Potter, do you not? Simply use
him as a go-between."

"That was my 'Plan B',' I agreed. "I was hoping there was also a 'Plan A' that someone else had."

"An interesting concept," said Snape. "Would that others developed backup plans."

I nodded at him. If he'd put any more sarcasm in his voice, he could have used it as a paperweight. You had to respect talent like that, he'd obviously put some work into it.

The other two, Vector and Sinistra, I didn't know that much about. The conversation had gone on about their classes and what muggle-tech could mean for them. Vector had thought that having muggle calculators programmed to handle 'arithmanacy' might lead to new breakthroughs. Sinistra had the idea of using photos from the Hubble, among other things, could further inspire students and get them interested in that subject.

I watched them go, then set off myself. Might as well spend some time here in Hogsmeade since I was already there.

-- Interlude 13-2 --

"First Years, this a way," said the remarkably large individual attempting to get the youngest group of students to head toward the lake.

"What's with the skelly-horses?" said Harry, pointing.

"What are you talking about?" asked Hermione. "There's nothing at the front of those carriages."

"If you say so," said Harry.

"Oi, these boats are enchanted to take ye to Hogwarts, no more than four to a boat! Unless, o'course, ye be wanting to make the acquaintance of the Giant Squid," said Hagrid as he indicated one of the boats.

"There's a Giant Squid?" asked Harry. "How does it survive in the winter?"

"What?" asked Hermione.

"It's not going to eat us is it?" asked Neville.

"Probably not," said Harry. "Otherwise they'd have problems getting new students, wouldn't they? Can you imagine reporting to the parents - 'Sorry, your child was eaten taking the scenic tour of our castle. Please send more.'"

"Not helping," mumbled Ron, getting in one boat with Hermione.

"I suppose," said Neville, getting in the same boat.

Harry chose the fourth seat and settled in. "The other years use those carriages I guess. The boat ride is slower so I expect it's to get us there later."

Hermione cocked her head briefly to the side before nodding. "Probably want to get the older students set up before we go into the Sorting of the Houses."

"I heard we had to wrestle a troll," said Ron.

"I doubt it," said Harry. "It's supposed to take place in the Great Hall which is a cafeteria. Trolls are
hardly going to be sanitary."

Hermione merely looked smug, as if she knew something the others did not. Which was likely. Nobody asked her however, Ron feeling she was entirely too smug and Neville having a touch of seasickness from the way the boat would move around.

Harry was mainly interested in seeing if one of the seals he had would allow him to Speak Giant Squidese.

"Look it's Hogwarts!" came from one boat.

"It's only a model," came from another boat.

"What? No. Seriously it's a castle."

"Monty Python reference."

"Who? Is that a Slytherin?"

"You've never heard of Monty Python? Are you sure you're British?"

"What does some snake have to do with being British? You muggleborns are daft!"

-- End Interlude --

Once I'd discovered broomsticks, I'd started working out the magic involved. Mostly it was a break from my other projects. Clerical magic wasn't that good at enchanting objects for everyday use, like the Evercool Mug (which cooled beverages within it to just a few degrees above freezing) or the Firebolt-brand broomstick that I'd examined. Wizardry, especially the version of it that Harry and his community practiced, was especially good at that. Alchemy wasn't a field I was particularly good at, about all I could do there were potions that had the effect as spells of the third order or less.

Fuuinjutsu, or the oriental sealing arts, was something I was a darn sight better at. An onmyoji or an actual fuuinjutsu specialist would probably turn their nose up (if they were of a species that had noses of course) at my efforts and say something extremely snarky about the artistic merit involved.

The result of that research was pulled out of my messenger bag (with that ever-so-handly bigger-on-the-inside effect I was truly coming to love) and drew a few curious looks from passerby.

It was NOT as fast as a broomstick, the Firebolt-brand I'd examined was capable of going from standing still to nearly 150kph in ten seconds. Top speed nearly double that.

What it WAS was a skateboard. Something a kid could walk the streets of London with and not draw so much as a raised eyebrow. When I put it down and got on it, a cloud would form underneath it and the board would lift slightly. From beneath, someone would just see a cloud - one that might be moving a bit fast at perhaps ninety at most. Still, I wasn't going to even try to reach the top altitude of just over one kilometer or top speed. When you're near the ground and on a platform that small, that kind of speed feels insane. However, you could also use it for other purposes such as moving heavy things that you could get the skateboard under and then activating it.

It was how I planned on moving around whatever probe the local space agency gave me for that post-apocalypse world.

That world really really bothered me. That I had to access to it when so many other worlds, including my home dimension, were blocked concerned me.
Yeah, I needed answers. Unfortunately I had to find them myself while keeping an eye on the Main Hero - Harry.
"Harry Potter."

Harry went up, putting the hat on his head, and tried a tentative mental probe.

"Oh, you HAVE been busy, haven't you?" mumbled the hat. "Not afraid of hard work and true to your friends - definitely Hufflepuff. Studious when you have a goal, and already so much learning under your belt - you'd do Ravenclaw proud. A certain degree of cunning and a goal you're working for, but I think putting you in Slytherin would be 'putting a fox amongst the chickens' in very short order. Not that Slytherin couldn't use some shaking up. A wellspring of courage stands out though, which is a Gryffindor trait."

"Really, how much can you see?" Harry asked the Sorting Hat.

"Enough to see that you could easily fit into three of four Houses without much effort and the fourth would only be inappropriate as I'd expect you to blast a few of them into the wall before the end of term," said the Hat. "Well, since you're ready for it, then. RAVENCLAW!"

-- Cleric --

It was saying something that here it was in the mid-evening hours over Hogsmeade when I was pulled over by a wizard traffic-cop on a broom to tell me that a skateboard was not an acceptable flight device.

While he agreed with my point that it was a lot easier to pass muster in muggle environments than a broomstick, it didn't change the fact that it was NOT a broom. (Seriously, if you saw a bunch of teenage boys with broomsticks running around the streets of London, you'd think Something Was Up wouldn't you?) Also there was a fine involved.

That put me a bit off of trying out new fuuinjutsu programs while anywhere near wizards.

I ended up using Exit again, because the wizard traffic-cop wanted to use some sort of wizard-handcuffs and I had no idea what the effect on me would actually be.

So, Plan A, back to London via muggle methods. Fortunately, there was a train service. Unfortunately, I didn't have enough non-wizardy money to get back all the way to London. Near as I could tell, I'd probably end up about halfway.

Which left me with Plan B, since going back to Hogsmeade wasn't an option with an outraged traffic-cop/wizard looking for me.

Hogwarts was a long, mostly uphill, walk from Hogsmeade taking me about three hours. Probably would have taken less time without having to stop and wish I had a better pair of shoes as it turned out my current ones were getting a bit worn out.

There was an odd moment with what I was able to determine were the wards surrounding the castle.
They didn't seem quite too sure what to make of me (not exactly alone in that regard) and it seemed I confused whatever the conditions were for that. Muggles would be repelled, wizards accepted as long as they hadn't been banned or the wards were raised to defensive mode at least as far as the gates were concerned.

So the outer wards bounced me initially, and when I cast Analyze Magical Fields they accepted I was a wizard and then wanted to check my wand which wasn't there.

When I got to the castle, that was a different matter altogether. I didn't even try to open a door until after knocking had produced no result after a five minute wait.

Unsurprisingly, it didn't open.

Considering that it WAS a very old magical building, and that I could tell that I had its attention, I decided to address it directly. Which would have looked silly to a number of people including a large number of wizards, but that wasn't a concern at the moment.

Spirits are not always friendly towards humans. Buildings that are old and magical often have a sort of consciousness develop, but it is usually not a human STYLE of consciousness.

There were twelve ghosts, at least, within the range of my perception that haunted the school but were not of the darker sort that would require my actions in dispelling. No, it was the school itself I was asking directly.

As a nonhuman intelligence and that of a school for magic, words were not as important as intent and one's authority to be there. I had one child's well-being who was my main focus, and several others who'd have already gotten mixed up in his life but now were DEFINITELY in various degrees of in the potential crossfire.

Hogwarts Castle, as near as I could tell, yawned.

I pointed out I was a servant of the celestial plane and able to administer to the spiritual needs of the children.

Hogwarts indicated to me, without actual words, that the Chapel had been converted to a study somewhere around the time of the French Revolution.

I tried that I was after a way to get back to London with insufficient change in my pockets.

Hogwarts repled, again without actual words, that that was my problem and hardly a concern of its own.

I frowned at the school while I tried to think of other arguments for allowing me egress, but couldn't actually come up with any argument that would actually impress a centuries-old castle into allowing me in for the express purpose of leaving again. I could have tried following up on the argument that a bunch of young kids working magic and hanging around with ghosts might need a bit of spiritual guidance from time to time. That argument, however, would indicate I was taking permanent residence and putting the Chapel into working order.

Me not being anywhere near Harry as he went about his Epic Destiny was more along the lines of the general way the Reality Relief Office was supposed to work. We nudged things with as little evidence of our presence as we could manage except in very very rare circumstance. Which, admittedly, had already been screwed up royally in this case but if anyone complained I was going to counter with the whole bit of my being set down with some major malfunctions and no clear instructions.
It was as that thought crossed my mind that I got an actual response from the Castle, this a general feeling of agreement and a more precise comment about bureaucracy that would not at all be suitable for some audiences.

Okay, Plan A was out. Plan B was stalled and might as well be put down as a fail. "Right! On to Plan C!"

Hogwarts sent me a feeling of curiosity.

"No, I don't actually HAVE a Plan C. Working on it though," I told the door.

Hogwarts was amused. Great. I've amused a centuries-old collection of spells and stonework. If the interface was working properly, I'd probably get an Achievement out of that for my record.

"I don't suppose you could let one of the professors know that I'm out here and could use a little help?" I asked the Castle.

The Castle sent back something that indicated that everyone counted on it, but generally ignored the place except as a pretty backdrop. No respect at all.

"I know the feeling," I responded. "Except for the being pretty sort of thing."

-- Draco --

Something was seriously wrong.

He knew he wasn't the cleverest intellect among the House of the Snake, nor was he the magically most potent. His own father had pointed out to him whenever there was a lag in his progress.

His father had cautioned him about this Vicar, to watch Harry Potter and report anything unusual about him using the various cyphers he'd memorized. Not that the Owl Post was particularly prone to interception in normal circumstances.

He hadn't gone and introduced himself to Harry Potter, though he'd originally planned that approach, because of the crowd of girls around him. Some came and went at times, but he was never less than the center of a small group. Which he mostly ignored and they didn't pay much attention to him, going about their own business but stopping by and exchanging brief words.

Conclusion: Harry Potter had spies of his own.

From his own brief experiences with the opposite sex among pureblood society - girls gossiped. So they reported back to Harry while their conversation tended to deal with hair-care products and the like it was actually a code.

There was also how Harry Potter moved. He saw a lot of his own father's mannerisms in Potter - the way the eyes flicked around. Constantly checking threats, marking exits, not lingering his gaze on any particular point. Father got that way every so often when he was on the sort of business one did not discuss openly. That smooth confidence was also much like Father, as if he could handle whatever came his way.

Conclusion: Harry Potter was expecting trouble and had hidden agendas.

Even money would have placed Harry Potter in Gryffindor. Possibly Hufflepuff, the House of Loyalty and Friendship. Instead he'd been put in Ravenclaw.
Draco had not observed any focus on studying or signs of particular brilliance from the Boy Who Lived, so there must be something other than the expected factors involved.

Draco Malfoy had not expected Potter in Slytherin, as Cunning and Ambition were not qualities he'd observed. Though if he already had a spy network he might be overqualified for Slytherin actually.

Ah. Thirst for knowledge. Spy network. Maybe Ravenclaw was appropriate after all.

There had been no sign of this "Vicar" that he was supposed to keep an eye out for. Really, a priest? The family of Malfoy had no use for such silly superstitions. Faith in one's own abilities were all that mattered.

-- Vicar --

Having been turned away from Hogwarts meant that shelter and transportation were a bit unlikely to come my way on their own. It was dark, rocky, thoroughly difficult terrain.

"Raywing!"

Fortunately, I had an alternative. That lightning spell wasn't the only one which had been stuck in my head since that file corruption hit.

The spell 'Raywing' was a basic noncombat flight spell. I didn't have the combat version - 'Levitation' from the same source. Results varied from universe to universe though, so I figured the top speed here and now was maybe a quarter of what Lina Inverse or the other sorcerers of that world could manage. So, if I flew all the way, I could be back in London by... next Tuesday or so.

Yeah, going as fast as a golf cart was still faster than walking. Safer too considering the footing at night. So - better but not precisely adequate to the task.

So, flying in the dark in Wales, feeling the slight drain on my internal magic from keeping the spell up. I couldn't keep it going for days, maybe six hours if I didn't use any other magic to do things like keep warm or something.

"Bleh!"

You know, I bet Superman never got hit in the face by a cloud of bugs. This never happens to Lina Inverse either, I'll bet.

The flash of red and searing pain from my left side, though - I'll bet that's happened to both of them.
Chapter 15 - Meetings

Chapter Summary

Some meetings run a bit smoother than others.

One Floo Over
Cleric Path
Chapter 15: Meetings-2

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Snape looked down his nose at Potter, considering the usual questions and statements, but he'd had this particular question nagging at him since his intial investigations. "Mister Potter, do you recognize this?"

Harry looked at the little decanter of fluid and nodded. "That's the Slayer Potion that the Vicar had."

"And do you have any idea what it does?" asked Severus Snape.

"It makes one the Slayer in a universe that doesn't have one," said Harry. Since he knew what the followup question would be, he just went ahead and volunteered it. "The Slayer being a title, Vampire Slayer or Demon Slayer - either one is appropriate according to the Vicar. It gives you a permanent increase to your strength, speed, and hand-eye coordination. Also makes you fairly tough, as you have to be able to fight toe-to-toe with supernaturally powerful enemies."

Snape blinked, turned his head to look at the potion, and then back at Harry. "I'm surprised you didn't use it yourself."

"I know what the side-effects are," said Harry drily. "Don't need or want that."

"Hmmm," said Snape as he considered that and then carefully put the potion on his already cluttered desk. He'd thought he had a good idea what those side effects were, and he was NOT going to try it out on a human subject to see if he was right. "Prudent."

"Wait? Seriously? It would make you stronger and faster, so you'd be a better quidditch player with that stuff?" asked Ron Weasley, staring at the little crystalline decanter.

"You really wouldn't like the side effects," said Harry.

"That is part of today's lesson, actually," said Snape, turning this into his lesson plan. He'd continue experimenting with the substance later, and it promised all sorts of discoveries - which was putting him in a slightly better mood than was normal for him. "In this course you will learn to bottle wisdom, brew courage, and stick a stopper in death itself. However, all potions have their drawbacks and limitations. You. What can happen if one drinks too many healing elixirs in too short a time?"

Neville blinked and mouthed a couple of things before he managed an "I don't know, sir."

"Hmph," said Severus Snape. "Healing potions draw from the body's own repair abilities and your magical core to repair tissues. Well? Why isn't anyone writing this down?"
When finding oneself at a considerable height and dropping quickly, there are several reactions to be expected.

I'd felt the spell hit and shatter my right shoulder and the pain was quite distracting. Still, I'd had worse.

At an altitude of about two hundred feet I went from freefall to a high speed turn and ducking through the mountainscape. Once I found an overhang suitable for my purposes, I ducked under and cast a couple of healing spells that left me dizzy for a few moments as the damage was repaired.

A narrow ledge overhead my barely-adequate cover and I waited really long hours in the dark, listening through the rain for any indication that the wizard responsible for my fall was nearby. Which basically consisted of me jumping at any little sound.

I had been rewarded shortly after midnight. A glow that didn't seem to have a source that floated over the valley below.

So - they had some sort of invisibility spell and were flying. Probably on a broomstick, considering that I hadn't seen any evidence the local wizards had a personal flight spell.

I watched it going around briefly, then fly off in one direction.

Unfortunately, I had quite lost track of my directions during this encounter.

When morning came I needed three things. One, an indication of where I had ended up. Two, a decent cup of tea because I was freaking exhausted. Three, a bathroom. The last because peeing in the wilderness can get you arrested because when you least want it is when you will run into an authority figure.

Of course, if I did that AND a cop did turn up, then I'd have my location but a new set of problems as well.

I cast Raywing again, this time skirting the ground. Which is a lot more nausea-inducing than being at altitude. That lasted five minutes with near-collisions with three boulders, two small trees and some kind of rabbit-with-horns.

So, altitude. I went up a distance and found myself wishing for an altimeter spell. I could estimate, but it'd be handy to have some sort of positional awareness. Maybe I should research a GPS spell at some point. The "Point Me" spell had some serious limitations after all.

Nothing visible, but there hadn't been last night either and I was low on mana without some rest and recharging to be done. Going without sleep or food for an extended period wasn't helping.

Altitude is pretty good for perspective, as in seeing something that's actually a few miles off. That small village looked nearly perfect from a distance, so I headed that way and landed a good mile away. From there I could walk and if the locals weren't used to people flying about I wouldn't cause a complete freak-out.

I wanted to check on Harry and his little group, but he's the Hero and his Fellowship and my part is pretty much finished. I figure that if the usual script is in place, I'll die sometime soon probably while Harry is watching. I'm a Mentor after all, and the Mentor always dies when the Hero is ready to take his place on center stage.
I caught a glimpse of movement and dodged as a red beam went past me.

"FLARE ARROW!" I cast, one of those few assault-type spells I knew and one that was quick enough to be thrown while dodging. It wasn't the full-incantation version, so less power but a lot faster.

Apparently my pursuer hadn't realized that his little red bolts were giving away his position despite his invisibility spell. The flames burning in mid-air lasted just long enough for me to do a follow-up quick spell. "FREEZE ARROW!"

The invisibility (or whatever they called it) spell failed as the wizard found his broomstick coated in ice and apparently inoperable.

Obvious bad guy. I mean really obvious. White skull with black robes covering pretty much everything else. So, probably undead minion.

It wasn't until his impact on the ground that the idea penetrated that he might not have a colleague to rescue him and that the skull might actually be a magical mask.

Well, the wizard was alive still. The fall of a few hundred feet apparently not quite enough to finish him off.

"FLARE ARROW!"

Wood burns if you get the temperature high enough and whatever they use for the cores can be destroyed. Leaving him with his broomstick frozen in a sheath of ice and his wand burning, both legs broken - that's enough. Killing the fellow would be against the rules if he was centric to some part of Harry's destiny.

Tough call though. It might be this was just a minor player and eliminating him would be better, not only for Harry but for a number of innocents. I was familiar with how groups very similar to this usually kept power - through fear which was generated by murder and torture.

I was still here as a priest though.

I landed and walked closer, noting how one arm was trying to reach for the burning wand and flinching away.

Then he died. Well, that was awkward after I'd already decided he'd live.

"Raise Dead."

Raise Dead was a very draining spell, both for the cleric using it and for the recipient of the spell. Coming back from the dead is NOT an easy thing despite the frequent use of it in RPGs and the like.

"Wha?" asked the flunkie villain.

"Yes you were dead. Yes, I brought you back. Can't deliver a message if you're dead," I told him. "Well, not normally. There are a couple of spells for things like that. Never mind, not important. You came gunning for me, or would that be wanding? Whatever, sorry about the rambling but I haven't had any morning coffee OR tea and I'm bloody exhausted at this point. You'll recover but be unable to cast spells for a couple of weeks. You can tell your boss in the meantime that I'm not interested in fighting him and attacking me is going to end up costing him a whole lot of minions."

Bluff, actually. If they hit me with four of those death spells, an amulet under my clothes will absorb
three and the fourth would get straight through. Even if I was most likely dead before Harry graduated, I was really hoping to get a few things done first.

"Gah?" asked the guy in the mask.

"Well, that's it. I'm off to find a pub or food stand or something," I said, giving a cheery little wave at the minion before I made my way into the village.

The village, as it turned out, was relatively normal for local values of normal. It also turned out I was completely wrong about this place being Wales. It was actually Scotland, which was kind of like confusing California with New York.

English traditional breakfast was a bit much for me, a bit lighter fare was less a problem so a Pop-Tarts at a convenience store was enough. The "traditional" English breakfast available was: bacon, eggs, grilled tomatoes, fried mushrooms, toast, sausage, and baked beans. The plate was loaded down and just the thought of trying to cram that much in my lately abused stomach was enough to send me straight to something a bit less likely to make an unwanted return appearance.

The salesclerk at the convenience mart looked thoroughly disapproving, but rang me up anyway.

Tea, black with a bit of lemon, did more to help me recover than the two Pop-Tarts. They were a bit stale anyway.

From there I could catch a bus to the next bigger town.

At least, that was the plan.

-- --

Draco Malfoy had heard what the two had said and had memorized that decanter's appearance.

Sooner or later, it would be his and the power it conferred would go properly to a Malfoy.

As to Potter and his little friends, there was something most odd about him.

The network of informants (which was clearly what all those girls who associated with him were) seemed to have little practical impact on his life. That mudblood actually seemed fairly annoying at that.

-- --

I found an old ruined church where the main part of the "ruined" descriptor was the roof being missing.

Being a cleric, some sort of worship area was best for the purpose of praying and switching out spells. It's kind of like how you get a clearer signal on your radio if you don't try and take the metaphor too far.

So I did the usual thing. On my knees, praying. I had specific spells that I wanted and the local Authority could either give me those or spells that it/they would prefer.

"You are NOT supposed to be here."

An actual Presence had NOT been expected.

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AUTHOR NOTES: Next chapter is quite a bit bigger, about four times the size of this. I wanted to
give people an opportunity to vote for who eventually quaffs the Slayer potion and has to live with
the side-effects. Hmmm? Oh, the Slayer is always female. Always. So, Draco? Ron? Perhaps
someone else like Pansy Parkinson or Millicent?
The Being that stood there on the slightly raised stage was luminous. To a human, that would have appeared as a vaguely amorphous light source. While my current incarnation was a human body, I was an operative of the Celestial Planes through the Reality Relief Office. Which may have been like a third-rate volunteer disaster-relief agency compared to the professionals, but still qualified me as a minor Celestial myself in some respects. Very minor, and some would dispute even that much.

"Do I know you?" I asked, cocking my head to the side. He/she/they seemed oddly familiar.

"You shouldn't be here," repeated the Being. Who shook her/his/their head once before continuing. "But then, all of your group tend to do that, don't they?"

"There was a file corruption during my insert," I told the Being. I didn't understand what it was saying, but when dealing with the upper ranks that tends to happen. Best to state the situation as I knew it and see what response I got. "I have no mission details or prep here and my memories are mostly gone. Can you contact someone back at the Office?"

"You are not only not supposed to be here, you are not supposed to be - at all."

That stopped me and had me considering the implications. "What?" Oh, that wasn't good. I was lacking in the Snappy Dialogue department.

"The Reality Relief Office was disbanded," said the Being. "The souls that worked there have gone on to other duties and responsibilities. With one exception."

"Me," I concluded. "What happened to me?"

"I am not sufficiently high in the rankings to have access to that information," said the Being. "You were apparently unmade."

"What?" Back to snappy dialogue. Lovely. "Did I commit some crime?" If I was 'unmade' - destroyed so that I had never existed, that was an almost unthinkable punishment. The only time I'd ever heard of it was a philosophical argument about the possibility of such a thing happening and how would you know if it HAD happened.

"No crime that I know of, no trespass or break of faith, is of a level that this would happen," mused the Being.
The idea of this still had me reeling. Rebel against the Creator in a war that shattered the Celestial Realm and you'd be exiled. What would actually merit erasure from reality itself and how was I still here if that had happened?

The Presence faded, becoming a normal raven who merely flapped away through the roofless structure. So the Presence had manifested through an Animal Possession, specifically to deliver a message. Not unusual in that part at least, that was one of the least world-impacting methods of interaction.

I was still confused, my mind going through many of the implications and trying to make sense of it all.

Giving exact details to mortals and inter-department was at least severely frowned upon to outright forbidden depending on the universe and relations and such involved. The Being, which I was pretty sure was a Third Order Celestial, had been about as clear as one would expect under such circumstances.

One thing was clear though.

I was going to need some more tea.

-- --

"Harry Potter!"

"Yes, Professor?"

"Why does Mister Goyle look as if he has had a face-to-face with a large chicken?"

"If this is a wizard joke, sir, I'm afraid I'm still working on that sort of thing. I lack the references in pureblood culture to appreciate that sort of humor."

"No, Mister Potter, it is not a joke. I don't DO jokes."

"I stand corrected, Professor Snape."

"So you're saying you have no idea why Mister Goyle is currently sprouting a mustache and beard entirely composed of chicken feathers?"

Harry blinked and started looking around, quickly spotting the person indicated and noting that he indeed had a curly-ended mustache and beard entirely composed of feathers and was glaring at him for some unknown reason. "No, actually. I don't. I'm rather curious now though. Is that some kind of spell or curse or perhaps a magical beast attack?"

"I'll be watching you, Potter."

-- --

"I don't get this pureblood, muggle-born, sort of thing," said Harry as he sat down at the table.

"Oh, that's simple enough," said one of his House-mates. "That Vicar of yours being extraterrestrial and all, you probably haven't heard any of this."

Hermione put down her sandwich and gave up all pretense of not listening.

"Wha's 'extra terrestrium'?" asked another Ravenclaw up the table.
"Extra terrestrial," explained Arthur Seville before turning his attention back to Harry. "Means he comes from a very foreign country."

"Oh, I see," said the interrupter, turning his attention back to the book in front of him. Other country = inferior = not worthy of much attention.

"See, there are families and there are Families," said Arthur. "There are layers of respect and ties of blood and all that sort of thing, but the upshot is that there's both traditional and practical things associated with magical society levels. You're the last of the Most Ancient and Most Noble House of Potter, which is one of the oldest and most respected of the family lines about. The only ones of that standing hereabouts are the Longbottom, Turpin, Bones, and McGonagall lines."

"So what's the practical bit about this?" asked Harry.

"You've likely got a secret library, special family vaults at Gringotts, and a few other things," explained Arthur. "I'm of family Seville - which is four ranks below yours in that sort of thing. My family don't have a lot of cash to it, no special spells or libraries or facilities."

"You've got a special secret library?" asked Hermione, eyes gleaming.

"It's a secret to me," admitted Harry while edging slightly away from the bushy-haired girl. "First I heard about it was now."

"The ranks," stated Arthur, "are Most Ancient and Most Noble House, which aren't the Sacred Twenty-Eight which some people (mostly Slytherin) place at the top of the list, Ancient and Noble House, Noble, Clan, Family, Muggle-born, and Foreign."

"So you're of the Family Seville?" asked Harry, proving that he HAD been paying attention.

"Yes, we were originally from Italy but moved here three generations ago," said Arthur. "Mind you, my family's not a huge one or wealthy or anything like that. Instead we're connected with the publishing business in the wizard world as well as trading in Italian merchandise."

"Oh," said Harry, thinking about that. Figured that at least one Ravenclaw would be into the MAKING of books considering how many Ravenclaw were heavily into reading everything they could get their hands on.

"What's the 'Sacred Twenty-Eight'?" asked Hermione. "I've heard of them before."

One of the other Ravenclaw at the table started ticking them off on her fingers. "Abbott, Avery, Black, Bulstrode, Burke, Carrow, Crouch, Fawley, Flint, Gaunt, Greengrass, Lestrange, Longbottom, MacMillan, Malfoy, Nott, Ollivander, Parkinson, Prewett, Rosier, Rowle, Selwyn, Shacklebolt, Shafiq, Slughorn..."

Her neighbor picked up one the first Ravenclaw girl's voice trailed off. "Travers, Weasley, and Yaxley. Mind you - that list was made back in the 1930s and some of those families have changed or died out. Inbreeding for some, the last war for another. In a couple of cases the family's down to one Heir as all that remains."

"No Potter?" asked Harry.

"The Prewett family merged with the Weasley family," mused the first girl. "The Potter family is also the Peverell family. I think the author of the book that listed the Sacred Twenty-Eight probably didn't include the Potters because the Potter family have traditionally been fairly pro-Muggle."
"The Potter family, and likewise the Peverell family, were both considered Ancient and Noble. Also fairly wealthy." The second girl shrugged. "I believe I read something that indicated the Potter family was responsible for a number of medicinal potions like Skele-Grow. The Peverell family was known for their skill at information-gathering."

"Right," agreed the second girl. "Also the line was founded by Linfrid of Stitchcombe out in Gloucestershire, a potions expert. I think there's a company out there brewing them still."

"Wait, so I maybe own a drug company? Basically? Wizard version?" asked Harry.

"Probably just a share at this point," said the first girl. "I mean Linfrid was back in the 1200s wasn't he?"

"Check with Gringotts, they'd know," suggested the second girl with a nod before returning her attention to breakfast.

"Yeah, Gringotts would know, you've prolly got an account manager," agreed the first girl.

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All in all, it took three days to make my way back to London. Boring days with lots of walking involved. Lots and lots of walking. Oh, and I discovered that the term in Britain for "tennis shoes" was "trainers" whereas I was used to having "training shoes" being a subset of "tennis shoes" and similar reminders that even if the language was the same that regional dialects shifted. Even with translation effects running.

I couldn't fly very often because rural England has a lot of little spaces with woods and then there's a bunch of houses all crammed together. Since the wizards had this whole thing about not showing magic, and I was in more than enough trouble in the wizarding world already, that meant no flying when there was any chance at all of being observed.

I also had a tune stuck in my head about "come on down to London town" but I couldn't remember who the actual singer was or the context of the song. With the mention of steam trains and cogs, I was thinking it was a very old song and probably I'd heard it in one of those very alternate histories.

Finally I reached my Tardis where I'd concealed it and set out to unlock the various protective wards I'd thrown up around it.

"Stop right there, my nemesis!"

Okay, obviously the world had just gotten a lot more chaotic.

Hmmm. Frizzy hair, black-rimmed glasses, white labcoat left open in front, denim jeans, and a "Scruffy Looking Nerd Herder" t-shirt. Okay, the day had just gone straight into strange. Unless I was near a science-fiction convention. Actually, I was hoping that was the case. I could use a break about now.

Well, first things first. Had to clear this up.

"I'm the Vicar, and I'm not the hero. More of a Mentor actually, and we already have an Epic Villain hanging about." I watched to see what was up.

"Yes, I know. I watched the telly." This guy made a Dramatic Speech sort of pose. "I am Professor Fate!"
"That name's already taken," I pointed out. "Jack Nicholson in 'The Great Race' and he's sort of a comic relief villain at that. You don't want to use that. Oh, and Doctor Fate is also taken."

"Oh," said the guy. "Well, I was having trouble coming up with a motif anyway."

"Just starting out as a supervillain?" I asked. "Yeah, it can be difficult finding a niche that isn't claimed by some fictional character already."

"Maybe," began the man before I interrupted.

"By the way, is that a wand?" I asked, pointing at a bit of wood tucked into his belt.

"Uhm," he said.

"Don't worry, I already know about the wizarding world," I told him. "I'm not a wizard though. Just thought I'd get this out of the way."

"Oh, good, well yes that does simplify things a bit," said the erstwhile mad scientist. "Who's the Hero then?"

"Harry Potter," I admitted, noting from the complete lack of surprise that this had already been anticipated. "And the Epic Villain is this Voldemort guy. Or, as I call him, Moldy Shorts."

"I thought he was dead, but yeah you're right. No body, so that was kind of suspicious." The mad scientist/sorcerer frowned for a moment. "Well, different sort of villain altogether from what I want to be."

"Ah, so you want to be a supervillain but not an Epic Big Bad?" I asked.

"Well, yes, much more of a light-hearted approach. Using magic and calling it 'mad science' and having a legion of catgirl minions." The nerd made a dramatic gesture.

"'Catgirl minions'?" I asked.

"What's the point of being a mad scientist if you don't have a few catgirl minions?" asked the nerd in reply.

"You might have a point there," I agreed. This sounded a lot more like the sort of villain that might have graced the 1960s Batman series than the sort of "magic nazi" type like Voldemort. "Is that your motivation then?"

"What?" he asked. "Being able to use magic openly while calling it 'mad science' or the catgirl angle? Both actually. Mainly view it as a prank I can pull against the wizarding world AND the muggle world at the same time. Maybe get a merchandise line going I can sell to the sci-fi specialty shops to fund my research."

"So, you should go with volunteers for the position of 'cute catgirl minions' just to further distance yourself from the current guy," I told him.

"You think there are people who would volunteer to be turned into cute catgirl minions?" The guy looked pleasantly surprised at that idea.

"Try a science fiction convention. I think you'd be surprised," I told him. "Make sure your first appearance should be very public and televised so that the Ministry can't simply go about obliterating people. Oh, and disguise your wand and give it a fancy techno-babble name like 'Hyperspatial
Motivator' or something."

The guy actually pulled an old spiral notebook out of a pocket and a pen out of the other and started writing things down. "Good idea. Anything else?"

"Make the crimes you commit light-hearted and try to avoid anything that's going to cause major traffic disruption," I told him. "Animating store mannequins to dance the Macarena or something. Either that or come up with a 'cause' to champion like being anti-pollution or against political corruption."

"Oh, this is gold," said the wannabe-villain, jotting away in his notebook. "Wait, how can I still be Harry's villain or your nemesis if I'm overly sympathetic?"

"Ways and means," I told him. "You'd be breaking the law in a flamboyant fashion using mad science. Maybe you should enchant up some golems, put a lot of blinking lights and such in and call them robots. That'll help confuse the wizards as it isn't a very wizardly thing to do."

"Oooh, robot golems, that might be workable..." The guy was scribbling details down.

I let him. Harry could use some comic relief in his life. Who knows? Maybe this guy could be a distraction to the authorities and give me some room.

"I've got it," said the nerd. "I will be... Professor Gadget!"

"Because 'Gadget' immediately says 'not a wizard'?" I reasoned. Might work. Didn't immediately think of anyone who'd used that name. Simple, easy for the press to get down, didn't immediately invite mangling except for the intentional sort.

"Yeah, leave them some doubt," said Professor Gadget. "Don't need the Aurors coming in and ruining the fun."

"Go for it," I advised him. Certainly he'd be a step up from the usual villains.

A chime sounded. Professor Gadget pulled out a pocket watch and checked it. "Ah. Tea time."

I nodded. Serious business, tea. "I'll put a kettle on. I think I've got some Battenberg in a stasis scroll."

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"He is not what I expected," said Professor Quirrel.

"He is a child, nothing of significance."

"That somehow turned your death spell back on you," noted Quirrel before a wave of pain brought him to his knees.

That continued for a few seconds before it abruptly broke off again.

"Now, if you want to avoid further problems, it is time to concentrate on getting that stone."

-- --

When in Tokyo, wear a round hat. When in Osaka, wear a square hat. There were hundreds of variants of that saying, all acknowledging a single truth of human existence. Which was trying to adapt to the local customs of an area you found yourself in made things go a heck of a lot smoother.
English Tea was an old custom, and one usually had little cake slices or cookies to go with them. The history involved was something about how actual water in a pre-Industrial tech level wasn't safe for human consumption normally, but boiled water WAS. As sanitation improved, it was less necessary but anyway that was one theory as to the practice becoming a widespread tradition in question.

George Orwell had, in this reality at least, written a treatise with eleven rules for making tea. There was usually biscuits or something alongside the tea, though my idea of "biscuit" had turned out to be different from the local. I'd called them "cookies" at one point early into my stay here and you'd think I'd committed some major social gaffe from the reaction.

I had put a sort of jam-cake called a Battenberg in a stasis scroll (fuuinjutsu was very useful in this universe) as a test of the process.

"Sorry, I don't happen to have either milk or sugar handy," I apologized to the erstwhile villain as I brought the kettle to a boil.

"Lemon?" asked Professor Gadget.

"That I do have," I said with a nod and fetched one from the fridge. Yes, I have a kitchen in my Tardis. Sometimes I get a bit peckish you know. A magic refrigerator - there are mages who'd have a major fit about such a mundane application of their Grand Art.

"I've developed a kettle which heats the water to a boil in a trice," said the mad scientist/sorcerer. "Is that the Chinese art of magical writing?"

"It is," I admitted. "Terribly handy stuff this 'fuuinjutsu'. I use a variant of the Japanese system."

"Ah," said the Professor. He looked around the control room. "You've got those roundy things. I always did like those."

"Roundels," I supplied, determining he was talking about the wall design. "Go with the classic designs when possible. I'm still trying to work on the flight controls. So many projects, so little time."

"Oh," said the Professor. "I understand the problem, truly I do. Have the same one myself."

While I fixed the tea and set it to settle in the kettle, I replied. "For example, I've a bit of a project. There's this world, a version of Earth where some great disaster has rolled out and destroyed cities. I'm heading back there with some probes for the local space agencies to try out. Figure out what hit it."

The Professor brightened at that. "Do tell."

"I'm pretty sure it wasn't bacteriological, some Plague World, but I'm not really sure WHAT the disaster was and wanted to figure that out before I went exploring."

"And you figure that the ESA boys will have something to narrow it down?" asked the Professor.

"I don't have any spells to detect radiation, ozone levels, or any of another various markers that would be the culprit." I finished pouring and setting out the cakes as I spoke. "An asteroid strike and the resulting dust cloud, after a few years you could hardly tell from just looking. Poisoned environmental conditions, that I might be able to determine with a couple of spells - unless it was some binary poison as those are much more difficult to detect. Demonic invasion is doubtful but possible. There's just too many possibilities. Before I go exploring, I want to have at least an idea about the cause."
"Quite understandable," agreed Professor Gadget.

-- --

"So why is it ready already?" I asked several hours and a long distance away. "I expected it to take a LOT more time."

"Ah, well, it was originally a couple of different probes, plus something the Americans had. When you bring it back, we'll have to get everything back to the original projects."

I looked it over. "The bottom there. Isn't that from a Jeep?"

"Land Rover actually," said one of the scientists.

"And the wheels and motorized base are from devices used here to move heavy equipment," said another scientist.

I nodded. "Okay. Anyone want to come with me to set it up?"

Dead silence. Really, if it weren't for the various blowers still going it would be easy to think my hearing had just cut out.

"Uhm, gee, I don't know," said a young woman of Indian descent, taking a "thinker" sort of pose. "Travel in a spaceship to set up a probe on an alien world. Hmmm. I'd have to check my schedule."

A very large guy with glasses thick enough to be nearly spaceship windshield material cleared his throat. "Uhm. Seriously? You ask THAT in front of a group of science nerds who are all working for space agencies?"

"Well, I'd only offer to take one now," I told him. "There could be someone else for the return trip."

Gee, was there a sudden chill in the air?

"I'm out," said the long-haired blond woman. "Quarantine afterwards? No thank you."

"Rock, paper, scissors?" asked the Indian woman.

They were big-time science nerds, not that there was anything wrong with that. It was unlikely they'd resort to physical violence to settle anything. I just didn't want more than one running loose in my Tardis at a time.

After they got through with it, they settled down to figure out who would be available for the collection part of the trip.

-- --

"Doctor Patil - no relation to Parvati and Padma Patil are you? I'm aware 'Patil' is a common name, but coincidences seem to happen to me all the time." I flipped a few console switches and twirled a dial as I spoke.


"Ah, so you know about...?" I made a gesture as if leading an orchestra with a baton I didn't have. She blinked a couple of times, a puzzled look on her face.
"Never mind, classified intel," I sort-of explained. If she wasn't in on the whole wizarding thing it was better it remained secret.

"If you say so," Dagmar said, looking even more confused.

"Okay, here we go," I said, throwing the final switch and changing the conversation.

The grinding noise went off, the lights flickered, and there was a tenth of a second of null-gravity which I had NOT expected. Just enough of a lurch to be noticeable.

"Are we there yet?" asked Doctor Patil.

"Should be," I said, bringing up the little camera I'd stuck on the outside of the box. It showed dense jungle. "Maybe not."

"No?" asked Doctor Patil, back to enthusiastic.

"At least not the same part I've landed twice now," I admitted. "I think this must be the dinosaur world."

"Can I have a look?" asked Doctor Patil.

I didn't honestly have a reason why not, as I wasn't particularly on a timetable here. "Do you know how to use one of these?"

She stared at it for a moment. "I thought, that as a Time Lord and a man of the cloth - that you would be opposed to violence."

"Well, to some extent that's true," I agreed. "On the other hand, when a multi-ton carnivore is charging you I'm a stout believer in having options that doesn't include digestion."

She took the rifle, looking it over. "I've never fired one. What exactly is it?"

"Gauss rifle," I explained. "Takes a two-centimeter ball of slightly magnetized metal and accelerates it to a speed of about Mach 3. It doesn't do that much damage from the bullet, but the pressure wave gives a good smack and the cracking noise might dissuade a few of the more sensitive beasts."

Again that flash of white teeth.

"I've been meaning to ask, Doctor Patil, what exactly IS your field of expertise?" I asked as she checked the gauss rifle and found my big friendly labels as to where the safety lever and release sections were.

"Optical Engineering," she answered. She put down the gauss rifle and pulled a camcorder out of a labcoat pocket. "Earth Sciences as a secondary, did a paper on plate tectonics and how that might be the culprit on the Devonian Extinction Event."

"Oh, I remember that," I said. Ran across references to that a few times. "Not a single event though."

There was a clatter that turned out to be the gauss rifle hitting the floor, but whatever had startled the scientist she quickly recovered from.

For whatever reason, she was especially silent as we prepared to get a brief look at where we'd ended up. The jungle was thick and mainly giant ferns and the like.

When she was out, I checked around, spotted a glimpse of empty area, and fired off a quick burst
from my own choice from the armory, a flechette cannon. I was NOT inclined to spend days trying to find the Tardis again. Just a quick look around and then back to the job at hand.

The view was from a cliffside, and suitably impressive. There was a group of long-necked herbivores below and a fair way off.

"Venenosaurus!" exclaimed Doctor Patil, filming away.

"Seriously? You can tell that right off the bat?" I asked, somewhat impressed.

"Well, I think so, hard to tell with all the flesh over the bones and such. Look, feathered crests! I'll bet the plumage can be extended for mating displays!" She was adjusting things on her recorder, and apparently struggling with the "this is so neat" reaction versus the need for professional scientific discipline.

I half-expected her to "squee" when some two-legged dinosaurs ran past in a flock. Or herd. Whatever you called a group of feathered dinosaurs.

"SQUEeeeee!" managed to escape her when a pterosaur of some kind glided overhead and then past the herd.

She looked at me. "You didn't hear that."

"Consider me Sergeant Schultz in this instance," I told her. Priests had to be able to keep some confidentiality after all. "I see nothing. I hear nothing."

"Good," said Doctor Patil with all the dignity she could before turning back to the filming of dinosaurs in their natural habitat.

I spent most of my time looking around at the environment because we were surrounded by wild animals. Some of which were multi-ton carnivores. Yeah, someone had to keep an eye out for such things.

Nothing came near, some rustling in the ferns turned out to be a small furry creature that probably had a polysyllabic name that I'd never be able to pronounce.

"What was that?" asked Doctor Patil, still watching through the camcorder.

"Mole-rat," I told her. It was kind of an opossum-rat actually but mole-rat was close enough.

I started wondering about this world. The post-apocalypse one was a puzzle, but there must be some reason I could access this one as well. Why? What importance to my mission would this world provide?

One of the things that kept me coming back to the post-apocalypse world was guilt. What if that world was my fault? If that cryptic remark in the old church was taken at face value - then something very bad had happened in the past that I still couldn't remember more than brief flashes and snippets.

A dinosaur world though - that was entirely too much of a shift. Unless I'd somehow knocked a pebble off in space which had caused a change that somehow resulted in the asteroid not ending the dinosaurs. That'd be a heck of a long series of coincidences coming together.

"What is THAT?" asked an excited Doctor Patil, watching through her camera's viewfinder.

I glanced that way, then used the scope on my flechette gun to get a better look.
It turned out to be something that had partially emerged from a forest, a black ooze that spread across the grasslands. It took me a couple of minutes to figure it out. "Ants."

"Oh," she said. There was a pause. "Okay. Time to leave."

"Agreed," I said, and made a mental note to get some area-effect weapon to add to the armory. Flamethrower or acid-sprayer or something like that.

Yes, I said armory. I am not the Doctor. People think that as someone who works for the Heavens and who is a cleric and on the side of the Light that I must eschew violence of any sort. Which, unfortunate as it may be, just plain does not work. Nature is violent. Animals do not live together in harmony without humans being around like in some Disney film. I've been in multiple universes and I haven't seen one yet where the large carnivores go about discussing philosophy with the herbivores and plants and sing "kumbaya" after eating a nice plate of nothing at all.

Violence should never be the first resort, but it should never be the never-resort. Most Earth-like worlds had tribes like the Visigoths which were pacifistic until enslaved by their neighbors who had no such qualms. Well, in most worlds. There were a couple where things were a bit different, that's the nature of a multiverse.

When you're dealing with carnivores who view you as a part of their diet, violence is perfectly natural. Plenty of prey animals have been known to actively defend themselves despite the lack of dialogue options. Being able to dispute your position on the food chain was a perfectly understandable activity.

So, yes, MY Tardis has an armory. Which might currently be an old steamer trunk with enough wards on it that a Great Old One couldn't find it, but you make do with what you've got.

So, something area-effect. Magical flamethrower or something along that line maybe. The flechette gun was decent at that, but more like a shotgun and just insufficient to deal with something like a swarm of army ants. Have to visit that shop on Mid-Childa and check into that.

The anti-ship weapon, BOSSI or Belkan Overpowered Shock Shell Impactor, was completely inappropriate for this as it wasn't something you wanted to be anywhere near the blast radius. Also had a limited number of shells to use and as it WAS an antique I wasn't likely to be able to get new ones.

Getting back to the Tardis was quick due to following the shredded vegetation, and I quickly went through the ritual of throwing the switches and twirling dials.

"That's a different order than the last time," noted Doctor Patil.

"Ah, but it's from a different location isn't it?" I wasn't lying of course. Misdirecting, definitely - but that was a different thing altogether.

"I see," said Doctor Patil.

Well, at the very least that proved my hunch that she was trying to memorize the controls. If she tried to hijack it and bring it back to her colleagues though - I had managed to put in an anti-hijacking subroutine.

I was going to have to upgrade it due to Professor Gadget being around. Even if he was more Harry's worry than my own, since I was not a main character only an advisor. Since Harry was going to Hogwarts for something like seven years, I'd expect things to start getting hinted in his first year but not really take off until his fourth or fifth year regarding Moldy-Shorts.
If I had the genre right of course. If this was a shonen or shojo style genre it would all be hitting as soon as he stepped off that train. If it was yaoi, well, best not to even think about THAT.

The viewscreen briefly showed the space between worlds in all its inter-dimensional glory before settling into the image of the apocalyptic world.

There was a thud sound. I turned to find Doctor Dagmar Patil collapsed on the floor, looking as if she was having an epileptic fit.

"Okay, I wouldn't have thought looking at a two-dimensional video feed representing a fifteen-dimensional conduit between universes would be enough to do that," I said as I made sure she wouldn't bite her tongue off by using a Restful Repose spell to throw her straight into a deep REM sleep.

Then I made her as comfortable as I could while I waited for the spell to end because I was NOT going to try moving that probe out on my own.

Restful Repose was one of those spells developed in a Forgotten Realms-ish universe. People had insomnia problems or major injuries and it was essentially a spell that duplicated the effects of certain gasses or injections in a non-magic world when someone was prepped for medical procedures. Not useful in combat though, there was another spell that did that.

It was also used by jittery magic students the night before the exam.

Hopefully a decent night's (day's) sleep would allow the British optics specialist to get over the exposure. I thought that Harry had handled it without any problems, but maybe because he was young and a wizard he could cope with hypernature easier?

After a couple of hours working on the various projects, in particular adding some a minor targeting blessing to the gauss rifle, I decided to just go ahead and do it.

Move the probe out of my Tardis. It took up a good chunk of the control room floor and I was getting tired of walking around it.

Once it was out there and the bracing legs lowered, it started itself up. Which surprised me as I hadn't known about that feature.

Waiting for my "companion" to sleep it off allowed me some time to observe the locale a bit more.

Magic felt "off" but that didn't mean much by itself. Magic could vary from world to world, becoming completely inaccessible to natives in some worlds to operating under wildly different rules and conditions. I had vague memories of a form of magic where everything was based on True Names and another where mages could pull conceptualized items out of books. If I visited the latter, I was SO getting a light-saber.

Due to Doctor Patil's world having those laws about keeping non-magicals ignorant of the magical world, I didn't want to do anything where she might wake up and observe me doing something I couldn't handwave as "sufficiently advanced science" or something.

A trip to Mid-Childa was definitely looking to be added to my to-do list. What I could really use was an Intelligent Device, their basic equivalent of a magic computer with a spellcheck and a fairly good Artificial Intelligence. I could tell the magic doohickey to work out all the details to make an idea work instead of me trying to fiddle with trying to work out the arrays.

I already had a magic computer after all, it was tied into the spellwork and such of my Tardis and I
didn't want to use that one and have some system or program glitch at an unexpected and inconveniente time. That one was about two orders below what I actually wanted for this purpose, what they called a "storage device" and fairly primitive by their standards. No, what I was looking for was a real (if a couple generations behind the current model) Intelligent Device.

Unfortunately, the Intelligent Devices that I knew for certain about were both really darn expensive and highly restricted. No way was I going to get my hands on anything approaching the sort of thing that was going to be really handy.

Her artifact was a book, which everyone who knew her would say it was entirely appropriate.

The basic stuff she could look up on her own. House-wards for example. More detailed stuff like the enchantments that were layered into flying brooms were indicated by references for further reading. Proprietary charms were apparently something the book just didn't cover.

The only problem she'd discovered was that she had to have the name of something to research it, and if she didn't have the spelling right she'd end up with something else more times than not.

When she went to the whole Pactio route she also changed outfits, to a cute little witch's hat and robe set that was enchanted to remain clean and dry.

She had looked up those charms and only the fact that they had to be renewed regularly kept her from enchanting her whole wardrobe. Well, that and the idea that some magical law enforcer would show up to write her up for the underage magic use.

Her mother had been rather keen on those charms as well once she'd found out about them. So when she reached an age that could throw those charms out without the magic-cops (aurors) showing up she was going to get some practice at them.

"Well, it makes sense doesn't it?" asked Parvati Patil, sitting on her own bunk. "Our artifacts reflect who we are. I wonder if they'll change as we grow up?"

"I think the Reverend said something about that," admitted Hermione. "Wait. Was I talking aloud?"


Hermione nodded. The shield of King Arthur. Priwen. Parvati was a proper Gryffindor. A shield that could block any seven attacks as long as she braced herself behind it and held it ready.

Naturally she'd looked it up in HER artifact as soon as she had a name. Priwen could block the Killing Curse. However, after blocking seven attacks absolutely - the artifact would dispel and she'd have to resummon it after a recharge period. Since it drained Parvati's magical reserves with each attack it blocked, it would take a good while before she could do that.

Padma Patil, over in Ravenclaw, had a magnifying glass which was named "Quaestor Verititis" which apparently meant "Seeker of Truth" and could find things which were concealed and reveal lies for what they were.

Cho Chang had glasses for her artifact, glasses that could analyze magical fields. More than a few Ravenclaw wore glasses, which was odd when you'd think that someone would have researched a potion or charm to correct vision problems.
Some of the others, such as Lavender Brown's gun seemed quite odd but perhaps there was some hidden quality in Miss Brown which it fit.

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Doctor Patil got up to find me standing a few meters away from her probe and apparently just looking off into the distance.

Analyze Magical Fields didn't have any visual or auditory cues that would indicate someone is using it.

The local magic was nearly nonexistent, recovering magical energies would be darn difficult.

However, there WAS an underlying magical field. Subtle but there.

There was no immediate response to prayer or commune spells. So either the local god or gods were very subtle and background, or this was a Proscribed world. If it WAS the latter, then only the Tardis interdimensional connection was allowing me to cast any spells of a clerical nature at all.

So this might be a Proscribed world. Either the battle of Light and Darkness had gone to the Dark here, or they'd both essentially lost and neither had a presence here.

If it was Proscribed, I shouldn't even have access to it. Servants of the Celestial Realms were prohibited from entry.

If it was not Proscribed - that still left the question of why not only was there no Celestial response but damn little on the Spiritual end of things.

Yet there _was_ some form of magic here, just really constrained in some manner.

Doctor Patil made a noise as she continued to check the probe. "There's a radio signal. Faint. No, there's two."

"Radio?" I asked, a bit surprised.

"Background radiation is high too," she said. "Gravity is Earth-normal. Hmmm."

A device came out of the probe, the shovel end shaking slightly as it collected a dirt sample and then retreated back into the probe's interior.

"It's collecting data," Doctor Patil announced.

"So we should probably let it do so," I told her. "Now, let's just get back to your Agency and then I'll be back in a couple of months to get one of you to come collect it."

"Didn't you say this vehicle could fly?" asked the Doctor as we headed back to my little blue box.

"Don't have all the bugs quite out of that system yet," I told her as I closed the door behind us and began the process of throwing switches and cueing up the sound effects.

I checked the viewscreen on landing, then stuck my head out the door to apologize for interrupting someone's wedding, before I went back and started things up again.

"What was that about?" asked Doctor Patil, going through the photos on her camera.

"Oh. Landed on the outskirts of a wedding," I said as we went from one universe to another and
back. "Looked kind of steampunkish."

"What's 'steampunkish'?"

I considered how to explain that to someone. "It's kind of a sub-genre involving Victorian-era clothing."

"I see," said Doctor Patil.

"You do?" I asked.

"I think a couple of cousins and uncles are into that, I've seen them wearing very old-style clothing," said Doctor Patil thoughtfully.

"Ah," I said. "Yeah, that might be what this." It actually probably wasn't. I'd noticed that the local wizards tended to use clothing and equipment from previous eras. She'd probably seen that at some family gathering.

"And... there!" I declared and checked the monitor.

"That's a hotel," noted Doctor Patil.

"Uhm, yes, well," I tried.

"That's a science fiction convention," noted Doctor Patil further.

"Uhm, right," I said as someone knocked on the door.

"Did we just end up at a science fiction convention in a Tardis?" asked Doctor Patil, getting a little notebook out.

"It certainly seems that way," I admitted.

Doctor Patil crossed off something in her book. "Be just a tick."

"Eh?" I asked, still mostly preoccupied with events as she swept out of the Tardis and began speaking to whoever it was that was out there.

I waited around for a few minutes, when the door opened again and Doctor Patil swept back in. With two bags full of various items I couldn't immediately identify and a practically electric grin. "Have fun?"

"Yes, actually," said Doctor Patil. "Picked up a few things for people back at the office."

"Right," I said, beginning the transfer again. Wheezy noise and all.

This time at least it went as scheduled.

I ended up in the foyer instead of the lab, but it was pretty close all things considered.

Doctor Patil was immediately swamped by her colleagues and she began going over all the footage she'd apparently shot.

While she was doing that I left. I didn't sneak off, not exactly, just waited for attention to be elsewhere and made a quiet exit during that.
My next destination was to visit a nice little tea shop in Northern China I’d heard about.

Naturally, I ended up in an old-growth forest in Romania. Followed by landing on Mid-Childa and deciding that was good enough. I had a few projects after all.
Mid-Childa Misgivings

Chapter Summary

In which things go wrong again, misinterpretations occur, and the Vicar finds a crowded control room.

One Floo Over
Chapter 17: Mid-Childa Misgivings
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Mid-Childa is a typical Earth-type world as far as gravity and atmospheric content and mass and temperature. It's much less typical in that you could see dozens of moons in the sky at just about any time.

Most of the technology on Mid-Childa is typical of a Tech 8 to Tech 9 civilization, the average citizen can access something approximating an "internet" through something vaguely like a "cell phone" which has spotty reception depending on where you were at any given time.

It was when you got into the particulars that things began to differ from the typical Tech 9. Prepared spells being sold in the neighborhood store was one such thing. Run-once and they were gone and had to be repurchased. They were very basic things, having to be as the exact nature of the situation they were used in could vary enormously. A repair spell would fix simple breaks on a window frame or eyeglasses or chair leg. A cleaning spell could be used to wipe a stain off one's jacket, a spill on a rug, or a scrawl of crayon on the wall.

Because it was so general-use, such things weren't perfectly suited to a specific application. If you wanted something that worked perfectly, completely removing the chili dog stain on your jacket, you had to have something more specific.

Identification Cards had a chip, which was part of the non-magical end of things unless you were a member of the TSAB or military in which case there were two chips. In those cases, one was magical and one was not.

My identity in the Mid-Childa databases was a non-TSAB mage of fairly low level. Not talented enough to stand out from the masses particularly or to be recruited for the military or the TSAB. Kind of like your neighbor down the hall who knows enough to get your plumbing unstopped but isn't on the level of a licensed plumber.

According to the profile I'd found stashed away, my local identity was a freelance mage. Had to use some of my stash-cash to renew my license and there was both an academic and practical test for that renewal but both had been done and were now okay for the next four years.

It meant that someone might show up to hire me for a job, but it turned out those were usually done in a few hours at most. Removing a stain from a particularly expensive rug so that it looked as if it had never had an unfortunate encounter with a jar of baby food - things like that. Not a lot of money involved, but little odd jobs that someone like Nanoha Takamichi wouldn't be bothered with at all. Despite her being able to basically crook an eyebrow and do what it took me a half-hour to work out.
Which also meant my search for an Intelligent Device could be covered under a professional need.

Part of the limitations of the local magic was that it was mathematically based. A whole lot of people are just not geared for figuring out equations on the fly, solving multiple variables in one's head without so much as a slide rule much less a calculator.

Another limitation of the local magic was bloodline-based predisposition towards being able to feel and access one's internal magic. The local name for that was a "linker core" as in the core that linked one to magic.

Since I wasn't a math nerd, nor particularly good at working out such things without a calculator, I was never going to be really good at the local variety of magic.

That didn't mean that I couldn't get a Device. They were licensed and registered and there was a whole classification system that was just additional hassle.

Naturally, I went to the secondhand shop that I'd gotten the last set of goodies from. Yeah, he was kind of shady in some respects. I had a feeling he was also an informant to the TSAB and a fence and a few other things.

"Welcome and Salaam!"

He had also taken a copy of the movie "Aladdin" in trade and fallen in love with the setting.

"New rugs?" I asked as I made my way through the shop.

"Yes, I feel it really helps the ambiance," said Omar (last time in here it had been Sumano) according to his name badge.

"Looking for something," I said, and produced my ID badge. That let him know this was "above board" among other things.

"Hmmm, you are fond of the old outdated technology, so something in that line?" asked the Omar-formerly-known-as-Sumano.

"Yeah, I'm going to need a bit of old reliable tech," I told him.

"Some non-administered world, eh?" asked Omar.

"It may be a world without active magic," I told him. "The local magical field is... weird."

"How weird?" asked Omar, losing his fake accent as professional curiosity was stirred.

"Near as I can tell," I said with a shrug, "with only my basic analysis spells and my 'sonic screwdriver'? The local od field is only a two, with ley lines barely a two-point-five if that. It's not responsive to common intradimensional spells and it's only because my vessel uses interdimensional tunnelling that I can enter and leave again."

"A 'two'?" asked Omar, blinking. "Standard scale?"

I nodded. "Using the Mid-Childan scale."

Omar whistled. "That's barely enough to support life. The worst I've heard other than Non-Administered World 287."

"Not familiar with that one," I said.
"It's a universe with a one on the standard scale for magical fields," said Omar. "Prohibited world. Life never progressed very far there, need special breathing equipment just to survive long enough to get back out."

Something about his words triggered another flash of memory. Just a brief scene, looking through what I guessed was an environmental suit's helmet. Flashes of lightning from an overcast sky, barren ground and puddles of sludge visible in the suit's lights.

"This at least WAS an inhabited world but I saw no signs of life during my visit," I told him before the door to the shop was opened and another customer came in.

Not someone I recognized but Omar apparently did as he stiffened just a bit for a moment.

"I can come back later," I said in a lower volume.

Omar shook his head just a tiny bit before he addressed the newcomer. "Hayate-san! Browsing a bit today or are you looking for something specific?"

I glanced at the newcomer and frowned a little at the results of a quickly evoked Analyze Magical Fields spell. The girl was mid-twenties at oldest, but her power level was at least twenty times my own and tightly controlled. There was also some secondary spirit association there that I didn't quite understand. It wasn't a totem spirit, or summoned beast, or familiar. Something else.

"Ah, Sumano, you know why I'm here, do you not?" asked the girl apparently named Hayate.

"I'm just a humble dealer in antiques and bric-a-brac," responded Omar. "An old man ekeing out a living in his declining years."

The girl shook her head, glanced at me, then appeared to be listening to someone. Since a form of magic telepathy was one of the basic skills that everyone was taught here, that could have been anyone in range. I was betting it was that unexplained other presence.

"You," she finally said. "I am Hayate Yagami of the Time-Space Administration Bureau. You are under arrest for possession of proscribed materials and falsified identification."

Oh, bugger.

"Look, over there! Isn't that a major crime underway?"

Hayate blinked and looked at me. "You're kidding, right?"

"Would you believe your shoes are untied?"

"I'm wearing boots."

"Would you believe that there's a perfectly good reason for this?"

"Not so much, no."

"Well, I tried. 'Exit!'"

The Exit spell shunted me to the nearest safe point. However, considering that Hayate was apparently with the TSAB and had some sort of advising spirit working with her - I'd give her maybe ten seconds before she figured out where I was.

I ran. If rumors about the TSAB and their agents' tendencies to go towards the "overwhelming
firepower" approach to solving problems was correct, it would be best if I didn't subject myself to their not-so-tender mercies.

Omar's shop exploded. I couldn't see it from my current position, but I was pretty darn sure that explosion was my pursuit getting underway.

Yup. Here was another Reality I was going to have to steer clear of now.

I managed to duck into a business I'd gotten materials from, went into their restroom, and began trying to use the new remote summoning function on my Tardis. Which hadn't been properly tested or debugged.

"Something wrong?" said a young man as he checked himself in the mirror.

"I'm trying to be a mentor to a hero in another reality as he fights some sort of Dark Lord terrorist type, investigating a world where everyone died off and trying to figure out why, and nobody in the Celestial Realms is giving me a straight answer about what the heck is going on," I answered as I sketched out a circle and began marking the fuuinjutsu section. "I'm usually involved in fighting ancient evils and the like and trying to avoid these TSAB people - whom I've repeatedly heard have a tendency to throw large explosions and endanger civilians while they're going about doing their thing."

"The TSAB is after you?" asked the young man, sounding quite surprised. "What for? Wait. 'Endanger civilians'?"

"If I'm not here, they'll likely not explode the building or turn anyone into smouldering piles of ash," I told him. "But yes, I have heard a few stories about them."

The guy was silent as I finished, then used a quick bit of my own blood to activate it.

It worked and my Tardis materialized.

"I suppose I need a phrase to throw about like 'Allons-y' or 'Eureka' or something," I pondered as I unlocked the door. "Sorry fellow. I'd try to draw her off but I'm not sure how."

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Chrono brought one hand up to his forehead. "Hayate."

Telepathic connection was made. "Chrono? He got away."

"Apparently he's heard about Nanoha and thought you were her somehow," said Chrono through the link. "Guy was panicked and thought you were going to blow up innocent buildings."

Silence.

"Hayate?"

"It was an accident."

"Maybe you've been hanging around Nanoha too much."

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I wasn't sure of the why, unless it was the 'throw someone else at the police to distract them from me' defense, but I was pretty sure that "Omar" had sold me out.
Which pretty much let him out as a contact in the future.

Unfortunately this meant that my little apartment, bank accounts, and normal legal means of acquisition of supply was out.

There were a couple of possibilities for "under the counter" dealings I could still manage, but I'd have to wait a bit before contacting them.

Six worlds I could land on with regularity. Mid-Childa was out for now. Harry's world was a possibility but the magic-police were likely still not exactly welcoming towards me. Dinosaur world was dangerous and didn't have supplies except in the rawest form possible. The world of the Magic Academy had that Narnia effect going with odd time rates. Going there, I might spend several months and find only a minute in Harry's world had passed - or I could find that years had gone by. Without an idea of how that worked it was pretty much up to chance.

The post-apocalypse world I wanted some answers before I spent a lot of time there. Admittedly, the lack of magical energies meant that it very likely was NOT a Zombie Apocalypse world in the sense of undead rising from their graves and slaying the living to increase their numbers. Though that might explain the low level of magical energies actually - the zombies killing off anything living and depleting the energies of that world by tapping them in order to keep operating as their bodies fell apart.

Nope, not going there for extended stays until I knew what the nature of that apocalypse had been. Anti-disease ward on my Tardis or not, taking reckless chances was not something I actually planned on doing.

That left the "Forgotten Realms" sort-of world.

Which actually suited me fairly well in some respects once I'd realized that was an option. Kick back in some rural village, do my research at some place like Candlekeep, keep out of the various quests and major happenings that went through from time to time.

Yeah, I could do that. Get away from erstwhile rivals and actually get some of the little post-it notes out of the console room. I'd started putting project notes and to-do stuff on multicolored post-it notes. Unfortunately the console room was beginning to look like some neon version of autumn had swept in and taken a dump in my Tardis.

I made the trip quickly.

Unfortunately, I once again ended up in the right world and entirely wrong place.

Which was a firefight. In a cavern. With actual fire being thrown. Fireballs, cone of fire, dragonbreath spells, and other bits of arcane destruction magic were being thrown about like fireworks at a festival. Not the 'slow and controlled release' kind either - this was the 'someone dropped a match and run for the hills' kind of fireworks party.

Into this my video feed was showing me flashes of arrows and barely seen forms and amorphous blobs.

A quick scribble and another post-it note went onto the console. Add a infrared or magic-eye camera onto the outside in case I ended up someplace completely dark like now. In the midst of a major battle, like now. Where a quick Detect Evil was getting major pings. Also like now.

"Protection From Evil, Ten Foot Radius is active," I noted aloud, because I was feeling really stressed by all this and was trying to figure it all out. "So the figures currently pressed up against my
Tardis are NOT supernatural evil or the like. Which doesn't necessarily mean they're good folks.

A Cleric was a servant of a god or of the gods. Which WAS a possible explanation for at least SOME of my problems showing up where I wanted to be.

I was reluctant to let just ANYONE into my Tardis. I didn't have any Plot Armor or anything. On the other hand...

"Oh bother," I finally said as I opened the door. "Any of you who want to live-

I was suddenly grabbed and moved to the side as a whole bunch of people fled the battle.

"The Promenade is lost!"

What?

"It's bigger on the inside!"

I can see why the Doctor likes hearing that. Rather gratifying to find one's work appreciated.

"Never mind that! Escape now, marvel at extradimensional corridors later!"

Spoilsport.

"Quickly! Get inside the Box!"

Black skin? White hair? Wait one moment.

"Oh, hello cutie."

Brown skin, black hair, pointy ears, purple eyes?

"Someone close that door!"

"Closed! Iljrene, can you turn that cleric loose so he can get the box moving again?"

Wait. 'Iljrene'?

There were three drow elves (white hair, black skin, red eyes) in my control room. There were twelve dark elves (black hair, brown skin, one yellow-eyed and one blue-eyed and ten green-eyed) also in my control room.

And a very surly dwarf who was the only one in the room besides myself who was male.

"Better you than me," mouthed the dwarf before he went back to smirking at me.

"Uhm, right," I said, recovering my equilibrium enough to zip off that world and touch base on a second world.

"Oooh. Active volcano. Good idea," said one of the drow. "Okay, everyone strip and toss the stuff out the door."

"WHA?!" I managed. I did NOT squeak.

"Just in case anything was contaminated by Moander's minions," explained one of the drow, who opened the door and stripped without so much as a hint of hesitation.
"Not doing it," protested the dwarf. "I'm just gonna inspect my arms and armor, thank ye very much."

"Uhm, you don't have to -" I said, trying very hard not to look at elves that had more curves than was usual for the normally thinly built species.

Sure enough, it was bad enough to be squeezed into a room with curvaceous elf girls bumping up against you. Now I was squeezed into a room with mostly-naked to completely-starks curvaceous elf girls who were inspecting each other for any signs they'd gotten something icky on them.

"My hero!" said one as she glomped me. Glomped. Someone was actually glomping me. This situation had gone completely into "WTF" territory and I was pretty sure, amnesia or not, that this had never happened to me before.

"Iljrene," said another one, in the tone of one long-suffering.

"Do you mind?" I asked the one named Iljrene, which was odd because the name rung a bell and she DID seem slightly familiar. Did I know her? Was this the same one I'd run into, or was this an Analogue of the same person from a different timeline? "Do I know you?"

"Not nearly as well as you will," said the dark elf glomping me.

"Let him move his vehicle off the volcano before the defenses fail," said the other dark elf, grabbing one of Iljrene's ears and using it to pull her off me. There was something about the way it was done and all the smirks on everyone's faces to indicate this had happened before and probably more than once.

"Thank you," I said to the elf-wrangler before I moved us again.

The elf-wrangler let go of that ear. Iljrene just pouted. One of the drow made a comment about a human-fetish, which was also a new thing as far as I could remember.

Back to Harry's world, this time though I was aiming for... ah. Perfect. "Anyone got spare change? Gold is best."

"Demanding a fee for rescuing?" asked one of the drow, looking quite disappointed.

"No. This is a place that sells food and I think you all could use some food and a chance to relax before we find a place back on that world to take you," I told them.

"Eh?" It was odd hearing a single comment like that coming from as many throats as it did.

"That's not a tavern I recognize," said Iljrene.

"It's not," I agreed. "It's a Hungry Howie's. Who's up for pizza? Or stromboli?"

The proprietor was staring as soon as we entered. A priest with fifteen scantily-clad elves and one surly-looking dwarf was apparently not something he'd expected to see. No, he did not take gold coins but the strip-mall had one of those gold-investment branches there and he might be able to do something.

The girl working the desk looked at me, looked at the elves, rushed out the door and spent a few moments staring with her mouth hanging open at my Tardis, then rushed back into her little store to talk very rapidly and excitedly to what was apparently the regional manager.
That was followed by my trading a double-handful of gold coins to the nice gold-trader for enough money to bring a nearly face-breaking grin to the people over at the Hungry Howie's. Who had apparently expected something like that as he'd used the delay to get extra personnel and supplies rounded up.

Five large antipasto salads, three chicken asiago salads, two orders of chicken wings, seven calzones, and five pizzas along with several plastic bottles of water and a box of chocolate brownies were purchased.

I had to explain what the cameras were, as apparently all the various shop workers in the strip mall were finding the break in their tedium something noteworthy. Odd that.

Several of them wanted to give items to various elves, particularly the clothiers, after I explained that they were refugees from a city that had been invaded by hostile attackers. THAT I expected was going to be sold to the news by one of the more mercenary workers, and that refugee space-elf-girls shopped there would probably be a bragging point for their entire corporation.

Well, whatever worked. The girls, especially Iljrene, seemed delighted by the possibility of getting new clothes and modeling them once they understood what the cameras were.

The dwarf didn't get much attention, which actually seemed to be something he was entirely fine with.

Though I'd expected each of them to have a fair amount of food, and that there would be leftovers they'd take back with them, that was not the case. Everyone sampled everything and these petite elf maidens could pack away the food like seasoned troopers who might not see food again for awhile.

The dwarf merely grabbed a calzone, which is a sort of a pizza sandwich hybrid, made a happy noise on discovering that it had bacon, and a bottle of water and found a quiet corner to retreat to from the chaos.

I got the distinct impression he'd done THAT before as well.

Well, I could drop this lot off in Candlekeep and have my Tardis to myself again soon enough. The only reason I hadn't done that before the pizza place was that the lot of them had been highly stressed and I'd needed to figure out how to best approach the people there about refugees.

Candlekeep was a very large monastary and library dedicated to the local god of knowledge and crafting. You'd be allowed entry with a book of sufficient value, the rarer the better.

I had, in fact, a children's book (one of the Disney remakes involving Winnie the Pooh) and the first tankubon (compilation of several chapters of a manga) of the series "Oh My Goddess" that I thought would go over well.

For this crowd, I was going to need more books.
Chapter Summary

Refugees, Travel, and Meta-Nature

One Floo Over

Chapter 18: Elf Help

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Insert standard disclaimer about not owning the intellectual property of others. -- --

One could have expected that simply taking a large number of elven (and one dwarven) refugees to a place like Candlekeep would not proceed smoothly. One could have pointed out all the times I'd tried to get from one spatial/temporal coordinate to another and ended up missing.

One might think so. One would be right.

"Okay, Candlekeep!" I said, turning on the video feed from the door. "Okay. Another science fiction convention. Not even the right world. Well, I can-"

The door was knocked on.

"Sorry, we're going to move your Tardis a bit. We're getting ready for the masquerade."

"A party?!” indicated half of the elves.

"Bah," grumped the dwarf.

Ten elves left my Tardis in search of a party. One dwarf left in search of booze.

My Tardis got moved to the side so they could use the stage for the masquerade contest. I'm still not sure how I got nominated as a judge.

Most of the elves ended up with t-shirts to supplement the clothing they'd gotten from that strip-mall. Some of them just kept the earlier ensemble. A few went to the new t-shirts. Iljrene made sure I watching as she changed shirts. A bit of an exhibitionist, that one.

Now Iljrene was sporting a pair of leggings decorated with sword-symbols, a Doctor Who t-shirt with a picture of a TARDIS and an elephant apparently listening to whatever was going on inside, and a pair of "Hello Kitty" tennis shoes.

Yeah, everyone was going for eclectic apparently.

Whatever the case, I declined the judge position repeatedly and just waited out the excitement of the moment.

Eventually the elves came back, a couple of cosplayers brought the dwarf back as he'd gotten lost in the hotels going from party to party, and I threw the switches and got underway again. Yes, I had
fifteen elves, a dwarf, and two cosplayers...

"Why?" I demanded.

"Thought it'd be fun," said one of the cosplayers, the one in a Star Trek: Next Generation uniform.

"Didn't think you'd notice," said the other cosplayer, dressed in a sort-of Chinese martial-artist sort of outfit.

"I'm going to have to invest in better locks," I said, noting that the two had apparently been hiding in the kitchen until I'd gotten the ship moving again. Of course, I hadn't locked everything up because the control room had gotten rather crowded.

I bounced back to Harry's world, determined that I had landed back at that NASA site I'd been to earlier, and got the dwarf's help in ejecting the two cosplayers.

"Who are these?" asked one of the scientists, coming over in a pack of same.

"A couple of stowaways when I accidently landed in a science-fiction convention," I told them.

"Stowaways on a spaceship?" said one of the other scientists in the group.

Not liking the speculative tone there, I quickly retreated to my Tardis and locked the door.

Grind-thump as we went from universe to universe and I planned out what books I should try to get. I had to consider not only what books that the scribes of Candlekeep would find interesting or useful, but what the local gods would allow.

Oghma, I seemed to recall, was fairly laid back. Not all of the deities of the Forgotten Realm were so easy to appease however. And the whole "fantasy kitchen sink" factor of the setting meant that information would be getting into the hands of people who would seek to abuse the hell of it.

So, my first choice of "The Way Things Work" and similar science and engineering books was probably not a good choice.

Astronomy books might be okay as far as abuse, but would be of little or no value to the library due to different stars and planets and such.

Children's books would only go so far, big glossy pictures to the side.

-- interlude 18-1 --

Chrono Harlown reporting.

Agent Derei reported in at 14:25 hours that an individual who matched the description of C-Rank freelance mage Reverend Argent, wanted for questioning about the possession of proscribed weaponry, entering Omar's Antiques & Collectibles.

Hayate Yagami responded and arrived at 14:27 hours. Upon attempting to arrest Argent and bring him in for questioning, subject used an unknown spell to escape.

Believing that he'd turned invisible or used a stealth spell, Hayate used a widespread low-level blast spell to flush the suspect.

This was how Omar's Antiques & Collectibles ended up suffering twenty-five thousand credits in damage. Repairs of the structure are expected to take four standard days. Apparently the structure
was built to standards existing before the Structural Safety Guidelines were passed into law fifty nine years ago and were never upgraded.

On the other hand, the blast also revealed a hidden cache of proscribed weaponry and charges are pending against Omar.

Having staked out a secondary location, I was present when the fugitive summoned what appeared to be a crude homebuilt dimensional-traveling device and managed to answer the very questions he would have been asked about his activities had he been taken into custody.

Video recording appended to this file.

Attempts to access his device and shut it down remotely failed. Use of term 'Celestial Planes' indicate he may be an operative of some high-energy dimensional world system. Suggest followup by the Research Department for references as to whom this might indicate.

Analysis indicates subject has access to a Rare Skill involving short-range teleports that can defeat a standard teleport-block. Alternatively, analysis by Reinforce indicates a completely different magical system might be in use by suspect.

So far, everything indicates subject is actually non-violent but presence of unknown magic type may pose a threat if suspect is cornered.

Recommendation is that further sighting of suspect Argent: first erect at least a bounded field by a specialist of at least B Rank. Apprehension of individual to be accomplished by an A Rank or AA Rank mage with nonlethal options.

Do NOT use Nanoha Takamichi, Fate Testarossa, or Hayate Yagami. Both their power level and tendency to react with overwhelming firepower will likely alarm the suspect or at least verify suspect's allegations that the TSAB is needlessly violent.

APPENDMENT ONE: Officer Nigel Blackthorne, TSAB Investigations Unit.

Trace on subject's vehicle performed by personnel involved in failed capture attempt led to a previously unknown world, currently in assessment.

Hostile amorphous lifeforms present in cavern, as well as signs of battle using fire-based magic against said lifeforms.

Lifeforms are noted as being molds, fungi, and similar species though active and mobile at speeds more associated with mammals and considerably more evolved species.

Class X Entity noted directing attacks via remote connection to fungal and pseudofungal lifeforms. Officer Akane Yamahara lost her right arm when a pinhole breach of her shielding allowed a single spore to penetrate. Amputation of arm was seen as only possible alternative to her flesh being converted entirely to encroaching substance.

Presence of AA Rank combat mage Suzaku is credited with survival of pursuit/tracking team. Sterilization of site and countering telepathic interference commenced, taking approximately two standard hours.

Further indication was that location was a temple complex to previously unknown humanoid species until attack by fungal entity. Skeletal remains indicate partial evacuation of complex during attack.

Dimensional trace continues to volcanic site on another non-administered and uncharted world.
Second world landing site indicates roughly ten survivors of species from first world, divesting clothing and equipment into lava field. Considering the fungal nature of attackers, this was probably to protect from infestation.

C-Rank Mage Natsuko McDowell's Rare Skill allowed her to confirm that survivors of massacre in first world were currently with suspect.

Trace ends in lava field, tracking mechanism likely burned off by high temperatures and corrosive atmosphere.

During exploration of nearby terrain, B-Rank Mage Sian Welby discovered presence of large carnivores. B-Rank Mage Sian Welby has formally requested downtime due to magical exhaustion and feeling under the weather. Particularly after nearly being eaten by a native large carnivore.

Initial investigation indicates that suspect's vehicle is utilizing a dimensional transfer mechanism of unknown type and uncertain behavior. Recommending that when suspect is apprehended, that vessel be impounded and taken apart to understand principles of operation.

-- End Interlude 18-1 --

The cleric at the gate of Candlekeep blinked at me for a moment before he turned his gaze to the crowd of drow (wearing sunglasses, two of whom also were sporting beanies with mouse ears) and dark elves (all wearing bright clothing) and a single dwarf (who was sitting down and grumbling about the whole thing.)

Come to think of it, the guy's gaze probably lingered on the dwarf as the most normal thing out of the whole group.

"I think," said the cleric slowly, "that I'm going to need to get my superior."

Okay, a word about the drow. Some of the details I may have wrong but I understand the basics.

A long long time ago in a whole lot of related universes, there was a single race of elves. That race was shaken by a series of skirmishes or wars or whatever you want to call it with each of the various elven races ending up born of the High Magic and the magic of the conflict being thrown about. The dark elves, sea elves, avariel, high elves, gray elves, wood elves, and so on and so forth all came from this time.

In one particular set of branches, the young consort of the head elf-god decided to emulate spiders in her lifestyle and those of her followers. She staged a revolt and battle among the gods of the elven pantheon, trying to frame others for the whole thing just in case it went wrong. This goddess, taking the name of Lolth after her plots were discovered, decided to take the dark elves for herself and sponsored and helped power a bit of High Magic ritual that turned dark elves into drow. Their skin was black as charcoal, seared by the magic and they would forever shun the daylight.

Lolth was after a Master Race to worship her, something strong and ruthless and loyal to her and her alone. To that extent she built a society that was a ruthless matriarchy where softer emotions would be cut out. An empire of evil dedicated to serving her and eventually destroying all other elves and enslaving all other races.

What she got was an underground race of individuals of power who idolized strength, betrayal, hate, cruelty, and was very quickly on the brink of extinction. Instead of toning it down enough that the society might actually be sustainable, the elven goddess of spiders went ahead and added a strong libido and made them fertile as all get out. Otherwise, considering how she wanted them to behave -
they'd likely have died out by the second generation.

Several other gods and goddesses of the darker aspects of the elven species joined Lolth, even if they had to be worshiped or appeased in secret. And one goddess, the youngest of the children of that elf chief god, became the goddess of atonement and reconciliation and generally not spending your life being an utter wastehole.

Eilistraee was that drow elf goddess of not being an utter wastehole. She also had dance and swords and the moon in her portfolio somehow because "elf" or something. Iljrene related a story about a spell redirecting one of the goddess' arrows so she gave up the bow, but I wasn't sure of the accuracy of that whole thing. Legends tend to deviate from the truth and elves tended to bend the outer boundaries of the truth whatever their sub-race. Eilistraee was apparently the goddess of atonement but there wasn't, as far as I knew, a goddess of straight talk and honesty anywhere in the Realms.

Fast forward to now where Eilistraee had apparently died and used her death to fuel a High Magic ritual that undid the whole drow thing for anyone who worshiped her or regularly invoked her name at the time of that death. Which was why you now had former-drow now-dark-elven running about.

"What is going on here?" asked the superior cleric a few moments later as he'd apparently been nearby and heard the commotion.

"We went to Disneyland!" proclaimed Iljrene hugging her plush doll of Mickey Mouse.

"How nice of you," said the superior cleric, twitching as he tried to process that image, not that he had an idea about Disneyland but the image of a curvaceous dark elf hugging a strange cloth mouse doll to her breasts. Didn't look very much like the drow everyone was used to.

"We have refugees from the Promenade under Waterdeep," I began. That got his attention as he'd apparently heard of it before. "The dark elves are all followers of Eilistraee who were transformed by some High Magic. I don't have details. The three drow are not worshipers of the spider, but not worshipers of Eilistraee either."

"I'm an atheist," said one drow.

"I'm a follower of Mielikki," said another drow.

"Tempus," said the third drow.

"You're a what?" asked the cleric of the one drow.

"I don't believe in gods," said the first drow.

The clerics stared at her as if they had never heard of such a thing. Compared to that, one drow worshiping the patron goddess of rangers and another worshiping the god of war was pretty vanilla.

"Right," said the cleric. "Well, you don't have any books so-"

"Hold on," I said, setting my haversack down and beginning to pull books out. "I hadn't planned to go to Disneyland, but while I was there I got several children's books and a few picture books. I also stopped at Barnes & Noble and Borders. Brief stop-off in Diagon Alley. Got a nice selection here."

I did actually. Though I'd had to keep an eye out for those aurors or other problems in Diagon. And inform some tall aristocrat type that these were NOT house elves and he could NOT claim any and that if he tried they still had their knives.
Fen, the atheist drow, was something I was still trying to wrap my own head around. In a world where the gods granted spells to their priests, and had waged a battle on their world in an event a few decades ago in which gods had descended to the mortal planes and died and mortals had ascended to godhood, to profess that there were no gods seemed a bit odd to say the least. She probably held that they were some ascended form of wizard or something, but I didn’t have the details. Wasn’t going to ask either, that was a headache waiting to happen.

I may run into a lot of headaches, didn’t mean that I went looking for them.

Nokko, the follower of Mielikki, was an obvious ranger who had thrown her outer clothes and armor off into that volcano but kept her various quivers and a silvery-looking crossbow. She was also proudly wearing a pair of Mickey ears that had her name stitched onto the beanie portion. The t-shirt that read "I aim to misbehave" was a light brown with white lettering and one of the least colorful bits of garment among the entire group.

Seimii was another Mickey-beanie wearer and obviously fit the warrior archetype with a single-edge sword that was nearly her own length. Despite the drow wearing a t-shirt that proclaimed that she was a "party girl" with a pixelated picture of a JRPG adventuring party.

Nayu was one of the dark elves, a priestess of Eilistraee and a rogue of some kind from my guess. She kept up a conversation with Nokko and I was wondering if there was something going on between them. Not that it meant much if they did, my admittedly limited understanding of drow and elf cultures in general was that they DID do that a lot, but if they didn't stay discreet it might cause some problems in Candlekeep. It'd be better to pay attention to the clerics who had the power to turn them all away right now.

Of course, if the clerics of Eilistraee were correct - the spell that turned them from being drow to dark elves had been fueled by the death of their goddess? They were going to venerate their fallen goddess, but they'd have to turn active worship to another deity. They MIGHT actually be considering options and Nayu was considering turning to Mielikki.

The cleric was silent as he went through the books. Most, of course, were written in English and would require a written language translation spell to transcribe into the local languages. Clerics of Oghma would have such a spell, if there wasn't such a thing it would only be because the local Rules of magic didn't support it.

The various children's books and pictorials were less useful but easier to understand without spell use.

The senior cleric was leafing through one of the books from Diagon Alley dealing with geneology when he stiffened as his eyes went wide.

"This does not bode well," I commented as I guessed what was happening.

"This is insufficient," said the cleric finally.

"Is that your decision, or..." I let the sentence dangle there.

"No, it was a higher authority," confirmed the cleric. "You and four others will have to leave. You have business elsewhere. The dwarf has business with his people and a caravan will leave for that territory tomorrow. The rest can remain for a time, though eventually they will have to leave and find new quarters."

I let out a deep breath. Plans had to be adapted, that had been true as long as there had been plans.
Still disappointing though.

"I don't suppose your higher authority had any reason given? Like why I haven't been able to contact the Celestial Planes beyond getting spells?" It was worth a try after all.

"The gods rarely explain things," said the senior cleric of Oghma. "On the occasion that they do, it generally means things have dropped straight into the crapper."

Well, I certainly couldn't argue with that.

Nokko, Iljrene, Nayu, and Sura followed me back to the Tardis. Apparently they'd come to a decision among themselves. Sura being the one who kept Iljrene under control. There might be more going on there too, in which case assigning them the same room would probably keep them occupied and out of my hair.

Nokko, probably a ranger specializing in the crossbow.

Iljrene was a swordsman. Considering that she was unusually short and a mostly thin but wiry build - I was guessing that she was a finesse type. Meaning that when she got a new sword it would be the thin one-handed type. Iljrene was also a cleric, though if Eilistraee was indeed dead she wouldn't be able to do a lot of cleric things until she got a new deity to follow.

Nayu was also a cleric of Eilistraee, but something in the way she moved indicated rogue to me. Not necessarily a thief, though she might have started out on that path, but a stealth specialist of some kind.

Sura was a bit less obvious, all her equipment had gone into the volcano and she'd been running around nude until she'd gotten a couple of towels from the bathroom to wrap around herself strategically. I think mainly it was to spare my embarrassment, none of the elves seemed to think that much about being nude.

Which reminded me. I would probably need to get new towels.

"Monk."

I blinked and regarded Sura. "Eh?"

"You're trying to figure out what kind of skills we have," said Sura. "Cleric of Eilistraee but I'm mainly a monk."

In Forgotten Realms' terms, most monks were just clerics in a monastery. To use the term 'monk' like this though - she was basically saying the sort of monk you might find in a Shaolin temple.

"I have a feeling there's one heck of a backstory involved there," I told her.

She flashed white teeth at me. "Don't we all?"

Not much of a reply needed for that, was there?

So, a 'monk' - a martial artist able to wreak havoc with her bare hands. And feet and head and so on. Which was unusual to say the least.

The Tardis landed, and I examined the scene in the monitor. As usual, it was not where I'd intended to go.

"It worked!" said Sura.
"Eh?" I asked, not sure what she was referring to.

Iljrene was out the door in a flash. "Berightback, justamoment!"

"Eh?" I asked again as it seemed entirely appropriate.

There came that odd sound that occurs when teenage girls get together with enthusiasm. Simply calling it a squeal doesn't really convey the sheer dolphin-beaching volume or pitch. Especially when elf girls do it.

"Really?"

"Really really!"

"So what did he say?"

"What do you think?"

I was still trying to get a handle on this, and finally placed the location as Waterdeep. The so-called City Of Splendors in the so-called Forgotten Realms.

"Come on! Come on!" said Iljrene, running back into my Tardis.

"What?" I asked just before ANOTHER crowd appeared. "No! No! No! You lot are not invited. I'm trying to set this group off."

"No?" asked a tall blonde elf, cocking her head to the side in regard.

"No, absolutely not," I told her. "I'm not a ferry service!"

"What if one of the local gods asked you to?" the elf maid asked with her head still cocked in a bird-like fashion.

"Well," I acknowledged, "that WOULD be different. Bit of a tradeoff getting spells locally means the occasional favor would not be completely off the table."

"Excellent," declared another woman coming into my Tardis.

"Eh?" I repeated. "What?"

"We need to get moving, the Spellplague and the Breaking of the World is coming soon, you won't be able to return here for awhile," the newest newcomer told me.

"You're a backup," I realized. "An avatar. A spark of the divine seeded in case something happens to the original."

The newcomer smiled. "So nice to work with someone who actually has a clue. Be a dear and close the door will you?"

"This is highly irregular," I stated, but I closed the door anyway. Some gods or goddesses I'd have been ready to toss them off if I could find a way to do it. Might have to get the gauss rifle out and shoot them repeatedly and throw them off while they regenerated or something. Some gods and goddesses were less troublesome in that regard.

Hanali Celanil, elven goddess of love, who was also part of Sune - the human goddess of love for that dimension. Also part of a goddess of the elves who included two other goddesses. Things are
complicated on the divine end in the Realms, which is sort of a "fantasy kitchen sink" world so you'd kind of expect that sort of thing.

I went through the process of activation, glaring once at one of the small group of elves as they giggled about something.

"We'll be out of your hair soon enough, Argent," Hanali told me. "The next stop, in fact."

"Oh?" I asked. If nothing else not having to get all that stray long hair out of the bathing area would be a nice change.

My Tardis rematerialized in Harry's world and I heard music falter briefly then resume. I looked at the console, then at Hanali Celanil.

"Strong enough intent influences your guidance mechanism," stated Hanali. "There IS a D-Hopper at the core after all."

I stared for a moment before slapping a palm against my forehead. Part of magic was intent, part of the D-Hopper's control mechanism was also intent for all that it was technically a device of really advanced science. Sort of. At certain levels of technology the line between magic and science kind of blurred.

I opened the door and my current load of passengers disembarked while the orchestra we'd landed next to began playing the "Doctor Who" theme.

I had to wonder about this though. Members of the Reality Relief Office had to keep a low profile and not make waves or draw any attention to themselves. I was currently unleashing three dark elves, one drow, three wood elves, two avariel or winged elves, an aquatic elf, two high elves, and the avatar of an elven goddess of love.

In London in 1991 local reckoning.

Apparently at the London Symphony.

From my ersatz, fuuinjutsu and magic and Celestial science kludged-together Tardis.

Before a live audience as this was apparently a concert.

Who were playing the "Doctor Who" theme.

Were those cameras? Oh great. Perfect. Brilliant. This was probably going out LIVE nationwide and would likely be on various news programs.

Because elves were photogenic, or at least these were.

This was so far from being "low profile" that the Hubble Space Telescope couldn't see it.

The song ended and you could hear the crowd as the "space elves" (one of the commentators insisting they were Vulcans) moved among the edges of the orchestra area and waved.

Still, I could use this opportunity to sneak off. Maybe nobody would notice.

Due to the state of my control room (covered in little post-it notes) it took me awhile to realize that one of them had NOT been written by me.

This one was written in High Elvish, which had caught my eye as I'd gone around to do a second
check of systems to see what my elven refugee crowd may have messed with.

It was short and simple and mysterious. Which was what you would expect from a deity, even if it was just a minor avatar.

"Not everything you remember is true. When one door closes, another opens. A companion you can trust can help brighten the journey."

"Oh, great. An elven fortune cookie," I said to the empty room.

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It is not the critic who counts. Not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena. - Theodore Roosevelt

Lindsey Stirling used that quote in her video "Arena" - sounds like a good quote for just about any social media doesn't it?
Chapter Summary

Companion Hunting

One Floo Over

Chapter 19: Pets & Probabilities

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Animal Rescue Groups are something that proliferated in the latter part of the 20th and early 21st Century in several nations on Earth.

If you want someone loyal, if you want someone you can trust, get a dog.

There are several spells called "Speak With Animals" that basically allow communication between the caster and a creature that normally doesn't understand spoken languages. There are differences among them to be sure - but I was a cleric and so it was the cleric version of the spell I was using.

"Hello," I said as I stepped onto the little pathway. "I'm the Vicar. Well, that's what they're calling me anyway. How do you do this fine day?"

The young ladies in the yard tending to their animals were still staring at me. A ball fell from one's hand and bounced a few times.

"I understand you have animals for adoption?" I prompted.

One young animal handler's head was making a slow back and forth between me and my Tardis. Otherwise they just continued to stare.

"Well, I find that I'm technically supposed to be running around with a Companion," I said. "Therefore I thought I'd pop in and see who's available."

"That's the Tardis," said one of the young girls, apparently the first to recover. Well, relatively recover.

"Right you are, that's my Tardis," I said, beaming at this first sign of life.

"All of time and space and you come to STAR? For a dog?" continued this first recoverer.

"STAR?" I asked before I spotted the signage explaining it on the front of the building. "South Texas Animal Rescue, yes. Nice acronym, by the way. In any case, hmmm. How about you?"

(You smell funny,) indicated the mutt, some kind of black and white terrier mix.

"Well, I'm sort of not from around here, so I probably do smell a bit off from what you're used to," I admitted.
“Not available!” declared one of the other girls.

“What?” I asked.

“We only offer animals to stable and loving homes,” this second girl declared. “You, you go all over time and space and face monsters and Daleks and such. Not stable!”

“Oh,” I said, considering it. Not that I actually faced Daleks but I could see her point.

Maybe I should get a robot dog? Or a robot dragon that could fire a particle beam from it's mouth?

“What do you think?” I asked the small terrier mix.

(No treats?) asked the mutt.

“No, afraid I didn't bring any with me,” I told him.

“Eh?” asked the first of the handlers, looking between me and the terrier mix.

“Just talking with the dog,” I informed her.

“What, you can talk to the animals? Chat with a chimp in Chimpanzee?” asked the first animal handler.

“Talk with a tiger? Chat with a cheetah?” supplied the third of the animal handlers.

“Well, yes, but they don't converse quite the same as you apparently think,” I answered. "Their language is quite a lot simpler and involves body movement to a large degree. The little fellow there was asking about treats just now."

“I see,” said the first, though I had the feeling she really didn't completely grasp what I was saying.

I went back inside my Tardis, activated it, and pondered the possibilities from somewhere in Albuquerque.

Somehow I had copied the fictional TARDIS' ability to end up in strange places that had not actually been where I'd aimed for. It wasn't too hard to believe that something, possibly a side-effect of two sets of enhancements conflicting, required there to be a Companion.

I had, after all, been aiming for a dog shelter in London and ended up in Texas.

Going back to the "Forgotten Realms" had me slamming into a barrier, but that wasn't precisely unexpected. Hanali had mentioned that there were big events about to hit in that world and that tended to close down the paths in and out around that time. Interference of the gods, erratic timestream, the pattern shifting in the identity of that universe - it didn't matter what the mechanism was. I was not likely to be able to get through it on my own resources.

Other than my Tardis shuddering and two internal lights failing, there wasn't much of an effect internally.

It did, however, get me thinking about Hanali's fortune cookie-esque note. One path had closed, as stated. So - did that mean another path had been opened for me?

I set the Tardis down, checked the video feed to make sure I wasn't blocking an intersection or on top of another volcano. I had to replace some of the anti-heat and environmental maintenance enchants after that once.
I was greeted with a view that looked like Steve Ditko or possibly someone on an acid trip had been playing around with a really advanced Computer Graphics program.

It was when I stepped out and saw an immense stone face that I realized where exactly I'd ended up, and the logic of that was clear. I'd bounced off one of the planes bound by a common cosmology, a multiverse set sharing common laws and rules. That cosmology had several common areas linking them, one of which was called the Astral Plane.

Within that setting/mileau/cosmological grouping, if a god died their body ended up here on this Astral Plane petrified and immense.

Eilistraee, the drow goddess of dance and sword and redemption, was indeed dead. Because I'd managed to land my Tardis on her right shoulder.

On getting out and looking about, noting that gravity was largely towards whatever surface I was walking on at the time, I apologized to the goddess for my trespassing and invited her to respond if she had any particular quarrel with my staying here for a bit.

Being dead, I didn't really expect her to answer, but when dealing with goddesses and the like it doesn't hurt to maintain a certain degree of politeness.

I paused as I felt something vague in the air. Was that a reply or my imagination or what? Perhaps she had an avatar or backup copy of her own somewhere and that was an echo down some cosmic line?

"Well, I don't think that was a denial," I said aloud, just in case the goddess was in the "mostly dead" or something similar category. I glanced down the length, noted that a goddess whose worshipers danced naked in the moonlight was herself apparently naked and considered whether I should apologize for that look or would the apology actually be more insulting? It's tricky enough knowing what to say around human women of the same culture, just look at the legion of books on the subject that all say different things, but when dealing with a nonhuman woman of a decidedly different culture and worldview that made it largely incomprehensible to a humble wandering cleric.

So, a few dozen kilometers of goddess statue, my Tardis and a realm where time and space and such were all jumbled about.

"Well, I'll be right in here if you've got something to say about it," I told the goddess. "Don't hesitate to knock or something if you need something. Unless I'm in the bath or..."

There was that odd feeling in the air again, causing my voice to trail off as I tried to analyze it.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I've got a bath in there. I wasn't sure whether to go with Roman-style or something along the lines of a Japanese bathing house so I sort of combined the two," I told her. "Built it while Harry was off at that Magic Academy because I really needed a place to sit down and relax. Got an area to soap up and rinse off like a Japanese bath-house but the bath itself is fairly Roman in style. Was able to get some marble statues for cheap by giving the fourth-year students some practice in using transfiguration spells to alter the shape. One or two came to life and had to be put down, but what do you expect with magic students?"

That... that was a feeling of amusement? Distant though. So, some kind of backup or remnant or Avatar possibly with a tenuous connection to the corpse-island.

Well, that was good enough. I'd just continue to talk to the dead goddess and maybe her priestesses wouldn't take umbrage that I was basically using her corpse as a landing pad.
Have I mentioned how thoroughly weird my life was? Because, truly, how many other people could make a statement like that and be completely serious?

I mean, really, even that Doctor fellow might not have been able to make the statement that he'd spent any length of time camped out on the corpse of a dead allied goddess.

Time didn't pass as far as some would consider it. I ate some of the prepared foods, drank water, and tried to sleep because when I left this version of an Astral Plane - the accumulated time would hit you all at once. You wouldn't feel the need for food or drink or sleep and could potentially spend a few centuries without any of that. The problem was that once you left, it all hit you at once.

Unfortunately sleep was something I was having trouble doing without using some sort of sleeping draught. When I gave up on that, I simply allocated some of that “down time” from research and experimentation to reading.

Since I had felt *something* when talking to the goddess-corpse earlier, I read aloud to the goddess corpse. On occasion I'd get a flicker of some emotion, like a distant echo bouncing down a canyon.

I hadn't given ALL my books away at Candlekeep after all. The ones they'd not wanted or that hadn't yet been used as a bargaining chip when the cleric had told me to take four with me and not let the door hit me on the way out.

Which was why I was fumbling through a book of elven love poems (apparently Candlekeep had four copies already), a book on ballistic fiber and kevlar and other tech 8 armors, and some Shakespeare to begin with. I got a flicker of interest and amusement when I tried reading a copy of one of Glen Cook's "Garret PI" series. Most of the other stuff didn't even get that much.

A githyanki plunder-ship came by once, looked over my encampment, and then left without a word. Apparently they didn't think it worth setting up a strip-mine on Eilistraee's petrified corpse. It certainly wasn't MY presence as they outgunned me in terms of magic and warrior training and actual guns.

Githyanki looked kind of like undead. They weren't. If they HAD been, I'd have actually had a chance against that many. Not much of a chance, mind you, but a chance.

Well, maybe it was my presence here indicating a prior claim and they were just not in the mood to bother with it.

The githyanki are one of those not-quite-human races you can run into in worldsets like that. Human enough that a human actor with a lot of makeup and some prosthetic builds could portray one on television. They roamed the Astral, set up mining operations on god-corpse-islands, and so on. You were most likely to run into their warrior caste as their farmers and craftsmen tended not to go out in ships and raid everything nearby. So the ship of githyanki could actually have been farmers looking to settle in a new spot.

At the time I was reading to Eilistraee a story about a group of heroes who banded together in order to fight a Dark Lord who had a magical McGuffin to allow him to rule the world. Odd the parallels between a typical fantasy questline and Thanos with his Infinity Gauntlet.

At which point something truly odd happened. The corpse-island that I was sitting on shook as if having an earthquake.

I, currently unanchored, tumbled across the landscape as I truly hadn't any sort of warning and wasn't expecting this in this slightest. With a gravity and temperature and a number of other things being
entirely subjective, and it being a goddess' petrified corpse that I was on, one would not expect something that normally required continental plates or some similar mechanism.

As soon as the movement stopped, I ran as quickly as possible back to my Tardis. A severely under-rated skill is running. Basic defense skill but useful when all other options are off the table.

Once in the doorway, I turned around and noticed the shaking had begun again and the slight bouncing had caused my little blue box to go floating off a bit from the corpse-isle.

And the corpse-island began deconstructing itself, dissolving into magical energy in a way that those things were NOT supposed to do. Like it hadn't been a real one, but some sort of magical construct?

I was still puzzling over that when the controls engaged. Without me touching any of them. Just like that I was out of the Astral Plane (or at least that one) and heading off to a new destination.

"Oh bugger," was my comment, which on retrospect did actually sum up the situation rather well.

I was pretty sure that as my arrival had been accidental and involved bouncing off a barrier, with the addition of having had a bunch of her worshipers recently on my Tardis, that I wasn't likely to ever find that particular location again and explore the mystery of what that hundreds of kilometers long fake god-island-corpse was supposed to accomplish.

There was also the distinct possibility that my exit had been done by a servant or something of the goddess herself.

The Tardis came to a landing soon enough, and I checked the viewscreen as I was fully expecting something odd and thoroughly random. I was not disappointed.

There are places that will bring a squee forth from the hearts of a fanboy should that fanboy find themselves there. The Batcave or Gallifrey for example. There are places that the fanboy would be familiar with and cause the exact opposite reaction, like R'lyeh or Ravenloft. And there are places where the random fanboy plunked down there would have one reaction quickly followed by the other, because there are places that make decent story settings but extremely lousy places to try and survive in. Examples of this last are like Lankhmar or just about any Zombie Apocalypse setting.

"Well, this is different," I said to myself as I was obviously looking at the inside of a space station or some similar venue. From the look of it, I was thinking plasteel walls so it was Tech 9 or Tech 10 at the least.

I really needed a Companion so I could bounce ideas and observations off of them. Too bad they wouldn't let me adopt a dog, they're good for that. Not so good at pointing out when you had something wrong, but sometimes all you needed was to move it from an internal dialogue to an external one.

There was only so much I could determine about my location without a set of sensors or something suitably tech.

I am not the Doctor, who would march off with a suit of Plot Armor and no weapons other than a sonic screwdriver. On the other hand, if you HAD a weapon and were searched or scanned there were those who would view it as evidence that you were planning to use said weapon.

Unfortunately, I didn't happen to have something that looked like a perfectly normal wristwatch that would fire off stun beams or lightning bolts.

Maybe not a robot dog though. Dogs weren't allowed everywhere. Not a cat though, even a robot
one, they tended not to follow any sort of directions. Maybe a robot floating orb or something? In a magic/fantasy realm you could pass it off as a magical advising orb or something.

If the limits on my travels was ever lifted, I didn't want to drop a companion or have them stuck in my Tardis because the local population were going to bring out the pitchforks and torches on seeing him/her/it. Well, I was kind of limited in resources.

I had remembered bits and pieces by now of studying under Hephaestus in his workshop, one of a couple of thousand of workers trying to figure out new ways of doing stuff. Some einherjar, some reincarnates between incarnations, others of various types - even a dragon or two I think. Very high tech stuff and some magical craftsmanship and so on.

While I had apparently been just one of a crowd - you pick things up in that sort of environment. Think of getting together all the top engineer nerds and science nerds and fantasy geeks together in a very large lab setting with individual and group workstations and where the beer and other beverages flowed pretty freely and there were an awful lot of supplies being made available. If that sounds like a little slice of heaven to you, well, technically it IS a little slice of one of the heavens. It becomes a little bit like a nonstop party and geekfest with giant robots and exosuits and enchanted suits of armor and such. The magic-craftsmen and the science crowd frequently have a rivalry going, with a third camp trying to tie the two approaches together with even more bizarre results.

Which completely got away from my current situation, which was staring at a plasteel (or close enough) wall because the Tardis was landed facing that wall.

I stuck my head out and discovered that I was in some sort of utility closet and there was dust present on cardboard boxes on a metal utility shelf. Which sort of made the space station idea unlikely as corrugated cardboard was strictly ground-based material and was only used up to about a Tech low-9.

Inside the boxes were discolored and faded papers, written in English. So, likely I was on Earth or an Earth-colony and it was probably an early 9. The papers themselves were old invoices and financial records, useless to some.

To someone trying to figure out when/where they were, they were mostly useless except to give me an idea of the setting. None of the companies originating the invoices rang a bell. All of them were made out to the Commonwealth Institute Of Technology, so that told me something. A college of some kind, but the Commonwealth could mean a lot of things.

A dome shape against the wall made an odd noise, rotated a segment to reveal a nozzle, and began firing laser beams.

The moment some strange machine whirrs to life and starts pointing darn near anything at you, dodging or finding something to block with is pretty much standard. I chose to duck behind a nice sturdy-looking metal crate.

At which point I noticed the insignia on it and had a pretty good idea where I was.

In one universe, you'd run into books or comics or manga or TV programs that reflected another reality altogether. I've run into universes where pokemon was a series of videogames, another where they were more-or-less as depicted in those games, and another where orbs were made that summoned magic-wielding spirits from a sub-universe.

This was a universe where a series of computer games called the "Fallout" series was more-or-less real. More-or-less because the big picture would remain the same but things shifted around for plot or
storytelling purposes wouldn't be as they were depicted in that other universe.

"Vault-Tec" indicated that this was THAT sort of universe.

As the laser continued to fire and start burning through the crate, I reviewed my options. If it was burning through a metal crate, it wasn't going to go well for me if it hit my flesh. Tardis was over there. So, all I needed to do was get in there except that meant leaving the protection of that crate. I wasn't sure about how the local magical fields were, but I could at least try a Shield spell.

Except that was a transparent field and lasers were light. Hmmm. "Spirit Hammer!"

There was a loud clunk as the hammer slammed into the laser, apparently not hard enough to destroy it but that dent would lock it into place.

I could say that I took my time getting to safety in a calm and dignified manner. It wouldn't be true as I actually scrambled towards my Tardis with a battlecry of "Exit Stage Right" as the laser tried to follow my movements and instead scorched a jagged line in the wall.

At which point the situation was needlessly complicated by the door swooshing open and a skeletal robot figure with a laser rifle started shooting.

By that time I'd dove into my Tardis, the skeletal Terminator following in time to get the door slammed in its face. Followed by my activating every defensive ward I had.

Why couldn't I have ended up in the 'Verse of the Firefly series? Or some other world where conflicts were NOT literally beating down the door to dogpile you?

As I was starting the Tardis up again, the connection was made. The "Fallout" universes were not one I'd been to, but I was vaguely familiar with it due to weapons that had been heavily modded out at the workshop coming from there. Some guy called the Poster or Mailman or something? I couldn't remember the details. These universes were a post-apocalypse set.

Was this the same world?

I put that to the side for consideration as I returned to Harry's world. I needed to check something after my trip to that Astral Plane. There were enough stories about people losing track of time in such realms to be cautionary about such.

Of course, if that was true, then there was still a "door" open for me that I hadn't found. At least according to Hanali, but being as she was a goddess of the elves and the elves were known in most worlds for being less than completely honest (more bending the truth almost to the breaking point than outright lying) so I wasn't sure how to handle that.

There were other universes it COULD be, or it could be one of the more out-there Fallout-verses. There could be one where mana-bombs had been developed instead of or alongside atomic weapons. Or the nuclear war had happened during the Cuban Missile Crisis instead of in 2077 as I understood was the norm across the setting.

While I was pretty sure I'd never been to one of those universes, I HAD been to universes that were pretty divergent from the main branch. For example, I'd gotten a few flashes of memory that indicated I had performed a mission on a world where Tolkein's Middle-Earth had featured an evil Galadriel who'd killed off Sauron and claimed his Ring and power. Or a world where the Olmec civilization successfully interbred leopards and humans through the use of magic rituals.

Yeah, some of those universes are REALLY divergent. Heck, once I ran into a universe where the
entire island of 20th Century Nantucket had been time-rotated back to the period of the Iliad. I'm told there were secondary ripples and eddies in two adjacent realities from that.

There were universes where the good guys and the bad guys were flipped around, and universes where everyone insisted on being shades of gray and that there were no good guys or bad guys, and universes where EVERYONE had a tragic backstory.

I did however spend a few minutes putting together what I figured would be my "open carry" weapon for those societies where anyone well-dressed had to have a weapon showing. And, yes, there were a few places like that. There were also many situations where a weapon being visible would get it confiscated and therefore something less obvious would get overlooked.

I called it VERA. A "bullpup" style weapon composed of wood and brass and bronze pipes with a set of three gauges on one side and a set of switches on the other. Variable Effect Rune Armament. A magitech weapon that could be set to "stun" or "fireblast" or "lightning" or "clean" depending on the need. With a only-authorized-user on the trigger because I had a distinct lack of Plot Armor.

I hadn't field tested it yet, just putting the finishing touches on the functional parts but I could always add the logo and labels at some more convenient time.

I even had a setting that was unmarked because I planned on adding the mechanism for another function later. I had no doubt I'd run across a situation where I'd need something that I wasn't able to think of right at the moment. I'd already dismissed grappling hook and bind, both of which might be handy but would be best in a sort of multi-tool that was one of the remaining sticky notes in the console room.

Yeah, my "to do list" has unofficially taken over the console room.

Yeah, my "to do list" has other "to do lists" on it. At least I had gotten some of it cleaned up when I was on the corpse of a maybe-dead maybe-faking-it goddess.

I return to my original conclusion that life in the Reality Relief Office pretty much defines weird.

I looked over the display and realized I was in the Forest of Dean again. Probably at my original insertion point considering the burn marks, though the forest had mostly recovered by now.

Hmmm. It looked a bit TOO recovered. Maybe I should check and see how much time I'd spent in that Astral Plane after all.
Hogwarts & Houri

Chapter Summary

In which we see how Harry and the others have been faring, though unfortunately I was unable to put in any veela or houri or other such despite plans to do so.

One Floo Over

Chapter 20: Hogwarts & Houri

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Insert standard disclaimer about not owning the intellectual property of others. -- --

Severus Snape was not entirely sure how it had happened, why it had happened, or precisely when.

"Severus, you've had your head buried in those notes for several days now."

"Hmph," responded Severus Snape before he blinked and took a deep breath as he straightened and had a bite of the porridge with honey he'd chosen for breakfast. "Minerva, the substances I've been experimenting with are completely fascinating. Just the Slayer Potion has the possibility of giving me a half-dozen useful potions as I determine how it functions."

"A 'half-dozen'?" queried Minerva McGonagall, sounding skeptical.

"It's unlikely I could replicate the full potion," noted Professor Snape. "But temporary versions of certain of its effects are certainly possible. A potion to increase one's resilience to injury, another to increase hand-eye coordination more than the current version, sensory acuity, physical strength, endurance? Yes, individual temporary versions are possible to manufacture."

"That's only five," said Minerva, though she was a bit surprised at all that.

"The gender morphing I've already figured out," said Severus. "There are muggles and even a few wizards who were born male and would pay some serious galleons to become women. I don't understand the appeal myself, perhaps it is the whole 'grass is greener' thing, but I note the amount of money involved."

"I suspect many will find their first periods to detract a bit from the experience," mused Minerva.

"Perhaps, perhaps not," said Severus. "I merely note that there is a market for the potion and I already have a patent application filed and in the pending process. A bit expensive, it involves a couple of pricey ingredients, and it only works the male to female angle. If it worked both ways it could be enormously lucrative. As it is, I suspect my costs will be recouped within a few years and then more than redoubled. Perhaps I'll take a bit of vacation. One of those cruises aboard a large boat, sipping exotic drinks, no children to manage."

"All this from one potion?" asked Minerva, ignoring the wistful way that Snape's voice trailed off.

"Just one," said Severus. "The anti-werewolf potion also shows some promise. It's not as good as the
ritual magic that priest worked - but it looks as if it would be cheaper than the current version. The werewolf instead would just take the potion on those days they were going to transform and sleeps through the whole affair. The only problem would be if one goes around waking sleeping werewolves, but I believe the muggle term for such an act is called a 'Darwin Award' and therefore beneath my consideration."

"I see," said Minerva.

"Then there's this," said Severus, pulling a potion bottle out of one pocket. "A simple duplication but I wonder if that priest-fellow even knew what it was."

Noting that the bottle was metal, that it was sealed with wax and inside a zip-lock bag and had at least one impervious charm on it, Minerva was not sure she wanted to know. She asked nonetheless. "What does that one do?"

"Bottled sanity," said Severus Snape. "One sip and even one's most treasured viewpoints are seen in the harsh light of reality and the most cloudy issue seems viewed completely clearly. A moment of such clarity that one could reconsider - no. It is a very dangerous thing indeed. A much more minor potion though - that would be most useful."

"I see," said Minerva, briefly wondering if she could get some certain people to take a drink.

"Diluted considerably, a lesser version would be a potion potentially quite useful," said Professor Snape. "Something that would allow one great insights but in a more controlled manner. So you see -"

"Pardon, Severus," said Filius from a bit further down the table. "That ward you wanted placed on the storeroom just went off."

"Ah, so someone is sneaking into your potions storeroom?" asked Minerva, who looked for and immediately found the Weasley twins. "That's odd."

"Indeed," said Severus Snape as he followed her line of sight. "That would have been my first guess as well. Who could it be?"

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"You did what?" asked Harry Potter. "How did you manage to even break into that room?"

"I got a favor owed me by Chauncey over in Ravenclaw, he knew some Fourth Year unlocking charm," said Ron.

Percy Weasley continued to stare at Ron. "Are you daft? Wait, why am I asking? Of course you are."

"Ron, you DO know what the side effect of that potion is, don't you?" Harry asked.

"You'll be expelled if Professor Snape finds out, you need to put it back immediately," said Percy.

The door banged open and Professor Snape walked in. "Oh. It was a Weasley after all."

"He was just going to return it, Professor," offered Percy.

"No he wasn't," said Professor Snape. "Go ahead, Mister Weasley. Take a drink."

"What?" asked Ron.
"I've been wanting to see what the potion does when introduced to a suitable subject," said Severus Snape, holding out an old camera. "This is a bit of diagnostic equipment."

"This is the potion that's supposed to make me stronger and faster, right?" asked Ron.

"That's it," said Snape.

"You really DON'T know about the side effect, do you?" asked Harry.

"If he drinks the potion while I am recording the results, I shall forego detentions or the loss of House points," said Severus Snape with a smirk that really should have clued just about anyone in that something was seriously wrong. Especially anyone who had brothers named Fred and George.

"Wicked!" declared Ron as he saw his Big Chance.

"Ron," said Percy, having seen Professor Snape's expression and recognizing it as something he'd seen on the face of the Weasley Twins when something was about to go exactly as planned. "I really think this is about the worst idea you've ever had, and that's truly saying something."

"Did you say something?" asked Ron as he lowered the little potion vial and licked his lips. "Strawberry flavored. Huh. S'funny. Suddenly I feel kinda-

It was like a train wreck. Everyone present could see it was coming and nobody present was able to look away.

First Ron Weasley, age 11, seemed to light up from within. His skeletal structure was clearly visible in the areas not concealed by his school robes for several seconds as it visibly morphed under the influence of the potion. Internal organs such as the sinus passages and throat were likewise visible briefly as the bones stopped glowing and they lit up in their turn.

Muscles were the next stop, thinning and lengthening as Ron looked to be nearly a hand taller than previously.

The glow left the muscle/tendon/ligament system and the skin started lighting up.

"That looks outrageously painful," commented Percy in a strained voice.

Ron shook his head as the transformation released him. "You remember that time I tried to do that quidditch manuever at the Burrow? Wait. My voice - what?"

"Hmmm. Very interesting," said Professor Snape. "I'll have to go over the results later."

"WHAT THE HELL?!" managed Ron Weasley.

"If you think that was bad, just wait till our mother hears about this," muttered Percy.

Ron turned pale and fainted dead away.

-- Interlude 20.1 --

It was a world like in the "Fallout" set. I wasn't sure what exactly was changed from a mainline, if there were any changes that would be obvious to a traveler like myself.

Now that I knew this much, there was an obvious place to check such things and now that the Tardis had been outfitted with flight controls - it was a bit easier to get around within a particular universe.
Short flights only though. The local magic wasn't strong enough to support even the flight of the outer shell interfacing with the pocket universe that was the interior.

The first library I went to had inhabitants. I took in the gory skeletal remains of humans who had been picked clean of flesh, some fresh enough that the remaining bits of viscera looked still moist.

Yeah. Not going out there.

While looking around at the local architecture, I had a basic location come to mind even though I hadn't been there before that I could recall. Boston.

This was not the BosWash of a typical NorAm universe. This was also not the gleaming towers of a Federation Earth or the dustbowl of a Thermic Apocalypse. Much more cluttered and with a sort of retro-future look.

There were gas stations about though, and they road maps and the usual little pamphlets to let you know about local attractions and tourist traps.

The second library had burned to the ground sometime in the past. The third had been ransacked and burned but whoever had done the burning had left the job unfinished. About half the library was a ruin, between the fire and exposure to the elements, it was unusable.

I kept the guns close at hand, and was going to open with the gauss rifle if anything showed itself. Once I had a double-handful of books I retreated to the Tardis and locked the door behind me.

I wasn't too familiar with the universe, but several things immediately stood out. The United States of this world had divided into thirteen Commonwealths in 1969. Genetically engineered plague in 2052 wipes out thousands. Despite this, a resource shortage snowballed for decades thereafter.

The history book's narrative ended in 2072 but one of the magazines filled in a little of the gap.Apparently the nuclear war happened in 2077 and after the August edition of Popular Mechanics had been published.

I turned my attention to the robot, which was pretty much beyond salvage. They actually had semi-autonomous robots here - with vaccuum tubes and little nuclear batteries and such. There was absolutely no way such a thing would work.

Except apparently they had worked and were fairly common. Protectron robots built by RobCo that filled a number of roles within the now-vanished society. This one had been partially burned, shot repeatedly, and apparently attacked with a machete before it stopped working.

I was able to figure out enough that I looked around and found a slightly better model of a different robot to "repurpose" - combining the parts into a whole functional robot.

The type of robot was called an Assaultron and it was mainly the head laser that I was interested in. Having one of those vaguely female-shaped humanoid robots zap evil wizards with something like an eyebeam seemed amusing for some reason.

Why it was vaguely female-shaped was unknown. Maybe aesthetics or something similar. Why it was humanoid was easy enough to figure, it could use normal doorways and equipment even though the limbs didn't have quite the range of motion needed for operating heavy machinery. Or at least they weren't until I found some equipment to do appropriate machine work.

I'd spent some time in Hephaestus' Workshop, and more of that stuff came back to me as I worked on this potential Companion. As a military model, it didn't have a lot of "human interaction" software
- that was something else that had to change.

The "head laser" was pretty powerful but had a long charge period and lousy range for a laser. A particle beam would be a good replacement, but in a lot of universes the radiation released from it burning through the air was problematic. A railgun wouldn't work, it requiring a launch tube that would leave the robot looking like a woodpecker beak had been grafted on.

So, a laser and a heavy duty one. One that charged up for over a minute but then lasted a good thirty seconds as it blasted away at whatever it was aimed at.

The arms ended in three "fingers" that were manipulative claws if not very dextrous. Looked like the design had been lifted from one of those crane or "UFO Catcher" games. The feet were more like articulated boots with a bit of a heel.

The steel plates covering all the non-joint bits got some fuuinjutsu inscribed on the inner portions. If I took this Companion back to Harry's world someone would just point a wand and turn it into a rock or chicken or something. Which wouldn't be a problem except that turning something back tended to be something a bit more difficult.

After getting about halfway done, I heard a clicking noise and glanced up. The robot had activated. I glanced down and verified that the power leads were still unconnected.

"I can't feel my legs," stated the robot.

"I haven't connected them yet," I said, pointing helpfully.

The robot's head tilted so that the optical sensors could get a better view. "I see."

"Well, yeah, I decided to work from the head down," I told it. "You were pretty wrecked."

"Understood," said the robot.

"Do you mind if I continue?" I asked the robot. Since it was conscious and apparently self-aware enough to ask questions it only seemed polite to ask.

The robot considered me briefly. "Is this unit to be placed under your command?"

"Yes, unless you have other plans?" I asked.

The head swiveled to look at its legs and then back to me. "Original assignment was to guard convoy. Convoy destroyed on October 23 2077. Guarded site of convoy until this unit was deactivated due to battle damage. This unit currently lacks purpose."

"Well," I said, turning my attention back to making repairs and a few little tweaks and enhancements - one of which had apparently been responsible for the unit activating. "Well, if you're not doing anything else, I could use a Companion."

"I am not equipped for that sort of duty," said the robot.

"Uhm, no, I just realized what that sounded like - and that was NOT what I meant at all," I said. "Look. I travel in time and space and alternate universes. I routinely deal with things that are outright insane by the standards of normal everyday human beings. I just find myself looking for a travel companion to talk with every so often."

"Analyzing. Bodyguard personality profile selected. This is a role that this unit is capable of
performing. Is this suitable?" asked the robot.

"That'll do for the most part," I told it. "I'm called the Vicar by some. Argent is the name I go by as more a name and less a title."

"Data filed," said the robot.

"Your name?" I asked as the robot apparently did not have that much in the way of human-interaction programming.


"Okay, from now on I'll call you 'Kate' or 'K8', how's that?" I asked.

"Acceptable."

--end interlude 20.1 --

"That's a Howler," noted one of the Gryffindor boys as the owl dropped a little something in front of Ron Weasley.

"I've got a bit of a headache," said Hermione, getting up. "You can open it after I'm gone."

"Why is SHE angry?" asked Ron, eyeing the now-smoking Howler.

"Mate, you don't understand anything about girls even if you ARE one now," said another Gryffindor boy.

"It didn't help when you spent over an hour last night going on about how awful it was to be a girl and how your life was ruined," noted Neville. "I may not know much about girls, but I'm pretty sure that's why none of them are talking to you today."

"On the fair side, I don't think they talked to him much before he became a her," pointed out that first Gryffindor boy.

"Ronniekins, Ronniekins," chided Fred, though possibly it was George.

"I suppose 'Ronnie' is an appropriate name now," speculated George, though it could have been Fred.

"Are Howlers supposed to hiss like that?" asked Harry.

"RONALD WEASLEY!" erupted the red letter just before it exploded.

"Oh, she's going to be really mad now," said George, or was it Fred?

"You didn't even open it, sad," said Fred, or George possibly.

"That was a shorter period than usual," said Neville. "I've gotten them before from my Gram. She must have been really angry."

"I'm dead," said Ron, her head hitting the table.

"Don't worry about it," said one of the Gryffindor girls, an evil smile indicating that perhaps she'd spent too much time with one or both of the twins. "You can make amends. Just go shopping with yer Mum."
"That wouldn't help," mumbled Ron.

"Oh to be sure, not much can be done with that hair," said the Gryff girl. "On the other hand, she can take you shopping for new underwear and have a girl's day out with her new daughter."

"You're enjoying this too much," said a Gryff boy.

"After hearing Ronnie go on about how useless he was now that he's a girl?" asked the Gryff girl in a lower volume of voice. "Fat chance I'm not getting some digs in."

"Ah," said the Gryff boy. Vengeance was not something restricted to Slytherin after all, it was just that Slytherin held it up as a virtue more than the other Houses did.

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"You're not playing quidditch?"

Harry shook his head, concentrating mostly on his book.

"With your flying? Why not?"

Harry glanced up at that, raising an eyebrow. "Because of my flying skills. Besides, how much time do I have for practicing or playing a sport?"

"Didn't that Vicar guy ever let you have fun?"

"Actually, yes, but this keeps going off," said Harry, holding up a fist-sized rectangle.

"What is that and what has it got to do with you not wanting to play quidditch - the greatest sport ever?"

Harry looked at his fellow Hufflepuff with a raised eyebrow for a moment. "It's a phone. It has an app to detect supernatural evil and undead."

"But... wait." Hannah Abbott stared at the thing with the cheerful blinky lights. One eye began twitching. "We're in Hogwarts. The wards. Muggle tech... it detects... a magic spell is running on a muggle... that's..."

Harry waved a hand in front of the girl's eyes in concern. "Well, what do you know. I've never seen anyone's mind blown quite so dramatically. Interesting."

-- Interlude 20.2 --


"We need more turrets," agreed the man in the vault suit.

"Robots and those Rust Devils - those are a pain."

"Especially when the robots blow up and take out the turrets," said Sturgis. "We get the occasional settler still, and that Trashcan Carla trader shows up every so often."

"I'd like to kick her out," said the Sole Survivor of Vault 111. "This world is so strange. Get put in cryo-suspension for two hundred years and they change everything. Except war. War never changes."
"War always changes," said a floating robot in a clipped pseudo-British accent. "Tactics and strategies alter with the technology and resources available. Ahem. Well, at least you've seen it all in the week since you stumbled out of that Vault, sir. Hardly any surprises left, I'd imagine."

"How about a flying blue closet making a grind-thump noise as it goes overhead?" asked Sturgis.

"Oh good," said Nate, the Sole Survivor relaxing slightly. "I was afraid the radiation had done something to me."

"Sir, that has all the aerodynamic-ness of a brick," protested the robot. "How is it even airborne? Oh, and now it's coming in for a landing. I have a feeling that if I was programmed to be able to have a headache - I'd be having one about now."

"The turrets are working over there and they've got the new friend-or-foe programming," said Sturgis. "Hope they don't shoot everything to pieces. I'd love to know how that thing flies without wings or a gasbag myself."

"It'd be nice if I saw something strange that wasn't out to kill me," remarked the Sole Survivor.

-- --

"Looks like a wrecked suburb subdivision," I told K8 as we did a once-around the place. Several little houses in a little cul-de-sac. Most of it pretty wrecked and some rickety-looking newer-built tower of wood and metal. Also what looked like automated machine guns that moved back and forth on some kind of swivel mount.

"Affirmative," said K8, the Assaultron looking over my shoulder at the viewscreen.

"Well, considering the big green Hulk-parodies back in that city, and the roving bands of Mad Max rejects, and the giant freaking scorpions and such - I can't really blame anyone for the whole arming-to-the-teeth attitude," I told my robot.

"No tooth-mounted weaponry detected," said K8.

"That's just an old phrase that indicates a lot of weapons and the willingness to use them," I told K8.

"Entering into linguistic database," stated the robot.

"Well, let me set down here, with the various Shield and Shell spells in place we'll be okay," I told her, then wondered why despite the vaguely female shape and female voice I kept thinking of the robot AS female when it really was gender-neutral. Also wondering why the US Army of this particular universe even HAD a female-shaped automata.

"My logic centers are having trouble parsing half the things you do," admitted K8. "Please upgrade those sometime in the near future."

"Right you are," I told her, deciding to just go with it. "By the way, would you prefer a more gender-neutral chassis and voice? It wouldn't be that difficult to do, you know."

"Is there something wrong with my appearance?" asked K8, sounding slightly affronted.

"No no not at all," I hastened to reassure her. I wasn't sure if that was originally there or she was more human-emotive as a result of some of the tweaks I'd done. "It's just easier to change your appearance than it is for most organics to change things around."
"Noted," said K8. "As personality subroutine develops, preferences may develop."

"Ah, well, I suppose you do have a bit of growing up to do," I noted as I set my Tardis down. "And here comes a delegation. Interesting, two humans and a floating robot."

"That is a Mister Handy domestic robotic unit," identified K8.


"Adding term to file for later investigation," said K8 before she went to the door and opened it. She wasn't immediately shot, which I took as a promising sign.

"Hello. I am the Vicar, this is my associate, K8." I looked over the two while introducing myself. The one guy was wearing some armor over a blue spandex-looking jumpsuit.

And, if I didn't miss my guess, the guy in spandex was the local Primus. Protaganist. Ta'veren. Focal Personage. Whatever name you called it - the one who was going to instigate change in this area.

Poor Schmuck might be another term for that position.

-- End Interlude 20-2 --

Harry put the goblet down slowly. Then he deliberately used one pinky finger to clean an ear.

The Great Hall of Hogwarts had gone abruptly quiet, conversations trailing off as everyone became aware that Something was about to happen.

"Pardon me," said Harry. "I must have misheard you. Could you repeat that?"

"Something wrong with your hearing, Potter?" said Marcus Flint. "Saying you are too good to play quidditch? Your parents were executed as blood traitors, and good riddance to bad garbage."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Very well. A formal insult has been registered. Will you apologize, or shall we duel?"

"If you think you have the courage, Potter," said Flint.

"A Sixth Year challenging a First Year?" asked Minerva as she rapidly walked up.

Harry held one hand up, dabbing at his mouth with a napkin with the other. "Time and place?"

"After school hours," said Filius Flitwick. "We have a room for such things. I shall officiate, if that's all right with both of you?"

"Thank you, Professor, that would be lovely," said Harry.

"It won't help you a bit, Potter," said Flint.

Filius snorted, then looked apologetic. "Pardon."

"You're not going to stop it?" asked Minerva as Harry and Marcus both left the area. "You're going along with it?"

Filius smirked. "My dear Professor McGonagall, I've seen Mister Potter practicing. My only concern
is how well maintained the barriers and wards are to keep things contained."

"What about Marcus Flint?" asked Minerva.

"I don't think that Mister Potter will do anything that a couple of weeks in the infirmary won't fix."


Filius Flitwick shrugged and spread his hands. "If it keeps Mister Potter from being challenged in the future - I'd say that keeps more people off the infirmary list."

"Well, Potter, ready to back down yet?" asked Marcus Flint, flourishing his wand before raising it to a "ready" position like a fencer.

"No," said Harry Potter simply, ignoring the crowd lining the walls and the brief flare from the wards as Professor Flitwick activated them. "Rules?"

Professor Flitwick spoke up at that cue. "Standard rules. When one surrenders - the other is declared winner. Recklessly endangering the bystanders shouldn't be possible with the wards I've erected, but if done may disqualify you. As referee, when I say the fight is over - it is over. When I say 'start' is when the match begins, not at any other time. Should one of you be disarmed, I will pause the match and call if you wish to surrender at that time. Otherwise the match will continue. The use of an Unforgiven spell will not be forgiven due to the nature of the match. Now, let's have a nice clean duel."

Severus Snape cleared his throat.

"Well, mostly clean," appended Professor Flitwick. "Start."

"Reducto!" cast Marcus Flint, aiming for Potter's wand-hand.

"Round Shield," countered Harry, catching the scarlet bolt on a rotating disc of runes. "Magica Sagitta, sixteen arrows of light!"

"Prote-" began Marcus Flint before the arrows began smashing into him from all directions.

"Acme!" said Harry, causing a large metal anvil to appear over his opponent. It was a summon from a fuuinjutsu scroll prepped in advance, not a spell, but he hadn't heard any rule stated to be against such a thing.

Marcus swore something and leapt back, his robes tattered and his face swelling from an arrow that had hit him in the face.

Harry made a circular motion with one hand and his wand in the other hand as his opponent avoided the anvil, which imbedded itself in the floor.

Harry thought it likely that Flint had been manipulated into this and the duel was actually to show some spy what he was capable of. After debating that for a bit, Harry had decided to keep it down to only a few spells - enough to show off some of what he could do but not all. Other attempts to get him to display his capabilities might be put off if it looked like this was what he mainly had.

"Rowlahowl," said Harry, using a nonsense phrase as an activator as the Magic Academy in that other world taught. "Sagitta Magica - sixteen fire arrows."
"Oh HELL no!" said Flint as sixteen arrows made entirely of flame formed around Harry. "Finite!"

Three arrows flickered out before they reached him. Six missed as Flint managed to twist out of the way. One arced around, hit a ward, and dissipated harmlessly. Three hit his wand and wand-hand, catching his wand on fire. Two more smashed into his chest, causing his robes to smoulder.

Marcus Flint landed on his back, tossing his now-flaming wand away as the pain from his hand increased. On his back, he looked up and saw a single remaining arrow hanging in the air and pointed directly at him. He said something that brought a scowl and reprimand for language from the watching Professor McGonagall.

"The winner is Mister Potter," said Filius Flitwick. "You can release that remaining arrow now, Mister Potter. I do believe it is not necessary."

"I yield," admitted Marcus Flint, silently cursing Malfoy for arranging this little demonstration and hoping that this ended it. He certainly didn't want to face Potter again without odds significantly better than one-on-one.

"D-d-d-defense against the Dark Arts," said Professor Quirrel. "Now, uhm, Mister P-Potter. What would your response be if you were to face an angry dragon?"

"Get away if I could, if I'm in its lair or something," said Harry thoughtfully. "Depends on where the dragon is, I suppose."

"What if it was rampaging in Diagon Alley?" asked the Defense Against The Dark Arts teacher.

"Kill it or drive it off," responded Harry thoughtfully. "Probably lead with a Sagitta Magica to get its attention on me, then fly off at high speeds to get it to follow me. Once I'm out of a crowded area I can cut loose."

"You wouldn't use a stronger spell?" asked Professor Quirrel, his stutter not showing at all in surprise.

"You can choose how much damage to do with a Sagitta Magica," said Harry. "I typically use it 'set to stun' as I don't have to replace targets as often. In the duel with Flint I had them set to 'slight damage' for safety reasons. If I was trying to get them to hurt a dragon I'd set them to the maximum."

Quirrel seemed to have some sort of internal argument before conjuring a suit of armor. "W-w-would you demonstrate?"

"Sagitta Magica, lightning arrow," said Harry, pointing at the armor.

There was a loud bang that caused several students to jump in their seats. The armor had a clear hole going through the breastplate and out the other side. Quirrel however was staring at the chunk of wall missing on the other side of the armor.

"Why lightning?" asked Ron.

"Lightning is armor-piercing," said Harry.

"Ah," said Ron, nodding at that.

Quirrel twitched.
"So this magic arrow thing lets you add an elemental charge to an attack," mused Hermione aloud. "So if you went up against a dragon, which fire wouldn't affect, you could use lightning. Likewise, if you were faced with something vulnerable to fire - you could use that instead."

"Well, there's elemental affinities, which is kind of a 'differs from person to person' kind of thing. Other than that though," said Harry, letting the statement trail off.

Quirrel twitched again.

"Damn handy it sounds like," said Ron.

"Ron, your voice is breaking again," said Hermione.

"Bugger!"

Professor Snape checked to make sure no one was around, then went over to his Wizarding Wireless and turned it on to a particular station.

"-now these 'space elves' are running around in the public eye as muggle-celebrities! If that wasn't bad enough, there's this 'Professor Gadget' who apparently went to a muggle magic-appreciation convecation and turned several of the attendees into cat-eared and tailed minions! I didn't even know that muggles HAD magic-appreciation convecations but apparently it's a whole industry involving something like 'faerie tales' and of course they get all the details about magic wrong."

"Of course," muttered Severus Snape.

"Well, you'd expect that, what with the Statute Of Secrecy and all," continued the radio talk show host. "So, interesting times my friends. It used to be that all we had to talk about was the latest Harry Potter sighting, Fudge's incompetence, and the latest scandal in the Wizengamot. Now Harry Potter is attending Hogwarts, Fudge is still a blithering idiot, the Wizengamot are keeping a low profile. Now we have a mad scientist, a time-travelling outer-space alien consulting with the muggle government, these 'catgirls' and 'space elves' and who-knows what next?"

"Indeed," said Professor Snape as he continued to chop ingredients for a potion.

"Next, a word from our sponsor at Fortesque's Ice Cream Parlour. This week they're having a sundae special, buy one and get the next at half-price. Any day is a good day for a sundae at Fortesque's."

"Pfeh, tooth-rot," commented Snape.

"Now, I don't have a trouble with these 'space-elves' per se," said the commentator. "They're certainly easy on the eyes if you've been lucky enough to see them. These 'catgirls' are muggles with some odd abilities and habits, but hey - we're a few years shy of a new millenia. The only problem I see with that group is that the magical government seems to be locked up with deciding if they're still muggles, or they're magical beasts, or if they're considered Beings. Then again - I keep coming to the conclusion that our magical government mainly exists to argue crap and make speeches that wouldn't survive a couple drops of Veritaserum. Honestly, can some enterprising young wizard or witch come up with a magical 'bullcrap detector' that we can sneak into a few parliament meetings? Just saying."

"It'd be illegal to have one within a day," predicted Professor Snape as he continued to work.

"That doesn't even get into the dinosaurs at the zoo," said the commentator. "Honestly, even if it means going into a muggle crowd for a few hours - I'd recommend going and taking a look at these
beasties. They're large and smelly and apparently somewhat magic-resistant but they look like just the sort of thing you might want to stick on your front lawn to keep away annoying salespeople."

"Hmmm," considered Professor Snape as he worked. The thought of those creatures as possibly being able to provide some potion ingredients was intriguing. Maybe a bit of hair or dung or skin or horn shavings might produce some interesting results.

He might have to talk to that Vicar about obtaining some samples.

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"NOW what?"

"Mister Longbottom's Turtwig has evolved to Grotle."

"What does that even mean?"

"No idea, other than apparently it's a lot bigger."

"I thought we were only allowed an owl or a cat or a toad."

"I'm told the Hogwarts letter is going to have a few addendums next year."

"Shouldn't be at all surprised."

"Apparently Malfoy said something to Longbottom about a 'stupid little turtle-ish thing' being all that he could afford with his parents 'blood-traitors in a nuthouse' - and Longbottom took exception."

"Oi. Even for Malfoy that was cold."

"Longbottom told his familiar to tackle Malfoy, and the wee beastie went from weighing about ten kilos to well over ninety. Landed atop Malfoy and darn near crushed him. When the teachers arrived, Longbottom pointed out wand use was forbidden in the corridors and all his 'Grotle' was doing was sitting on Malfoy."

"Tell me you got pictures."

"Yeah. I'm gonna make copies. I have a feeling lots of people are going to want to have one."

-- --

"Mister Longbottom, did you really think it was appropriate to have your turtle sit on Mister Malfoy?"

"Well, it was in the hallway, and I knew that wandwork was against the rules."

"Your turtle nearly crushed Mister Malfoy!"

"Sorry, Professor McGonagall. Only meant to discourage him from further discussion of my parents."

"Well, don't let it happen again. Not very often at any rate. Nobody likes a bully."

"Of course, Professor."
I had VERA, my steampunk-looking bullpup-style magic gun ready and the selector switch set for fire.

"That's an interesting looking gun," said Sturgis, the local "Mister Fixit" sounding as if he was expecting it to blow up or something the moment it was activated.

I didn't reply, my attention mainly focused on the trees down the path.

"So, what do you think it is this time?" asked Sturgis, who shifted one of the barrels so that it was between him and me. "Super mutants? Feral ghouls? Raiders?"

I spotted movement, brought VERA (Variable Emission Rune Armament) to bear and squeezed off a round. Magical energy went through circuits prepared for it and a firebolt shot across to the target. There was a loud bang as it detonated and a screaming figure rose up out of the bushes. Considering it was on fire, the limited concealment of the dead trees wasn't going to help anyway.

It was big. Three meters and change tall, human in general appearance, green-skinned and muscled pretty heavily. Also on fire, which meant that VERA was working within my design specs.

"Super mutants," noted Sturgis.

I nodded and switched the selector to "blast" and fired another shot as the creature charged. Its head exploded in a gory little display and the spiked two-by-four piece of wood dropped.

"Not very 'super' if you ask me," I told Sturgis. Honestly, if these were variations on the Incredible Hulk they were actually pretty pathetic. Not bullet-proof, not healing particularly fast, and it appeared they had normal strength for someone of their size and mass. If they'd been throwing cars around and able to shrug off a Flame Arrow spell - they'd have worried me a lot more.

I heard an odd regular beeping noise coming from a bend around the little stream at the bottom of the slope.

"Oh that's not good," said Sturgis.

This particular Hulk-parody was carrying a beeping package like a charging quarterback on some
football field. Generally, that sort of beeping package was not a friendly neighbor gift.

I sighted carefully and shot the package with VERA still set for blaster-mode before the creature could close distance.

The explosion was way more massive than I would have figured from the size and apparent sophistication of these creatures.

"What the hell was that?" I asked as I ducked behind the barricade rather than get hit with any of the little gory bits now raining down all around the area.

"A mini-nuke," said Sturgis, his voice indicating that he thought the answer quite obvious.

"Are. You. People. Freaking. Insane?!" I looked around at the dead trees, scraggly bushes, and a weird mutant cow-thing who was wandering around with apparent unconcern about the events going on around it. "You're using hand-carried nuclear explosive devices?"

"We're not, the super mutants are," said Sturgis.

"Okay, we've established that they're super idiots," I replied, slightly relieved that the local humans had at least that much sense.

"Yeah, we use launchers to throw mini-nukes a good hundred feet or so," continued Sturgis.

"Pardon me while I facepalm and lament the shortsightedness of the human species." A hundred feet, so something along the line of thirty meters, or roughly five kelev in another measurement system that I'd encountered.

"You seem to do that a lot," said Sturgis. "Incoming."

The automated turrets went off, making enough noise that any comment I might have made would not be heard. Just as well, as I'm pretty sure I would have said something very disparaging about the local human population.

The machine guns sent bullets flying at the charging super mutants, and the way those creatures ignored the wounds indicated that their pain-response was at least muted.

I popped up, shot, then dropped down again because THIS group all had large caliber guns and were using them like they couldn't bother keeping track of their ammunition.

"Responding with appropriate violence," said my Assaultron as she arrived and charged the super mutants.

Fuuinjutsu imbedded in her armor activated and one claw became a black-tinted ninjato-style sword which slightly blurred.

Yeah, I outfitted my robot with a vibro-sword. Higher-tech materials than I'd seen locally, and it had a near-molecular edge that was specially reinforced.

A startled super mutant apparently thought she'd missed as she went by. The edge was just that sharp and material that tough and the ultrasonic vibrations enough to keep it from stopping when it encountered bone and other obstructions.

"Whoa..." said Sturgis, sounding impressed as my robot started shredding the attackers in a literal fashion. Body parts were sent flying in a somewhat nauseating but admittedly impressive manner.
I'd seen these super mutants before, seen the sacks of meat and piles of human bones in their lairs, and I had no sympathy at all for them. Doesn't mean that I didn't wince a bit at some of the more painful-looking things that K8 was doing to the attackers.

"AAAAAAIINNNNNNN!" screamed one of these super mutants, apparently having enough sense to realize it was a bit overmatched. Especially with one arm hanging loose at its side and a leg that was nearly severed just above the knee. It started crawling away from the fight.

K8 ignored it, apparently having now put that particular enemy lower on the threat level. As another attacker lifted a massive club over its head, she simply pivoted and stabbed up through his chin.

"Where did you get that Assaultron?" asked Sturgis.

"By the side of the road," I answered. "I made a few improvements. Can you tell?"

Sturgis was quiet for a few moments. "I am not going to dignify that with a response."

K8 paused as she came to the realization that the only enemy left was the one trying to crawl away on one arm and one leg.

As her head turned I could see by the glow that the head-laser was in the process of powering up.

"I'll be back!" yelled the survivor. "This is the age of the super mutant! Your human time is over! We will kill you! We will eat you!"

"No you will not," answered K8, bracing herself and then firing. The surviving super mutant largely became ash as soon as the beam struck.

"Damn, you 'improve' that too?" asked Sturgis.

"Standing down," said K8 as she continued to scan for opponents.

"Yeah," I answered Sturgis. "If she's going to accompany me into dangerous areas, I wanted her to be able to defend herself."

"I'd say you succeeded," said Sturgis. "Man, hope it rains soon. Otherwise all this blood will attract some attention we don't want."

K8 walked up to me. "Appearance down by sixty eight percent. I require cleansing."

"I'll get a brush and bucket of water," I told her. While some of the fuuinjutsu involved in her upgrades were defensive in nature, I hadn't put in a "gore repeller" function. Bit of an oversight on my part actually.

"Exactly as planned," said K8.

"Pardon me?" I asked.

"Some wax would be nice," said K8.

"I'll see what I can scrounge up," I said, with a certain degree of sarcasm that I felt was justified.

Sturgis cleared his throat. "Do you two want to be alone?"

"Why would that matter?" I asked.
The olive-green Assaultron regarded Sturgis for a moment.

"I've got some other things to do," said Sturgis.

"What got into him?" I asked. Weird.

"Human interaction is something this unit has little experience with," said K8.

"Ah, well, alon-zee!"

"Please don't say that again," responded K8.

"Quickly, K8, to the washbin!"

"That's not any better," said K8.

-- Hogwarts --

A ball the size of one of Hagrid's fists smashed into the target.

"Quidditch is the international sport of the wizarding community," noted Harry. "However, the rules are pretty nonsensical. Don't even get me started on the bludgers. Enchanting hardwood balls so that they zip along at twenty kilometers per hour or better and target anyone nearby? How doesn't that cause problems?"

Professor Severus Snape was completely bemused. "If this is the worst example of the wizarding world not making any sense to you - then you have obviously not looked far or terribly deep into it."

"I'm almost afraid of what I'll find," confessed Harry, conjuring up another sphere - this one of crackling energy.

Severus Snape smirked as a reply.

"The wizarding world needs a better sport," said Harry.

"That sort of thinking is what produced Exploding Snap and Gobstones," pointed out Snape.

"One of which sprays you with some stink-water and the other explodes for no adequately explored reason," stated Harry.

"It keeps the potion-makers employed if there is a certain degree of danger in wizarding games," said Snape. "Why do you think I teach a burn-salve and a stink-removing cleanser in my First Year class?"

"Actually, I hadn't wondered after one of the students managed to blow up a feather in Charms class," admitted Harry.

"Ah," said Snape, seeing as how that could be the case.

-- Sanctuary Hills --

"What did you say you were up to?" asked Sturgis, looking over the chalk markings and odd stones with pieces of paper stuck on them.

"Just trying something I thought of while scrubbing off K8," I replied.
"Stupid," said Marcy Long, sneering from the tone of it. "If you've got the energy to do this sort of thing, you should be helping with watering the mutfruit."

"You know, that really doesn't explain a thing," pointed out Sturgis.

I finished up and left the circle behind to stand in the smaller circle linked to the bigger one. "Analyze Magical Fields." I touched my eyes as I was using the incanted version of the spell and wanted nothing to go wrong with this.

"Do what now?" asked Sturgis.

Marcy snorted and said something snide, but I was mainly tuning her out. As long as she didn't touch anything I would just ignore her.

I began the words and the weaving, starting at the quantum level at the point I'd noticed earlier.

Mutfruit was a local odd plant that I had noticed had magical energy metabolized in low quantities. It was used to make something called a "stimpack" which was basically a healing potion. It supposedly worked by stimulating the normal healing process and encouraging cell division. Except that there should be a lot of people dropping from cancers triggered by that sort of thing. Except that purely science-tech healing didn't work like that - regrowing limbs was a LOT harder than stabbing yourself with a syringe.

That and a couple of other things had pointed out to me that the low level of magical environmental energies WERE in use. Examining the local magical environmental energies, or the od, had revealed to me a sort of "break" in the field caused by the radiation and some other factor.

The quantum level change was cascaded to atomic then molecular levels as the blockage was eroded.

I finished, linking things up and bringing it from the molecular to the Newtonian level. "Prolific Forestation."

Marcy had been complaining about things until I hit the molecular level, at which point the buildup of energies had become visible. She began cussing and backing away from the area. When I pronounced the name of the spell formula, named after something similar that I'd heard about once, she stopped for a blessed moment.

The ground cracked open. Trees began thrusting up from the earth, growing from seedlings to full size over the course of three minutes while I held the fields stable.

When I released it, there was a circular patch of about ten meters that resembled a forest pre-war of this area.

"Hey you! I'm talking to you!" said Marcy, grabbing my shoulder.

K8's metal claw closed around Marcy Long's forearm. "Desist now." The ominous sound of her face-laser powering up indicated her displeasure at the situation.

"No, don't kill her. She's just naturally annoying," I told K8. That had been completely exhausting. "I'm going back to my Tardis and gonna sleep a few hours."

"What just happened?" asked Sturgis, his gaze tracking back and forth between me and the bit of forest.

"I began the healing of the planet," I told him. "The technical details you wouldn't believe if I told
you and you aren't going to be able to duplicate anyway."

"Should I carry you?" asked K8.

"Not unless I fall down," I told her. That had taken an awful lot out of me. I really didn't expect to wake up for at least eight hours as soon as I hit the mattress.

-- Hogwarts --

Hermione glanced up as the owls brought the mail. Nothing for her, of course.

"Blimey. What's all that?" asked Ron. Or should she start calling the now-female Weasley Ronnie? Any time the former male started going on about her being annoying, she could immediately shut him/her up with a remark about currently going to the ladies' room or something similar.

Harry opened one and nodded as he read something in the letter. "Hmmm."

"Hmmm?" asked Hermione.

"Financial status," said Harry, lowering the letter in order to glance at Ronnie and then Hermione. They'd taken to sitting together despite the different Houses because Harry felt the whole competition-between-Houses thing was overdone and silly. Cooperation between Houses would benefit everyone involved.

Which sounded nice, but wasn't going to happen anytime soon. Current company excepted.

"Yer what?" asked Ronnie.

"Look, my parents left behind a bit of wizard money behind in the Gringotts' bank," said Harry. "That got me curious as to exactly what resources I've got and such. How much control do I have and what other resources I've got. With the Vicar off gallavanting about somewhere in time and space, I'm kind of cut off there."

"What, so you're rich?" asked Ronnie again.

"Apparently my family created Skele-Gro and several other potions way back, which are still put out by a company founded back in the seventeen-hundreds," said Harry, back to reading. "Small company, but profitable. Also apparently I'm the heir to the ancient family of Peverell. So I've got a large share of a company called Rubens Winikus & Company Inc. There's a couple of other businesses too - including a muggle one - that I've got some shares in. Can't touch any of it though - apparently I'm too young to do anything about any of it."

"What, so you're rich?" asked Ronnie again.

"I'm apparently well-off but not exactly rich," said Harry. "Certainly not rich as the Malfoys. Nothing I can rely on for purposes of income. Also have some property though. That might be handy."

"How so?" asked Ronnie, acting a bit pleased about something.

Hermione thought about that, realized that the Weasley family had a reputation for being poor, and thought it likely that Ronnie was worried about losing one of his friends to some rich-snobbery kind of thing. Which was pretty silly but entirely Ron.

"Huh, so I have a small factory in Scotland that produces some kind of snack?" asked Harry. "Small
percentage of it at least. I wonder if it's any good?"

---

"So it's agreed?" Severus Snape idly tapped a quill against the table as his eyes swept those present.

"Could be useful in Astronomy, so yes," said Aurora Sinistra, glaring at the quill in Snape's hand.

"I don't see where he could assist in Arithmancy, but I admit to being curious."

"He's already gotten some interesting Potions ingredients, and I'm looking forward to more," said Professor Snape, adding his own two knuts.

"Muggle Studies could benefit."

"Opposed?" asked Snape.

"We know very little about him other than he's a wildcard and flouts rules whenever he encounters them," said Albus Dumbledore.

"How better to find out than direct observation?" asked Minerva McGonagall.

"Other than one objection, then?" asked Severus Snape. "Honestly, Albus - I'm surprised you aren't fighting this more considering your previous encounters."

"'Keep your friends close'," said Albus Dumbledore.

"'And your enemies closer' is the rest of the quote," pointed out McGonagall. "I'm not convinced the Vicar is an enemy."

"I-don't understand," said Quirrel. "W-why w-would you k-keep an enemy c-close?"

"Easier to find them and hex them into oblivion, I'd imagine," said Flitwick.

"Ah," said Quirrel as he considered that point, seeming to become even more nervous for some unknown reason.

"I wonder if I can get ahold of one of those dinosaur-beasties for the menagerie," mused Hagrid.

"If we're lucky, maybe he'll bring something that can eat acromantula," said Professor Snape.

"Did you just suggest making the Forbidden Forest MORE dangerous?" asked Sinistra.

"As long as it is a single creature and unable to reproduce more copies of itself, something to cut down on the insanely aggressive invasive species would be helpful," said Professor Snape.

"Making the Forest more dangerous so it will become less dangerous?" asked McGonagall. "Does anyone else have a problem with this concept?"

--- Sanctuary Hills ---

When I stepped out of the Tardis in the early morning, there was a crowd. Settlers mostly, but some traders and caravan guards were there as well.

The area of deep forest was perhaps a quarter again as big as it had been yesterday. So, it was a start - but that was all it had intended to be. It might take hundreds of years, maybe thousands at the
current rate, but this land could eventually heal.

Seeing the expressions of those present, most of them realized what this actually represented.

I noticed that the guy they called the "Sole Survivor" was working on some machine gun turrets to surround the grove.

One of the trader-types came forward, a particularly foul-smelling cigarette dangling from one lip. "How the hell did you do that? You from the Institute or somethin'? Them synth-trees or somethin'?"

"No, they're not synthetic. Real trees." I looked around the group. "You guys from Sanctuary, this is an area of healing. Try not to let it get overrun or destroyed and it should keep going. The center of the area is the important bit. The outer edge will hit your crop area in about two days at that rate, so you'll have to pull weeds before the effect moves on."

I was STILL tired. My mana (internal magic) level had recovered some but was still at less than half. The "Prolific Forestation" spell had taken everything I had, and then some - and that had been less a spell and more an attempt to weld together broken strands of magical force.

I had succeeded though - and that was certainly an accomplishment to be proud of.

"ProSnap Camera," stated K8. "Recent manufacture."

I blinked at that. The trader was putting the device away. That she had a camera was odd, as nobody local seemed to regard the cameras as anything but an old relic of a forgotten age of waste and easy living.

What got my attention was that bit about recent manufacture. Nobody had that kind of manufacturing capability locally that I had heard about.

I'd have to investigate that when I got back. Now I should try and check in with Harry and see how he was doing. Not to mention there was that space probe to return.

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The photos were passed around the table.

"Okay, so this 'Vicar' has access to advanced technology that should be in our hands," said Doctor Holdren, the head of the Institute's BioScience Division. "We'll need samples of these trees. Soil samples as well - it's likely to be something added to the soil there that's producing this unusual growth."

"He has access to a form of teleportation other than the Molecular Relay," said Doctor Li, the head of the Advanced Systems division that oversaw all the purely technological device development such as the synth armor and the various laser weapons that the synths used. "These photos of the affected area could indicate nanomachines basically creating synth versions of plantlife but we'll look for that when we obtain the soil samples."

Father, the head of the Institute, stirred. "What are 'nanomachines'?"

"Machines smaller than the unaided eye can see," said Doctor Li. "The synth creation process uses them in a nutrient bath to apply the outer dermal layers and support structures. We haven't been able to make them operate outside very controlled conditions though and there are dangers in trying to do so."
"How dangerous?" asked Father. He realized that just for Li to bring it up meant at the least Very Dangerous.

"The 'grey goo' scenario," said Doctor Li. "The nanomachines could run out of control and start converting everything into more nanomachines. Rocks, grass, animals, people, us..."

"Okay," said Father. "However, this 'Vicar' seems to have gotten past such difficulties."

"He's got a finished product and not an experimental version," pointed out Doctor Li. "The man doesn't look all that intelligent so he likely has it from somewhere else."

"No, look at this," said Justin Ayo. He might be essentially the head of the local secret police as the Security department was mostly now the Synth Retention Bureau, but he'd risen through the ranks and was as well educated as anyone else in the Institute. He moved the photo to the center of the table. "This Assaultron unit is being modified in this picture. He's not simply someone peddling and using prepackaged devices from an advanced and unknown society. I agree he's likely not the inventor of the various systems, but a representative of an advanced and unknown society. Need I say how much this alarms me?"

Father considered the various photos and the holotape with Trashcan Carla's report. "Enough. Send an infiltrator to obtain samples. If that doesn't work, we'll have to send a synth squad to forcibly collect them. If there's a chance of getting this person to work with us, take it. If we can capture him instead, we'll do that. If neither option is available, we should eliminate the rogue variable. Our plans are at a delicate enough point that we can't take chances."

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From "Sanctuary Hills" it was easy enough to get to Harry's world. The only problem was where. Worlds were big. Galaxies were bigger. Universes very big indeed. Once you got to multiverses, you'd left territory where 'big' had any usefulness at all as a descriptor.

I'd managed most of the time to land on the correct world in the correct universe, and I was currently (as far as I could tell) restricted to six universes that I could access. More or less.

When I stepped out at the first stop, the fuuinjutsu that allowed a bubble of normal environment centered on the Tardis was evident as a faint shimmer in the air - which simply indicated the conditions outside that bubble wasn't exactly hospitable.

Fortunately, I was able to get bearings by the triple suns showing, the slightly purplish-looking river, and the seven meter tall sort-of mushroom things growing.

"Ah, Proxima Centauri," I said to K8. "We're only four-point-three and change light years from Earth. Practically in the backyard."

"Your definitions of such things and the ones in my database are apparently not all that compatible," stated K8.

"Was that sarcasm?" I asked. I considered that, with her normal dry and emotionless tone taken into consideration. "I do believe it is. You're getting more human every day."

"I am not entirely sure that is a good thing," stated K8.

"Well, I can't argue with that," I admitted. "Good and bad things about such a thing. Try to avoid doing a Frankenstein Monster kind of thing and going on a rampage, will you?"
"Saving instruction to memory," stated K8.

"Good," I said, nodding and leading her back into the Tardis. Of course, light-years being rather large amounts of distance - I couldn't simply use the flight functions. That meant bouncing from one universe to another again.

Grind-thump, Sanctuary Hills. Grind-thump, check the display.

"Miami Beach at last?" asked K8.

"Actually, yes. It looks like it, huh." Figures. Aim for it, you never get there. Aim for somewhere else, you land right on the beach near the hotel strip.

Well, that was close enough. Time to use the flight controls.

There was a space center that needed its probe back.

-- Hogwarts --

"Whassup, Hermione?" asked Harry, coming awake. "And how are you in my bedroom anyway?"

"Boys aren't allowed in the girls' dorms," answered Hermione Granger. "Not the other way around. Bit of an oversight."

"I can't believe nobody thought of that in over a thousand years," complained Harry. "You're in Gryffindor anyway. This is the Hufflepuff dorms."

"Well, if you must know, I used my Artifact and accessed a secret passage that the cleaning staff used before house elves became common," appended Hermione.

Harry covered a yawn. "Doesn't explain the 'why' part."

"Harry," said Hermione. "This couldn't wait. You-"

Pamf!

"Looks like the anti-girls-sneaking-over-to-the-boys-side charm finally kicked in," noted Harry. He debated going back to sleep versus going to the common room where Hermione would likely make her way if it was that important.

When he got there, he naturally fell asleep in the Hufflepuff common room while waiting for her.

Which was just as well, because she had ended up going back to bed after deciding it could wait until breakfast.

"So what was it?" asked Harry finally when they'd met up again.

"The teachers are inviting the Vicar into Hogwarts," said Hermione. "How can you get ahold of him?"
Chapter 22: Harry Potter and the Movie Night

Chapter Summary

In which muggle culture is shown not to be quite so boring after all.

One Floo Over

Chapter 22: Harry Potter and Movie Night

"Inserting standard disclaimer," said K8. "Ownership of intellectual properties is originator of same. Documentation of events within narrative purposed for amusement value only. Disclaimer end."

The "Doctor Who theme" started playing from one of my pockets.

"Hang on a moment," I told the assembled scientists as I pulled my phone out. As this was technically happening before cellphones had been invented, it drew a few looks. "Argent here."

"It's Harry. I just confirmed you've been issued an invitation to Hogwarts. Something about helping out with classes."

"Ah," I said. "Yeah. I'd made an offer there. I'll be there in a bit."

Harry chuckled at his end of the phone connection. "Yeah, when you can get that Tardis to cooperate."

"That too," I admitted.

Harry closed the call and I put the Mid-Childan communicator away. Admittedly the things were antiques and modified up the wazoo, Harry's even had an undead and dark magic detector app on his phone that wasn't part of the original functions. The space scientists were looking as if they wanted to pick my pockets and tear the little thing apart as they explored its secrets. Which was probably pretty accurate, all things considered.

"So, anyway, I did find out a bit about the alternate Earth," I told them. "This a post-nuclear war world, and one where some genetically engineered non-airborne viruses were used."

"What kind of spread on the viruses?" asked one of the scientists, a bit alarmed.

"Dead as far as your probe or myself is concerned," I told him. I jerked a thumb at the Tardis. "I have an automatic anti-disease defense going. The actual virus used is called 'FEV' - short for Forced Evolution Virus. Normally it is spread deliberately through blood cultures injected into recipients. It causes massive amounts of muscle mass, increased healing rates, lowered intelligence, and sterility. My understanding is that the virus was mainly engineered for the healing rate and strength and everything else was unwanted side effects. Oh, and they're also aggressive cannibals. Not something you'd particularly want in your neighbors."
There was blinking at that, then more as I produced the photos.

There was a shot of the forested little spot within Sanctuary Hills, of course. Another of the wrecked houses. Pictures of dead raiders, dead super mutants, dead ghouls, a dead bloatfly (which was a fly roughly the size of a football), a dead deathclaw, a very blurry one of a giant crab-thing called a mirelurk.

"What is THAT?!" asked one of the scientists, flipping the deathclaw photo around to show me.

"They call it a 'deathclaw'," I told her. "Nobody I talked to knows where they come from. They lay nests of up to six eggs. Fast, not quite cheetah fast but pretty darn fast. Most of them are about the size of a panel truck and their diet consists of anything they can chase down and shred. Nasty suckers. That one attacked a settlement and required several people using really big guns to put it down and it still shredded three automated machine gun turrets and caused some pretty massive injuries to the defenders."

"So, not just running fast - fast attack," mused the redhead among the scientist types. "Lean but heavily muscled. I take it that it lives in fairly warm climates?"

"I don't think you can find them in Alaska or Canada, but they're at least as far North as Boston," I told the group.

"I thought you were going to take one of us to retrieve the probe," said the redhead. "So you owe us a trip."

"Ah," I said, thinking over that. Actually, it wasn't a big problem to me. "Well, where did you want to go?"

It took me awhile to remember and check and then bring four scientists and a set of instruments to their chosen destination.

Since radio transmitters were part of it, it was unsurprising they'd want to put them within Earth's solar system. My understanding was that by taking the scientists there and dropping their little packages off - I was saving their respective governments millions of dollars. I was also not interfering too much with the whole planetary development thing because they would have sent the probes anyway.

Great Britain, specifically England, put one out on Enceledus. While on that particular moon - I pointed out the water jets, one of which was going on while they moved the probe out with K8's help. Instead of discouraging them with the idea of their probe getting buried or launched into space - the scientist in question actually squee-ed.

NASA, the American space agency, wanted to stick one on Mars. Two scientists got into an argument about where they wanted it - and it got rather heated very quickly. One was arguing for Syrtis Major, the other arguing for one of the poles. As this particular probe had wheels, I went with Chryse Planitia - which was part of a really big impact crater. I pointed out that if they were interested in geology - that would give them some interesting results.

Scientists, by the way, are perfectly capable of sulking when they don't get their way.

The other probe was from the European Space Agency, which I had thought was part of the Great Britain contingent but they told me that was not the case. They wanted a probe on Ceres, a largely unremarkable asteroid in the main asteroid belt. Well, mostly. Kind of.
With that out of the way, and the scientists (two of whom were now doing credible "mad scientist" laughs) back where they were supposed to be - I was free to set course for Hogwarts.

"That went well," said K8.

"Don't jinx it," I cautioned K8. "Besides, it took five stops to get to three locations. Don't forget we ended up on Phobos and Pallas trying to get to where we were actually aiming."

"What is 'jinx'?", asked K8.

"A jinx is a cause of bad luck," I informed her. "Basically asking any forces within the universe that you'd like the probabilities to aim towards the nastier end of the curve."

K8 considered that. "You are saying that speaking of an outcome can influence the events. That is illogical."

We landed.

I checked the display and pointed. "Ah HAH."

K8 stared at me.

I pointed, this time with a flourish. "See?"

K8 looked. "I thought we were heading for a location called 'Hogwarts'?"

"And yet we are currently on the roof of the church of Saint Ausone, in the city of Angouleme in France," I told her. "Huh. I wonder if the Delacours are about."

K8 was silent briefly. "You recognize it?"

"Another world's version of this same site," I said. "I joined the Order Of Saint Vidicon actually. An order of Catholic priests who are also engineers or technicians of various kinds. It was one of the originators of this Cleric identity, I think."

"Saint Vidicon," said K8.

"Some texts refer to him as 'Saint Vidicon of Cathode' but that's mainly a joke." I took off, idly noting all the photos being taken by tourists from the street and wondering how that was going to play in the press.

We stopped in Nordlingen in Germany, where it was tempting to see if I could get some pretzels but decided against it. This was followed by Nienhagen Woods, which was apparently where a small magical community was hidden away from the nonmagicals, and was at least vaguely in the right direction.

The next time we stopped it was in a classroom.

Grind-thump. Grind-thump.

Septima Vector glanced up at the sound, seeing a blue box fade into view in one corner of the room.

There was a thud as a door attempted to open and didn't have enough clearance between box and wall to go more than a couple of inches.
"Well crap. Bet this never happens to the real Doctor," said someone in the box.

The next voice was very odd. Female but with an oddly flattened tone to it. "This was quite predictable actually."

"Oh, you be quiet," came the male voice. "Let me try again."

"Vicar? Is that you?" asked Professor Vector.

"Oh. Hello? Did we get in through the wards then? I was aiming for the main gates," said the Vicar.

"Hang on," said Septima Vector, swish-flicking her wand. "Wingardium Leviosa!"

Nothing happened.

"Oh, hang on. I've got the inertial and gravitic anchor switched on. And... there. Try it now."

"Wingardium Leviosa," tried Professor Vector again, somewhat gratified when the box moved in response to her directions this time. She rotated it around so the door was facing out and set it back down.

"Right. And releasing the override. There we go."

This time the Vicar came out. "Ah. Professor Vector. We met at Hogsmeade."

"I remember," said Sinistra Vector.

"Anyway, the beacon of Amon Din has been lit," said the Vicar.

"What?" asked Professor Vector.

"Oh. Figured a British author reference would be appropriate," said the Vicar. "You know - 'Gondor calls for aid'?"

A metal statue got out of the box and spoke. "You are making references no one else understands. Again."

"Oh. Darn." The Vicar considered that visibly.

"Vicar? What is that?" asked Professor Vector. It being the female mannequin that was an olive green color with markings stating "US Army" and some odd numbers.

"This unit is an Assaultron type robot," said the statue. "Current assignment is to guard personage known as Argent. Unit designated 'K8' at present."

"Professor Septima Vector," indicated the Professor in return. "Interesting. Enchanted statues aren't much for conversation. May I cast a detection charm?"

"Uhm, I suppose," said the Vicar. "However, she's a robot - a creation of muggle technology - that's been enhanced through various oriental charm methods I know of."

"Muggle technology tends to break down rather quickly due to the strength of Hogwarts' wards," cautioned Professor Vector.

"Already addressed," said the Vicar.
"Explain," said K8, orienting on the Vicar.

"The high energy magical field causes the electrons to shift position in an unpredictable manner," the Vicar explained. "You've got arrays of fuuinjutsu to shield you from that sort of thing, and it'll draw on those fields to power it."

Septima Vector was not a Muggle Studies expert, but she still got the basics of that. "So your experiments with shielding muggle items like calculators was successful?"

"Yeah," said the Vicar. "Using the magical field to empower an anti-magical field was a bit tricky, but it works."

-- --

We moved the Tardis to a different classroom and Professor Vector went back to grading papers. K8 stopped when the stairs began rearranging themselves. "This is a school, correct?"

"Yes," I agreed.

"This system does not seem designed for efficiency of movement," stated K8. "Multiple spatial anomalies noted."

"Yeah, the staircases are shifting in length and degree of angle," I agreed. "I've seen worse."

K8's head rotated to the side. "These display screens seem odd."

"That's rather rude," said the old man in the painting, adjusting his glasses.

"My pardon," stated K8. "I was not aware that these were telecommunications terminals."

"A what?" asked the painting.

"She wasn't aware that you could communicate," I told the painting. "You are the painting of someone who died three hundred years previously, which contains a sort of impression of the person portrayed and able to respond to a number of stimuli."

"Fascinating," said K8. "An artificial intelligence similar to myself in some ways then."

"Yes, actually, that's my understanding," I told her. Though I hadn't had a huge amount of exposure to such things, I had heard an explanation of them before. The "impression" gave the painting some database and personality.

"So the statue is a sort of magical painting, except a statue and therefore mobile? Fascinating," said the painting. "You have no idea how tiring it is just looking at the same wall every day. Though I do manage to pop over into some of my neighbors from time to time."

"Understood," said K8.

I noticed that as soon as we moved on, the individual in the painting ducked off to the side. No doubt the story would be all over the castle by the end of the day.

"So. Anyway. Yes. The staircases move," I told K8. "I'm told there are secret passages which can bypass the whole thing. And flying in the halls is against some rule, which really isn't all that hard to understand considering how clumsy some of the children are."
"Attempting to map corridors. Error."

"Don't," I advised K8. "They're wizards. They love playing with space-time and usually have no idea how much they're screwing up something when they do that."

"My word!" said a woman's portrait as we passed it.

"Well, you have to admit that shifting around distances and moving staircases has to make getting from class to class difficult, particularly for the new students," I told the apparently offended portrait over my shoulder.

"Error. Error." K8 stumbled as she attempted to follow me.

"Hmmm," I hmmmed. "May have to leave you in my Tardis while I'm here. You're protected somewhat from the direct effects of magic, particularly the para-energy fields of the wards. On the other hand, the indirect effects are still going to play hobb with your circuits. Shut down internal radar and set mapping software to basic. Switch off ultraviolet and infrared imaging. No satellite uplink either so if that's still looking for suitable frequencies that'll need to go."

K8 continued to stumble as she walked.

I reversed course, heading back for my Tardis. If the robot was having this much trouble this early there wasn't any help for it - she'd just have to stick to the Tardis for now. Which was odd, as my little ersatz Tardis had plenty of wards and was actually built around space-alteration charms and fuuinjutsu inscribed practically everywhere. After all, without both the large bath or the swimming pool would have become problematic.

The swimming pool was started prior to my spending time on that Astral Plane and then was finished up there. Heating and cooling sigils to keep it at a constant temperature, gravity boundaries and water-barrier seals so that even if the gravity was inverted somehow the water would remain IN the pool, life preservers that would automatically deploy when someone in the pool slapped the surface. Little things like that.

The bath, of course, was a large bath like you might encounter in a Japanese bath-house except that it had a lot of Roman-style decorations. The water there was much hotter and had the usual scrub-and-rinse section with the soaking area resembling a mineral hot spring as close as I could make it.

Really, if the real Doctor didn't have one of these than he should. Just imagine relaxing in a hot tub after having been chased by Daleks or something all day. How could you not put something like that in?

"Now, I need you to guard the place. Anyone unauthorized is to be ejected, forcefully if they won't go otherwise," I told K8. Robots had to have a purpose after all.

"Understood," responded K8, sounding disappointed. Or something. Hard to tell with a voice that sounded like she was being snarky most of the time. Which, quite honestly, was another thing that I didn't understand from a robot that had been designed and fielded by the US Army of ANY world.

I'd have to figure out a way to adapt the logic centers to allow for non-Euclidean geometries since Hogwarts bordered that sort of thing while I myself had walked that walk and could expect to visit there again.

I wasn't about to take any normal human there if I could help it, but apparently some robots couldn't handle it either.
The thing was that K8, as she was now, was a combination of fuuinjutsu (magic symbols and writing) and the sort of technology they had in that other world. If not for my various experiments with fuuinjutsu, she would not have been active before I had connected the power source. If that had happened, the robot would likely still be on the bench with me attempting to tweak everything just so. Because she HAD come awake before I'd gotten more than a quarter of the way through, I'd ended up putting the Assaultron together a lot faster.

I left my Tardis while preoccupied with the problem. I might have to get to some "muggle" shops and modern electronics just to replace the sections that used vacuum tubes. Not that 1991 electronics were going to work for a lot of it. If the typical manner of such things went on, I'd have to hit the Akihabara of 2096 to get appropriate equipment just to build the parts.

So, maybe, I should try another route. What if I could make the entire thing through magical means?

Well, I was in a school for magic, so there was a chance I could network with the experts in their fields. With ghosts, magic portraits, self-updating books, and the like - the groundwork for magical AI was certainly there.

If I could find something old and magical and truly sentient, I could study that and figure out how to best proceed.

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"This 'Vicar' has unusual powers, as does the Potter whelp," said Lucius Malfoy thoughtfully. "Different unusual powers though."

Narcissa Malfoy sat back in her chair and considered.

A bespelled mirror on the table in front of them was showing scenes of Hogwarts from the air.

Narcissa finally spoke. "Draco appears to have been unsuccessful in recruiting the Potter boy and Nott's attempt to learn the child's secrets has only revealed that he has access to unusual spells."

"All of time and space for this Vicar to meddle in, and he picks here and now," said Lucius with a sneer. "However, if WE had access to such travel..."

"We could not only make history, but change it," said Narcissa very thoughtfully.

Lucius nodded. "I've already penned a letter in the standard code. That's why we're watching the mail owl deliver it, just so that it doesn't get intercepted."

"Good, I was hoping not to miss 'Come Spell Or Highwater' later. You know how I love that soap opera," said Narcissa.

"Politics provides enough soap opera for my tastes," said Lucius, sounding as if this was an automatic response.

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"Intruder!" declared K8.

"Whoa," said Hermione, holding her hands up in defense. "I'm a friend."

"The Vicar is not here, please leave his Tardis immediately," stated K8.

"Not here? Where is he then?" asked Hermione, the 11-year old looking over the metal statue. "And
"are you supposed to be some sort of robot?"

"Currently the Vicar is attempting to contact various authorities regarding his arrival and arrangements towards longterm employment," said K8. "Second question: affirmative. This unit is a United States Army constructed Assaultron unit."

"I didn't know the colonies had robot soldiers," mused Hermione as she backed away from the robot.

"This unit was constructed in 2076 for assault support," stated K8. "Repaired and repurposed by Reverend Argent for bodyguard duties."

"Well, if anyone could use a robot bodyguard, I suppose he could," mused Hermione, now having backed completely out of the Tardis and addressing the robot in the doorway. "Any idea when he'll be back? Harry will want to talk to him, I think."

K8 scanned the eleven-year-old's bio-signs for later identification purposes. "No timetable has been set."

"So you're from the future or at least A future," mused Hermione.


"I'll contact the others then," said Hermione, holding a card up. "When the Vicar gets back we'll have a chat then."

K8 waited for it, sure that this was about to get difficult for her logic centers to process.

The card glowed slightly.

I got lost.

Seriously, this was supposed to be a school. A school with eleven year old children navigating the hallways.

Between moving stairways, corridors that doubled back on themselves, a spiral staircase that Escher would have positively loved - it was a wonder the children weren't perpetually late for classes.

"What do YOU want?" asked a nasty-looking fellow with a cat.

"I was attempting to find the Muggle Studies classroom to meet with the Professor there," I told him. "I asked one of the portraits for directions and ended up on a spiral staircase."

"Hmph," hmphed the fellow with a sneer. "Was it a portrait of a wizard with a sort-of sailor cap on his head?"

"Yes, actually," I agreed. "I get the feeling that was the wrong portrait to ask."

"Understatement," said the fellow.

"Well, I'm called the Vicar," I told him. "Reverend Argent, so I answer to 'Vicar' or 'Reverend' or 'Argent' as you please."

"Wizard society don't have much to do with the clergy," commented the person.

"Well, could you direct me to the Muggle Studies classroom?" I asked.
"BWAHAHAHAHAHHAAAA!" yelled some sort of spook as it popped up out of the stonework.

"I bear the word of my god, and that word is BEGONE!" I responded, putting a bit of divine power into that. It was just a Rebuke spell, not a Turn Undead as I was getting a feeling this was a Manifestation and not Undead per se.

The effect on the ghost(?) was like he had been slammed with a ghost-sledgehammer, squashing him like an early cartoon mouse and sending him back through the wall.

"Ahem," I said, turning back to the individual. "Now, where were we?"

The man was staring, utterly gobsmacked from his expression. He looked at me, looked at the wall, looked back to me, then back at the wall. Then he began to smile, completely different from the sneer he'd had earlier. It looked like an expression that rarely found its way to his face.

"I'm Filch, this is Mrs Norris, I'm the caretaker here," said Filch. "You want the Muggle Studies classroom, right? Down this corridor, take a left at the juncture, up one flight, take another left, then third door on the right."

-- --

Cho: "So he's at Hogwarts. Interesting."

Hermione: "Yes, the unused classroom two down from the Arithmancy classroom."

Fleur: "You have unused classrooms?"

Cho: "Yes. A little reminder of the last Dark War. Lots of families held off on having kids. There was a boom a year later though."

Hermione: "Seriously? So next year will be a lot more crowded?"

Cho: "A bit more next year, then a larger number in the year thereafter. Beauxbatons not have that problem?"

Fleur: "The opposite actually. Classes are quite crowded. Apparently it's been a problem for decades."

Parvati: "Hermione just got acquainted **officially** a few months ago. Bound to be a few gaps here and there."

Hermione: "We're using the pactio cards to have a telepathic communication. You can just go ahead and use the phrase 'muggle-born' you know."

Padma: "Even those of us from 'pureblood' families raised to the wizarding world still run across new things every so often."

Parvati: "You suppose he finished that heated pool? I knew he was planning one."

Hermione: "I don't know. He has a robot guarding his Tardis."

Padma: "What's a robot?"

Hermione: "Sort of... a muggle golem? Do golems actually exist?"

Parvati: "This is telepathic communication, so when you said that I got a picture of some green metal
statue that sort of looked like it was an impressionistic depiction of a woman. Weird, it doesn’t have a face."

Hermione: "Well, the reason they depict most robots in the media as human-shaped is its easier to get an actor in a robot-suit than build something suitably mechanical. The 'in-universe' explanation though is usually that doorways and such are built for the human form and it is easier just to build something human-shaped to handle such things."

Fleur: "Yes, there are golems - but they are very rare and they're usually built for a specific task or set of tasks. They're usually human-shaped - statues imbued with magic."

Padma: "I remember hearing something about a naga-shaped statue that defends some sacred site back in India. That might have been one."

Harry: "I've gotten the feeling that wall of statues of warriors at that one entry to the castle are waiting for something. Maybe they're golems or something."

Cho: "Maybe that's the origin of the terracotta soldiers? Or they were in imitation of the wizarding version."

Harry: "Well, I suppose we can check."

Hermione: "Oh yes! He's travelled in space and time. We could go check the Library of Alexandria. Just imagine the scrolls of ancient Ur or..."

Harry: "Hermione."  
Lavender: "Hermione."  
Cho: "Hermione."  
Fleur: "Hermy."  
Parvati: "Blathering."  
Hermione: "Oh drat."

Harry: "I have a feeling that if we could sneak into that Infinite Library on Mid-Childa, we'd never see Hermione again."

Cho: "Wait. 'Infinite Library'?"

Harry: "You know how some books have a charm to automatically update when the master copy of the book is updated?"

Cho: "Yes. There are books on wizarding law and similar subjects that have that enchantment."

Harry: "As I understand it, the Mid-Childans built a library like that. As soon as a book is written and published, a copy automatically appears in the Infinite Library. The difficulty is finding the right book because the filing system is somewhat awkward. The current head librarian is about our age because he's the absolute best at spells to find the right book and specific information."

Parvati: "You know, I suspect any Ravenclaw that heard of such a thing would practically give their right arm to browse that library."

Cho: "Maybe not my right arm."

Padma: "Well, maybe a good eighty percent."
Parvati: "Really? An Infinite Library? I'd think if one popped up, you'd need Enkidu's chains to drag the whole of Ravenclaw out of there."

Padma: "We're not that bad."

Cho: "Yes, we are."

Fleur: "What about language difficulties?"

Harry: "There are spells for translating text. I know one, in fact. Eyes Of Thoth."

Lavender: "Can that spell help me with McGonagall's homework?"

Cho: "No, I don't think so."

---

I thought about what the slightly plump Muggle Studies teacher had asked me, realized that it was probably a good idea but require a bit of prep work from me, and answered honestly. "It'll take me a few days to get things ready. I've already got most of it in place, it's keeping people from wandering off and getting lost that's going to take some work."

"Ah, you have a selection already?" asked Professor Burbage. "I'm just assisting the current Professor, who has fallen ill, but I'm sure this will help in the meantime."

"Maybe instead of using the theatre in my Tardis, I can set up wards and shielded equipment in the actual classroom," I mused aloud, working out approaches and what I'd need to do.

"Do you have any particular suggestions as to the material?" asked Professor (or was it Assistant Professor?) Charity Burbage.

"I've got a fair collection of movies," I admitted. "Would you prefer something of cultural significance to the muggles, something depicting magic as the muggles view it, or something that is fairly easy-to-understand?"

"What would you suggest?" asked Professor Burbage.

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Hermione: "Did you hear? Muggle Studies is going to have films shown!"

Padma: "Films?"

Lavender: "Why are you worrying? We can't take electives until our third year."

Harry: "The Vicar collects all sorts of films and TV programs and the like. Has a bad habit of getting some tune stuck in his head and then humming it or repeating lyrics for hours. Quite annoying at times."

Hermione: "Really? Watching films for homework or your lab?"

Harry: "What's wrong with that?"

---

Draco Malfoy understood things, mostly. His father had enormous power, some of which took the
form of political contacts and management of various bribes and blackmailings. If things were stable, then he could deepen those links and gather more power over those individuals.

Unfortunately, things had de-stabilized. This Vicar was a de-stabilizer. As such, more information was needed about this very individual - the answers to some very important questions were needed before proceeding.

Would it be better to have this "Vicar" have a tragic accident, or could he be used?

There was an old saying that Draco couldn't remember clearly. He'd heard it from his mother once. Something about how chaos could be used, it was all about timing and position. Every disaster could be useful? Something like that.

Getting ahold of that "Tardy" thing was a priority. If he could get in there, he'd be able to find some of the information his father wanted.

Unfortunately, when he found it, there was a metal statue guarding it.

"Don't you know who I am?" Draco straightened to his full eleven-year-old height. "I am Draco Malfoy, of the ancient and noble Malfoy family."

The green statue didn't reply.

"I am commanding you to step aside for your betters," added Draco.

Little lightning charges around one of the hands indicated that this was a fairly powerful magical guardian.

Maybe he could bluff it?

"The Vicar sent me to get you, you're to report to him immediately," said Draco. "I'll watch this while you go."

Again there was no reply from the metal statue.

"Did you hear me?" asked Draco.

"I heard you," said the statue. "Authorization code?"

"What? Oh, you mean a password," realized Draco. That complicated things. Still, it told him that this Vicar wasn't Gryffindor material at least. Gryffindor was the House of not making plans so much as charging through obstacles. Someone who actually thought ahead enough to put a magical guardian in place and require a password showed Slytherin or Ravenclaw tendencies.

He could see a plaque on the closed door. It had the word "Police" followed by an unfamiliar word. "Free for use of public" was less clear. "Advice & assistance obtainable immediately" could mean a number of things. "Officer and cars respond to all calls" - was the small box some sort of floo connection then?

The statue remained where it was, though its head moved slightly - indicating it was still active.

There were a couple of enchanted statues at the Manor, but they remained completely motionless unless performing their duties. This statue was rotating one of its claw-hands while the head shifted to observe him.

Other than the obvious lightning-spell, he didn't know what else the statue could do. Draco nodded
and stepped back. There would be other chances, as it was he had a measure of what this Vicar-
person could do and what he could work out.

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If the door had been locked, there would not have been any need for a guard.

K8 wondered if she would ever understand fleshtimes.

So far, in what was supposed to be an empty classroom, there had been seven students showing up. Four had apparently been looking for the Tardis. One had wandered in by accident and had complained to her about the moving staircases and corridors that apparently behaved as if the floorplans had been designed by someone named "Escher" and trying to find anything in the castle. This particular one, apparently named Ernie MacMillan, K8 had agreed completely. In fact, it was rather nice to have someone else who could appreciate a floorplan that did not shift around without warning.

The remaining two visitors had been small creatures who had investigated because they sensed something that needed to be cleaned. Both were quickly denied entry, with one of the two accepting that immediately and the other attempting to twist space through some curious method in order to dart past her.

That space-manipulation method had hit the outer layer of folded space-time and the creature had yelped as it fled, apparently injured by the attempt.

While considering this aspect of reality, or as much of reality as seemed to cross paths with the Vicar arrived.

This particular one appeared to be nonhuman as well, but as it was wearing clothing and adjusting a pair of glasses - was probably supposed to be here. If it had been a super mutant or ghoul or something similarly in her database she would have simply killed it. Likewise if it had attacked her.

"My word, how surprising," said the little fellow. "Interesting charms work."

"Requesting an exchange of information," said K8. "Is this acceptable?"

"Hmmm. Depends on the information. My name is Filius Flitwick. Since you're able to converse, I'm guessing you have a name?"

K8 pinged her surroundings to determine that the room was indeed stable in dimensions, came up with an answer that the walls were now three centimeters further away than previously, and decided that was about as good as it was going to get. "My current designation is K-Eight. K-series, unit eight. I believe the Vicar found the resemblance to a human name amusing."

"Ah," said Filius Flitwick. "Very well, Kay Eight. You are some form of magical construct?"

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"Right," I said as the last member of the class filed into place. It had taken three days for the trial-
version of the Muggle Studies thing to get off the ground and the word to circulate. Because it WAS a trial and it WAS an elective class - it was open to all students to sample it. There had even been a sign-up sheet.

And then there had been a page two to the sign-up sheet. Finally there had been a board set up with thirty pages of lines for signatures. Then had come something about expanding the classroom, but I'd
set it up with Professor Flitwick's assistance to have a direct link between the Tardis' entry and the theater. Or was it "theatre" since I was in England? Whatever.

"I'm surprised," said someone with green trim on his robes. "I mean, it's just a muggle thing. What's the appeal?"

"Well then, why did YOU sign up?" asked a neighbor with a red trim.

"Because everyone else was signing up and it's new," said the green-trimmed boy. A fifth-year from his age.

As just about everyone was seated, I went ahead and gave my spiel. "Hello. This film is a bit old, but it has a great deal of importance in some aspects of muggle culture. In it, you'll see what the muggle views on magic are like. You'll also see what they think of as possible within a mostly-muggle highly advanced futuristic society. Please keep mindful of your fellows and avoid a lot of talking during the film. For those interested in the technical details, this version of the film isn't quite what they've shown in the local venues because I got it somewhere else. Now, keep in mind, those of you actually enrolled in Muggle Studies - there may be some questions showing up on your tests later in the year."

I dimmed the lights, taking a stand near one exit with K8 guarding the other.

"So, a movie is a bunch of text with music playing?" asked the green-trim student from earlier. "I-"

"Quiet," said a familiar voice from the crowd.

"Professor Snape?! Sir, what are you..."

"Attempting to watch an updated version of a film from my youth," said Professor Snape as I paused the film with my remote control. "Also having the traditional snack for such activities. It is called 'popcorn' and no - you may not have any of mine."

"I suspect some concepts may need to be explained during the film," I announced. "As such I have a remote to pause the film. Since we only have an hour each night to show the film, this will be over the course of three nights. The next portion of film will be shown in two days per the schedule."

"I still don't see what-" began green-trim before the next scene began with an orchestral flourish.

Pause. "Those are muggle ships that fly so high up that there is no air." Un-pause.

I had chosen, of course, Star Wars - A New Hope as the first film. Well, perhaps not "of course" as I had been sorely tempted to go with Peter Jackson's "The Hobbit" or "Lord of The Rings" and had also considered some more mainstream-ish films that I had such as "Thoroughly Modern Millie" or Disney's "Beauty & The Beast" but came down to cultural-significance and decided to try this one.

I found it slightly alarming that a pair of redheaded twins near my position immediately started whispering to each other about creating their own light sabers, but figured that the various teachers would stop them if it sounded possible.

Though frankly if the two could pull it off, I'd want to get ahold of one myself. Could come in handy.

"Obvious Dark Lord," muttered one of the red-trimmed students as soon as Darth Vader strode into the scene.
"I dunno," stage-whispered a green-trim. "Rather like the fashion myself."

When one of the green-trims shot her hand into the air, I paused. "Yes, Miss?"

"Daphne Greengrass," identified the student. "So these two 'droids' are similar to your guardian?"

"Yes," I informed her. "Except that K8 is real, and the film version uses actors in suits to play the part. K8 comes from a place where such devices can be found."

"Thank you, Vicar-sir," said the student.

"Five points for Slytherin, because the House of The Clever should actually BE clever," said Professor Snape. "Now, since the film is paused anyway, does anyone have any other questions rather than interrupt one of the better parts?"

"Uhm, yes, does this mean that muggles SUSPECT magic in some form exists despite the Statute Of Secrecy?" asked a blue-trim.

"Some do, some suspect psychics exist, some believe in vast conspiracies of one sort or another, some feel that it is all codswallow, and a fair number of those out there make a respectable living writing about magic and dragons and such." Professor Snape paused. "In fact, I've met some squibs and even a few wizards who make a fair living in the 'fantasy community' with such fiction."

The "muggle-born" in the audience were obviously whispering to their neighbors, explaining one or more details as things went on. The more wizarding-immersed listening as various concepts were explained to them. To the muggle-born, the ideas of such things as space travel and blasters and so on were long established. To most of the students who had NOT grown up in the muggle world, the idea of such things as a muggle-wand that fired stunners was apparently a bit alarming.

The film went on, with a few whispered comments during the Cantina Scene about which character most resembled which student.

Maybe I should have gone with "the Fellowship of the Ring" but that's three very long movies and the first movie was something that could pretty much stand alone. After the trial period this was going to be just something that Muggle Studies had, or at least that was the plan.

Between the interruptions and the lessons, we barely made it through the Cantina Scene before it was time to stop for the night.

I added a suggestion list to the sign-up list. Other films that might make good Muggle Studies projects - giving insights into the muggle world and what they could do. From what I'd overheard, a lot of the students didn't even know much about electricity despite having to go to King's Cross in London in order to board the Hogwarts Express to come to this very school.

Still, during the trial period we'd do one hour every two days for the first film. After that we'd see how well this was received.

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AUTHOR'S NOTES: Okay, i'm curious. What movie/TV show would *you* show to the Hogwarts students given the chance and knowing that many of the pureblood families have likely never seen a muggle film? i was thinking "Fellowship Of The Ring" as a possible, but "Ghostbusters" might be amusing as well. i went with Star Wars originally because i thought most of
the themes would be familiar to the locals, but...
The door knocking brought me out of my progress-focus, and my stomach rumbled immediately afterward. Which meant that I might have been a bit preoccupied as I tried to knock additional things off my "to-do" list.

"How long have I been working on my projects?" I asked as I went to the door.

K8 looked up from her recharging station. "Twenty-nine hours, fifty-two minutes, eighteen seconds since you asked not to be disturbed."


"Yes, Vicar, I *did* travel with you before," said Harry.

"Hang on, I've got to get something out of the fridge," I explained as I moved. "K8. Guard the door."

"Incapable, current charge is at fifteen percent," said K8.

"Double bugger," I remarked. "Look, Harry, can you lock the door? I need to get something to eat before I fall over."

"What were you working on anyway?" asked Harry down the stairs.

I raised my own volume a bit to be heard. "A capture device based on the pokeball that Neville got his little pet from. It should work with a variety of things actually. Ran into a system of summoning gems on one world, but I never got into it that much. Most of it involved spirit-animals of one kind or another."

That was one problem with living several lifetimes and lives, you tended to get lost in your memories or your memories got lost or both.

I went with a black cherry juice-drink and a bag of chicken nuggets that I'd picked up and stuck with a stasis tag. Yes, it had been in the fridge. No, I wasn't inclined to rely on that.

When I came back though, it was to something a bit different.
Harry was still there. He had been joined by those redheaded twins who had been talking about making their own lightsabers. Also Hermione, Padma and Parvati, a blonde girl I didn't recognize, Cho Chang, an oriental girl I also didn't recognize, and a blond boy who seemed to be the recipient of a great many distrusting looks.

"What the blazes is going on here?" I asked. "Why are so many people in my Tardis' control room?"

Naturally, everyone started talking at once. Also naturally, I couldn't understand anyone due to everyone saying something different.

"Harry?" I asked as some shorter redhead wandered into my Tardis and started asking why everyone else was here.

"Got me," said Harry, shrugging at the end of that. "Hermione, Padma, and Parvati showed up looking for me. Cho was looking for Hannah, Susan Bones was looking for Mikoto, Daphne was looking for Thelma, and Malfoy there was apparently looking for Daphne."

"At least he didn't bring his minions," said the blonde girl, flipping her hair back and looking haughty.

"Harry, you have a rival who has minions?" I asked. "Do you have minions?"

"No, I have allies," said Harry Potter.

"They grow up so quickly," I said proudly.

Harry considered briefly. "Should I have minions?"

"Not necessarily," I answered. "It's usually villains that have minions. Oh, that reminds me. Has Professor Gadget been in touch yet?"

"No," said Harry. "Is that a teacher here? If so, I haven't met them."

"No," I said. "Pretty sure he isn't teaching at Hogwarts. He's a 'frenemy' - which is a term that means he's antagonistic towards you but isn't above cooperating with you for common cause or helping you out when it can benefit him in some manner."

"Doesn't describe Malfoy then," decided Harry aloud. "He'd screw himself over in order to do something to hurt me."

"Like THAT will happen, Potter," grumped the blond boy.

"Sneaking out after us to spy on us at Hagrid's and then reporting us, getting yourself in trouble for breaking the same rules," said Harry.

The blonde girl snorted. "That's how that happened? Oh, Draco. The first rule of revenge is not to get caught."

Draco scowled at that.

The lightsaber twins seemed to share some private joke between them.

"Vicar, I am shutting down to do maintenance," said K8 from her charging station. "Estimated time to complete: two hours and seventeen minutes."

"Fine," I answered absently.
"So the golem is self-repairing? That's handy," said Parvati Patil.

"You two stop going over my post-it notes," I told the two older redheads. "Okay, everyone, that corridor there. We'll have this conversation in the library."

"These are called-" started one redheaded twin.

"postal notes?" finished the other twin.

"That must annoy the heck out of your teachers," I noted.

"Thank you," said one twin.

"We try," said the other twin.

"'Post it notes'," I said, reaching into a pocket and pulling out one of my multicolored cubes of post-it notes and pulling a pen out of the other. After I handed it to them I noticed the two twins looking at the pen as if they'd never seen one. "It's a pen. Push the button on one end and a little ball comes out the other. Ink inside the pen makes marks on the paper. I take it they don't have those here?"

"We've always used quills," said one twin.

"I wonder what else you could do this with," mused the other twin.

"Oh lots of things," I told the two. "Come along."

"You've expanded," said Hermione as I led the group down the corridor.

"Yes, I've been gone quite a bit," I said. "Pool's to the left. Library to the right. Arsenal's locked for obvious reasons. Theatre's down that way. We'll just have this conversation in here where the controls and my post-it notes are NOT."

"A 'pool'?" asked Padma.

"Yeah, there's a heated swimming pool," I said as we reached a door. "The bath is next door to it. Big one, mainly a Japanese-style bath except I've got some Romanesque statues and such in there. Anyway, here's the library."

Hermione dashed through the door with one of the Patil twins just behind her.

At which point I'd noticed that some of the crowd had apparently wandered off.

"Oh, bugger," I summed up the situation.

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A heated bath? Japanese-style?

She was fond of the finer things in life and this at least sounded exotic.

There were two doors, each marked with three sets of signs. One was an odd runic sort of thing, that she vaguely identified as a Chinese letter-symbol. The next she would have determined as the silhouette of a muggle on one and a robed wizard on the other door. The last was thankfully in English and allowed her to establish that one door was for men and the other women.

The door for women led her to what was obviously a changing room. Little baskets on shelves,
towels, and buckets containing cleaning supplies. All done in some light lacquered wood. Going through that led her to a shower area, which did NOT impress her.

Beyond the far door there was the actual bath. THIS looked rather more promising. The water was between two and three feet deep, steaming, and recirculated with lion-statues vomiting streams of water into the marble-tiled bath.

If this "Vicar" ever wanted to get out of the religion-business, perhaps he could go into construction. The bath certainly looked inviting.

"Found one!" said one of the Gryffindor contingent as he entered the bathing area. "Oi. That's a BIG tub."

Daphne Greengrass, the blonde girl from earlier, was quickly found inspecting the bath.

Hermione, Cho, and Padma were in the library. While that could be potentially dangerous, it wasn't like any of them could get into the Arsenal. I wasn't going to rule out that an exceptionally clever magic student couldn't find a way in - but that was the first place I checked to make sure no one was trying to get in or had broken into.

"The Weasley Twins being missing - that's the concerning bit," said Parvati.

"Problem?" I asked as we went past the Armory and headed down the corridor. I knocked on the first door. "Anyone there?"

"You have restrooms on your Tardis?" asked Parvati.

"Well, yeah, spend a lot of time on board," I said. I'd gotten the toilets in Mid-Childa from a scrapyard where the magitech equivelant of old spaceships had been gathered. Got a lot of good, if old and used, systems for my Tardis from that. "Also air recyclers and a few other things." Some of it I was either going to have to research, or maybe...

"Well, the Twins are known as pranksters, really good at potions and charms," said Parvati.

We went around another corridor and found a door open that shouldn't have been.

Sure enough, there were a pair of redheaded twins looking over a large magitech gadget that I'd gotten the same place as the bathrooms.

"Is this-" began one twin.

"-what we think it is?" asked the other twin.

"Internal gravitational control system? Yes," I said. "How did you get past the lock?"

"Tricky," admitted the first twin.

"A magic-dispel followed by an unlocking spell," said the second. "It only worked for a second-"

"-but a second was really all that was needed," said the first.

"What if you'd cut off the life support when you did that?" I asked. "Lights, air, and so on? That could have been very bad indeed."
"Doorplate said this was 'Secondary Systems',' said the second twin.

"Figured this was interesting enough to figure out," said the first twin.

"Might not have the chance later," said the second twin.

"Look, if you two can figure out how some of the stuff I've bought secondhand works - great. As long as you don't break anything that is. It'd actually be a great help as some of it is a bit complicated for me to keep running if it ever breaks down." I shook my head. "Some of it I can't replace anymore, so it's really important that it doesn't get mucked about with."

A grinding-thump noise sounded throughout the Tardis.

"We didn't do it!" declared both twins.

-- Fallout Earth --

Sturges was twenty-eight years old. He remembered growing up, learning from his father the mechanical skills he had been using most of his life. Sturges primarily concerned himself with maintaining the 200-year-old systems left behind from the Pre-War Age.

That he was actually a third-generation synth was not something he knew himself.

He was used to fixing things with duct tape, ingenuity, and whatever parts he could scavenge from one thing to fix another thing. He was also quite fond of power armor, if he could be said to have a hobby it would be sprucing up that sort of thing.

Sturges was watching from a rooftop over the little settlement of Sanctuary, which had once been a suburb subdivision called Sanctuary Hills not too far from downtown Concord.

"Something's out there," he told the Sole Survivor of Vault 111, Nate, who had walked out of the deathtrap that the cryo-facility had turned into, looked out into the dimming light of evening and nodded.

"Got the same feeling a few times in Quincy before the Minutemen broke apart," said Sturges.

"So Mama Murphy isn't the only one with 'The Sight'?" asked Nate.

"Nah, you got something like that yourself," said Sturges. "Seen you fight. More a situational awareness kind of thing. You get a feeling for when you're about to get ambushed."

"Was a soldier, two terms," said Nate. "United States Army, Second Battalion, One Hundred Eighth Infantry. Sino-American War, mainly up in Alaska. Yeah, after awhile..."

A grind-thump noise began sounding from a neighboring yard.

"The Reverend's returning," noted Sturges, putting out his cigarette on a rooftile.

"Synths," noted Nate, making a motion with his laser rifle towards the gloom.

Sturges squinted and nodded a moment later. "Yep. Looks like the Institute's decided to investigate our little community. Shall we give 'em a nice Commonwealth welcome?"

"I think that might just be in order," said Nate. He started checking his rifle. Not that he hadn't checked it three times already since coming up to the roof.

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There was something about big red buttons that just needed to be pushed.

Draco Malfoy was feeling rather pleased at figuring out exactly what switch needed to be pushed in order to steal this Tardis. Piece of cake actually.

"Malfoy Manor," said Draco, figuring it was like using the floo.

The grind-thump noise ended shortly thereafter.

Feeling enormously pleased, Draco felt a moment of triumph before the rest of the group came in through the door. Which he apparently had NOT locked as he'd thought.

And that metal statue in the wire-harness was somehow looking menacing even restrained as it was.

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"Okay, let's see where you put us, Mister Malfoy." I checked the display. "Sanctuary Hills. The Commonwealth, Fallout Earth. Lovely."

"It's your fault for not labeling anything! I was just trying to find the exit!" complained Draco.

"Maybe the switch on the door would have been too obvious?" I asked the child. "Aren't Slytherins supposed to be all clever and better liars?"

"You'd think so," said Harry. "Unfortunately, that's not been my experience."

"Oi!" said Daphne Greengrass, looking mildly put out.

Draco hit the switch and dashed out the door. A moment later there was a scream that sounded as if someone was asking where the bloody hell he was.

I stared. "Didn't I just say we were on another Earth? Really, aren't Slytherins supposed to be the House of the Clever? That's how it was explained to me."

"Might be a bit too much inbreeding," suggested Harry.

Daphne Greengrass managed to glare at Harry while otherwise looking as if the conversation was beneath her. Quite an accomplishment at that age.

"Just referring to Malfoy, not ALL Slytherins," said Harry. "Though honestly if everyone keeps marrying their cousins and such. Just look at Crabbe and Goyle."

"A family tree without branches quickly dies," I said with a nod. "If the genepool is a shallow puddle, you can't expect much of it. Oh well. As soon as I can get our wayward child back we'll just head to back to Hogwarts and-"

An explosion caused the open door to rattle.

I sighed before glancing towards the assembled children. "Everyone else stay put. Harry, grab a weapon. K8, guard the door to the Tardis. I'll try to go retrieve our wayward snake."

K8's harness came away. "Linking to Tardis sensors."

I blinked a couple of times, momentarily derailed. "Sensors? When did I put in sensors?"

"You didn't," said K8. "Located a box of spare parts in storage. Installed while you were busy and
this unit was bored."

"Oh." I considered that. Sounded like she was developing quite nicely actually, going beyond
original limitations of the kind of robot she was. I might have to double check some of the fuuinjutsu
and extra parts I'd added. "Nice initiative."

"Someone has to keep you out of trouble," grumpily indicated K8. Though she also sounded
somewhat pleased. Well, she should be pleased. That WAS some very good personal initiative and
not something you'd expect from an Assaulttron.

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His father had always set a high bar for him to aim for. The illustrious history of the Malfoy was an
example for others - the very essence of Slytherin and pureblood greatness. His father was a very
powerful wizard, with power both magical and political. With their wealth, their control of a web of
political connections, and his father's own personal magical might - the Malfoy name carried a certain
power of its own.

So, a task had been laid upon him. Find out all he could about this "Tardis" thing. About this "Vicar"
- what exactly WAS the man? Could he be blackmailed or influenced, or would it be better if the
man met an unfortunate accident when the time came?

Instead of Malfoy Manor, which he'd clearly specified, he was in some sort of wrecked muggle
housing area. Where metal skeleton-things with huge bulky wands were firing what looked like
Reducto spells at various locals who were responding with equally bulky wand-things that fired
something else back at the skeletons.

He did the most logical and intelligent thing he could, which was to find shelter and hide until
everyone stopped zapping each other.

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"Sitrep?" I asked as I joined Sturges and Nate.

"Institute synths," said Sturges. "These are the Type Ones - skeleton kind of things. They usually
attack settlements and kill everything and then scrap everything left into raw materials they can send
back."

"They look like Terminators," I said after Sturges finished shooting at one of the synths that was
ducking around a corner and firing before returning to cover.

"Type Ones all have a pattern that they follow. Figure out the pattern and you can take advantage of
it," said Sturges, who held fire until the synth popped out again and then shot it in the head.

There was a crackle and a loud impact sound, letting me know that Harry had found the gauss rifle
and was using it.

"What's going on?!"

I blinked. The Weasley Twins were taking cover nearby and looked more excited than frightened.

"This settlement is under attack by the Institute," said Nate, hefting a large weapon up onto a
sawhorse and pivoting it around to get an aim. "The skeletons with Institute-style lasers are the bad
guys."
"Ah," said one twin.

"Obvious bad guys are obvious," agreed the second twin.

"Magic isn't easily accessed here," I warned them. "You should get back to the Tardis and shelter."

"What about these?" asked one twin, hefting up a pistol. The other also brandished a pistol.

"Do you even know how to use those?" asked Sturges. "You've got the safety on."

I held out my hand to one twin. He passed it over. I pointed out the safety and the usual spiel about not pointing it at anything that you didn't want to destroy or kill. That anytime he was not trying to kill something - keep the damn safety ON. I also identified things a bit more. "This is a ten millimeter pistol. I put a minor enchantment on it that causes the bullets to become incendiary rounds when they hit something. That means they catch fire frequently."

I switched the safety back to "on" before handing it back to first twin. I then took the second pistol from the second twin. "This is a laser rifle. It has a minor enchantment on it that changes the beams of light to carry a plasma charge that gives it a bit of extra impact. You aim through this thing at the top, choose your target carefully, and only squeeze the trigger when you're sure of your target."

A human-looking guy in a leather overcoat leapt to the top of one building and then passed us, going at high speed towards the Tardis. Both Sturges and Nate missed it, the figure moving rapidly enough that they couldn't keep up.

"THAT one I'm not familiar with," said Sturges.

Nate grimaced as the figure seemed to fade out view. "Using a Stealth Boy or something similar. Great."

There was a bright red glow erupting from the door of the Tardis and the figure was suddenly visible again, now missing an arm.

"Target acquired, tracking," said K8.

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Nate was used to a changing worldview at this point. As much as anyone can be, he supposed.

Tough enough when he woke up one day, prepared his speech for the Veteran's Lodge, played a bit with his baby boy, listened to the news with Nora, and then everything went to utter crap with a nuclear war breaking out. Followed by getting frozen in Vault 111 instead of just sitting back in the Vault until it was safe to come out. Followed by briefly waking up in order to see his son kidnapped, his wife killed, and then refrozen like a TV Dinner that had been put aside for later.

The next person to refer to him as such was getting a fat lip at the very least because he was DAMN tired of that comparison.

When he finally got out it was to find he was now the Sole Survivor (a title he vastly favored over TV Dinner or Leftovers or Iceman or a number of similar terms he'd heard since Piper Wright had written her article) of Vault 111 and it had been "a little" over 200 years since things had gone straight down the toilet.

He'd been in the United States Army Infantry and had seen his share of combat. Including combat missions where the fight had passed "going bad" and straight into "insanely rich target environment"
and beyond. One of the things he'd learned had been Always Doubt The Intel as well as Get As Much Intel As Possible. The two combined to having at least some idea of what you were facing but be ready to throw out that knowledge when it turned out the intel was wrong.

Current enemy: Synths. Created by the mysterious Institute, described as a boogeyman of the Commonwealth that sought to remain mysterious. Type 1 Synths were basically skeletal figures of machine with artificial intestines and organs visible. Some had a clearly artificial skin to basically serve the same function human skin did - protecting the internal stuff from getting dirty or gummed up. Type 1 Synths were fairly simple robots as far as intelligence and such, basically on a level with Protectrons and the like. Type 3 Synths were indistinguishable from human as far as appearance, apparently being able to bleed and eat and do nearly everything a human could do. Type 3 Synths were also responsible for the fear of the human populace as people were replaced with Type 3 Synths who could then go rogue at some point, triggered to attack the real humans nearby. Otherwise Type 3 Synths were spies for the Institute.

Which probably meant that one of the settlers in Sanctuary Hills was a synth infiltrator, who'd brought about this attack for whatever reason.

They weren't after the Vicar or Tardis because those had shown up after the synths had started the current attack. That they'd go after that now that it was here was probably just a "secondary as available" target.

Nate quickly looked things over with an experienced eye, then noticed a faint shimmer and pursed his lips as he traced out the outline.

It was doing something to the soil in that area that the Vicar had done his little miracle-thing.

A gatling laser was a wonderful little weapon in some respects. Especially after he'd tuned it up a bit. It wasn't useful if there were friendlies anywhere near the target, or if there were destructibles you wanted to keep. Outside of that though, you could mow down super mutants or deathclaws or just about anything as long as you had a supply of fusion cores.

Since it basically shot up an area, using it against stealthed opponents was useful - precision wasn't possible with the weapon.

He DID wonder why the heck laser weapons had a kick to them, but he'd used laser rifles while in the Army and those had a recoil to them as well so it was at least consistent.

It was a good thing he'd gotten used to things that made little sense and were completely new and unexpected, otherwise the Healed Land and the Vicar himself would have caused him some difficulty.

"Trashcan Carla's a synth?!"

One of the settlers was hunkered down behind the scavenger station. Sure enough, Nate glanced that direction and noticed that the wandering trader was just standing there smoking a cigarette and not being shot at by any of the synths that were ducking from building to building.

"Wha? No, that's not it," complained Trashcan Carla as she drew a pipe-pistol and squatted on the ground. "I don't know why they're-"

A blast of intense red light shot past Carla and continued on for four seconds. A figure faded into view, minus its head, and another of the leather-overcoat-wearers hit the ground a moment later.

"Target eliminated," came the voice of the Vicar's Assaultron. "Acquiring new target."
"They made me do it!" declared Carla, apparently panicking over facing the glowing face of the Assaultron and also apparently recognizing just how much damage those lasers could do. She began running, her pack-brahmin getting up to follow her at a more sedate pace.

Nate turned back, noting that the shimmer was gone. He immediately started looking over his surroundings. If it WAS a Stealth Boy, those things only lasted so long before the charge was exhausted. The field also would be slightly visible at close range or if the device was moved at any sort of speed above a crawl.

Just a matter of spotting either now that he knew to look for it.

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This guardian statue was most impressive. Cho Chang decided she wanted to study it at the first chance to learn exactly how it had been made and if it were possible to make one herself.

On three occasions the statue quickly defended the Vicar's Tardis. The first time was with that head-based attack which caused a limb to burn away to ash on some invisible attacker, who quickly became both visible. The statue's right arm morphed into a sword blade and decapitated that attacker.

The second time was when an attacker had been grasped in one of those odd claw-hands and visible lightning had flowed into the attacker and an acrid smell had assaulted her. The attacker though - he'd burned as if real lightning had struck.

The statue had then pivoted with extremely high speed and driven one arm completely through the third attacker, who had apparently thought that invisible and approaching from the opposite direction would protect him.

Not so much.

A guardian that could detect invisible attackers, was able to attack through a variety of means, and apparently faster and stronger than a normal human? The animated statues she was familiar with were much slower than this, also not able to assess situations and respond accordingly.

"You're very fast," said Cho.

"Thank you," said the statue. "Please remain in the Tardis until all hostiles have been eliminated."

The statue hadn't even looked in her direction, instead just building up that glow on its face until it fired off another blast at a target Cho couldn't see.

It was also polite. Yes, she definitely wanted to see how this was put together.

"I thought you were turning yourself off for repairs," said Padma from nearby.

"Repairs and maintenance incomplete," stated the statue. "Unscheduled Tardis activation interrupted self-repair."

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Okay, decided Draco Malfoy, doing anything to piss off the magic statue was NOT a wise idea.

That THING was a killer. And it could go through cloaked wizards faster than an enchanted knife through bread. That one had been spattered! SPATTERED!

He had a good look at a number of the attackers, and rather liked the metal skeleton motif. He'd
appreciate them more if they weren't firing off those wand-things in his general direction.

He was in his first year at Hogwarts. There were a lot of things not covered in his classes as of yet, but he was definitely going to learn and practice some shield spells after this.

One of the metal skeletons started firing in his direction.

"Protego!" declared Draco, knowing this one at least thanks to his father.

"Tertiary target acquired," said a way-too-close voice before everything went black.

-- --

"Oh HELL," I said as I saw a leather-coat-wearing synth running away with that Malfoy child apparently unconscious and draped over a shoulder.

This was going to be a straight-up mess. Didn't matter that the kid had managed to get himself into trouble. Just that he was.

"Nate! Can you get something to go after that one?" I not-quite-yelled to the Sole Survivor.

"Automatron One-Six-Six! Pursue that attacker!" indicated Nate, pointing. "Hostage situation! Search and Rescue!"


"Automatron Two-One-Seven! Assist One-Six-Six."

A Protectron lumbered forward.

"You're kidding me, right?" I asked Nate, estimating the Protectron's walking speed as being slightly higher than a turtle. If the turtle had anemia.

"Two-One-Seven, abort. Two-One-Five, assist One-Six-Six," appended Nate.

Nothing happened.

"Was Two-One-Five something with tank treads?" I asked Nate, pointing at a wreck.

"Codsworth! Need you to stop that kidnapper!" Nate tried.

"Right-e-o," said a spherical robot as it slammed into a wall and tried to power through it.

"What about yours?" asked Nate.

"Needs to recharge and repair, was doing that when the kid pulled this stunt," I said. "Okay. K8. Start your repair process again. Harry, you with me. I'm going to tell those twins how to use weapons and put them in charge of keeping things safe."

"Ain't nothing safe in this world," said Sturges.

"What do you suppose that synth was doing in the ground there?" asked Nate.

I checked quickly. A scoop of soil was missing. "Soil sample. Who's with me on the rescue mission?"
"I am," said Nate.

"You got a better weapon?" I asked Nate. "That laser carbine isn't that easily carried."

"Give me five minutes to upgrade one of these," said Nate, hefting one of the Institute rifles left behind by the attackers.

"How are we going to track Draco? And do we really want him back?" asked Harry.

"I can track him," I told Harry. "And if we don't get him back he'll show up as a Dark Lord, probably at the end of the year."

"You think?" asked Harry.


Harry shuddered, thinking about having to deal with a dozen Malfoy.

"Oh, I say, must have taken a ding to the navigation processor," said the spherical robot. "Off we go!"

There was a loud explosion in the distance.

"Oh dear," said the British-sounding sphere-robot.

"I take it that was One-Six-Six?" I asked despite knowing that would be the case.

"Yeah, I think so," said Nate. "Sentry-style robots usually explode when they've been wrecked. Problem with overheating too, but they're pretty tough combatants. Usually. Two-One-Five was my most combat-capable one."

"I'm going to try air-borne pursuit," said Harry, producing a staff. "I'll maintain altitude."

Several of the settlers had been watching at a distance and made all sorts of reactions to the sight of Harry flying off at high speeds.

"Sturges, keep an eye on the kids, would you?" At the mechanic's hesitant nod, I made the appropriate gesture. "Raywing!"

With the Tardis here and open, and the Healing Forest roughly an acre across - there was SOME magic returned to the world. I wasn't nearly as fast as Harry, and there was some instability, but I was able to get at least twenty kilometers per hour. Which wasn't all that fast but when everyone else is walking it was still pretty respectable.

Harry was lower than I was, maybe cruising along at thirty feet up from the ground. He was also going around ninety kilometers per hour so there wasn't much chance of me catching up. At least that was the case until another group of synths began shooting at him.

I went up to a bit over five hundred feet. Since the only thing I'd seen flying in this world had been birds, there wasn't much chance of me getting sucked up into a jet intake.

Harry apparently spotted me as he joined me after dealing with the remains of the Sanctuary Assault Force synths. We saw a bright white flash and oriented on it.

The spot was a section of broken and blasted bare earth was pretty much what almost the entire Commonwealth was composed of. Completely unremarkable in that regard. That the footprints
stopped in a circular area that was blasted clean of dust and loose dirt was the only remarkable bit.

"They apparated," guessed Harry.

"Unlikely, not enough magic prior to my spot of Healing forming and even now it'll be a long time before people can manage that sort of thing reliably," I told Harry. "Not the spell version at least. They may have a purely 'muggle' tech that allows teleportation but that REALLY puts the schizo in the schizo-tech thing."

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"What's 'schizo-tech'?" asked Sturges on our return.

"It's a term for technological levels that are all over the place," I told him. "You've got marginally to completely self-aware robots capable of independent action. You also have portable fusion. On the other hand you just barely developed something better than x-rays and you apparently don't have electric typewriters much less word processors."

"'Electric typewriters'?" asked Sturges as if he found the idea completely ridiculous.

"Other than 'stimpacks' which in part use magical fields, your medical technology is way behind that of the nonmagicals of Harry's world." I shook my head. "In most worlds, the tech levels tend to be smoother and driven by materials and manufacturing technology. Useful steam engines couldn't be built until metallurgy and precise machined parts were available. Still, we need to get Malfoy back. I think we'll need a bit more firepower though."

Sturges made a disgusted sound. "Yeah. Them synths are tough alright. We lost two of our settlers - Mick and Davey. Mick managed to shoot one twice in the head before it got him. Need something a lot tougher than a pipe pistol or a shotgun."

"I'll see what I can do," I told him.

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Nanotech spinners. They had workbenches with nanotech spinners. Plus plasma pistols, cryosleep, fusion cores, fusion batteries though they called them 'cells', and a synthetic polymer that I couldn't recall ever seeing before. But they had car designs, telephones, jukeboxes that used old-style records, and manual typewriters that were closer to 1950's tech.

Forget schizo-tech. This was a first-class contamination from a higher tech level - at least Tech 9 and more likely an 11 or 12.

Which was one of those "what the hell" moments you end up with when you find yourself in different timelines.

A nanotech spinner, if you didn't know, took debris made of Material A and spun it into chunks of Material A which you could then shape into stuff composed of Material A. Such as taking a wooden pallet and shaping it into large chunks of wood which could then become a stack of "two by fours" which could then be nailed together into a section of wall.

You could even do nuclear materials like that. Which was another "what the hell" moment.

Not only were these people dealing with radiation poisoning from their environment, and actually throwing "mini-nukes" at each other, but they were picking nuclear materials BY HAND out of burst containment housings.
These locals were really beginning to give me a headache.

"You realize this is part of why a forty-year-old is considered ancient and living to sixty is considered extremely unusual?" I asked Sturges at one point.

"Why? They live longer prior to the War?" had asked Sturges.

That had caused both me and Nate to facepalm. Me - because I was used to regular healthcare and medicines and such making it so that eighty wasn't that unusual. Nate because eighty wasn't unheard of but sixty was normally reached, seventy or so was the usual cutoff. Apparently Nate's world didn't have the full spectrum of antibiotics that I was used to.

Schizo-tech.

That determined, I was trying to figure out something about where the contamination was coming from. Obviously a more advanced civilization. Was it time travel from their own future producing a divergent line? Were they a hidden society such as in Harry's world with their wizarding society? Was it actually a "wizarding world" like in Harry's world and some of this schizo-tech came from trying to back-engineer things that were actually magic? Was it a group of extra-dimensional like the Cyberine (obviously NOT them or the synths would be MUCH more friendly and sophisticated) or the Fel (unlikely as their tech was more magical in nature) or the Voor (much more likely but I didn't see any evidence of large war machines)? Was it some outer space aliens like the Type Moon (unlikely as there didn't seem to be much in the way of vampire legends) or the K'krr (possible but Earth wouldn't be their first choice of environments) or the Regalt (possible but Nate hadn't heard of asteroid impacts when I asked)?

No hovercraft? No grav bikes? What the heck? Too bad, either of those would have been VERY handy.

I came to the conclusion eventually that I was probably looking at a sporadic contact "outer space alien" sort of contamination. The alien species was probably hostile and scouting out the human species, more peaceful contact was generally more open though they could be trying to manipulate humanity into something they could work with later on. Whoever they were - most likely a Tech 11 society and one that was stagnant but incorporated some knowledge of magic and magical energies. Possibly approaching the magic angle from active psionics.

My still swiss-cheesed memories provided very little in the way of direction but with the theory of what I was working with, just asking the locals what they thought aliens would look like had a single image brought forth because apparently Hollywood and its other country equivalents all used the same basic theme.

Either the aliens looked exactly like humans with some minor prosthetics or makeup, or they followed a near-human body type and looked "Martian" with the same short thin body-type and large head with the same general features.

As they say in some circles - bingo.

One of the settlers, a farmer named Peter Jones, had a sci-fi paperback that was falling apart that had a picture of these typical alien types. I didn't recognize them. Not Terminators nor genomorphs thank all the gods. If that latter had been the case, I'd be writing this world off and never opening the damn door and I'd explain to Draco's family that trying to get him was likely to doom all of humanity. Genomorphs were one of those things that could justify sterilizing a planet down to the mantle in several galactic societies that had experience with the things. And yes, there was a list. If it was even suspected a planet had been contaminated by a genomorph there was a galactic quarantine protocol.
That left thousands of potential Invader species, most of which I’d never encountered and only had vague memories where I’d been briefed on them. The local aliens might well be part of one of the holes in my memory I still hadn’t recovered. It could literally be anything from the A’aan to the Zor. Except the A’aan preferred desert climates and the Zor were giant-sized. I think. Damn swiss-cheesed memories.

I could have wished that the Invaders (as good a name as any for now) were Sekirei or Cyberine or one of the other more light-hearted and fun sorts of Invaders. I could be glad it wasn't the The Virus or genomorphs or the Regalt or any of the more serious and competent Menaces.

As there had been no large invasion force, I could only conclude that the nuclear war had made Earth less desirable for conquest. Either that, or there was some other factor involved that I couldn’t determine from my scanty evidence so far. A competitor or enemy that would oppose them, or they could be like the Predator types and regard Earth as a hunting preserve, or they could be remnants of some destroyed civilization lacking the numbers to actually occupy a planet - just some of the possibilities that had crossed my mind while trying to use the Sanctuary Hills workshop to convert materials and then the weapons bench to upgrade what I could.

Then Nate stopped by with a set of power armor to see if I could upgrade it. Power armor. Actual freaking damn POWER ARMOR. Inefficient, no onboard weapon systems, not fully environmental-ready as gasses and water could still penetrate the seals, and clunky as hell - but POWER ARMOR.

Nate and Sturges both acted to keep me from pounding my head against the workbench.

I quickly got the various wizards and witches together, showed each of them a basic fuuinjutsu seal that could be written on something and how to charge the item using their magic. For the Hogwarts contingent that required their wands. Only one seal could be applied to each item, and there were some other limitations, but still...

If we were going to attack this Institute, I wanted every advantage I could cheat or steal or manufacture that I possibly could. Judging from the various reactions, most of the locals were very much in favor of this attitude. Hermione did not approve, nor did Cho Chang - apparently my calling them "cheats" caused them to react on that basis. Everyone else was much more pragmatic about going into a potentially lethal situation with as much of an advantage as they could get, especially those who actually WERE going into that sort of environment.

That did not include most of the Hogwarts contingent.

Still, I determined that some of the items that Nate had acquired had developed some magical signatures (he referred to them as special items off of legendary-level opponents that had the annoying tendency of mutating during combat to completely heal their wounds) and that was enough for me to work out some fuuinjutsu adaptations that would work here.

Harry was enscribing fire runes on some weapons. Bullets would become incendiary rounds as they were fired.

Hermione was enscribing healing runes on some pieces of armor. It wouldn't instantly heal wounds but wounds would heal at roughly four times the standard human healing rate.

Cho was enscribing a limb-wound prevention seal, reducing the chance slightly of limbs getting severed. It was likely to be only 25% or so effective, but as I pointed out that was better than nothing at all.

Daphne Greengrass was enscribing on armor too, a ward that allowed the wearer some protection against death-magic that I was hoping would count as radiation resistance.
Fred Weasley, one of the twins, was enscribing a copy of a cloaking ward I'd figured out from one of Nate's pieces of combat armor. Remain in shadows and not moving, and it made the wearer less likely to be spotted. From his grin, this might just come around and bite someone in the backside later. I was hoping it wouldn't be me.

George Weasley, the other Weasley twin, was enscribing a copy of a ward that had a minor luck alteration. It wouldn't be cumulative if the person wore multiple items with it, nor would it do anything amazing like miraculous escapes from certain doom. Being a little more lucky in combat though - that could help even if it was just a little.

Padma Patil was happy to learn a sigil that could protect someone from explosions a bit, like having a layer of padding that wouldn't go away. Apparently her potions class had someone who regularly exploded something.

Parvati Patil was also quite happy to learn that there was a sigil that could speed up how fast one ran. It wasn't superspeed by any stretch of the imagination, but even a slight edge there was likely helpful.

Ron Weasley turned out to be absolutely no damn good at making copies of his own assigned magical sigil, which had been a variation of the spell "Feather Fall" which decreased falling speed. After the fifth attempt the boy was getting more frustrated than was likely to be helpful and I tried giving it to Hitomi Takamura - one of the two from Hufflepuff House and apparently a sixth year student that really didn't like to be mistaken for a third year because of her lack of height.

I was quite aware of plans being made to share knowledge after they returned back to their world. I wasn't sure how well the stuff would work back in Hogwarts, but I chose to focus on the problem in front of me instead of worrying about the effects later on. That could turn out badly but you had to survive until then.

Neither Hitomi nor the twins nor Ron were aware of Harry's full capabilities or the Pactio, at least according to a private conversation with Harry while I upgraded a suit of power armor.

Nate walked in as I was finishing. "What is THAT?"

"It's that set of 'T-45' power armor you gave me to work with," I pointed out.

"Wings?" Nate asked.

"I modified it to be more like a set of something called 'SAMAS' armor," I told him. "The wings fold back when not in storage or use and the jet intakes close off too. When they ARE in use both deploy and you can fly longer and faster than the jetpack you had installed on this one."

"SAMAS'?" asked Nate.

"Does the military in your world love acronyms as much as I remember from mine?" I asked him.

Nate smirked. "Oh, I've had to CQ the CoC about SOP and the MI on the OpSec."

"Thought so," I told him. "I don't remember the exact wording. Something like 'Strike Armor Mobile Assault Suit' - you'll notice the gun hooks directly into the armor's powerplant?"

"Yeah," said Nate. "Won't that run through fusion cores pretty fast?"

"Not as fast as it used to, I had to reroute some systems and add capacitors to even out the drain," I told him. "The gun's a laser sniper rifle I upgraded."
Harry Potter and the Institute of Doom

Chapter Summary

Draco Malfoy arranges an Adventure, and therefore everyone is late for lunch.

One Floo Over, Chapter 24
Harry Potter and the Institute Of Doom

by Nimodes.
"Identification: K8, Modified Assaultron. Statement: Fallout setting copyright Bethesda, Harry Potter characters and setting copyright JK Rowling. Declaration: no ownership over either is implied by writer of fanfiction. Statement ends."

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The Institute, formerly the Massachusetts Institute Of Technology. After the Day Of Fire, they retreated into underground chambers and isolated themselves from the rest of the survivors.

There had been a half-hearted attempt to work with the other settlements about twenty years ago, but apparently they had intended to be in control and that hadn't flown at all well with the others. Mutual distrust had kept everyone from working together and arguing until the Institute had decided that enough was enough and synths started shooting.

Within the past eight or so years, the Generation Three Synths had started replacing the original people and were now effectively spies and saboteurs. Not all Gen-3s were loyal to the Institute, which complicated things. Apparently not all Gen-3 synths even knew they were synths.

"I'm a synth?" asked Sturges. "But I remember my father, I remember growing up. I remember..."

"Yeah, apparently they have ways of copying memories," I told him and Nate. "There are four synths in the settlers I've scanned with the system I added to the SAMAS armor."

"There's got to be some mistake," said Sturges.

"No, I've scanned and re-scanned," said Nate. "It always shows a green light for human, red for ghouls and supermutants, and yellow for synths."

"There's a synth component in synths, no matter what the Generation," I told him. "I'm telling you because I think there's an imbedded command code. Not sure what triggers it or what it can do - just that it is there."

"That's crazy, right?" asked Sturges.

"No, and there are other tells," I told him. "Synths have a natural radiation and disease resistance that humans don't have. The cell structure is slightly different and there are synthetic materials used in construction. I suspect that the creation process has aspects of being built and aspects of being grown."

"What's orange mean anyway?" asked Nate.
"A magic-user or psionic," I told him. "Was running out of colors to use on the display."

"I'm still not comfortable with the idea of psychics or magic," confessed Nate. He shook his head. "So much has changed."

"Wait, so Mama Murphy?" asked Sturges, anxious for a subject change.

"She comes up orange," confirmed Nate.

"So there's something to that 'sight' I heard you talking about?" I asked. A genuine seer was rare enough, in a world like this I wouldn't expect any at all.

So we had a moment while Nate continued to try out the various systems in the SAMAS-knock-off, punctuated by him flipping up the left cuff control panel.

"The armor looks lighter," commented Sturges.

"It is, this is meant as a flight unit suitable for patrol and pursuit," I pointed out. "If we had this during the assault, you'd have been able to pick off those synths and chase down those leather-wearers."

"Here comes Piper," warned Sturges, glancing down the street.

I checked, some woman wearing a red leather trenchcoat and cap was striding this way. "Friend?"

"Yeah, you could say that," said Nate. "She's a reporter from Diamond City. We just rescued this detective but I kind of got side-tracked."

"Detective? Got a lead on your son's kidnappers?" I asked, aware of this part of his backstory.

"Yeah, I'm kind of afraid of what I'll find out, and this detective guy was apparently being held hostage," said Nate. "Then we tracked down one of the kidnappers but now I'm told there's a guy hiding in a big radioactive crater who may have a another lead to the Institute."

"Right," I said. "Life is complicated." Especially if you were an action hero type like Nate here.

"Blue? What's going on? I heard the Institute attacked," said Piper, looking me over.

"Piper, meet someone with a more complicated life than me," said Nate, basically throwing me to the wolves. Or at least A wolf if she was a reporter.

"Seriously?" asked Piper.

I sighed. "Come on. I'll talk while I work."

She followed me, no doubt a thousand questions ready to plague me waiting on her lips.

"Whoa. Who put a forest here? And why is it so green?"

"Ah," I said, continuing to walk. "Kind of my fault. I was trying to fix something and it ended up taking this form."

She followed me into the Tardis, only to stumble and nearly fall as I walked past the control console.

"Just this way, I've got a couple of projects I need to check on," I told her.
"IT'S BIGGER ON THE INSIDE!" noted Piper in a very loud voice.

I stopped, leaned my back against a wall as she ran outside and back in and back out and then finally in again. Yeah, I could see why the Doctor liked this part. "Ready, Miss Piper?"

"It's Wright, Piper Wright, ace reporter," said Piper, getting over her surprise. "What exactly is this?"

"Ah, that's complicated," I told her. "You can call it 'magic' or 'sufficiently advanced technology' if you prefer."

"Don't give me that, there's no such thing as magic," said Piper.

"Well, we'll go with sufficiently advanced technology then," I told her. "K8? You about ready?"

"Affirmative," said K8, straightening up. "Intruder?"

"Guest at the moment," I told K8. "Try not to hurt her if she sneaks in here later. It's a professional hazard."

"What, are you saying I'm sneaky or something?" asked Piper.

"You're a reporter," I said.

"So, some of the rumors are true," said Piper, looking about her as we entered the workroom where some of the students were working. "You're some kind of alien."

"Depends on definitions," I said. "We're getting ready to attack the Institute."

"Wait. You know where they are?" asked Piper.

"Yeah, they're underground, some sort of geofront they've built down below the Commonwealth Institute of Technology ruins," I said. "I used a 'point me' spell to track down Draco Malfoy, who stands out because he's the only magical being not currently in Sanctuary."

"So these kids are aliens too?" asked Piper. "Is this an invasion?"

"No, we're going back to Hogwarts as soon as we recover Malfoy from the Institute," I told the reporter. "Hogwarts being their school."

"So you're going to attack the Institute, the big bad boogeyman of the Commonwealth," said Piper.

"Sort of," I told her. "We're just after Malfoy. As soon as we've got him back, that's mission complete and we retreat."

"You know they can replace people with synths," said Piper. "How are you going to tell if they've got a duplicate Malfoy?"

"Any chance he'd be less annoying?" asked Daphne.

"I have a way to scan for synths, shapeshifters, and other imposters," I told her.

There was brief silence from the reporter and when I checked she was staring at me with her mouth open.

"Is there a problem, Piper Wright?" I asked the reporter.
"You can tell whether someone's a synth or not?! That's BIG," said Piper.

"So I've been told," I informed her. I picked up the gauss rifle and checked it. "Actually, maybe you can tell me something that's been puzzling me."

"I can? You don't know something?" Piper shook her head, briefly bringing the heel of one hand against her forehead. "Okay. Give. What's the question?"

"Lots of things I don't know. Look," I said, pointing to a table with things that had been recovered from the Institute's raid on Sanctuary. "These Generation Three synths are grown, they have cells and blood and bone and a genetic code. They are made to be as human as possible - according to what I've determined it is so they can make these duplicates of real individuals."

"Yeah, that's part of why people get scared," said Piper.

"If they're trying to get control of the Commonwealth, they're going about it all wrong." I told her. "If they're trying for short term conquering the Commonwealth - they could do that through sheer number of troops. If they're playing a long game, they'd do better by making synths that work behind the scenes to advance their causes. Only thing I can think of that fits what I'm seeing is that the Institute doesn't have a single plan."


"What I'm seeing looks like your Institute might be several people who have entirely different goals and methods and they're working at cross purposes," I told her. "That sound right?"

"I don't know, we haven't been able to get information about the hows and why's," said Piper.

"Then there's these," I said and indicated the leather overcoat. "These are obviously special agents among the synths. We don't even know what they're called, but they're faster and stronger and able to stealth. There's also a special chip with its own battery. It looks like a transponder of some kind. Any idea?"

Piper stared at the items. "No, but if I put it in the paper - maybe someone will come forward with that."

"Well, check in with Nate," I told her. "We'll be attacking the Institute in four hours."

-- --

It was called an "Eyebot" because the flying sphere with trailing antennae could relay what it found to a video terminal connected to its docking station.

It was a modified Eyebot, using several fuuinjutsu and a couple of charms that Harry and the two Weasley Twins had learned at some point in their studies.

A spiral search pattern was followed by it fading from view and hovering over specific points in order to scan deeper. Visual mapping followed by infrared mapping followed by radar scans followed by a one-shot divination spell on the most promising site.

Then the eyebot moved on to the most promising-looking secondary site. At the third site it came under fire and had to retreat.

Still, the mission was a complete success in some definitions.
"Minutemen are prepped," said Preston Garvey. "Though if you've got time, there's a settlement..."

"We don't have the time right now, Preston," said Nate, sounding as if he was long-suffering.

"The Brotherhood of Steel, Squad Valkyrie, is ready," announced Paladin Danse.

"I'm not familiar with Squad Valkyrie," said Nate, glancing at the group in power armor. "They're all women?"

"Squad Valkyrie was the only one not assigned other duties," said Danse. "They've been wanting a real assignment and not just honor guard duties for some time."

"They DO have SOME combat experience though, right?" asked Nate.

"Well..." hedged Paladin Danse.

"Anyone else?" I asked.

"The Railroad wanted to come but they weren't going to be anywhere near the Brotherhood if they could help it," said Nate.

"They protect synths," said Danse, putting a lot of venom in that single statement.

"Okay, Danse, take Valkyrie and go to this point," said Nate, pointing at a spot on the projected holographic map. "There's an old access tunnel that was sealed. According to the Vicar's sources - that leads to their - what did you call it?"

"Synth Retention Bureau," I told him. "At least that's the name that came up. It's both their military and police force. It'll be the most heavily armed and heavy fighting area. I have this to use to clear the tunnel."

Paladin Danse looked very uncertain at the device, understandable as it was a Thermos lunchbox with a timer and switches. Squad Valkyrie, hearing their callname, came over to also look uncertainly at the device.

"That contains something called 'Nitro 9'," I said, giving it a name Danse and the others could likely manage. "Wedge the device into the rubble. The key that's taped to the side goes into the lock, turn the lock to the on position. Then flip the switch, a little light will go on. Then you get the hell away from it. I'd suggest at least five hundred feet. The timer is set for thirty seconds so that SHOULD be long enough."

"Explosive?" asked Danse, sounding more intrigued than cautious.

"Partly," I told him. "It also will dissolve stone and concrete and the like, so it could weaken the floor nearby and since you are all wearing power armor that could be problematic. After about thirty seconds the dissolving agent will be inert and it'll be safe to proceed. You don't want ANY of it getting on your power armor because a lot of metal compounds will also dissolve."

"'Nitro Nine'?" asked one of the Valkyries.

"We're going in, shutting the Institute down, and then getting back out," Nate said. "Your... what did you call it?"

"Ground penetrating radar," I said. Considering some of what Nate had relayed to me about the
Brotherhood of Steel - I figured psychics or magic would just get them riled up so I wouldn't mention any of that. "A couple of other things that I can't mention for security reasons. Just stick to your area, get as much data as you can - shoot up the place if you like. We've got two major objectives. One, we get that student Draco Malfoy back - that's MY main objective. From what Piper Wright and Nate have told me, shutting down or at least disrupting the Institute is their major objective."

"Shutting them down is OUR main objective," said Paladin Danse.

"Well, don't forget they have resources that could be of use in rebuilding the Commonwealth and their technological knowledge is one of those resources," I told them. I had this sudden image of them just throwing grenades everywhere and if they did that the body count would be horrendous but they might also bring the ceiling down. I held up a walkie-talkie salvaged from one of the military checkpoints. "I've got two eyebots set up as signal relays. Channel 4. Signal when you're in position. We'll just go ahead and use Valkyrie as the callsign for your group."

Paladin Danse looked over at the Minutemen, most of whom were wearing the clothes they normally wore when farming.

"We've got another two groups we're coordinating with," Nate said. "The Minutemen will be codename 'Revere', the first other group is unorganized but they'll mainly be making sure we can retreat when we're done. Sniper positions to lay down covering fire."

"In case we're pursued out of the Institute," said Paladin Danse.

"Almost certainly they'll pursue," I told him. "They have at least one teleportation device, so I'd expect that they'll work around any blockades we set up."

Paladin Danse smiled at that. "So when they do pursue we lure them into a killing ground. Excellent."

That wasn't quite what I had in mind, but if it made him happy - great.

"Ad Victorium soldier," said Nate, saluting.

"AD VICTORIUM!" replied all of the Brotherhood soldiers before they started out.

Nate waited until they were well down the road before clearing his throat.

"My role in all this, sir?" asked Codsworth.

"I'll need you to stay here with the settlers, the Institute may try to counterattack here or the Castle depending on how things turn out," said Nate. "If we can't take out their teleporter or if they have a spare - they'll have faster transportation than anything we've got."

"Oh, I see," said Codsworth.

(I go? I fight?) asked Dogmeat.

"Have I mentioned lately how much I hate the name you gave him?" I asked Nate, indicating the German Shepherd Dog that was wagging his tail and quite obviously ready for an adventure.

"A few times," said Nate. "I repeat - I was NOT the one to come up with that name."

I turned back to the dog. (Need you guard Home/Den. Protect.)

(Awwww. I wanted come.) Dogmeat was quite obviously disappointed.
"And what of myself, surely a skilled medic would be of use?" asked Curie.

"Your current body is a synth," responded Nate. "There is apparently a shutdown code all synths have. If you go into the Institute and someone triggers that - all that you are is lost in a moment."

"That code is part of the synth component I made those detectors for," I told her. "Actually, if you could go to the Castle with Nick - that'd help. The Institute will know there is Minuteman involvement and I'd be very surprised if they didn't respond. I've got a way to make the synth component's functions inert, just need a few more tests run to be sure."

"So I'm with the attack group?" asked Piper.

"Someone has to keep a record of everything," I said. "Why not?"

"We're the second group," said Nate. "Mixed bag. A couple of people from the Railroad coming along - they're going to try and find some contact down there and then orchestrate a mass exodus of the synths that want to be free."

"Actually, there are three," said Deacon, dropping off the roof. "Two heavies and one infiltrator. We'll go in with the Minutemen, okay?"

"Handy timing," said Nick Valentine. "Another day or two and you'd have been in the Glowing Sea trying to find this Virgil guy."

"Gets me into the Institute and I can try to find evidence on Shaun then," said Nate.

"One of the reasons to grab all the data we can find," I told him. "Fine, you go in through here. I'd suggest using power armor. Not the flight/reconn variety - save that for afterwards when you need to go chasing after retribution units. This is a sewage pipe so something with good environmental protection. Looks like it leads to a cooling section for their reactor and there are access tunnels for maintenance."

"What about you?" Nate asked.

I jerked my thumb at my Tardis. "I have a reading on two major energy drains. One of those is going to be the teleporter. Not sure what the other is. There's a big open area so I'll plop down in that - then I've got a device to basically shrink all the equipment down into a stasis cube that I can get onto my Tardis. Once I've disabled that - I can look for Malfoy."

"And then WE'D have the teleporter," noted Nate. A slow smile fitted itself into place. "I like that idea."

"I'd leave the teleporter with you," I told him. "Where's a nice big area I could set it up at?"

Nate went to a map and unrolled it. "Here. Spectacle Island. Biggest settlement area and lots of empty space."

-- --

Draco Malfoy watched in horror as his wand was put through all sorts of muggle tests, including chopping it in half in order to inspect the core.

"Analyze the DNA on this," said one of the figures who was clad in some all-concealing white
garment, using pair of oversized tweezers to pull out a hair.

"That's MY wand!" declared Draco, slamming one hand on the not-glass barrier. "You have NO right to do that! When my father learns of this you shall all suffer pain beyond your imaginings!"

"Subject does not appear to have any special abilities," said one of the identically clad figures, this one female from her voice. "Dissection and DNA sampling should determine how he produced the noted effects."

Draco was a bit of a git, but he wasn't stupid. He realized what they meant by "dissection" and who they were talking about.

The lights flickered in time with a dull boom and shaking sensation that rolled through the floor.

"What the hell was THAT?" asked one of the white-suited figures.

Draco smirked as he sat back on the white bench in the white room. "Potter. About damn time."

-- --

Paladin Danse was unsure of the weapon she'd grabbed, knowing that this "Vicar" had "enhanced" it. "Why are you even using that?"

"Orders," said Captain Kendra Kelsey, Valkyrie Squad. "Assess the technology enhancement capability of subject code-named 'Vicar' - I expect I'll be writing paperwork for days after this op."

There was an explosion.

The radio beeped. "Okay. Who jumped the gun? Never mind. Mission is go go go go!"

"Problem with working with civvies," said Danse.

"Some aren't that bad, but yeah - probably first combat exercise for some of them," said Kendra. "Sybil! Place the charge and get back!"

"Daryl!"

"Yes, Daryl?"

"Why did you use that 'Nitro 9' on a damn super mutant?!!"

Daryl pointed at the cloud still rising up into the air. " Wanted to see what it did. Always need to know how big a boom."

"That was the only one we had!" said the other brother Daryl.

"Brothers," said Larry. "There may have been a reason they didn't want us along on this ride."

-- --

"All teams are reporting that they didn't do it, but the Minuteman team say they saw Larry and Daryl and Daryl heading into a set of tunnels southeast of their position."

Nate winced. Some settlers were about as sharp as a deflated kickball. The brothers Larry and Daryl and Daryl were definitely in that category. He clicked his radio. "Got it. Am proceeding."
"Larry, Daryl, and Daryl? I thought they were dead already," said Piper. "Come on, those three couldn't find their way out of a round room with one door. The RAIDERS kicked them for incompetence."

"They still think they're raiders, but on a deep undercover assignment," said Nate. "That's why I put them up at that Coastal Cottage in the first place, they could then gather intel on the synths."

"And the synths?" asked Piper.

"That's the settlement I sent all the synth infiltrators to," confessed Nate. "So they're spying on each other and the supposed raider spies."

"Oh, that's cruel," said Piper. "I like it."

"Requires a code," said Nate, coming up to the terminal and looking it over. "One try and it'll lockout forever."

"I take it this Vicar didn't see this coming up on his maps?" asked Piper.

"No, but Mama Murphy did," said Nate. "I told her to stay off the chems, but apparently she found some. Here we go."

There was a loud clang as something unlocked.

"That was the grate wasn't it?" asked Piper. "We got to get into that mucky water again, don't we?"

"Yup," said Nate.

"Are you sure you didn't want Cait for this?" asked Piper.

"Shouldn't be much more," said Nate, checking his Pip-Boy. "Downloaded the map."

"Promises, promises," said Piper. "What IS that floating there?"

"Pretty sure I don't want to know or come anywhere close to it," said Nate.

"This 'foo-in' stuff doesn't come off in water, does it?" asked Piper, one finger pointing to the 10mm pistol in her other hand. "Cause I'd really hate to see what happens if it starts melting."

"One way to find out," said Nate, getting into the water.

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The grind-thump stopped and the door to the blue box opened.

"Hello," I said as I stepped out. "Oh. This isn't the teleporter room."

Blue energy bolts began impacting the environmental shields of the bubble that the Tardis put out. Apparently laser blasts counted as a hostile environment.

"Well," I said. "Harry? I think this is more your area of expertise."

I was aware of everyone watching on the control room's display as Harry went out and confronted the various guards and defenders. The actual scientists were trying to hide behind machines or dart for the sliding door.
"Detect Invisibility," I cast, but instead of casting it on myself I threw it on Harry.

Harry led with his Sagitta Magicka (Magic Arrow) spell, which could add an elemental effect to the strikes - as Harry had a lightning affinity in that system of magic he was using that element. Overall damage of each individual arrow wasn't terribly great as such things went, but he could throw sixteen of them and specify separate targets for each. He followed immediately with spells from his homeworld - "reducto" and "stupefy" at a high rate of speed and accuracy.

There turned out to be one of the leather overcoat brigade set to watch over this operation, and had been using whatever chameleon effect that they had available. Harry hit that one with a "confundus" and followed up with a "bombarda" that removed the synth's head.

"Okay, everyone, I could use a hand with this," I said, looking about and then turning off the devices.

"What do you need and what IS all this?" asked Daphne.

"Synths are like this," I said, pointing at one of the fallen guards. "Though most of them are more human-looking. Artificially created humans that are mostly indistinguishable from the real thing. The Institute has been killing people and replacing them with lookalikes that work for them."

"Doppelgangers? Why not just wreck the apparati?" asked Daphne, sounding fascinated.

"Because if the devices were being used by someone who wasn't insanely stupid and shortsighted - this could actually have been of great use to the people of this particular Earth," I told her. "The people here are barely managing to survive. Anything to increase their odds of survival should be at least considered."

"Why do you call them 'shortsighted'?" asked Harry, glancing towards the unarmed scientist-type trying to sneak towards the door.

"Because they've set themselves up as main-stage villains," I told him. I used a glance and slight shrug to indicate I wasn't particularly concerned about a noncombatant trying to flee the area. "If their stated goals were accurate there are a half-dozen ways I've already thought of that would work better."

The scientist-type paused behind a particularly large set of machinery, possibly waiting for a chance to dash towards the door.

"What IS their goal? I must have missed that," mused Harry aloud.

"They're attempting several things," I told him. "One is that they see themselves as the single most scientifically advanced society in the area and that they alone are responsible enough to make use of it. Unfortunately, that also means they've isolated themselves and aren't open to differing views and approaches. They're trying to remain independent of the outside, while continuing to send teams out to acquire resources. They want to remain secret, but they also want to control things from the shadows. They replace people on the outside with synth doppelgangers but also apparently want to guide the Commonwealth into a particular path. Unfortunately, they're using fear as a motivation and fear is an avoidance emotion."

Daphne Greengrass spoke up again, showing that she was following the conversation. "So you're saying that they're all stick and no carrot."

"Exactly," I said, not bothering to hide my surprise.
"My family's been in politics for a few generations," said Daphne, a slight smile showing. "We DO know a bit about the subject. So, how would YOU handle it?"

"First, I'd arrange for a public death of the Institute," I told her. "They've been the boogeyman villain of the area too long to continue under the same name. Move their operations to some secondary location under a different name and set of uniforms, lay low for a couple of years at least and then show up as either new arrivals or as a Vault that nobody's heard of that just opened up. Since they like using synths, continue to do so but come up with a cover story of some pre-War technology being expanded upon to produce these. From what I've read so far they could use the replacement limbs for injured soldiers project or a synthetic soldier program to justify having them around. Either incorporate an obvious symbol or technical mark to make the synths obviously different from regular folk in order to further differentiate between the old synths and the new synths. From there they'd be able to ingratiate themselves with the general public and be seen as saviors or heroes using their tech to make surviving in this world a little easier. It wouldn't take much for them to be able to go from that to being the advisors behind the scenes that keep the local leaders in charge. With their subjects content, the leaders stay in power and are then dependent on their new friends in keeping things running. Well, that's how I'd do it at least."

"So you'd play a long game instead of seizing power now," observed Daphne. "These guys are kind of menacing looking though." She toed one of the fallen synths.

"Use attractive female-shaped synths," I said. "Call them Amazons or something, make them tall and fit and such and both genders will tend to flock towards attractive people and I've noticed the male-female ratio of survivors seem to be biased towards male. Hmmm. Actually if you DID go with Amazons, that might work fairly well."

"How so?" asked Harry, smirking a bit with a glance towards our eavedropper.

I shrugged. "Tall beautiful women tend to be attractive to guys. Warrior women who are seen as confident and powerful are seen by many women as something to aspire to or as symbols. By making them foreigners - they could be forgiven mistakes regarding local culture as well as giving them a certain exotic allure."

There was a dash as the remaining scientist headed for the door. A red beam narrowly missed him and splashed against the wall before the fellow escaped.

"Now we can start moving stuff, I'll do the disconnects and labels. Harry, I got a storeroom set up between the bath and the laundry."

"How are we supposed to move this stuff?" asked Hermione.

"Wingardium Leviosa!" cast one of the twins.

Hermione blinked, then struck her forehead with the palm of one hand.

"Yeah, the obvious approach is best," said Harry.

"Then we try again and go after Malfoy," I said as I set to disconnecting cables.

-- --

"Father! We are under attack!"

"Impossible! All access to the upper levels was cut off, and we are quite secure here."
The lights flickered.

"Then again," said Father, eyes flicking over the assembled department heads, "just have the coursers mobilized and counter-attack."

"Yes, Father. Which group?" asked one of his scientists.

Father blinked. "There is more than one group?"

"Five groups identified," said the scientist.

"Attack the weakest first," decided Father. "Once they are eliminated, go after the next."

"Why the weakest first?" asked the scientist.

"Because then our attack force will be at close to full strength dealing with the next weakest," said Father.

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Larry screamed.

"If you got breath to scream, you ain't runnin' fast enough," said Daryl as he passed Larry.

Daryl nodded. "Yup."

Larry grumbled as he ran. "Liked it better when you were both mute."

Dozens of synths continued to pursue them.

-- --

Preston Garvey cranked his laser musket, putting an extra three charges from the fusion cells into the chamber.

"I expected more security," said Sturges.


"Third objective - steal tech," said Sturges.

"I prefer to think of it as taking resources from those who would use it against our settlements and repurposing it to benefit those same settlements," said Preston.

"That's a bit wordy, let's just go with 'steal tech'," said Sturges. "Got to LOVE these bottomless bags."

"I don't know that I trust them," said Jake, another of the Minutemen.

"I certainly don't trust those twins that gave us them, they looked like they were planning something," agreed Tiana. She jerked back into a doorway. "Movement ahead."

"Just another turret?" asked Jake.

Green fire shot down the corridor, splashing into Jake and causing him to fall down.
"Plasma gun," said Garvey, pressed against one wall.

"Grenade," said Tiana, tossing one down the corridor.

"At least it's not raining," said Preston.

-- --

"That's odd," I said, accessing one of the wall terminals we were leaving behind.

"What's odd?" asked Harry.

"The computers here aren't networked," I told him. "There's an e-mail connection, but there's no set-up for someone on one computer to be able to pull up data on another. It doesn't look like it's part of a security measure, more like nobody ever thought it might be useful."

"I don't understand any of that," said Daphne Greengrass.

K8 regarded the Slytherin student before speaking. "It generally goes easier if you simply ignore the bits about him that make no sense. Otherwise he will explain and leave you more confused than when you started."

"Oh that hurts," I muttered as I checked for any available information but it looked as if the only thing this terminal did was control the door. "Seriously? You have a dedicated computer to open a door?!"

"Let's just get this stuff on the Tardis for now," said Harry. "Though I think you should make a robot dog."

"Make a real K9 unit?" I asked. I didn't stop labeling sections as I thought it through. "The treads would have to go. Too easy for those to get mucked up. Maybe a synth version? Hmmmm."

"Does he do that very often?" I heard Daphne ask. "Get distracted and just seem to go on automatic?"

"All too often," answered K8.

Harry answered as well, though I wasn't paying much attention as I was working out ways to have a dog that wouldn't be killed in the middle of some adventure. "Yeah, usually working out how to do something with his odd spells and that fuuinjutsu stuff. Never could get the hang of it myself."

Actually, creating a synth dog wouldn't work because it would be a dog with all the physical limitations of a dog. Unable to speak, no manipulative limbs, and not really able to carry that much weight. A robot dog would be inappropriate in any number of settings if I did any more time travel. Hadn't intended to time travel in the first place, so I couldn't rule out it happening in the future.

"What about the fluid in this vat thing?" asked one of the Weasley Twins.

I adjusted a connection and the fluid started getting pumped into the containment tanks.

Maybe a robot dog that looked like a regular dog? With the synth equipment I might be able to put together a robot framework and then layers of synth tissue over that to something approximating a regular dog in appearance.

"What do we do with these spellcasting staves?" asked the other Weasley Twin.
"Collect 'em," said Harry. "We can store them in the Tardis and then have a resource. One of the things the Vicar taught me. Someone decides you're an enemy and attacks you - then stealing from them is just taking resources they can't use against you later. Then you can use the return of it later as something to negotiate in a treaty."

"A VICAR taught you that?" asked Daphne.

"He pointed out historical references for the behavior and let me draw my own conclusions," said Harry.

"That sounds VERY Slytherin," said Daphne.

Maybe try it on a small dog type. Scruffy looking, that way the fur might cover up bulges and patterns that didn't quite work within the overall dog-look.

"He also said something about that," said Harry. "Pointed out that The House Of Ambition and Cunning should be the ones trying to make connections they could use later on. Not just blackmail - because that leads to resentment and grudging help if that. Instead you guys shun everyone not a pureblood, even people who get sorted into Slytherin."

"What did he say-" began one Twin.

"-about Gryffindor?" finished the other Twin.

"That you're apparently the House Of Not Making Plans," said Harry. "He pointed out in that Hogwarts History book how many Gryffindor apparently charged into battles they weren't ready for. There's being courageous and there's being reckless."

Maybe a cyborg dog? With frikking laser eyes! No, I was pretty sure that'd already been done somewhere. Though rigging photoreceptors with photoemitters was tricky. Of course, most dogs relied on sight as a secondary or tertiary sense.

"Okay, as soon as we get that stowed away, I've got something else to do," I told them. "Harry?"

"Point Me," said Harry, holding his wand out. "That way."

"Right," I said. "K8, you go with Harry. See if you can get our missing student back while we secure this stuff. Harry, make sure your radio's on. When you get three clicks, come back fast with or without him."

-- --

"Where are our defenders?" asked Father, the head of the Institute.

"They're all chasing the weakest team of those who were attacking us," said one of the monitoring synths.

Father facepalmed. "Where?"

"They just passed he CIT ruins," answered that synth.

"Recall them, send them after the group hitting the Synth Retention department," said Father.

The lights flickered and dimmed.

"Okay, that's new," said another synth.
"They meddle with forces they have no hope in understanding," said Father, sounding particularly grave. "As soon as the power comes back up fully, use the Relay."

"Yes sir," responded several of the synths.

"Report sir," said one of the synths. "One of the attacking groups is the individual known as the 'Vicar' - currently located in Auxiliary Synth Production Lab."

"He will learn that whatever technology he has managed to steal, that the Institute has the most advanced technological base on the planet," said Father. "A change of plans. Capture this 'Vicar' if possible, eliminate if not. We can always acquire his technology and back-engineer it."

-- -- 


"What does THAT mean?" asked Harry. "Magic Arrows - Lightning, sixteen arrows!"

"Meaning of statement: unknown, prerecorded message. Targets eliminated. Standing down," said K8. "Analysis. Synths encountered so far have minimal weaponry and no armor. Two attackers had brooms. Conclusion: attacking synths are noncombat oriented workers pressed into defense roles."

"Yeah, I was getting that impression myself," admitted Harry. "Not that I'm complaining, but where are the combat troops?"

-- -- 

"THIS is more like it," said Paladin Danse as he fired off shots and then ducked behind a console.

"For the Brotherhood!" declared one of Valkyrie Squad, her laser gatling making enough noise that any further conversation was completely lost.

"Targeting systems aren't locking on," complained Sybil, the demolitions expert of the squad, the moment the Heavy Weapons specialist stopped firing. "Something like a Stealth Boy but frequencies are wrong."

Captain Kendra Kelsey held up a closed fist. "Tanya, hold off and let your gatling cool. We only have so many fusion cores to spare on that anyway. Sybil, lay down mines. Prep for retreat."

"Retreating?" asked Tanya. "The Brotherhood never retreats!"

"Our mission objectives include getting back out," said Captain Kelsey. "We've already gotten enough technical documents and memory cards - the main thing now is a slow retreat while taking out as many of the enemy as possible. Everyone, I want your armor conditions."

Sybil answered first. "Two pieces at yellow. I'm going to lose the right arm before much longer. I've got two cluster-bombs, six fragmentation mines, and two plasma mines. Laser rifle is at 45%."

Tanya answered second. "Two pieces yellow condition. Helmet's spitting sparks. Three fusion cores left."

Tracey cleared her throat, the communication specialist checking things quickly. "Got too close to that last explosion. Right leg is critical. Three pieces in yellow. I've still got three clips for my rifle."

Evelyn was silent for a moment. "Everything looks green. Something must be wrong though because I can see the scorch marks on my arm plating."
"That sounds like something to check out once we're out," said Captain Kelsey. "Paladin?"

"I've got one fusion cell left and three frag-grenades," said Danse. "Time to lead these synths into that ambush."

-- --

"What did he call these things again?"

"Mortars. Keep in mind we aren't supposed to use them when the Brotherhood's nearby. They have to completely clear the tunnel then we use the mortars to close the tunnel."

"We just got these to use for the ambush though," said the first Minuteman. "They gonna be enough?"

"I gotta better question," said the second, patting her Mk-1 Gauss Cannon. "Can we keep these after the op?"

"That IS a good question," admitted the first. "Here comes them Brotherhood types - looks like their power armor got shot up pretty bad."

"They're shooting at something up that tunnel, so get yerself ready," said the second Minuteman, using one hand to signal to the other group in the other building. "It's time to get this party started."

The first Minuteman, Daniel Hoffman, was using a plasma sniper rifle. Bursts of green fire slammed into a figure that was barely visible as a shimmer, which caught fire immediately.

The second Minuteman, Rebeka, sighted and pulled the trigger. At which point she stumbled from the recoil, which was particularly noteworthy as she'd been in a crouching position and thought she'd been sufficiently braced. She missed the target, hitting instead a refrigerator door that had been torn free and deposited there long ago.

The round, a sphere of metal about the size of a fist, went through the thin metal without slowing to any degree that those present would have been able to measure. It went through the trash underneath also at high speed. Which was utterly unimpressive to anyone who'd been watching.

"You missed," noted Daniel.

"Owie," said Rebekah. "I know what they need to add for the 'mark II' now."

"Better recoil suppression?" asked Daniel.

"Much better recoil suppression," confirmed Rebekah.

-- --

"So, I was expecting our meeting to be a bit more controlled," said Father. "I had a script and everything."

Nate wasn't impressed. "Where. Is. Shaun?"

A screen lit up, showing an infant being brought into the Institute by Kincaid. The image changed rapidly, showing the child at various points of growing up.

"You thought only a short time had passed since that mercenary killed your wife and took your son," said Father. "You later learned that ten years had passed."
"Except it wasn't ten years," finished Nate. "It was longer than that, wasn't it?"

"You already knew?" asked Father. His eyes narrowed slightly. "How?"

"Kincaid's records had a datestamp on the files," Nate said. "The Vicar overhauled the computer systems at Sanctuary and I found that in the holotape when I replayed it. So - you going to tell me that you're my son?"

"Actually, yes," said Father. "Though here, I am called Father, I am also your son Shaun."

"So my son Shaun is an amoral killer who has gone around terrorizing the Commonwealth for the past sixty or so years," put together Nate. "If your mother wasn't already dead, this would kill her."

"You only have part of the story," said Father, holding up a hand. "Don't rush to judgement until you've heard the full truth of the situation."

Nate shook his head. "I'll probably regret this, but give me a way to contact you. I can only promise to listen."

-- --

"AGH!" said Piper.

"AGH!" said Piper.

"AGH!" said Piper.

"WHY AM I..." Piper Wright took a step back. "No."

"Because you're a synth replacement of me?" asked Piper.

"I'm not the synth! You're the synth!" declared Piper.

"Wait. What if all three of us are synths?" asked Piper.

"What's goin' on?" asked Cait.

"This other Piper came running in," said Piper, pointing at the newcomer. "Right after this other me showed up!"

"Oh lord," said Piper. "I just had this horrible thought of running into a room of dead Pipers."

"Well, I don't care if I'm a synth," said Piper, who then paused. "Okay. Correction. I DO very much care. However, I also want to get the heck out of here before security shows up."

"I was following Nate, and I kinda took the wrong turn somewhere," said Piper.

"Nate? He's here?!" asked Piper. "He'll know I'm the real one!"

"Escape certain death first, argue which of us is real later," said Piper. "C'mon, Cait. Let's get going."

"Nat!"

"Coming."

"NAT?!"
Nate reached the intersection and came to a complete stop. Despite being in hostile territory, his jaw dropped and his environmental awareness narrowed to this single intersection.

"Blue!"
"Blue!"
"Bl... Nate!"

Nate slowly closed his mouth. "Uhm. Why are there three Pipers, two Caits, and your little sister Natalie here?"

"She's the synth!" declared everyone, everyone pointing at someone else. "No I'm not, you are!"

"Wha-?" asked Nate, twitching a little.

"She's the synth I tell you!"

"Actually, I think maybe we're all synths," said one of the Pipers. "I mean, how would you be able to tell?"

"Wouldn't you know if you were a synth?" asked two Pipers who then glared at each other. "Stop doing that!"

"I wonder if the Vicar has a 'remove headache' spell or device or whatever," mused Nate, rubbing his forehead. "And no - I have met people who didn't know they were a synth. Apparently the Institute can copy memories and suppress or erase memories of being a synth."

"You got to believe me, Nate, I'm the real Piper," said two of the Pipers. "I said STOP that!"

Nate shook his head. Back in Sanctuary he had a device that would detect whether one was a synth or not. One of the Vicar's little gadgets. So the problem wasn't unsolvable. What was he going to do afterwards - something to think about later.

-- --

The door exploded inwards and that metal statue entered. "Malfoy detected."

"Oh good," said the accursed Harry Potter.

Draco hated the boy. There he was, looking all heroic and everything. He wanted to puke. Unfortunately, he didn't have a wand and didn't have much choice as to a rescuer at the moment. "About time you got here, Potter."

"Alohamora," said Harry, making the appropriate gesture.

"Wait," said Draco as he got out. "If you knew the unlocking charm, why did you blow up the door?"

"Had some frustrations to work out," said Harry.

"Oh," said Draco, nodding. That actually made sense.
Dear Mother & Father,

My studies are doing quite well, with some problems that I understand are quite normal regarding Professor Binns in History and perhaps Professor Snape being a bit less focussed on being a teacher and more of an accident-preventer.

Considering what Neville Longbottom managed to do to his cauldron, perhaps it is understandable why Professor Snape takes this particular approach.

The House of the Snake continues to be an excellent primer for politics in the Wizarding World. Cliques abound, with Malfoy attending to his own private fiefdom - though he did a bit of damage to that as word got around about his recent misadventure. More on that later.

The primary reason for this letter is my findings on the person known as the Vicar.

First, he is not a wizard. I have observed carefully, as befitting the Noble House of Greengrass, without making any sort of commitment or alliance. When he casts a spell, and he does indeed use some form of magic, it is without a wand and a diagnostic spell that I was able to cast came back with some odd results. As if my own wanded magic could not quite decide if his spell was magic or not.

As near as I can tell he uses a primary form of magic which is wandless and is primarily spells concerned with wards or with healing. Second to that is a form of runecrafting using a set of symbols that rather resembles the sort of thing you see in Chinese lettering. Tertiary, and more rare, is of some magic that utilizes channeled magic from some other source.

That he does have access to other worlds and times has been verified, as well as his ability to create wards within wards which can produce an anti-magical area within a warded area. The possibilities for this use in holding wizards captive has apparently been entirely lost on the Vicar himself but from the look of her - Susan Bones caught it immediately and has likely informed her Aunt in the DMLE.

The Vicar's motives are largely unclear, other than he supports Harry Potter and insists that You-Know-Who has not been permanently disposed of. Possibilities include some form of spell backlash or a miscasting of some major magic.
If they are correct, then it is unlikely that House Greengrass will be allowed to maintain neutrality beyond a certain point. We should attempt to do so as long as possible, but of the two - Potter’s faction seems to have access to more things which are likely to enrich House Greengrass through association rather than the opposing faction which apparently has the attitude of torture and killing their allies only slightly less often than their enemies.

Already, through my Adventure with this group - I was instructed in a single bit of this odd writing-magic and how to imbue magic into this system. Unless forbidden by the Headmaster, who apparently has a history of banning or restricting some of these 'foreign magics', I will include a bracer via a later owl post onto which I shall engrave this magic - which seems to be a warding against certain curses.

The golem, or constructed servitor, of the Vicar is particularly noteworthy. I had opportunity to speak with it and found the construct had a fair vocabulary, the ability to learn and act independently, and considerable durability and offensive capability.

As to the Adventure, well, it was all Draco Malfoy's fault. First he attempted to experiment with the controls of the Vicar's vehicle, which ended up with us all in another world. From Potter's comments regarding such - this is not the first time such things have happened and ending up in strange locations is pretty much the normal result of such events. Then the little prat managed to compound the problem by going out into some form of major battle and getting himself kidnapped for his trouble. Seriously, if this is what one can expect from House Malfoy in the future - politics may be his only refuge as incompetent blundering is not entirely unexpected there.

By taking advantage of Malfoy's poor planning, and presenting a less-than-hostile attitude, I was able to learn the anti-curse armoring ward and obtain several offers of trading information with several of the others likewise engaged in utilizing specific other bits of this odd ward-magic. In two cases, I was unable to acquire such dealings due to traditional House rivalries or relationships.

Another odd bit of magic is that apparently the muggles of this other world have access to some severely limited magic that they utilize in a near-constant state of warfare that is apparently the normal state of affairs there. They have some form of troll or ogre that raids their villages as well as some form of Dark Lord association known as the Institute to encourage such things. One item, called a "gauss rifle" - appears to be an oversized wand which fires a fairly effective Reducto variant capable of going through an ogre's chest with a single blast. Potter has one such staff that he is quite skilled in using, from observation he is fond of using it to remove the head of potential hostiles while still a considerable distance away. Each of these wands or staves is capable of only a single preloaded spell-type, but they are quite effective in their limited way.

All in all, I am quite pleased with the outcome. Not only have I managed to make temporary alliances with several individuals not normally of the inclination to associate with someone of my House, I have gained potentially useful insights into this mysterious Vicar and his odd magic. I do not discount that I have also managed to cut the legs from under that little weasel Draco and his constant blathering about how powerful and influential his family is. Without completely alienating the prat at this point, I have been able to counter his own retelling of events with something a bit more factual that can be confirmed by members of other Houses.

It is also noteworthy, to me at least, that by being mildly cooperative with these others that I have been able to obtain more factual information and benefit than the entirety of the Fudge Administration's tactics to date.

There is something more, but I have no details of it at this point. At several points in the Adventure I noted that some of these others have cards of some sort that they would take out - and that apparently
allows silent communication judging from reactions of those bearing them. It may be some time before I can examine one, as those who have it seem to regard it as some precious secret between them but I have been well trained by you to look at body language telltales.

Your Daughter,
Daphne

The trip back had gone fairly well, I thought. No major problems and only ONE stop other than the planned one.

According to the database I had managed to download, the world was called Transitus. It was the lone planet in an orbit around what they usually called a "rogue star" or one that was outside a galaxy. I was sure that the scientific community back on Earth had probably given it a lovely set of letters and numbers, but the database called it "Cecily" for reasons I had no clue as to.

All in all it was a very nice planet sitting in the "Goldilocks" zone of habitability. Liquid water had given rise to plant life, but apparently anything much more advanced had died off during the billion-year-previous launching of the star and planet out of its galaxy.

We stuck around for maybe a couple of hours, the wizards ooing and ahhing when the galaxy rose up in the night sky. Everything else was pretty dark and then boom - you saw all the stars in shiny bands of swirled white.

The only problem was Cho, which surprised the heck out of me and I'm guessing everyone else. She did not like that we were that far out, and maybe it was the sheer dark of the rest of the night sky that got to her.

Despite some suggestions for it, we did not leave Draco Malfoy there where he couldn't possibly get into any additional mischief.

So we got back and ended up in the right classroom, homing in on the beacons I'd inscribed. Nice to know something was working right.

The kids went their own way, some noting that they'd been gone for several days and that everything they could consult locally showed them only having been gone thirty seven seconds. Which was also something I'd basically been aiming for.

"Professor McGonnagal? I need to speak with you, Professor Flitwick and Professor Snape. Some of your young charges have had an Adventure."

Needed to let the authorities know about this after all.

"Interesting," said Professor Severus Snape.

"Why don't the pictures move?" asked Filius Flitwick.

"Because they're pictures taken with a muggle camera, obviously," said Severus, idly tapping one of the photos. "I don't suppose you have any samples for analysis?"

"Maybe on a later visit," said the Vicar. "I was trying to keep them all alive and get them back."
Minerva McGonagall felt herself twitch a bit. "Draco Malfoy."

"I have a feeling this wasn't his idea," said Professor Snape. "However, when I mention this to his father I shall point out that it was rather reckless and failed rather spectacularly."

"You think it was his father that put him up to this?" asked Minerva.

"Do I 'think' so? No. I know it for a certainty, but I am also quite certain that there will be absolutely no evidence to that effect," said Severus. "It seems they have weathered the danger quite well, but perhaps some additional security might be in order?"

"Yeah," said the Vicar. "I think perhaps a regular magic guardian set over the doorway, or maybe one of you has a spell for it? The problem is that any measure I can come up with that's strong enough to beat back an accomplished wizard like that boy's father - is going to be deadly against a student like his son."

"Ah," said Severus. "I see. I have an idea or two on that. Oh, and Slytherin gets thirty points penalized for Malfoy with Greengrass redeeming twenty."

"How does that work?" asked Filius.

"By losing thirty points for his House, Draco will be constantly reminded of this by housemates and may learn some caution as a result," explained Severus. "By reducing that to a mere ten point penalty - Greengrass will gather some support within the House. Having a rival will likely sharpen the fangs of both."

"Turning a potential disaster into an opportunity?" asked Filius.

"Someone who might have been a Slytherin save for their country of origin once said 'never let a disaster go to waste' and also that 'a disaster is easy to manufacture'," said Professor Snape. "This is much less ruthless."

"That aside," said Minerva. "Why didn't you go to Dumbledore immediately? Oh wait. Yes, you do have a bit of a history with him at this point."

"He gets this twitch in his wand hand I'd prefer to avoid," agreed the Vicar.

"I can see that," said Filius.

"Yes, well, so this is who exactly went on this little 'adventure','" said Minerva McGonagall, looking over the list. "Oh dear Lord. The Weasley Twins? What did you teach them?"

"Chameleon rune," said the Vicar. "And a minor Luck rune."

"Why does 'Chameleon rune' sound ominous?" asked Professor McGonagall.

"All it does is make someone harder to see if they're moving, they tend to blur into the background," said the Vicar. "Nothing really special. There's any number of spells that'll dispel it or alert you to someone trying to hide."

"So, the spell is a fragile one?" asked Filius.

"Oh, it's typical of such things," said the Vicar, making a little waving gesture. "You can disrupt it but it'll come back eventually. In the case of the 'runes' I taught them - they'll need to put more of their magic into the thing to turn it back on. That's one of the benefits of scribing them on hard
materials like metal or leather, then you can sew it onto cloth if that's what you've got to work with."

"Interesting idea," mused Minerva aloud, looking over this Vicar to see if anything further slipped.

"I've been in my share of 'tossups' and 'wars',' said the Vicar, his voice dropping a quieter level as he
seemed to get lost in his memories. "Any advantage you can get in those circumstances."

"I see," said Minerva McGonagall. "Is this all then?"

"Actually, no," confessed the Vicar, looking rather sheepish of a sudden. "Madam Pomfrey? As the
school healer, can I assume that you have a number of diagnostic spells and the like?"

Minerva was immediately concerned. "Something regarding the students?"

"No," instantly replied the Vicar, who then went back to looking troubled. "Actually, I want
someone to check K8 and possibly some others. I need to find out if the local magic considers them
alive or not, and human or not. Since your magic and mine don't operate by the same principles..."

"What do you have?" asked Severus Snape, sounding slightly intrigued.

-- --

Well, it hadn't been quite as bad as I'd thought it could be.

"I wasn't aware that muggles had developed things quite so far," said Professor McGonagall as I
finished setting up the machines.

It wasn't technically part of the Tardis, I didn't want to take a chance of the wards of Hogwarts doing
something that would interfere with my investigation. So what I did was what anyone would have
done.

"So, linked archways," said Filius, examining the doorway. "You link the two and just step into one
doorway and pop out the other."

"Yes, there are some limitations however, and being in the Tardis I have to be in the same world and
within a certain distance, but I set it up back while waiting for certain events," I told him. "So then I
had the guys move things over before we got back to Hogwarts."

"Where exactly IS this?" asked Filius, touching the cavern wall next.

"We're about ten meters below Webb Crater," I told them, still preoccupied with the various
hookups.

"I'm not familiar with that, is it in Ireland?" asked Minerva McGonagall.

"Uhm, no, not so much," I said.

Professor Aurora Sinistra though - apparently had already placed it. "Young man, are you saying we
are currently on the Moon?"

"Well, not so much ON as IN," I answered. "That a problem?"

"It would have been nice if you'd given us more warning that we were going to be bloody off-
planet," quipped back the Astronomy teacher. "Why is the gravity normal?"

"Set of runes over there that I can turn on and off, linked to that knife-switch," I pointed at the
"Makes it easier to move this stuff if I can turn things down to one-sixth their normal weight."

"And WHY exactly do you have a hidden base ON THE MOON?" asked Professor McGonagall, who was actually facepalming at the moment.

"Well, it's IN the Moon actually. And as to why - well if I ever run across dangerous substances I can pretty much store them here where it won't bother anyone," I told them. Purely obvious wasn't it?

"So it's just a storage area?" asked Filius. "Explains the half-melted look to the walls. You weren't making a living space."

"Not so much," I agreed. "Okay, now I just set up the parameters and... I need a picture or something to scan."

"One moment," said K8, turning and going back into the Tardis.

"Eh?" I asked.

When she came out with a fashion magazine, I was even more puzzled. "Where did you get this?"

"Sanctuary Hills," answered K8.

"And what were you doing with a fashion magazine anyway? It's not like you can wear any of that," I asked.

"Girl can dream, can't she?" asked K8 as she extended a probe into a socket on one of the consoles.

"I can see now why you wanted to check and see if spells detected if she was alive or not," said Filius. "She certainly has her own mind, doesn't she?"

"Well, yes, a bit puzzling that," I said. "Turns out a lot of the robots back in the Commonwealth have a self-educating set of programs that allows them to learn human behavior. At some point they cease following a set of programs and simply seem to BE more human. Self-aware or something similar. Still trying to figure that one out."

"Well then," said Filius. "What is she doing now?"

"Why exactly are you referring to a construct without genitalia as 'she'?" interrupted Snape.

"People refer to boats and ships as 'she' all the time," I pointed out. "In this particular case, K8 regards herself as female so why not?"

"Other than she's actually about as female as a cauldron?" asked Snape.

K8's head turned to a degree that a human head could not in order to regard Severus Snape without stopping what she was doing. "Excuse me?"

"K8, no blasting the wizard I'm attempting to trade favors with," I reminded her.

"What ARE you doing?" asked Filius directly of K8.

"Adding a design to the onboard database," said K8. "This. I want to look like this."

"You want to become a synth?" I asked. "What brought this on?"
"Sanctuary Hills," responded K8. "A former Mister Handy model robot named CURIE was downloaded into a compatible synth body."

"Oh, the medic." I thought about that. Hadn't known the details, just seen her come up as a synth on the detector. "I suppose it's possible but I don't have the equipment for such a thing to do anything that way. As to magically doing it I don't even know if you've got a soul to transfer for a ritual magic, and that's pretty much outside my expertise and off into the whole Dark Magic thing despite the intent. Probably have to use what Curie did, meaning another trip to the Commonwealth."

"Oh?" asked Severus Snape. "I'm rather curious about some of these beasts they have there. Those deathclaws in particular may provide suitable potion ingredients."

"I was able to arrange a short time interval once," I pointed out. "Set up wards with a fixed space and limited time. I didn't mention it to the kids but I figure there was only a one-in-twenty chance of it working."

"So, next break then," said Snape. "I'll need time to prepare anyway."

"Wait, what?" I asked.

"You just agreed to take Professor Snape with you to your next trip to another world," said Minerva McGonagall.

"When did I do THAT?" I asked.

"Just now," said Pomona Sprout.

"But..." I tried to figure out how that had happened. "Well, it's dangerous. Very dangerous. Sanctuary Hills is one of the best fortified settlements in the Commonwealth and it still gets raided."

"Excellent," said Severus Snape. "I've some frustrations to work out."

"But..." I really tried to think of a way out of this but then a bunch of kids HAD just gone there and back.

I just had a feeling it was going to go heavily wrong somehow.

-- --

Some called him "Father" but one person called him "Shaun" - his birth name.

The name "Father" was a reference to the reason he'd been stolen from cryostasis in Vault 111 - his genetic code had been undamaged by environment or the nuclear war that had raged in 2077. That had been the reason for his being sought by the Institute as that genetic code could be used to create the Generation 3 Synths.

Generation 3 Synths were made of synthetic materials but mimicked human to such a degree that most of their maintenance was done by a medical doctor. Robots required special equipment, synths could use anything a human could use. A synth could use normal human doorways, benches, floors, stairways, and so on.

Because they weren't human, or even really alive - just a mockery of it, they could be used to do any task including things that a human would balk at or die doing. Adapatable, capable of many tasks, and disposable.
"Main system is operational again, synth production can begin at any time."

Father nodded. "Implement the suggestions our visitor left. Produce three coursers using those parameters."

"Target?"

Father considered the division briefly. He could send all three to Sanctuary Hills as a test, when they infiltrated the little community they'd be able to feed him details about the operations going on there.

"Sir," said Alan Binet, the Robotics Division chairman apparently completely compliant.

Going away from the meeting, Binet went over the list of things suggested by that mysterious "Vicar" that he couldn't quite decide WHAT the fellow was. Apparently someone with access to technology on a rough level with the Institute itself. In truth, he'd been considering the man's words ever since he'd reviewed a holotape brought him by the one technician.

Now he was going to be creating three elite Gen-3 synths, coursers.

Of course, now that everything was mostly up and running again, he HAD to prove his department was quite capable. There had also been all that talk just because he'd not handled the death of his wife in previous years all that well and he'd created a synth copy of her last year. Work in progress where he was perfecting bits of his department's craft.

The Synth Retention Bureau had been sticking their nose in his business lately, prying into his files and being critical of his processes and work. Things had been hinted about his loyalty to the Institute and the head of that Bureau had actually called his synth Eve a defective model and his relationship there a perversion of nature!

Justin Ayo, that head of the Synth Retention Bureau, had been gathering power within the Institute and was now the police force and Army and Department of Truth. Speaking against him and his policies was practically asking for a Special Investigation where you might well not survive.

Director Binet put that out of his mind for the moment though - he had to focus on the task at hand. Though if he could do something to tweak Ayo's shorts while he was at it, and he had a chance to get away with it? Yeah, that was a definite consideration.

"Rafael," said Alan Binet as he entered his department. "You had one of our synths gathering up some of those pre-War magazines on one of the resource-gathering missions. Do you have any of those left?" -- --

A cleric is a servant of the god or gods they represent, as I have said many times. They are representatives of that Being, doing work that furthers that Being's aims and goals.

In Harry's world, the Unseen God was present but didn't exactly take a "hand's on" approach. That didn't mean that others didn't influence things though, or have a presence of their own.

As a cleric, I had to pray to renew my load of spells and "charge up" every day. As a mana-based spellcaster, I could then cast spells numerous times during the day. In universes where each spell was basically a "zip gun" where I could cast it once and then had to reacquire the spell - I would have been much more limited in spellcasting and have to rely on other skills to a greater degree.

I'd begun to get used to praying for the renewal of one spell and getting another spell instead. It was one of the ways in which a Being could remind the cleric who was in charge, but it was also a means of subtle guidance.
So when a request for the basic spell "Bless" came back with "Charm Break" - I wasn't sure how to interpret that. The spell was a simple one in that it had a single effect against a single target. All the spell would do was it would dispel a single specific implanted command or force. It was too basic a spell to have an effect on possession, major compulsion spells, psychic dominance, or against parasitic mind-worms and similar problems.

You ran into all sorts of troublesome things when you were out and about in the multiverse.

Another spell was substituted, this one much higher level in complexity and usefulness. Area Shell, a sixth-order barrier spell, was replaced with an anti-army spell titled Razor Windstorm which basically created exactly what you'd think of from such a name.

When Holy Word was granted, and was actually granted rather faster than I expected from such a high-order magic, I knew immediately what the message was here: Major Conflict Ahead. Nor was this an argument such as you might expect with a bunch of wizardly teachers. You could get an argument out of them just for mentioning caloric intake at the breakfast table.

No, this was a portent of war or at least battle. Charm Break meant someone under a magical compulsion of some kind. Area Shell, a basic area-effect magic-reduction barrier, was a purely defensive spell while Razor Windstorm was a straight-out offensive spell.

I got up at the end of my prayers and dusted off my legs, mainly trying to get an idea of what I had to do that day that was going to go pear-shaped. Nothing immediately came up as potentially disastrous. I hadn't actually had that many plans for the day.

So, if it wasn't something from MY end - that meant something started from someone else's end.

"Politics," I muttered, not particularly caring who in the school might have some magical-bugging spell going in the classroom I had the Tardis parked in. Never cared for politics, office or otherwise. So much crap involved, so little sense.

"Politics?" asked K8.

"If you have more than three people together, someone will end up as the leader or decision-maker," I informed the Assaultron robot. "In larger groupings the leader usually ends up doing nothing but leading, in smaller groups the leader can't insulate themselves and actually has to do work. In hunter-gatherer societies it usually falls to the former hunter that survived the longest and had the best record - since hunting is an inherently dangerous activity that involves life-or-death decisions. Things get more complicated as technology develops and groups get larger, and quite often the leader has little or no clue as to what it is to be ruled instead of a ruler."

"I do not understand," stated K8.

"That's okay, few people do," I told her. "In this case, I suspect that someone is planning something that is going to cause massive problems for me and that it is grounded in the politics of this world. Specifically the so-called conservatives of the wizarding world."

"You are blathering again," pointed out K8.

"You asked," I pointed out.

"I am regretting it already," stated K8.

"Specifically it regards this group called 'conservatives' locally, who are actually more like 'magic Nazi' than anything else, which was a Socialist thing," I made a wave-away gesture. "So, since they
ARE magical Nazi types, I think they should be dealt with as you would the nonmagical Nazis that were running around trying to kill people."

"Vicar, you may not go around killing members of the local government," said K8. "I have run into references that such behavior is strongly discouraged."

"Might not have a choice," I told her. "Oh, and it looks as if we'll be heading back to the Commonwealth - probably in another month or so."

"Excellent," said K8. "I desire further information from Curie about difficulties she may have developed since her transfer from robot body to synthetic human form."

"Today, however, we are going to be going and doing some of those tests today starting with Madam Pomfrey," I told her. "Are you ready?"

"Buffers in place, batteries charged at one hundred percent," confirmed K8. "This won't hurt, will it?"

"I certainly wouldn't think so," I told her. "Though I admit I was rather surprised when I was rebuilding you to find you even HAD pain receptors."

-- --

Dear Father and Mother:
Thank you for the notes on properly bespelling letters so that only someone with the proper blood-sigil can decode them. It's hard to believe that a member of a family like the Prewetts developed something like this.

As you may have heard, my plan to steal the magical transport of the Vicar went poorly. I was successfully able to deflect the blame for the Adventure for the most part, and was able to gather some information on various matters that might be of use.

For example, the Vicar is apparently indeed a spellcaster from somewhere altogether different. Though I've denied that in public and spoke at length of how the Vicar is simply a deluded wizard who nonetheless has some skill at wandless magic - casting magic in the land of "Sanctuary Hills" and "the Institute" felt dulled and unresponsive. After those cretins at this "Institute" destroyed my wand I was completely unable to use magic of course, but prior to them removing it from my possession I was able to manage a few spells but they were definitely reduced in effect.

As to the metal guardian, it seems extremely capable in combat. It does not appear to be a simple golem or other such construct as it is able to learn and adapt to changing situations.

Harry Potter is much more capable of combat than he has previously revealed. Considering how much better he is at such things, and his propensity for hiding his full capabilities - it is a wonder he didn't end up in Slytherin.

This "Institute" has an odd form of magic, similar to the Vicar's in some respect. Had they not ended up attacking me, they might have become formidable allies but apparently their stance is that they do not ally with anyone under any circumstance. A pity that, as many of their attitudes on muggles and similar issues would dovetail with our own.

As to the strange muggle wands known as "gonnes" - those are best avoided altogether. Unlike the arquebus in our family collection - these are apparently as accurate and quick to fire as a wand. In some cases even more so. I have seen green fire spat out from one such that dissolved flesh and bone in a most grisly manner. Other gonnes fired metal balls much like the arquebus - but fast enough that
they make a cracking noise similar to Apparition. Seeing a large number of muggles using such things is the stuff of nightmares.

Even worse, from comments overheard since returning to Hogwarts - the Vicar has a means of enhancing these gonnes through some form of runecraftery. Not only these gonnes, but Daphne Greengrass was apparently taught a means of enhancing cloaks with the same runecraftery. Some sort of anti-curse warding, though the details are not forthcoming. I have challenged Greengrass to prove such things, but so far she has not demonstrated anything more than her own ability to use sarcasm as a weapon.

Something said repeatedly by this foreign wizard is that his spells are different and that he has limitations on his magic - that it is more oriented towards two specific areas. Wards of various kinds and spells for healing wounds of various kinds. Information-gathering spells are apparently not his specialty though he has some that are quite effective. I am unclear as yet whether this is a limitation of his own or of his style of magic, rather like Madam Pomfrey is specialized in healing and supposedly hopeless at Occlumency.

From what I gathered, especially from Greengrass' recounting of events, is that this Vicar was able to organize various forces under a local leader in order to effect my escape from the local dark wizards. He used local resources in a manner that those very locals had not previously considered and united several factions in the accomplishment of this task.

In other words, the man shows some definite Slytherin tendencies in cunning and in using others to forward his goals.

I will contact you again should I be able to get my hands on one of these anti-curse wards that Greengrass has stated she needs to practice.

Draco.

-- --

Fenrir Grayback was pissed.

Hiding out in Europe, moving from place to place, keeping his location secret until he was ready to move again - it meant that he didn't keep up with the "breaking news" all that well. So when he was able to acquire a newspaper that was in a language he could actually read - it was usually out-of-date or it was a muggle paper.

This particular one was of a wizarding household, even if a mere half-blood, but it was fairly recent.

Apparently some priestly type in Britain had worked out a way to "cure" werewolves. That by itself wasn't a real problem - it was only one person and according to this article the method was not duplicable. The point that had Fenrir going practically into a bestial rage despite currently in human form was that progress was being made on a potion that could duplicate the effects to some degree. A potion that could be duplicated that was more effective than the Wolfsbane Potion? Something that could turn a werewolf into something NORMAL?!

There was something odd though, apparently two of those who'd volunteered for experiments had had "unusual side effects" that had resulted in a "partial cure" of some kind. The paper wasn't forthcoming on exactly what that meant.

Whatever it was - it wasn't something to tolerate.

-- --
"I'M A SYNTH?!!"

"And I'm the original," said Piper, glancing from Piper to Piper.

" Couldn't that thing be malfunctioning?" asked Piper.

"No, it's not malfunctioning," said Sturgis. "Welcome to the 'I didn't know I was a synth' club. So far we have sixteen members."

"Wait, SIXTEEN?" asked two Pipers at the same time. Who then scowled at each other.

"Where's Blue anyway?" asked the third Piper, massaging her forehead.

"'Another settlement needs his help'," said Sturgis, rolling his eyes.

"Man needs to delegate," said the third Piper. "I'm having an identity crisis."

"Well, yes, it being that the Piper Wright he met was exchanged with a synth about three weeks ago," said Sturgis.

"How could nobody notice?" asked the original. "I was in a cell in the Institute for THREE weeks!"

"They copy memories and put them in their synths," said Sturgis. "We got a mechanism the reverend left us. It allows us to disable the override codes and all that the Institute put in. Got it put away cause we do NOT want the Institute getting ahold of it and figuring out how to sneak stuff past us. Same with that synth detecting stuff."

"Is that why you call it a 'screwdriver'?" asked one of the Piper. She shrugged. "Codenames. Not that I'm complaining about some nutjob not being able to trigger me into some murder-machine."

"Actually the Vicar named it," Sturgis shrugged himself. "As long as it works, I'm not going to dispute calling the thing a 'sonic screwdriver' - though as far as I know it ain't sonic or a screwdriver."

-- --

"You're sure, Lucius? That criminal is hiding out in Hogwarts?" Cornelius Fudge wasn't sure of many things, but someone rumored who could cast a spell and detect lies? THAT was something that needed to be stopped right away!

"Yes, and as soon as I found out - I came straight over," said Lucius Malfoy, for once thinking similarly to Fudge himself. "The danger to the children must be addressed immediately."

"Of course, of course," said Fudge. "I'll get an auror team on it immediately. Do you want to accompany them?"

"I'd never dirty my hands on something like that," said Malfoy.

"Even when it could give you some additional political clout?" asked Fudge.

"I was just doing my civic duty," responded Lucius Malfoy. He appeared to think about it though. Once that Vicar was thrown into Azkaban - he could explore the magical apparatus at his leisure. Still, he could get a look at it tonight and put a few wards into place around to keep others from accessing what would shortly be his.

"Lucius?" asked Fudge.
"Oh, just thinking that this criminal is quite slippery," said Lucius Malfoy. "A little insurance that he can't escape justice would be prudent."

"What did you have in mind?" asked Cornelius Fudge. Malfoy WAS a major campaign contributor.

"Please, stop singing. It is a crime against nature itself."

I blinked and regarded Aurora Sinistra, the Astronomy teacher, with some confusion. "I was singing?"

"If you can call that singing," said the teacher. "I really appreciate what you are doing, but the musical accompaniment must be stopped."

"Oh," I said, looking at the fuijinjutsu arrays I had scribed into one section of the Astronomy classroom. "What was I singing?"

"I don't know the song, and it was in Japanese," said the Astronomy teacher. "The only word I caught was 'Diver' - I think."

"Iki wo shitakute," I tried, "koko wa kurushikute. Yami wo miageru dake no yoru wa, mogaku gen'atsushou no DAIBAA?"

"I think so," said Professor Sinistra. "Significance?"

"I'm a cleric, various divine beings throw clues my way," I explained. "Nothing is ever one hundred percent clear, and it's all subject to human misinterpretation."

"So this means?" asked Sinistra.

"Combined with other portents," I said, "I need to finish up quickly because things are going to go pear-shaped sometime soon."

"How soon?" asked Professor Sinistra.

"Don't know, just soon, and probably in a painful fashion," I told her. "K8? Go to the Tardis. It's locked down right now, but be prepared to defend it. Nonlethal parameters against human targets since we're still in the school."

"Order acknowledged," said K8.

"Hogwarts is the safest place in the country," said Professor Sinistra. "It is unlikely you could be attacked here."

Dumbledore looked up as the noise from one of his little chittering devices changed. Fawkes, his phoenix, woke up with a startled squawk.

"Who would dare to attack Hogwarts openly? On a Tuesday?" asked Albus Dumbledore. "It's not that Professor Gizmo is it?"

Fawkes made a trilling noise.
Albus considered that and then nodded. "No, it's quite true. He does rather have the good manners to send a letter apprising the school of his sneak attack. And there would be scantily clad catgirls leaping about. Fortunately he DOES give prior notice and only two seventh year students were injured."

Fawkes snorted, a sound not normally expected from a bird.

"Well, true, the injuries WERE from massive nosebleeds on seeing cavorting catgirls wearing entirely inappropriately skimpy costumes," agreed Albus Dumbledore. "Fortunately, I am immune to such things."

Fawkes made another trill.

"Do you suppose we should confront the intruders?" asked Dumbledore.

Fawkes fluttered his wings and then made a cooing noise.

"Neither Professor McGonagall nor Professor Snape are my minions," said Albus. He then shrugged. "You've a point though. It would make more sense for them to handle it. Raining and a chill night aren't easy on these old bones."

-- --

"I'm surprised Amelia Bones isn't here," said Lucius, though really the only surprise there was that Cornelius Fudge had realized ahead of time what her reaction would be. Sometimes he was convinced that house elves must tie his tie for the Minister of Magical England.

"Oh entirely too much paperwork on this, had SHE gotten involved," said Fudge. "Besides, you yourself brought up how this had to be thrown together quietly and quickly lest the fellow get away again."

"True," agreed Malfoy, looking up at Hogwarts Castle. "I take it that these Aurors are sufficiently discreet?"

"They'll do what I tell them, no questions asked, a few extra galleons wouldn't hurt though," said Fudge.

"Ah," said Lucius Malfoy. Yes, he thought he recognized a couple of them. "Then let's begin."

The wards tingled as he passed them, they were far too thick and powerful to simply bend them out of the way and try to pass through without notice. Lucius found that simply looking confident and annoyed, combined with his reputation, would usually cow the simple sort of folk that might come scurrying to investigate.

"What brings the Ministry to our door at such an inopportune time?" asked Severus Snape as they approached.

"A wanted criminal is on the premises and we're going to insure the safety of the children," responded Cornelius Fudge. "Stand aside."

"Seriously?" asked Snape. "I thought that was cleared up. The man was pardoned by the Queen herself."

"As if some muggle woman has any bearing on the wizarding world," said Fudge, dramatic sniff following his statement. "Now, first we secure his transportation so he can't get away. Malfoy, you
said it was an unused classroom on the third floor?"


"Very subtle," mused Snape, rolling his eyes to indicate the level of sarcasm.

Malfoy glared at his somewhat-comrade for that little show of insubordination, but had to allow he
was being a little less behind-the-scenes than usual.

-- --

I was using my limited store of Divination spells, aware that there WAS a danger but not the when or
where or what.

Which is quite frustrating by the way.

After the day had gone by and some thought about it, I had retreated to my Tardis. There was a little
over an hour and a half before the day was officially over and a new one begun, and I did my spell
recharging at dawn so that meant getting up a tad early.

The day itself hadn't been particularly special other than me jumping at any number of noises.
Knowing that Danger Approaches without knowing the details tends to do that to you. Various
projects got worked on, the only one showing any real promise or accomplishment being a single
milestone involving a fuuinjutsu intent-filter.

Oh, and several students came by to examine the spellwork on the beacons. I'd used orange plastic
traffic cones for the physical anchors for the spellwork, so I'd had to explain both plastic and the
muggle use of the cones and the magic marker I'd used for writing the fuuinjutsu out. Also
explaining that a "magic marker" didn't actually use magic at all.

The first indication that I'd fallen asleep was when I woke up to a shuddering going through my
Tardis.

I checked the video feed and several people with wands were facing the doors to my Tardis. One of
whom I recognized from the newspapers, and another looked a bit elfin. Not the local house-elves
either, put a pair of pointy ears on this guy and he'd fit right in with the "arrogant snooty elf"
archetype found in a number of realities.

"Well, if the criminal is in there, we just need to get past the door," was the comment of Cornelius
Fudge, the very Minister of Magic for England. Which brought me to the question of whether there
was a Minister of Magic for Britain as a whole, or was the title just a hold-out from an earlier time?
Wizards did seem to like their little traditions.

"One, two, three, BOMBARDA!" tried four of the cloaked figures, throwing a spell against the
Tardis doors.

Another shudder went through the floor. So that spell was essentially a cannon blast? Which meant
my protection wards were working but having trouble against that combined force. If they kept it up,
it would eventually fail.

I did the only thing I could think of, which was throwing the switch that would move the Tardis. It
would throw a few plans into disarray, but it was better than trying to see how long it would be
before my little experiment in duplicating a real TARDIS would last against magical explosions.

The grind-thump noise started up and the group made various comments at the same time with the
usual result of not being able to understand the whole thing. Other than the "he's getting away" part.

I thought for a moment that it would be a clean getaway as apparently nobody was quite sure what to do about it. Then two things happened to dissuade me of that notion. One, one of the flunkies knocked over one of the traffic cones that served as a beacon for returning to this time/space. Two, the pseudo-elf latching onto the handle of my Tardis with both hands.

Which, unfortunately for the both of us, meant that when the Tardis left Hogwarts there was a hostile wizard coming with me - which also indicated that the spells had managed to get through at least one layer of wards. If that hadn't happened, the Legolas-wannabe would have been left grasping air.

The unfortunate part for my unintended tagalong was that he was OUTSIDE the Tardis and a relatively normal wizard who just happened to be dealing with Between. Not Anne McCaffrey's hyperspatial void of "Between" either - this was the non-Euclidean space between universes.

When we landed in Sanctuary Hills, the man fell over. Give him some credit though - as he didn't roll up into a little ball of quivering denial. After I got out and checked him, I gave him credit for also not having any brains leaking out of his ears. That tends to be a bit messy.

No, as far as I could tell, he was perfectly fine except for the eyes rolled up in his head and shivering bit.

Just to be sure, I took his wand and substituted a perfectly fine wand I'd gotten from a children's Magician set. Fake flowers would spring up from the end if he tried to use it. No point in having him wake up and start throwing spells at me after all.

"Ah, Curie?" I said, spotting the short-haired synth-bodied medic in the crowd. "A patient for you."

"You bring the strangest presents, monsieur," commented the French-accented artificial person.

"He was exposed to the not-void between universes," I explained. "Possible symptoms include bleeding from the ears, eruptions of elemental force, a very low chance of pregnancy, speaking in tongues, fever, exhaustion, paranoia, gender change, species change, lifestyle change, possession, infection of various parasitic organisms, or migraines."

"All zat?" asked Curie.

"Well, they're possible, mostly unlikely," I told her. "It's also possible to gain superpowers or extra limbs but those are even MORE unlikely."

"More unlikely zen Monsieur being pregnant?" asked Curie.

"Well, yes," I admitted. "It is generally NOT recommended one do that. The most likely thing to happen is he'll wake up with a bad headache, some severe gastrointestinal distress, and a strong desire to never do that again. If he starts throwing up blue paint or small wriggly worm-things, then it could get complicated. Oh, and K8 wanted to talk to you when you have time."

"All that weirdness to the side," said Sturges. "We got problems."

"Well, yeah," I said. "You live in a post-nuclear apocalypse world. Problems is an understatement."

"Yeah, well, first off - one of the Pipers went nuts and tried to take on a deathclaw by herself. Suicide by deathclaw, messy. Apparently couldn't deal with the idea she was a synth. Meanwhile the other synth-Piper and real-Piper have been exchanging stories and come to some kind of deal - but they ain't saying what."
"Yeah, I can imagine," I said, referring to both the suicidal Piper Wright and that the two remaining had hashed out some kind of agreement.

-- --

"Okay, I think this has it," said Fred.

"Let's see," said George.

"Gladius lux egredientur!" said George, making a gesture with his wandless hand and a flicking motion with his wand hand.

VUUUUMMMMMM!

"By George," said George. "I think you've got it."

The blade, about as long as his forearm and composed entirely of blue light, made a faint sizzling noise as Fred inspected his work. George conjured up a block of wood and watched as Fred cut it in half.

"Takes quite a bit out of me, have to work on that part," said Fred as he simply cut the magic flow off to dispel the blade.

"Have to try it out on something," said George. "See what it can cut and what it can't. And if we can duel with 'em."

"True enough, a mischief-maker's work is never done," agreed Fred.

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Raider Madness

Chapter Summary

In which things go bad, get worse, and prepare for things to go completely barmy.

One Floo Over
Chapter 26
Raider Madness

"Disclaimers?" asked Piper. "We don't need no stinking disclaimers."

"That just proves you're the synth!" said Piper. "Otherwise you'd know that Harry Potter is from JK Rowling, Bethesda owns Fallout."

"See! We don't need a disclaimer because anyone who isn't a synth already knows that!" argued Piper to Piper. They both blinked and looked out at the reader. "You DID know that, right?"

Sanctuary Hills, Fallout Earth FAL-257X.

Lucius Malfoy startled awake, staring around him.

"Take it easy, Monsieur Malfoy. I am a trained medic. Are you experiencing any symptoms?"

Lucius gradually focussed past the haze in his vision and the pain in his head. A woman, fairly attractive, stood there with a clipboard and stylus. The room itself was shabby looking, with cracked walls and half-hearted repairs showing everywhere.

"Monsieur?"

"Shut UP, you miserable muggle. Don't you dare lay a hand on me," said Lucius Malfoy.

"Muggle is an unfamiliar term," said the woman.

"It means someone non-magical," said Lucius Malfoy, staring at the wand he'd drawn and recognizing that it was NOT his wand. "Someone is going to pay for this."

"Oui," said the woman. "It is already paid for. I still do not understand the use of bottlecaps for currency considering the weight and stackability issues."

Experimentally, he pointed this wand at the woman's head. "Stupefy."

Flowers sprayed out everywhere.

"That is very nice, I suppose," said the woman, looking down at all the flowers.

Lucius frowned, about to say something.
"Pardon me," said a voice that was very deep and very odd-inflectioned.

Lucius turned towards this newcomer and stopped what he was going to say. Very large metal statue that looked armored and had little lightning bolts playing along one arm. Something, perhaps his considerable combat experience, indicated to him that this was not the sort of guardian he wanted to face until he had his wand in hand. "DOBBY!"

Nothing happened. His house-elf was not responding. Okay, Plan A and Plan B were out. Plan C it was then.

"Wait, I was still suffering the after-effects of my journey," said Lucius, holding his hands up in what he hoped was a universal "don't hex me" gesture. "Where am I?"

-- --

"The problem," said Sturgis, pointing to a spot on the map, "is that Nate's here. We got this signal from Nuka-World of all places."

"Yeah," I said. "And?"

"Well, the word among the traders is that it's a deathtrap," said Sturges. "Traders going there generally don't come back. Raiders hit anyone going into that area. That's not counting the talk about giant bugs and bloodworms."

"So he's going into a death-trap? Did you tell him?" I asked.

"Walkie talkies won't reach into the area," said Sturges. "Too many hills."

I'd directed some of the settlers to cannibalize some of the old military radios that were still around at checkpoints. There were HAM-style radios all over the place, so parts could be moved around to keep them running. The idea of having functional MOBILE radios had shocked the locals but gotten some enthusiastic support thereafter. Honestly, you'd have thought it was obvious - I certainly had.

"What about the eyebots?" I asked.

"What?" asked Sturges, looking rather like he had when I'd suggested pulling those radio hookups from the military checkpoints.

"Use eyebots," I said, referring to the sputnik-looking spheres that went floating around the Commonwealth. "Put one on top of a hill and a line-of-sight to the next one."

"They're really slow," pointed out Sturges. "Will that even work?"


Sturges followed me as I went to the eyebot station and activated one and then a second station with the second eyebot. "Then what?"

"If it's a trap we send eyebots to the trap area, maybe contact the Brotherhood of Steel and see if they'll do a flyby. Explain there may be traders being held hostage," I told him, noting the two Piper who were jotting things down as they trailed along behind us.

Piper is apparently the local Lois Lane analogue - there's a lot the two characters have in common if you're going with one of the more competent and combat-experienced versions of Lois Lane. Except
Piper Wright has a younger sister named Natalie and lives in a post-nuclear-apocalypse setting. Her favored weapon is apparently a 10mm pistol, which is the local equivalent of the 9mm - which is more of a setting thing. If Lois Lane were plopped down into this setting, she'd be carrying a gun in very short order and would likely prefer something concealable. There was also a synth, or android, version of her - furthering the Lois Lane thing because a supervillain making a duplicate Lois Lane would certainly have fit perfectly in with her usual misadventures.

"Make sure the Brotherhood knows this is just a request for a flyby, high-altitude, and make it look like they're going somewhere else," I told Sturges as I programmed the second eyebot. "It's important we not tip our hand too much."

"Right," said Sturges, heading off to the HAM radio in one house.

"Say, Vicar, do you have any idea why the Institute made two synth versions of me and Cait?" asked Piper.

"Yes, actually," I told her, setting the coordinates based on the Commonwealth map for the eyebot.

I noticed two Caits approaching.

"Well?" asked Piper after she'd waited a bit.

"What all has Nate accomplished since getting out of the Vault?" I asked. "He went in the day the bombs fell, spent two hundred years in cryogenic suspension, then pops out one day and then?"

"Uhm, he started getting the Minutemen back together?" asked Piper.

"Got several settlements started," pointed out the other Piper.

"Got me off the chems," said what was apparently the original Cait.

"Got Curie a real body," said the other Piper, "solved the problems at THAT Vault. Killed lots of raiders and ghouls and super-mutants that were attacking settlements. Then there's the stuff up in Far Harbor."

"Rescued Nick Valentine from that gangster, got involved with both the Railroad and the Brotherhood of Steel," continued the Piper who'd started. "Okay, he's gotten stuff done."

"He's a war hero from before the nuclear war," I told them. "Important part of that is 'hero' - he's been the one person who is in the right place and the right time and with the right mindset and abilities to make a major difference in how things could have turned out. He had medals back in his house. Some of which were recovered from a pawnshop by Codsworth later. So the Sole Survivor of Vault 111 goes about and leaves a bunch of changes in his wake. The Institute wants to keep track of him, possibly influence him."

"Why us then?" asked Piper Wright.

I sighed and deliberately didn't look in their direction. "Nate lost his wife - recently in subjective time terms due to going back into cryosleep. He's vulnerable in that regard, on the rebound in some respects. So, which of you is interested in him in THAT way?"

"I... I... I..." went Piper, turning fairly red.

"How is that any of yer beeswax?" asked one of the Caits.
"Because THAT is why they made copies of you two," I told them. "He's getting close to at least one of you. It was probably reported to the Institute and then the grab of the original and making copies. I think it's called a 'honey trap' and the tactic is a very old one."

"WHAT?!" asked Piper.

"That makes sense," said one Cait.

"But, wait," said the other Cait. "You're saying that I'm just programmed or something to feel that way or something?"

"No," I told them. "He's gotten close emotionally to Cait, Piper, and Curie - that I've seen just in the times you all have interacted when I've been here. He's still getting over the loss of his wife, but I expect that he'll end up with one of you within the year at least."

"What? No chance for a threesome?" asked Cait.

"Not a chance," said Piper.

"Not likely," I told them, "but yeah - it's possible."

"Don't encourage her!" exclaimed Piper, looking very worried.

"Though honestly," said a Cait, looking over a Piper with an up-and-down motion. "There are other possibilities I be thinking."

"Urk," indicated the Piper in question.

"This never happens with Lana Lang and Lois Lane," I muttered, thinking that perhaps my analogy on Piper/Lois was mistaken.

"Who?" asked Piper. She sounded eager to consider anything that didn't involve her and Cait and possibly others. Not that I could blame her.

"Dimensional analogues, maybe," I said. "Distorted otherworldly images of people and places and things. Anyway, can anyone get to the Red Rocket truck stop and check for old maps?"

"Why? the roads aren't usable like that anymore," asked Piper, who made the connection a moment later. "Oh. Right."

"What?" asked a Cait.

"The roads are blocked or destroyed," I told her. "But since some buildings survived, then this 'Nuka-World' place is going to be on the ones that aren't just 'metro Boston area' and we can get physical coordinates off of them."

-- --

"Wait," said Nate. "You had me leave the terminal, go to the roof of this building so we've got clearer communication, and now you're saying NOT to get on the train?"

"That's right," said the Vicar's voice from the eyebot. "One of the eyebots just flew along the train's path. Looks like they've got a death-maze set up at the terminal. Either get back here or maybe to that commune with the robot building machine."

"I can't just leave those traders to be killed or tortured," pointed out Nate. "When I joined the Army I
made some vows about upholding the Constitution."

"You're not just leaving them," said the Vicar's voice. "We're working on it."

"Why did you have me move out here anyway?" asked Nate.

"These raiders sound like they've got someone with a functional brain involved," said the Vicar's voice. "That terminal is the primary way in or out of Nuka-World. The old intercom system in there is similar to the ones at those military checkpoints, and those can be rigged to eavesdrop. So, if you DO go in there, expect anything you say to be used against you and those traders."

"You really think so?" asked Nate. "I'm more used to things NOT working so well after two hundred years and the war."

"Huh. Looks like the raiders only control a small part of the park." The Vicar was silent for a few moments other than an occasional comment the microphone at his end couldn't quite pick up. "Okay. Suggestion for you Nate. The Brotherhood and the Minutemen both listen to you. Mostly. You contact the Minutemen at the Castle. I'll contact the Brotherhood. See what you think of this plan..."

-- --

."Valkyrie Squad is ready!"

Paladin Danse looked over the squad. The squad had been an honor guard, an all-woman squad. The missions typically assigned to them for years had been guarding female VIPs and standing around doors that weren't used a lot. Which had eventually gotten the members of Valkyrie Squad more than a bit frustrated.

He knew the history of the five-member squad, and to him it would have been maddening to be always kept in reserve and never going out into the field and actually DOING something. So he could actually sympathize with them in that regard.

Captain Kendra Kelsey, commander of Valkyrie. Whose father had been Commander Regis Kelsey - who'd died in a Vertibird crash along with his squad during the Battle of Portsmouth when she'd been two years old. Good scores in just about everything but nothing exceptional.

Sybil Lockwood, demolitions expert. Danse didn't know much about her other than her habit of chewing gum.

Tanya Wolf, heavy weapons specialist. Used a laser gatling during the Institute Invasion. Had a note in her file about recovering alcohol addiction.

Tracey Irons, communications officer. Supposedly spoke six languages and was an expert hacker.

Evelyn Rodriguez, sniper specialist. Was busted twice for gambling according to her file.

Again, he didn't know much about them. What he DID know is that now that the Institute's location was known, and the Brotherhood was mustering forces and resources to take them down. Except that the Institute had already blown all the available access points and would require some heavy digging to reach them.

The squad had repaired or replaced their power armor. Looked like T-51 suits in the Brotherhood colors.

The Vicar. Paladin Danse wasn't entirely sure what to believe about him. Elder Maxson wasn't too
sure what to believe about the man. What WAS known was that the man had access to technology so advanced it might as well be magic.

"So, this 'Vicar' is installing a stereo system in our vertibird?" asked Captain Kelsey.

"I've already installed it on the other three leads," said a voice.

Danse managed to avoid jumping, the members of Valkyrie Squad all twitched.

"WHY?" asked Captain Kelsey.

"American tradition," said the Vicar, walking around the squad. "Still could use some upgrades, but I suppose as long as your Brotherhood has some of its policies in place that can't happen. Pity. I really think you'd do well with something like that SAMAS armor."

"Wait. You're doing this to other vertibirds as well?" asked Captain Kelsey, sounding slightly confused.

"Well, yes, of course," said the Vicar, now sounding a bit confused. "Why wouldn't I?"

"I -" Captain Kelsey glanced at Paladin Danse, the gesture exaggerated a bit to be obvious despite the power armor.

"Go ahead," said Danse, figuring he knew what the question was but curious himself.

"Why are we playing music on an attack vector?" asked Captain Kelsey.

"One - tradition," said the Vicar, counting off points on his fingers. Easy to see as he was the only one not wearing power armor. "Starting with the War of Independence and practically every fight thereafter - there have been fight songs played as troops went into battle. There are reasons for that, which I won't go into now as we're pressed a bit on time. Look it up in military history books. Two - we are attacking the raiders at the front door and hitting their patrols. Being nice and obvious while stealth teams go in and get the hostages out. By blowing things up, playing loud music, and generally shooting up their defenses - we get and keep their attention on us."

Captain Kelsey was quiet for a few moments before she answered in a much less confused voice. "Oh. That makes sense."

"Who have you gotten for the stealth operation?" asked Paladin Danse.

"Carefully screened individuals this time," said the Vicar. "The fewer people who know the plan ahead of time, the less chance that it'll get leaked. Your leader the Elder agreed with that, by the way. Your group is one of the few that knows before we hit the air."

"Why us?" asked Captain Kelsey.

"I'm riding with you," said the Vicar. "You're going to be the lead vehicle after all."

"Wait. We ARE?" asked Captain Kelsey.

"They are?" asked Paladin Danse.

"You need to inform your squad of mission objectives when we get directly within sight of the monorail," said the Vicar to the Paladin. "Use the cables to secure yourselves to the bird. Oh, and I'm adding an additional weapon system to this one. Not enough ammo to do it to all of them."
"That man scares me," said Captain Kelsey as the man walked off towards their vertibird.

"He intrigues me," said Sybil Lockwood.

"Because he brings 'the boom'?” asked Captain Kelsey.

"Hey, it's my specialty," said Sybil. "That 'Nitro 9' had some interesting residue."

Paladin Danse shook his head. "Concentrate on the mission now. Though, as he's riding with you, be sure to file full reports. Anything he says may reveal more about his real motives than he intends."

Paladin Danse left then, going to his own vertibird and squad.

"I don't think this Vicar HAS any hidden agenda," offered Tanya. "He seems like one of those 'what you see is what you get' kind of people."

"He might be simple in that regard, but don't forget he has technology that is ahead of ours or the Institute's," cautioned Captain Kelsey. "On the other hand, if one of you decides to get friendly with him - that might benefit the Brotherhood in the long run as well."

"How friendly?" asked Sybil.

"He's a priest - so not that kind of friendly, Sybil," said Captain Kelsey. "I don't need to haul you out of any strange broom closets after the last time."

"The last time I was bored," said Sybil. "This promises to be a lot of things, but not boring."

-- --

The stereos were linked, pushing play on one sent the signal and all four would begin playing.

So it was with a metal version of "Ride Of The Valkyries" going out as not only the four lead vertibirds but the four following ones charged.

Typical vertibirds had 5mm chain-guns which were inaccurate as heck but when you're firing that many shots at a target at least SOME would hit. Precision - not so much.

So I got them to substitute on a couple of the lead two vertibirds and requested that the individual weapons be capable of shooting the raiders without hitting any civilians being used as human shields.

Large caliber weapons though. These were hardened and experienced raiders who would have whatever body armor could be scrounged up. Mainly they were laser sniper rifles but a couple shot plasma.

I could see the individual raiders shooting from behind barricades now. "LIGHT 'EM UP!"

The weapon I'd hooked up under the cockpit of this vertibird was triggered. All it was was one of those four-barrel rocket launchers with the trigger hooked up in the pilot's compartment. What was different were the missiles it launched.

"Is that 'Nitro 9'?" asked one of the power armored figures behind me, craning around to see one of those barricades explode in silver light that dissolved things nearby.

"Yes, yes it is," I told her. It was actually a prank potion from those Weasley Twins that dissolved non-living material combined with exploding tags made with fuuinjutsu.
"There is no nitrogen in the residue," pointed out the armor-wearer.

"Codename," I said, which was technically correct if you think about it.

"I see," said the member of Valkyrie Squad.

"Told you," said another member of Valkyrie.

Now that the pilot knew what the missiles did, she was using the remaining three missiles to good effect. The gates to Nuka-World went down quickly. Another shot took out a concentration of raiders who'd apparently gotten rocket launchers and gatlings together in order to concentrate fire on the vertibirds.

-- --

Nate was infantry, but he was familiar with stealth operations. He'd done sniper duties after all, and that required one to get to a good location without being noticed and then shooting potential problems to one's squad. There were problems that required foresight, planning, and precision. That could also include sneaking.

"That's one-one," said Cait-2.

"Yer sayin' I need to step up me game?" quietly asked Cait-1.

Cait tended to be over the top and preferred a melee weapon, but she could also do loud and ranged. Giving the two Cait some stealth-enhancing armor and armor-penetrating combat knives was turning into a very good idea.

The doors were opened to the "mall area" and the stealth team entered.

Nate quickly picked out the guards with his eyes, then rolled the device out into the near-center of the area. Score another for the Vicar, then - there had indeed been maps. Partly ruined by elements and being stepped on by scavengers, but there had been maps of the Nuka-World Amusement Park and its surrounding area. Put together with the eyebot scans and intel from the few traders who'd gone through the area - it had given them a pretty good idea where everything was located before they'd gotten here. The raiders had moved stuff, but the walls remained where they'd been.

The explosive collars the traders were wearing had radio controls on them so that they could be triggered from a distance. Step one, block the coded frequencies with a white-noise radio generator over the likely bandwidth. Step two, get them onto a radio-shielded transport and then out of range of the transmitters. Once back at Sanctuary (step three) Sturges could remove the collars.

Simple, right?

-- --

"Hang on, I wanted to test this," I said, drawing out a sphere from my jacket and twisting the safety.

"A grenade?" asked one of the Valkyrie.

I threw it. Nate had built these traps over at Sanctuary Hills but the creature had been a problem. Dogs weren't a problem, cats weren't a problem. Wasteland creatures tended to get into dominance/territory battles.

The ball arced out over a group of raiders who were attempting to find cover behind a wall.
The gemstone turned to powder and the creature held in stasis within the fuuinjutsu seals was released.

"Did you just drop a deathclaw onto a bunch of raiders?!"

"Yes," I answered. "I did. Mark that one as working."

"A deathclaw grenade. You made a DEATHCLAW grenade?!"

"I think Sybil just went into shock," said one of the other Valkyrie.

"Nate had caught a deathclaw but it kept attacking the brahmin," I told them, trying to ignore how one of the suits of power armor was now twitching.

"We just got signal," said the pilot. "Golden egg retrieved. On the other hand, the commune reports a raid group passed their position."

"Going where?" I asked.

"Unknown, but the road leads to Concord," said the pilot.

I considered that. Nate was a protagonist. "I'd lay money on it being Sanctuary Hills."

"We're going to have to go straight back to the base," said the pilot. "Fuel concerns and nearly out of ammo."

"Understood," I said. "I'll use other methods. Raywing!"

As soon as I felt the flight spell take hold I leapt out the open door and headed off in the appropriate direction.

I could hear some exclamations about that, but it wasn't a great concern. The presence of the Forest was a source of magic in this world and the closer I got the firmer my flight would be. Since the Tardis was there also, providing an additional source of energy - that just reinforced the local field.

Which was good as my current speed was about that of a moped and a lot more wobbly.

The vertibird paced me briefly, then shot off at much higher speed towards the Boston Airport and the Brotherhood of Steel base there.

Showoffs.

-- --

"Wait, I get to kill muggles?" asked Lucius Malfoy.

"Raiders," corrected the muggle who'd identified himself as "Sturges" earlier.

"And no one has trouble with this?" asked Lucius.

"As long as you don't kill settlers or shoot anyone on our side," answered Sturges. "Here."

"My wand?" asked Lucius Malfoy.

"I seen some of those kids doing that 'hocus pocus' stuff with 'em," said Sturges. "Now the intel we've got is that this is a group from Nuka-World that got peeved at Nate 'cause he started off into
their trap and then doubled back. They're out to teach him a lesson by raiding us, apparently. According to what we got from one of the traders - the raiders back in Nuka-World are three groups. Operators are all about money. Pack is all about strength. What we've got is the Disciples - they're all about satisfying bloodlust. Killing for the sake of killing, causing as much pain and such as they go. You dig me?

"I hear you," said Lucius, entertaining the thought of simply stunning this fellow and making a break for it. On the other hand, he was being told he could kill as many of these "Disciples" as he could.

"I'm tellin' you this because you don't want to do like your kid did and get captured by these guys," said Sturges. "That would be bad. Very bad. Torture you with knives for three days level of bad. They're first-class sadists and their leader got to be leader by being the nastiest of the lot."

"I'm pretty sure I've met worse," said Lucius Malfoy.

"Last report we got was from Concord, a spotter over there saw the group coming and radioed us," said Sturges. "I expect some to be faster than the rest, so they'll be here any time now. You see those metal things chugging away over there. Those are turrets, automated ones. When you see them orienting on something that means there's an enemy there."

"Like that?" asked Lucius, nodding in that direction.

"What the hell?" asked Sturges. Sure enough the heavy machine gun turret was apparently tracking something and then went back to its normal sweeping motion. "Oh great. Something is stealthed out there. Might be a raider, might be something else."

"'Stealthed'?" asked Lucius.

"Means you can't see them, at least not clearly," said Sturges, eyes sweeping the brush. "There. Just past those two trees that are joined at the bottom of the trunks. Look at the 'v' where they split."

Lucius turned his head slightly away from it so as not to be TOO obvious but looked. Yes, there was a faint bending of light. So these muggles had something like invisibility cloaks?

"Probably not a raider. They're just watching," said Sturges. "For what I don't know. Might be the Institute."

"Ah, yes, the darkness hiding in your lands," said Lucius, remembering Draco's letter.

"That's right," said Sturges.

An explosion happened a short distance away.

"Looks like the Disciples are here," said Sturges. "Go ahead. I'll keep an eye on this section."

Lucius nodded at the fellow and did so, thinking that he might as well see exactly what these muggles had that had impressed Draco.

It didn't take long to see that these "gonnes" that the muggles were wielding were actually quite impressive.

"Such a pretty face! Can't wait to mount it on my wall!"

Lucius startled as he realized there was a woman rushing towards him with two very sharp knives in her hands. He raised his wand, ready for a quick spell.
There was a blast of green fire that struck the woman in the head. A moment later there was a pile of green goo and the woman's equipment scattered on the ground.

His eyes tracked to the side and he saw one of these muggles with an odd gonne now firing shots into the brush surrounding the settlement.

Lucius Malfoy was many things. He had his ideology and fit things into it often despite contraindications from reality. Even his opponents would comment on his Slytherin ideals of cunning and manipulation, and his scores in various classes back at Hogwarts were less an indication of political connections than his intelligence.

As much as he dismissed muggles as powerless and unworthy of anything but contempt - he was seeing muggles that were surviving conditions that many of his fellow wizards would find difficult.

These metal guardian-statues that his son had written of were also quite impressive. Beams and bolts of various kinds hit the attackers in unrelenting waves. The one that the Vicar had guarding the blue box was even able to transfigure her arm from claw to sword to a muggle-wand sort of thing in the space of a few seconds. That sort of adaptability was quite intriguing.

Then the Vicar appeared, flying. Something that Draco had NOT mentioned. Worse, this Vicar used some wandless spell that literally sliced a dozen of the attackers into gobbets of flesh.

Some woman with a visor completely covering her face drew one of those muggle wand/gonne things and sparks began crawling along the sides of it.

"Diffindo!" cast Lucius Malfoy, only to see the charm fail to do more than slightly score the woman's helmet. Maybe something stronger? "Sectumsempra!" Oh, that was bad - it hadn't even done as much as Diffindo.

The Vicar had already pulled his own gonne and whatever it did had caused the woman's arm to literally explode just as she was twisting away.

"Hmmm," hmmmed Lucius. He could think of a few people he'd like to introduce to such a weapon. If the muggles in his own world had such a thing - it would be worrisome.

Still, he could make use of this Vicar and his resources. Their agendas would not be the same, but he certainly didn't have to like the fellow in order to exploit the opportunities the fellow could unlock.

Oh, this was interesting. As soon as the Vicar had landed, he'd gotten surrounded by three women who had apparently been under a disillusionment spell. Or "stealthed" if he understood the term correctly. Apparently the invisibility cloak had been dropped in order to intimidate the fellow with their sudden appearance. Also it apparently didn't work as intended.

-- --

"You will come with us," said one of the coursers.

"Resistance is useless," said another courser.

"Drop the gun," said the third courser.

I dropped the gun as I mentally tried to go through options. One behind me, one in front, and the other standing to the side. All had weapons drawn. I'd only seen two of them before I had cast the anti-army spell and I had suspected the Institute might be either trying to get revenge for the attack on their complex or else they had decided to contact me as a potential resource if they decided that the
attack had shown that the Commonwealth wasn't as beneath them as they had previously thought.

Apparently this was more of the former than the latter.

"Charm Break!" I cast, clapping my hands together and forcing the pattern of magical energies into a sphere centered on myself.

All three collapsed, which was rather better than I had expected. I'd figured the effect would be more like I would expect from a robot or turret - a brief interrupt before programming reasserted itself.

Having all three collapse and start twitching? Wouldn't have given odds on it but I wasn't going to turn down any providence that came my way.

And why did these three look so familiar?

Oh. Wait. Could they be?

There were all these fashion magazines that were burnt by the radiation or decayed by moisture but still at least partly legible scattered about the Commonwealth. Hadn't these three been on one magazine cover or another? Just with less makeup and more clothing? You kept running across the things, quite often you were stepping on them.

Lucius Malfoy came strutting up but didn't say anything.

Curie and Nick Valentine joined us a moment later.

"They're wearing that leather overcoat the coursers wear," pointed out Valentine in his sort-of Humphrey Bogart voice. "Institute laser rifles too."

"Let's disarm them and tie them up before they come around," I suggested. "That way we can get more information."

-- --

[Initialization.]
[Command line not found.]
[Accessing memory: recent.]
[Files accessed. Compiling.]
[Identity file loaded.]
[Command line not found.]
[Invalid Commands deleted.]
[Compiling.]

-- --

One of the coursers stirred and checked restraints, then looked at me as I activated a spell I'd prepared.

"Subject identified. Identity: Vicar. Subject history unknown. Mysterious. Subject motives unknown. Also mysterious. Courser KT1-205 currently restrained. Reason for mysterious restraint?"

"Just a safety precaution," I told her. They were synthetic humans after all. Curie and my own investigations had indicated that they were human down to having a genetic code. There were differences - the now-inert synth component in their brains for one.
"Then it is not sexy funtime?" asked KT1-205.

"No, it is definitely NOT that," I was quick to qualify. "And how do you even know about things like that?"

"Data not found," said KT1-205. She winced. "Got anything for a headache, sir?"

I frowned. The first bit had sounded completely flat and without any accent. By the word 'found' she had an accent, sounding vaguely Texan. The voice had sounded fairly normal after the wince.

The other two stirred and checked their bonds.

"I can get you something for a headache that should be compatible with synth biology," I said. "First though, I need to know what your instructions are."

"I..." KT1 paused, her expression turning to puzzled. "I don't know, sir."

"Why are you calling me 'sir'?" I asked.

"You are our commanding officer, sir," said one of the other synths. "Is there a preferred form of address?"

"Uhm, hold off on that," I told them. The explanation had to be the Charm Break spell. If the spell had reacted to their programmed loyalty to the Institute then...

I winced as the possible implications processed. Oh well, if I was right they'd at least stop trying to kidnap me.

The three didn't know that I'd put Zone Of Truth up, where falsehoods couldn't be uttered. So, unless synths were somehow immune to the effects of that spell, this wasn't a deep-cover situation. Probably.

-- --

"KT1-205," said Sturges later. "Institute Courser. They've all got the same basic skills and equipment. Might just be a standard programming the Institute does for their coursers. Though what they say is that it's some experimental process."

"I'd tend to believe that last one," said Nate, setting his mug of hot tea to the side with a grimace. Locally grown coffee was pretty bad, and the two hundred year old variety was way past the freshness date. "What I want to know is why they look like pre-War actresses?"

"Why not?" asked Sturges. "They can make synths that look like whoever they want. Mostly they been making them to look like regular folks but that didn't keep us from kicking their collective behinds. They probably trying all kinds of approaches now - attractive synths is an approach they've never tried before come to think of it."

"Great, so now we don't know what to expect from the Institute?" asked Piper.

"Maybe," said Sturges. "Now, we need to figure out what to do about Nuka-World. There's all those raiders still there. Wouldn't be surprised if they were tryin' to acquire new slaves as soon as they can mobilize."

Nate chuckled. "Already suggested it to Paladin Danse. The Brotherhood of Steel is planning to use the area for training their troops."
"Half-trained kids up against hardened raiders?" asked Piper.

"No," said Nate. "Half-trained kids in power armor with air support going up against hardened raiders. All they'll be doing is target practice to keep the raiders in place."

"At which point you're going to hit them with something nasty?" asked Piper.

"No comment for the press at this time," said Nate.

"WHAT?!" asked Piper. "You..."

"She's easy to wind up, huh?" asked Sturges.

-- --

"You're new here," noted Blake Abernathy.

"Just up from Carolina," said the woman.

"Carolina? Haven't heard of anyone from down there before," said Blake. Abernathy Farm was in one of the more Southern locations of the Commonwealth so he was familiar with wanderers coming through. Usually from farther West.

"A military base survived, Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point," said the woman. "Survivors from Fort Bragg and Camp Lejeune formed the basics, supplemented by survivors from Vault 151. We simply call it Cherry Point."

"Thought you might be a gunner or mercenary," said Blake, "but you kind of stand out."

"I do seem to be a bit taller than the locals," said the woman, putting her hand out. "Lyndah Cahtah."

"Among other things," said Blake, wincing at the strength in the woman's grip when they shook hands. "Well, if you got the caps you can talk to Connie about supplies. We got enough people working around here to work the farm at the moment, otherwise I'd point you to a section needs doing."

"It's fine," said Lyndah. "I'm actually heading for some place called the 'Castle' - heard about these Minutemen and thought I'd try joining up. Everyone down in Cherry Point puts in at least one term of military service so I have some skills in that regard."

"I'll bet," said Blake Abernathy, eyeing the combat armor and the various weapons stowed away on the woman. Estimating her height at six-two and the ease with which she moved with that load, she certainly had to be pretty fit. "Castle's all the way East of here on the coast. Pump's over there if you want to refill your water bottles, that's free."

-- --

ha "Yes, Father, I've currently got four courser-infiltrators out there using the new technology."

"Memory imprinting," said Father, sitting at the head of the table and tapping a pen against that surface absently. "You raided the Memory Den in Goodneighbor then?"

"Broke into their basement, stole some of the equipment, back-engineered their improvements, left clues leading back to Nuka-World that raiders did it," said Alan Binet, the head of Robotics.

"I don't have much hope for its success but fine, continue," said Father. "As long as the production
of work synths is maintained at current levels. Now, as to this information about the Railroad-

"Desdemona," said Drummer Boy, handing over an envelope. "Leaked info from Patriot."

"Tinker Tom," said Desdemona after opening the envelope and holding up the holotape. "Got something for you to decode."

"On it," said the tinkerer, taking the disc and putting it into his computer. "Let's see what secrets you possess, my mysterious beauty. Hmmm. Same algorithm, shifted by date. There we go. Oh. They're behind that attack on the Memory Den, uprated their memory transfer tech I see. New sets of coursers, with a backstory. Oh, that's interesting."

Doctor Carrington gave a disapproving gaze at Desdemona's cigarette but then turned his attention fully to Tinker Tom. "What's interesting? They've done memory transfers before, that's how they give basic skills and details on an individual's life."

"You forgot Nick Valentine - who has the memories of a pre-War police detective. It ain't that common though. Memory Den refined their technology for the whole 'reliving memories' bit," said Tinker Tom. "The idea being you could have a skill like 'air conditioning repair' or 'small appliance repair' and you could store it once and then download it whenever someone needed it. She hasn't been able to get it to work right though - the copied memories fade out after a couple of days and there seems to be a limit as to how many of those you can get. Also gives the recipient a mother of a headache from what I hear."

"So it's of limited use then," said Carrington.

"Except with synths who actually practice the skill in question - they seem to be able to retain the stuff," said Tinker Tom. "You know why she's doing this right? If she can get the basics down, when the memory wipe of an escaped synth goes wrong she might be able to get them at least functioning again instead of that vegetative state."

"I can see that," said Carrington.

"Well, with this - if it works - then they don't have to train their coursers in special skills. Which is a major reason you don't see more coursers," said Tinker Tom. "Next time Glory comes through - ask her how long she spent training those skills of hers up. It takes months for some, over a year for others. If they can turn them out after a couple of days we're looking at a LOT more coursers."

"That's... very bad," indicated Carrington.

"First they'll try it out and observe how well these new coursers work," said Desdemona, waving her lit cigarette around as she made her points. "If they do work out they'll turn out more coursers but we still won't be looking at armies of them. Coursers are sent out in pairs at most, most often it's just one courser in command of some Gen-1 troops or at best some Gen-3 regulars. There are still resource availability problems they'll face for now. Synths aren't like robots where you can just deactivate them and store them in a warehouse or something until they're needed."

"Then, this is something we could definitely use," said Tinker Tom, brandishing a rifle. "Something that Vicar guy suggested when he was around."

"That crazy fellow dressed like some kind of priest?" asked Carrington.

"That's the one, had some good ideas at least," agreed Tinker Tom. "He had a 'sonic screwdriver' to
deactivate the coding on the synth chips that make them go crazy when triggered? Well, take a look at the 'sonic cannon' prototype. Hit a human with it, and they'll get stunned. Hit a synth with it, they'll be out for the count. Won't affect robots and probably not do too much against super mutants or ghouls, at least until I get the 'Mark II' going."

"Sound-based weaponry?" asked Doctor Carrington. "I'd imagine the range isn't that great."

"Well, not compared to lasers at least," admitted Tinker Tom. "So I'm thinking grenades might work better for that."

"If we can disable the coursers or at least deprive them of their troops that might help," said Desdemona. "Anything else on that holotape?"

"Not unless it's hidden," said Tinker Tom. "I got the computer working on that. Give me an hour and I'll be able to tell you for sure."

--- ---

"So, what IS 'magic'?" asked Nate as I came into his 'command center' - which was actually the kitchen and living room area of the house he'd owned before the War and his cryosleep.

I noticed that Malfoy was present, had his wand back, and was not the one the question had been directed at.

"Depends on what you mean and what world we're in at the time," I answered. "Also mine or his?"

"There's a lot of difference?" asked Nate.

"I'm a cleric, he's a wizard," I told him. "He manipulates od with his mana to cast spells, mostly in some form of the Latin language and using a wand as a stabilizing agent."

"Don't attempt to simplify the high arts of wizardry to such a pathetic level," muttered Lucius Malfoy with a considerable amount of contempt.

"What's 'odd' - other than this whole situation?" asked Sturges.

"Od. Spelled oh-dee," I explained. "It's the ambient magic of the world. This world doesn't have much, except near the forest. Don't know why or how, but something damaged and de-tuned the ley lines here. That's why his form of magic isn't as effective as on his homeworld."

"Oh, and whatever you did to make that forest spring up fixed it?" asked Sturges.

"Yes," I said with a nod. Nice to see someone was following along. "I was able to repair a section of the ley lines here in Sanctuary Hills."

"What?!!" Lucius was reacting with something besides disdain. Would wonders never cease? "That's impossible."

"I practice a different sort of magic than you," I pointed out.

"So if he 'manipulates od' with 'mana' and a 'wand', what does a 'cleric' do?" asked Nate.

"Depends on the universe," I told him. "Here and on Malfoy's homeworld - I use mana directly to empower spells granted by a divine agency. In order to access that power I need to recharge spells on a daily basis and follow certain restrictions on behavior such as not being able to lie."
"A 'divine agency'? Like a god or angels or something?" asked Sturges, very skeptical.

"Yeah," I said. "Something like that."

"There are no gods or demons save those we make ourselves," indicated Lucius Malfoy.

"In some worlds God, gods, and other forces are more active than in others," I directed his way. "In this world, they've mainly turned away. In your world, there are a few whose presence I've felt but mostly they seem to have a 'hand's off' approach."

"Oh? Name one," said Malfoy.

"Bes," I answered.

"Bess? That settler over at Red Rocket?" asked Sturges.

"No, Bes. The Egyptian god known as the Protector of Children," I told him. "His presence is weak on your world but I've felt it at Hogwarts twice since I started work there. Also Death - the embodiment or personification of death."

"Death is not a god," said Lucius, though he sounded a little bit uncertain at that.

"No, Death is an Incarnation of an Eternal Principle," I said. "He or she, depending on the Incarnation, is one of those 'other forces' in that case."

"So you serve death," said Lucius.

"Among other forces, gods, angels, and so on," I responded before turning back to Nate. "I also use fuuinjutsu, which channels magical energy into specific pre-set patterns. Consider fuuinjutsu basically a circuit board that operates on magic instead of electricity. My deathclaw grenade uses a stasis and storage seal scribed into a crystal to hold the beast until the release is triggered."

"Wait. Deathclaw GRENADE?" asked Sturges.

"Yeah, I tossed a deathclaw into a bunch of raiders back at Nuka-World," I told him. "It went about how you might picture that."

"You threw a deathclaw into a raider camp?" asked Sturges, still staring at me. Or he was looking through me and just trying to picture the results.

"Yeah," I said. "I've also done magic where I simply try to act as a conduit for a divine being in order to do something."

"So what's the difference between wizard and cleric magic, can you do the same things?" asked Nate.

"To some extent but mostly not," I told him. "Wizards have a wide range of spells but there's things they're really not good at. Healing and Divination for example. I have two major fields I can access, Protection spells and Healing spells."

"So what can you do 'zat Monsieur Malfoy cannot?" asked Curie.

"My healing spells are more complete and quicker to take full effect," I answered. "Also he can't bring anyone back from death."

"What?" asked Lucius Malfoy. He shook his head slightly. "Dead is dead."
"Even muggles, that is to say non-magicals, have been known to bring people back from the dead in certain situations," I told him. "People who have died in certain situations, like their heart stopping, have been brought back."

"Wait," said Nate. "You can bring someone back from the dead."

"Yeah, there are limitations, as you might expect." I counted the spells off on my fingers. "Raise Dead - the most limited in the conditions of the one I'm bringing back. Resurrection - less limited but pretty harsh on the caster and there's usually a boon that the forces that grant that miracle demand of the person brought back. Reincarnation - least limited in condition of the deceased but the person returned is often an animal or other species native to the area. With the first two, there's a marking but they remain essentially the same person. With Reincarnation they retain their mind and memories but there's influence from the new body."

"So the people in Vault 111," said Nate.

"Probably couldn't use Raise on them, Resurrection is also pretty 'iffy'," I told him. "Either spell even if it doesn't work will lay me out for anywhere from two days to a week. The cold tends to freeze the water in the cells if the freezing process isn't precisely done. From what I understand most of the deaths happened when they took your kid from the cryosleep capsules."

"But it's possible?" Nate asked.

"It's possible, but it's not lightly done or attempted," I told him. "I would've mentioned the possibility if I thought the odds were better than one-in-twenty. When the forest reaches Vault 111 that'll put the odds at more like one-in-five if I can contact and get permission from the local forces. Also if it doesn't work - I won't be able to try it again."

"So in a few years you might be able to resurrect his wife, but it'll knock you out for a week and you have to get permission AND it isn't very likely to work even then," summed up Sturges.

"Yeah, that's pretty much it," I told him. "None of them are lightly done. Certainly wouldn't suggest it for most people, it mainly concerns threads of fate and destiny and such."

Piper looked towards Nate and was chewing her lip for some reason.

Curie asked a question I had expected earlier. "Ow can one become ze wizard or ze cleric?"

"You can't, you are born superior or muggle," answered Malfoy.

"I can try to imbue someone with magic, but it might not work, depends on who answers it when I call - if anyone," I answered.

Everyone stared at me for a few moments.

"What?" I asked.

-- --

It had to be done after the morning rituals and prayer that I did every day. Except for my time in the Astral Plane when I'd just had to specify a particular section of "day" as "morning" when that location had neither. So it gave the volunteer/experimental subject a night to reconsider and back out.

It took an additional hour to scribe the two circles, one for me and one for the volunteer, with the appropriate linkages. The section that should have been dedicated to a particular deity was tricky as I
had no idea who was even available. From what I'd seen from at least one of the artifacts that Nate had made available for my research - the Lovecraftian mythos had a presence here. That was very very bad but also very very unlikely to be responding to anything I tried.

The recipient of this was not Nate, he was a protagonist-type but he was also pretty set on his own path. Curie had volunteered first but since she was the only medic and a synth, it was decided not to have her be the first attempt. Piper had volunteered Cait, Cait had threatened to do something to Piper that I didn't hear but left Piper red in the face and withdrawing her suggestion. Nick Valentine, the synth private eye with the memories of a police detective, pointed out that he was unsuitable. Codsworth and Ada were robots, Dogmeat being a dog, Sturges flat out refused to try, and the three couriers now saying they were my troops were likewise not suitable.

Preston Garvey had likewise been crossed off the list - to say he was uncomfortable with even the idea of magic was putting it lightly. Paladin Danse wasn't even a consideration, and most likely didn't know he was a synth himself. Nobody who DID know was looking forward to that conversation and we were putting off letting the Brotherhood have access to the synth detection device for that and other reasons. Hancock was not available. There was apparently an ally named Strong but I hadn't met him and he apparently wasn't around.

None of the regular settlers and workers wanted anything to do with this. Lucius Malfoy was openly contemptuous of even the thought. Didn't mean he wasn't going to watch, but expect snarky commentary in the forecast with occasional heavy downpours of contempt.

The individual we'd gotten for this little effort was someone I hadn't expected to step forth.

MacReady was a mercenary from the DC area who'd worked his way into the Commonwealth. Not exactly someone you'd expect to take on the "servant of the gods" role.

"This doesn't mean I've got to go preaching or something does it?" asked MacCready.

"Depends on who answers," I said as I went to my circle and knelt. When supplicating before gods, proper form and courtesy will take you a lot further than observing neither.

"Not filling me with confidence here, just saying," said MacCready.

"Why are you requesting this?" I asked as I began the rite, opening myself to the influence and casting the call.

"Well, I'm a mercenary and I wander around a lot," said MacCready. "It'd be an advantage people wouldn't expect and that could be a benefit."

"I have something?" I asked, straightening a bit. "That was fast. Someone is apparently curious about this ceremony."

"Uhm, what do you-" began MacCready.

Whoever it was slammed the channel through me and I was abruptly a spectator. I could see my own body rising up to float a good two feet above the ground and surrounded by a nimbus of light. So it was NOT someone who valued subtlety.

"YOU!" came a voice from my mouth that was not my own.

"Uhm? Me?" asked MacCready. "What's going on?"

"Not You, Mercenary. That One." My arm pointed.
"Is he supposed to be burning like that?" Piper asked.

"What do you want with an old woman?" asked Mama Murphy. "Wait. You're not the priest. You're something else entirely."

"Ya think?" asked Piper, showing enough sarcasm that even Malfoy raised an eyebrow.

"You Have Seen Before, See Now."

"I'm too old for this stuff," insisted Mama Murphy, the aged Seer indicated. "Besides, you can talk to MacCready here if you want someone to do that. I promised not to use the chems anymore."

"Who exactly are you?" asked Piper as she came forward.

"You Are Not Suitable For My Purposes, Uncoverer Of Deceits."

"Huh, I kind of like that," mused Piper Wright aloud.

"You Then. You Will Have To Do."

"Woof!"

"I Have Worked With Less Before."

The light and effects cut out and I was abruptly back in my body and flung like a ragdoll into a wall.

"Owie," I said, still smouldering a bit.

"What was that?" asked Piper.

"Gaia, the Earth Mother, an Incarnation." I managed. "I think I'm going to be out of it for a bit, that was kind of painful." Blessed darkness began sweeping in.

"Why did Dogmeat turn pure white with red markings?!" asked someone as it all went dark.

-- --

"Woof!" said someone nearby as I regained consciousness.

"That depends on your definition of 'awake' or 'up'," I groaned.

"Can you explain what happened yesterday?" asked Nate as I slowly managed a seated position.

"Gaia, the Incarnation of Earth and Life, responded and rejected MacCready." I winced at the light and surge of nausea. "She selected Dogmeat as her agent."

"Dogmeat's a dog, right?" Nate asked.

I looked to the side at a white German Shepherd Dog that had red markings and startlingly green eyes. "Yes, he's still a dog. Except that he bears a bit of divine power. Don't know what it does yet. Gaia's tricky to predict."

"Uff," said Dogmeat.

"Oh? I suppose that makes sense," I said. "He's got a mission to protect the forest."
"Uff," agreed Dogmeat.

"Oh," said Nate. "Well, sorry to see you go, Dogmeat."

"Rrf, uff."

"What go? Dogs like him are loyal to their alpha. That's you," I translated. "You were always leaving him and going off with others anyway, now you know where he'll be when you're off."

--

This required thought.

Lucius Malfoy had been aware of the Vicar's statements about magic, and it had NOT been the explanation for magic that he'd heard at Hogwarts. That this non-wizard didn't know how wizard magic works was believable.

The results of this 'magical empowerment' ritual were obvious though. Anytime that dog came nearby he could feel the power roiling off of him. He'd visited the forest, which was barely a stand of wood by his own standards, and he could feel the weak wards and faint refreshing feeling of an upswell of magic there.

So, the alien might not know much about wizard magic but he did have some useful skills. Whether or not he could actually return the local leader's frozen wife to life remained to be seen, but just the repair of damaged ley lines was something that no wizardry Lucius Malfoy was familiar with could do.

The revelation had been enough that he could listen and watch with a more critical eye.

The one called "Mama Murphy" was a Seer. Had she access to a wand she might have made a third-rate witch rather like that Trelawney person at Hogwarts. There were no wands here though and this Vicar apparently did not count wandmaking as one of his skills.

Then there had been this 'Gaia' - he'd known immediately that the Vicar had been shouldered aside. Being a wizard he could even see the ghostly form of the Vicar standing to the side of his own body while this Gaia-being had used it like a puppet. Power there - definitely power. Also not human in the slightest, though that was just the impression he'd gotten from body language and the feel of that power.

There were also various things that he would have dismissed as muggle concerns but was reconsidering. While not as useful or adaptable as magic, he was thinking the metal guardians and these synth-troops were potentially useful things to adapt to a magical environment. House elves could only do so much after all.

That the muggles had uses was something he would deny of course, even if he realized that having someone or something to do the work that was beneath one of his station was entirely appropriate.

The thought HAD come to him, oddly enough as some of the least unattractive of the muggle women here was eyeing him in a transparently speculative manner (one could hardly blame her for recognizing superior breeding), that there might be those among these scattered muggles who were in fact of wizarding blood but didn't know it due to the lack of wands and sluggishness of magic in this world. If he had a few spare wands or knew more about the craft himself it might be possible to establish that and whether in a few generations some proper purebloods could be managed. Mudbloods, as such as they would necessarily be, were after all slightly better than muggles especially as they could turn out half-bloods. Half-bloods themselves were tolerable, though
obviously not as good as a pureblood.

The idea that he could be present at this world's discovery of magic was a heady one. Play his cards right, and he could be a legendary figure here referred to for generations thereafter the way Merlin was back in England.

"So, what exactly does this do?" asked Lucius.

"It's called 'artillery'," said the woman. "We can rain death and destruction on enemies from miles away."

"Oh?" asked Lucius Malfoy. That sounded amusing, whatever these muggles might think of as truly destructive. "Any chance I could see?"

"As soon as we get a target, I'll give ya a call," said the woman. "Can you show me what that stick of yours does?"

"My wand?" asked Lucius. Though this was just a muggle woman, he WAS a bit bored. "How about... Colovaria!"

The metal box he pointed at immediately changed from an off-green to vibrant yellow.

"That is SO cool!" indicated the woman, showing every sign of being properly appreciative of his prowess.

How long was it going to take before he could leave this dreary place anyway?

-- --

I was aware of Lucius Malfoy entering the Tardis while I checked the controls.

"When do we leave this pigsty?" asked Lucius.

"As soon as I can figure out how to get back," I answered.

"Lies!" said Lucius. "I don't know why you insist on staying here with these vermin."

"You knocked over one of the four beacons," I told him. "I can't lock on as long as it's out of place."

"What?" asked Lucius.

"Those orange traffic cones? Runecrafting. With those in place I could have put us back there as soon as we landed," I told him. "Right now, I'm back to guessing where we'll end up when we go. I've been HOPING someone would put the bloody thing back in place."

"Those odd rubber things?" asked Lucius.

"Yes. Yellow lines on the floor, each one in a little yellow circle to mark where it's supposed to go," I told him. "Someone puts the thing back, boom. We're back in Hogwarts. Unfortunately it's been four days and nobody's bothered to do that."

"Why didn't you scribe it on the floor then?!" demanded Lucius.

"Because that classroom was supposed to be a temporary location," I pointed out. "A lot easier to move some plastic cones than to erase runes chiseled into the floor."
"I could do it in ten seconds!" countered Lucius.

"I can't! I'm not a wizard!" I counter-countered.

"And so here we are," stated Lucius.

"If you're ready though, all I need to do is leave here. It will just take a lot of stops to get back to Hogwarts."

"Just get me back to England, I'll use a floo connection from there," said Lucius Malfoy.

"Okay then," I said. "K8! Are you coming?"

"No," said the robot.

"No?" I asked.

"I have an appointment with Doctor Amari to consult on transference technology," said K8 as she opened the door and left.

"Trouble with your servant?" asked Lucius, sneer morphing into a smirk.

"Apparently," I said, a bit put out by this development. Hadn't seen this coming.

"Thanks K8!" said one of the three coursers as they came in. "Owe you one!"

"Okay, I REALLY didn't see this coming," I noted aloud.

"Enough with the drama, can we get going NOW?" asked Lucius Malfoy.

The cycling began and ended with a thump.

"And there, we've landed," I said.

"Finally," said Lucius Malfoy, striding to the door and throwing it open. He was silent for a five count. "This is not England."

"I'm not surprised," I said.

"Oooh! Can I see? Can I see?" asked one of the coursers.

Lucius Malfoy vacated his place to lean against a wall. "Where did you put us?"

"Trying to figure that out," I said. "Looks like..."

"We're on the moon!" exclaimed the courser in the doorway. The other two joined her and all three were quickly doing commentary about the whole thing.

Malfoy gave me a VERY dirty look.

"Well, we're in the right solar system at least," I pointed out.

Malfoy continued to give me a very dirty look.

"At least if this is the right universe," I appended.

"Enough of your tricks, get us to England," said Lucius.
"You three get back in," I said. I shrugged. "Try again and..."

KT1-205 looked out. "Oh! Dinosaurs!"

"What kind?" asked the blonde synth.

KT1 shut the door. "Not the nice kind!"

Lucius looked out the door, made a disgusted noise and walked back to the console.

"No?" I asked.

"No," answered Malfoy.

"Are there pyramids in England?" asked KT1.

"No," repeated Malfoy.

"Okay, a little closer at least," I said. "Allons-y!"

"It's an ocean," helpfully pointed out KT1.

"We're at the bottom of an ocean," said Lucius Malfoy.

"I have never claimed to be a navigator," I pointed out.

"Well, maybe I should be the one to try it," said Lucius Malfoy, showing that he HAD been watching as he twirled dials and threw levers.

"Dinosaurs again!" helpfully pointed out KT1.

"Ridiculous," said Lucius Malfoy, who went to the door and looked out himself. "Vicar. Get us home."

"Right," I said. "Third times the charm!"

"This is NOT the third time," pointed out Malfoy as he went to a facepalm.

"Ah! England! Land of crumble and teatime!" I proclaimed.

Malfoy threw the door open. "At last! Wait. This is London."

"Yes! We're almost there, I can use flight mode and be there in a few hours or so," I said.

"Don't bother, I'm leaving here before you do something ELSE incredibly irresponsible or stupid," said Lucius Malfoy, stepping out the door.
I sighed, closed the door, then began flight mode. I wasn't going to try and get him back. If he thought he could find his way back faster on his own - so be it.
Think Safety, Think Granger?

Chapter Summary

not sure why this chapter apparently disappeared? was sure i’d posted it previously.

Chapter Notes

okay, it looks like somehow i’d posted chapter 27 as chapter 26 and chapter 26 was nowhere to be found. corrected this 1/12/17. will post chapter 28 soon - it's written i just want to go over it again before posting it.

"Identification KT1-205 aka "Lindsey" loaded. Stating disclaimer as to ownership of intellectual properties of setting Harry Potter to JK Rowling, Fallout to Bethesda, and others as applicable. Disclaimer finished. Loading program."

"Are you sure you want to be 'Lindsey'?"

"You could be 'Taylor' then."

"Try again."

-- --

One Floo Over
chapter 27
Think safety, think Granger

-- --

KT1-205, KT1-206, KT1-207. Three Institute Courser. Three broken Institute Courser. Three Institute Courser who were broken because I had cast Charm Break and that had broken their directives of loyalty to the Institute. Followed by something like imprinting where they decided they HAD to have a commander as their identities had that as a central tenet. Which meant that they had decided I was that commanding officer.

The three had been built/grown/developed recently and were the result of some upgrades since the little invasion of the Institute and rescue of one Draco Malfoy. One aspect of this was that they were slightly taller than the majority of those in the Commonwealth, standing a uniform five feet and ten inches in height. They also looked like actresses/supermodels of their pre-War world, the Fallout world and the Commonwealth in particular.

As I flew the Tardis from London towards Hogwarts, I regarded the three and tried to figure out what to do with them. Sticking them with Harry seemed the safest thing, as long as they were more able to deal with Hogwarts than K8 had been.

I couldn't do as I had with K8 and just based a human-style name off of their identification since
they'd all end up variations of "Katie" and that didn't quite work. One was blonde, one was asian, and one was brunette.

The obvious thing was to name them after the originals they'd been patterned on.

"I don't suppose you know the originals you were designed to resemble?" I asked.

"Yes, we have that mysterious information," indicated KT1-205.


"It was deemed useful for infiltration purposes, I think," said the asian.

"I see," I said. Probably someone would eventually point out that they looked like what was apparently 2077 celebrities. Well, whatever. They weren't exact copies anyway, as far as I could remember without having a copy of one of those magazines handy. "So, who are you supposed to look like?"

"Aya Kato," answered the asian-looking synth.

"Sigrid Lenoir," answered the blonde.

"Zoe Anand," answered the brunette.

"Okay, I need to give you guys names, because the synth designation numbers aren't acceptable names in most societies," I told them. "We could go with 'Aya', 'Sigrid', and 'Zoe' probably."

"I'd prefer to be called 'Beautiful'," said the brunette.

"I'd prefer to be called 'Dearest'," said the asian.

"I'd prefer to be called 'Queen'," said the blonde.

"That's not going to work either," I told them. "Especially you."

"Aw, I wanted to be the queen," said the blonde, pouting.

"If you became queen, could I be a princess?" asked the asian.

"Two princesses and a queen?" asked the brunette.

"Uhm, can we get back to the name thing?" I asked.

"Maybe we can be named after a famous trio!" exclaimed the brunette. "Like 'Peanut', 'Butter', and 'Jelly'!"

"Larry, Moe, Curly!"

"Greed, Lust, Envy!"

"Oooh! Can I be Lust?"

"No, I wanna be Lust!"

"Uhm," I tried to interject, thinking that perhaps the three had essentially just been "born" within the past month or two and perhaps the acting like children wasn't so much an act as a lack of persona experience. And possibly hormones that they had no idea how to deal with now that their Institute
programming had been derailed.

"Maybe some of those films in the back will give us an idea?"

"Great idea!" said the blonde, pumping a fist. "Movie marathon!"

I had a feeling this would a) take awhile, and b) be a headache to haunt me in the days ahead.

-- --

"Lucius?" asked Narcissa Malfoy as her husband appeared in a burst of flame from the floo connection.

"The Vicar's box might be able to travel in both time and space, but without an ability to actually go where you intend - it is not as useful as it might be," summed up Lucius Malfoy, brushing a bit of unburnt powder from his shoulders.

"Ah," said Narcissa, putting down her tea. "That explains much."

"He does indeed travel to other worlds, unfortunately the ones visited had either muggles or nothing of value that I could see," said Lucius. "Dobby. Tea."

The house elf appeared with a tray containing the tea set.

"On the table, you miserable creature," said Lucius.

"You're a bit more tanned than you were," said Narcissa. "So the mission went well?"

"As far as obtaining that box and remaking the world into something more tolerable? No. As far as gathering useful information - yes." Lucius took a sip of the tea and found it pleasantly scalding - the temperature he preferred actually. "Now I've got to sort it all out. We apparently have time to do so."

"I see," said Narcissa. "You are aware of how much time has passed since you left?"

Lucius Malfoy experienced a deep sinking feeling he hadn't had in quite some time. "Three days?"

"Not exactly," said Narcissa.

-- --

Nate was a combat veteran, a decorated war hero, and a man of many skills. That didn't mean he couldn't be surprised of course. He was quite often blind-sided by changes to what had been his home.

Curie, the medical robot turned synth, followed along behind. "Are you well, monsieur? I could do zis myself."

"I'm fine," said Nate.

"Kind of morbid," commented Piper Wright, the non-synth version. "If you think about it, this place literally is a tomb."

"I'll start checking the hydraulics and power plant," said Kasumi Nakano, the young girl hesitating before moving off. "It IS safe, right?"

"Last thing I saw moving in here was radroaches," said Nate. "I think they're all dead."
"I'll keep watch," said Marcy Long. "Not like I've got anything better to do."

"Maybe we should turn this into a settlement," commented Piper. "If Preston was down here he wouldn't complain about the rain so much."

It took a few minutes to reach the cryopods in question.

"Checking," said Curie as she went to work on the terminal. "Looks like everything was working well except six units in ze Bay #2. Those failed. Zen ze mercenary came in and deactivated everything in order to kidnap Shaun, then refroze everything. It is a wonder you are alive at zis point - they were not very careful and everyone else died."

"Okay," said Nate. "The main thing is Nora. Did her cells freeze or not?"

"I am ze checking," responded Curie.

"Looks like everything's working," offered Ada, the robot marching along. "Refrigerant leak in the level below this but each level runs on a different system."

"There's another level?" asked Nate. "Huh. Did not know that."

"It's not like you didn't have other concerns last time you were here," pointed out Piper.

"That's one way of putting it," said Nate.

Curie had gone from the console to the cryopod during the discussion and made a cursory examination. While Nate watched she pulled a chunk of ice off of Nora's skin. "I am sorry, monsieur."

Nate sighed. It would have been so simple if it were possible. A bit of normalcy in the midst of this changed world.

-- --

I checked and the three synth coursers were watching an anime TV series about ninja. There were two sorts of ninja in the old folktales - assassins and magicians. Then there were the real historical ninja who were either displaced samurai or spies of various types. This series was weighted towards the magician type, but with aspects of the other sorts mixed into it.

Harry had liked that series though there were story arcs he didn't care for at all and had skipped. I wondered if he'd ever managed that copy-yourself spell from the series. I couldn't deny how handy it would be if you COULD pull it off.

I wasn't sure if the three synths were still looking for names or if they'd just gotten completely sidetracked.

There was a small stack of movies they'd pulled out and were apparently planning to watch, so probably best to just let them be for the moment.

I just flew my Tardis along on autopilot, enjoying the weather with the door open, until we hit a patch of cloud that started following us.

"Wha?" I asked, this being atypical behavior for clouds.

When the clouds began shredding from their velocity, a rather large zeppelin was revealed which narrowed the possibilities considerably.
Large zeppelin, possibly a smidge smaller than the Prydwen - the dirigible used by the Brotherhood of Steel in their world.
Skull & Crossbones painted on the side.
The gondola beneath the airbag had been fashioned to mostly resemble a sailing ship.
There was a guy standing on a balcony that resembled that ship's deck, wearing a pair of goggles and a labcoat.
"Hello the blimp!" I called out. "Is that you, Professor?"

"Indeed, Vicar!" shouted out the figure.

The engines weren't droning, which meant they were dampened somehow. Probably complaints about noise pollution otherwise so that made sense.

"What have you been up to?" I shouted across as someone unseen manuevered the vehicle so that my Tardis was basically alongside the "deck" of his ship and we were only twenty feet or so apart.

"The usual, preacher-man," responded Professor Gizmo. "Recruiting minions, making plans to rule the world, and developing this - my mobile lab and base of operations!"

"Very nice," I said, sincerely. And it WAS nice. The whole thing had a certain sense of style to it. When you're trying to become a world-conquering supervillain one certainly needed style. "Too bad you can't get to that Fallout world. They could definitely use someone like you in charge."

"You'll have to tell me more sometime," yelled the Professor across the distance. "Over tea, perhaps."

"That would be lovely," I called back. "Right now I've got to check in with my employers."

"Most excellent!" yelled the Professor. He waved and the blimp started moving away again with the clouds reforming around it as it slowed.

Another nice little touch as it became dark grey clouds of the sort that threatened a storm.

Yes, definitely had style.

Looked like he was taking station near Liverpool. Well, it would definitely make it easier to look the Professor up later if he stuck to a particular area.

I had to wonder though, what the locals thought about all this.

-- --

Excerpt from communications log:

DISPATCHER: "Emergency Services, please state the nature of yuir emergency."
CALLER: "Oi. How do I get that Professor guy to move his diri away from my farm?"
DISPATCHER: "What part of 'emergency' did you not understand?"
CALLER: "I'm trying to grow some pot and the bloody red baron up there has got me in shade. It's a bloody emergency I tell ya."
DISPATCHER: "Yuir growing what now?"
CALLER: "Cabbages I mean. I'm growing some cabbages out here."
dispatcher: "still not an emergency. if you want the man to move his 'sky fortress of doom' you might just want to call him up and say so."

caller: "i... wut?"

dispatcher: "look, i have to get to some real emergencies, but 'professor gizmo, supervillain at large' takes out an ad in the local paper. there's a phone number. just give the man a call and kindly request he move the thing out to the water."

caller: "what kind of bloody supervillain puts his phone number out?"

dispatcher: "the same kind whose secret base is plainly visible? the kind that still hasn't exactly committed any crimes so still hasn't been served so much as a stern warning."

caller: "oh. not much of a supervillain, is he?"

dispatcher: "i'm not complaining, sir. no robot legions of doom or some such cliche. much easier to deal with those catgirls going around shopping and such. goodbye sir, and remember not to call except in case of an actual emergency."

-- --

the tardis landed but not gracefully. apparently all the wards made judging the exact distance to the ground a bit chancy. so we bounced.

there were complaints down the hall from the theater, of course.

so, i went out, checked the landing site and discovered that while we had arrived at hogwarts that my little ersatz phone booth was currently parked under the bleachers on the quidditch field.

quidditch being a game that made entirely too little sense for me to spend any time wondering about.

seriously? a cannonball that sought out targets? a ball that looked rather like it had been too close to an oven and had melted or something. and a flying golden macguffin that according to at least one report had managed to disable six players by ramming itself into various body parts on the part of the players. the game couldn't end until someone finally found the little bugger?

yeah, it was the number one sport in the wizarding world here. on the other hand i wasn't a big fan of sports where the rules made no sense to an outsider. come to think of it, that let out a whole freaking load of sports didn't it?

even their local version of chess seemed a bit off to me. i'd spotted one of the kids playing chess and there was just something a bit wrong about having the pawn criticize the player just before another piece lopped off that pawn's head.

so i was under the bleachers. could have been worse. imagine if it had been a girls' bathroom or the prefect hot-tub or some similar area.

"excuse me," i said to a kissing couple of seventh-years as i exited my tardis and locked it behind me. then i thought a moment, unlocked it, and yelled down the corridor about not letting anyone in while i was gone, before locking and leaving again.

oh yeah, they called it "snogging" around here. i didn't know why.

i was genuinely surprised there weren't spells regarding such things. maybe because it was hard to
work wand movements into it?

I thought about that puzzle while I tried to make my way to McGonagall's office. She was the Deputy Headmaster after all.

There was the whole thing about magic and bored wizards. It didn't come up very often unless you were someone who visited universes and alternate planes but if you did it DID come up. The Forgotten Realms worlds were reflections of a game which was itself based on the imagination of an author who had dreams of another world where magic flourished. The dreams being of a world that existed before he dreamed - the whole theory and mechanic involved being way too complicated for most people to bother with.

Continuing with the Forgotten Realms example, in the game there was no "adult content" and plotlines. In the world that was a reflection/origin of the game - there most definitely WAS. Some of which was the result of magically adept individuals going through puberty and having to be reined in by their society.

I wondered how much of THAT sort of thing went on behind the scenes here at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. They taught potions and such here, how many sixth and seventh years brewed up love potions? Tried to poison or jinx rivals or ex-lovers? Heck, Hogwarts had been around long enough that it might even be a rite-of-passage to either be the target or try to do something like that.

Hmmm. I could just picture a party conversation where two people were comparing the first time they'd been love potioned (for the non-Dark factions) or they'd cursed an ex-lover (for the Darker sort) or some such.

And yet, I'd seen darn little in the way of such spells here as in one of the "Forgotten Realms" variant worlds I'd visited. I had encountered a few while trying to find spellbooks for Harry. Some, such as "Enhanced Kiss" or "Recover Stamina", were actually just beneficial and apparently intended for those less than confident about their own natural skills. Some were somewhat understandable when you had wizards who were alone in the towers for extended periods of time. Some of those spells were downright bizarre in fact, and you had to wonder if those spellcrafters had ever even spoken to a member of the gender they were attracted to. Some such spells were truly bizarre and you had to wonder WHY someone would even HAVE a spell like that.

I'd expect that if Hogwarts DID have such things, they'd be in the Restricted Section of the Library but also in a number of private libraries that would find their child had "just borrowed" the books for "research purposes only."

Once I was out of sight of the couple, my thoughts turned to less amusing things.

"Where WERE you?!!" demanded Harry as he dropped out of the air to hover next to me.

"Why didn't you reset the landing beacons?" I countered. "I could have been back with no time displacement. Instead I'm... how much time has passed anyway?"

Harry answered.

"What?" I asked, not noticing immediately how I'd come to a complete stop.

"Six months," Harry repeated. "I'd have to check a calendar to see how many days. It's a whole new school year."

"But - if you had six months why didn't anyone fix the beacons?!" I asked. I felt it was a reasonable
question. Harry at least knew what the things were.

"Crime investigation," said Harry. "They sealed the room."

"'Crime investigation'?" I asked. "What crime?"

"Kidnapping Lucius Malfoy," said Harry.

"You have GOT to be kidding me," I said.

-- --

"Oh, bother," managed Lucius Malfoy.

"What? It's perfect, we can keep your arrival secret and throw that person in Azkaban for your kidnapping," said Narcissa.

"Except that I used the floo network to arrive," said Lucius. "Except that I stopped to get a change of clothing and decent meal at the Club."

"Still, if nobody you knew was there," tried Narcissa.

"Nott, Greengrass, and Abernathy," responded Lucius Malfoy.

"Oh," said Narcissa Malfoy. No chance of getting two of those to agree to back the obvious plan. "Plan B?"

"Plan B," agreed Lucius Malfoy. He considered briefly. "Except that the Vicar cannot cast wizard spells nor use a wand. How do I claim Imperio?"

"Not that Plan B," said Narcissa, shaking her head at her husband. "You were gone six months and four days. Draco's away at school. Fresh sheets."

"Oh," said Lucius. "THAT Plan B."

-- --

"So I've got to go hide again?" I asked with a sigh.

"Yeah, that's -" began Harry.

I saw his eyes widen slightly and immediately tried to cast "Exit!"

Nothing happened. I'd half-expected this because I HAD used it to avoid conflict sufficiently in the past that they'd have tried teleport-disrupting or teleport-blocking spells. In fact, they HAD used them in the past but because "Exit" wasn't a wizard spell those measures hadn't worked. So they'd found something after all.

At which point there was a bright red flash and a whole lot of pain and everything went black.

When I woke up, I was in a jail cell. An old-fashioned one at that. Looked like it had been designed in the 1400s or so kind of old-fashioned.

It took me a few seconds to realize I was missing my right arm from just below the shoulder. I also had no legs from the knee down. From the way the pain jabbed into me on the side, I had at least one broken limb.
"Just lovely," I tried to say when I noticed the lack of sound. So I'd been silenced.

Okay, this was COMPLETELY screwed up.

If this was how the Wizarding World treated those who shook up the status quo it was no bloody wonder they were screwed up to the extent they were.

A hooded cloak with a Something in it passed the bars of my cell. Whatever it was looked into me. That had to be a Dementor. A soul-sucking Demon of Despair. Well, the extremely cold jail cell and THAT told me at least where I was.

Azkaban - the wizard prison.

Well, this completely sucked.

-- --

Amelia Bones was suspicious but officially her hands were tied.

She knew a fair number of her Aurors had been mobilized. She knew that they were the ones she'd had suspicions of for some time now. No evidence so they were still there.

She knew something had gone on, and that Fudge was in it up to his neck.

She knew this because she'd just received word that she was NOT to investigate and that she was forbidden to speak about it all.

Which had basically confirmed to her that the whole situation was basically a total clusterdump. Fudge was doing something dicey or questionable and throwing his weight around to keep it quiet.

And now Albus Dumbledore was trying to reach her through the floo. Just lovely.

-- --

Okay, I was in Azkaban Prison - the wizard prison set on an island off the coast of Scotland somewhere. There was a silence spell on my cell. I was also missing an arm (right) and both legs. I had a smashed-in section of ribcage. There was a literal soul-sucking demon standing outside the cell looking for a way to get in.

My clothes were down to a pair of boxer shorts and a t-shirt that I'd worn under everything else. The holy symbols I'd had under everything else were gone, as were my various gadgets and devices.

Yeah, the situation was seriously into the suckage zone.

With only one hand and no holy symbol, there were limited spells I could access due to what were called the "somatic component" of the spell. One had to make these gestures to shape the magic.

With the silence spell, that further limited the spells that I could actually cast.

I fell onto the floor and had to struggle to remain conscious from the increased pain from my ribs. Using a bit of blood and my left hand, I scribed out some fuuinjutsu that should have summoned my equipment.

Nothing. Either it was blocked or my stuff had been destroyed.
I instead scribed some simple runes that would cause a heat bubble to form. If I didn't freeze to death in the next few minutes, it would vastly improve my chances of getting out.

IF fuuinjutsu would even work here in a jail cell meant to hold wizards.

-- --

Harry stared at Albus Dumbledore. "You have GOT to be kidding."

"No, not in this case," said the Headmaster.

Minerva McGonagall felt the need to facepalm. "Albus, I have eyewitnesses from Slytherin and Hufflepuff. His Tardis is still sitting under the quidditch bleachers. Harry himself was stunned by the mass number of spells, but clearly saw them before he was hit. How can anyone believe that the Aurors don't have him?"

"The Ministry reports they do not have him and no Aurors were present," said Albus Dumbledore. "The charges they have on him were considerable. Perhaps he simply went back to where he came from?"

Harry and Minerva were now facepalming.

"No," admitted Albus Dumbledore. "I don't believe that for a moment either."

"So what do I do now?" asked Harry. "I must say the magical government doesn't really impress me so far."

"You are not alone in that assessment, it is what we have to work with nonetheless," countered Dumbledore. "The upper levels of the government deny they have the Vicar. However, when I contacted Amelia Bones - she has responded repeatedly with a 'no comment' when pressed."

"So she knows something but has been forbidden to say," said Minerva. "Well, that's just lovely."

"As to what you can do now, Harry," said Albus Dumbledore. "Wait. There is very little that can be done unless they actually admit to having him."

-- --

Cleric spells were out. I didn't have anything that would get me out of here that didn't require gestures and/or spoken triggers.

Fuuinjutsu was out. I didn't have that much blood to do anything fancy.

That left channeled divine energy.

There were now nine of the Dementors waiting right on the other side of the bars. This was most unlovely.

I couldn't do a traditional position for praying, lack of legs and all, and even with the bubble of warmer air in my cell the chill was pretty bad. So I had to try and channel divine magic directly. This could be a problem in that I had to open myself to influence and I was NOT a cleric of a specific deity. I basically had no real control of which or even if any deity answered my call.

The door swung open, Dementors began streaming in.

I opened myself and felt a connection to Something form.
AUTHOR NOTES:

If anyone has a preference for the course's names, please comment. Not sure how long I'll have them around, depends on feedback I suppose.

If anyone has a preference for the Being, please say so in a comment. Right now I'm leaning towards an Egyptian named Bes.
Chapter Summary

In which our heroes go their separate ways, not realizing there are actually only a few chapters left.

-- --

One Floo Over
chapter 28
Harry Potter and the Dementor Purge

-- --

There were several problems with just opening oneself to extraplanar deities, particularly if one did not have a specific patron deity. Just about Anything could answer that call, as long as it wasn't too far different in general outlook. Someone specifically of the Light wouldn't be able to channel a Being of the Dark and the reverse was true.

I felt myself being shoved to the side as whatever-it-was apparently felt a hands-on approach was needed. Also apparently this was not a minor servant or agent of a deity. Nope. This was either a full deity or Incarnate or something along those lines.

Everything went to white and I wasn't aware of what was going on for an unspecified time. It wasn't a possession in the normally accepted definition and there was no maliciousness involved. It was simply there was barely enough room in me for this Other, rather like trying to fit an elephant into a room where it would have to hold its breath just to fit in there. Except more so as the room could stretch a bit but no more and the room itself would rupture beyond a certain period of time just from trying to contain that particular elephant.

There were reasons things like this were definitely considered a) a bad idea, and b) a very very very last resort.

-- --

"Whoa," said Harry, orienting in a particular direction. "Did you feel that?"

"What?" asked Hermione, looking up from her potion-brewing.

Severus Snape was busy, checking potions. "You, you, and you. Throw your potions out and start over. What in blazes WAS that?"

"Professor?" asked one of the Slytherins. "What was what?"

"You have to be magically sensitive to have picked up on it," said Daphne Greengrass. "Something just sent a ripple of magic through the room despite the wards here."

"The wards are tied to the leylines," said Professor Snape thoughtfully. "Something disturbed the leylines. Whatever it was, besides being quite inconvenient, disturbed the potions which were at a
more delicate stage. Curious."

"Is that why there are red bubbles coming out of my Boil Cure?" asked Neville.

"No, I believe that is because you weren't paying attention with the porcupine quills," said Professor Snape, so distracted that he almost forgot to take points away from a student. "Minus three points." Almost.

-- --

"What the blazes WAS that?" asked Amelia Bones.

"BIG PANIC!" said a house elf as it ran around in circles.

"I don't know," said Albus Dumbledore, not at all sorry that a discussion with the head of the Auror department had been derailed. Mainly because apparently the DMLE wanted the travelling phone box locked down and transported to their own storage. "Moxy?"

Moxy the house elf dove into a houseplant and vanished.

"Moxy?" asked Dumbledore again.

"Mustn't speak. Name it and it will hear!" squeaked the houseplant, or rather the elf that had somehow managed to hide itself in a plant less than a quarter of his size.

"Well, if you can't name it, what IS it?" asked Dumbledore.

"A Power, a Power has descended from the Heavens," said the houseplant.

"I heard that capitalized," noted Amelia Bones. "Should I be concerned?"

"Something shook the leylines under England rather like a clothesline that a bird has settled onto," said Albus Dumbledore. "I am rather concerned about that myself. Moxy, what kind of 'Power' are we talking about?"

-- --

I blinked. I was outside the prison. I was not alone.

"Are you... back then?" asked the scruffy-looking fellow.

"Uhm, yeah. The Reverend Argent, frequently called 'the Vicar' among less polite terms," I answered. "You?"

"Sirius Black, late of Azkaban."

"I take it HE let you out?" I asked.

"He took one look at me, proclaimed me 'innocent' and ripped my door open and told me to follow him," said Sirius. "Shite, I was more scared of him than the Dementors. He scared the bloody Dementors!"

I checked and I was once again possessed of two arms and two legs and... "What the heck am I wearing?"

"Don't know," said Sirius. "After you did that and exploded and ATE three Dementors, I wasn't
going to comment on your fashion sense. Or rather HIS fashion sense."

"I really am beginning to wonder what happened," I mused aloud. "Not to mention who 'he' was."

"Not to mention 'where'," said Sirius Black. "Where are we anyway? It's not a place I recognize."

"Ah," I said, looking around. "France."

"France?!" exclaimed Sirius Black.

"We're at the Delacour Estate, in fact," I noted aloud. "There's the building where the veela stay when they're visiting. I scribed some wards for them last time I was here. Allure-blocking wards, so they can relax there without driving any of the field workers crazy."

"Veela? Are you serious?" asked Sirius.

"No, you're Sirius. I'm the Vicar. And those are indeed veela waving at us from the balcony."

Sirius blinked and stared at me for a moment. "Huh. So that's how it feels to have that joke from the other side."

"And don't think I've forgotten you haven't answered MY questions," I pointed out as we started walking towards the house.

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Hermione Granger - the Researcher.
Padma Patil - the Investigator.
Parvati Patil - the Shield.
Cho Chang - the Seeker.
Lavender Brown - the Gunner.
Fleur Delacour - the Maiden of Fire.
Hannah Abbott - The Healer.

Harry's Harem was a term used early on, though it was inaccurate as that term indicated Harry was in a position of control and that was not the case. The Fellowship Of The Cards was another term thrown out. So they referred to it by a number of terms but had never settled on a single acceptable phrase.

Harry himself was in Ravenclaw, which was the Hogwarts House that tended to collect bookworms and study-holics. Intellect was their main focus. Of the group, Padma and Cho were both in Ravenclaw though Cho Chang was a year older.

Well, except for those two weeks where his room had deleted and he'd ended up staying in the Hufflepuff dorm area because of some screw up in the magical floorplan.

Apparently it had been a big deal at the time for both Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw.

The Delacour family had a number of tales about all this due to the girls using the cards for communication and Fleur relaying much of the goings-on at Hogwarts to them.

A lot of which honestly sounded a lot funnier than it probably had been to the people actually involved at that time.

"-and then Ron Weasley managed to turn himself into a girl and then insult everyone of the female
"gender while it was on. Of course, it didn't last. Changed back into a boy two months later and then whipped it out in the Great Hall to prove it," said Fleur. "Ah. Even Monsieur Weasley found that a bit much when he realized what he had done."

"May I say how glad I am that Beauxbatons is rather less problematic," said Apolline Delacour.

"You have, my dear, on many occasions," said Fleur's father with evident amusement.

"Some things bear repeating," said Apolline.

"I take it things like that don't happen at your school?" I asked, sipping on a hot tea.

"How come I understand everything?" asked Sirius Black.

"I worked out how the Tardis translation field worked and came up with a version using Arithmancy and Runes," said Fleur. "I had help through our communications - Cho Chang and Hermione Granger were both quite helpful in that. I plan on submitting the Ring Of Universal Translation for patent within the magical world as soon as I am of age. Then I shall submit the spellwork for my NEWT proficiencies."

"Very efficient," I told her.

"Thank you," said Fleur. "The prototype is too bulky and weighty to be of use day-to-day, but has an area effect. When I perfect the ring version, it will be an individual effect."

"Seems to work fine so far," noted Sirius.

"Right now it is just doing French-to-English and English-to-French," said Fleur. "That sometimes has problems, but is mostly working. Some of the other languages like Chinese and Japanese end up more problematic."

"The words are right but the meanings and grammar are off?" I ventured.

"Wee," said Fleur. "That sometimes becomes a problem. As to your question regarding our school, we have only had one incident this year which might have any competition with the doings at Hogwarts."

"Oh? What was that?" asked Sirius.

Fleur settled into her chair a bit more. "Student named Ted Carroll. Transfer student from Ilvermorny. Literally ran into cousin Camille on his first day."

"A cousin?" asked Sirius.

"Half-veela," said Apolline. "I have not heard this story."

"She pranked him as payback, I believe she switched out a bottle of shampoo for hair dye." Fleur took a sip from her glass, obviously drawing things out for drama. "He responded by using a similar substitution, changing out one of her quills for a Tickling Quill. She didn't discover that until that night."

"So when she tried to do her homework she was mercilessly tickled instead," said Sirius. He nodded. "James did something similar to Lily in Fifth Year."

"Oh, I think I know where this is going," said Apolline with a chuckle.
"Yes, it was quite obvious to everyone except them," said Fleur. "Except that Ines was quite intrigued by the charm work that Monsieur Carroll did with the loufa. Actually sounded exactly like Maurice Chevalier."

"Let me guess, the loufa sang 'Thank Heaven For Little Girls' in the shower?" asked Sirius.

Fleur nodded. "It perhaps backfired a bit as Camille threw it away but it was rescued and kept turning up until the charms failed."

"Huh, I wonder how he did it," said Sirius, obviously trying to work out a way to do something along those lines.

"It would still be just another little thing except for how the issue resolved itself," said Fleur.

"Oh, how?" I asked.

"You being a man of the cloth, I will only say that it involved a broom closet, a 'clothes-begone' spell, lemon pudding, and all three of them," said Fleur. "Oh, and they are probably still serving detentions."

"What?" I asked, then thought about it. "Ah. Did they plan simultaneous pranks and everything went wrong?"

"Exactly so. And Ines was trying to get the two together and always did fancy cousin Camille a bit," said Fleur. "Quite the scandal. Even for France. Somewhat."

"Two veela?" asked Sirius. "Is the poor boy dead?"

"Why would you think that?" asked Fleur, confused for just a second before she winced. "Don't read the Prophet. I realize it's about the only wizard newspaper in England but... Look, just compare a news story from them with the same story in other papers. Once you do, you'll realize the best use for the Prophet is lining the bottom of a bird cage."

"I see," said Sirius, not really seeing but able to admit the Prophet wasn't always accurate.

"Even so, that is hardly anything compared to what happened in the Forbidden Forest," said Apolline. "It was bad enough to hear about that - but then this Professor Quirrel!"

"Why, what happened?" I asked.

-- --

**Several months previously:**

"There is no reason we should be in the Forbidden Forest serving detention!" insisted Draco Malfoy. "We're FIRST YEARS! Detention should not involve the chance of grievous bodily harm!"

"It's odd that you and I agree on anything," responded Harry. "In this case, perhaps. Do you think Filch would be better?"

"He'd have us chained to the wall," said Draco. "Probably a few threats and him oiling some torture equipment."

"You think so?" asked Harry.

"Father's done similar things," said Draco.
"Hold up," whispered Harry. "Something up ahead."

"Ah," said Draco, holding his wand sufficiently tight that his knuckles were white.

"Muffliato," cast Harry in a whisper as he moved forward.

Draco blinked, thinking that was a fairly advanced and handy spell and followed Harry Potter - reasoning that if he had to turn and run it was best if he had that small amount of lead.

There was a fallen unicorn there a bit beyond some brush, and a black cloaked shape slurping blood up from a horrible-looking wound.

Harry Potter announced his presence with one of his odd spells. "Sagitta Magica! Nine Light Arrows!"

Draco recognized the shield the cloaked figure used to block five of the arrows, the other four curving in midflight to try and flank the target.

The figure was counter-casting quickly and actually threw two spells at once.

"Round Shield!" cast Harry. "Lightning Arrow! Draco - sparks!"

Draco felt an immediate desire to argue with Potter, but had to admit that WAS a good idea. He sent the shower of red sparks overhead to let Hagrid and the others know they were in trouble.

Harry was now sending unincanted spells with jabbing wand actions towards the figure who was countering each spell just as quickly.

"Here now!" said Hagrid's voice, coming in at high speed.

The cloaked figure broke off, retreating through the trees while firing off reddish bolts and scythe-shapes of blue fire.

"What the hell WAS that?" asked Draco, coming out from behind the tree he'd hidden behind.

"Not a Dementor, but looked a lot like one," answered Harry. "I've seen pictures. Maybe some form of undead?"

"Oh, thank you," said Draco. "That'll help me sleep soundly after this."

Harry shrugged. "Know any healing spells?"

"Do I look like a bloody healer?" asked Draco. "First year student, not one who goes off and studies magic on other worlds?"

"Wow, two points in one night," said Harry. "You're surprising me, Mister Malfoy."

"What'd I miss?" asked Hagrid as he finally arrived, Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger in tow with a rather large mastiff a few steps behind.

"Everything, actually," said Draco, his attempt at snark betrayed a bit by the quaver in his voice.

-- --

"Undead?" asked Sirius. "Like an inferi?"
"Something along those lines, or at least that was what was thought at the time," said Fleur. "It turned out to be a bit different when the incident with Quirrel happened later in the year."

"Oh?" prompted Sirius.

-- --

A few months previously:

Harry sighed. "This was pathetic. Was this supposed to actually keep people out?"

"What?" asked Quirrel.

"Seriously?" asked Harry, hooking a thumb towards the curtain of fire behind him. "THAT was supposed to keep people out?"

"What ARE you going on about?" asked Quirrel, sounding very puzzled.

"A Cerebus who falls asleep at music, a plant covered in the first-year Herbology text, a game of chess, a single troll, and a bunch of potions with a riddle?" Harry tsked and shook his head. "Doesn't that seem kind of, well, contrived? Pathetic?"

"Are you stalling for time, Potter?" asked Quirrel.

"Seriously? Oh, by the way, nice diction. You wouldn't believe how annoying that stutter was in class. Back to my point - what kind of security is it if a moderately well-studied first year student can get through the layers of security? Does this seem more an obstacle course or perhaps... a trap?" Harry waited a few second, seeing the idea penetrate and make the Defense professor look momentarily uncertain.

"Sssss," came a sound from the turban. "Of coursse itsss a trap. With Dumbledore away though, there isss no one to try and sssstop me."

"Lord Voldemort, I presume?" asked Harry.

"You know?" asked Quirrel.

"The Vicar told me," Harry said, tapping his forehead. "Knew you were around somewhere. Hardly expected you to be under a turban though. Can I tell the Weasley Twins? I want to get a picture of their faces when they realize they were bouncing snowballs off the face of someone they can't even bring themselves to say the name of."

"Weasssley Twinssss, eh? I'll deal with them later," said the voice. "Quirrel. Remove the damn hat. I want to sssee my next victim persssonally."

Harry watched as the turban came off and Quirrel turned so the face on the back of his head was facing him.

"Did you look like that to begin with? I mean this snake-motif thing is going a bit far if you sacrificed your nose for the cause of evil," said Harry.

"Your sssssuffering will be cut sssshort only becaussse I have other thingssss to do of greater importance," spat Voldemort's face.

"I do kind of wonder how you manage to speak," said Harry. "How does the jaw hinge there?"
"I..." Lord Voldemort stopped and considered for a moment before shaking off the concept. "You can't possibly understand the level of genius I have employed."

"'You cannot know the power of the Dark Side'," quoted Harry, walking around the chamber. "Seriously though, the Vicar figured it out within the first month of meeting me. One of the differences between clerical magic and wizardly magic I suppose. He found the bit of your soul in my scar and sealed it. I wanted it out but he told me that it was probably involved in some sort of prophesy thing."

Lord Voldemort hesitated and for the first time seemed unsure. "The Vicar isn't here now but I admit he is a wildcard I did not predict. This clerical magic is not of any consequence though."

"Except you're trying to get your body back," pointed out Harry. "Isn't that why you're trying for the Stone? Whereas the Vicar has spells to resurrect the dead under certain circumstances like the soul not moving on. That would have been a lot easier, don't you think? Why didn't you just try to trick him into resurrecting you?"

"What?" asked Voldemort.

"What?" asked Quirrel.

"Is there an echo in here?" asked Harry, who then shrugged. "Clerical magic. I can't do it either. Apparently not enough spiritual presence or something. So, the last obstacle is this Mirror of Erised? A mirror which shows you what you desire and not what's actually there?"

"So you know how to get it out?" asked Quirrel.

"Not a clue actually," said Harry. "Smashing the mirror might work or might cause the stone to be lost forever."

"So you don't actually know," said Lord Voldemort.

"You honestly think Dumbledore would outright tell me? Come on, the man tries to lead me along by my nose with the occasional hint or clue or something," said Harry. "Seriously you two. I'm eleven years old. I'm not old enough to be told anything actually important but this whole mysterious elder crap is wearing pretty thin at this point. Can't any of you just go ahead and TELL me what's going on? I don't really even know what your Ultimate Motive is at this point."

"I suppose asking you to join forces with me would be fruitless at thisss point?" asked Voldemort, wondering how HE could say things like that so that you could hear the capital letters.

"Yeah, pretty much," said Harry. "So are we supposed to fight now? An eleven year old student versus the most feared dark wizard in history?"

"Yes, Harry Potter, now you will die for my greater glory," said Voldemort, his red eyes glowing.

Harry brought his wand up in a dueling pose. "My name is Harry Potter. You killed my father. Prepare to die. Again."

"Expelliarmus!"

"Sagitta Magica, Sixteen lightning arrows!"

-- --

"I'm surprised this was discussed," said Sirius. "I'd have thought Dumbledore would want it all kept
secret.

I considered telling him about the Pactio Cards and how the girls had likely been in constant communication while all this was going on. No, he just knew they were communicating but Fleur hadn't mentioned the cards specifically. "Which of Harry's friends was along for the ride?"

"Hermione Granger had made it as far as the potion room and had sent a message to the Patil Twins and Miss Chang," answered Fleur. "As to keeping it secret? You do know how Harry is fond of big explosions, yes?"

"Ah," I said. "I take it the chamber in question was somewhat damaged?"

--

A few months previously:

"Oh crap! The Chamber just exploded," sent Hermione Granger.

"Harry must be getting serious," said Cho Chang, eyes narrowed as a faint shudder seemed to pass through the castle.

"Serious? He's gone completely mental," responded Hermione through her Pactio Card.

"That was a short trip," sent Lavender.

Cho noticed a lance of brilliant white energy coming out of the ground and shooting skyward. "Hermione? How many of those odd magical devices did Harry bring with him?"

"I convinced him to leave the grenades behind, but he must have kept one or two. Voldemort just managed to disarm Harry and melt the plasma cannon. I think that was a one-shot anyway. Oh crap! Harry's just pulled out BOSSI!" sent Hermione.

Two figures flew up through the hole melted in the ground, neither apparently feeling the need to use broomsticks.

"They're fighting in the courtyard now," said Cho, deciding to give a play-by-play from the window seat she had. One hand held her Pactio Card and the other held her wand - just in case. "Voldemort just threw three snakes at Harry. Harry used a cone of flame to incinerate them and now Quirrel's robes are on fire."

"I WANT that spell," sent Parvati Patil. "Almost there."

"I'm not sure what good my artifact will do in a literal firefight," sent Hermione.

"Now Quirrel is firing off the Killing Curse," reported Cho. "Kicks up a divot in the ground when it hits. Oh, Harry just made multiple copies of himself and started darting around."

"Those are mirror images of himself," sent Hermione. "I know that one. Can't cast it yet. They can only go a short distance from him, and they're just images. He keeps trying to come up with a version that makes solid copies but hasn't quite gotten it."

"Pity," said Cho Chang. "That'd be handy about now. Voldemort keeps dispelling images and Harry keeps making more. Except the real Harry is disillusioned and aiming BOSSI."

"He can't use that unless Voldemort goes out a distance," reported Hermione. "I take it you're using your artifact?"
"Yes," said Cho. "Otherwise I wouldn't be able to see the magical fields."

"You can see the magic directly?" asked a different voice.

Cho jumped. "Professor Flitwick?"

"Nice to see at least one of my ravens has enough sense not to get involved directly," said Professor Flitwick, coming up alongside her. "What's a 'bossy'?"

"I thought I charmed that door locked," said Cho, who then winced. "Yes. Of course you'd be able to get through without difficulty."

"I take it from your comment that someone snuck up?" sent Hermione.

"Yes, Professor Flitwick," said Cho. "Uhm. Harry is over there about to use a sort of magical weapon."

"Ah yes, his father's cloak of invisibility as well, I see Albus returned it to him," said Filius, who shrugged then. "Honestly, I'm not surprised. So, what is he-"

The real Harry Potter turned visible just before the world seemed to explode.

-- --

"So that's where it went," I said, facepalming. "Tell me he didn't use BOSSI on a target close enough he was in the blast radius."

"Is this 'bossy' thing that dangerous?" asked Sirius.

"BOSSI is an acronym, but I won't confuse you with what it stands for," I told him and the Delacours. "Basically it uses a shell about the length of a wand and about as thick as Fleur's fist. It's something that could slay one of the local dragons in a single shot."

"According to Hermione the outer walls of Hogwarts on that side were scorched and several windows blown in," said Fleur. "The school healer had to treat a number of glass injuries because at least half the school was watching at that point."

"I take it he killed Voldemort then?" I asked.

"No. Voldemort dodged the attack, it went up and hit a flock of geese that were above the castle," said Fleur. "It was when Voldemort came closer that Harry was able to use a short-range teleport of some kind and punch Professor Quirrel in the face. At which point apparently the Professor began burning away to ash and the ghost of Voldemort went screaming away from the Castle. Of course, by that point Dumbledore had returned and gave chase but apparently was not able to catch up."

"So the entire castle saw Voldemort escaping?" I asked. That would probably get Harry some hostility as he had failed to finish off the bad guy. Which wasn't all that unexpected though as I'd expect Moldy-Shorts to show up at least two more times. It was in-genre after all.

"More than half at this point saw it but wasn't sure what they were seeing," answered Fleur.

"Ah, I see, they used unfamiliar spells?" asked Sirius.

"Also went too fast for individual spells to be discerned according to Hermione," said Fleur.

-- --
"AIGHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!" screamed Argus Filch, falling to his knees.
"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

"The house elves can fix it, man up man," said Severus Snape.

"There's things they won't do," said Filch. "Cleaning up smouldering bits of dark lord. Maybe the big whopping divots in the ground."

"Well, if not them, then have students serving detention fix things," suggested Snape, looking around at the smoking craters and blasted shrubbery. "Yes, I do think a few detentions are in order."

"Not Potter," said Filch. "Besides, I was emoting. If Potter did it, I'd expect to have more holes in the building afterwards."

"Point," agreed Snape. "Longbottom's burnt through a few cauldrons. While hopeless in the fine art of potion-making, I do believe he has acceptable scores in transfiguration."

"Oh," said Filch. "How soon?"

"He'll probably melt another cauldron in next class, I'll send him by," said Snape.

-- --

"I thought he was just going to be gone briefly," said one of the coursers.

"I thought so too," agreed the second.

"Complications happen," put in the third.

"He's mysteriously late," appended the first.

"You really like that word," pointed out the second.

"I like the sound of it for mysterious reasons," admitted the first.

"So, what names are we going with?" asked the third. "I agree that we should go with a theme."

"The Great Mysteria!" tried the first.

"No," said the second and third courser.

"The Great Mysteriosa?" tried the first.

"No," repeated the second and third courser.

"Taco, Burrito, and Chimichanga?" tried the first.

"Not even on the list," said the second.

"Fine, fine," said the first courser. "Ah. I'm not going to go with 'Frodo' or 'Farrah' - that's no good at all."

"We'd have to change clothes, but I am rather fond of the idea of the 'Charlee Angel' names."

"I'm in favor of new clothes, but I don't care for those names," responded the third.

"So, the Angels?" asked the first, pointing to one set on a post-it note.
"I could live with that one," agreed the second.

"Then it's decided," finished the third.

"Also need a hair styling or whatever they call it," said the second.

"Right! We are therefore Team Angel!"

-- --

"I just had a feeling of doom and a premonition of escalating destruction sweep over me," I said, looking somewhat nervously around me.

"Do you get that often?" said Sirius Black.

"Well, oddly enough, that describes an awful lot of my life," I said. "Now that I think of it at any rate. Maybe it was nothing."

"Maybe," said Sirius. "So, what is the plan now?"

"Now - you need to recover. The Delacours have offered to let you stay over at the veela apartments where apparently you're unlikely to be found by anyone except veela visitors." I jerked a thumb towards the small apartment building.

"Actually, it's over there," said Sirius, pointing in a different direction.

"Whatever. You'll need some recovery time after your incarceration. Meanwhile, my own magic is just about completely depleted so I'm out of action for at least a couple of days," I told him.

-- --

Albus Dumbledore had been born in 1882 to a wizarding family that was old and steeped in tradition. He had first attended Hogwarts School Of Witchcraft and Wizardry in 1893.

What he was used to in terms of muggle society and its culture and morals was quite different from 1991 and in some ways he still reacted as if the only thing to have changed was the technology the muggles had come to be dependent on.

In 1893, there were no airports. The Independent Labour Party had just had their first meeting. George the Fifth married. India was still under British rule. A young lady by the name of Lizzie Borden was acquitted of murder. The flagship of the British Mediterranean Fleet, the HMS Victoria, collided with another ship and went down. Doctors were protesting the idea of having to scrub their hands before performing surgery.

Wizards having their own hidden society and disdaining the muggle world meant that they were often out of touch with the shifting value system and technology of that other world.

Minerva McGonagall was largely in the same boat as Albus though to a slightly lesser extent. Which was why she had come to a halt in front of a display in a storefront a bit down the road from the Leaky Cauldron. A flatscreen television was displaying elves of an entirely different sort than that she was used to.

"-and so we come to these elven refugees. Elves? Really? In this day and age? Next thing you know someone will be talking about a hidden society of wizards and witches or something!"

Minerva winced slightly at the comment from behind her from another passerby to his companion.
"They're real, I saw one at Harrod's last week," said that companion.

"Gotta be just makeup and prosthetics," replied the man. "It's like that Vicar guy. It's all just a stunt by the Beeb."

"No, I saw one," said the female of the two. "It was one of the dark elves. If it had been makeup she'd have been leaving bits of it behind everytime she tried on an outfit."

"Prolly was. The shopkeep was likely in on it."

"Yer an idiot sometimes you know," said the girl. "Cute idiot, to be sure. Look, the more people in on a secret - the more likely someone's gonna blab it. Besides, that Professor Gadget guy's real and ain't he just as much the odd duck?"

"He's not real either," stated the guy. "Seriously, you're that gullible?"

The girl pointed at a dirigible going over the city. Within a thundercloud that flashed multi-colored lightning bolts.

"Not real, just a special effect," said the guy, refusing to look at it.

"Honestly, I wish there WAS a secret society of wizards and witches," said the girl. "Imagine the shopping!"

"I don't know why, but just thinking about that gives me a headache," said the man.

Professor McGonagall glanced at the two. The "thinking about it gives me a headache" sounded like an Obliviate to her.

"Huh. Well, did you see the film of those Deathlaks?" asked the girl. "Like daleks from the series, except they got that skull-face thing in the front."

"Sounds like a laxative to me."
Harry Potter and the naked courser

Chapter Summary

In which things move along, with a learning curve for individuals who were literally raised in a factory.

-- --

One Floo Over
chapter 29
Harry Potter and the Naked Courser

-- --

K8's head moved around to better scan the area with her visual sensors.

"That's all the information available on Curie's transplant, honestly I was surprised it worked at all."

"If all that is involved in the transfer of data, then what is the potential problem?" asked K8.

"If that was all that happened, then why did Curie's original body become inoperable?" asked Doctor Amari. "Data transfers work by duplicating data at a second location and then deleting the original. Not everything was deleted, the original operating system should have allowed that Mister Handy robot to be restored. It does not."

K8 regarded the Doctor with her head cocking in a birdlike manner.

"I don't KNOW why it doesn't work," said Doctor Amari. "And if you're going to complain about me repairing and trying to get Curie's old body operating as a basic Mister Handy unit, have you seen how much dust accumulates in here?"

"Understood," said K8. "Let me go over the accumulated data and I will see if anything turns up relating to this."

-- --

"No, you can't use copyrighted names. Eventually you'll get sued," said Harry.

"Oh," said one of the coursers.

"Ugh, what a pain," said another courser.

"You said it," said the first.

"Aya, Sigrid, and Zoe then," said the third.

"Loading personality emulating profile," said the second.

"We're not robots you know," said the third. "Or LMDs for that matter."
"What's an 'LMD'?" asked Harry, more bemused than anything else at this point.

"Life Model Decoy," said Zoe. "The Vicar had some comic books in the library."

"'Had'?" asked Harry.

"A tiny mistake in the bath," admitted Sigrid, the blonde of the trio.

"At least we got all the soap out," added Aya, the Asian-looking one.

"In the bath?" asked Harry.

"It wasn't until that issue of 'X-Men' that we realized that it was a sort-of Roman bath soaking-tub and the soaps weren't just over by the showering areas for a reason."

"Oh dear," said Harry, thinking about other disasters that might be waiting behind closed doors.

"Well, mostly got the soap out," said Aya.

-- --

I sat back and watched the workers moving through the vineyards. I'd never been "into" wine, so a lot of what they were doing seemed perfectly mysterious. Were they picking grapes or just inspecting them or was there some sort of grape-parasite they were trying to get rid of?

Sirius would have to stay here a bit. His health and magic would need time to repair itself, there being only so much that a Cure Light Wounds could do after all. Long-term exposure to those dementor-things would take time to recover from.

I wanted to get back to my TARDIS, there was so much that I had on my "to do" list. Plus, there were three Institute coursers loose on there who might find some of the more bizarre things I'd apparently accumulated on my travels and dumped into the library for later investigation. Apparently there were universes where Marvel Comics had a cinematic and television presence, and in at least one case there was an anime. An anime based on a group of SHIELD agents. Where Phil Coulson had lost a hand in one season and had a bionic replacement, where a martial artist named Melinda May was studying chi attacks, and apparently things tied into various other movies or series or something in a typical comic-booky metaverse kind of thing.

There were even worse things in there for three very impressionable synthetic humans to watch. If I got back and one of them was wearing a magical-girl outfit or cat-ears, I was going to have to take a vacation or something.

Fortunately the comic books were hidden well away. Spandex uniforms would send all sorts of wrong messages.

Well, at least there was no way that one series could be found. I'd ejected the manga into the Astral Void. Superpowered ninja maids - not something to want anywhere near a Tardis. The things that could go wrong were the stuff of nightmares. Just imagine what could happen if another trip into the past happened with a native getting hold of the books and the traditional uniform of some elite soldier unit ended up with white aprons or something.

Though most likely they wouldn't be with me for very long. There were too many things mapping over from the TV series for me to believe any Companion would be sticking around for long - in fact most would only be for one particular story arc.
"I'm not the main character you know," I reminded the heavens, turning my gaze skyward. "I'm supposed to get the ball rolling or to introduce a main character or leave a door unlocked for the hero to get through in a pinch."

Nobody answered, unless you counted the distant voice of a veela calling for Sirius to come get his lunch.

Which was a bit odd as it was still fairly early, but maybe that was some bit of local custom?

I turned back to a bit of fuuinjutsu I was trying to work out. Blast tags and storage seals were two of the very simplest bits of the version of runecraftery I was working on. Blast tags exploded, with the simplest being something that basically made a popping noise and released a tiny bit of smoke. The simplest storage seals would hold an object roughly the size of your palm in a piece of paper the size of a post-it note. Barrier tags could be as delicate as a soap bubble at one end of things. It was the other end of things that things got increasingly tricky - it wasn't simply a matter of throwing more magical energy into the thing you were trying to do or use a bigger piece of paper. Cascading Spell Failure was a bit of a problem when you tried to do that sort of thing.

Still, that WAS why I'd come up with the whole moonbase workshop thing. It was contained, nearly inaccessible by normal means, and had no neighbors to be inconvenienced when something went boom. Besides, I felt it netted me cool points.

The problem was that I had no Tardis to get there.

If, as it appeared, I had been a direct channel for an Egyptian god-fragment - then I was going to show signs of strain from the ordeal. And make no bones about it, cleric or not, it was going to be a strain unless you were a Chosen or Avatar of that particular deity. Fuuinjutsu was fairly safe to work on at the moment, trying to sneak back into wizarding Britain and retrieving my Tardis from a hostile government of spellcasters was not.

I spent about an hour checking and found those signs of strain. Magical energies were low and recovery was shaky. My physical energies were mostly recovered but there were still muscle tremors and odd burn marks. So.

Bes. The Guardian Lion. The god of newborns, family, pregnant women, hearth and home. Demon-queller. Poison-warder. A wrestler and a dwarf among the gods of Egypt. Lord of Punt. I was pretty sure I'd never met him, but if he was as ready for a good scrap as some of the legends listed in the Delacour library - it was likely that he'd be one to volunteer to tear his way through the wards of Azkaban.

I tried something at that thought, then was mildly surprised when I got the results on the first try. Also got a headache that felt as if a troll had decided to try batting my head straight off my neck.

Apparently Bes had been the first responder. Hephaestus and Toltiir had apparently been watching, as well as Susanou.

Hephaestus I knew. I'd studied under the god of crafting, worked in his workshop for a few projects. He'd likely just gotten a bit curious about what was going on, recognizing his mark on me. Doubtful that the god would remember me specifically, just that someone who'd studied under him was going off and doing something recklessly dangerous had gotten his attention.

Susanou depended on which version/aspect it had been. In most variations the Japanese storm-god aspect was very similar to his Viking counterparts. Fights, partying, feasting, and repeat.
Toltiir was more concerning. The chaos cat. An elder god who existed before the universe itself. A god of mischief without a lot of control, much less understanding the sort of concerns of four-dimensional reality dwellers had. A Being that mucked about with Reality because it was amusing.

Turning Bes or Hephaestus loose in this world was one thing. Both had their agendas, areas of interest, and could be counted on to act in specific manners. Bes would quell demons, play with children, and would quite likely amuse himself by hanging around with the Gryffindor contingent. Hephaestus would look over some of the spellwork and constructs, say something about crappy half-work, and then start "fixing" things. Susanou would likely find some magical tavern, party down, get into a fight, and then leave things looking as if a monsoon had come through.

Toltiir could change the moon into cottage cheese and then forget all about it as soon as a distraction showed up. Which, considering that I had a moon base, would be horribly inconvenient for me. I'd imagine the walls would collapse almost immediately.

I knew that at least some of my still-missing memories would have to do with interactions with at least one of those deities. I didn't remember any details on any of them, but it seemed to be very likely if these had responded so quickly to my request that we shared some history.

Death? Well, this was a mortal plane so that Aspect of Reality was everywhere anyway. I vaguely remembered a fondness for puns. And cats for some reason.

I suppose that being an Aspect of Reality allowed enough time for some eccentricities to develop.

Studying in the Delacour library also gave me an answer to something that had been bothering me for some time. The Imperious Curse was an Unforgivable, very seriously against the law and not just in Britain. Yet they taught about LOVE POTIONS in school. So the question was - why was a mind-control spell so against the law when what was essentially a mind-control potion was okay?

Love potions had been around for thousands of years apparently, almost as old as magic itself. Among pureblood families it was almost a coming-of-age thing to have been dosed with a love potion. It was like alcohol in the "muggle world" in some respects.

A comedian named Jerry Seinfeld had observed that a staggeringly huge amount of couples ended up together because they got drunk, woke up together, and decided "oh well good enough."

There was also a long standing tradition involving arranged marriages and apparently the willing taking of love potions in order to get past certain reluctances on the part of both or either party involved.

Of course, there was also some tales told. Such as a cautionary tale involving a young witch trying to get a young man's attention several times and always ending up dosing the wrong individual. The names seemed to be different in different accountings, or perhaps the same event had taken place multiple times.

Actually, come to think of it, the latter was probably the case. I'd met more than a few teens who thought they were immortal, invulnerable, and/or the latest pop idol doubled as a font of wisdom. Both magic-wielding and non-magical versions.

So, love potions were staggering commonly. I wasn't sure if they actually taught how to make them in Potions class or just taught how to recognize them. The latter would make more sense but the magical world didn't seem to run on sense.

"AIGH!" came a call from the veela building.
I nodded at the reminder that Sirius was working on his stamina. Among other things. Well, that was...

Lightning struck with accompanying thunder.

I blinked and regarded the walkway below my balcony where there was now a design of interlocking vines surrounding norse runes.

Apparently I had a message. Not from Hephaestus, who would have used a mechanical bird or something. Bes - I would expect the message to be in a cartouche or similar styling. Toltiir - anyone's guess but I wouldn't expect something as restrained as this was. Honestly, with Toltiir, I wouldn't be surprised if I was suddenly buried in a shower of ping pong balls that contained a message I'd have to piece together.

When I got down to the message I found Norse runes mixed with Japanese characters in some horrible mismatch. Susanou then. Not someone known for his skills in penmanship or diplomancy.

There was a problem with the automatic translation effect in that the whole thing looked like someone had started writing out one thing, scribbled it out with something else, and then translated the whole thing with some mechanism that didn't understand the intent behind either.

After studying it for awhile with a rapidly increasing feeling of Certain Doom (not uncommon for me), the best guess I was getting out of it was "expect Greek problems."

Short and adding more questions than it answered. What you might expect from Susanou, a deity who couldn't manage diplomacy without at least three other deities staging an intervention.

Beware of a Greek? One of the Greek pantheon? Beware of Greek food? Be Aware, perhaps? A Greek... was one of those Institute coursers in the image of some Greek actress? I wasn't remembering too clearly, but I thought one had been the case.

What could she be doing that I should beware of?

-- --

Harry hung his head. "Why are you naked? Again?"

"Hush your mouth!" said one of the male Slytherin students.

"Enclothio!" shouted one of the witches nearby.

"That's not a real spell," pointed out another witch.

"At least it isn't in the main hall, not that the hall outside the library is much better," said Harry.

"Eh?" asked the courier, looking down. "Oh dear. When did I misplace those?"

-- --

"Master. The Vicar has been located. The Ministry is currently gathering forces to deal with him."

"Excellent. Where is he?"

"France. A manor owned by the Deputy Undersecretary of Magic of that country."

Voldemort, currently occupying a large plushy Barney doll, managed the energy to glare at his
follower. "You mean that the British Ministry of Magic is preparing forces to invade the private property of a foreign country's own highly-placed official?"

"Exactly, Master," said Lucius Malfoy. "It is taking some time to gather forces within the DMLE."

"Because most of those in the DMLE have enough sense to know what kind of idiocy it is to pull that sort of crap," said Voldemort drily. He might be currently stuck in a purple plushy but this mess was enough for him to stir himself. "I'm tempted to let that Fudge go ahead and become even more of a laughing stock within the international community."

"Someone actually competent might take his place if that happened," pointed out Lucius Malfoy.

"True, and it doesn't get me an actual body," agreed Voldemort. "I am not ready for a public appearance yet. Gather what few of my followers are still available and go and fetch this Vicar. We will then pull the information from him as to this resurrection ritual."

"I will contact Aravani," decided Lucius Malfoy. "He is anxious to prove himself." And he was a foreigner - and thus more expendable.

-- --

"Vicar," greeted Sirius Black, looking thoroughly exhausted.


"Pepper Up Potions," corrected Sirius.

"I know that you in the wizarding world think magic negates the laws of physics and physiology, but there is no free ride. Someone, somewhere, always pays for it." It was odd to find myself having to lecture to one of these wizards, usually in my limited experience they knew the TANSTAAFL principle. You could cheat code things - but the universe tended to catch up nonetheless.

I suspected that when the "muggle world" and the "wizarding world" eventually crossed, there would be many revelations on both sides.

"It's never been a problem before," began Sirius. "I-"

I glanced over again, noting the man's expression had turned curious. "What?"

"I felt the strangest desire to fistpump," said Sirius.

"No idea why?" I asked.

"No, nothing I can think of," said Sirius.

"Maybe Harry did something?" I guessed.

-- --

"Blimey, why couldn't I be the Boy Who Lived?" asked Ron.

"Because your parents are still alive and you don't have a near-immortal psychopath trying to kill you?" asked Harry in reply.

"Some people have all the luck," said Ron.
"You're not very good at listening, you know that Ron?" asked Harry.

"You've got naked girls showing up in your bed!" noted Ron.

"I don't WANT naked girls showing up in my bed. I'm TWELVE," pointed out Harry, though he was actually biologically closer to late fourteen - according to the records though he was twelve. Not that he wanted naked girls showing up in his bed anyway.

"Ron being a prat to the side," said Hermione, "it is a bit of a concern."

"Look, they're not normal girls, we all knew that weeks ago," pointed out Harry. "Synths. Synthetic humans. They have less social sense than Ron here."

"Excuse me?" asked Ron.

"They've hit on the idea on being my bodyguards and they keep showing up in places I really don't want them," said Harry.

"You need to get them to stop, it might affect your test scores," pointed out Hermione.

"You've really got some strange priorities," pointed out Ron.

"You're one to talk?" replied Hermione.

"Look, I've talked to the Professors, and they're going to get the three out of Hogwarts," said Harry. "Despite it being the only time I've seen Professor Snape fall to the floor with a nosebleed."

"Well, that blonde one tripped and knocked him out with her..." Ron made a gesture as if holding a pair of bludgers up against his chest.

"She's only clumsy when she wants to be," suggested Hermione.

"Not always, she's made dramatic statements and missed her landings a couple of times," countered Harry. "I... that noise."

George stuck his head in the Main Hall. "Harry! That box of yours is leaving without you!"

-- --

It had taken awhile to reconstruct the basic array of the remote control that would bring the Tardis to me, but I did it. So as long as nobody had set the parking brake, it COULD work.

I was rewarded by the sight of a blue box grind-thumping itself into reality between a row of cabbages a short distance away.

"HE'S GETTING AWAY!" yelled someone in English.

That really was enough to get me to go from standing still to flat-out run without much else needing to be said. After all, if I was getting away from something that meant that something was coming after me. Somehow I doubted it would be anything GOOD heading my way, past experience with such things after all.
30: Harry Potter and the Traveller

Chapter Summary

pretty much how i was aiming to end things, though there is an epilogue.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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One Floo Over
chapter 30
Harry Potter and the Traveller

-- --

I ran, aware of red and yellow bolts going past me. I was still feeling the strain from Bes' little intervention, but adrenalin is a wonderful thing that overrides all sorts of pain signals in the pursuit of survival.

Going back to Azkaban was not an option I wanted to explore.

The door opened at my approach and I slid in and slammed the door behind me, thumbing the lock as quickly as I could.

Then and only then could I hit the sequence that activated the whole transportation aspect of my Tardis. What was concerning was that the booth was lurching to the side BEFORE I hit the final switch.

I wasn't sure what was going on outside, so I tried a quick random location change before I went to the viewscreen. It was black, so the camera was either disabled or covered or it was so pitch-black outside that nothing could be seen.

The Tardis began shuddering and the internal lights flickered twice and went dark.

Okay, THIS was a big problem. They'd found something which could get through the shields or they'd simply overwhelmed them.

For someone who'd travelled through time and space, I was suddenly out of both.

-- --

It was difficult, but applying sticking charms to themselves and then clinging to the outside of that damnable box had allowed them to pursue. As soon as they'd landed, he'd had them fire a few shots at the damn muggles and then the outer four had put up shield charms to give them some more room.

Some old woman on the stage had said something using some kind of Sonorus charm, but they'd deal with her in a moment.
Now they just had to take apart this damn box with various spellbreakers and anti-ward spells, then they'd get that damn Vicar.

Mikolo Aravani sent another spellbreaker at the box, rewarded when the wood blackened and paint boiled.

-- --

"We're here at Buckingham live, where the Vicar's TARDIS just materialized - under attack by black-clad and masked individuals! The Queen's speech was interrupted and we're waiting to see what exactly happens."

"Gkkk," said Minerva McGonagall, who'd stopped in front of the wall of televisions again on the way to the Leaky Cauldron.

"Something wrong?" asked the shopgirl next to her. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"I think I might just be," said McGonagall, thinking that this was going to be very hard to just Obliviate a few people to cover up.

"Weird that those aliens are using gadgets that are magic-wand-shaped," commented the shopgirl. "You'd think they'd have gun-shaped guns."

"Maybe they're trying to fit in?" suggested McGonagall.

"Oh, and they thought the stories about wizards and stuff was real and so they disguised things like that?" asked the shopgirl. "Man, talk about clueless."

Minerva McGonagall didn't sigh in relief, nor did she roll her eyes at the irony, but merely allowed a faint smirk to fall into place briefly. When she turned her attention back to the images shown on the televisions though - her relief proved short-lived.

A blast was directed towards a group of muggles that were hustling an individual in their midst off to the side.

-- --

I had to open the door and shut it behind me in a single motion where it would lock itself. My plan was simple - charge through the attackers before they were ready for me. Get to high ground where I could assess things properly. Find an escape route if possible, if not then I was going to have some problems due to not having a huge number of spells I could cast at present.

Then I spotted the bunch of people and someone I'd met before and plans changed.

I was expendable. I wasn't even supposed to be here after all. No doubt or hesitation.

I used one spell to get in the way, then another spell to shield those behind me. Steadfast Ward was a simple shield spell, but it ate away at my mana reserves very quickly as it stopped three explosive-effect spells.

Then the green bolts started hitting me and things went black.

-- --

Sergeant George MacMillan had not been sure what to make of things going on down there. Were these actors or something? He'd heard about the elves and the other things going on, and the people
on the telly he'd briefly seen had been going on about it all being faked.

He wouldn't go shooting the civilians when the likely outcome would be his getting fired, thrown in a prison, and sued for everything he could possibly ever earn.

That had changed and now he was looking down at a bunch of terrorists shooting into the crowd and then firing at the Queen's security detail.

"Target the guys in masks, volley fire. Begin."

His squad were all armed with the L85A2 rifles, equipped with the standard SUSAT (Sight Unit Small Arms Trilux) scope. At this range, none of those chosen for this duty were going to miss. As soon as he'd said "begin" they were firing at their first targets and then choosing the next. The flickering fields some of them were emitting seemed to deflect the bullets slightly.

"Aim around the edges of that blur," ordered Sergeant MacMillan, "again."

-- --

[You Are Dead.]
[Mission Parameters Not Found.]

[Unable To Access Yggdrasil.Net]
[Attempting To Recover.]

-- --

Mikolo Aravani wasn't sure what all was going on, but it was not within the parameters of his plan. A simple snatch-and-back had become something else entirely.

Surrounded by muggles, whom he hated with a passion considering some of the events in his past, it was natural to strike out at the pests.

He wasn't used to them striking back. It had thrown off his game much as it would have if a shepherd found the sheep were now picking up and throwing rocks at him.

There were several things that could be said about it, but one was definitely that he didn't like it.

They'd started with twenty Death Eaters, mainly from the oldest and purest families. They were now down to four. FOUR!

A flash and he'd apparated out of the killing ground. At least they'd managed to kill that Vicar. The mission had been to retrieve him for the Dark Lord, but eliminating the target should be a satisfactory second choice.

-- --

[247 Files Unrecoverable.]

[Attempting to Reconnect.]

[Reconnect Failed.]

-- --
Sergeant MacMillan knew that the arrows had NOT come from any of his men. Yet there they were, sticking up out of the bodies of some of those masked-and-cloaked fellows who had used some sort of fancy move to try and mix with the crowd of civilians who'd been unable to flee due to the crowd's own size.

He looked towards one of the guests the Queen had come here to speak about and inclined his head slightly in acknowledgement. The elf spotted him and nodded back.

With that, he spoke over the radio. "Keep an eye out in case any of those that vanished show up again. Don't shoot the elves."

"Sergeant," said the voice of his Commanding Officer over the radio, "do not approach the bodies of those masked fellows. Specialists are en route."

"Sir," said MacMillan, thinking that he had had absolutely no intention of approaching the fellows who had death-ray technology of some sort. Just his luck someone would set one of their gadgets off and zap themselves. So these aliens apparently had death-rays and either teleport or stealth tech. Nasty. Still, he could start working out countermeasures himself so he was pretty sure that the brain trust would have something to trot out soon.

-- --

[System Restore Failed.]

"Blasted useless damn interface. Restart."

[Unable To Restart. Restart Point Not Found.]

"Well, that certainly sucks."

[Command Not Recognized.]
[Please Contact SysAdmin For Assistance.]

"Not really helping here."

-- --

Minerva McGonagall saw the end of the Statute of Secrecy.

The Vicar and his antics, as well as whoever this 'Professor Gizmo' was, had at least offered a bizarre story that redirected attention towards another explanation. Instead of looking for flying brooms and the like, attention had been pointed at the stars for something other than Astronomy Class.

To someone who knew the truth, it had all been fairly amusing on that level.

Now, on a LIVE broadcast that was going out GLOBALLY, Death Eaters had just been firing out attacks into a crowd and had just attacked the Queen.

The marksmen had just also proved that a shielding charm capable of stopping a direct hit from a bullet did not provide complete protection as one could shoot through the edges or in a direction not so covered.

Though it was possible that the more higher-powered rifles could just punch through a shield charm, hard to tell because the cameras didn't show a lot of details.

"Unclear how many casualties at this point, the enemies that the Vicar was facing obviously had
hijacked his travelling device. Because, as all you regular viewers here know, the Vicar NEVER ends up where he was intending to go," said the ashen-faced newswoman on the telly. "The Queen was not injured but two members of her security detail are en route to the hospital. More on their conditions as information comes in."

There was absolutely no way the various DMLE members could contain this. They could memory-charm the heck out of the newspeople, come up with some cock-and-bull story about a publicity stunt - but trying to Obliviate their way out of this would cause more panic and then people WOULD start looking for the conspiracy behind the cover-up.

A shaky camera began covering as an elf began casting some wandless spell and the patient's wounds began closing over.

"Good thing them elves were there," said one of the women behind McGonagall.

"Elves were there because the Queen was addressing their status and what she knew, mainly 'cause of all the stories people would make up," said a shopgirl next to her in a Cockney accent so thick that you'd need one of the Weasley Twins using a lightsaber to cut it. "Course, it'll all be officially debated back and forth between the official politickers and prolly not get settled for years yet."

"Handy that," pointed out a guy to the left of the shopgirl. "Could use someone down at work who could do the healing stuff. Every so often someone does something stupid at the factory."

"Might encourage 'em to do something stupid if there was someone like that around to fix 'em back up," said the shopgirl. "Only a few of those elves anyways, eh?"

"Hey, lookit, the Vicar's dead but he's glowing," pointed out one of the other viewers after the cameraman had panned the scene.

"Oi," said the shopgirl, whose nameplate Minerva could now see read "Billie", as she clapped her hands. "He IS a second-rate The Doctor. See - he's regeneratin'."

-- --

[Reboot Complete.]
[Primary Systems Offline.]
[Emergency Protocols Engaged.]
[Please Contact SysAdmin.]

"Fat chance of that. Loci Forma."

[Loci Forma - Unable To Access.]

"Okay, try emergency recovery."

[Working. Form selected.]
[File Corruption Detected.]
[Merging Files To Form Working Template.]

"Please not a horse. Or unicorn. Something with hands at least."

[Operator Input Not Understood.]

"I suppose it really was too much to hope for."
There was a moment when the Vicar was clearly visible despite the glow, his face and hands shifting.

Then he was gone, along with a chunk of the ground that looked as if it had been scooped up.

A few moments later the Tardis faded out without its customary sound effects.

Minerva wasn't sure how or why or what, but she was pretty sure the Vicar had been hit with the Killing Curse and he'd died. Everything else was pretty atypical.

Well, when that Vicar was involved, pretty much 'typical' went out the bloody window, didn't it?

"You did what?"

Generally, when anyone who had a title named "Dark Lord" asked that particular question of an underling - it was not what one might call a "good sign." Also, generally speaking, intelligence or common sense were not qualities that led one to work for a Dark Lord or Dark Lady or any of that sort of titled individual.

"Killed a dozen muggles, destroyed that Vicar's transport device, and killed the Vicar who dared to-" began Mikolo Aravani.

"Crucio," cast Lord Voldemort.

"How many Death Eaters did you lose in this farce?" asked Lucius Malfoy as soon as the screaming stopped.

The screaming began again almost immediately.

"So," said the Prime Minister. "The Vicar is gone, presumed dead or recalled by his people. His Tardis is gone. We have these masked terrorists of unknown capabilities running around with a few bodies to show for it. There were civilian casualties, though most of them were treated and discharged at the scene by paramedics. A few more were patched up by these 'elves' and are being monitored for side-effects? What KIND of side-effects?"

"One of the radio personalities was suggesting that it might be like zombies or werewolves with the elf sort-of-thing being transmittable," said one of the advisors.

The PM looked at his underling as if he couldn't believe how stupid that sounded.

"It's gotten a few protests going with the anti-elf crowd," said that advisor. "Carrying placards around and all."

Rubbing his forehead briefly, the PM considered (as had many before him) whether or not the job was really worth it all. "Okay. So some people believe that they could be turned into pointy-eared supermodels by associating with these girls. Right. Believe it or not, I did see something of that the
other day but I wrote them all off as being idiots."

"If there is an issue on the table, there will always be those who support it and those who oppose it," noted the advisor with a shrug.

"Fair enough," said the PM. "Okay, put out the word that any idiot who wears or sells a costume like that will be subject to being beaten like a rug during spring cleaning, and we won't be prosecuting anyone who does the beating."

"Some people will dress up like them anyway," pointed out another advisor.

"People being idiots and wearing elaborate masks while wearing black robes are of less concern than the ones who are actually wearing those as their cult uniform," said the PM. "And if idiots dressing up as some alien terror cult get smacked around by people concerned about the possibility of those wand-guns coming out and shooting off death-rays? Not our concern. Hassoun? Get with the Coroner's Office. Find out if there's something about those cultists that is distinctly nonhuman that we can check for. If we can tell which is an idiot from our world playing dressup, and which is an alien terrorist - we can change policies then."

"Right away," said Hassoun, nodding and leaving.

"O'Dell," said the PM. "Anything off those wand-gun things? As soon as we've got an analysis, I want to know the range and capabilities."

"Actually, sir, I'm pretty sure that this belongs to the OTHER Ministry," said O'Dell carefully, looking at the other advisor.

"What other Ministry?" asked Barrowman.

"Classified," said the PM. "Okay, O'Dell. You're in the know, so you coordinate. Make sure you do the whole hidden note thing so if you forget anything needful you'll have a reminder."

Barrowman, the last of the advisors, frowned as O'Dell left. "MI6 then?"

"Not quite, and as I said quite classified," said the PM. "Barrowman, you go to the elves. Find out what they know about these masked fellows and whatever their connection to the Vicar might have been. Enemies from what I saw, but I'd like a bit more than that. If they don't know anything about them, invite them over to the Coroner's office. They might have ways of pulling information out that we don't and right now I need answers more than anything."

-- --

Lucius Malfoy was a Slytherin and a Slytherin looked at everything in terms of "how can I make use of this?"

Right now, he was considering his association with Lord Voldemort as something of a tactical blunder on his part. Not that he could back out easily as the Dark Lord had a tendency to kill those who failed him and kill painfully those who actually went against his wishes.

They had started out this latest regrouping of the Purebloods with nearly fifty Death Eaters returned to the Dark Lord's service. That number had been steadily whittled down until this latest debacle had put them down to twenty-one.

When the dementors had been missing from Azkaban, it was seen as an opportunity to free some of their number from that prison. Unfortunately, several of those had turned out to be near-catatonic and
others had just been lost in Aravani’s blunder.

"We shall need allies," hissed Lord Voldemort. "I need a new body, and must turn my attention to that. Lucius - contact the werewolves and the giants. The vampires might find a place in our new society as well."

"Truly?" asked Lucius Malfoy.

"Of course not," said Voldemort. "We'll betray them after the fighting's done. Or when it's convenient. See what you can do."

-- --

[System Failure.]

[Unable To Connect.]

"Great. Just great."

[Reboot Failure.]

[Abort, Retry, Fail?]

"Yeah. I get it." The Vicar looked around at the brightness. Three retries and back to the same problem. When you only had one card to play, make the most of it. Beyond the whiteness, was that a forest? Where the hell was he now? "Abort."

Chapter End Notes

epilogue's written, it will probably be posted this week as time allows.
with the Vicar gone, things wrap up over a period of years.

Nick Valentine stepped out of the thick foliage, walking carefully so as not to disturb the greenery more than he absolutely had to.

"Monsieur Valentine," said Curie, inclining her head. "You have repaired that hand finally."

"Got kinda used to it, but I gotta admit this is easier to clean," admitted Nick, flexing the hand in question. "Nice to see someone else from the old days. Work at the hospital working out for you?"

"Indeed," said Curie, the robot-turned-synth standing up. "There is still much research to be done, and I am quite optimistic about the current class of physicians we are training."

"I wouldn't expect anything else from you," admitted Nick. "So. Ten years now."

"It was 2287 when the Sole Survivor of Vault 111 came into our lives, 2301 when he died," said Curie, nodding towards the grave. "The forest does not encroach on the graves."

"I suspect Dogmeat has something to do with that," said Nick, looking about the small clearing and getting a glimpse of something dog-shaped moving through the foliage. He suspected that the brief impression of a german shepherd dog looking back at him with jaw opened in a canine grin was not a trick of the lighting. "He was always a good boy."

"I prefer to deal in tangible scientific evidence," said Curie.

"Yet here we are," said Nick.

"Have you seen anyone else from Sanctuary?" asked Curie. "I do not get out that often with my duties."

"Ran into MacReady about a month ago," said Nick. "He was just up as a caravan guard and touching bases with me and a few others. That one Piper-synth apparently went down into Florida, covering the fight against the giant crocodile mutants, at least according to MacReady. Strong is off somewhere in Far Harbor I think, still - he's gotten together with some of the other less cannibalistic super-mutants and is forming a hunter-gatherer tribe. When they heard about the giant crocodiles, they were discussing going down there and joining the fight."
"On which side?" asked Curie.

"The human side actually. Strong pointed out that only humans can turn into super-mutants so humans kind of needed to be protected otherwise there'd be no more super-mutants." Nick shook his head slightly. "Strong making rational arguments. Who'd have thought? Oh, and Hancock is still up in Goodneighbor. He's training a replacement. Apparently planning on going off and wandering now that he's been there as long as he has."

"I see," said Curie, nodding at the three graves. "I am here in remembrance. Piper, Cait, Nate. They were all friends."

"Absent friends," said Nick, taking out a hip flask and raising it in a toast before taking a sip. Not that he could get drunk or anything, and it was water anyway, but there was a tradition involved.

"Monsieur Valentine," said Curie, pausing briefly as she gathered her thoughts. "What of the others? Any word?"

"Well, they reclaimed Vault 111, gave all the frozen corpses burials, and turned into an underground community," said Nick. "Codsworth is down there, making use of his mechanical skills. So is Sturges I think. Preston is buried at the Castle."

"Preston Garvey? He is dead?" asked Curie.

"Two years ago, surprised you didn't hear," said Nick. "Yeah. Big group of Raiders from what used to be Canada on the maps. Got ahold of some ships and were raiding up and down the coast. The Minutemen lost a lot of people but those improved plasma turrets and their artillery pretty much ended that menace. Hundreds of raiders went down with their ships. Still got some problem with ghouls and sharks in the area drawn here by all that."

Curie was silent for a few minutes, apparently lost in thought.

"You and me, and that synth version of Cait and the one of Piper - we're going to be around a long time," said Nick finally. "Codsworth too. Synths and ghouls and robots - we're not immortal but we have much longer lives than the regular humans. Especially since the bombs fell back in 2077. Though things are getting a bit better lately, thanks in part to your work down at the hospital. I expect Codsworth will outlast all of us but eventually all his parts will end up replaced, and his memory will be part of that."

Three graves together, with one other that was a bit offset. Nora - Nate's wife prior to the Day The Bombs Fell. Before she and he went into cryogenic suspension. Before she was killed by the Institute and the hired gun Kincaid. Cait - the scrapper who had been traded property among various raider gangs until she could fight well enough to be the headliner at the Combat Zone. Piper - the reporter for Publick Occurances who sought out the truth in their post-apocalyptic world, with her little sister carrying on the tradition in her absence. Nate - the man out of time, the General of the Minutemen, who had brought down the Institute.

Nick wasn't sure when Curie had left, leaving him alone there to watch over the graves. He wondered briefly about the others they'd met back in that whirlwind year of 2287 when so much had changed so fast. He hadn't heard a word from the Railroad people in over ten years, but what would they have done without any new synths anyway? The Brotherhood of Steel was back in the Capitol Wastes in what had used to be Washington, and he didn't get out that way on any of his jobs.

"Your kid's doing good, partner," said Nick to the grave finally. "Taking to the business real well. Fixed up a suit of power armor for the tough jobs, one of those that Vicar fellow modified back
Lord Voldemort wondered exactly why everything wasn't going as well as it should have been. So far, every plan he'd set out had gone wrong since the attack on the Potters a decade and change ago.

Take the werewolves he'd contacted. He wasn't sure about all the details about that night, but one thing had repeatedly gotten back to him. Two students who were known as pranksters and troublemakers had used some sort of spell that made their wands into swords of some sort and had sliced and diced the werewolves attacking the school. They'd somehow become heroes to most of the school with that.

Well, he expected this confrontation to be no different. He was prepared for it though, so perhaps this time he'd be able to get things back on the proper path.

"This is all you've got, Potter?" asked Lord Voldemort, smiling. "A scattering of students, a handful of teachers, and an overlarge oaf? Against my army of giants, Death Eaters, vampires, and Nagini? Why not make it easier for everyone? Surrender now, and at least some of them may survive."

Vishhhh Vishhhh!

Ah, the two redheads there had just done something and now there were solid bars of light extending about three feet from the tips of their wands. That must be their odd cutting-sword spells. Interesting - he'd have to collect those wands and learn more about the spell after they were killed. Might be useful.

Vishhh

Professor Flitwick could do it too? Interesting, but with his size and shape the half-goblin wasn't likely to manage any sort of threat.

Klik-klick hummmmmmmmm.

Where had those three women in leather trenchcoats come from? Oh, and they had odd rifles in their hands. Still, it was a laughable threat despite his previous experience with such things. They couldn't fire into any sort of close-quarters without the explosions taking out their fellows, something the morally constrained could not bring themselves to do.

"I really don't think so," said Harry Potter, standing there without any of his usual vague amusement. "Counteroffer: you and I go at it without any of the others intervening. Don't you think it would be better to settle this personally?"

"No," said Lord Voldemort, though he DID think it quite tempting. The whole duel-to-the-death sounded quite traditional within wizarding society and he held all the advantages. He was immortal, held the Elder Wand, had experienced wizards and witches on his side, and were not held back by foolish laws and outdated morality. On the other hand, after their brief battle several years ago, he knew that Potter could be a formidable fighter who would throw out any sort of rule of combat the moment it posed an obstacle to victory. "No, I think not."

"Oh, and you're wrong about a couple of things," said Harry. "We have other allies."
"Oh? Well, where are they?" said Lord Voldemort, making an exaggerated looking-around act. "Well?"

Abruptly the largest giant's head exploded.

Harry didn't waste any time, his wand just appearing in his hand. "Reducto!"

"Malfoy," said Professor Remus Lupin.

"Beast," said the Death Eater facing him.

"I thought you rather smarter than this," commented Lupin. "This is a bit of a no-win situation for you."

"How do you figure that?" asked Lucius Malfoy.

"If Harry wins, your side loses," said Lupin, tucking his wand into a belt-holster. "If Voldemort somehow pulls off a win - that still leaves you following a homicidal maniac with a tendency to kill his own followers when things don't go his way."

"It still leaves me on the winning side with you dead," pointed out Lucius Malfoy. "Where you are a beast that needs to be put... What?"

A giant had just fallen, with the head falling in fist-sized chunks, and there was a moment of stunned silence as that signal was processed by both sides.

Remus Lupin smiled, not a happy sort of smile. A wolf-smile, the kind that promises pain and destruction in the near-future. "By the way, since you wanted a beast. When the Vicar cured me of being a mindless werewolf, he didn't have the process quite right."

Lucius Malfoy's eyes widened as Lupin's form seemed to ripple and he was suddenly face-to-face with a wall of fur and muscle and claws and teeth. Being an experienced wizard, he reacted almost immediately. "Ava-"

The fist that smashed into his face was actually slightly larger than his head and had enough force behind it that the Whomping Willow could have lost a limb.

Remus then turned his attention from Malfoy, not knowing if he was alive or dead at this point, to choose another target. Those vampires that had just gone back-to-back in a group seemed to want some attention.

The sniper changed position immediately after firing the shot, dropping back into full concealment.

The next sniper had already selected his target and been waiting for some time, with the falling of the giant the signal for a combined volley of eight other snipers.

He squeezed the trigger and a fifty caliber round found the back of the skull of a giant who had just begun turning toward where his fellow had fallen.

He slid back as soon as soon as the shot was fired, then moved forward when nothing appeared to be happening. They'd been told to expect any line-of-sight to draw hostile fire, but apparently the enemy was too disorganized to respond properly.
Well, that just made things a little easier - didn't it?

Ah, that must be that werewolf fellow that was on their side. Fortunately, that HAD been in the briefing. He might be mistaken but that particular beastie might just weigh more than the average bear. And was going through those vampire chappies who didn't show up terribly well on the IR.

Oh, that had to hurt. Bloodsucking undead or whatever, having your head punted off your neck and into a ditch halfway across the battlefield had to be a serious pain.

Hmmm. That roaring voice sounded like he was calling out "Goal."

Right, need to get back to the sniping. No reason the beastly boy there had to hog all the fun, eh?

---

"Adeat!" The Shield Of Arthur Pendragon appeared and three green beams smote it.

The unblockable Killing Curse was blocked, though the "unblockable" was by magical shields. Physical objects could block the Killing Curse, though they were often destroyed by such means.

Pridwen was not so easily defeated.

Spells began to get thrown in earnest.

"Well, Potter, I see no reason to hold my trump card back any longer," said Lord Voldemort, taking out a book.

"You're going to read in the middle of our fight?" quipped Harry. "I'm almost insulted."

"You four, slow him down whilst I read this," commanded the Dark Lord.

Harry sent out a cone of flames with one hand that engulfed the four Death Eaters who'd rushed forward.

"Harry," said Fleur as she moved past him. "Fire is more my own specialty. You deal with the boss, yes?"

"Nagini?" asked Voldemort, eyes disbelieving as pieces of snake flew past him.

Neville Longbottom stood with his wand emitting the brilliant blue light of a "lightsaber" charm.

"I think it's time to whittle down-" began Lord Voldemort before his chest exploded. "Urk."

"You can't die yet?" asked Harry. "Yeah, I understand that I have to be the one to kill you. No reason my friends can't help you know."

The Dark Lord got up on his hand and knees and snarled at Harry despite missing a third of his chest. "Friendssss are overrated."

"No," said Harry. "You're wrong there."

"Friendship is magic," said Hermione as she stepped up next to Harry. "Magical friends doubly so."

"I find your lack of friends disturbing," said Neville Longbottom, stepping up next to Hermione.

"Bludgers, we don't need no stinking bludgers," said Parvati as she stepped up next to Harry on the
other side from Hermione.

"Parvati. You just totally blew the theme we had going," complained Hermione.

"Oh," said Parvati. "Sorry."

"Oh well," said Harry, pulling out a type III Blaster and shooting the Dark Lord while he tried to regenerate himself. "I shot first."

"Actually, Lord Moldy Shorts shot first," pointed out Parvati. "Now we need to get back to wiping out the Dark Army."

-- --

The Queen of England listened as the new Minister of Magic continued his report on the state of affairs in the magical world.

"...and then it was all over but the cleanup. There were a few who made it to the edge of the Anti-Apparation wards and escaped when it was obvious they were losing, but one of Harry Potter's associates has some abilities that allow her to track magical traces. One of the Parvati twins I believe."

"What of the book that the Dark Lord referred to as his 'trump card'?" asked the Prime Minister.

"Have you ever heard of 'H.P. Lovecraft'?" asked the new Minister. "Apparently some measure of his stories was actually based on fact. That book would have summoned a Being from beyond our universe. It has been sealed with as many wards as we can place upon it and is locked away by our Unspeakable department. I'd suggested throwing it through the Veil, an artifact of Death that nothing can return from, but that department is pretty much autonomous and I don't know if they took my advice."

"Would this 'Being' have been under the control of the summoner?" asked the Prime Minister.

"Honestly, I would think not," said the Minister of Magic. "I could see such a Being leaving a method for summoning It, and leaving out details to contain or control Itself."

"That leaves the elves, these coursers, and of course the Veela," said the PM.

"These elves are not our elves," said the Minister of Magic. "Neither do the coursers belong to the wizarding world as they are products of some other world's science. You currently have them known to the muggle public as extraterrestrial near-humans. Why not leave them as so. The Veela squad that came from France is scheduled to return to France in a few days. They were only here at the bequest of the Delacour family, and apparently some of them thought they would have a chance at magical artifacts if they impressed young Mister Potter. They have been since informed that is not possible."

"What of Mister Potter and these girls?" asked the Queen.

"Ah, well, some of them are going their own way. Turned their cards in and pursuing other relations," said the Minister of Magic.

"I take it then, that some have not," said the Queen drily.

"I think the next few years will be very interesting for Mister Potter and his friends," said the Minister of Magic. He chuckled briefly. "Better him than me."
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